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**THE RETURN OF THE STORYTELLER  
IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE**

**By**

**Areti Dragas**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the award of the degree

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Department of English Studies**

**University of Durham**

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**07 JUN 2007**

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# THE RETURN OF THE STORYTELLER IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

By

Areti Dragas

## ABSTRACT

This thesis sets out to identify a growing interest in storytelling in contemporary literature, which I argue is reflected in the return of the figure of the storyteller. This interest in storytelling and stories seems to be inter-disciplinary and is reflected not only in literary critical discourses such as postmodernism and the postcolonialist interest in oral traditions, but also in areas such as cognitive and evolutionary science, which have presented stories as necessary for survival. However, despite this, the role of the storyteller has been relatively neglected in literary criticism and theory, a neglect that may have arisen in part because of the recent preoccupation with writing and textuality, which has led criticism to focus debates on the figure of the author. This thesis sets out to address this omission. The role of the storyteller in contemporary Western fiction is explored alongside some examples of postcolonial and hybrid fictions. I draw largely on methodologies from narrative and postmodernist theory, and investigate the preoccupation of the storyteller through a reading of six contemporary authors chosen as a representative sample of contemporary fiction today. These are: Jim Crace, Mario Vargas Llosa, Salman Rushdie, John Barth, A.S. Byatt and J.M. Coetzee. Through the close reading of a selection of their novels, I reveal how the storyteller, and the art of storytelling, are genuine preoccupations in their works. Moreover, I show how, through their employment and problematisation of the figure of the storyteller, these writers all raise questions about the role and value of fiction and real authors. Surprisingly, the infamous 'death of the author' has produced a rebirth of the storyteller. The storyteller has returned and provides us with some new and useful tools with which to re-map the territories of contemporary fiction.

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This thesis tells the story of the storyteller, but for the story to come into being, to become real and to be contained within these pages, there have been many people involved, besides the storyteller and myself. I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have accompanied me and assisted me in so many ways on the journey. Special thanks go to my supervisor Professor Patricia Waugh. I am deeply indebted to her and commend her ability to guide, encourage and also provide me with the freedom to find my own path in the world of literary criticism and theory. With her encouragement, quiet wisdom and generosity, both personally and intellectually, she has not only allowed me to enjoy my research, but also helped foster a desire to continue to forge new paths. In this, I feel I have been especially fortunate. I would also like to acknowledge the love and support of my family, particularly that of my parents, who have helped in ways that these few words cannot describe. Thank you for believing in me, encouraging me and supporting me unquestioningly and always. Finally, I would like to thank all my friends who have offered their support and encouragement along the way, and especially my partner, Justin, who has been there from the beginning, forever holding my hand.

## PREFACE

### *Why the Storyteller?*

But in all the wonderful worlds that writing opens, the spoken word still resides and lives. Written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings.

Walter Ong, *Orality & Literacy* 8.

This thesis began with an attempt to understand better the line between oral storytelling and written fiction. More specifically, it began with a questioning of the origins of the stories that live within the written world of the novel. However, as I moved deeper and deeper into this area of research, the storyteller started to emerge as the quintessential figure that married the oral and written worlds together, and this idea became more and more compelling. Consequently, I began to question: what is the relation between telling and writing? Is not writing a type of telling? And if so, could we not call the 'writer-author' a 'storyteller'? More importantly, if we call the author 'storyteller', how does this change our perception and reading of literature? In this preface I highlight the main reasons why I argue for the storyteller's return to contemporary fiction.

Although 'the author' has had a relatively well-documented history which has engendered an ever-thriving critical debate within literary studies, the story of oral storytelling traditions, along with the figure of the storyteller, is often less substantive. Moreover, despite the growing interest in post-colonial literatures which *has* traced links between oral storytelling and the written narrative tradition,<sup>1</sup> within

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<sup>1</sup> For example, as in Native American writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko and Gerald Vizenor, or African writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'O as well as writers coming out of indigenous peoples from the Caribbean, New Zealand, Australia and occasionally Russia and Eastern Europe through *skaz*.





the Western European and Anglo-American tradition, there has been far less interest. Indeed, *outside* this critical interest in post-colonial writers who come from *active* oral storytelling cultures and traditions, European and Anglo-American literary history has concentrated on investigations of the author and the written word, blinkered by restrictive notions of 'literariness'. In other words, its focus has tended to be less on storytelling and the storyteller, and more on authorship and implied narration. Stemming from a long-standing cultural tradition that has privileged 'text', as part of a 'canon' of writing, perhaps it is no wonder that the storyteller has been neglected in relation to the author. The storyteller, instead, is most commonly thought of as belonging to folklore, to oral tradition, to a realm that lives well below the dizzying peaks of the mountain which is 'Literature'. I contend that this view is misguided: the storyteller does have a place within the two traditions and in a sense, should have been there all along. What this thesis reveals therefore, is that *it is not only post-colonial or 'native' literatures that have engaged with 'the oral storytelling tradition' and with the link between oral and written narratives; these preoccupations are also apparent in contemporary Western European and Anglo-American novels.* My attempt to marry these two traditions (Western and Native/Postcolonial traditions) lies specifically in the figure of the storyteller. In other words, I show that the storyteller (and his<sup>2</sup> art of storytelling) has a place in *both* these traditions and my aim is to return the storyteller to his rightful place within them.

As there has already been research into oral storytelling and thus implicitly into the storyteller in postcolonialist writing, the texts I have chosen to highlight this first point come in the main from contemporary Western European and Anglo-American traditions where this interest has not yet been clearly mapped. My aim,

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this thesis, I will be using the pronouns he/him/his to refer to the storyteller for the sake of simplicity only. Whilst this is problematic in the sense that the use of the pronoun 'he' as opposed to 'she' is necessarily gender specific, I am not trying to imply by this use that I am favouring the male gender. As with the concept of author, the storyteller can be both genders. I am in this sense following Ivan Kreilkamp who states: "the storyteller takes either male or female form without fundamentally altering the ideological and aesthetic work it performs. [...] Part of the strength and resilience of the ideology of myth of the storyteller, indeed, lies in its flexibility in regards to gender." See, Kreilkamp, Ivan. *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 33.

primarily, is to re-establish and return the storyteller to the Anglo-American fiction tradition where critical discussion of this figure has been curiously absent. I propose to do this by charting instances of how 'the storyteller' appears in a variety of largely Anglo-American texts and writers. I hope therefore to address the current neglect and to open up ways of reading the storyteller in a variety of contemporary contexts.

Oral storytelling traditions and the figure of the storyteller (implicitly, if not always overtly) have most often been traced in post-colonial literatures. I do not mean to imply that there has been *no* interest in issues surrounding storytelling or oral modes within 'Western literature'. On the contrary, there have been a number of readings that focus on these issues, which strengthen my argument for the return of the storyteller. Currently, any interest in storytelling and the storyteller in Western and Anglo-American traditions largely centres on fairy-tale and folktales and their relationship to contemporary novels. However, my interest in the storyteller does not begin here either. Instead, this thesis avoids the category traps that surround readings of novels through fairy-tale and folktale studies, and concentrates more on a broader idea of storytelling and the storyteller. My focus on the storyteller thus seeks to reveal that in the Western and Anglo-American traditions *this interest in the storyteller has not as yet been clearly identified and/or thoroughly theorised*.

Although fairy-tale studies do relate to the interest in oral storytelling traditions (and implicitly therefore also to the storyteller), they look specifically neither at the storyteller nor at the art of storytelling outside their own field. Critical discussion of the storyteller and the art of storytelling tends to be loose, imprecise and impressionistic. In other words, although there are readings on specific writers, there is no unifying consensus on what is meant by 'the storyteller'. As a result, *this thesis addresses this lack of a clear definition of storytelling through a focus on the figure of the storyteller*, but without falling into the kind of essentialism which assumes that human artefacts can be treated as natural kinds, and that 'the storyteller' is a kind of universal and timeless figure. This thesis offers a closer reflection on, and rethinking of, the term *storyteller* and implicitly his art of *storytelling* in a variety of contexts in order to investigate *both how and why he has*

*returned to contemporary fiction.* To focus more specifically on why I call this thesis 'the return of the storyteller', let me turn briefly to cultural criticism and contemporary culture.

It is interesting to note that in the actual 'oral world' of contemporary storytelling, the storyteller has also 'returned'. As professional storyteller and academic, Patrick Ryan, identifies in his very illuminating thesis on the storyteller in contemporary culture,<sup>3</sup> the oral storytelling tradition has seen a revival over the past few decades, particularly in Britain, mirroring an earlier revival in the United States. This fact contrasts with literatures (particularly 'Eastern' as well as those from native and indigenous cultures), whose storytelling tradition has not in fact 'stopped' and therefore had to be subsequently 'revived'. In Britain and America, as cultures which have long since privileged the written over the oral word, this fact is revealing. This 'revival' or 'return' of the storyteller as a profession suggests a parallel with my argument for the return of the storyteller and his art of storytelling in contemporary fiction and criticism. My claim and use of the word 'return' however, although supported by the cultural phenomenon above, is not borrowed directly from it. Rather, the word 'return' is a direct reply to an essay entitled "The Storyteller" (1936)<sup>4</sup> by the Marxist cultural critic, Walter Benjamin, who, through a reading of the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov, claimed that the storyteller was disappearing. As I am concentrating largely on post-1950's fiction, which I label 'contemporary fiction', I look closely at Benjamin's assertions and make the claim that Benjamin's predictions were wrong: the storyteller did not disappear as Benjamin predicted; he is still very much alive. In this way, then, this thesis seeks to return the storyteller both to criticism and to the novel.

Finally, I contend that *reading novels with the idea of 'storyteller' in mind has a dynamic, transformative effect on our understanding of them, proving in effect that 'the storyteller' has a pivotal role in literary understanding.* I show that the storyteller-role is as complex and multi-layered as the author-function, therefore

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<sup>3</sup> Ryan, Patrick. "The Contemporary Storyteller in Context: A Study of Storytelling in Modern Society." University of Glamorgan, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." *Illuminations*. London: Cape, 1970. 83-109.

adding an interesting and exciting perspective within debates surrounding authorship and narration in general. However, I must stress that the main purpose of this thesis, is to provide an exploration of the 'storyteller' idea as a means of proving that *storytelling is indeed a preoccupation and tendency in contemporary fiction* rather than providing some definitive framework for reading *all* contemporary fiction. There would need to be a closer reading of many more texts to really 'test out' the ideas that emerge from this exploration.

Of course, I am aware that the storyteller-concept could be problematic as he is a figure that comes out of and belongs to an oral storytelling tradition. What I am *not* doing, therefore, is making the claim that literature is in any way 'oral'. In other words, *I draw parallels from the oral tradition which I then apply to the written literary tradition, in order to add to our understanding of the figure of the author and his masterwork, the novel*. This, I reveal, provides a new and useful language for reading contemporary fiction. More specifically, I suggest that certain writers, particularly those often placed under the umbrella of postmodernism and post-colonialism in particular, often self-reflexively problematise and thus utilise the storyteller in their fiction. Thus, *my concept of storyteller aims to present itself precisely as a unifying concept, albeit a tentative one, questioning the authority of the author and his role*.

The way I propose to do this is by showing how contemporary writers may engage with 'the storyteller' as 'narrator' and/or 'implied author' and/or with the oral storytelling tradition, which they may deploy either as a motif, a theme or a trope, within their fiction. One avenue of exploration concerns what characteristics the 'author' and 'storyteller' actually share. In addition, I discuss the idea of audience, looking at the relationship between storytellers and listeners, and authors and readers. As a result of these explorations, I reveal that what can be said about the 'storyteller', his discourse, 'storytelling' and his product, 'story', can also be applied to the 'author', to his discourse, 'narrative' and to his product, 'the fictional text', which leads to some surprising conclusions. My aim, then, is that in returning the storyteller to Literature, we recognise that stories and 'authors' do not come only from a closed textual world. Just as the written word and the oral word are linked, so

too are the writer and the storyteller. It is from this perspective that I propose the concept of *storyteller*, which I argue, is more in keeping with postmodern ideas surrounding authorship, truth and reality.

## INTRODUCTION

### TRACING THE STORYTELLER IN THEORY AND CRITICISM

[f. *story* n.1 + *teller*.] One who tells stories. 1. One who is accustomed to tell stories or anecdotes in conversation. 2. Euphemistically: A liar. colloq. 3. One whose business it is to recite legendary or romantic stories. 4. Applied to a writer of stories. 5. The teller of a particular story.

*OED*

As I set out in the preface, the premise of this thesis is to seek to establish a secure place for the storyteller in the reading of contemporary fiction. However, before I go on to look at what we mean by the word ‘storyteller’ and how it might be deployed as a means to read contemporary fiction, this introductory chapter seeks to contextualise the storyteller by tracing how he has appeared in literary criticism and theory. The chapter is divided into three parts, all of which take on a different focus but, when read in succession, serve to show that interest surrounding the storyteller is growing, even if there is little specific theorisation of this tendency. Part one begins by seeking to situate the storyteller and storytelling within the broad spectrum of literary theory. Here, I show that the idea of ‘telling stories’ has become more and more pervasive to the point where theorists from various fields have begun to further investigate its implications. The second part of this chapter, entitled “Where is the Storyteller?”, follows on from this examination and goes on to survey literary criticism more specifically, charting where and how the storyteller has been subsequently deployed within it. I show that there has been a growing interest in research surrounding the storyteller and his art of storytelling and, even if his appearance is not always explicit, that some of this research is supportive of my own investigations.

Finally, the third and concluding part of this introduction returns to, and subsequently re-examines, Walter Benjamin's seminal essay on the storyteller which remains, even today, one of the few to link the storyteller to the figure of the author. As one of the first and one of the few critics to write on the storyteller,<sup>1</sup> Benjamin thus offers a valuable starting place for introducing my argument about the storyteller's return. By looking at the influence and meaning of the essay and its place and reception in literary and academic criticism, I seek to discover whether there is a case for applying the idea of storyteller to a literary writer and whether the characteristics that Benjamin ascribes to Nikolai Leskov, his writer-storyteller, are applicable to other writers. In other words, I question: is Benjamin's a useful model for our concept of *storyteller* and if so, how and to what extent? My conclusions are followed by a brief schema of chapters where I set out how I embark on the readings of my selection of contemporary novels in the main body of the thesis.

### *I. The Literature Frame and the Problem of Theory*

The critic, forever searching to define literature, to enclose it within a structure, a canon or tradition, to 'explain' it and endow it with meaning must do so, according to Northrop Frye, by turning "to the conceptual framework of the historian for events and that of the philosopher for ideas."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the very existence of the 'science' of literary criticism enforces the fact that there is a need to relate literature to "a central expanding pattern of systematic comprehension."<sup>3</sup> However, is this truly possible when literature "is not itself an organised structure of knowledge",<sup>4</sup> when, as its very nature expresses, it is fictional and therefore mutable, unreliable and unreal? Is the critic's very quest for definition also partly fictional? And are the very definitions that he or she seeks, definitions which reside in the 'written' records of history, philosophy and in the literary world, reliable? Could they not also have one foot in the fictional world? If (s)he looks far back enough, the critic may find

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<sup>1</sup> Albeit reflecting on the works of the Russian essayist, novelist and short story writer, Nikolai Leskov.

<sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1973) 12.

<sup>3</sup> Frye, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Frye, 12.

that the very roots of history and philosophy reside in stories. Could (s)he then believe anything to be absolute and true?

Frye's own criticism of the lack of an all-encompassing principle of literary criticism as a science "whose principles can apply to the whole of literature and account for every type of critical procedure",<sup>5</sup> led him not only to return to Aristotle's idea of what constitutes 'poetics', but then to begin all over again by taking it upon himself to reinvent this "coordinating principle" in his highly original work, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Whether or not we wholly agree with Frye's subsequent attempt, the problem he identified still exists. Indeed, his bold endeavour was, although extremely enlightening, in a sense futile: can there *truly* be an all-encompassing organising principle of literary criticism? Where would the boundaries be? Where would we begin? And what about organising the complex nature of influences?

Surely then, the problem lies in the fact that we no longer believe in the frame. As supported tellingly by the 1999 film *The Matrix*,<sup>6</sup> we have begun to question our own role in relation to a frame, whether this is in terms of understanding our literature or our sciences, philosophies and religions.<sup>7</sup> Are we on the inside or the outside? Are we all that exists, or is there something else that *frames* us? Has the matrix really shaken our sense of the real? Are we the illusion? Inevitably, all this leads to the realisation that to attempt a definitive organisation of literary criticism is as problematic as the attempt at absolute organisation or classification of any 'episteme,' whether this be in the field of the humanities or sciences. In an era where we have seen the steady rise of the 'post-isms' – postmodernism, post-feminism and post-colonialism – and where poststructuralist readings have led texts deeper and deeper into a recursive analytical space, the notion of absolutes or indeed any such searches for definitions are sucked into an exhaustive interpretative vortex. Although some may argue that we have stopped

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<sup>5</sup> Frye, 14.

<sup>6</sup> *The Matrix*. Dir. Andy & Larry Wachowski. Perf. Keanu Reeves, Larry Fishburne. 1999. DVD. Warner Bros., 1999.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of how science, religion and narrative relate to each other *see*, Prickett, Stephen. *Narrative, Religion, and Science: Fundamentalism Versus Irony, 1700-1999*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.



trying to define the frame or indeed stopped worrying about it, in the end however, we cannot help but return to it. We are unable simply to write it out of existence; be it 'real' or yet another fictional construct, it still remains: obstinate, complete with its illusionary, blurred boundaries.

In this sense, it could be argued that by their very nature, all 'sciences' ultimately point back to a search for origins, for an absolute foundation, a 'right way' that is somehow 'correct' and 'true'; and one that can be taught as such. If not, what are we teaching? What are we searching for? Indeed, what is the point of argument or dialogue? Without a belief in foundations, we would have to reassess all epistemological pursuits as being equally valid and relevant. We would have to teach the framework relativism that would make it difficult to have any stable connection between a text and the world outside of it. Arguably, this *is* a version of the inevitable consequence of living in the postmodern condition and what the performative contradiction of the '-ism' is striving to express. How then do we go about returning to find the beginning?

Of course, origins are harder to determine the further back you go. Questions like, 'where do we come from?', 'where did our story begin?' and 'how do we understand what has happened to us?' inevitably feature in our origin quest. Whether we quote 'Big Bang Theory', 'The Theory of Evolution' or argue a belief in a creation story like 'Adam and Eve', we cannot 'absolutely' know our origins. In the end it may simply come down to a belief in or acceptance of a cultural tradition. However, it is also true that in order to move forwards into the future, we have always tried in some way or other to interpret and understand our past. Marx and Freud, as the great figures of modernity, also sought formulations for future constructs. Invariably, then, we have done this through stories and, as I seek to bring to light in this thesis, the storyteller is the key to both past, present and future, the storyteller as the 'original' narrator of stories both true *and* imaginary.

But who is the storyteller and where can we find him? In a broad sense, we could say that storytellers are 'everywhere' shape-shifting into various guises: priests, teachers, madmen, scientists. Storytellers are real people who invent and shape our experiences into 'understandable' pictures, into stories and 'truths'.

Through imagination and invention, storytellers present us with narratives which help us to make sense of the world and our lives. In fact, this idea of imaginative invention has been ascribed not only to writers of literature, or the oral storytellers of the world, but has also been ascribed to scientists by one of the first harbingers of 'postmodern science', the French theorist, Jean-Francois Lyotard. In his seminal work *The Postmodern Condition* (1979),<sup>8</sup> Lyotard argues that Quantum theory, and big bang cosmology have destabilized the 'truth-effect' of much of traditional realist science, and present science to us as 'narratives' of a kind. Moreover, we observe that Lyotard is not necessarily interested in the content of scientific knowledge but rather in its structures. Thus 'grand narratives' are contrasted with what he calls the 'little narratives' (*petits récits*) which, he argues, remain "the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science."<sup>9</sup> These 'little narratives' are another way of storytelling and thus, Lyotard, borrowing a phrase from P.B Medwar, sees the scientist as a person "who tells stories", in other words, a 'storyteller'. Following on from Lyotard's statement, Stephen Prickett observes that:

What Lyotard is admitting, in effect, here is that so far from science being a fundamentally different form of knowledge from narrative, the supposed 'objectivity' of science is in fact itself actually *composed* of a multitude of minor (and presumably 'subjective') narratives.<sup>10</sup>

From this point of view, we could say that rather than seeing science as a return to story, should we not rather recognise that 'story' has always been there at the heart of science?

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<sup>8</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. 1979. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984. Postmodernism has itself often come to be regarded as a recognition that there is nothing outside 'stories'. However, my interest is more in a tendency in postmodernism, first identified by Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending* (1967). Here he referred to stories that do not acknowledge their own status as stories as 'degenerate myths', dangerous discourses, passed off as truth, used to enclose seduce and gain power. What I am interested in here is the way that the return of the storyteller is itself a means of drawing attention to the provisional status of 'stories' and therefore to safeguard against their potential abuse as what Kermode calls 'degenerate myths'. In a sense, by returning to the storyteller as opposed to the author and thus emphasizing the status of 'story' as opposed to 'truth', we are returning to a more 'honest' representation of 'reality' whether this be within the 'real' or 'literary' realm. See Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. New York; London: O.U.P., 1967.

<sup>9</sup> Lyotard, 61.

<sup>10</sup> Prickett, 23.

The recent turn to evolutionary explanations of human behaviour has reinforced, from a scientific perspective, the significance of stories to human survival. Science itself has begun to take an interest in storytelling and the storyteller. For example, the American evolutionary theorist Stephen Jay Gould, tentatively argues that “our tendency to tell stories may be one of the *conditions* of consciousness and intelligence itself”, and that therefore “it is, quite simply, the way the human mind works.”<sup>11</sup> Mark Turner, who has served his apprenticeship in neural and cognitive science before moving into literary studies, has also tried to prove this link between cognition and storytelling in his highly original study, *The Literary Mind* (1996).<sup>12</sup> Turner’s central argument is premised on the idea that storytelling is linked to our fundamental cognitive process, to how our mind works. He states:

Narrative imagining – story – is the fundamental instrument of thought. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining. It is a literary capacity indispensable to human cognition in general. This is the first way in which the mind is essentially literary.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, Turner’s study is not the only one that proposes this link. Patrick Ryan notes that there are many disciplines that share an interest in storytelling which include “cognitive scientists and neuroscientists, and informational technology experts, including those who develop websites for distance learning, computer games, and artificial intelligence.”<sup>14</sup> Ryan identifies three further critics who adhere to this view. Firstly, the psychoanalyst Simon O. Lesser in his book *Fiction and the Unconscious* (1957) reiterates this view asserting:

By the time man learned to read and write, much of such wisdom as he had amassed was probably already cast in story form. He had evidently created – or evolved – stories which set forth his surmises [...]. It must have seemed natural to man [...] to turn to fiction for images of his experience, his wishes and fears. Fiction was probably among the earliest of his artifices.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Prickett, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Turner, Mark. *The Literary Mind*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Turner, 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> Ryan, 23.

<sup>15</sup> Lesser, Simon O. *Fiction and the Unconscious*. Beacon Press: Boston, 1957.

Lesser goes on to say that: “The frequency with which discourses fall into – or are deliberately given – a narrative model [...] suggests the hold that the mould has upon the human mind.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Jerome Bruner in his book *Acts of Meaning* (1990) finds this idea of “the human mind’s readiness or predisposition to organize experience into a narrative form, into plot structures and the rest [...] irresistible.”<sup>17</sup> Finally, much of Barbara Hardy’s research, from her 1975 study *Tellers and Listeners*,<sup>18</sup> through to one of her later studies *Shakespeare’s Storytellers* (1997),<sup>19</sup> clearly argues a case for storytelling and the storyteller. Again, Hardy builds on the premise that cognition and neuroscience suggest storytelling, in any form, is “a primary act of the mind.”<sup>20</sup>

More recently in his ground-breaking work *The Mind and its Stories* (2003),<sup>21</sup> Patrick Colm Hogan argues that there are profound, extensive, and surprising universals in literature and that these universals are connected to similar universals in emotion. Hogan reveals how debates over the cultural specificity of emotion have been misdirected, having largely disregarded a vast body of data that bears directly on the way different cultures imagine and experience emotion in literature. He says that emotions play such a vital role because they reinforce our capabilities to feel empathy and to learn from other persons’ experiences. One of the main reasons for this is that narration acts on our emotions in very particular ways, some of them so important that they have contributed to humankind’s survival, evolution, and development. He returns to the fact that storytelling, in all its manifestations, is probably as old as the human species and continues to perform a vital function in the quotidian experiences of people worldwide.

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<sup>16</sup> Lesser, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Jerome S. Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1990) 45-6.

<sup>18</sup> Hardy, Barbara Nathan. *Tellers and Listeners: The Narrative Imagination*. London: Athlone Press, 1975.

<sup>19</sup> Hardy, Barbara Nathan. *Shakespeare’s Storytellers: Dramatic Narration*. London: Peter Owen, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> Hardy, *Tellers* 4.

<sup>21</sup> Hogan, Patrick Colm. *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Clearly, then, the link between storytelling and survival is already proving to be quite compelling. Firstly, it seeks to propel humankind forward in all forms of knowledge whether it is in science, philosophy and/or history. Secondly, it seems to be an integral part of how our mind works and constructs reality through language, and finally, it acts on our emotional life as well. If the above studies are correct, it is no wonder that scientists, philosophers, theologians or rhetoricians have sought and continue to try to explain the world through 'story'. In this sense, it could be argued that it is in the figure of the storyteller that all these 'tellers' converge. The storyteller is the quintessential shape-shifter, one that encompasses all these figures whether we call them scientists, literary critics or fiction writers. The storyteller is *the archetypal figure*. This is one of the reasons why there has been a return to stories, storytelling, and a fascination with the figure of the storyteller within contemporary fiction, a return to this more fluid, less authoritative, trickster-other, the denouncer of the author-father. The storyteller returns to us the key to imagining the future and it is his fluid word which allows the spirit of inventiveness to re-enter the world of fiction.

In a sense, then, coming back to Frye, he may have been right in saying that all literary criticism leads back to philosophy and history. However much we try to escape it, we are all still trying to answer the question 'why does this all exist?' which then leads us to the secondary question, 'how to make sense of it?'. If we are not asking ourselves this, how then do we justify our positions, or indeed, how do we justify literary criticism? If stories are essentially versions and interpretations of the world we live in, what is literary criticism? Is it not an interpretation of an interpretation? And if there is no 'objective truth', if logic and reason fail us by giving way to an element of the imaginary, then we could simply be chasing strands of elusive meaning into an ever-yawning abyss. As Brian McHale argues in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1989),<sup>22</sup> the postmodern condition is one where epistemological concerns have opened onto profound ontological uncertainties. We have returned to doubt the epistemological foundations of the sciences we have created to question things. We are returning to the roots of being. As a result, it

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<sup>22</sup> McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1989.

seems as though our argument has come back full circle to the idea that science and thus perhaps all 'institutes of knowledge', those 'grand narratives' that we feel are ruled by logic and reason, have one foot in the sea of stories. And once subjective and objective realities blur, so too does the distinction between 'scientist' and 'storyteller'. Perhaps the 'true' scientist cannot help but recognise this phenomenon, one which is captured in Einstein's now-famous maxim, "imagination is more important than knowledge". If the boundaries are so blurred, however, where then does literature begin? Where is the 'literature frame'? Does it begin with writing or speaking? What makes it decidedly 'untrue' and thus 'fictional'? And if story is included in the 'literature frame', what differentiates it from its partner-opposite 'history'? Or is chasing the nature of 'Truth' that constitutes the problem?

My purpose here has not been to write on philosophical or historical principles, nor am I attempting to give absolute or even tentative definitions of either literature or criticism. Rather, my intention has been to begin with the idea that few boundaries are ever fixed, and certainly not those which constitute the frame of 'literature'. As a result, there might still be room to argue a case for the storyteller to find his place within the literature frame. Indeed, there have been ample warnings against turning literature into philosophy or for that matter, into history. Perhaps here we should heed Richard Rorty who states that "he is happy for philosophy to become criticism but not for criticism to become philosophy", as "it cannot justify itself in the traditional terms of philosophical universality and truth"<sup>23</sup> (if, indeed, we choose still to believe in universality and 'Truth' with a capital 'T'). From the point of view of literary criticism, it seems that it is precisely in our need to enter the 'truth arena' that literary boundaries become blurred.

As we have moved from modernism into postmodernism, from a nostalgic belief in universality and truth to a self-conscious questioning of them, criticism is becoming more aesthetic and with it literature (and art in general) more theoretical. Perhaps it is something in self-consciousness that makes literature into criticism, in other words, makes fiction into knowledge. And if we return to mimesis, to the idea

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<sup>23</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 13.

that 'art mirrors life', perhaps this 'blending' of art and theory reflects the wider blending and blurring of boundaries, and in so doing, returns us to the storyteller. For, if we no longer know who the critic and the author are, or what their positions are, and if it matters less than we thought it did, then perhaps the storyteller as archetypal figure could encompass them all. To lose the storyteller would be to return to God or to the idea of an all-knowing author whose 'Truth' might be hidden, but never questionable.

### Orality and Literacy

Since the 1960s, in particular, literary studies has developed into an ever-growing matrix of theories and criticisms. No-one has quite dared to take on what Northrop Frye attempted in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), which was to find "the coordinating principle", that magic elixir, which would hold all literature together in a kind of unified whole. It is undoubtedly true that theorists (that alien breed of "lemmings", that Harold Bloom referred to in his 1995 book *The Western Canon* (1994)<sup>24</sup>) have long since 'invaded', transforming the former race of 'critics' into a new breed. With the coming of what is now referred to as 'The Theory Revolution' of the 1970s, the very foundations of literary studies were challenged as theorists endlessly mutated, forging pathways which have taken them into disciplines as varied as anthropology, linguistics, cognitive science, and even, most recently, evolutionary biology.

One avenue of investigation was to trace the elusive line between the oral and the written, between speech and writing, which was re-opened in the 1960s with Eric A. Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963)<sup>25</sup> and later with Walter Ong's work, *Orality and Literacy* (1982).<sup>26</sup> Similarly, it is from such a starting point that this

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<sup>24</sup> Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York; London: Harcourt Brace, 1994.

<sup>25</sup> Havelock, Eric Alfred. *Preface to Plato*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1963. For a more in-depth view of the beginnings of what he calls 'the orality problem' and how research has viewed it, see Havelock, Eric Alfred. *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1986. Havelock, as in *Preface to Plato*, looks at the problems surrounding orality and literacy in Ancient Greece but then relates this to the present day and to contemporary scholarship.

<sup>26</sup> Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London and New York: Methuen, 1982.

thesis began, with the attempt to trace the gap between oral and written storytelling, between the 'oral' storyteller and the 'writerly' author. It seemed to me that in order to find the edges of literature, or 'the literature frame', it was to the written word that one would look for the key. However, in the quest to find answers, I found that, following Havelock, this debate can be traced back to none other than the birth of writing in the West, the foundations of philosophy in the Platonic dialogues.

One of Plato's fears was that writing could be disseminated as an absence. In other words, that, in writing, as the speaker was 'absent' from the text, he could not defend his words which could effectively then be forever open to misinterpretation.<sup>27</sup> Yet although Plato therefore seems to privilege 'oral engagement' or 'dialogue', because the speaker can defend and 'own' his words, he also recognised that, crucially, writing made possible the birth of rational philosophy in the West. Writing frees the mind from memory and allows it to develop analytic capacity. However, this relationship between speech and writing, origins and responsibility, was one that would never be resolved. Despite its positives, writing was dangerous: by dissipating responsibility it threw the origins of the text into question and in so doing it allowed the illusionists and rhetoricians to persuade people of false realities, to present false truths with potentially dangerous ethical consequences. Therefore, more than anything else, Plato feared writing in the hands of the poets. As illusionists, and tricksters, their truths were often deceptively convincing although not always ethically viable. Did not the devil himself seduce Eve with the power of a story? If poets were not properly 'policed' the very foundations of the Republic would crumble. Rhetoric coupled with the technology of writing was a potent weapon. It had the power not only to question belief systems, but also to knock established truths off their pedestals and shake the cornerstones of reality. Perhaps that is why Plato's ideal 'Republic' was never to be realised and doomed to failure. Arguably, this is still true today: we only have to look at the case of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) to realise the power of rhetoric to rock the foundations of a given religion or people's belief system, of how this can threaten established

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<sup>27</sup> See Plato's *Phaedrus* to read the dialogue between Phaedrus and Sophocles in which they discuss a written speech by the sophist Lysias and consequently the virtues of the written word over speech and myth, over reason and logic (*logos*).



'truths'. This may be but one example, but in it we can still see clearly why Plato's fear of writing might have been well-founded.

Over twenty years of scholarship have passed, but this debate about the dawn of speech and writing has continued to interest scholars. More recently, this speech-writing issue has been largely addressed in relation to Derridean deconstruction which has had a large impact on critical discussions of authority and authenticity, absence and presence. This thesis does not engage closely with Derrida, but reversing his preference for writing over speech, I will argue that such questioning of authority and authenticity might also be approached through the figure of the storyteller, rather than starting with his counterpart, the author. The storyteller, unlike the author, no longer has the 'authoritarian' stamp on him, and immediately this leads us to realise that his very nature suggests inauthenticity, trickery, and lies, as well as power. Perhaps it is this power that peeks up from under the cloak of what Walter Benjamin saw as his "wisdom".

Significantly written at the dawn of modern, institutionalised literary criticism, Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" (1936) heralds a concern with the disappearance of the storyteller in modernity. In so doing, it seems to mark the rise of author-criticism. In fact, since the time of its publication, debates surrounding authorship have taken centre-stage whereas Benjamin's storyteller has for long remained, for the most part, the disappearing figure that Benjamin lamented. In order to 'return' the storyteller to the realm of 'written' literary fiction, it seems evident that a closer analysis of his position in relation to the author is necessary. However, in the field of literary criticism and theory the term 'author' is already loaded with over fifty years of theory behind it. What exactly is it that differentiates the author from the storyteller? Is the relationship between author and storyteller *simply* a distinction between an oral teller and a written teller of stories or can the difference be something more dynamic? Instead of only focusing on what differentiates them, I want to propose that it might be more interesting to explore what brings them together. What characteristics do the author and the storyteller share? Do these terms have a specific meaning, a purposeful one, or can they be

interchangeable? And how can an understanding of the relationship between author and storyteller aid us in our understanding of contemporary fiction?

Rather than launch into more specific aspects of these debates at this point, what seems more pertinent is the question: *why* do so many influential thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes<sup>28</sup> engage with the problem of authorship? What draws them to this area? One answer to this question again points to the tracing of origins, and in this instance, we return to the origins of the written word. We are told in the bible that creation begins with the 'word' (*logos*) but is this word oral or written? Is it authorial, as God's, or fluid, like the Devil's? Is the author really a 'god' in control of his 'creation' and thus a harbinger of truth or, is he more of a 'devil', a liar, a 'trickster', who manipulates us with nothing more than beguiling words? If he is the former, what creates his authority? And if he is the latter, why do we call him 'author'? Does this name, *author*, not give us a false sense of authority? Why not simply call him *storyteller*, which has no such connotation? Indeed, we could go on to ask: is it the written word that dupes us into false belief, or is it simply the nature of fiction? In this postmodern age where boundaries between truth and lies are becoming more and more blurred, the nature of fiction is indeed itself proving to be more and more ambiguous.

Although these opening remarks may seem to skirt around 'big questions' without really getting to the core of anything, I want to stress that this is precisely my point. Are literary critics able to find truths in 'Literature' which stand up to those giants, the philosophers and theologians? And if 'Literature' *is* capable of bearing us fruit from the tree of knowledge, where does this come from: from the Devil or God, the storyteller or the Author? Postmodernism, as we have seen, has tended to call everything a 'story' – philosophy, history, theology, science – so who then is the storyteller? Are we all tellers of stories? Waugh reminds us of Stanley Fish's comments:

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<sup>28</sup> For an interesting collection of essays surrounding authorship and its changes from the time of Plato, see Burke, Seán. *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern, A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995.

Theory has flourished because literary critics have been given the freedom of expression to say whatever they like within the confines of their particular language game and whether feminists, or Marxists, or deconstructionists, can proclaim the death of God, the End of Philosophy, the death of the author, the subject, the phallus, or whatever until they are blue in the face. [...However,] they are entirely disabled from making good such claims in the world outside the literary academy.<sup>29</sup>

It is with a 'happy' awareness that I am to some degree involved in 'a language game' that I proceed to tell my own story of the storyteller. Tracing his story has taken me on a very interesting journey and one that this thesis aims to retell.

## *II. The Case of Literary Criticism*

Since Walter Benjamin's seminal essay on the storyteller was published in 1936, the use of the story and the critical interest in it have been diverse. Before going on to look at this essay specifically, I want to pause and briefly survey how the storyteller has appeared in literary criticism to date.

To begin with, although there is still an ever-present debate surrounding theories of authorship in contemporary fiction, the storyteller does not feature as a main contender. In studies of contemporary fiction, literary critics most often use the word 'storyteller' loosely as well as using its partner term 'storytelling' to similar effect. One often finds academic articles that discuss 'storytelling' as an aspect of a particular novel, as if storytelling has a nature that is not the same as that of novelistic (written) discourse. This might be true if we were able to clearly understand what was meant by the term *storytelling*. In fact, storytelling is often referred to and applied by these critics as if it were a special discourse, but with a little probing one finds there is no real consensus about what it really is. Moreover, the storyteller as the implicit figure behind the art of storytelling is scarcely mentioned, nor is it safe to say that all novels that express the elusive 'storytelling' claim their writers as storytellers.

Let us consider a few examples to illustrate this. Firstly, the word 'storyteller' might feature in the title of a work on a particular writer, for example

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<sup>29</sup> Qtd. in Waugh, *Theory and Criticism* 31.

this could be a work of critical essays, or indeed a (critical) biography. Dawn Trouard's collection of essays entitled *Eudora Welty: Eye of the Storyteller* (1985)<sup>30</sup> is one such example. Apart from scholarly essays on various books and aspects of Welty's fiction, it contains nothing specific on what is meant by the title 'storyteller', or on what is meant by 'aspects of storytelling' which actually features in only one of the titles of its collection of essays.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Judith Thurman's acclaimed biography of Isak Dinesen (alias Karen Blixen) entitled, *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller* (1995)<sup>32</sup> and Kenneth Kaleta's critical biography *Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial Storyteller* (1998)<sup>33</sup>, although useful studies of these particular authors and their work, do not specifically engage with the concept of *storyteller* in their readings.

Conversely, Braulio Muñoz's *A Storyteller: Mario Vargas Llosa Between Barbarism and Civilization* (2000)<sup>34</sup> does have some engagement with the meaning of 'storyteller', but this is by no means the main thrust of the work. Muñoz looks mainly at Vargas Llosa's engagement with 'storyteller' in relation to his novel of the same name, entitled *The Storyteller* (1989), which actually uses the concept of 'universal' or archetypal storyteller in its very theme and direction.<sup>35</sup> Vargas Llosa's novel similarly inspires Jean O'Bryant-Knight's study of the author entitled *The Story of the Storyteller* (1995)<sup>36</sup>, but again, the impetus for her argument is less the desire to examine the storyteller *per se*, than to trace the connection between Vargas Llosa's varying writings.

There are, however, a few studies that do look more specifically at the concept of storyteller. Blair Labatt's book on Faulkner, entitled *Faulkner the*

<sup>30</sup> Trouard, Dawn. *Eudora Welty: Eye of the Storyteller*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1989.

<sup>31</sup> Le Pitavy-Souques, Dani. "Of Suffering and Joy: Aspects of Eudora Welty's Short Fiction." *Eudora Welty: Eye of the Storyteller*. Ed. Dawn Trouard (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1989) 142-50.

<sup>32</sup> Thurman, Judith. *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller*. New York, N.Y.: St Martin's Press, 1982.

<sup>33</sup> Kaleta, Kenneth C. *Hanif Kureishi: Postcolonial Storyteller*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998.

<sup>34</sup> Muñoz, Braulio. *A Storyteller: Mario Vargas Llosa between Civilization and Barbarism*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000.

<sup>35</sup> I give a reading of Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *The Storyteller* (1989) in chapter 3.

<sup>36</sup> O'Bryant-Knight, Jean. *The Story of the Storyteller: La Tía Julia Y El Escribidor, Historia De Maya, and El Hablador by Mario Vargas Llosa*. Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Ropdopi, 1995.

*Storyteller* (2005),<sup>37</sup> is one of these, in that he looks at the notion of an implied teller behind the tale. Labatt explores how Faulkner's use of plot creates an implied voice that lends a humorous element to his story's twists and turns that often brackets and encloses the pathos of his characters.<sup>38</sup> However, this study is limited to Faulkner and has nothing to say about contemporary writers or an emerging trend. Ivan Kreilkamp's very recent study *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (2005)<sup>39</sup> does look at the storyteller as a trend, and is the only study I have found to date that does so specifically, but it does not look at contemporary fiction or apply it to fiction outside Britain.<sup>40</sup> Finally, in a study entitled *Interactive Fictions: Scenes of Storytelling in the Novel* (2003),<sup>41</sup> Yael Halevi-Wise traces interactive storytelling scenes in various works which span works of fiction from the seventeenth century to the present day. She examines dramatized storytelling scenes in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605), Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759), Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1803), Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857), Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), Yehoshua's *Mr. Mani* (1992), and Esquivál's *Like Water for Chocolate* (1990), demonstrating how dramatized arguments about storytelling open a window on social and generic dilemmas affecting the narrative of each novel at the time of its composition. Halevi-Wise has discovered 'storytelling' within these novels, but she fails to take the next step of relating the figure of the storyteller to that of the author.

Another study which supports and overlaps with certain parts of my research is Irene Kacandes' *Talk Fiction* (2000).<sup>42</sup> In her study, Kacandes does concentrate on contemporary fiction and culture, but her focus is more cultural and pragmatic in that she sees in contemporary societies a rise in secondary orality which has

<sup>37</sup> Labatt, Blair. *Faulkner the Storyteller*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005.

<sup>38</sup> This idea has links with my notion of storyteller as an implied narrator and with Ryan's idea of the 'storyteller persona', which I discuss in more detail in chapter 2 / 9.

<sup>39</sup> Kreilkamp, Ivan. *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

<sup>40</sup> I discuss this study in the section below in more detail. This is not to say that there is not an argument for seeing the 'storyteller' in non-contemporary fiction, but that the engagement with storyteller would need to be read with the implications of the time and context in which the novel was written, as Kreilkamp's study proves.

<sup>41</sup> Halevi-Wise, Yael. *Interactive Fictions: Scenes of Storytelling in the Novel*. London: Praeger, 2003.

<sup>42</sup> Kacandes, Irene. *Talk Fiction: Literature and the Talk Explosion*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001.

engendered a culture of 'call' and 'response'. Kacandes argues that this has been translated into contemporary literature, arguing that certain novels reflect this tendency to "talk" and she accordingly labels her approach "talk fiction". She divides this concept of "talk fiction" into four main modes: storytelling, testimony, apostrophe and interactivity. Where Kacandes's research most closely supports my study is in her description of a mode of 'storytelling'. However, the impetus for her study comes out of reader-response theories, rather than a focus on debates surrounding authorship as in my own study. As a result, she does not highlight the storyteller as such, but uses storytelling to promote her idea of "talk".

Turning now to critical essays, these again provide varied results. There are a few critical essays which take Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" as a starting point from which to read other novels than those discussed in this thesis (which I discuss in more detail in the section below on Benjamin). Of those few who have used Benjamin's essay to address and read contemporary fiction, none has developed the concept of storyteller and applied to it a broader spectrum of writers. Typical of this is Pilar Hidalgo's "Memory and Storytelling in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*", which provides a reading of the novel but one in which the "storytelling" mentioned in the title does not actually feature as a concept in the essay itself. Indeed, what often emerges from a review of critical essays, is that despite the fact that these critics have identified the motif of storytelling in an author's work or works, at best these readings remain focused either on a particular work, or on a writer's *oeuvre* in general, and they fail to address more theoretical or ontological issues about storytellers and authors.

On the other hand, there are essays which do talk about 'story-telling', 'tale-telling' and 'fairy-tale telling' and which bear on questions concerning the line between oral and written telling. However, the readings of novels that have consistently been identified with oral traditions often emerge out of cultures where the oral tradition is still dominant. For example, much work has been done on the relationship between oral and written tales in relation to first world, postcolonial literatures (as is evident in Native American fiction and African fiction, in particular) and this is a growing field. One example of this, in the field of Native

American Literature, is Blanca Schorcht's *Storied Voices in Native American Texts: Harry Robinson, Thomas King, James Welch and Leslie Marmon Silko* (2003).<sup>43</sup> Schorcht's study is very much focused on the relationship and transformation of the Native American oral storytelling tradition and its 'translation' into the Western novel tradition. Some of the questions she asks are valuable in terms of the relationship between oral and written modes and the question of how the storyteller relates to the author. However, this study tends to focus on 'native' literature and its transformation and relationship to an ongoing indigenous oral narrative from which it takes its starting point. As a result, it has no real focus on the storyteller as a unifying concept, if at all. The implication is that, as the novel, its discourse, and novelists, emerge out of a 'Western' Imperialist tradition, then they mutate in direct opposition to the stories, oral discourse and oral storytellers that are coming out of the 'tribal' and 'oral' storytelling tradition of the Native Americans. Thus, Native American novelists are understood in terms of their 'otherness' vis-à-vis 'Western' novelists.

Although Schorcht's points are valid within this field, I think a more interesting avenue of investigation would be to explore the blending of the traditions of the novel and oral storytelling, both in and outside of 'native' cultures, looking at these together in terms of their similarities as well as their differences. What we find more often than not is that these readings tend to bifurcate into those framed by discourses of postcolonialism on the one hand, and those of postmodernism on the other. My question is: are we not pigeon-holing here? Although I risk sounding 'anti-theorist', can we not perhaps move away from or even change the 'posts'? Rather than focusing on 'otherness' can we not look instead at 'likeness'? Instead of an argument, can we not see fiction as a conversation? Are *all* novelists coming out of a 'western' novelist tradition still writing in imperialist, colonial terms? Could they in turn be moving away from the 'traditional' focus of the novel and instead be returning to the 'oral' 'tribal' storytellers that still exist in cultures such as the Native Americans? Of course, this is not an attack on Schorcht, who is simply writing

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<sup>43</sup> Schorcht, Blanca. *Storied Voices in Native American Texts: Harry Robinson, Thomas King, James Welch, and Leslie Marmon Silko*. New York; London: Routledge, 2003.

within her field of Native American Literature, but this is precisely my point. Why do these have to be such closed fields?

Similarly, other Native American writers are read through the impetus of storytelling or through attention to oral and written modes. The most prominent of these is Leslie Marmon Silko, who is often read in relation to 'storytelling' and who, like Vargas Llosa, has also written a book titled *Storyteller* (1981). Silko's *Storyteller* is not a novel, but rather a strange mix of folktales, poetry and autobiography. Essays by Dharma Thornton Hernandez<sup>44</sup> and Paul Lorenz<sup>45</sup> look at how *Storyteller* draws on many of the oral stories of the native Laguna people, where Silko grew up. Looking at Silko and other Native American writers in terms of storytelling is thus in one sense a given, as this is what these writers engage with specifically. As a result, other essays on Silko are often read through a relationship with storytelling,<sup>46</sup> but again these do not specifically look at the storyteller *per se*, or look at it from a wider perspective.

Other studies that link oral storytelling traditions to literature are commonly found in relation to African writers. One such example is Pietro Deandrea's study *Fertile Crossings: Metamorphoses of Genre in Anglophone West African Literature* (2002).<sup>47</sup> Deandrea pools evidence that links the African oral traditions which also reflect on folklore, shamanism and storytelling. He shows how certain writers use material from the oral traditions which reflect aspects of their work, not only in the rhymes and rhythms of the texts but also in their themes and performances. Similarly, Ato Quayson's study<sup>48</sup> on Nigerian writing looks particularly at orality and history in the works of Reverend Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri. Quayson's basic claim is that the myths, rituals, songs, stories, and other oral and

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<sup>44</sup> Hernandez, Dharma Thornton. "Storyteller: Revising the Narrative Schematic." *Pacific Coast Philology* 31.1 (1996): 54-67.

<sup>45</sup> Paul H. Lorenz, "The Other Story of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*," *South Central Review* 8.4 (1991): 59.

<sup>46</sup> See, Gilderhus, Nancy. "The Art of Storytelling in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*." *The English Journal* 83.2 (1994): 70-2. Velikova, Roumiana. "Leslie Marmon Silko: Reading, Writing, and Storytelling." *MELUS* 27.3 (2002): 57-74.

<sup>47</sup> Deandrea, Pietro. *Fertile Crossings: Metamorphoses of Genre in Anglophone West African Literature*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002.

<sup>48</sup> Quayson, Ato. *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Orality & History in the Work of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka & Ben Okri*. Oxford: James Currey, 1997.



religious materials of the Yoruba people provide resources from which a modern written literature was created according to the needs of each period and writer. However, both these studies again reflect the tendency to look at the literature from a particular perspective, in this case through issues about race and nation and the construction of an African Literature, rather than more specifically through the development of a theoretical account of storytelling and the storyteller.

Storytelling aspects of contemporary novels can thus manifest themselves simply through an engagement with oral tales as a means of continuing and re-creating the memories of the tribal, or minority culture or community, as with many post-colonial literatures. In terms of Anglo-European Literature, storytelling aspects of novels usually come out of a link to folk traditions, particularly that of the fairy-tale. In the field of postmodern fiction and feminist fiction, in particular, the interest in folktales and fairy-tales of many contemporary writers (mainly female) has engendered a number of critical studies. This area of research either focuses on one or more authors or gives readings of individual works as for example, Cristina Bacchilega's *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (1999)<sup>49</sup> and Susan Sellers' *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (2001).<sup>50</sup> Both look at fairy-tales not as children's literature but within the broader context of folklore and literary studies. For example, Bacchilega's study focuses on the narrative strategies through which women are portrayed in four case studies: Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood, Beauty and the Beast, and Bluebeard, which she uses to trace the oral sources of each tale. Bacchilega offers provocative interpretations of contemporary versions of fairy-tales by Angela Carter, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, Margaret Atwood, and Tanith Lee, and explores the ways in which the tales are transformed in film, television, and musicals. On the other hand, Sellers explores contemporary women's rewritings of myth and fairy-tale, examining the nature and role of myth. She reviews existing theories in an attempt to explain the ongoing potency of mythical paradigms in contemporary

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<sup>49</sup> Bacchilega, Cristina. *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

<sup>50</sup> Sellers, Susan. *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. Basingstoke, Hants: Palgrave, 2001.

women's fiction, despite the distorted images of gender they frequently present. Similarly, Sellers offers a series of readings of texts by a range of contemporary women writers whose fictions draw on, interrogate, or otherwise rework mythic models, including those of A.S. Byatt, Michele Roberts and Angela Carter. These writers would be interesting to look at through the storyteller lens, but as yet, these readings have not engaged with this idea specifically, and have only approached storytelling through the fairy-tale genre.

Similarly, there are numerous essays on Angela Carter and the fairy-tale, in special issue journals<sup>51</sup> and a number of critical books dedicated to specific writers, such as Sharon Rose Wilson's work on Margaret Atwood entitled *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (1993),<sup>52</sup> Danielle Roemer and Bacchilega's *Angela Carter and the Fairy-Tale* (2001),<sup>53</sup> as well as Rosemary Fiander's *Fairy-Tales and the Fiction of Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble and A.S. Byatt* (2004).<sup>54</sup> However, again, although these studies look at the fairy-tale as genre, they do not look at the *storyteller* in relation to this or to these authors. Moreover, one could go as far as to say that there seems to be a tendency towards 'pigeonholing' a certain type of contemporary 'female' author as simply feminist and/or postmodernist re-writers of fairy-tales without looking at them in a broader perspective.

Elizabeth Wanning Harries' study, *Twice Upon a Time, Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale* (2001)<sup>55</sup> and Donald Haase's edited collection of essays *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (2004),<sup>56</sup> perhaps most clearly exemplify this tendency. Although Harries attempts a trans-historical perspective, her work still looks at the fairy-tale from an exclusively gendered and genre perspective which fails to engage with the broader issues about oral storytelling.

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<sup>51</sup> For example, for a special issue on Angela Carter, see, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 14.3: 1994.

<sup>52</sup> Wilson, Sharon Rose. *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993.

<sup>53</sup> Roemer, Danielle M., and Cristina Bacchilega, eds. *Angela Carter and the Fairy-Tale*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001.

<sup>54</sup> Fiander, Lisa M. *Fairy-Tales and the Fiction of Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble, and A.S. Byatt*. New York: Peter Lang, 2004.

<sup>55</sup> Harries, Elizabeth Wanning. *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*. Princeton, N.J.; Chichester: Princeton University Press, 2001.

<sup>56</sup> Haase, Donald, ed. *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004.

Similarly, Haase's collection of essays takes a global look at the fairy-tale, with essays that concentrate on the fairy-tale from India to Europe, and from the sixteenth century to modern day cinema, but again it is reviewed as part of a very specific area of research: fairy-tales and women's studies.

It is encouraging that the fairy-tale has been highlighted in these studies and that links between oral and written storytelling have been heightened, and it is always heartening to see female authors being given much deserved critical attention. However, it is a pity that none of these critics seeks to extend analysis into the figure of the storyteller as a motif in contemporary fiction as a whole. More recently, however, Stephen Benson's study, *Cycles of Influence: Fiction, Folktale, Theory* (2003),<sup>57</sup> represents more of a move away from these revisionist views of fairy-tales exclusively centred on female writers, and looks more broadly at the folktale and traces its influence in contemporary literature through readings of writers such as Italo Calvino, John Barth and Robert Coover.

One other disciplinary discourse that relates to the study of the storyteller is that of narratology. However, these studies tend towards an exclusive concern with narrative as a discourse rather than the relation between the figure that creates and the figure who narrates it. For example, classics in this field are Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg's *The Nature of Narrative* (1966),<sup>58</sup> Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980),<sup>59</sup> Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* (1980)<sup>60</sup> and Steven Cohan and Linda Shires' *Telling Stories* (1988),<sup>61</sup> all of which look at ways in which narrative is constructed. More recently, Monika Fludernik's *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996),<sup>62</sup> looks more specifically at the relationship between oral and written narrative but her work has a more theoretical linguistic thrust. Barbara

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<sup>57</sup> Benson, Stephen. *Cycles of Influence: Fiction, Folktale, Theory*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003.

<sup>58</sup> Scholes, Robert, and Robert Kellogg. *The Nature of Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.

<sup>59</sup> Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.

<sup>60</sup> Chatman, Seymour Benjamin. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.

<sup>61</sup> Cohan, Steven, and Linda M. Shires. *Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

<sup>62</sup> Fludernik, Monika. *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Hardy's early work *Tellers and Listeners* (1977)<sup>63</sup> is perhaps the only study of this kind that comes close to my own in its focus, offering readings of various novels, mainly from the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries. Although not explicitly using the word 'storyteller', Hardy does look closely at the relationship between telling and listening to stories in fiction, which implicitly foregrounds the storyteller. Interestingly, Hardy seems to have continued her interest in this area, a fact that can be seen in her more recent study entitled *Shakespeare's Storytellers* (1997).<sup>64</sup> Here she considers the art of dramatic narration and looks at the way in which Shakespeare's narrators essentially 'tell their stories'. Similarly, Bakhtin's idea of 'dialogism', highlighted in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981)<sup>65</sup> and in *Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984)<sup>66</sup>, is useful when looking at the author as storyteller, (and I draw on these various parts of this thesis), but again do not specifically discuss the storyteller *per se*.

One idea developed initially within Russian Formalism and that seems to lend itself in part to my ideas is *skaz*, a term denoting a type of narrative technique, which emphasizes oral speech, and is seen to imitate a spontaneous oral account in its use of dialect, slang, and the peculiar idiom of a persona who is often a lower class, lesser educated, provincial (or regional) narrator. *Skaz* comes from the Russian word *skazat* (to tell) and was adopted by the Formalist school of Russian literary criticism in the years just before the Revolution and might comprise an entire work, or an embedded portion. In the sense that it highlights the aspect of telling stories in the person of an 'oral' narrator, *skaz* does in part link with my conception of the storyteller. This type of technique was distinguished and explicated in essays by, among others, Boris Eichenbaum and its most notable practitioners were identified as nineteenth-century writers Gogol and Leskov.<sup>67</sup> The term *skaz* has made at least

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<sup>63</sup> C.f. see footnote 18 of this chapter.

<sup>64</sup> C.f. see footnote 19 of this chapter.

<sup>65</sup> Bakhtin, M. M., and M. Holquist. Ed. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

<sup>66</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, and Caryl Emerson. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

<sup>67</sup> For a classic essay on *skaz*, see, Eichenbaum, Boris. "How the 'Overcoat' Is Made." *Gogol from the Twentieth Century: Eleven Essays*. Ed. Robert A. McGuire. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.

occasional appearances in critical studies of narrative written in English from the later part of the twentieth century: Marie Maclean, in *Narrative as Performance* (1988), refers to the unskilled everyday tale or *skaz*,<sup>68</sup> while Wallace Martin in *Recent Theories of Narrative* (1986) alludes to *skaz* as stories that involve a tale-teller speaking to an audience.<sup>69</sup> However, there are signs of increasing interest in the idea of *skaz*. At a conference I attended at St. Andrew's University in July 2006 called "Sound Effects: The Oral/Aural Dimensions in Literature", there were two papers (as yet unpublished) that used *skaz* as a means of reading contemporary fiction in English. The first of these was presented by Grzegorz Maziarczyk whose paper examined the uses of *skaz* in works as diverse as Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993), Martin Amis' *Money* (1984), Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1988) and Patrick McGrath's *The Grotesque* (1990) among others.<sup>70</sup> These are novels in which the narrator shares demotic qualities of voice with his characters and therefore appears to renounce claims to authority. The second paper was presented by Mariangela Palladino, who made specific links between *skaz* and Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992), looking at the ideas of speech and sound as designated in the novel.<sup>71</sup>

On the whole, then, a survey of the field shows that although there *are* many contemporary novels that engage explicitly with storytelling and the storyteller, the links between these have hardly been investigated or identified as a trend by literary critics. Professional storyteller and cultural critic Patrick Ryan has noted that even within cultural studies, 'storytelling' has, up until very recently, not been taken seriously by critics. He claims that this is due either to storytelling being ignored, or

<sup>68</sup> Maclean, Marie. *Narrative as Performance: The Baudelairean Experiment*. London: Routledge, 1988.

<sup>69</sup> Martin, Wallace. *Recent Theories of Narrative*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

<sup>70</sup> Maziarczyk, Grzegorz. "Skaz Rules: (Re) Oralisation of Contemporary Fiction in English." Paper presented at *Sound Effects: Oral/Aural Dimensions of Literatures in English*. University of St. Andrews, 5-8 July 2006. Maziarczyk has published a book on the narratee which in part relates to the idea of the implied listener-reader and which, again, could prove useful when looking at the storyteller. See, Maziarczyk, Grzegorz. *The Narratee in Contemporary British Fiction: A Typological Study*. Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 2005.

<sup>71</sup> A version of this paper was given at the conference above but is also available on the internet at this address. See, Palladino, Mariangela. "Sound and Sign in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*". 2006. Unpublished Academic Paper. University of Strathclyde. 11 November 2006.  
<[http://64.233.183.104/search?q=cache:RavFzB58u\\_kJ:www.strath.ac.uk/ecloga/Sound%2520%26%2520Sign%2520in%2520Jazz.doc+Mariangela+palladino&hl=en&gl=uk&ct=clnk&cd=2](http://64.233.183.104/search?q=cache:RavFzB58u_kJ:www.strath.ac.uk/ecloga/Sound%2520%26%2520Sign%2520in%2520Jazz.doc+Mariangela+palladino&hl=en&gl=uk&ct=clnk&cd=2)>.

to its meaning being taken for granted. He asserts that of “the few scholarly publications remarking upon storytelling [most were] technical manuals, still the most common written discourse *about* storytelling.”<sup>72</sup> Amassing his evidence from a variety of critics,<sup>73</sup> Ryan points out that:

No language was established to quantify and qualify its development, neither was its history consistently considered or portrayed. Perhaps this was because of its ubiquitous nature, or because rare reports mostly describe it as the activity of women, children, and the elderly: being an activity of the marginalised, storytelling was considered unworthy of serious study.<sup>74</sup>

Like Ryan, I believe that we can usefully draw from the many different areas of current research on ‘storytelling’, and the complex relationship between them, in order to come to a fuller understanding of its function, role and place in contemporary culture. Literature is one important expression of this. As it stands, however, what we are seeing in literary studies is similarly the case in cultural studies. Ryan goes on to say that the lack of serious critical interest in storytelling was compounded by a “lack of an accurate historiography of storytelling, and a reliance upon a selective, mythologized, Romantic view of storytelling, more stereotypical than real.”<sup>75</sup> It is precisely this Romantic view of storytelling that is often adumbrated when it is applied to literary fiction. The actual storyteller is more often ignored within literary studies because of his association with oral telling. But even within cultural studies, we can see that the storyteller has also been largely ignored.

One of the few to identify this trend is A.S. Byatt, who points to this “interest in storytelling and thinking about storytelling” in an essay entitled “Old Tales, New Forms”.<sup>76</sup> Here she notes her seemingly chance discovery of the storytelling trend when she was appointed chairman of judges for the presentation of the European Literature prize in 1990. After reading a number of novels that had been put forward for this prize, she says “I realised I had discovered a pattern of forms and ideas new

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<sup>72</sup> Ryan, 1.

<sup>73</sup> See Ryan for references.

<sup>74</sup> Ryan, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Ryan, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Byatt, A. S. *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2000.

at least to me – and at the same times as old as Western Literature.”<sup>77</sup> Although Byatt happened to read enough books, one after the other, to identify this ‘trend’, the pattern is hardly new. As a critic and writer herself, she was in a unique position to write about it in essay-form, as well as use this new-found ‘interest in storytelling’ as a concept that she could investigate further through her own writing.<sup>78</sup> But Byatt, particularly as a writer, is not alone in her interest in storytelling and (less directly) the figure of the storyteller. Storytelling is old, older than Western Literature. Walter Benjamin was perhaps one of the first to highlight this fact. I will now turn to examine his seminal essay on the storyteller.

### *III. Interpreting Benjamin’s “The Storyteller”*

In 1936, on the eve of the Second War World, while Adolf Hitler was opening the eleventh Olympic Games in Berlin, far from the hometown he had recently fled, Walter Benjamin published an essay on a figure that he saw as disappearing: the storyteller, an archetypal figure that he saw present in the writer Nikolai Leskov.

Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller in his living immediacy is by no means a present force. He has already become something remote from us and something that is getting ever more distant.<sup>79</sup>

However, to a reader who, directed by the full title “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov”, might be expecting the essay to have a purely ‘literary’ focus, it proves highly ambiguous. Although the first lines of the essay conform to this reader’s expectations in that both ‘the storyteller’ and ‘Leskov’ are mentioned, by the end of the first paragraph both Leskov and the figure he is said to represent seem to fade away, both literally and metaphorically. He states: “To present someone like Leskov as a storyteller does not mean bringing him closer to us but, rather, increasing our distance from him.”<sup>80</sup> Instead, the storyteller that Benjamin sees in Leskov reads more like an elegy, a lament to a dying age, than an

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<sup>77</sup> Byatt, *On Histories* 123.

<sup>78</sup> Chapters 8 and 9 of this thesis examine Byatt’s use of storytelling in a story entitled “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye”, and discuss how her awareness of storytelling has shaped her work in general.

<sup>79</sup> Benjamin, 83.

<sup>80</sup> Benjamin, 83.

exegesis of the works of a writer. Although Leskov had died in 1895, we feel that it is not his death that Benjamin is lamenting, but rather it is Leskov as the personification of the storyteller that he mourns. Benjamin's lament for the death of the storyteller as present in Leskov is of such import that from the first paragraph he claims that his disappearance marks the end of an era in the history of man and his stories.

The art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is 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.<sup>81</sup>

From here on, the focus seems to shift from Leskov and the storyteller to the beginnings of a warning whose dark shadow continues to sweep over the essay in huge waves. For held in the figure of the storyteller and his art of storytelling, Benjamin would go on to lay claim to a phenomenon that was so profound that it marked "the end of not only the external world but of the modern world as well."<sup>82</sup> Astonishingly, such a huge and immeasurable claim as the above is not only the norm in the essay that follows, but is reinforced to such a large degree as to render the purpose of the essay on Leskov and 'the storyteller' illustrative of a larger and more sinister phenomenon. As the reader is led deeper into the pathways of Benjamin's thought, a picture begins to emerge that could be described as moving between the poles of, at worst the 'terrifying', or at best the 'nostalgic'.

Benjamin's lament incorporates both the storyteller and his art of storytelling, an art which he seems to champion over others, endowing it with features so highly praised that, were they stronger, they may have threatened the very foundations of the novelistic canon. Moreover, this lament seems irreversible; the storyteller does not seem capable of being saved. According to Benjamin, he has already been pushed out by the bolder, stronger other, by that 'individualist' bully otherwise known as 'The Author'. In this story-less time, there is little room for the romantic plea that perhaps underlies his yearning for the storyteller to stay, as there

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<sup>81</sup> Benjamin, 83.

<sup>82</sup> Benjamin, 84.



is no doubt that the rough finger of blame is firmly pointed at the author-novelist and his duplicitous partner-in-crime, the reader. Unlike the storyteller's partner the listener, whose main inclination was to repeat the story he heard (thus creating a context for the communicability of experience and the passing on of a story's ultimate purpose to counsel), the reader is fuelled by a desire to 'possess' the text. A dirty picture of the novelist's 'other' emerges: the reader is a jealous creature and, like an illicit lover, is driven by the author's careful promise of 'individual gain', fired by suspense, at once consumed and consuming, guarding the story as his own.

As we can see, Benjamin's claims surrounding the storyteller take on almost mythic proportions. The storyteller's image is surrounded by an aura that elevates him to almost angelic heights: a 'righteous' hero whose dying signals the loss of 'wisdom' not only for an age but for all mankind. For Benjamin, then, it appears that the oral storyteller faded into obscurity with the birth of print culture and the rupture created by the scars of a cruel and inorganic modernity. However, does the rise of the novel bring about the fall of the storyteller? More importantly, is the novel really the child of the author or could the storyteller still be hiding somewhere in the shadows? Although Benjamin's essay does clearly insist on the storyteller's disappearance, what is perhaps surprising is that it remains one of the few to link the storyteller to the figure of the author, even today. Despite its continuing appearance in collections of literary criticism and theory, thus claiming a place of importance in literary history, Benjamin's application of 'storyteller' to a literary author has remained to date relatively unquestioned. Why is this? Why has the storyteller, at least within the field of literary criticism, remained mostly absent?

This essay, as I have noted above, stands almost alone in its interpretation and focus on the figure of the storyteller. What is singular about it, and what is of interest for this thesis, is Benjamin's application of the concept 'storyteller' to describe a writer of *literary* works. Of course, his writer of choice was the Russian journalist, novelist and short story writer, Nikolai Leskov, whose name in the subtitle clearly indicates that he is also considered to be a 'storyteller'. However, it is with Leskov that Benjamin's application of the word begins and ends and accordingly, it is here where I take my point of departure: what is it about the

storyteller that Benjamin thinks is of note in order to identify a writer with him? Considering the storyteller is a figure that lays claim to the oral or opposed to the written tradition of telling stories (Literature), I believe this fact is worthy of investigation. What characteristics make a writer a storyteller and why then do they begin and end in this essay? Were Benjamin's assertions 'correct' or indeed 'useful' for future applications? Can other writers achieve storytellerhood?

To look at this more closely, let us consider in more detail some of the characteristics Benjamin ascribes to the storyteller. For example, early in the essay he claims that the storyteller draws on "experience passed on from mouth to mouth",<sup>83</sup> which we could take to mean that the storyteller draws on both/either real life experiences and/or on traditional oral tales. However, he adds to this claim the lines: "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."<sup>84</sup> This second statement, if not immediately, should ring alarm bells. Can Benjamin really mean this *literally*? And if not, what *does* he mean? Can he be saying that writers are like storytellers if they write down *word for word* how an oral storyteller would tell their story? Surely, there are fundamental differences between written-down stories and orally told ones? Moreover, a written-down version of an oral tale would not necessarily be classed as *literature* and certainly could not constitute a novel. Indeed, Leskov himself, as Benjamin's example of one such 'storyteller', clearly did not do this. Leskov was a writer: he may have characteristics in his writing that he shared with the storyteller, but this was definitely not one, or *not exactly* one. Benjamin correctly recognises this in a later assertion:

The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story [...] is its essential dependence on the book.<sup>85</sup>

However, a closer look at this quotation again poses problems and reinforces the ideas above. Does Benjamin mean that Leskov is not a novelist, despite the fact

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<sup>83</sup> Benjamin, 84.

<sup>84</sup> Benjamin, 84.

<sup>85</sup> Benjamin, 87.

that Leskov did write a novel? Or was Leskov's status as storyteller only meant in reference to his short stories?<sup>86</sup> How can a writer be a storyteller? Surely, it is something about *writing* and in particular *the novel* that is the focus of Benjamin's attention, not the storyteller as such. Benjamin says:

What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in a narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. What can be handed on orally, the wealth of epic, is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel. What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature – the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella – is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular.<sup>87</sup>

If the novel "neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it", then how can Leskov, as an example of a storyteller-as-writer, also be a novelist? Surely this is a contradiction in terms. And if we were to take it that Benjamin was referring to Leskov as writer-storyteller only in terms of his short stories, then why, a little further on, does he assign the short story to a similar fate that has befallen novels?

We have witnessed the evolution of the "short story," which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings.<sup>88</sup>

As yet another example, let us consider this sentence: "An orientation towards practical interests is characteristic of many born storytellers."<sup>89</sup> Again, on face value, this characteristic in itself is not especially helpful were we to use it as a basis for distinguishing whether a writer could be seen as a storyteller or not. This does not mean to say that the characteristics that he ascribes to the storyteller are altogether unsound, but that they need further clarification. However, how much

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<sup>86</sup> Benjamin discusses sketchily and/ or mentions briefly the following stories by Leskov: "The Deception" (89, 92) "The White Eagle" (89); "À Propos of the Kreutzner Sonata" (92); "Interesting Men" (92); "The Steel Flea" (92); "The Alexandrite" (96). There is no mention of Leskov's novels and more importantly whether Benjamin regards Leskov as a 'storyteller' in these also. (Page references refer to the essay in this instance.)

<sup>87</sup> Benjamin, 87.

<sup>88</sup> Benjamin, 93.

<sup>89</sup> Benjamin, 86.

clarification does the essay need? A closer examination of the essay reveals that it is full of such sentences, sentences which are more like the writings of a modern day prophet than what might be expected of the writings of a cultural or literary critic. However, this is not something new when reading Benjamin. As Esther Leslie observes, Benjamin's writings are noted for their ambiguities, which have led some critics to see him as a Jewish cabalistic mystic, and others as a theoretician of Brechtian "crude thought" on the way to a communist aesthetic.<sup>90</sup> Terry Eagleton splits the difference in his *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* by titling his chapter on Benjamin, "The Marxist Rabbi."<sup>91</sup> Equally, Susan Sontag notes this ambiguity as a singularity in Benjamin's writing style. She remarks that in Benjamin's texts, sentences do not seem to generate in the ordinary way; they do not lead gently into one another, and do not even create an obvious line of reasoning. Instead they stand as if each "had to say everything, before the inward gaze of total concentration dissolved the subject before his eyes", a writing and thinking style she calls "freeze-frame baroque."<sup>92</sup> Sontag concludes, half-jestingly, that "his major essays seem to end just in time, before they self-destruct."<sup>93</sup>

Although Benjamin goes on to describe certain characteristics which distinguish Leskov as storyteller (for example, his focus on morals, his similarity to the historian, his rootedness in the people, his link to craftsmanship), it becomes clear that we cannot take Benjamin's claims altogether too literally. Indeed, the more astute Benjamin critics do not read this essay without reference to his other works, or in other words, without seeing it in the light of Benjamin's philosophical and cultural critical writings. In fact, the more common reading and understanding of the essay is not to look at what characterises the author as storyteller, which would be a more literary reading, but rather what the loss of the storyteller and his art represents: the rise of capitalism, the sterilization of life through bourgeois values, the decline of craftsmanship, the growing influence of the media and the press, all of which focuses on "information" rather than the "wisdom" and "counsel" that comes

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<sup>90</sup> Leslie, Esther. "Walter Benjamin." 2001. Online Encyclopedia. The Literary Encyclopedia. 12 July 2006. <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=357>>.

<sup>91</sup> Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

<sup>92</sup> Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980) 129.

<sup>93</sup> Sontag, 129.

through storytelling. From this point of view, any search for the storyteller as a figure that is part of or aligns himself with the author is difficult to trace. Returning now to our brief analysis of the one or two characteristics that Benjamin ascribes to the author-storyteller Leskov, we find that his statements are, if not simply generalised and sweeping, perhaps also critically unsound.

What becomes clear with further reading is that Benjamin's essay is in itself open to different interpretations. In order to fully appreciate and 'read' the essay 'correctly' one must understand this basic premise: as an essay which seems to be highlighting a historical and cultural shift, and one that moreover, was close enough to the writer to have not afforded him the opportunity to gain too great a perspective on it, Benjamin's essay should in turn be viewed in the light of its own historicity. Significantly, then, from this perspective, it might be prudent to decide 'pre-reading' whether it is read as an essay of literary or cultural criticism, or as a mystical or philosophical pronouncement. Bearing this in mind, how do current critics 'read' Benjamin and 'read' this essay? How have they interpreted and 'read' the storyteller that Benjamin wrote about? Let us now turn to a few examples.

Shoshana Felman admits that Benjamin's opening to the essay, which she describes as being "as forceful as it is ungraspable", does not quite "process" or "truly integrate it with the arguments that follow."<sup>94</sup> However, rather than condemning the essay for its ambiguity and ungraspability, she claims that this is "not a mere coincidence" and states that instead the essay:

[...] duplicates and illustrates the point of the text, that the war has left an impact that has struck dumb its survivors, with the effect of interrupting now the continuity of telling and of understanding. The utterance repeats in act the content of the statement: it must remain somewhat unassimilable.<sup>95</sup>

Felman thus attributes the ambiguities and difficulties in the writing style to the very cultural phenomena that Benjamin was highlighting. In her interpretation, she explores the ideas of silence, speech and death, which she claims are actually reflected in the text itself, in precisely the way Benjamin has written it. The loss of

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<sup>94</sup> Shoshana Felman, "Benjamin's Silence," *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (1999): 206.

<sup>95</sup> Felman, 206.

the storyteller's voice reflects the loss of voice that came with the trauma of war.

Thus, she claims that Benjamin's use of storytelling and the storyteller is more a:

[...] way of grasping and of bringing into consciousness an unconscious cultural phenomenon and an imperceptible historical process that has taken place outside anyone's awareness and that can therefore be deciphered, understood, and noticed only retrospectively, in its effects (its symptoms).<sup>96</sup>

If the effects are the impossibility of telling stories, it is the sharing of experience, the thing that is "the securest among our possessions"<sup>97</sup> that we have lost.

From another perspective, yet in a similar vein, John McCole reads the idea of death and disappearance in "The Storyteller" as pointing to the death or dissociation of meaning which has to do with what he sees as a reflection of "the increasingly private nature of experience in nineteenth-century bourgeois society."<sup>98</sup> McCole sees Benjamin's focus on the disappearance of the storyteller and his art of storytelling as a reflection on how Benjamin saw *experience itself* as changing, which is linked to the idea of death. If the oral culture of storytelling is a form of sociability and its resource is "experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth",<sup>99</sup> then it is the "atrophy of experience itself which Benjamin is pointing to."<sup>100</sup> McCole investigates Benjamin's use of the word "experience", linking it to the cultural and historical period in which Benjamin was writing and which saw the rise of factory work, the death of 'the craftsman' (that Benjamin also links to the storyteller), and the very real deaths that surrounded people as a result of the First World War. Finally, in an essay entitled "Walter Benjamin's Love Affair with Death" Rey Chow claims that the essay supports reading "storytelling in terms of progressive politics."<sup>101</sup> She says:

As a mode of communication which is grounded in the intimacy of lived experiences, storytelling represents a healthy alternative to what in the postmodern period have come to be criticized and repudiated as "master narratives" with their scientific, ideology-ridden facade of

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<sup>96</sup> Felman, 205.

<sup>97</sup> Benjamin, 83.

<sup>98</sup> John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1993) 277.

<sup>99</sup> Benjamin, 84.

<sup>100</sup> McCole, 277.

<sup>101</sup> Rey Chow, "Walter Benjamin's Love Affair with Death," *New German Critique* 48 (1989): 67.

objectivity. The storyteller can be considered someone who demonstrates the dictum "the personal is the political," simply because his act mediates between the uniquely personal and the public or communal."<sup>102</sup>

She goes on to examine storytelling through an investigation of issues of gender that come out through the figures of death in Benjamin's writings.

What is clear from all these readings above is that they tend to focus on the interpretation of Benjamin's thought as 'cultural criticism' rather than on the figure of the storyteller himself. But Benjamin's essay read purely as an essay in literary criticism is of course problematic for the reasons outlined above. "The Storyteller" was written ten years earlier than fellow German Eric Auerbach's more obviously literary critical study *Mimesis: Representations of Reality in Western Literature* (1953)<sup>103</sup> which, despite its post-war publication, had been written during the war between the years 1942-46. Although one is an essay and the other a book about literature, both writers were writing in circumstances where they could not support their claims by referring to other critical works. Read today, the question then is not whether an essay such as Benjamin's (which does make such crudely sweeping, and romantic claims) would ever make it to print, rather, it is whether there is anything in it still relevant to the current literary situation. Bearing this in mind, I now want to turn to Benjamin's conception of the storyteller as a figure that a writer can occupy. Despite its age and its wider interpretations, Benjamin's essay is still one of the few and clearly the first essay that applies the idea of storyteller to a writer of literary works, even if it is to mark his disappearance.

### **Applications of "The Storyteller" to Literary Authors**

In the section above we looked at a few of the interpretations of the essay on a wider level, but now I want to turn to how Benjamin's essay has been used or interpreted from the perspective of applying the storyteller to literary works. Firstly, has any other critic used this interpretation and looked for the storyteller? Secondly, if so, where and how have they applied this concept of writer-as-storyteller borrowed from

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<sup>102</sup> Chow, 67.

<sup>103</sup> Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. 1953. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Benjamin? As I mentioned above, "The Storyteller" continues to appear in current collections of critical theory published even today. Despite this fact, the essay has not often been used as a means from which to further investigate the concept of writer-as-storyteller in literature. To date, I have found only three essays which take Benjamin's essay as a starting point from which to argue a case for the writer as storyteller, and only one very recent study that develops the concept further, but which looks specifically at British, Victorian fiction. However, a closer look at these essays does prove useful when assessing whether Benjamin's storyteller is of use for literary critical application.

The first of these is by James Walter and is on an early story by Eudora Welty called "The Hitch-Hikers" (1941).<sup>104</sup> Walter uses Benjamin's idea of "the travelling seaman", as one of the prototypes of the storyteller that Benjamin talks about and makes a link between this figure and the main character of the story, Tom Harries who, he says, "is recognised as a storyteller."<sup>105</sup> However, the main body of the essay does not really engage with Benjamin's storyteller much more apart from this primary focus and does not link the storyteller to Welty. The second essay I have found that takes Benjamin's storyteller as a starting point for a reading is by Richard Millington and is entitled "Willa Cather and 'The Storyteller': Hostility to the Novel in *My Ántonia*."<sup>106</sup> Millington's essay on Cather focuses on both the 'oral aspects' of storytelling in the novel, and the position of the reader-listener and highlights the link between death and storytelling. This is an interesting reading, which draws unquestioningly on Benjamin's ideas about the storyteller and storytelling. For example, Millington says that: "For Cather as for Benjamin, the felt presence of death gives birth to stories; for her as for him a writer seeking to reanimate the oral tale must place the reader "in the company of the teller",<sup>107</sup> a theme that this thesis also explores in the idea that storytelling is linked to survival. Millington discusses the various 'story-tellings' that are presented by characters in

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<sup>104</sup> Walter, James. "The Fate of the Story Teller in Eudora Welty's 'The Hitch-Hikers'." *South Central Review* 2.1 (1985): 57-70.

<sup>105</sup> Walter, 58

<sup>106</sup> Millington, Richard H. "Willa Cather and 'The Storyteller': Hostility to the Novel in *My Ántonia*." *American Literature* 66.4 (1994): 689-717.

<sup>107</sup> R. Millington, 694.



the novel, all of which could be seen to take the role of the storyteller. In fact, he notes, "from the very start, *My Antonia* is full of storyteller figures." Moreover, he traces instances which reveal how these story-'tellings' point to the "embodied quality of the storyteller's art" and to "the listeners" that gather round to hear the tale.<sup>108</sup> Taken explicitly from Benjamin, these again prove useful ideas that we can further extend to the writer-storyteller.

Millington's reading reveals Cather's novel as so far explicating Benjamin's contemporary dicta for the storyteller to the point that he sees the novel as a "counter-novel", as one which has a "dialogic shape".<sup>109</sup> His argument essentially centres on the premise that the novel in a sense defies its 'novelistic' boundaries, defies its 'novel-ness'. He claims that a "contest" develops between 'story' and 'novel' in *My Antonia* that finds its conclusion in "the victory of storytelling"<sup>110</sup> and thus implicitly, the storyteller reigns over the novelist-author. Despite the ambiguities that derive from the more 'literal' kind of reading of Benjamin's essay, Millington's argument helps to pave the way for a re-examination of the storyteller in the figure of the novelist.

Finally, the third of these essays is entitled "The Storyteller, The Novelist and the Advice Columnist: Narrative and Mass Culture in 'Miss Lonelyhearts'"<sup>111</sup> and it begins with the intention of investigating thematic links between Nathaniel West's 1933 novella *Miss Lonelyhearts* and Benjamin's "The Storyteller". Barnard takes as a starting point the idea of *advice* which is one of the characteristics that Benjamin ascribes to the storyteller and juxtaposes it with the advice-columnist who is the central character in West's novella. Barnard's argument does not specifically focus on the storyteller, but does raise some interesting points about the idea of narrative forms and the changes brought about by the processes of modernity that were sweeping over the western world. She notes that:

It would appear, in short, that the value of experience did not, in fact, fall straight into "bottomlessness" as Benjamin theorizes, but that

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<sup>108</sup> R. Millington, 696.

<sup>109</sup> R. Millington, 699

<sup>110</sup> R. Millington, 706.

<sup>111</sup> Barnard, Rita. "The Storyteller, the Novelist, and the Advice Columnist: Narrative and Mass Culture in 'Miss Lonelyhearts'." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 27.1 (1993): 40-61.

personal experience, as well as old-fashioned advice, was instead resuscitated – sublated, if you will – in a corporate and commodified guise.<sup>112</sup>

These guises that Barnard identifies were found in other forms of mass media which were growing with the rise of modernity. Although the authentic voice of the storyteller is lost, Barnard shows that Benjamin did not account for the simulation of authenticity which was brought about by other mass-media: the radio, the advice columns and even the comic strips. For example, she says that the simulation of the storyteller's authentic personal wisdom could thus be found in the slogan and his voice in the speech balloon. Thus Barnard suggests that:

[...] it is perhaps then necessary to find a second paradigm: one which could count not only for the loss of the authentic voice of the storyteller, but also for the reinvention and simulation of authenticity – the commercialised survival of traditional forms in the mass-mediated culture of the time.<sup>113</sup>

This is where I find Barnard's arguments particularly useful. Although she focuses on a novel that is pre-1950, her reading clearly points to an emerging trend in post-war fiction that I reveal in this thesis: a return to the kind of 'authenticity' represented in his embodied form by the storyteller.

Interestingly, this is where Ivan Kreilkamp's book-length study entitled *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (2005) in some sense also converges with my argument. Kreilkamp's study actually goes back pre-Benjamin and traces the idea of the embodied storyteller in nineteenth-century British fiction. His point of departure is centred on the notion of "voice" which suggests "corporeality" and takes issue with what Benjamin saw as the destruction of voice through the rise of print culture. Kreilkamp argues against Benjamin's claim that, as he succinctly puts it, "where the novel rises, the oral storyteller falls",<sup>114</sup> revealing, through a series of case studies of Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, Browning and others, that the storyteller was very much reflected in Victorian literature, following on perhaps from the Pre-Romantic figure

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<sup>112</sup> Barnard, 44.

<sup>113</sup> Barnard, 45.

<sup>114</sup> Kreilkamp, 1-2.

of the Celtic bard.<sup>115</sup> Rather than disappearing with the birth of the novel and the age of print culture, Kreilkamp's study seeks to prove that rather than disappearing "the storyteller came into being as a fiction within the very medium that is accused of having killed him off."<sup>116</sup> Rather than having been mystified, displaced or even "murdered", voice, orality, and oral storytelling traditions broke out and become apparent in various ways within the rising medium of print. Thus, Kreilkamp sees "the mythology [that surrounds] the storyteller [as protecting] literature and particularly fiction from the mechanization and inhumanity of industrial print."<sup>117</sup> Kreilkamp's study is the nearest to my own in terms of impetus and direction, and it supports my view that the birth of the novel did not entail the death of the storyteller. His research also supports my view that Benjamin's essay does provide some significant insights for reading the storyteller. Although in need of some re-evaluation, "The Storyteller" can serve as a point of departure for further research on the figure of the storyteller in literary fiction.

### Schema of Chapters

This thesis is divided into eight chapters outside the introduction and conclusion which all follow a similar shape. They are centred on key themes and ideas all of which serve to show how contemporary writers engage with my concept of *storyteller* in the novel. Although Benjamin is not the only model we might follow to investigate the role of the storyteller, his essay is a suggestive starting point for our subsequent investigations on the storyteller's nature. The first chapter begins with the question 'who is the storyteller?', and looks more closely at the history of the storyteller, and at how he has been represented in and outside of literature. Here I establish, following Benjamin, that trying to understand the storyteller as a concrete figure proves impossible, and instead it is more useful to see him as an archetypal figure that embodies certain generic characteristics which reveal his many facets.

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<sup>115</sup> Kreilkamp draws on Katie Trumpener's *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (1997) which identifies the bard as a major cultural icon haunting late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century British literature – an ambiguous embodiment of a lost pre-print world. See Trumpener, Katie. *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997.

<sup>116</sup> Kreilkamp, 2.

<sup>117</sup> Kreilkamp, 14.

For example, the storyteller can be a performer, a liar, a wise man, a teacher, a priest. By nature a shape-shifter, he can move into various guises. As a result, the titles of each chapter have taken their starting point from one of these guises. However, these are not meant to be understood as definitive or even concrete characteristics; they are only indicative of one aspect of the storyteller, and as we will see they overlap and move positions as each author-storyteller moves through the telling of his story.

Each of the subsequent chapters (two to eight) looks at one contemporary novelist and attempts, through a focused reading of one of their novels, to show how the storyteller provides a new and useful concept for contemporary criticism. The writers I have chosen come from diverse backgrounds and from different corners of the globe and are all internationally and critically acclaimed with a large body of work behind them. These are (in order of appearance in the thesis): Jim Crace, Mario Vargas Llosa, Salman Rushdie, John Barth, A.S. Byatt and J.M. Coetzee. Although initially I had (and still have) many other novelists and novels that I could have chosen to read for this thesis, in order to do justice to my ideas, I had to limit my readings. Thus, I feel that the six authors I have chosen to read represent a large enough number to show that the storyteller is not only a preoccupation, but also a worthy addition to the current figures of literary criticism, helping us to map new territories in contemporary fiction.

In each chapter, I offer a close reading of a specific novel, in order to provide an in-depth textual analysis to support my general hypothesis. I have tried to place the chapters in such a way that the areas investigated follow on from each other in order to create a sense of fluidity and continuity. For example, themes and ideas that come out of this include: the story of the birth of the storyteller, which is linked to a preoccupation with the primitive and with origins; the role of the storyteller, as authoritative author-god or trickster storyteller; storyteller as re-teller and the postmodern turn in literature; storytelling and oral traditions and the spoken word; the storyteller and fairy-tales; the storyteller *vis-à-vis* his audience, which rethinks the relationship of the reader as 'listener'; and the storyteller as shape-shifter, which centres around the evolution and relationship of the storyteller to the modern day

author. What becomes clear in the reading of each chapter is that the links generated by ideas and preoccupations between the chapters return and recur throughout the thesis. As a result the titles and themes that I have chosen to focus on are not definitive, in the sense that they do not highlight *all* aspects of contemporary literature's preoccupation with the storyteller and storytelling, but instead act as useful frames from which to begin the exploration of *storyteller* and *storytelling* in contemporary literature.

Following the introductory positioning of *storyteller* in this introduction, and the subsequent quest for definition in chapter one, chapter two opens with a reading of Jim Crace's *The Gift of Stones* which I argue directly charts the birth of the storyteller in a primitive setting. The reason that this novel is given a key position is that it not only tells a version of the story of 'the birth of the storyteller', but also serves to highlight some of the areas of investigation which the following chapters subsequently examine. These include: the theme of storytelling for survival; the line between oral and written modes; the relationship between the 'writerly' author and the oral storyteller; the performative aspects of the storyteller and his relationship to the audience; and finally, the storyteller's role in relation to his community or 'tribe'.

Building on this last insight, in chapter three I read Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Storyteller* (1988)<sup>118</sup> which again employs a storyteller in a primitive setting, but which juxtaposes this with narration in the modern world. One of the recurring themes that emerges from my reading of the novel is the idea of the storyteller's masks and of his shape-shifting nature. In Vargas Llosa the storyteller is never stable. In attempting his capture, we see him shape-shifting between the positions of a magician, priest, teacher and prophet as well as those of chronicler and interpreter of individual and collective experience. Chapter four follows on from these ideas and extends their analysis, juxtaposing them with their opposites: the storyteller as trickster, devil, liar and illusionist. Here, I offer a close reading of Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), questioning the idea of authority in the perception of the author as 'god' which I juxtapose with the idea of storyteller as 'devil'. I argue that

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<sup>118</sup> This text is called *El Hablador* in Spanish.

in so doing, Rushdie's novel asks us to question our own constructs of authorship, authority and truth, revealing that the grand narratives they support may also be fictional 'constructs'.

In chapter five, I continue with Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), which is read as an explicit engagement with oral modes and speech, with the way that storytellers tell stories. I look at how Rushdie has drawn on storytelling traditions from both his native India, and from traditional storytellers of *The Arabian Nights*.<sup>119</sup> By drawing parallels between techniques employed by storytellers of the *Nights* and the discourse of *Haroun*, I reveal how Rushdie reinforces the fact that the traditions from which literature feeds, come from both oral storytelling and 'literature proper'. The choice of reading yet another of Rushdie's novels here, stems from the fact that I read *Haroun* as a reply to *The Satanic Verses*. Disguised in the form of a storybook for children, this novel reinforces and powerfully builds on the views that Rushdie was originally trying to assert in *The Satanic Verses*, namely, that it is important to breach differences between differing world views and discourses, and that rather than seeing the world from opposing poles, we should see its similarities and continuities. In this reading I also argue that Rushdie evokes the storyteller in the figure of the parent who may read the story to their child and, in this sense, the storyteller becomes both performer and orator.

Chapter six begins with the idea of storyteller as re-teller of tales, a theme that I touch on in the novels above. Here, I return to the birth of postmodernism and to one of the first writers to write on postmodern literature, John Barth. I return to Barth's two key essays, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Literature" (1979) and rethink the 'original' impetus behind them in the light of subsequent postmodern readings of literature that followed. What is revealing about Barth's *oeuvre* as a whole is that he talks about and uses 'storytelling' and the 'storyteller' in his fiction and non-fiction as if they are synonymous or interchangeable with 'literature' and the 'author'. Interestingly, what comes out of a closer study of Barth's fiction is that he has perhaps more than

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<sup>119</sup> I largely refer to this text in the abbreviated version 'the *Nights*' throughout this thesis.

any other writer, identified himself as *storyteller*, modelling himself on the fictional storyteller, Scheherazade, of *The Arabian Nights*. My reading of his novel *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991) features a complex web of stories within stories as well as a crowd of storytellers – Scheherazade, Sindbad and Somebody – and is set between the world of medieval Baghdad of the *Nights* tales and Barth's own hometown of Maryland. In order to save his life, the storyteller 'Somebody' must tell stories in a competition with Sindbad the Sailor himself. Barth thus highlights the theme of storytelling for survival, which the *Nights* most poignantly expresses.

Chapter seven continues from this theme of oral folktales and fairy-tales and looks at the storyteller as fairy-tale teller. In my reading of A.S. Byatt's self-dubbed fairy-story, "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" I highlight the storyteller's relationship to the reader as well as bringing in the issue of gender. I also investigate how Byatt's literary critical background has helped her to manipulate her fictions to the point where I argue she has self-consciously deployed the storyteller and the theme of storytelling to gain critical readership, which links her to Barth and to Vargas Llosa. This is highlighted in the figure of Gillian Perholt, the narratologist and heroine of this story, who also serves to powerfully assert the status and role of the female writer and academic in literature and literary studies.

In the conclusion, I consolidate all the critical evidence collected from the previous chapters and show that the return of the storyteller is a definite trend in contemporary fiction. In order to further explicate my arguments, I end with one final writer, J.M. Coetzee, whose novels have attracted much critical attention and have often baffled critics. I concentrate my reading on the figure of Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee's fictional-novelist, by tracing her appearance in the novels *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Slow Man* (2005) in particular. Costello is interesting from a number of perspectives, in that she not only appears in a number of Coetzee's novels, but has also 'appeared' in the real world, through the person of Coetzee himself. Building from my focus on Byatt as reader, academic, critic and writer, my argument develops around the ideas that through his fictional novelist, Coetzee hides

behind a complex web of disguises, all of which point to the shape-shifting nature of the storyteller.



## WHO IS THE STORYTELLER?

### *The Storyteller's Story*

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge--  
 That myth is more potent than history.  
 I believe that dreams are more powerful than facts--  
 That hope always triumphs over experience--  
 That laughter is the only cure for grief.  
 And I believe that love is stronger than death.

Anonymous, *The Storyteller's Creed*

The figure of the 'eternal' storyteller as an archetypal figure – also in part the child of a romantic imagination – has been a constant throughout the ages. When we pronounce the word 'storyteller' we all understand what it means, even if we do not necessarily know of someone who is an actual storyteller by profession. However, can we really say that this figure has a precise description? What do we actually mean when we call someone a *storyteller*? Who exactly *is* the storyteller? And what is his relationship to literature? In this chapter I investigate these questions further and in so doing begin the quest for definition. I look closer at what we understand by the word *storyteller* and who we label *storyteller* with the ultimate aim of establishing ways in which it might be deployed in relation to contemporary fiction. The way I do this is by primarily looking at how we might begin to see him in literature, schematically tracing his appearance from early literature to contemporary fiction. I then turn to an investigation of how the storyteller is understood outside literary fiction, surveying some of his many manifestations in history and culture. Questions raised are: could the storyteller that Benjamin saw in Leskov still be with us? Do contemporary novelists bear any relation to this elusive figure? In order to assess this, I finally turn to consider more carefully the relationship between the novelist and the storyteller, investigating how the word has been used and understood by contemporary writers.

## The Storyteller in Literature

To begin with, it is a popular misconception that the storyteller is a stranger to literature. Although current literary interest has tended to focus its attention on the figure of the author, if we take into account the history of storytelling in all its guises, this is a relatively 'new' phenomenon. As Adriana Cavarero notes:

[...] the tradition of the *storyteller*, which goes back to the 'muse' invoked by Homer, has it [that] the one who tells stories is hardly preoccupied with the question of the *author* (unlike the philosophies of our time). At the center of the ancient art of storytelling lies the figure of the narrator, not that of the author.<sup>1</sup>

The narrator, in a sense, is the storyteller, and if all stories are in a sense *told* by someone, this someone always refers back primarily to the archetypal *storyteller*, not the *author*.

From the earliest collections of tales, we see the storyteller's fingerprints on the text. In European literature we can trace instances of storytelling from ancient Greece through to the middle ages and right into our present day. Implicitly, if not always explicitly, we can see the storyteller shape-shifting into various guises, from fictional characters to the person of the author himself. For example, the storyteller often appears in some form or other in frame-narratives. In Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353), the seven young men and three young women that flee from plague-ridden Florence to a villa in the countryside fill their time with telling tales, each in turn claiming the role of 'storyteller'. Often, the tales they tell instruct in some way and thus impart a form of 'wisdom': we hear tales of the power of fortune and power of human will; love tales that end tragically or happily; clever replies that save the speaker; tricks that women play on men or that men play on women; examples of virtue.

Similarly, we recognise the storyteller in both Geoffrey Chaucer himself and in each of the pilgrims in Chaucer's late fourteenth-century collection *The Canterbury Tales* (1386-95) who, each in turn, become 'storytellers' in the telling of

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<sup>1</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul Koffman (London: Routledge, 2000) 141.

their tales. In this collection of stories, again significantly written in the spoken dialect and always told to a group of people, to a real and diverse audience, we hear a variety of tales that all have different messages and purposes. Some are humorous and some serious, some tell of love, others of greed; some draw on romance, on the sermon and others on fables and illusion. With each guise, we determine that the storyteller's nature is one of constant evasion. Moreover, with each storyteller we witness yet another characteristic, and again a different set of fictional skills. What we find is that the storyteller flits between the poles of good and evil; never stable, we cannot really place him or clearly pinpoint his message. We thus see the storyteller moving between all the characters in the pilgrimage: in the wistful figure of wife of Bath who instructs us in the art of marriage; in the Miller's drunken yet entertaining banter, in the Knight's tale of romantic love. We see the storyteller as wise woman, seductress, magician, holy man, teacher and instructor, and also liar, devil, trickster, cheat.

In the European tradition we glimpse the storyteller in the tellers of fairy-tales that were famously captured in the written tradition by the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen and Charles Perrault. Although not always immediately brought to mind, beyond and behind these stories there is always a teller. We might imagine the figure of the old grandmother spinning her yarns, the fairy godmother or Old Mother Goose herself. But we ourselves might also have become storytellers without realising it. Every time a parent reads a fairy-tale out to a child, they in turn take on this role. In fact, a closer look at the history of the stories in these collections reveals a complex web of storytellers, all of whom have contributed to their survival. For example, the history of the Cinderella tale, believed to have originated in China in the first century, reveals the importance of both the oral and writerly storyteller to its survival. In Europe one of the first written versions of the story entitled "The Cat Cinderella"<sup>2</sup> appears in one of the first collections of European folktales, *Il Pentamerone* (1634-1636), by Giambattista Basile. As Alan Dundes explains, this collection was originally entitled *Lo Cunto de li Cunte*, the tale of tales, and was

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<sup>2</sup> For a history of the story of Cinderella see Dundes, Alan. *Cinderella, a Casebook*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988.

written in an oral Neopolitan dialect. The use of the spoken dialect very much situates it in an oral storytelling milieu rather than a literate one. Moreover, its form was also indicative of its design for oral delivery and performance as it consisted of five sets of ten stories with each set representing one day's worth of telling.

Aside from fairy-tales and folklore, one of the most widely influential frame-tales of all time, *The Arabian Nights*, has not only come out of an oral tradition, but has also immortalised the storyteller in the figure of Scheherazade, the storyteller-ess who tells tales to keep her from death.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the aura that surrounds the Eastern storytellers even today has been fired by this collection of tales that has left deep traces in the Western imagination from the nineteenth century and beyond. In his book *The Arabian Nights in British Literature*,<sup>4</sup> Peter Carracciolo traces these influences in figures such as Charles Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman and others. But many contemporary writers continue to be influenced by this collection of tales even today. For example, Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* is based on this idea, although it proceeds by parodying the tales within tales idea by creating a novel within a novel. Other writers such as John Barth, Salman Rushdie and A.S. Byatt have also been influenced by these tales.<sup>5</sup>

However, it is not only the East that brings with it tales of magic. This study seeks to reveal how the storyteller has shape-shifted throughout the ages and has moved into the figure of the author himself. As a result, early literature is not the only place where the storyteller resides. Although we might think that the rise of the novel and individualism had obscured the storyteller, in fact he has still been there, eluding us, disguised in his many cloaks. For example, we recognise him in Conrad's Marlow, who on the deck of a dark ship in foggy London sits in the stance of a Buddha, a 'wise-man', and through the power of words alone leads us into a world that lies across the ocean. It is Marlow's storytelling that guides us through the metaphorical 'heart of darkness', the darkness that surrounds the story that the storyteller tells. In Conrad we are faced with one of the two archetypes of

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<sup>3</sup> I discuss the *Nights* in reference to two of the novels I look at in this thesis in more detail. See Chapter 4 and 5.

<sup>4</sup> Carracciolo, Peter L. *The Arabian Nights in English Literature: Studies in the Reception of the Thousand and One Nights into British Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> I will talk more about the *Nights* tales throughout the thesis particularly in chapters 5, 6, and 7.

Benjamin's version of the storyteller: the travelling journeyman, or the seaman.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the vision of Marlow sitting on the deck surrounded by a circle of listeners echoes that of the tribal storyteller. Marlow's image becomes one with the archetypal storyteller, storyteller as soothsayer, or wisdom-carrier, that Benjamin also evokes.

More recently, in Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *The Storyteller* (1989),<sup>7</sup> we see this idea of the archetypal storyteller perfectly highlighted. The novel begins and ends in Florence and is framed by the narrative of a Peruvian novelist who, in trying to write a novel about his native land, is drawn to the elusive figure of the Machiguenga storyteller. His quest to find the Machiguenga storyteller becomes an obsession, a fascination that leads him on a journey through time and into the heart of the Amazonian jungle. In the quest to find him, the narrator sees echoes of him in various other 'storytellers'; he recognises him in "the wandering troubadours of the Bahia pampas, who, to the basso continuo of their guitars, weave together medieval romances of chivalry and local gossip in the dusty villages of northeastern Brazil" (S 164). Similarly, he sees him in the figure of "the Irish *seanchaí*" who is described to him by a local in a Dublin bar as a "teller of ancient stories" and "the one who knows things" (S 164). The vision of the *seanchaí* leads the novelist-protagonist to see him as "a living relic of the ancient bards of Hibernia," still recounting "in our own day, old legends, epic deeds, terrible loves and disturbing miracles, in the smoky warmth of pubs" (S 165). The storyteller seems to encompass many different people: never stable, his nature is one of the shape-shifter:

He can be a tavern-keeper, a truck driver, a parson, a beggar, someone mysteriously touched by the magic wand of wisdom and the art of reciting, of remembering, of reinventing and enriching tales told and retold down through the centuries; a messenger from the times of myth and magic, older than history, to whom Irishmen of today listen spellbound for hours on end. (S 165)

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," *Illuminations* (London: Cape, 1970) 85.

<sup>7</sup> Vargas Llosa, Mario. *The Storyteller*. Trans. Helen Lane. New York: Penguin Books, 1990. All subsequent in-text quotations in this chapter are taken from this edition and will appear in the text in the abbreviated form S followed by the page number.

In this sense, the narrator presents us with a clear link between the ancient and the modern storyteller, as he chases the elusive line which links them together. But ultimately the storyteller emerges as multi-form figure, a figure about whose true nature Vargas Llosa's fictional novelist can give us no specific answer. Is this what defines 'storytellerhood'? Is the storyteller simply an amalgam of various characteristics drawn from a myriad of figures? Let us now turn to how this figure appears in the real world, in culture and history.

### **A (Hi)Story of the Storyteller**

As we have seen, Vargas Llosa's search for the storyteller leads us to see his shadow in various figures throughout the ages. In fact, these figures that Vargas Llosa conjures up all have certain characteristics in common. They are characteristics which offer us some sense of what it is to be a 'storyteller'. However, if we were to try and describe more specifically what makes someone a storyteller or indeed to find who the storyteller is, we might find that we see him only shape-shifting between various figures and faces.

In the first instance, similar to Vargas Llosa's idea of the storyteller, we might imagine the storyteller to be animated, enthusiastic, to perform his stories with sparkling eyes and gestures. We might also imagine him to be funny or wise or see him as an entertainer or a keeper of old traditions or stories from the past that others have now forgotten. We might see the storyteller as a man or a woman, someone old or young. Moreover, depending on our cultural associations, this figure could be dressed in a turban and be riding a horse, or be sitting by the hearth in some cottage in the wood; this figure could be your grandmother or your great uncle Tom, a fisherman, an old man of the sea, a traveller, a local witch doctor, yourself. We see the storyteller in the teller of fairy-tales, in imaginary and long-lost figures as Old Mother Goose and the bard. We see him also shape-shifting throughout the ages from court poets, tribal soothsayers, to gypsies, to modern day comedians. These generalisations surrounding the storyteller are the most common, because more often than not, the storyteller is difficult to place, moving between different persons, genders and other boundaries.

Particularly in the West, the role of the traditional storyteller who has an active role in the community has diminished, but there are still many countries within which the storyteller still functions as a present force and has an active role in a given community. In fact, if we scratch under the surface we might find that the storyteller is still around, albeit to a lesser degree. Of course, it is certainly true that the word 'storyteller' brings with it connotations and associations, certain preconceived attributes or characteristics which in turn are influenced by cultural and individual circumstances. As a result of this culture-specificity, the guises of storyteller may appear different: for instance, if we were to ask a Native American Indian to describe a storyteller, the 'description' might be, at least outwardly, very different from that of a Western European answering the same question. This said, one might immediately group these storytellers together by the fact that they share some fundamental characteristics and it is here that Benjamin's description of the storyteller might come in useful.

Benjamin classifies the storyteller into two archaic types: the one that is embodied in the tiller of the soil, the local and specific storyteller that knows the history of the tribe, and the other embodied in the sailor, the traveller or wanderer who moves about and links different stories together. Both these types, however, have similar characteristics. The storyteller is a person who is a part of the 'oral tradition', who performs his stories to a living audience, a person who uses both his own stories and others' experience to craft his tale. He is a person who can be close to a historian and chronicler as well as to the idea of the epic bard, a person who is driven to tell in order to retain the 'memory' of a storied past.<sup>8</sup> When tracing the storyteller through different countries and traditions, these aspects seem to be universally 'true' of his nature. Let us now turn to some examples to test these out.

Firstly, we might see the storyteller in the tradition of the bard which, most pertinently in Europe, we trace back to Homer and to the Homeric epics. However, this bardic relative of the storyteller can be traced from classical antiquity through various figures through the centuries. In the Middle Ages, we have the minstrel, who was, as Alfred Bates observes, "one of the most picturesque figures of medieval

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<sup>8</sup> See, Benjamin.

life”, and who “inherited some features of the Roman historians and others of the bard of Gaul and Germany.”<sup>9</sup> From minstrel we move to the travelling minstrel or *jongleur* who, often “at the bottom of the social scale [...] performed chansons in the vernacular.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the minstrels’ close ancestors were the Germanic scop, the Scandinavian scald and the Celtic bard, who were all poets of the oral tradition in the Middle Ages<sup>11</sup> and who performed their stories all around medieval Europe. However, the tradition of the troubadour or *trouvère*, a poet-composer-performer who famously told tales of “courtly love”,<sup>12</sup> was more of a professional poetic practice that spread from Provence to the north in the twelfth century.<sup>13</sup>

In the Balkans, in countries such as Serbia, Croatia and Albania, for example, one might still find the old ‘singers of tales’ performing to the music of the lyre in some remote mountain village. Although their numbers are diminishing and are not very large, they still exist, often singing their stories in formulaic language which, as Albert Lord has argued, could date back to the way epic tales were composed.<sup>14</sup> However, this idea of a bardic singer is not only found in Eastern and Central Europe, but does have further links to existing practices, closer to home in the Scottish and Irish folk traditions. For example, the Celtic and Gaelic bards still exist today and find their contemporaries in the singers of ballads and stories by folk musicians, storytellers or *seanchaí* that Vargas Llosa identified, or in traveller tales.

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<sup>9</sup> Alfred Bates, ed. *The Drama: Its History, Literature and Influence on Civilization* (London: Historical Publishing Company, 1903) 4.

<sup>10</sup> Evan Alderson, Robin Blaser and Harold G. Coward, eds. *Reflections on Cultural Policy: Past, Present and Future* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press for The Calgary Institute for the Humanities, 1993) 61.

<sup>11</sup> Alderson, Blaser, Coward, 60.

<sup>12</sup> For an introduction on troubadours that traces the development of this figure through medieval Europe, see, Gaunt, Simon, and Sarah Kay. *The Troubadours: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Alderson, Blaser, Coward, 61.

<sup>14</sup> Lord, Albert B. *The Singer of Tales*. 1960. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997. Milman Parry and Albert Lord famously began their investigations on these Slavic singers in the 1930s when they visited various remote places all around the Balkans tracing and recording their songs. Curiously, the Albanian writer Ismail Kadare, re-told a version of this exploration in a novel entitled *The File on H*. See, Kadare, Ismail. *The File on H*. 1981. Trans. David Bellos. London: Harvill Press, 1997. For more recent transcriptions and generally a look at existing oral traditions and how they are interpreted by academic scholars see, ‘The Centre for Studies of the Oral Tradition’ at (<http://oraltradition.org/>). This project has not only made the journal ‘The Oral Tradition’ free of charge, but provides various related interactive sources and authentic texts allowing us to hear the singers telling their tales, which helps contextualize the poems and aids in the interpretation.



Sometimes these storytellers sing their tales to their audiences accompanied by the traditional harp but may also use the fiddle or the guitar and other times they just simply tell their tales to their audiences throwing in some jokes and anecdotes for good measure, what the Irish famously call the crack (*craic*).

In Britain it is often in the Irish, Scottish and Welsh traditions that storytelling is still kept alive. The traditions of both the Celtic and Gaelic storyteller have been very long-standing, and again can be traced back to the halls of Kings and to the humble peasantry.<sup>15</sup> James Delargy, who spent many years collecting tales from storytellers as the tradition declined, describes the storytellers as custodians of the oral tradition, highlighting this by telling a story of a dying storyteller expressing his relief that his stories have been written down and made secure before his death.<sup>16</sup> Delargy's description of the old storytellers as "walking libraries"<sup>17</sup> is perhaps apt coming from the standpoint of a literate man, who lists the contents of their repertoire as including: heroic tales, religious tales, fabliaux, cante-fables, collections of aphorisms and genealogies.

There were several kinds of storytellers, as well as singers, who contributed to the tradition. The *seanchaí*, that Vargus Llosa recalled, was a man or woman who specialised in local tales such as family sagas, genealogies, social and historical traditions, folk prayers and short tales about fairies, ghosts and other supernatural beings. However, there were other lengthier and more significant tales told by the *sgéaltóirí* who, much like the bards above, relied on mnemonic devices and learnt synopses of their tales off by heart in order to be able to elaborate upon them in performance.<sup>18</sup> The *seanchas*, or local narrative of various kinds, was next in order of popularity, followed by the *nathaíocht* or argument couched in verse, composed on the spot. Finally, there was the *rianníocht*, a general discussion of such things as

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<sup>15</sup> Proinsias MacCana, "Irish Literary Tradition," *Ó Cúiv* (1969): 45.

<sup>16</sup> James H. Delargy, *The Gaelic Story-Teller: The Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture of the British Academy* (London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, 1945) 20.

<sup>17</sup> Delargy, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Delargy, 33.

current affairs and local genealogy. In any one evening, tellers of long tales, tellers of *seanchas* and singers would all perform.<sup>19</sup>

Storytelling traditionally took place around the fire at night, and there was even a season for storytelling that began with the end of harvest and went through to mid-March. Stories were commonly told at various collective gatherings such as births, marriages and christenings, and other communal events such as quiltings, net-mending in fishing villages, and at wool carding evenings.<sup>20</sup> Very often these communal gatherings were conducted in the village storytelling house (*toigh áirneáil*)<sup>21</sup> where, occasionally, visiting storytellers would come and tell tales for a night's lodging. Again, as Benjamin notes, it is the travellers that would bring new stories into the melting pot of local lore, and they came from such a diverse background that it resulted in a wealth of diverse material for the local storytellers to play with. Among these travelling storytellers then, one could find beggars, cattle drovers, carters, pedlars, farmers, labourers, itinerant school masters, friars, priests, soldiers, pilgrims, wise women, smugglers and poor scholars.<sup>22</sup> The storytellers were everywhere, in almost every type of person, from every town and occupation.

In a recent book entitled *Scottish Traveller Tales: Lives Shaped Through Stories* (2002),<sup>23</sup> the American folklorist, Donald Braid, traces the tradition of storytelling in the traveller communities of Scotland. Braid explains how travellers would walk for miles to visit one another in order to exchange stories.<sup>24</sup> On investigating this culture's social practices, Braid asserts that, "stories and storytelling played a central role in social interaction",<sup>25</sup> a fact that leads one to the conclusion that it was a way of cementing communal bonds. In fact, these stories were mostly told around campfires, a practice that is still observed to this day, even if the campsite is substituted by the kitchen table or any other such circular form.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Irene Lucchetti, "Islandman Translated: Tomás O'Crohan, Autobiography and the Politics of Culture," Diss. (University of Wollongong, 2005) 65.

<sup>20</sup> Delargy, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Delargy, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Lucchetti, 67.

<sup>23</sup> Braid, Donald. *Scottish Traveller Tales: Lives Shaped through Stories*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Braid, 56.

<sup>25</sup> Braid, 58.

<sup>26</sup> Braid, 56 & 64.

Similarly, other traveller communities such as the Romani gypsies that are spread across central and Eastern Europe, in particular, are not only noted for their storytelling but are actually held responsible for the transmission of folktales from one place to another.<sup>27</sup>

Another place where we might find the storyteller is in cultures that have low literacy levels and where the oral tradition takes on the function of both history and memory of the tribe. For example, in many countries on the African continent the role of storyteller is taken by the *Griot* or *Jeli*, a West African travelling poet and musician who is a combination of what we, in the West, might describe as a mix between a storyteller and historian. Echoing the European bards above, traditionally *griots* were court musicians who sang praise to the leaders of the tribe, thereby telling the history of the region. Even today, the *griots* still perform the function of keepers of history in many West African communities and can be both men and women (*griottes*).<sup>28</sup> A storehouse of oral traditions, the *griot* is still found singing the history of a tribe or family at naming ceremonies, weddings and other social and religious occasions.

In the European imagination, the image of the Eastern storyteller, in part fired by *The Arabian Nights* which reached European audiences in the late eighteenth century, can still be glimpsed in the bazaars and squares of many Arab countries where again, the tradition is still very much alive. For example, the bustling central square of *Jemaa el Fna* and the *souk* in Marrakech are places where travellers can still spot local people gathering to listen to storytellers vying for the audiences' attention. In a travel book by Elias Canetti entitled *The Voices of Marrakesh: A Record of a Visit* (1978), Canetti describes the sighting of a storyteller and the impact that he made on him:

They were words that held no meaning for me, hammered out with fire and impact: to the man who spoke them they were precious and he was proud of them. He arranged them in a rhythm that always

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<sup>27</sup> T.A. Acton and Gary Mundy, *Romani Culture and Gypsy Identity: A Companion Volume to 'Gypsy Politics and Traveller Identity'* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1997) 21.

<sup>28</sup> For more information on the history and function of the *griot* in West Africa see, Hale, Thomas A. *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998. Hale, Thomas A. *Scribe, Griot and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire*. Orlando; London: University of Florida Press, 1990.

struck me as highly personal. If he paused, what followed came out all the more forceful and exalted. I sensed the solemnity of certain words and the devious intent of others. Flattering compliments affected me as if they had been directed at myself; in perilous situations I was afraid. Everything was under control; the most powerful words flew precisely as far as the storyteller wished them to.<sup>29</sup>

However, this tradition goes back centuries and, of course, has inspired the writing of the tales of these nameless storytellers in the collection known as *The Arabian Nights* or *The Thousand and One Nights*.

In Robert Irwin's excellent companion to these tales, he traces the history of the storyteller in the Arabian world. Whilst the minstrels and troubadours were singing their way around Europe, the Arab equivalents were touching the shores from Spain across North Africa and into the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond. Similarly, their tales varied from high to low culture, from court entertainers to street storytellers of low social status who told their stories to illiterate audiences as a form of entertainment. Storytellers that Irwin mentions include the Turkish storyteller the *meddah*, found particularly in Turkish courts, who was a descendant of the *ashik* ('lover'), a poet-minstrel who similarly wandered through the early Ottoman empires singing or reciting poems about love and heroism. However, the *meddah* did not always occupy a high status and was also found telling tales in coffee-houses, using a wand and a handkerchief as props. In medieval Persia, the *naqqal* ('transmitter') was the court storyteller of the great national epic the *Sahanama*, but sometimes again could not resist the temptation of telling secular stories and so doubled up as a *rowzeh khan*.<sup>30</sup>

However, the bazaar and market-place is not only typical of the storytellers of Arabia, but traditionally is a central haunt of storytellers of the East. For example, in the Chinese tradition, the role of storyteller and his art of storytelling (*shuouha*) has been traced back to the first century Song dynasty (960-1279) and has spawned a

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<sup>29</sup> Elias Canetti, and James Amery Underwood, *The Voices of Marrakesh: A Record of a Visit* (London: Boyars: Distributed by Calder and Boyars, 1978) 78.

<sup>30</sup> See chapter 4, pp 110-119. Irwin, Robert. *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*. 1994. 2nd ed. London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2004.

tradition which again continues to this day.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, the Chinese oral tradition of storytelling was not born out of a 'primary oral culture' but existed side-by side with the literate one. Vibeke Børdahl has shown how these arts, one considered to be low culture and the other high, have influenced each other, to the point where the storyteller often appears in simulated form in the Chinese novel, giving it an element of the vernacular.<sup>32</sup> But again, we see something of the archetype here. Often encircled by a captive audience, the storyteller is a performer who, through a blending of various oral arts and gestures, strives to keep his audience listening. The storyteller is very much a part of the culture and the narratives that he tells are often both culturally specific and universally translatable.

Many indigenous peoples of colonised lands also often retain storytellers and the storytelling traditions. All over North America and Canada, the various tribes that are known most commonly as 'American Indians' or 'Native Americans' in the United States, and 'First Nations' in Canada, still have an active storytelling culture where various people take on the role of storyteller. Often, the storyteller in this tradition can be taken on by various people whose role is to remember the stories of the tribe. Although the storytellers might be different, they each employ various techniques and methods which signal their role as storyteller, again, many of which Benjamin describes in his essay. As Ronald Frey explains:

[...] among the various styles and techniques exhibited by storytellers are the use of repetition of key phrases to signal key actions within the narrative, the singing of associated songs during the telling of the narrative, the dramatic use of intonation and pauses, the accentuation of body movement and hand gesturing, and [...] action.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, on the other side of the world, in New Zealand, the Maori tradition has a strong storytelling culture and members of a tribe will meet and exchange their stories in a meeting house, which echoes the practices of the Irish storytellers described above. These stories not only preserve the history, but are of such great

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<sup>31</sup> Vibeke Børdahl, "The Storyteller's Manner in Chinese Storytelling," *Asian Folklore Studies* 62 (2003): 66.

<sup>32</sup> For a study of Chinese storytelling see, Børdahl, Vibeke. *The Eternal Storyteller: Oral Literature in Modern China*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999. -- *The Oral Tradition of Yangzhou Storytelling*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996.

<sup>33</sup> Rodney Frey, "Oral Traditions," *A Companion to the Anthropology of American Indians*, ed. Thomas Biolsi (Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) 162.

import that Maori storytellers risked life-threatening outcomes if they lacked skill at this craft.<sup>34</sup> In the same way, for the indigenous peoples of Australia, storytelling was a necessary and integral part of their culture and was the means from which all forms of knowledge (history, religion, spirituality, genealogy) were passed down from generation to generation, from elders to children. The storytellers were the custodians of stories, the keepers of a whole tradition of lore, some of which has now been forgotten. Interestingly, these storytellers (as Benjamin shows), did not tell about their individual lives, but always translated their stories so that they could be understood and were applicable to the collective. For these people, their storytelling practices were often performed as a ceremonial act with religious significance.<sup>35</sup>

Storytellers are often associated with religious teachers, sages or shamans, which links them to the idea of morals or “counsel” that Benjamin describes. These storytellers are responsible for the teaching of spiritual truths through story. For example, in the Hindu religion, even to this present day, storytellers exist who mix religious teachings and folklore.<sup>36</sup> In a study of Siberian Shamanism, Kira van Deusen explains that “oral storytelling is the way shamans themselves convey spiritual truth.”<sup>37</sup> Van Deusen explains that these stories are important not only because they relay new ways of looking at the world, but also in that the act of listening to them can bring about spiritual growth for both the listener and the teller. She notes: “the way a storyteller chooses the tales, the details added or removed, the tone – all of these make storytelling a spiritual act. Stories and songs are not objects or artefacts but living beings.”<sup>38</sup> In fact, even in the Christian tradition, as Leland Ryken has argued, the bible can be seen as a form of storytelling and Jesus himself as a storyteller.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Brian M. Fagan, *Clash of Cultures* (Walnut Creek, Calif.; London: AltaMira Press, 1998) 273.

<sup>35</sup> For a study on the indigenous peoples of Australia which includes information about their storytelling practices see, Berndt, R. M. *World of the First Australians*. Sydney, Australia: Lansdowne Press, 1982.

<sup>36</sup> For a study on Hindu teaching and storytelling see, Narayan, Kirin. *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989.

<sup>37</sup> Kira Van Deusen, *The Flying Tiger: Women Shamans and Storytellers of the Amur* (Kingston, Ontario: McGill Queen's University Press, 2001) xvii.

<sup>38</sup> Van Deusen, xvii.

<sup>39</sup> Ryken, Leland. *How to Read the Bible as Literature*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Academie Books, 1984.

Although, my examination here is by no means exhaustive and does tend to sketch the history of the storyteller rather than give a full account of it, nevertheless it does serve to prove that the storyteller is so old and has been so long-standing, that we can thus see him in various figures throughout the ages and in a variety of cultures. In fact, most countries of the world lay claim to this figure that has existed from ancient times. As a result, this in part may be the reason why, when talking about the storyteller, we are more likely to talk in generalisations and why it becomes difficult to define him as resting in one stable figure.

### Contemporary Storytellers

Interestingly, in the West, particularly in contemporary British (and American) culture, these various 'guises' of the storyteller have re-emerged in an ever-growing contemporary storytelling culture. As I mentioned above, although many cultures have had an active storytelling culture, where the storyteller still exists as a dynamic member of the community, is an actual profession, or has a recognisable function, in the West, the storyteller has been less apparent. However, the profession of 'storyteller' is on the rise<sup>40</sup> a phenomenon that cultural critics have described as a 'storytelling revival'. Increasingly, we see more festivals which are specifically geared towards telling oral stories and many professional storytellers who tell stories in theatres, schools and other venues.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, it seems that storytelling is coming back into fashion; for example, The Scottish Storytelling Centre was opened on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2006 and claims to be the world's first purpose-built modern centre for live storytelling.<sup>42</sup>

For me, one of the most interesting aspects of the idea of 'revival' in relation to contemporary oral storytelling as a cultural phenomenon is that it links with my idea of the storyteller's return to literature. Contemporary storyteller and cultural

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<sup>40</sup> Of course this is not taking into account the Irish and to a lesser extent the Scottish and Welsh storytelling traditions which have always been more prominent.

<sup>41</sup> For more information on storytelling in contemporary culture see, Bauman, Richard. *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

<sup>42</sup> See, [http://www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk/centre/scottish\\_storytelling\\_centre.htm](http://www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk/centre/scottish_storytelling_centre.htm)

critic, Patrick Ryan, gives various reasons for this interest in the phenomenon of storytelling as a revival in oral culture. He asserts:

The contemporary storytelling 'scene' in Britain and Europe mirrors the development of 'revival' storytelling in North America. Much that prompted those developments came out of counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, reactionary responses to elite, classical art forms, and to educational, social, political and ethnic hierarchies. Multi-culturalism and identity politics – feminism, gender studies, gay rights, minority rights, and so on – contributed to thoughts about what storytelling is and what it is for.<sup>43</sup>

Some of these ideas bear a striking resemblance to developments and trends in the literary scene of the time, a scene which had begun to leave behind modernist ideals and move into the more fluid, plural world of competing discourses, the 'postmodern' world of stories. One of the heralders of this movement was the American novelist and critic John Barth, who tellingly perhaps, was greatly influenced by the fictional storyteller 'Scheherazade' of *The Arabian Nights*. In fact, Barth makes no secret about his 'love affair' with Scheherazade, an image he describes as "the aptest, sweetest, hauntingest, hopefulest [...] I know for the storyteller."<sup>44</sup>

However, even here, in the world of contemporary oral storytelling, the storyteller evades arrest. Ryan argues that contemporary storytellers lack 'proper' definition so much so that this lack has become a problem in terms of trying to theorise about contemporary oral storytelling. Ryan states:

Self-definition is central to artistic development. In the case of organized storytelling there is often a confused sense of what it means to be called, or to call oneself, a storyteller. The term is vague enough to cover a multiplicity of performance arts: telling and parodying folktales, doing one-person drama, mime, dance, puppetry, or stand-up comedy.<sup>45</sup>

Ryan reveals that within cultural criticism 'the storyteller' has created myriad terms which lack consensus,<sup>46</sup> pointing out that those attempts by cultural critics to classify

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<sup>43</sup> Patrick Ryan, "The Contemporary Storyteller in Context: A Study of Storytelling in Modern Society," Diss. (University of Glamorgan, 2003) 17.

<sup>44</sup> John Barth, *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: Perigee Books, 1984) 86.

<sup>45</sup> Ryan, 22.

<sup>46</sup> See Ryan, pp30-40 for a more in depth analysis surrounding this question of definition.



storytellers have proven contentious and have sparked various arguments and debate. For example, a particular storyteller may be labelled 'professional storyteller', 'traditional storyteller' or 'revival storyteller'. And there are yet more 'precise' terms such as 'conscious cultural storyteller', 'platform storyteller', 'theatrical storyteller', 'modern, urban storyteller', 'neo-traditional storyteller', which prove more problematic both in and outside the field.

In the main, it seems what these terms are really trying to signal is the differences between storytelling as a craft that has been learnt, and storytelling as part of a tradition. This raises the question of authenticity which, interestingly, is a question that often surrounds the author in contemporary criticism. One of the tendencies that this thesis seeks to reveal is how this self-conscious re-appropriation of the storyteller that we see so clearly in contemporary professional storytelling seems also to be mirrored in literature. But what do novelists themselves think about their relation to the storyteller? Let us now turn to look at this in a little more detail.

#### **"Who are you labelling a storyteller?"**

As I pointed out in the introduction, the word 'storyteller' can be found in various places ranging from book blurbs to headings of critical essays. To complicate matters further, 'storytelling' – indicated as the 'craft' of the storyteller – is attributed to certain writers and not others, without a clear picture of what is meant by it. Particularly in the writings of public critics, the words 'storyteller' or 'storytelling' are often preceded by an adjective lending them positive value – for example, 'great', 'brilliant', 'excellent', and sometimes simply 'good'. In addition, 'storyteller' can describe any particular writer in any given period at any given time as well as being used with any of their works. How many times do we see writers being praised for their 'great yarns', 'great storytelling' or being described as 'excellent storytellers' by anonymous reviewers, esteemed public critics, and even by other writers? Not only is this term 'storyteller' often thrown around as a value judgment on the nature of writers' works, but infuriatingly, this value judgement remains obstinately imprecise. Margaret Atwood expresses this imprecision

perfectly, noting how it often leads to dubious romantic notions not only as to the nature of the storyteller, but also of the novelist-as-storyteller.

It has become a habit for people to speak of novelists as 'storytellers,' as in 'one of our best storytellers,' which can be a way for reviewers to get themselves off the hook – you don't have to say "one of our best novelists" – and can also be a way of saying this writer is good at plots, but not much else. Or it may be a way of indicating that the writer has a certain archaic or folkloric or outlandish or magical quality, reminiscent of a German grandmother propped in a rocking-chair telling old wives' tales, with a bunch of children and the Brothers Grimm gathered round, or of an old blind man or sharp-eyed gypsy woman sitting in the bazaar or the village square, and saying as Robertson Davies was fond of saying, "Give me a copper coin and I will tell you a golden tale."<sup>47</sup>

According to Atwood, the novelist and the storyteller are entirely different persons, and she reiterates the idea that the term 'storyteller' as used expressly by critics, is indeed vague, lazy and perhaps even a little derogatory. This leads us to question whether the term 'storyteller', as used to describe contemporary writers, is positive or negative. Judging from Atwood's reaction here it hardly seems especially positive. Similarly, Derek Brewer asserts:

Although the novel as a form has always and rightly been enormously popular, taking its place along with, or even replacing, the traditional tale, the story-telling aspect of novels has always been despised by intellectuals.<sup>48</sup>

What both remarks do point to very clearly, however, is that the label "storyteller" is often highly romanticised and does not clearly point to a relationship with the writer. Atwood reiterates this, echoing in part Walter Benjamin's distinction between the novelist and the storyteller being very different creatures:

But there are significant differences between that sort of tale-teller beguiling his or her live audience, and the novelist in his nineteenth-century garret or study, inkwell on desk and pen in hand, or the twentieth-century one in the seedy hotel room so beloved by Cyril

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<sup>47</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 46.

<sup>48</sup> Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories: Traditional Narratives of the Family Drama in English Literature* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1980) 12.

Connolly and Ernest Hemingway, hunched over his typewriter, or, by now, her word-processor.<sup>49</sup>

However, to what extent are Atwood's assertions correct? Are novelists and storytellers entirely different creatures? Or, do they instead have more in common than one might first think?

Despite Atwood's insistence on the differences between 'novelists' and 'storytellers', there is more than a romantic reasoning behind their similarities. In fact, many successful contemporary writers share a background in storytelling, have 'known' or been influenced by a storyteller, or regard themselves as a 'storyteller'. Often they talk about their interest or love of 'stories' and 'storytelling' and without necessarily making a distinction between their love of 'novels' and 'written fiction'. For example, Atwood may insist on their differences, but she also admits:

A good many writers have had [...] storytellers in their lives. My primal storyteller was my brother; at first I featured only as audience, but soon was allowed to join in. The rule was that you kept going until you ran out of ideas or just wanted a turn at being a listener.<sup>50</sup>

Whether she is consciously aware of it or not, Atwood's influence from 'real life' storytellers can be traced in at least one of her novels. Although she herself might not immediately identify herself as a storyteller, she certainly evokes the tradition in her own 'storytelling.' For example, in *Alias Grace* (1997),<sup>51</sup> this relationship of the storyteller to the listener is present in the figure of Grace Marks who tells her stories to the visiting psychiatrist, Dr. Simon Jordan. As Hilde Staels remarks:

Grace as overt teller transmits fragments of her life story to a listener. The presence of a narratee plays an important role in the creation of her narrative design and its meaning. As an "I," she addresses a "you," either Simon or the reader, because her sense of existence depends on being heard.<sup>52</sup>

By this insistence on hearing the story to exist, Atwood not only evokes the storyteller, but creates the idea of a storyteller in the reader's mind. In fact, the

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<sup>49</sup> Atwood, *Negotiating* 46.

<sup>50</sup> Atwood, *Negotiating* 8.

<sup>51</sup> Atwood, Margaret. *Alias Grace*. London: Virago, 1996.

<sup>52</sup> Hilde Staels, "Intertexts of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 46.2 (2000): 427-50.

lawyer McKenzie compares her to the storyteller Scheherazade of *The Arabian Nights*, and it is precisely in a Scheherazadian manner that Grace narrates her tale. This actually echoes Benjamin who says that the storyteller's "task was less to increase its didactic content than to refine the tricks with which the attention of the listener was captured. They have left deep traces in the narrative cycle of *The Arabian Nights*."<sup>53</sup> Grace similarly stops and starts her narratives, telling Jordan her stories over days and weeks, seducing him with the power of her words. However, when questioned about the truth of her stories, Jordan admits that although the way she tells her tale is very convincing, somehow, somewhere he feels she is lying to him. At this, the lawyer, McKenzie, replies:

Did Scheherazade lie? Not in her own eyes; indeed, the stories she told ought never to be subjected to the harsh categories of Truth and Falsehood. They belong to another realm altogether. Perhaps Grace Marks has merely been telling you what she needs to tell, in order to accomplish the desired end [...] to keep the sultan amused.<sup>54</sup>

Interestingly, the story is actually based on historical fact, and on the records kept during a real murder case that took place in mid-nineteenth century Canada. From this perspective, it seems as if it is Atwood herself who has shape-shifted into the position of storyteller-Scheherazade, and that the reader is the sultan she is trying to amuse. In this sense, Atwood, although clearly a novelist, is also a storyteller, beguiling us with her words to keep on reading.

But Atwood is not alone in evoking this particular storyteller, or her audience. As I mentioned above, John Barth's imagination has also been fired by the fictional storyteller, Scheherazade. However, rather than just hint at this association, as Atwood does, Barth is much more explicit and we find such 'Scheherazades' everywhere, both in his novels and in his essays. Barth has even accepted prizes on behalf of this fictional storyteller and has admitted to keeping quotations and notes from the *Nights* on his writing desk to give him inspiration.<sup>55</sup> In fact, he has openly stated that he models himself on Scheherazade from whom he often says he gets his

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<sup>53</sup> Benjamin, 101.

<sup>54</sup> Atwood, *Alias Grace* 438.

<sup>55</sup> See, Barth, *The Friday Book* and Barth, John. *Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures and Other Non-Fiction, 1984-1994*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995.

inspiration to the point where he sees himself as a storyteller, in turn, making no distinction between his status as a *writer* and an *oral teller*.

By trade I am a storyteller, I'll begin by telling a story. Once upon a time, in a land close at hand, there lived a storyteller [...] in those days the teller of this story was a full-time professor as well as a full-time storyteller and the protagonist of this particular story.<sup>56</sup>

Not only are his fiction and essays littered with references to Scheherazade, but Barth has also specifically used her as a character in two of his novels, *Chimera* (1972) and *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991).<sup>57</sup> As I argue in chapter five, he has based his life's work on the idea of tales within tales borrowed from the *Nights*.

On the other side of the ocean, another contemporary writer, Graham Swift, considers his "strongest influences" to have been his "first encounters with tales [...] reading and listening to stories in childhood."<sup>58</sup> Again, echoing this tradition of the storyteller, Swift's novel, *Waterland* (1983)<sup>59</sup> begins with the telling of a story, one that gives "counsel" and "practical advice",<sup>60</sup> but also one that has been passed down through the oral tradition from father to son.

"And don't forget," my father would say, as if he had expected me at a moment to up and leave and seek my fortune in the wide world, "whatever you learn about people, however bad they turn out, each one of them has a heart, and each one of them was once a tiny baby sucking his mother's milk."<sup>61</sup>

Immediately then, from the first lines, the reader is reminded of Benjamin's idea of the storyteller as "lesson-giver" and "counsellor", a fact that is literally true in the world of the novel, as Crick is also a history teacher at a local school. 'Old Cricky's' lessons become a strange blend of history, fairy-tale and story, linking them perfectly to Benjamin's archetypal storyteller who embodies all these figures. For

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<sup>56</sup> Barth, *Further Fridays*, 183.

<sup>57</sup> I give a reading of this novel in chapter 4 of this thesis.

<sup>58</sup> Heike Hartung-Brückner, "The Question of History and Writing: An Interview with Graham Swift," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatschrift* 46 (1996): 471.

<sup>59</sup> Swift, Graham. *Waterland*. London: Picador, 1983.

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin, 86.

<sup>61</sup> Swift, 1.

Swift, however, the storyteller moves beyond these figures to encompass everyone.

He teaches:

Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man – let me offer you a definition – is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories, he has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right.<sup>62</sup>

In this way therefore, Swift shows that he recognises the link between storytelling and survival, echoed in the *Nights* and in Benjamin's dictum: "Death is the sanction of everything a storyteller can tell."<sup>63</sup> Similarly, A.S. Byatt says:

We are all, like Scheherazade, under sentence of death, and we all think of our lives as narratives, with beginnings, middles and ends. Storytelling in general, and the *Thousand and One Nights* in particular, consoles us for endings with endless new beginnings.<sup>64</sup>

Doris Lessing also seems to ascribe to the same beliefs, reminding us again of the archetypal figure that the storyteller embodies:

The human race has been telling stories since it began. Storytelling began with the songs and ceremonies of the shamans and priests, began in religion, and for thousands of years has been instructing us all. It is easy to see the process in the parables of the Bible. Humanity's legacy of stories and storytelling is the most precious we have. All wisdom is in our stories and songs. A story is how we construct our experiences. At the very simplest it can be: He/she was born, lived, died. Probably that is the template of our stories — a beginning, middle, and end. This structure is in our minds.<sup>65</sup>

In a recent interview, Swift was asked (on my behalf) to what extent he identified himself with the traditional storyteller, to which he replied:

Well, it's interesting that you use the word "traditional". Your earlier question was, do I see myself in a tradition? I guess I would say that, yes, that is one tradition that I genuinely do see myself in: the

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<sup>62</sup> Swift, 62.

<sup>63</sup> Benjamin, 94.

<sup>64</sup> Byatt, *On Histories* 166.

<sup>65</sup> "Doris Lessing on the *Grandmothers*." Interview. 12 October 2006.

<<http://www.harpercollins.com/author/authorExtra.aspx?authorID=11302&isbn13=9780060530112&displayType=bookinterview>>.

tradition of the storyteller. Novels are a relatively recent, relatively modern, sophisticated literary phenomenon. But they tell stories – essentially they are stories, anyway. And humans have been telling stories ever since they've been capable of doing so. It's clearly something very deep in human nature. We need it: we need to tell stories, we need to receive stories. It's impossible to think of a world without stories. So in a way the story is the nub of it. The business of storytelling, I think, can bestow a very – happy is a word like magical – you can never really explain what makes a story, a perfect story is part of the power, the charm, the spell they can have. It is something mysterious and it goes deep, and I think it's important to hang on to that notion. However modern and sophisticated we want to be, don't forget, if you're a novelist, if you're dealing with this very basic thing which is storytelling, it answers a, well, a deep need. I think that's one of the reasons why the book or the novel will never die: because it does preserve, one of the ways, is in which it does preserve the process of storytelling, which is so important.<sup>66</sup>

Here again, we see in Swift's answer that not only is the storyteller similar to the novelist, rather that he also sees him as a kind of ancestor to the novelist. Moreover, the fact that he clearly identifies himself as a storyteller and in the storytelling tradition reveals, yet again, that the storyteller emerges as an archetypal figure. Although as Atwood pointed out, the novelist and storyteller might use different mediums, at least Swift proves that this does not mean to say that they are not doing, in part at least, the same thing. They do seem to be engaged in the same business: storytelling.

Irvine Welsh, in an interview with Dave Weich, talks about the oral storytelling tradition as a living tradition, where everyone can be a storyteller, where everyone has a story to tell. He juxtaposes the oral living word that one hears directly from the mouth of a storyteller in the shape of living stories, to the literary tradition which he sees as harbouring dead stories. He says:

I grew up in a place where everybody was a storyteller, but nobody wrote. It was that kind of Celtic, storytelling tradition: everybody would have a story at the pub or at parties, even at the clubs and raves. They were all so interesting. Then I'd read stories in books, and they'd be dead. I got to thinking that it had a lot to do with standard English. I mean, nobody talks like that in cinema, nobody

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<sup>66</sup> Tew, Philip, Fiona Tolan, and Leigh Wilson, eds. *Writers Talk: Interviews with Contemporary British Novelists*. London: Continuum, to be published 2007.

talks like that on television, nobody sounds like that in song. In any other cultural representation, we don't talk like that, so why do we in the novel?<sup>67</sup>

Borrowing from this tradition with which he obviously identifies over that of the literary novel, Welsh's first novel *Trainspotting* (1993) almost echoes Chaucer in the way that it recreates the spoken language of his native Scotland. In replicating the oral voice of the people in written form, Welsh shows that he is following the tradition of the oral storytellers that he identified above. As in Benjamin, his storytellers tell from their own experience. The quotation we looked at in the introduction now begins to make full sense:

Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers.<sup>68</sup>

Salman Rushdie also says he learned much from oral storytelling in India, to the point that he tried to mirror the style of oral telling in writing. Realizing that narratives are never linear, but are instead derived from personal experience, personal events, jokes or analogies he says: "It struck me that the oral narrative had to focus on keeping the audience sitting still, and I needed to find a written-down version of that."<sup>69</sup> In other words, as we can see from Rushdie and other examples above, written narrative fiction, although it can never *be* oral by nature, may derive some of its influences from oral narratives. The novelist could then be more like a storyteller in the way that he crafts and tells his stories.

Although not numerous, these examples clearly highlight the fact that again, at least some key contemporary writers do not necessarily see a distinct line between the 'novelist' and the 'storyteller'. Returning now to my initial observations on the influence of storytellers on writers' lives, we can note that although storytellers may be an elusive breed, their 'storytellings', as well as the stories they have left behind,

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<sup>67</sup> Weich, Dave. "Author Interviews: Irvine Welsh." 2001. Powells.com. 10 October 2006. <<http://www.powells.com/authors/welsh.html>>.

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin, 84.

<sup>69</sup> Salemme, Elizabeth. "Rushdie Wins Janet Weis Fellowship". Lewsiburg, 2004. *The Bucknellian: The weekly campus newspaper of Bucknell University*. (1 April 2006). 11 134. <[http://easyweb.bucknell.edu/News\\_Events/Publications/Bucknellian/Archives/2004\\_11\\_19.html](http://easyweb.bucknell.edu/News_Events/Publications/Bucknellian/Archives/2004_11_19.html)>.



*do have* a function in many writers' lives, a function which can become a stimulus and provide an impetus for writing. Storytelling, therefore, can be a profession, a gift, or a simply the action of a person engaged in the act of telling stories (even if that 'telling' constitutes a 'writing' of them).

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first definition of storyteller, which seems the most obvious, is simply "one who tells stories."<sup>70</sup> In this definition there is no specific reference to the idea that these must be of purely "oral" form, although perhaps this is the idea that immediately comes to mind. Although we may refer to writers as "good storytellers" we would not immediately use this word to talk about their profession. However, there is no reason why we should not or rather could not do this. As I argue later on, it is more often than not the word 'author' which problematises the status of the fiction writer and perhaps this is why Roland Barthes was led in part to call upon the author's 'death' in 1967. Semantically, the word storyteller can include the word 'author' if not imply it. In fact, the fourth meaning according to the same dictionary states that *storyteller* is also "applied to the writer of stories", a use which dates back to the seventeenth century at least.<sup>71</sup> As a result, we could say that the storyteller is not the only person who 'tells stories', but that he shares this characteristic with a person we, in literary studies, call *the novelist*, or more specifically in literary criticism and theory, *the author*. Moreover, as we have seen above, there are numerous instances both in and out of literary fiction, where the author-novelist is referred to and/or refers to him/herself as being a *storyteller* or as someone who 'tells stories'. From this point of view, we could say that despite the ambiguities in definition and use of the word that I have highlighted above, there is definitely a case for the use of the storyteller to apply to the novelist, if not the author.

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<sup>70</sup> "Oxford English Dictionary Online". Oxford, 2006. 2nd edition 1989: Oxford University Press. 10 October 2006. <[http://dictionary.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/cgi/entry/50238554?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=storyteller&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/cgi/entry/50238554?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=storyteller&first=1&max_to_show=10)>.

<sup>71</sup> The OED quote from Sir Walter Scott's *Waverly*, here dated 1814. "These circumstances serve to explain such points of our narrative as, according to the custom of story-tellers, we deemed it fit to leave unexplained, for the purpose of exciting the reader's curiosity."

From this perspective, we could say that it might have been better to call all authors of fiction 'storywriters',<sup>72</sup> a term that could have differentiated them from the 'oral' idea that comes with 'storytellers'. Perhaps then, our perspective on fiction writing may have had a different emphasis. The 'Canon of English Literature' would not have been so fixed in the written word, which may in turn have led to a very different literary history, one which took into account the 'oral' stories that we are only recently beginning to trace as influences.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, some contemporary writers, for example Salman Rushdie, may champion this idea. Rushdie has long been trying to instigate a rethinking of what the influential and controversial literary critic F. R. Leavis highlighted as 'The Great Tradition', which included novels on the basis of Leavis' largely 'moral-aesthetic' evaluation.

In October 2004 Rushdie gave a series of lectures at Emory University entitled 'The *Other* Great Tradition', [my emphasis] where he outlined an alternative pantheon of great 'storytellers' to add to the standard established by Leavis in the middle of the twentieth century. According to Leavis, only five novelists fell within the great tradition of English-language fiction: Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad and D.H. Lawrence. Rushdie's lectures went under the headings: 'Proteus', the Greek sea god who could change shape at will; 'Heraclitus' Greek philosopher of 'flux and fire' who became famous for his pronouncement, 'All things are flowing'; and he named 'Scheherazade', narrator of *The Arabian Nights*, whose storytelling is seen (as it is by John Barth) as a way of prolonging her life.<sup>74</sup> Rushdie was barking his response clearly: his influences were not *solely* steeped in the literary tradition, they were not *solely* intertextual, they were inter-'storial' too. Rushdie's choice of lectures correctly points to 'stories' being the harbingers of any subsequent stories, whether they come to one in written or oral

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<sup>72</sup> In fact, 'storywriters' is a word that John Barth has used in one of his essays. See, Barth, *Further Fridays* 188.

<sup>73</sup> These influences are limited to some extent and develop around specific writing or writers (e.g. fairy-tales and feminist re-visions; oral folklore and Native American and African writers), which I analyse in more detail in the literature review below.

<sup>74</sup> See Zeilkowitz, Rachel. "Rushdie Gives Lectures About Literary Study, Nature of Life". Atlanta, GA, 10 August 2004. Online Newspaper. *The Emory Wheel*. 27 November 2005. <<http://www.emorywheel.com/media/storage/paper919/news/2004/10/08/News/Rushdie.Gives.Lectures.About.Literary.Study.Nature.Of.Life1646491.shtml?norewrite200612151712&sourcedomain=www.emorywheel.com>>.

form. As a result, the writer is always a storyteller, because as Rushdie states in the conclusion of his final lecture (curiously echoing Swift's Tom Crick above): "We are storytelling animals – who we are, what we are up to, and why. When we die, we become part of other stories. This residue is our immortality."<sup>75</sup>

Returning to my initial proposition to locate the storyteller, all the evidence reveals that to attempt to apply this term as a *specific* concept to literary fiction is problematic. Therefore, it seems more reasonable to abandon trying to find a specific idea of what constitutes a storyteller, and begin in the first instance to look at what characterises the storyteller in a more generic way. From this vantage point, it seems as if the idea of the *archetypal storyteller* gives us a better starting point from which to begin in our application of this term to novelists, and to leave specifics for actual individual storytellers.

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<sup>75</sup> Loftus, Mary J. "The Storyteller". 2005 Winter. *Emory Magazine*. Ed. Andrew W.M. Beierle. Emory University. 15 April 2006.  
<[http://www.emory.edu/EMORY\\_MAGAZINE/winter2005/precis\\_rushdie.html#](http://www.emory.edu/EMORY_MAGAZINE/winter2005/precis_rushdie.html#)>.

## THE BIRTH OF THE STORYTELLER

### Jim Crace's *The Gift of Stones*

A great storyteller will always be rooted in the people, primarily in a milieu of craftsmen.

Benjamin, *Illuminations* 101.

Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back.

Benjamin, *Illuminations* 94.

What, if any, are the circumstances which create the conditions from which a storyteller is born? Is he born out of culture or community or is his vocation one that he finds? Where do his stories come from and with them his voice and his 'truths' and what is their function? I want to begin my first reading with the idea that Jim Crace's *The Gift of Stones* (1988)<sup>1</sup> offers an answer to these questions. What is significant about this novel is that it unravels the myth surrounding the storyteller by telling the story of the 'first' storyteller, a figure that emerges out of conflict and change. Although initially cast out, the storyteller returns as a powerful force, helping the community move from the past into their unknown future. In Crace's novel, we see the storyteller as both 'primitive' man and archetypal figure, as well as the storyteller as an individual, an actual living, breathing person, with his own story to tell.

My reading of the novel, which also reflects more generally on Crace as a writer, draws on two essays which I argue not only aid a more complete understanding of the novel, but also serve to introduce my concept of *storyteller* and the issues that surround it. The first of these is an essay by the American critic,

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<sup>1</sup> Crace, Jim. *The Gift of Stones*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1988. All subsequent in-text quotations in this chapter are taken from this edition and will appear in the text in the abbreviated form *GS* followed by the page number.

Edmund Wilson, entitled “Philoctetes: The Wound and the Bow”<sup>2</sup> which presents us with the artist as outcast, the wounded man who in turn becomes storyteller to save the people and himself from suffering. I argue that Crace’s novel can be read as a re-telling of this myth which not only links with the idea of storyteller as re-teller, and with the artist as storyteller, but in so doing, places the novel itself within the realms of myth.

The second essay I draw on is Benjamin’s “The Storyteller”, discussed in detail in the introduction, but relevant here for two reasons: firstly, Benjamin’s storyteller is more of an archetypal figure whose characteristics, consequently, are not precise and definitive but instead are generic and interpretable. Crace’s novel returns us to the ‘original’ storyteller, to the birth of the storyteller, who emerges as the father of all storytellers. In this sense, if we follow Benjamin, Crace’s storyteller might be seen to embody many of his assertions: the fact that the storyteller is born in a milieu of craftsmen; the fact that he creates stories out of a blending of individual and collective and ‘lived’ experience; the fact that his storytelling is linked to survival and death. As a result, I feel that Crace’s ‘original’ storyteller is interesting to consider in the light of Benjamin’s archetypal storyteller and functions as a means of both ‘testing out’ and explicating Benjamin’s assertions. Secondly, it is interesting to consider whether Crace himself can be viewed as a storyteller on a par with Leskov. As Crace’s novel gives us both a character as storyteller and the author as storyteller, this reading helps to prove the main point of my thesis: the storyteller has returned.

Although Jim Crace has not immediately received as much critical attention<sup>3</sup> as some of the other writers that I have chosen to read in this thesis, he is emerging as a significant figure in contemporary British Literature and has won an array of literary awards.<sup>4</sup> Crace’s career was launched in 1986 with his first novel *Continent*,

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<sup>2</sup> Wilson, Edmund. *The Wound & the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature*. London: W.H. Allen, 1952. This essay was first published in 1941.

<sup>3</sup> Critical interest on Crace, however, is growing. The first definitive study of Crace’s fiction was published in 2006. See, Tew, Philip. *Jim Crace*. Manchester: MUP, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Following these three prizes for his first novel *Continent* Crace went on to receive the Premio Antico Fattore (Italy) in 1988. For *The Gift of Stones* he won The GAP International Prize for Fiction (USA) in 1989, and three years later, in 1992, he was awarded the E.M. Forster Award from The American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1995 he was awarded the Winifred Holtby

which consists of seven interconnected stories set on an imaginary seventh continent and explores Western attitudes to the Third World. *Continent* went on to win three literary prizes that same year: The David Higham Prize for Fiction; The Guardian Fiction Prize; and The Whitbread First Novel Award. Since then (*Gift of Stones* is his second novel), Crace has written a total of seven novels to date with his latest, *Pesthouse*, due to be published in 2007. He is emerging as a significant presence in contemporary fiction and serves as a supportive figure to open my larger argument on the storyteller's return to contemporary fiction.

### **The Flight of an Arrow**

*The Gift of Stones* is set in an unspecified village community in the Neolithic era and is significantly placed to mark the death of the Stone Age and the advent of the Bronze Age. It opens with the picture of a wealthy and complacent community of stoneys who survive by the trade of their unrivalled skills. This is a village community which has not yet needed to imagine another life; secure in their microcosm and in the supremacy of their craftsmanship they exist in a version of 'stoney' Eden.<sup>5</sup> Like the Neanderthals in William Golding's *The Inheritors* (1955), the stoneys have never before perceived the possibility or need for change. Logically, then, storytelling proved unnecessary for them; unthreatened and secure, they live in an eternal present, with no perception of past or future. In a village that was "obsessed with work, with industry, with craft" (*GS* 9), the vocation of storyteller, therefore, has not yet been conceived. However, all this is ruptured by an event which leads not only to the birth of the storyteller, but also to the 'death' of life as they know it: the flight of an arrow.

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Memorial Prize for *Signals of Distress* and had two novels short listed for the Booker Prize in 1997 and 1999 respectively (*Quarantine* (1997) and *Being Dead* (1999)). Finally his novel *Being Dead* won the Whitbread Novel Award in 1997 and The National Book Critics' Circle Fiction Award (USA) in 1999 as well as being short listed for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

<sup>5</sup> The move from Stone to Bronze might also remind us of the 'Ages of Man', alluded to by the Greek Hesiod as being five (the Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age), and in Ovid's *The Metamorphosis* as being four (missing out the Heroic Age). The presentation of village life in this novel links to the Golden Age and to Arcadia (utopia) and Eden and its subsequent fall either into an Age of Bronze or out of a state of paradise. (*Aracdia*, is Jim Crace's third novel, first published in 1992.)

The story begins one day when a young boy ventures out of the safety of the village in order to collect scallops and is attacked by a group of horsemen, traders from a neighbouring village. When they demand that he give them what he has collected, he fights back, perhaps poignantly, with nothing more than 'words' and, consequently, is shot in the arm by a poisoned arrow. The arrow is significant in various ways but primarily marks the moment of change both for the individual boy and for the community as a whole, prefiguring the larger change that is to come with the Age of Bronze. With its flight through the air, the arrow symbolises the future and with it, both the unknown and chance which can have both negative and positive connotations. The arrow is negative in that it symbolises threat; pointed at another human being, the arrow is no longer a tool for supplying food, but a weapon.

Although initially our storyteller-to-be escapes the jeering horsemen, on returning to the village it becomes clear that he must either "lose an arm or die" (*GS* 7), an horrific prospect considering that he needs two good arms to learn his craft of working stone. The master craftsman of the village known as 'Leaf', who was not only "renowned for the sharpness of his blade [but] also for the bluntness of his tongue, his dolefulness, rigidity" (*GS* 13), is the one who saves the storyteller-to-be. He fashions the blade which is to be "the amputation knife" (*GS* 13) that cuts off the boy's arm and with it his ability to work stone. The skill of the hand is reflected here in three ways: in Leaf's amputation knife; in the crafting of the arrow; and in the skill of the Bowman who shot it. This theme of craft runs throughout the novel, encompassing not only the stone that the stoneyes were renowned for crafting, but the skill of storytelling that followed it. However, more importantly, what it reveals here is that the craft that the stoneyes relied on, the skill of stonemasonry, is temporary. The boy's accident leads him to discover a new craft in the art of storytelling and in this way storytelling becomes his industry. Storytelling then, not only links him to his community and proves his value, but also brings to that community a new craft which will continue to lead them into the unknown future: "He was to truth what every stoney was to untouched flint, a fashioner, a god" (*GS* 56).

The use of the hand as tool then, is usurped by another type of craft, that of the voice: storytelling. This highlighting of the voice as the substitute for the hand is

expressed in the telling of the storyteller's story by his daughter, the narrator, and is poignantly linked to the idea of craft. Significantly, this idea of craftsmanship links our storyteller to Benjamin's archetype: "A great storyteller will always be rooted in the people, primarily in a milieu of craftsmen."<sup>6</sup> The fact that the amputation is conducted based on the skill of the master craftsman (who relied on a skill based on the use of his hands) now takes on a more poignant meaning: the hand is the very thing the storyteller has now lost. The storyteller's craft is described in the same way as the craft of stonemasonry, linking the two crafts together: "Watch out, you say, he's chipping and he's knapping at the truth. He's shaping it to make a tale" (*GS* 33). By the end of the novel, it is the master craftsman, despite his initial position of power, who is revealed to be the real invalid of the story. His craft is neither as long-lasting nor as vital to the community as the storyteller's becomes.

The loss of the hand is also symbolic in another way: it reflects the craft of writing. Perhaps then the 'moral' (or at least one of them) of Crace's story of the storyteller is that we are meant to remember: nothing is permanent, one technology makes way for another, but the one thing that can lead us to this imagined space of the future is the art of the storyteller. In this sense, even though storytelling is now recorded in the act of writing, what survives, beyond the pen, when there is nothing left, is the storyteller's voice itself. This is surely the point being made when the role of the daughter-narrator becomes more significant and it refers back to Crace, the writer, who outside the fiction, fashions the story that he has created through imagination and invention.

Although they do save the boy, the villagers cannot see the future for him or for them. In their ignorance, and lack of imagination, initially, the stoneys do not perceive anything outside of themselves as being useful. As a result, when the boy wakes up, saved from death, he is transformed from a useful villager to an outcast, overnight:

[...] the ember died. The village slept. It woke as usual with the dawn and slowly, painstakingly, more flints were formed; the hammers scrapers, bellows, chisels were gathered up and put to work. Here was the normal day – except, of course, for one small boy who slept on

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, 101.



and on for fear of waking to his pain, his severed arm caked and stiffened by dry blood, his nightmares blustery and full of stone. (GS 30-31)

What is the boy's fate? At this point nobody, not even he knows – perhaps because they have never been forced to imagine this. Here the boy emerges as an individual; no longer part of the community, he becomes the outsider and we see his struggle, solitary, alone.

Although the villagers primarily see the arrow as pointing back to them, the boy's world has been permanently and irrevocably changed. No longer protected, he follows the trajectory of the arrow outside the village and looks out across the sea into the unknown world beyond. Here he sees a ship in the distance and as he has no other use, no other work to do in the village, he decides to follow it along the coast. As he moves into the unknown world that lies beyond the safety of the heath and stoney Eden, we see him meet a woman called Doe who is bringing up a child outside the confines of any community. The boy glimpses a different world, a world that is cold and dark and frightening. But he feels an affinity with Doe; she too is an outcast surviving on prostitution and living outside the safety of a community. When he returns he tells the story of his travels outside the confines of the village, but he is curiously selective. This is when he realises that the truth is not a 'good' story and that the storyteller must lie. Here we witness the birth of the storyteller who, in trying to entertain and capture the attention of his listeners, creates a new craft: storytelling. Thus, while eating their evening meal, he tells his cousins his *first* story, of how he followed the ship, of how, because he had no work to do, he "simply filled his chest with air and took off down the coast" (GS 54).

My cousins stopped eating. Their eyes were turned on me. Those phrases – 'fill my chest' and 'took off down the coast' – had made them hopeful in a way they could not understand. Those phrases were like perfume. They had dramatic odours. They promised more. I knew at once that the truth could not be told. No love, poor food, a woman – thin and naked, with breasts like barnacles – who sold herself for chickens. What could I say to make it sound attractive? They wanted something crafted and well turned. I wanted their applause. The truth would never do. It was too fragile and too glum. It offered no escape. (GS 54)

In Benjamin's essay on the storyteller, he talks about there being two archaic types of storyteller: the one embodied in the farmer, the stay-at-home storyteller, and the other in the sailor, the wanderer and traveller who collects tales along the way. Richard Lane, in his reading of *The Gift of Stones*, suggests that the storyteller is an embodiment of both these archaic types, as he is:

[...] both inside and outside his community: incapable of becoming a stone-worker because of his amputation, but still part of a stone-working family and environment, he is also a wanderer, an explorer of remote places, inspired as a child by the sight of the sailing ship that he attempts to follow along the coast.<sup>7</sup>

As the boy follows the ship their realities become conjoined and he realises that "they were a pair" (*GS* 57).

He could not, he said, have invented a more workable device for telling tales than the ship upon the sea. Each time it came ashore it could offload a new and untried plot; a different set of characters with untold loves and enmities could disembark. The ship had formed a rough and tidy core from which my father could detach at will his patterned blades of fables, romance, lies. (*GS* 57)

This move into the world outside the secure 'stone' village leads him to begin to create stories about the unknown beyond. Thus, the storyteller is also an inventor: he invents a new craft, and a new language that comes from outside reality, and from imagination.

Eventually, however, the storyteller does bring Doe and her child into the village; they are the first outsiders. Like the arrow then, Doe represents the outside world which had the ability "to pound and crush, to hammer and bruise" (*GS* 82) a reality the villagers could not know, for their village, due to their 'gift of stones', is prosperous, secure, "as snug as poppy seeds" (*GS* 101). In the end, these workers, who "with two hands, were made tame, secure and virtuous by labour" (*GS* 101), are rendered worthless, numb in the sense of an inability to move. For the stoneys then, the 'attack' that the boy receives, prefigures the destruction of the village at the end of the novel that points outside themselves. When the arrow returns again at the end of the novel, it is made from a more powerful material: bronze. This time, the

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<sup>7</sup> Richard J. Lane, "The Fiction of Jim Crace: Narrative and Recovery," *The Contemporary British Novel*, ed. Philip Tew (London: Continuum, 2004) 29.

stone's supremacy is blown apart; they are weaponless and toolless. This time, the arrow kills. It kills the storyteller's partner Doe, marking the death of the village and the death of stone. With their 'Garden of Eden' destroyed, they have to face the real world and the threat of change. It is at this moment that they realise the importance of the storyteller: "their little liar was to be their guide" (*GS* 166). He is the only one that can now lead them into the unknown future, the one that they had never before imagined. The end of the story is the beginning of another, and this is perhaps why Crace, the storyteller, ends it with these lines:

The stories that he'd told were now our past. His new tale was to invent a future for us all. He closed his eyes and what he saw was the shingled margin of the sea with horses wild and riderless close by. He tried to place a sail upon the sea, but could not. He tried to fill the air with human sounds. But all he saw were horses in the wind, the tide in loops upon the beach, the spray-wet rocks and stones reflecting all the changes in the sky, and no one there to notice or applaud. (*GS* 169-170)

As we can see then, it is precisely in the instance of his 'escape from death' that the boy is placed on the path to become a storyteller. As Benjamin observes: "Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back."<sup>8</sup> It is as a result of this wound, one that led him to lose his arm and come close to death, that he became a storyteller, that the storyteller was born. In fact, the storyteller is aware of this, as he says: "'Now all that stood between me and death,' said father, relishing his circumstance, 'was a hoof of roasted stone and a hairless, trembling Leaf'" (*GS* 15). Therefore, the flight of the arrow also brings about positive results: by introducing threat, it creates the circumstances which bring about the birth of storytelling; it birthed the storyteller. This metaphoric 'birth' of the storyteller reveals the storyteller as 'outcast' and links not only with romantic notions of the artist, but also with the idea of storytelling for survival. In fact, this partnership

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, 94.

between storytelling and survival is one that is very long-standing, and arguably, reflected in storytelling throughout the ages.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Wound and the Bow**

Interestingly, one of the archetypal myths of the artist is found in Sophocles' drama *Philoctetes* which, although not immediately apparent in the drama itself, has been interpreted as such in the well-known essay by Edmund Wilson, "The Wound and the Bow", written in the early 1940s. Philoctetes suffers a wound in his leg and is cast out to live his life alone on a deserted island until he is saved by Neoptolemus, the envoy of Odysseus, who wants to procure the magic bow left to him by Hercules. In this essay Wilson professed that this was a myth of how art, the creativity and voice of the poet, is a compensation for the wound and the suffering. Wilson presents us with the quintessential myth of the artist as outcast, but it is revealed that in the end, his society needs him to lead them forward. They have to accept him with his deformity, and listen to the wisdom that he speaks. Crace's story slightly subverts the original myth – Philoctetes does not actually receive a wound by the arrow but by a poisonous snake – however, arguably, there are such striking parallels between the two stories that lead us to see *The Gift of Stones* as a re-telling of the myth. The similarities to this myth and reasons behind its use not only point us to the storyteller, but also help us to understand him more completely. Let us now look at this relationship more closely.

Firstly, as I have pointed out above, the young boy, significantly wounded by a poisoned arrow, is subsequently outcast and this leads to his transformation into a storyteller (the poet-artist). Like Philoctetes then, the boy is rendered useless: not abandoned on a desert island, but shut out of village life. Indeed, it is as a direct consequence of his abandonment, and his 'outcasting' from the familiar world, that the storyteller finds his vocation. Moreover, it is his vocation of storyteller that not only allows him back into his community, but also proves to be pivotal to both his individual and the community's survival. Similarly, after gaining his trust, although Neoptolemus procures the bow and could leave the island without Philoctetes, he

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<sup>9</sup> There will be more on this discussion specifically in chapter 3 and 4, particularly in relation to frame-tale literature and *The Arabian Nights*.

realises that he needs him in order to defeat the Trojans. Without him the bow would be useless: he is the key to survival. Thus, empowered and empowering, the storyteller's art ensures the survival of both himself and the tribe. Moreover, it is the deformity that becomes symbolically the magic portal through which he enters to find something far more precious: the vocation of storyteller. This is the first instance where we see the role of the storyteller as one that is linked to death and transformation. His is a metamorphic role: his story shows us that to survive one has to be able to adapt, to change; one has to be able to imagine a future.

Philip Tew notes that in Crace's *The Gift of Stones*, the boy "acquires his role as the storyteller only after his transformation, his abandonment of the familiar, his *rite of passage* in hostile conditions."<sup>10</sup> This happens because of the wound received from a poisoned arrow, a fact that connects Crace's story with the story of Philoctetes, who had procured the arrows from Hercules. Unlike the storyteller, however, Philoctetes was not poisoned by an arrow but by a snake. The snake bite Philoctetes suffers also echoes this idea of metamorphosis or transformation from one reality to another, from Eden into the world, by reminding us of the story of the Fall, of Original Sin. Was not the Devil the original seducer of man, the original liar? Crace's storyteller not only bases his stories on "lies" but insists on this at various points throughout the novel. But lying or 'telling stories' is shown to be both positive and negative. It is positive because it takes the stoneys out of their world and presents them with something new; hence, the storyteller tells us: "Salute the liars – they can make the real world disappear and a fresh world take its place" (*GS* 64). On the other hand, it is also dangerous because it is powerful. In the novel we see this in the juxtaposition of the stoneys' protected world and that of the heath outside. The beauty often concealed in the storyteller's words, hides a stark reality that wounds and kills. To protect the stoneys from the world's reality, its harshness, the storyteller thus becomes a liar and uses 'tricks' and lies to entertain. But the liar is also a "deceiver" (*GS* 63), like the devil that you must be careful not to be seduced by.

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<sup>10</sup> Tew, *Jim Crace* 68.

The storyteller as a liar thus follows the tradition of the Devil who, through the power of his tongue, seduces Eve to take the fruit from the tree of knowledge and thus suffer the consequence of the loss of Eden. In the novel, it is the storyteller's lies that eventually lead the stoneys out of their 'Eden' and into the unknown world beyond. Thus, the stories the devil told that turned him symbolically into a snake, and poisoned Eve, also echo the poison in the arrow that led the boy to lose his arm and in turn to become a storyteller. As a result, poison itself becomes significant: poison not only kills but also distorts reality. Once poisoned, neither Philoctetes, the storyteller, nor Eve, can ever be the same. Poison contains something that can cause death and pain and it is from this suffering, from the reality of death, that is a consequence of the physical body, that reality is changed. Storytelling thus seems to result from the consequence of a wound, of the mutilation and distortion of the physical body.

This link between illness and storytelling has been investigated within the field of sociology of health. In a study entitled *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995),<sup>11</sup> Arthur W. Frank argues precisely this: that the experience of illness creates what he calls a society of "wounded storytellers". He says:

The stories that ill people tell come out of their bodies. The body sets in motion the need for new stories when its disease disrupts the old stories. The body, whether still diseased or recovered, is simultaneously cause, topic, and instrument of whatever new stories are told.<sup>12</sup>

Although Frank traces 'real' cases of 'wounded storytellers' and looks at it specifically from within his own discipline, I think there is a curious parallel here, between the myth of Philoctetes and Crace's re-telling in *The Gift of Stones*. As with real life sufferers, both characters, Philoctetes and the storyteller, are very much victims of their 'wounds'. With Philoctetes he is paralysed by this so badly, that he is consequently abandoned and left to suffer alone. Similarly, the boy is cast out and

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<sup>11</sup> Frank, Arthur W. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. For further reading into this area of research and in particular of how individuals self-construct narratives of health see, Gustafsson, Ulla, and Sarah Nettleton. *The Sociology of Health and Illness Reader*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002. Nettleton, Sarah. *The Sociology of Health and Illness*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Frank, 2.

ignored until it is finally revealed that he proves useful because of his wisdom to understand reality, to *know* the truth of things.

*The Gift of Stones* begins with this story, with the image of the wound. This is a story that has directly come out of an experience. But this is not just any experience; it is the experience of a wounded body. The wound, we later learn, is precisely what led him to story-tell in the first place. As the daughter tells us:

My father's right arm ended not in a hand, but at the elbow, in a bony swelling. Think of a pollard tree in a silhouette. That was my father's stump. Its skin drawn tight across the bone and tucked frowning into the hole left by the missing lower joint. The indented scar was like those made in the ice by boys with stones – a small uneven puncture, wet with brackish pus. The arm was rarely dry or free from pain. (*GS* 1)

This bold opening image is very similar to the one we find in *Philoctetes* whose wound, as Wilson reminds us, becomes so virulently infected that he began to groan and produce "ill-omened sounds [...and] the bite began to suppurate with so horrible a smell that his companions could not bear to have him near them."<sup>13</sup> As a direct consequence of the wound, he is rendered useless and a burden to society and subsequently becomes an outcast. Moreover, again for both parties, despite the passing of time, the mysterious wound never healed, nor was it ever free from pain. In *Philoctetes*' story we see this most poignantly just as he is finally being rescued by Neoptolemus, where the wound opens again and he suffers so badly that he hands him the bow, the very thing that Neoptolemus had come to procure. However, rather than leave him there, as Odysseus would have done, Neoptolemus recognises that despite his handicap *Philoctetes* is necessary: the bow, symbolic of the power of stories perhaps, is useless without its owner, just as stories need a storyteller to make them come alive.

As we can see, the storyteller's wound perfectly mirrors *Philoctetes*' wound as if it were the *same* wound. The fact that it cannot heal is symbolic of the fact that the storyteller can never forget his story. As long as the wound is alive, the storyteller will keep telling. With *Philoctetes* we see this clearly: the pain and suffering caused by his wound were at first dismissed but later listened to by

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<sup>13</sup> E. Wilson, 247.

Neoptolemus, who recognised the need for Philoctetes' story. Although clearly the audience was not initially ready to listen to this story, Neoptolemus' return and his heeding of the oracle's insistence that they needed Philoctetes, and not simply his bow, to defeat Troy, showed that his story was in fact important to tell.

Interestingly, this wound is also 'real' on an extra-textual level for Crace. Although Crace is not a sufferer himself, Philip Tew tells us that Crace's father actually suffered from a similar condition. He says:

This suppuration is biographically suggestive, as it echoes the medical condition of Crace's father, who contracted osteomyelitis aged eleven in 1922, effectively ending his education. He suffered muscle wastage in his left arm, thereafter stiff and periodically weeping wounds left by the boils and lesions.<sup>14</sup>

Although as Tew notes, Crace is said to resist biographical interpretations of his work and prefers to see himself as an 'enigmatic' writer,<sup>15</sup> this relationship between his father's illness and the storyteller is revealing. Crace has said of his father:

My dad was very interesting, a bizarre and odd character, a curmudgeon, and yet interested in a multitude of things. I owe my attitude and my politics to him, my interest in the arts, and my love of wildlife and natural history [...].<sup>16</sup>

Just like the daughter in the novel, Crace has been led to tell the story of the wound and in so doing not only echoes the story of Philoctetes and the storyteller, but places his own father and himself in the same tradition.

Returning to Frank's study of the "wounded storytellers", he explains that "these embodied stories, have two sides, one personal and one social"<sup>17</sup> which again mirror the observations above. The personal issue of telling he says is "to give voice to the body, so that the changed body can become familiar in these stories".<sup>18</sup> The wounded body, an unfamiliar body, needs new stories to make it understandable and in so doing shows us its separateness, its move away from perfection. Again this idea has echoes with the story of the Fall where Adam and Eve lose their

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<sup>14</sup> Tew, *Jim Crace* 9.

<sup>15</sup> Tew, *Jim Crace* 1.

<sup>16</sup> Tew *Jim Crace* 9-10.

<sup>17</sup> Frank, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Frank, 2.



immortality and become aware of their body, this 'separate' creature that in its transformation can now lead them to death. Secondly, the social aspect of telling stories, Frank observes, "is that they are told *to* someone, whether that other person is immediately present or not."<sup>19</sup> Again this relates directly to the storyteller, who needs an audience and who tells his story very much in response to the expectations of that audience. Frank notes:

Even messages in a bottle imply a potential reader. The less evident social aspect of stories is that people do not make up their stories by themselves. The shape of the telling is molded by all the rhetorical expectations that the storyteller has been internalizing [...].<sup>20</sup>

Frank goes on to investigate three aspects related to these "wounded storytellers": their need to tell their stories and the subsequent new perceptions of the world these lead to; the embodiment of their stories, how they are told, not just about the body, but through it; and finally, about how the social context affects which stories are told and how they are told.<sup>21</sup>

This idea has also been noted by Elaine Scarry in her ground-breaking book *The Body in Pain* (1985). Here Scarry notes this instance of the foregrounding of the body through pain in Philoctetes:

In Sophocles' Philoctetes, the fate of an entire civilisation is suspended in order to allow the ambassadors of that civilisation to stop and take account of the nature of the human body, the wound in that body, the nature of the wound.<sup>22</sup>

Again, this link between Philoctetes and our storyteller becomes apparent. Moreover, looking at this from the point of view of an embodied author or 'storyteller', this point becomes even more interesting. The story not only comes out of the body but tells the story *of* the body, in order to make it understandable and familiar. The wounded body is an unfamiliar body thus needs new stories to make it understandable. If we see the body as a metaphor for reality, we could see that telling stories from a wounded body would naturally present us with a new way of

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<sup>19</sup> Frank, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Frank, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Frank, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: OUP, 1985) 10.

looking at reality or even “experience” (another of Benjamin’s *dicta* for the storyteller): and incidentally, all things which our storyteller does. As Benjamin notes:

Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience.<sup>23</sup>

Benjamin’s point here is reflected both in the storytelling of the storyteller himself and in the daughter’s re-telling of his story. Both are the telling of an experience that is their own and someone else’s. Thus, in *The Gift of Stones*, we see the wound literally transforming into story, into something useful before our eyes:

And here, of course, if there were children in his audience, my father would not resist the obvious embellishment of his tale, that was his fate too. They cooked his raw and living flesh over the fire and removed his poisoned arm with forty bites. There were the teeth marks still. He would present his puckered stump – not too slowly, not too close. And, indeed, you thought you saw the logic to his lies – those indentations, those pussy fissures and frowning scars could be the work of mouths. (*GS* 12-3)

In André Gide’s version of the drama, in his play of the same name, *Philoctète*, this interpretation is even more pronounced. As Wilson describes: “the misfortune of his exile on the island has allowed him to perfect himself”<sup>24</sup> to the point that Wilson sees Philoctetes as “at once a moralist and an artist, whose genius becomes purer and deeper in ratio to his isolation and outlawry.”<sup>25</sup> Wilson quotes a passage, spoken by Gide’s Philoctetes, which poignantly expresses this:

I have come to know more of the secrets of life than my masters had ever revealed to me. And I took to telling the story of my sufferings, and if the phrase was very beautiful, I was so much consoled; I even sometimes forgot my sadness by uttering it.<sup>26</sup>

This reminds us of a similar passage quoted above that the storyteller first pronounced the first time he told stories.<sup>27</sup> It was the beauty of these words, the

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<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, 91-2.

<sup>24</sup> E. Wilson, 258

<sup>25</sup> E. Wilson, 259.

<sup>26</sup> E. Wilson 258-9.

<sup>27</sup> See p.82 of this chapter. Quote beginning with the lines “My cousins stopped eating. Their eyes were turned on me. [...]” (*GS* 54)

poetry in them that consoled him and gave him a purpose in the village. Indeed, perhaps it is in this vision of Philoctetes that the romantic notions of the artist as a sufferer find their root.

Near the end of *The Gift of Stones*, the storyteller decides to stop telling stories and tell the story of the truth. At this point, he recognises that his audience no longer need lies, but that they are ready to hear what he has learnt about the world outside. Although not about his illness, the impetus for storytelling is the same as that of Philoctetes. The storyteller, outcast due to his deformity, now becomes useful. He teaches the 'unfamiliar' stoney about what is familiar to him, what he has learnt physically through his body, which came about through his direct relationship to illness.

"This is a story made by life," he said. "It's true in every way." That caused some cautious laughter and some shouts. "You know that when I want to make your eyes stretch wide, I stretch my stories wide to match. You know that when I want some fun, I let my stories tickle truth. You know all that. You are not fools. Well, now, here is a tale that's meant to make you weep. There is no need for camouflage. The world out there is sad enough. So this is not a dream. This, to a hair, is fact." He'd never heard an audience so quiet. They sat and waited to be entertained by truth. (GS 105)

As we have seen, it is the 'wounded body' that leads to storytelling and to genius, or to Benjamin's idea of 'wisdom'. The story that genius tells is one that we must hear as it contains something 'useful'. Wilson recognises the fact that "to the modern reader: the idea that genius and disease, like strength and mutilation, may be inextricably bound together."<sup>28</sup>

Both the storyteller and Philoctetes then are rendered useless and a burden to society because of the wound. As vile creatures who could no longer 'speak', their bodies set them apart from their communities. However, they find liberation through their wounds. The wounded body leads them to learn to speak in a new way and they become not only essential to, but also the most important figures in their communities. In other words, although at first there is no language for pain, the wounded body forces the person to tell its story: hence Frank's dubbing of these

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<sup>28</sup> E. Wilson, 259.

sufferers as 'wounded storytellers'. The birth of the storyteller reveals that it is a birth of the story of the body; not the body as an ideal, but the real physical body, the body that dies. Out of the wounded body comes language and it is suffering that leads the voice to learn to story-tell. The return of the storyteller as an *embodied* figure rather than an absent author, thus takes on an even greater poignancy.

### **Invention, Storytelling and Survival**

Already then, the picture that is emerging from the reading of the novel is that Jim Crace himself seems to adhere to the tradition of the storyteller as wounded and embodied more than to the novelistic tradition of disembodiment. Indeed, Crace sees that many people's perceptions of the novel are that it is still essentially linked to the realist tradition, or if not directly, that it employs 'realistic' visions of the world. However, his escape into a 'fantastical' world, and this striking parallel between his story and that of Philoctetes, points us in the direction of seeing the novel in terms of *mythos* and thus, again, helps situate it within the realm of 'stories'. Moreover, the re-telling of an ancient myth, borrowed and re-told by Crace in the twentieth century, serves to situate Crace's narrative within a 'larger' tradition than the novel, and to the tradition of 'storytelling' that his storyteller(s) belong to. In fact, Crace seems to reiterate this idea:

It's only modern day conventions that make one feel nervous, that everything's got to be real if you read it in a novel. What a ludicrous reaction to the novel! Why should everything be real? Make everything up. This is the traditional way of storytelling. If you look at any of the old stories [...] the Cyclops doesn't exist, the Minotaur doesn't exist. The whole traditional way of storytelling always uses gross inventions, and I think that's the tradition that I'm part of.<sup>29</sup>

Crace has said in a telephone interview, the origins of this novel lay in his interest in discovering:

[...] what would happen to a community based on work which was suddenly separated from that certainty. Here was an example of a community which suddenly must have lost its lifeline when bronze

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<sup>29</sup> Hogan, Ron. "Jim Crace". 2000. *Beatrice: The Collected Interviews*. 29 March 2006. <<http://www.beatrice.com/interviews/crace/>>.

came along - it would never imagine that the world could ever do without stone, and then of course the moment of metal comes.<sup>30</sup>

The key word in this quotation is 'imagine', for as Wolfgang Iser points out, the imaginary is the third element which links with reality and fiction to create the fictional text.<sup>31</sup> Imagination is what Crace's protagonist, a storyteller, uses to turn reality and fiction into story. The way Crace imagines and comments on the community's transformation is through storytelling. Crace's narrative itself is all 'imaginative invention'; he was no more present in 'reality' than we are ourselves to the details of his story. He could not have created this world for us to see, unless he used the similar tool: invention and storytelling. Crace's novel mirrors the way the storyteller invents. Invention is thus linked to creation and to birth: storytelling is born from the need to survive, and implicitly also from the pain of living.

Although Crace's original conception of the novel did not involve a 'storyteller' in its problematic, it is revealing that Crace's fictional experiment led him to tell the storyteller's story as a means to explore the conflict between the two ages, of stone and bronze. In this sense, the storyteller was *born out of* this conflict, out of the beginnings of change. In her short reading of the novel, Karoly Roza makes this very point when she says that:

What is indispensable for the birth of storytelling is the clash between two antagonistic forces (two opposing worlds), [...] the subject who suffers the outcome [...] and who is sensitive enough to realise its significance, that is the storyteller.<sup>32</sup>

However, the birth of storytelling is *not only* due to the meeting of worlds and the problems this creates, but more importantly relates to the way in which the world is *understood* and *perceived* by those who live in either world. What becomes clear is that this novel (and perhaps most of Crace's fiction) is centred on this word 'imagine', and it is imagination and invention which are the key tools in the storyteller's toolbox.

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<sup>30</sup> Smiley, Jane. "What is this thing called bronze?" 1989. *The New York Times*. 29 March 2006. <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950DE0DA103AF935A25754C0A96F948260>>.

<sup>31</sup> Iser, Wolfgang. *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

<sup>32</sup> Rozsa, Karoly. "The Gift of Stories". 2002. 29 March 2006. <<http://www.jim-crace.com/Rozsa%20paper.htm>>.

Undeniably, it is imagination that moves the boy to 'story-tell', to see beyond work and stone and into the unknown future. He says: "my story takes shape from what has happened to my arm. With two arms I'd be knapping and too dull and chalky to tell tales" (GS 132). Unable to create anything with 'stones' our storyteller uses 'words' to create new visions of the world and in so doing, helps the community 'imagine' their future. Without the storyteller and his ability to transform the mundane reality of 'working stone' into 'stories,' the villagers would have no record of their lives and no possibility of imagining a future. Crace's 'world' does seem to be in itself more 'imaginary' than real, as Jane Smiley points out: "the setting of the story in the late Stone Age is, rather than an attempt to create a world, a conceit that provides the author scope for his meditation."<sup>33</sup> In fact, 'meditation' is another way of describing this novel, which is not a 'historical' novel in the conventional sense, of seeking to be true to its time and setting. (Smiley is right in questioning whether they had 'ships' in those days and leads her to add the warning: "The reader seeking to be swept into the past will be disappointed."<sup>34</sup>) But this is far from a 'disappointing' novel, rather it is a novel which is centred on the premise of 'invention', an idea that Crace vehemently believes in and that ultimately comes not from the tradition of 'literature' but from 'storytelling'.

It is invention which is linked to the survival instinct, to progress and evolution that brings about the storyteller's transformation. This creation of the role of storyteller directly came out of his ability to choose life and survival rather than death, which could have manifested itself both literally, and in terms of his future role in the village. Thus, in *The Gift of Stones*, survival is significant in two ways: firstly, in the sense that the storyteller survives death and this leads him to storytelling, and secondly in the sense that the storyteller's story continues through the daughter's retelling. It is the daughter as listener and subsequent re-teller of her father's stories which ensures not only the birth of the storyteller but the birth of the tradition of storytelling, the storyteller's art. As Benjamin reminds us:

It has seldom been realized that the listener's naive relationship to the storyteller is controlled by his interest in retaining what he is told.

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<sup>33</sup> Smiley.

<sup>34</sup> Smiley.

The cardinal point for the unaffected listener is to assure himself of the possibility of reproducing the story. Memory is the epic faculty *par excellence*. Only by virtue of a comprehensive memory can epic writing absorb the course of events on the one hand and, with the passing of these, make its peace with the power of death on the other.<sup>35</sup>

Yet although the novel foregrounds the story of a storyteller, it is not told directly by him but by his daughter. Although we hear his stories in the first person, they always begin in inverted commas and are followed by the lines "my father said" in brackets. In other words, even when we think we are 'hearing' the storyteller's stories first hand, we are constantly reminded that there is another voice that lies behind them, and that it is the daughter that is telling us the tale. This fact not only highlights the act of telling and thus the story's implicit orality, but in so doing also places the reader into the role of listener. Furthermore, set in an age when writing has not yet been born, we are directed to imagine even the daughter's words, the words on the page, as being 'spoken words'. The daughter's telling is directed to an implied listener, to the community that she belongs to and this fact links the reader back to this tradition despite their act of reading.

As Benjamin asserts above, the oral storytelling tradition is a tradition of *re-telling*. Consequently, the story that the daughter tells us is also littered with insights into the art of storytelling, as if we are to learn directly from her. For example, the daughter highlights many aspects of the storyteller's art which include: the way he uses his voice to create tension in his tale; the performative aspect of storyteller and his use of gestures; the idea of the storyteller as a liar. In this sense, *The Gift of Stones* actually becomes a storyteller's manual. In fact, the daughter's telling of the storyteller's story is juxtaposed against her father the storyteller's story. By not presenting herself as storyteller, and by highlighting the characteristics that make her father one, she creates the image of a storyteller in the reader's mind. By telling his story into existence, and describing him, we see the storyteller as an embodied being. We see him move and frown, perform and jump. We hear him 'speak'. Of course, the reader, as reader (as opposed to listener), can only imagine the telling of

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<sup>35</sup> Benjamin, 97.

the father's story but, again mirroring the imagination that the storyteller tells us is needed to create stories, the reader's own imagination creates the character of the storyteller in the mind. Real readers are thus invited to put themselves into this role of imagined reader and to remember the storyteller and his importance as part of their own experience. Just as the daughter tells us of how the audience implored her father for stories, we in turn may implore her and thus enter into the realm of storytelling. What writing can do, and has done here, through the daughter's telling of her father's story, is to recreate the picture of the storyteller and the storytelling performance.

Reflected in the daughter's re-telling is the fact that this newly invented craft of storytelling is one that has proved to be so vital to the community that it needs to be taught and continued. As a result, the story is not only the story of the birth of the storyteller, but also the story of the tradition of storytelling, which is implicit in the fact that it is being retold. Therefore, significantly, Crace's narrative choice as a 'telling' of the storyteller's story, not only foregrounds the storyteller's role as vital in the life of a given community, but also highlights the passing on of his/their story from one generation to the next, reflected in his daughter's narrative. Storytelling is a way of defeating death by keeping things alive in memory. The 'original' storyteller, the father of the story, will always be remembered through each re-telling of his story, from generation to generation. Written in the form of thirty-one short chapters, it is relatively late in the story when we actually learn who our 'storyteller-narrator' is. She herself has been hiding behind the mask of her father, but significantly this is not her father by blood but by tradition.

Perhaps now is the time to make myself clearly known to you. It will not do if I stand darkly to cough and comment at my father's tale. It is my story too and I should show my face. You know me as my father's daughter and his only child. All that is false. His title "father" was well earned, though not by right of blood. We are not kin. (GS 102)

In this sense, the novel is a novel of memory and teaching, both attributes which link back to Benjamin's ideas about the storyteller. Again, as he reminds us:

*Memory* creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation. It is the Muse-derived element of the



epic art in a broader sense and encompasses its varieties. In the first place among these is the one practised 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 [...] have always readily shown.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, both our storytellers, father and daughter, by the very fact that they are not named, assert their role in relation to their community as ‘functional’ and cultural. By simply being known as ‘storyteller’ they do not take on the role of ‘individual genius’, but rather highlight the oral tradition’s dictum that it functions as an expression of collective memory, rather than simply being an expression of ‘individual genius’. The birth of the storyteller leads to further storytellers and thus to the creation of a tradition that prides itself on memory and re-telling rather than on the individual work. In fact, this is precisely how, in his own re-telling of the daughter’s telling of the storyteller’s story, our novelist Jim Crace places himself directly into the same tradition. Returning now to my wider argument of the return of the storyteller to contemporary fiction, it seems as if through the reading of *The Gift of Stones*, we can say that the storyteller that Benjamin saw in Leskov has returned in the figure of Jim Crace. No longer is the novelist the “solitary individual” that Leskov saw as signalling the death of the storyteller, instead the contemporary novelist calls for his return.

As I have revealed, Crace’s novel *The Gift of Stones* seems to argue its case for the return of the storyteller within it; but how are these ideas played out on a broader level and how does Crace’s fiction relate to that of his peers? Let us now turn to look at this more closely.

### **The Reverend Crace**

As a contemporary writer (born in 1946), British-born Crace is of the same generation as Salman Rushdie, Julian Barnes, Graham Swift, Ian McEwan and Kazuo Ishiguro. However, despite a career which has led to a large number of ‘successful’ novels not only in terms of readership, but also in terms of prestigious literary prizes and awards, as he says himself, he does not identify himself with those “successful writers” whose novels enjoy profuse ‘critical’ attention.

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<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, 98.

I'm not claiming to be Philip Roth, or Ian McEwan, with a very long span and a promising future. Or Margaret Atwood or J.M. Coetzee. Those writers are almost beyond being criticised. I'm not one of those writers.<sup>37</sup>

This ambiguous remark leads us to pose the question: well, what kind of writer *are* you Mr Crace? Sean Matthews elevates him to a status which isn't too far off the likes of those 'author-gods' above, saying that he "occupies a unique and unusual place in the contemporary canon [with the likes of] A.S. Byatt ha[ving] described him as the most significant writer in English fiction of the last ten years."<sup>38</sup> However, what does Byatt mean by 'significant'? A deeper delving into Crace's position *vis-à-vis* other contemporary 'British' writers converges around an 'idea' of him being somehow 'different' from the rest. Of course, all writers are 'different' from each other. But what is it exactly that sets him apart from those writers above?<sup>39</sup>

Matthews gives us one suggestion, remarking that what is peculiar about Crace's position, is that "this place has been secured with writing which bears no obvious relation to the prevailing currents and concerns of his peers," so much so that it has "set him apart from the mainstream of writing in English."<sup>40</sup> Matthews continues with the example that Crace's writing is most often likened to other, presumably non-British and non-Western traditions, that fall under the headings "Continental European Writing" or even "South American Writing." Crace reiterates this point, ending up with the idea that his books are more 'moralistic' than 'ironic', a tone he attributes to the 'conventional' English novel.

I don't write out of other books, but I do feel European, and I do read a lot of European writers. Günther Grass is someone I admire greatly, along with Calvino and Primo Levi. Less so Kundera, more so the Latin American magical realists. The conventional English novel is not like my novels. It is realistic, it is autobiographical. It is largely

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<sup>37</sup> Lawless, Andrew. "The Poet of Prose: Jim Crace in Interview". February 2005. *Three Monkeys Online*. 29 March 2006. <[http://www.threemonkeysonline.com/article\\_jim\\_crace\\_interview.htm](http://www.threemonkeysonline.com/article_jim_crace_interview.htm)>.

<sup>38</sup> Matthews, Sean. "Jim Crace". 2004. *British Council Arts*. 15 May 2006. <<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth24>>.

<sup>39</sup> In this thesis I aim to show that in fact Crace does have links with other writers, perhaps not stylistically but in his use and interest in the storyteller, which I intend to prove can be read in various contemporary writers.

<sup>40</sup> Matthews.

ironic in tone. Irony is the great contribution of the English to literature [...] and I like the ironic tone, but my books are not ironic at all. They're very moralistic.<sup>41</sup>

It is precisely this 'moralistic' tone that Crace recognises in his novels that has led him to be dubbed the "Reverend Crace"<sup>42</sup> by the critic Ian Sansom, a fact that Crace himself talks about in a later interview with Andrew Lawless.

There was a review where they referred to me as the Reverend Crace, which annoyed me for a moment, but then amused me because it's spot on. I am moralistic and I do lecture in my books.<sup>43</sup>

I want to suggest that this moralistic strand in Crace's writing can be linked to Benjamin's idea of the storyteller as the harbinger of 'wisdom,' a fact that can subsequently be interpreted to have religious or 'spiritual' connotations. Is Crace, like the storyteller Leskov, "a righteous man"?<sup>44</sup> The answer is, if we take him at his word, then most probably, yes. Although Crace dubs himself a "North-Korean style atheist"<sup>45</sup> and is vehement on his 'unbelief' in God, he recognises this 'ambiguous' aspect of his writing:

I'm very aware that no matter what I've said about my views on religion, there's a deep ambiguity, in me and my books, that shows through about spirituality. There's a spirituality that comes across in a very old fashioned and biblical way. But then I deny the existence of God. All I'm doing is replacing God with natural history. Arguing that the world is an inside job rather than an outside job, and then I behave like an old fashioned priest.<sup>46</sup>

Benjamin links this ability to "counsel" his readers, which is a form of "wisdom", to the storyteller. Do we also then find a storyteller in Jim Crace? One thing is certain, as I have tried to reveal in this chapter from a reading of *Gift of Stones*, that (at least one) of Crace's novels and indeed his beliefs about fiction writing, seem strikingly similar to many of Benjamin's own for Leskov. Moreover, if Benjamin sees Leskov

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<sup>41</sup> Lawless.

<sup>42</sup> Sansom, Ian. "Smorgasbits". 2001. *London Review of Books*. 29 March 2006. <[http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n22/sans01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n22/sans01_.html)>.

<sup>43</sup> Lawless.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin, 104.

<sup>45</sup> Lawless.

<sup>46</sup> Lawless.

as the quintessential storyteller, then perhaps in Crace we might find a twentieth-century equivalent.

Another way of understanding how Crace comes to conceive his novels, as Ian Sansom suggests, would be to see them as presenting a ‘question’ which each individual novel then tries to answer. Sansom writes of Crace’s novels that each of them “asks essentially the same question: given a particular set of circumstances, what happens if? And if  $x$ , then  $y$ , and so on”, which leads him to state, that Crace “might almost be writing equations, or presenting exegesis.”<sup>47</sup> The word ‘exegesis’ again connotes religion and interpretation, and again point us back to morals, deeper meanings, and indeed to the primal questions that try to give reason to “the meaning of life” itself. Indeed, the themes and subjects of his novels seem to reflect this; as one interviewer, Ben Ehrenreich put it, Crace is not shy of ‘big subjects.’

In the most direct of ways, Jim Crace’s last four books have taken on, in order, God (*Quarantine*), death (*Being Dead*), food (*The Devil’s Larder*), and sex (*Six*)<sup>48</sup>. Of course, *Quarantine*, [...] is about Christ’s forty days in the wilderness.<sup>49</sup>

Interpretation may indeed be one way of understanding Crace’s novels, whereas on the other hand, connecting Crace’s novels with ‘equations’, might be more misleading. The word equation has connotations of ‘solution’ attached to it, which in one sense is what Crace is offering in his pointing to the ‘moral’ in the story. However, Crace’s solutions are not always ‘definite’ but rather ‘exploratory’ and ‘open’. Therefore, I suggest that, if we were to reduce Crace’s writing to an equation, we should rework Sansom’s model above to: if  $x$  then (why not)  $z$  (instead of  $y$ ), because then we might get (something as exciting as)  $\zeta$ , instead? Writing for Crace is not entirely planned but, like the storyteller in *The Gift of Stones*, it is something that comes out of imagination and invention. Of course, although he does follow the path of ‘ifs’ and ‘thens’ he also likes to change around the symbols, revealing something new that surprises both him and us. This ‘undiscovered’

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<sup>47</sup> Sansom.

<sup>48</sup> Ben Ehrenreich (see reference below) wrote this article before Crace’s novel *Six* was published, and therefore in the article he calls this novel *Genesis*, a title that I can only presume was Crace’s original idea but that must have been changed before publication.

<sup>49</sup> Ehrenreich, Ben. “Jim Crace”. 2003-4. *The Believer*. 29 March 2006.  
<[http://www.believermag.com/issues/200312/?read=interview\\_crace](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200312/?read=interview_crace)>.



element comes to him almost in a moment of revelation, again which equates him more with prophecy or the oracular muse than with logic and mathematics. He says:

With writing there is a moment of abandonment for me [...] particularly if you're not an autobiographical writer, and you're wanting this intuitive thing to bubble up, and to lead the story to places you don't expect it to go, then you have to wait for the moment of abandonment, because if you don't, these things aren't going to happen. I love that moment of abandonment, when a story starts to take over and take its own direction.<sup>50</sup>

Crace's 'equations' or 'exegesis' is thus expressed through the medium of 'story' and in this novel more than any other, it is the telling of the storyteller's story and the nature of his art of storytelling that lead us closer to understanding Crace's fiction and to his relationship to the storyteller. The storyteller, unlike the author, does not 'control' his characters and rather lets them 'create' themselves. This notion links not only to Bakhtin's ideas of the voices of the characters emerging as independent in themselves, but also with Barthesian notions of authorship that stem from his essay "The Death of the Author" (1967) (which I return to more specifically in chapter four).

Sansom takes this 'contemplative' tone one step further and remarks that 'Reverend Crace' "often begins a book or a story with the statement of a problem, or a conundrum, and then sets out the proposed solution" to the point that he sees each novel as a "lesson" that ends with "a moral on the tip of its tongue."<sup>51</sup> Again, Crace's tendency to 'instruct' links with Benjamin's idea of the storyteller as being a "practical" man who "in every case has counsel for his readers."<sup>52</sup> As I noted above, it is precisely this moralistic tone that Benjamin used to describe the archaic storyteller of old whose "wisdom" and "counsel" he found lacking in the novel. In some senses it could even point back to the responsibility that Plato put on the poets to present 'ethical' stories which did not distort the 'universal truths' the Greeks lived by.

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<sup>50</sup> Lawless.

<sup>51</sup> Sansom.

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin, 86.

If Crace's novels are more moralistic than ironic, and more poetic than psychological (another of Benjamin's presuppositions for storytelling) they may be closer to an oral storytelling tradition and hence to telling the story of the 'archaic', universal storyteller. Crace is not interested in 'realism' or the problems of correctly positioning his 'atypical', 'historical' novel. He says:

[...] we don't know how people at the end of the Stone Age spoke to each other. If I had them speaking in a twentieth century style that would strike you as false, but at the same time if I gave them a type of speaking pattern where they spoke in *ugghs* and *arghs* that would also seem false, and so storytelling sort of takes on this universal English, almost as if it's been translated from another language.<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps then it is this 'universal' quality to his work that stems from his "natural voice",<sup>54</sup> from the way he writes which has a rhythmic quality to it much like poetry, and it is precisely this quality which as he says himself "infuriates critics who don't like my work."<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, this might explain why both he and others have seen his novels as filling an ambiguous space outside the 'mainstream', again a factor which leads him to be both 'accepted' and 'rejected'.

Andrew Lawless has said of Crace that "the combination of beautifully rhythmic language with incredibly detailed invention sets Crace apart from most other British writers of the moment."<sup>56</sup> Moreover, it is precisely this poetic, metaphorical quality to his work that might have led both Sansom to see his work as a kind of "dramatic poetry"<sup>57</sup> and Jane Smiley to describe his novel *The Gift of Stones* as "a modern poem".<sup>58</sup> Smiley notes:

Reading *The Gift of Stones* is not a "you are there" experience, but a contemplative one. No tale moves forward without a hitch – the listener, the reader, is always asked to doubt what the storyteller says, or to consider the storyteller's real intentions, or to find the larger meaning of the story.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Lawless.

<sup>54</sup> Lawless.

<sup>55</sup> Lawless.

<sup>56</sup> Lawless.

<sup>57</sup> Sansom.

<sup>58</sup> Smiley.

<sup>59</sup> Smiley.

We could make the connection that this interest in language, in the poetic, harks back to another quality of the storyteller that is found in the ancient figure of the bard, who uses rhyme and metre to 'sing' his song. In fact, the narrator of the novel *The Gift of Stones*, the storyteller's daughter, actually describes her own telling of the story in similar words. As she progresses in the telling of the storyteller's story and grows in confidence, she too becomes like her storyteller father, a storyteller herself. She says, "I had become a warbler in love with my own song" (GS 127). The oral nature of storytelling, which sets itself against the novel tradition as 'realism,' is thus highlighted. Benjamin says that:

What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature – the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella – is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it [and that it is this aspect which] distinguishes it from storytelling in particular.<sup>60</sup>

In fact, Crace makes the point that his books do indeed draw more on the 'oral tradition' in as much as they are about rhythm and voice, about invention (and lies) which he sees as the true nature of fiction. He says:

I'm not trying to write realist books [...] I'm trying to write books with beautiful prose in them, which is expressed in the oral tradition, and in the oral tradition of story telling [...]. The real tradition of oral storytelling is all about rhythm and about hitting percussive notes, and changing the notation of prose, that's the style of writing I employ. I couldn't do anything else really, as I set all my books in invented places, if I started inventing idiom on top of that it would seem very false.<sup>61</sup>

It seems that his second novel *The Gift of Stones* is an ode to this tradition of the storyteller, and perhaps this is why he writes it so early on in his career.

Returning to our initial question, 'what kind of writer are you Mr Crace?' we could follow Ehrenreich's lead who describes him as "socialist, Darwinist author" who writes "mythical stories."<sup>62</sup> Crace's own description of himself may reflect this as he identifies himself with all "working class blokes from North-London",<sup>63</sup> which seems to be yet another aspect which he shares with Benjamin's storyteller

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<sup>60</sup> Benjamin, 87.

<sup>61</sup> Lawless.

<sup>62</sup> Ehrenreich.

<sup>63</sup> Ehrenreich.

Leskov.<sup>64</sup> This aspect, coupled with his “socialism”, reminds us that “all great storytellers are rooted in the people.”<sup>65</sup> On the whole then, the picture that is emerging is that Crace’s purpose, style and preoccupations in his fiction have strong parallels with some of Benjamin’s ideas surrounding the storyteller. In fact, Crace’s ideas about writing fiction are so reminiscent of Benjamin’s on Leskov it seems as if he has used Benjamin’s essay as an instruction book. Perhaps the only thing that jars with Benjamin’s ideas of the storyteller is that Crace is a novelist, a creature that Benjamin sees not only as a by-product of the bourgeoisie, but as one that is far removed from the oral storyteller. Curiously, Crace admits that he is part of this very (albeit twentieth century) ‘bourgeoisie’ that Benjamin ascribes to the novelist, not the storyteller. Although Crace admits that all his novels are ultimately “political” he quantifies this with the explanation that “they are not placards, leaflets. They are bourgeois fiction. They’re full of metaphor.”<sup>66</sup>

Philip Tew, in the first critical study of Crace’s work, following an article by Adam Begley,<sup>67</sup> dubs Jim Crace’s worlds, tellingly, as “Craceland”. Although this is, in some senses, a pun on ‘Graceland’, this choice of description is nevertheless revealing in the sense that, as we have seen from the reading of *The Gift of Stones* above, Crace seems to revel in the creation of definite ‘worlds’. Tew sees Crace’s work as so many expressions of the pastoral idyll, which I see again, as linking to the idea of the storyteller: the storyteller as the figure that represents this mythologized past. Indeed, it does seem that Crace’s worlds are outside of our own, they are self-contained and our closer to an idea of ‘story’ than of the ‘novel’. They are more about creating ‘landscapes’ of the mind, than realistic fiction; curious fantasy worlds, which point to a need to return to a child-like happiness, to the Eden he so poignantly expresses in *The Gift of Stones*. Although Tew recognises the differences in Crace’s style, he does link them to his peers and interestingly, he does this precisely through the use of what he dubs ‘traditional narrative’ and what I argue reflects my idea of the storyteller.

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<sup>64</sup> Benjamin, 86.

<sup>65</sup> Benjamin, 101.

<sup>66</sup> Ehrenreich.

<sup>67</sup> Adam Begley, “A Pilgrim in Craceland,” *Southwest Review* 87.2 & 3 (2002): 227-40.



Although neither fully an experimentalist nor a postmodernist in the manner of B. S. Johnson, J.G. Ballard or Salman Rushdie, Crace mirrors the movements in the novel from the late 1970's, away from middle-class post-war realism in its apparent rejection of modernism [...]. Crace engages in an interfusion of traditional narrative and forms with certain modes – in Crace's case folktales storytelling structures, fabulism, mythopoetic possibilities and a rehistoricizing of the past – that link him to his peers.<sup>68</sup>

Perhaps then, the novelist and storyteller can be the same creature after all? Since Benjamin wrote his essay in 1936 the novel has moved away from the traditional modes of realism; no longer is realism at centre stage and this indicates that there is a very real possibility that the storyteller is returning. I argue that as the first example of this towards my wider argument, this is apparent in the beliefs and fiction of Jim Crace.

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<sup>68</sup> Tew, *Jim Crace* 24.

## STORYTELLER AS PROPHET

### Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Storyteller*

The voice of the anonymous storyteller [...] was prior to all literature.  
Benjamin, *Illuminations* 107.

The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others.

Benjamin, *Illuminations* 87.

Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Storyteller* (1990)<sup>1</sup> as its title clearly denotes, presents us with the story of a storyteller who, again, as in Jim Crace's *The Gift of Stones* belongs to a primitive tribe, the Machiguengas of the Peruvian Amazon. Narrated by a Peruvian writer who remains anonymous, it tells the story of his quest to trace and understand the Machiguenga storyteller, and thus in the first instance presents us with a juxtaposition of writer-novelist and 'primitive' storyteller within the frame of fiction itself. Indeed, the novel depicts the novelist-narrator in the process of writing about a storyteller in the process of telling stories and so creates a dichotomy between the literary narrator and (the illusion of) an oral narrator. As a result, the preoccupation of this novel is with what it means to be a novelist as well as, in Peter Standish's words, "what it is to be a storyteller"<sup>2</sup> in the context of modern society, both locally in Peru and Latin America and globally, in terms of contemporary society as a whole.

Although not numerous, the critical essays on this novel raise some valuable questions surrounding both this relationship between the novelist-storyteller and the

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<sup>1</sup> Llosa, Mario Vargas. *The Storyteller*. Trans. Helen Lane. New York: Penguin Books, 1990. All subsequent quotations in this chapter are taken from this translation. All subsequent in-text quotations in this chapter are taken from this edition and will appear in the text in the abbreviated form *S* followed by the page number. This novel is also referred to by its Spanish name, *El Hablador*, occasionally by critics.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Standish, "Vargas Llosa's Parrot," *Hispanic Review* 59.2 (1991): 145.

meaning of his metamorphoses in the text. Unsurprisingly, as the novel very explicitly raises the question of authorship, storytelling and of 'the novel', many of these readings overlap in their interpretations. A few of these have actually made the link between Benjamin's essay on the storyteller and Vargas Llosa's novel,<sup>3</sup> although none have extended this to ask whether the storyteller has returned to contemporary fiction more generally. But many of these essays do explore: the line between the 'oral' and the written; the intimate play between the storyteller and author; the idea of audience and readership; the idea of metamorphosis and unmasking which lends itself to seeing the storyteller as shape-shifter. As a result, I have chosen to focus less on what, I feel, is 'ground already covered' and more on how the various discourses that the novel weaves together tell us about the storyteller and his role.

Significantly, Vargas Llosa's highly self-conscious questioning of the role of the storyteller and/or novelist in contemporary society foregrounds this problematic and forces us to question our own constructions of fiction and reality. More politically perhaps, by creating an argument through various discourses that the novel employs (ethnology, law, romanticism, conventions of realism, cosmology, spirituality, religion, politics), he elevates the storyteller and thus implicitly the contemporary novelist, to the status of a modern day prophet,<sup>4</sup> one who tells 'truths' through 'fictions'. Moreover, by returning the storyteller to the primitive tribe, he forces us to question not only our constructions of nationhood or *ethnos*, between local, national, western and primitive communities and cultures, but also of how these categories fundamentally shape our constructions of reality and our

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<sup>3</sup> See, Braulio Muñoz, *A Storyteller: Mario Vargas Llosa between Civilization and Barbarism* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000) 80-94. M. Keith Booker, *Vargas Llosa among the Postmodernists* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994) 123, 132, 136.

<sup>4</sup> Braulio Muñoz has made this link between Vargas Llosa, the storyteller and the prophet. "The role of the Storyteller/prophet could not be more difficult than in Peru – a cursed and chaotic land, inhabited by individuals embodying antagonistic cultures, languages, and values, and hence necessitating either the rule of a ruthless strongman or, perhaps, the gifts of a Storyteller, to bring into chaos and unite individuals into a people, according to Vargas Llosa. In other words, as for some prophets of old, the task of the Storyteller in Peru is to invent a new identity, a new Truth, a new Nation. This means the Storyteller must reinterpret the past, understand the present ruthlessly, and, grounded on such insights, carry the project for reinvention forward into the future. Perhaps that was why Vargas Llosa entered politics, against his better judgement and seemingly against his own interests; in Peru, the Storyteller had to become a politico." See, Muñoz, 93.

communal 'truths'. In this sense, he departs from Crace's relatively unselfconscious fabulism, a practice which, from this perspective, may be seen as mythologizing the storyteller. In this chapter, I examine how Vargas Llosa's tentative linking of the storyteller to the novelist not only resurrects the storyteller in the person of the novelist himself, but also endows this very same novelist with the storyteller's pre-modern powers: specifically those of prophecy. I argue that it is precisely in Vargas Llosa's aim to present the storyteller as a prophet,<sup>5</sup> whose religion is storytelling, that Vargas Llosa calls vehemently for his return.

One of my wider aims in this chapter is to reveal that Vargas Llosa's novel *The Storyteller* not only tries to offer answers to these questions, through the telling of the storyteller's story within a novel, but in doing so raises further questions about the 'literature frame', about whether the novelist can actually escape it. Again, we see a return to origins, which in Vargas Llosa not only links the storyteller to the origins of man and to the Fall, but also to his literary and pre-literary ancestors, the poets, novelists and storytellers. More importantly perhaps, in his self-conscious return to the primitive, having experienced the children of 'civilised' man, the grand narratives of history, philosophy, religion, he chooses to abandon them. In this sense, his storyteller also links to Rousseau's idea of "the noble savage". The question is: does the return of the storyteller really make this a possible or worthy cause?

As I noted in the preface and more explicitly in the introduction to this thesis, contemporary investigations of the storyteller and storytelling tend to dwell on a fusion of the real and continuing tradition of storytelling of indigenous peoples in

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<sup>5</sup> In the OED, the first meaning of prophet is "a person who speaks by divine inspiration or as the interpreter through whom the will of a god is expressed." Although in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Islamic faith the prophet indicates a specific person who is known by name, (e.g. the prophet Muhammad, Ezekiel, Jeremiah etc.) this is not the only application of the word. Indeed, there is more than one meaning to prophecy, which perhaps shows that its meaning is partially dependent on the belief of the individual applying it. In other words, God does not necessarily have to exist for there to be prophecy. The second meaning given is simply "a person gifted with profound moral insight and exceptional powers of expression"; the third "a predictor; a soothsayer"; and the fourth "the chief spokesperson of a movement or cause." The etymology of the word is also interesting and returns us to the idea of embodiment and the oral word. As the word prophet etymologically means 'before speaker', it is through the oral word that prophecy reaches us, through voice. It is the second, third and last meanings of the word that I follow in my application of the word 'prophet' to Vargas Llosa's storyteller.

such places as Africa, America, Canada and New Zealand. But my concern is to concentrate on 'Western' and Anglo-American fiction where the interest has not been so clearly mapped. Although Vargas Llosa uses the lore of a very real tribe belonging to his own country, Peru, he is neither directly linked to these tribes, nor to their traditions. In other words, I differentiate Vargas Llosa from the writers above who have grown up in both traditions<sup>6</sup> and have thus learnt first-hand the traditional stories of their tribes, as well as the literacy and knowledge of discourses that result from a 'western' and 'modern' education. By contrast, Vargas Llosa's mixing of Machiguenga lore is thus 'inauthentic' and 'appropriated' and consequently raises the issue of authenticity and responsibility. This is reflected in the main character, whose dream is ominously illusionary: this pre-modern storyteller is a fake, a "cultural convert"<sup>7</sup> who plays at authenticity. His storyteller-hood is a fiction: the storyteller is a Jew in Catholic Peru, whose own displacement echoes that of the primitive storyteller he seeks to embody. As a result he can only play at bringing the primitive and unprotected flock of a diminishing primitive tribe back into the fold.

Interestingly, questions raised by this are: is the storyteller-novelist 'allowed' to tell stories that do not directly come out of his own community? Does this risk corruption and misrepresentation? Does this promote the presentation of false histories, that favourite preoccupation of the postmodern with the constructedness and fictionality of history? What I find particularly interesting in looking at a Latin American writer such as Vargas Llosa, is that although situated within the Latin American context, he also culturally straddles Latin America and Europe. As becomes apparent from this reading, Llosa's literary influences often return us to

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<sup>6</sup> I differentiate Vargas Llosa in this sense from the writers above who have grown up in both traditions, for example, the American Indian writer Leslie Marmon Silko who grew up in with one foot in the indigenous and traditional culture of the Pueblo Indians and the other in twentieth-century America.

<sup>7</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa refers to Saúl's conversion as a "cultural conversion" in this interview with Ricardo Setti, which was given shortly after the book's original publication. See, Setti, Ricardo A., and Mario Vargas Llosa. "The Storyteller." 1986. Interview. 3 January 2007. <<http://www.geocities.com/boomlatino/vobra07.html>>. Although this interview is in Spanish, it can be (albeit) crudely translated using Google translator and found at the following address. <http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=es&u=http://www.geocities.com/boomlatino/vobra07.html&sa=X&oi=translate&resnum=1&ct=result&prev=/search%3Fq%3Del%2Bhablador%2Bmachiguenga%26hl%3Den%26lr%3D%26sa%3DG>

precisely the Western European and Anglo-American tradition that frames 'Literature' with a capital 'L'. The question is: can he really escape it?

Finally, although Vargas Llosa does not write in English, and thus he is the only writer that I have chosen to read 'in translation', my choice is justified by his long-standing reputation as an internationally acclaimed writer, who is well-known in the English-speaking world as well as in his native Spanish. Indeed, Mario Vargas Llosa belongs to a growing number of internationally acclaimed writers whose works are widely available in English (for example, Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabelle Allende, Milan Kundera, Orhan Pamuk, to name but a few), who have often been read by both comparative and non-comparative literature scholars. I acknowledge that ideally an understanding of the native language in which the literature is written is preferable, but I believe there is also a case for regarding translations as able to stand independently as viable literature. This said, I have consulted both bilingual readings and translations of the novel in order to bridge the language gap and to gain a deeper understanding of it as much as possible.

### **The Meeting of Worlds: Novelist & Storyteller**

*The Storyteller* is not a linear narrative and contains a complex web of stories within stories, where narratives reveal themselves slowly within various embedded fictional frames. It is these fictional frames, and the relation between the narratives that lead us to a series of 'unmaskings',<sup>8</sup> both in terms of the storyteller's identity, and in terms of the stories we are told by the storyteller(s) in the novel. These 'unmasking' events are linked to the identity of the storyteller in the novel, who we assume to be an old university friend of our narrator, Saúl Zuratas, a curious individual whose nickname Mascarita (translated as 'Mask Face', but literally meaning 'little mask' in Spanish)<sup>9</sup> supports Vargas Llosa's and the author's own narrative masks. In fact, Mascarita is the key to unravelling the mystery that surrounds the storyteller for both

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Geddes uses this word in her reading of the novel. See, Jennifer L. Geddes, "A Fascination for Stories: The Call to Community and Conversion in Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Storyteller*," *Literature and Theology* 10.4 (1996): 370-77.

<sup>9</sup> Lucille Kerr, *Reclaiming the Author: Figures and Fictions from Spanish America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992) 154.

the narrator and the reader. His mask is both literal and metaphorical: it is the mask which we must lift in order to find the storyteller.

Vargas Llosa's novel differs from Crace's return to the imaginary storyteller of old in that it problematises the 'primitive' storyteller by bringing him closer to home and into the twentieth century. This novel is set in very real historical places and times – the narrative flits between Florence, Lima and the Amazon between the years 1956 and 1987 – and it stands almost between memoir and literary detective story. We are poised to witness the drama that unfolds when the storyteller, a figure who belongs to a real and living indigenous community, a threatened people, is pushed further and further into the margins by a rising and terrifying modernity. Vargas Llosa's novel not only begs the question of whether the primitive storyteller has been substituted by the novelist and if they are similar creatures; but more so, raises a more important one: can the novelist *be* a storyteller or is this merely a nostalgic return to the mythologized past; to the storyteller as a living relic of the pastoral dream?

Set initially in Florence, *The Storyteller* opens with the image of chosen exile, one which nevertheless has a literary purpose: "to read Dante and Machiavelli and look at Renaissance paintings for a couple of months in absolute solitude" (S 4). However, this exile is disrupted by a chance encounter with his country and one that leads him to abandon his former plans and instead write the book we are reading. As our narrator tells us: "I came to Firenze to forget Peru and the Peruvians for a while, and suddenly my unfortunate country forced itself upon me this morning in the most unexpected way" (S 3). This inability to escape his country comes in the form of an image of his native Peru, a window display outside a small gallery that he chanced upon and which holds an exhibition of "The Natives of the Amazonian Forest" (S 4). On entering, the narrator sees a display of a number of photographs that are of the Machiguengas, a tribe that the narrator is not only familiar with, but that he has visited himself many years previously and has been forever fascinated by. However, this fact, in itself, is not enough to cause the rupture to his plans which he had specifically gone to Italy to accomplish. What causes him to 'return' to Peru, if not literally but metaphorically through the telling of a story, is triggered by a particular

photograph which depicts a “gathering of men and women, sitting in a circle in the Amazonian way – similar to the Oriental: legs crossed tailor-fashion, back held very straight – and bathed in the light of dusk falling” (S 4). The photograph he sees depicts the audience that encircles the mysterious figure that is the Machiguenga storyteller, a figure that inspires the narrative we are reading and that allows the narrator finally to write about a subject that has been with him since his youth.

From the first few pages of the novel, then, our narrator presents us with an image of the tribal storyteller, whose communal, oral art thus sets itself in direct juxtaposition with his own written, literate and solitary writing practices. The picture of the storyteller surrounded by a circle of listeners, their distinctive way of sitting and the reference to Oriental tellers, leads us back through time to visualise similar groups who have done the same throughout the ages.<sup>10</sup> Thus, from the outset, the storyteller is presented as a figure that, at one and the same time, belongs to a particular community and also reminds us of similar communities stretching through time and in many places. This fact is doubly highlighted as we approach the end of the chapter, when we are presented with our first clue which leads us to decode the narrator-novelist’s placing of the storyteller in the person of Saúl himself. (Chapter one ends with the words ‘storyteller’ and chapter two begins with the words ‘Saúl Zuratas’ which points to the link between the two.<sup>11</sup>) However, whether we choose to believe this fiction that begins with the photograph is the crux of the novel.

The novel is constructed around what Jean O’Bryant Knight has described as “two narratives situations”.<sup>12</sup> Outside the frame story, which introduces us to the narrator and his subsequent narrative quest to find the storyteller, chapters two, four, and six make up the first of these narrative situations. These begin with the narrator’s recollections of his meetings with Saúl during their years together at university. Saúl was a brilliant student of law and ethnology, who became fascinated with the Machiguenga tribe that he had first encountered during one of his expeditions into the Amazon with a group of linguists. In particular, his fascination

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<sup>10</sup> See chapter one of this thesis, ‘The (Hi)Story of the Storyteller’.

<sup>11</sup> Doris Sommer noted this. See, Doris Sommer, “About-Face: The Talker Turns,” *Boundary 2* 23.1 (1996): 106.

<sup>12</sup> Jean O’Bryant-Knight, *The Story of the Storyteller: La Tía Julia Y El Escribidor, Historia De Mayta, and El Hablador* by Mario Vargas Llosa (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1995) 76.



centred on the figure of the *hablador*, the storyteller, who kept the tribe together through communicating their stories. Indeed, their beliefs and way of life were so powerful that he consequently lost faith in the humanities and the nature of academic study, turning down a scholarship to study in Europe. However, after the death of his father he mysteriously disappeared from Lima, although rumours circulated that he had returned to his spiritual homeland, Israel. Lured by the mystery surrounding both Saúl's disappearance, and the Machiguenga storytellers, the narrator found himself on a similar expedition meeting the same group of American anthropologists that Saúl had initially met on his trip years previously. As a narrative of exploration and discovery, the narrator's retrospective narrative takes us through the jungles of memory and time.

In the first of his many literary links, the narrator's narrative as a series of "memories" reminds us of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and takes us back to Enlightenment philosophy and to Rousseau's "noble savage". As we might remember, Conrad's narrative also began with a storyteller surrounded by a circle of listeners. Vargas Llosa echoes this through the image of the storyteller in the photograph: a figure that fascinates and alarms him. If we see the storyteller, as Ivan Kreilkamp suggests, "as a mythologized figure who embodies a lost natural past",<sup>13</sup> then it is perhaps no wonder that, when confronted with this plain image, the novelist-narrator reacts in this way. The image of the mythologized storyteller, here come alive, becomes at one and the same time threatening and seductive to the novelist whose solitude and loss of voice has been engulfed by print. Interestingly, Kreilkamp goes on to align the storyteller with the "noble savage", seeing any instance of his evocation in literature as a "backformation, an idealised agent deployed to anchor a regretful story of origins for a modern culture seen as oppressive."<sup>14</sup> From this perspective, Vargas Llosa's novel probes us to ask: how does a Western audience respond when faced with the no-longer-mythologized but still existing storyteller, in a twentieth-century literate culture that had assumed he was killed off? What is his role? Or even, what has he come back to tell us?

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<sup>13</sup> Kreilkamp, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Kreilkamp, 4.

The second narrative situation employed by Vargas Llosa's novel, seeks to answer these questions. It takes up chapters three, five and seven of the novel and is written in an entirely different voice, which we can only assume is the voice of the Machiguenga storyteller telling his stories to the tribe. Following the true storytelling tradition, the storyteller tells the larger story of the Machiguengas to the various settlements that live scattered through the jungle and in so doing brings the various settlements together into a unified community. The stories he tells are peppered with tribal legend and lore and include tales from his own travels and snippets of tribal gossip. Here we see the storyteller in his act of creating; we see him in the process of "fashioning a world" that Braulio Muñoz sees as bearing the "counsel" that Benjamin expressed in his essay on the storyteller.<sup>15</sup> Although initially the two narrative situations appear to be distinct in form and content,<sup>16</sup> as the novel progresses, the relationship between the two becomes increasingly clear: Saúl is presented as the Machiguenga storyteller and the figure in the photograph. As the narratives and figures of the storyteller converge, so too do the literate and oral traditions, suggesting that they are one continuing tradition rather than two separate ones. Saúl's position as storyteller thus aims to bring narrative traditions, nations and tribes together.

### **The Question of Authorship**

As we have noted above, one of the central issues that *The Storyteller* seeks to examine is played out in this relationship between the implied novelist-narrator and the ancient, archetypal storyteller and their positions in relation to the way they tell their stories and to their function and place in the community. This problematic is also an abiding concern of this thesis and Vargas Llosa's novel offers a sure investigation into the relationship between them. The complex interplay between the positions of novelist-author and tribal storyteller initially raises questions about their roles, natures, identities and influences. In order to find out who they are, whether they are distinct characters, and the precise nature of the relationship between them, we are led to look more closely at the traditions which have created them. How do

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<sup>15</sup> Muñoz, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Q'Bryant-Knight, 76.

these traditions influence the way they tell their stories? More importantly, what is it about the nature of each tradition that makes them distinct or brings them closer together? In order to answer these questions, let us return to the opening of the novel and the reason for the novelist-narrator's residence in Italy.

As I mentioned, the narrator tells us that he came to Italy to read Dante and Machiavelli 'in absolute solitude'. Although a frame narrative,<sup>17</sup> which we do not return to until the final chapters of the novel (chapters one and eight of the novel), this opening setting and image is important, primarily because it serves to highlight the narrator's position as both a scholar and a potential novelist. In fact, we can say that in the figure of the narrator, the image of the scholar and novelist converge, in that both demand the need for solitude, privacy and letters, and therefore require both an absent and an imaginary audience. These literate figures, who work in absolute solitude, are juxtaposed against this 'primitive' pre-modern image of the illiterate storyteller of a primitive tribe. Thus, in his subsequent abandonment of the study of literature and his taking up of writing it, both the narrator's position and those of the scholar and storyteller, are brought into question. Is the narrator the author of the book we are reading? In fact, we can never be sure who the narrator actually is although the implication is that we identify him with Vargas Llosa himself (as some critics have already argued).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the end of the novel also leaves us with a question as it ends with two dates: "Firenze, 1985 and London, 1987" (S 246) which suggests that it was written at two different times and possibly by two different persons. In a study that specifically investigates authorship in Latin American Fiction, Lucille Kerr's reading of *The Storyteller* notes that the first of these dates "corresponds to the narrator's situation"<sup>19</sup> but that the second one, points to Vargas Llosa's own date of writing of the novel. The acknowledgement in the back of *The Storyteller* perhaps reiterates this fact. Vargas Llosa clearly 'acknowledges' the people and places he has visited in his own research to write the novel and which correspond to the narrator's own reflections.

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<sup>17</sup> This idea of the frame narrative, as I reveal later in the thesis, is actually linked to storytelling and survival and reminds us in particular of the tradition of the *Nights*. See chapters 5 and 6 in particular.

<sup>18</sup> See, Geddes, 376; Muñoz, 94;

<sup>19</sup> Kerr, 135.

Nevertheless, whether this is meant to be Vargas Llosa or not is only one aspect of what Kerr sees as “a confusion or confounding of authorial figures and faces”<sup>20</sup> with which this novel is concerned. One of the recurring themes of the novel is related to transformation and metamorphosis which are played out in the masking and unmasking of these authorial figures. Kerr’s reading tackles this question of authorship, which she concludes, contradictorily, as being one which “is about a turn away from and also a return to the figure of the author.”<sup>21</sup> In the interview with Ricardo A. Setti in 1986 (mentioned above),<sup>22</sup> Vargas Llosa argues that the narrator of a story is never the author, even when he appears with the same name, surname and the selfsame life as the author. Rather, the narrator is “the first character that the author creates”,<sup>23</sup> a fact that thus highlights this distance. Just like the storyteller who uses a combination of his own and others’ experience to create his fiction, Vargas Llosa insists that the narrator is always an invention, and is always someone into whom the author transforms and translates himself.

This insistence by the author on the fictionality of the narrator highlights the fictionality of all the subsequent authorial figures in the novel and notably, those that converge in the unmasking of the storyteller. As the storyteller is one who relinquishes authority for his narrative, his voice becomes, in contrast to Kerr’s reading, separate from that of the author and implicitly then also distant from the resulting synonymy of authorship with ‘authority’. In the highlighting of his voice as both the individual and collective expression of a community, the author thus vows his allegiance to the storyteller. From this perspective, it is more apt to see the author as ultimately absent from the text, a fact that corresponds more to the idea of authorial death than to his resurrection.<sup>24</sup> As a result, although the narrator’s position in one sense points us to identify him with a novelist, scholar, memoirist or writer, all these positions are ultimately fictional: all are narrative constructs.

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<sup>20</sup> Kerr, 134.

<sup>21</sup> Kerr, 157.

<sup>22</sup> c.f. footnote 5 of this chapter.

<sup>23</sup> Setti & Llosa. Although this article as I noted above is in Spanish, and my Spanish is only rudimentary, I confirmed the translation of this part of the interview from a bilingual friend of mine, who also studied Spanish Literature at the University of Manchester.

<sup>24</sup> In the following chapter on Salman Rushdie, I investigate this issue of authorship more specifically, raising and attempting to explicate similar questions.

### Storytelling and Exile: Dante

As in Jim Crace's *The Gift of Stones*, Vargas Llosa's storyteller is born from out-casting and exile. Here too, we see how exile leads to transformation and metamorphosis which in turn leads to 'storytellerhood'. In *The Storyteller*, however, these transformations are more self-consciously assumed. Although in Crace, the storyteller was born from 'difference' and subsequent out-casting, in Vargas Llosa this exile, both on the part of the narrator and the storyteller Saúl, is in part a "chosen" exile: in this sense, the return to storyteller is not a birth but a rebirth. It is from this perspective that the turn to 'storytellerhood' becomes a religious and almost mystical experience. The storyteller does not 'birth' storytelling, but rediscovers it – the opening image of Florence and the Renaissance hints at this. Aware of both oral and the literary traditions, he has earned the right to choose a 'storytelling renaissance' and thus his allusions to other texts, figures, authors and faces, all serve to facilitate his choice. Let us now look at this in more detail.

Primarily then, the move from Latin America to Europe, the evocation of the birth of European literature and art, serves to link the narrator-novelist to the European Western tradition of Literature and all it represents. Furthermore, the abandonment of the narrator's reading and solitary study also reflects an abandonment, or at least a questioning of these very values, a problematic which he plays out throughout the novel in both his own and the storyteller's narratives. Instead of looking at Renaissance architecture, he looks at a photograph. Instead of studying form and interpretation, he is led by memories and by fictions. Thus, as much as the narrator seems to embrace and exalt the European literary tradition, which in part birthed the novel, the very medium in which he is writing, he is also drawn to something he sees in the tribal storyteller whose communal and embodied act of storytelling proves integral to the community's very existence and survival.

Those *habaldores* [...] using the simplest, most time-hallowed of expedients, the telling of stories, were the living sap that circulated and made the Machiguengas into a society, a people of interconnected and interdependent beings. (S 93)

With the European tradition comes the notion of the artist as a solitary individual who, in order to create his masterpiece, needs to abandon the world and

the community in order to emerge with his wisdom. This is compounded by the myth that I highlighted in the previous chapter, of the artist as outcast, whose suffering and exile thus leads him to wisdom. On the other hand, the abandonment of this scholarly pursuit, specifically related to us in the opening pages, calls into question the romanticism which surrounds such a conception of the artist. But, a different kind of romanticism is equally at work in the Western glamorisation of the primitive storyteller, particularly one that is placed within a tribal setting. In this way, the romanticism of isolated and suffering genius that surrounds the artist coming out of the European tradition, is juxtaposed and subsequently problematised by an equally questionable romanticism, one that instead surrounds the tribal, pre-modern, primitive storyteller whose image the novelist-narrator is confronted with. One is a romanticisation of the lone scholar or alienated genius, the other of the communality of 'voice' of tribe and teller.

As we saw with Benjamin, this pre-modern, primitive storyteller similarly harked back to a romanticised past, a past that the narrator in some ways reflects in his own fascination and subsequent telling of the storyteller's story. Keith Booker sees this instead as a reflection of the difficulties that the novelist faces in the light of a rising post-modernity. He notes:

If Dante and Machiavelli are figures of an ideal literary past, then the *habladores* are even more so, playing the kind of essential and effective role in Machiguenga culture that the novelist himself no longer feels able to play amid the confusion of the modern world.<sup>25</sup>

But is that what Vargas Llosa is really depicting? Is the novelist confused? Is his role really ineffective? How might he achieve this power if indeed it has been lost?

To look at this more closely let us return yet again to the image of the photograph. Here the narrator specifically tells us that the photograph of the storyteller is presented "without demagoguery or aestheticism" (S 5), which again forces us to question the nature of how we perceive art: is the novelist a demagogue, a leader who obtains power by means of impassioned appeals to the emotions and

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<sup>25</sup> Booker, 122-3.

prejudices of the populace?<sup>26</sup> Or is it the storyteller who does this? Moreover, is “aestheticism” an unnecessary and superfluous pursuit that has no real substance? Is our notion of beauty misguided? And if the storyteller is different, how is he so? These questions seem to be at the heart of the narrator’s quest to find and write about the storyteller, this compelling individual who exerts so much power from such a plain and unpretentious image that it causes the narrator to abandon an “up until then well-conceived and well-executed plan” (S 4).

With the picture of the tribal storyteller fresh in both the narrator’s and thus the reader’s mind, this return to these famous Florentines becomes ever more poignant and provides us with a clue to the narrator’s literary predecessors, those he chooses to follow as part of his tradition. As a result, his evocation of Dante leads us to a few conclusions. Firstly, the narrator’s allusion to Dante as a literary predecessor is significant in that he is a poet who again wrote in his own dialect as opposed to Latin; this use of the vernacular links to the bardic tradition (which indeed Dante was interested in), identified as one which the storyteller harks back to.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, not only did Dante’s interest bring him to discover the *Provençal* minstrels and poets, but of course it also links him back to Virgil, a poet who he revered so much that he installs him in his *Purgatorio* as his guide through Hell. Moreover, he refers to him as a “father”, again revering him and the tradition to which he belongs.<sup>28</sup> Keith Booker makes the point:

The novelist’s search for wisdom in the classics of Dante and Machiavelli is itself a clear echo of Renaissance humanism, and he begins his search in a confused state, lost in the dark wood of modern civilization and seeking guidance from these past masters much in the way that Dante himself seeks guidance from Virgil in the beginning of the *Commedia*. Similarly, the search for wisdom in the tales of the Machiguengas is in truth little more than an echo of Western Romanticism, in which the vast, brooding presence of the Amazonian jungle provides a source of sublime inspiration as the novelist seeks

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<sup>26</sup> Interestingly perhaps, Mario Vargas Llosa could be said to embody some of these positions. As Peter Standish notes, Vargas Llosa has stood as a candidate for the Presidency of Peru, a few times, in addition to his long-standing reputations as speaker, orator and TV presenter. See, Standish, 146.

<sup>27</sup> Count Cesare Balbo, and Frances Joanna Lady Bunbury, *The Life and Times of Dante Alighieri* trans. F. J. Bunbury. Vol. 2: (Richard Bentley: London, 1852) 63-4.

<sup>28</sup> *Purgatorio* c. 9 v. 50. Qtd. in Balbo and Bunbury.

the beauty of the communion with nature that he believes resides in the culture of the Machiguengas.<sup>29</sup>

As we shall see it is the storyteller who brings both the traditions together. It is he who is always the true exile, he who can re-fashion worlds and move through spaces and times through the power of his words.

Secondly, if we remember, Dante himself was 'exiled' from Florence, an exile which he saw as a form of 'death' that stripped him of his identity. Although with the narrator of *The Storyteller*, his is a chosen exile, this initial reference to Dante is not to be overlooked. Indeed, it was this exile which arguably granted Dante the 'distance' from which he wrote *The Divine Comedy*, an exile which not only links to the Fall but which led to poetry. In her study of exile in Literature, María-Inés Lagos-Pope says, "there is no doubt that in the *Divine Comedy* the writing of poetry is linked to the experience of exile."<sup>30</sup> This is most poignantly expressed in this verse from the third canto of Dante's *Paradiso*.

Thou shalt abandon each and every thing  
Most dear to thee: that shaft's the first that e'er  
The bow of exile loses from its string.<sup>31</sup>

Strangely, as with Philoctetes and Crace, the metaphor Dante uses for exile is a bow and arrow: this was what led to his being cast out from his Florentine Eden. Exile causes suffering and leads to lament, which in turn leads to the image of the wounded storyteller who has to tell his tales in order to survive. Implicitly from this exile we see the stages of metamorphosis, from one being and person to another. Again we see this image of the artist-poet or storyteller, whose suffering and subsequent exile led not only to poetry but to a form of wisdom, perhaps even a spiritual wisdom.

Interestingly, Lagos-Pope links this to prophecy, observing that:

[...] like the prophets, Dante makes of exile a virtue and a necessary perspective from which to speak to the world and from where he can challenge its expectations and assumptions; like the prophets, he also

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<sup>29</sup> Booker, 125-126.

<sup>30</sup> María-Inés Lagos-Pope, *Exile in Literature* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1988) 53.

<sup>31</sup> *Paradiso* c.17 v. 55-7 See, Dante Alighieri, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine: Canto III: Paradise (Il Paradiso)* 1962. Trans. Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1986) 207.



acknowledges that the truth he communicates is, paradoxically, what further alienates him from the world he has already lost.<sup>32</sup>

However, Dante's prophecy does not come from true theology but from poetry. Hence, he has been called a *theologus nullius dogmatis expertus* (theologian expert in no dogma).<sup>33</sup> This again is another place where Dante and Vargas Llosa's creations converge. As I argue below, Saúl's subsequent conversion to storyteller has 'spiritual' connotations. This may be perhaps why Vargas Llosa has described Saúl, in his transformation into a storyteller, as a "cultural convert".<sup>34</sup> The word "cultural" however, might be misleading: although he definitely embraces a 'new' culture, the Machiguengas, the religion he practices is a very old one: storytelling. Saúl's cultural conversion is more a conversion to the culture of storytelling than to the Machiguengas themselves. Indeed, it is precisely Vargas Llosa's aim, in calling for the storyteller's return, to present him as a prophet, whose religion is storytelling itself. Conversion is linked to transformation and metamorphosis which comes about from exile. Let us now turn to look at the figure of Saúl more closely.

### **Storytelling and Monstrosity: Frankenstein**

From the very first moment we are introduced to Saúl, or Mascarita, (although we do not know him as a storyteller as he has not become one yet) we are introduced to this image of a very literal mask: a birthmark that covers half his face.

Saúl Zuratas had a birthmark, the color of wine dregs, that covered the entire right side of his face, and unruly red hair as stiff as the bristles of a scrub brush. The birthmark spared neither his ears nor his lips nor his nose, also puffy and misshapen from swollen veins. (S 8)

Curiously, just as Jim Crace's novel *The Gift of Stones* begins with the description of the storyteller's amputated arm, the first chapter of Vargas Llosa's *The Storyteller* (that follows the frame narrative) begins with a very similar image. Again, this is the first picture that both the narrator and the reader 'see' of the storyteller-to-be: the graphic image of disfigurement. Although in this case we do not see a wound, as with Philoctetes and the amputee storyteller in Crace's novel, we are once again

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<sup>32</sup> Lagos-Pope, 54.

<sup>33</sup> Lagos-Pope, 53.

<sup>34</sup> C.f. *see* footnote 7 of this chapter.

shown how this man has been marginalised, from both his community and society as a whole, due to this 'deformity'. In this sense, Saúl has been marked by difference from birth, again by a mark on his *body*. In *The Storyteller*, however, this disfigurement is significantly placed on his face, which not only leads to his nickname Mascarita, but also on a metaphorical level, to the many masks of the storyteller.

The opening image of the birthmark is not the only instance where Saúl's disfigurement is alluded to. In fact, the novelist-narrator makes a point of revealing to us at various instances throughout the narrative just how unsightly this birthmark was in order to reinforce his message of Saúl as outcast or 'outsider'.<sup>35</sup> The second time we hear reference to Saúl's face is when, on entering a billiard parlour, he is referred to by a man as a "monster" who had escaped from a "zoo". On seeing Saúl the man shouts at him: "You're not coming in here monster. [...] With a face like that, you should keep off the streets. You scare people" (S 14). Immediately, on hearing this, the narrator is so outraged that he picks a fight with the name-caller, who by this time had begun to make "hex signs with his fingers" (S 14); again, the implication being that Saúl is more like "devil" than an "angel". In contrast to his appearance, as if to prove his kind and gentle nature, Saúl takes this abuse heroically and simply leaves with a joke and a smile. Finally, on another occasion, while eating in a restaurant, which is incidentally the last occasion our novelist-narrator sees Saúl, his deformity invokes more ogling from a waitress. Not only did she stand "for a long moment looking, fascinated, at Saúl's birthmark", but as she walks off, the narrator notes how he sees "her cross herself as she went back to her stove" (S 98).

These two passages, in emphasising 'monstrosity', raise some interesting ideas which return us to the idea of morality and lead us to question our own assumptions *vis-à-vis* the marginalised and the 'primitive'. There are interesting parallels between Saúl's 'monstrosity' and the treatment of monstrosity in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1813), and this is signalled in the narrative by his own reference to it as a "Frankenstein syndrome" (S 29). Once again, this literary link

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<sup>35</sup> This relationship between insider and outsider in *The Storyteller* has been investigated by Mark Millington. See, Millington, Mark I. "Insiders and Outsiders: Cultural Encounters in Vargas Llosa's *La Casa Verde* and *El Hablador*." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 31.2 (1995): 165-76.

serves to situate the storyteller in the literary tradition, but as we shall see, his subsequent abandonment of this myth and its transformation into story, mirrored in Saúl's "conversion" to oral storyteller, puts the romantic beliefs that it upheld into question. Thus, for any reader versed in Romantic literature, the parallels are unavoidable, beginning with the horrific appearance of the teller of tales. As we have seen from the passages above, Saúl's disfigurement could not be hidden. Everywhere he goes he is a marked man, his very presence 'scaring' people to the point that they cross themselves, as if he is a 'devil'. Similarly, Frankenstein's monster likens himself to a devil and for both (as for Crace's storyteller) it is initially their appearance that leads to their being cast out from society and their search for a home. However, Frankenstein's monster never finds a home and is left wandering the earth in search of his father, a father that never gave him a history, or identity. Conversely, he chooses to abandon his own history by finding a home amongst others, who represent 'monsters' of another kind. Again, Benjamin's image of the wandering storyteller returns, and it is this "walking" storyteller that Saúl becomes for the Machiguengas.

This allusion to Frankenstein's monster is also relevant in that he returns us to another image of the outcast: one that is fatherless and echoes again the fall of man; one that leaves the garden of Eden for a world which seems more like a Hell on Earth, (again echoing the ideas in *The Gift of Stones*). This in turn begs the question: is it to Heaven that Saúl is returning in his abandonment of the Western world and his return to the primitive state whose "noble savageness" he reveres? As Frankenstein himself has been seen as the embodiment of the "noble savage", we could interpret Saúl's return to the 'primitive' as an embracing of difference. By returning to the other and becoming one with them he tries to dissolve the myth, transforming it through story into something new: a reinvention. His calling seems to be taken directly from Rousseau's own mouth, as he who had written his discourse *On the Origin of Inequality* three quarters of a century before Frankenstein's monster met his own literary fate.

O man, of whatever country you are, and whatever your opinions may be, behold your history, such as I have thought to read it, not in books written by your fellow-creatures, who are liars, but in nature,

which never lies [...] Discontented with your present state, for reasons which threaten your unfortunate descendants with still greater discontent, you will perhaps wish it were in your power to go back; and this feeling should be a panegyric on your first ancestors, a criticism of your contemporaries, and a terror to the unfortunates who will come after you.<sup>36</sup>

Vargas Llosa's transformation of the storyteller/monster into a "noble savage" signals our 'unbelief' in his words, and his abandonment. Thus we are compelled to look at the storyteller as outcast: this has been his role throughout the ages, and one that Frankenstein's monster also embodied in his own story of his abandonment and fall. In this sense, a second parallel occurs in that both the monster's and Saúl's casting-out could be interpreted to have led them to tell their story and in so doing to become 'storytellers'. But are 'Western' critics or even the contemporary reader, prepared to let the storyteller back in?

In one sense our distance as readers from both the storyteller and the 'author' parallels that of the blind man in *Frankenstein* and gives us no choice but to simply listen to the voice and not judge by appearance. However, it is difficult to 'hear' the storyteller's voice, this primordial voice, not only because of constraints of space and time, but also because of the confinement of the word to print. On the other hand, if we recognise that the oral tradition is one of transformation, repetition, reinvention and reinterpretation, we might begin to see it (or hear it) in the voice of 'speakers' (*habladores*) who are reborn in the world of the novel. Vargas Llosa's choice of the word *hablador* meaning "the one who speaks" thus takes on its full significance.<sup>37</sup>

This urge to listen is apparent in the storyteller's narratives to the Machiguengas, whose audience is so perfect that O'Bryant-Knight calls it "an Eden of sorts".<sup>38</sup> When Saúl is telling stories to the Machiguengas they do not seem to see his face, but simply "listen to him". We are constantly reminded that in order to

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<sup>36</sup> Rousseau, Jean Jacques. "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among Men and Is It Authorized by Natural Law?" 1754. The Constitution Society. 7 January 2007. <<http://www.constitution.org/jjr/ineq.htm>>.

<sup>37</sup> Muñoz, 80.

<sup>38</sup> O'Bryant-Knight, 95.

understand, we must learn to listen.<sup>39</sup> “If you want to hear, you have to know how to listen. I’ve learned how. [...] Listen, listen storyteller.” (S 126) In this way, the reader is placed in the role of listener, another transformation that the storyteller manages to conjure up. Although we are not listening but reading, this focus on orality and speech serves to create the vision of a talking and embodied storyteller in our minds and thus place us also in the midst of his audience. However, he reminds us: “Does it matter to you, seeing what I look like? Does it matter to you that I am the way I am? What people do and what they don’t matters. [...] Stains on a face don’t. That’s wisdom they say” (S 209). Although we might imagine him as embodied and real, we are asked to look beyond his facial disfigurement and look deeper, behind the mask.

As with Frankenstein’s monster, it is Saúl’s narrative that is important: this is what we must listen to and it is a story that, as I reveal below, has been echoed in various figures, peoples and faces throughout the ages. This is a story of peoples, nations and man himself. The storyteller has been shouting this through the centuries. In this way the storyteller becomes the link between all nations, people and figures. The storyteller, as the embodied voice of the tribe, tells our own story, an oft-repeated, old story that we have heard time and time again throughout the ages. His wisdoms are our wisdoms; his truths, our own. Whether we choose to see ‘good’ or ‘evil’ in his stories depends on whether we have learnt to listen. The message he asks us to heed on a wider level is: shall we judge people by the colour of their skins, these “stains on the face”, (S 209) or shall we instead listen to their stories?

Every time I go visit a family I don’t know yet, I think maybe they’ll be frightened and say: “He’s a monster, he’s a devil,” when they see me. There, you are laughing again. All of you laugh like that when I ask you: “Do you think I’m devil? Is that what my face means?” “No, no, no, and you’re not a monster. You’re Tasurinchi, the storyteller.” (S 212)

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<sup>39</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between orality and literacy in the novel *see*, O’Bryant-Knight, 78-84.

Furthermore, he implies that although we might seek to find the embodied author behind the masks of storyteller and narrator, it is the voice of the universal storyteller that we should heed to.

Another point that links Saúl and Frankenstein's monster is that they both learn to 'talk' and 'tell their stories' from other stories, from literature. Of course, Frankenstein's monster significantly learns his language from three key books: Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Plutarch's *The Lives*, all of which are significant not only to the monster himself but also on a wider level as it reflects the themes of the novel as a whole. Similarly, Saúl chooses a book (in fact it is a 'story') that we are told, "he had read countless times and knew virtually by heart" (S 17) and whose author he "revered" (S 16): this is Kafka's "The Metamorphosis". In the first instance, "The Metamorphosis" highlights Saúl's own metamorphosis from outcast to storyteller, strangely inverting Kafka's own story from a negative to a positive. His abandonment of law, religion and his own ethnicity and his adoption of a new tribe, gives the monster in him a 'home' and thus again dissolves the Frankenstein myth forever. Following the series of transformations – Saúl, Mascarita, Monster, Frankenstein, Machiguenga storyteller – in a final act, mirroring another literary outcast, he himself transforms into his parrot, which is named after the main character in Kafka's story, Gregor Samsa. The final story that the storyteller tells is a story of 'parrots' whose "chattering" (S 228) he tries to understand until he realises that they are his "companions" (S 229). This "talking animal" (S 231) not only becomes his "shadow" (S 231), but actually reflects the storytelling tradition that moves from one mouth to another copying, transforming and repeating itself from storyteller to storyteller.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Standish notes that the parrot also links to Flaubert, who was said to have borrowed a parrot from a local museum so that he might describe it in vivid realistic detail. Moreover, Standish notes, "Flaubert, too, used his bird in a similar way at the end of one of his novels, *Un coeur simple*. His protagonist, appropriately called Felicite, dotes on her parrot, even once dead and stuffed; at the end of the novel she comes to wonder whether this articulate beast, this imitator of human sounds, might not represent the Holy Ghost, and as she dies imagines a huge parrot hovering above her head." See, Standish 147, 149. Mary Davis also makes the link between Flaubert, Kafka and Vargas Llosa and notes: "It should come as no surprise that the novelist who has admired Flaubert as a spiritual father should pay homage to Kafka, who considered himself 'a spiritual son' of Flaubert. Vargas Llosa's use of the 'The Metamorphosis' illustrates the self-conscious nature of this text; he assumes that the reader is familiar with Kafka's text (and his world), and he does not

Why in the course of all those years, had I been unable to write my story about the storyteller? The answer I used to offer myself, each time I threw a half-finished manuscript of the elusive story into the wastebasket was the difficulty of inventing, in Spanish and within a logically consistent intellectual framework, a literary form that would suggest, with any reasonable degree of credibility, how a primitive man with a magico-religious mentality would go about telling a story. All my attempts led each time to the impasse of a style that struck me as glaringly false, as implausible as the various ways in which philosophers and novelists of the Enlightenment had put words into the mouths of their exotic characters in the eighteenth century, when the theme of the "noble savage" was fashionable in Europe. (S 158-9)

Unlike Mary Shelley, or any one of her three narrators who tell the monster's story, our narrator, and implicitly Vargas Llosa himself, is not living in post-Enlightenment Europe or writing out of a Romantic tradition. As a glaringly self-conscious postmodernist, his creation of a plethora of storytellers and his subsequent return to the "noble savage", marks out the difference.

Finally, as Saúl transforms into the storyteller, he loses his name; his nickname Mascarita thus takes on more significance. No longer Saúl Zuratas, he becomes simply the Machiguenga storyteller, no longer an individual but part of the collective. Thus, his anonymity is indicative of his facelessness, of the importance of his story and his words, as opposed to his authority as a 'named' person.<sup>41</sup> Again, this links to Frankenstein's monster who is also nameless and without a family bond. His embodiment of the collective (being made of various body parts) is transformed into a positive: the Machiguenga storyteller is the one who brings all the various people of the tribe together. This is why when the narrator is searching for the

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hesitate to parody Samsa's history as he incorporates it. The final episodes in the speaker's narrative employ a delirious number of interior narrators, not the least of whom is Gregor Samsa, as an insect, narrating from within an iguana who has, before our very eyes, devoured him." See, Davis, 138.

<sup>41</sup> The anonymous narrator of the novel thus also parallels the storyteller-daughter in Crace who, in telling the story of her father's birth to storyteller-hood, is not only continuing the storytelling tradition herself, but also advocating its need to continue. The storyteller is a functional being, one that expresses the collective and not the individual talent. Although the narrative is further complicated by the idea of a 'writerly' narrator, as opposed to the implicit spoken narrative of the storyteller-daughter in Crace, it is the very same narrative tradition, the oral (illiterate) tradition that Vargas Llosa's narrator foregrounds. In *The Storyteller*, however, we do not witness the birth of the 'first' storyteller, but more so his rebirth. Storytelling, as we shall see, takes on the aura of a spiritual conversion.

storyteller throughout the ages, he sees him in various figures, nameless perhaps, but obstinately there.<sup>42</sup> His story is their story: the story of all the outcasts, of all the marginalised, of all those who have no voice and who live outside of society's construction of itself. Our narrator explains:

The *hablador*, or *habladores*, must be something like that of a courier service of the community. [...] Their name defined them. They spoke. Their mouths were the connecting links of this society that the fight for survival had forced to split up and scatter to the four winds. Thanks to the *habladores*, fathers had news of their sons, brothers of their sisters and thanks to them they were all kept informed of the deaths, births and other happenings in the tribe. [...] those *habladores* who [...] using the simplest, most time-hallowed of expedients, the telling of stories, were the living sap that circulated and made the Machiguengas into a society. (S 92-3)<sup>43</sup>

In this sense the storyteller's role is one of community-creating which also means culture-creating, and tradition-creating.

### Storytelling and Ethnic Marginalisation

Another way that out-casting and exile is reflected in the novel is through ethnicity. Mascarita may be hiding behind the literal mask of his birthmark, but he is also an outsider due to his ethnicity: pointedly he is a Jew who becomes more interested in studying 'ethnology' than in 'Law'. As I argue in this section, the politics of ethnicity is another way that Vargas Llosa's novel leads us to the storyteller. The Jews, as a 'wandering people' who, until the re-creation of Israel did not have a stable 'home', mirror the walking storyteller that Saúl eventually becomes. From this perspective, his choice of converting to wandering 'storyteller' seems apt. His story is their story and is the story of all marginalised and threatened communities,

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<sup>42</sup> See, Chapter 1 of this thesis, 'The (Hi)Story of the Storyteller.'

<sup>43</sup> The word *hablador* is not without connotations. Peter Standish traces the etymology of *hablador* which he argues leads to the idea of a "fabulator", one who creates "fables". He says: "The Latin verb, from which *hablador* derives, *fabulari*, (itself derived from *fari*: to speak) was to tell tales, *fabulae*; hence it also gives us English 'fable', and that obsolete word resurrected some years ago by Robert Scholes, 'fabulator', which now comes to mean the self-conscious storyteller.' [...] *Fabulari* also gave us *hablar*, hence *hablador*, the person engaged in the act of speaking; except, perhaps, in the sense of *chismoso*, in normal modern Spanish usage there is little in the meaning of *hablador* that is fabulative or fabulatory or fabulous, little, so to speak, to write home about. But these are precisely some of the layers of meaning that Vargas Llosa gives to this normally somewhat dull term." See, Standish, 143.



whose survival rests on the fact that their stories are kept alive. Let us now turn to look at this more closely.

Unlike Crace's novel, whose narrative focus does not really specifically 'judge' the villagers' initial out-casting of the disfigured boy, in *The Storyteller* the ethics of marginalisation is brought into question from the outset. Following the description of his very unsightly facial disfigurement, the narrator adds the remark: "He was the ugliest lad in the world; but he was also a likeable and exceptionally good person" (S 8). This idea of 'goodness' is significant in two ways. Firstly, in that it forces us to question not only our personal judgements, but also those of society as a whole *vis-à-vis* the marginalised and secondly, in that by so doing, it brings to light the very notion of morality, of what we understand as 'good' and 'evil'. A bit further on in the narrative, the narrator extends the metaphor of marginalisation to the very real community of the Machiguengas of the Peruvian Amazon.

Both he and [the Machiguengas] were anomalies in the eyes of other Peruvians. His birthmark aroused in them, in us, the same feelings, deep down, as those creatures living somewhere far away, half-naked, eating each other's lice and speaking incomprehensible dialects. (S 28)

As it is Saúl who later is 'reborn' into the Machiguenga storyteller, this question of evil is further heightened. Do we consider this tribe to be evil? Is this why we send out missionaries, represented in the novel by the Schneils,<sup>44</sup> whose bible education and aid to literacy brings 'goodness' back to the lost fold?

Of course, the line between good and evil is a matter of perspective and this perhaps is Vargas Llosa's point. As Keith Booker asserts:

[...] the Protestant missionaries' of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, [...] attempts to civilize the Machiguengas and to bring

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<sup>44</sup> These people are curiously reminiscent of Wayne and Betty Snell who began work with the Machiguengas in 1947. Doris Sommer has noted the following: "Vargas Llosa's missionaries of monotheism and modernity are named Schneil, by the way, and are mentioned by name in Saúl's diatribe. The name obviously seems a corruption of the German 'quick,' in a heavy-handed, redundant image of modernizing assimilation and acceleration. In fact, the real missionaries who translated and then published manageable condensations of Machiguenga lore were named Snell. Vargas Llosa took an orthographic liberty." See, Sommer, 106. Also, see the following website, for continuing aid work on the Machiguengas that began around this time and still continues today: [http://www.certinternational.org/mission/peru\\_machiguenga.htm](http://www.certinternational.org/mission/peru_machiguenga.htm)

them the Word of God represent perhaps the greatest threat to the survival of traditional Machiguenga culture.<sup>45</sup>

Vargas Llosa's storyteller makes us question: whose is the 'real' evil? The storyteller does not substitute their story with another but instead blends them all together, thus creating a synthesis. By raising the question of whether or not it was his difference, marginality and subsequent out-casting that led to Saúl's identification with them, the narrator forces us to face our attitudes towards difference: whether this is due to appearance, race, or way of life. More importantly perhaps, he not only questions our ability to empathise with the Other, but in so doing, demands that we question our very construction of the Other and ourselves.

Unlike Saúl who transforms and reinvents himself, and who finds his "destiny" in storytelling, Vargas Llosa's narrator, as a 'literate' and 'westernised' individual, is aware that he is still bound by his own constructions of reality and of his interpretations. As a result, he does not keep his interpretations to himself and instead puts them directly to Saúl, asking him: "Had he unconsciously identified with those marginal beings because of his birthmark that made him, too, a marginal being, every time he went out in the streets?" (S 28). As a student of the 'humanities' in Lima university, Saúl's answer also shows that he is aware of Western constructions of reality (here represented by the discourse of "pop psychology") but that he is on the path to rejecting them (a fact that is later further reinforced by his rejection of a scholarship to study in Europe). In reference to a psychology course that they mutually attended, he denies the narrator's crudely 'psychological' interpretation and offers another, proposed by his own father, who had said he was "identifying the Amazonian Indians with the Jewish people, always a minority and always persecuted for their religion and their mores that are different from those of the rest of society" (S 28).

This fact leads us away from a Westernised view of reality and the world, and again reflects the theme of transformation: it points to other ways of seeing that world that lie outside the European imagination. Perhaps this is why the narrator sees in Saúl's subsequent transformation into the Machiguenga storyteller something

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<sup>45</sup> Booker, 127.

of his own 'conversion'. As he says himself: "Here, I was born a second time" (S 210). In order to truly see differently, one must abandon all previous beliefs and embrace the new 'religion'. However, one cannot come to this through reason, but only through a spiritual conversion. One must pray to 'see the light'. Thus the narrator tells us:

With hindsight, knowing what happened to him later – I have thought about this a lot – I can say that Saul experienced a conversion. In a cultural sense and perhaps in a religious one also [...] what the priests at the school where I studied tried to convey to us during catechism through phrases such as "receiving grace," "being touched by grace," "falling into the snares of grace." From his first contact with the Amazon jungle, Mascarita was caught in a spiritual trap that made a different person of him. (S 19-20)

As this conversion is a question of belief, it follows that not everyone will see the same way he does. Therefore, it is not about whether we *can* see the world differently, but what we do with that difference. Do we follow Saúl's prophetic vision or do we stay where we are? If we really *understand* our own positions, that is.

As this passage reveals, Saúl's transformation seems to have prophetic undertones. But there are other clues to this, interspersed throughout the narrative but particularly in the storyteller's narrative. As Peter Standish notes:

In the *hablador* sections there are numerous assimilations of Jewish and Christian myths to Machiguenga ones, or vice-versa. I have already alluded to Diaspora. Also we have [...] paradise and fall, God and Devil, resurrection, a lost tribe, a promised land, a land of milk and honey, a Messiah, a myth of creation. A chosen people is protected by Tasurinchi-Jehova, a Christ figure is born, and there is a Trinity.<sup>46</sup>

Apart from allusions in the text, again the act of naming gives us clues. As Mascarita is known for hiding behind 'masks' this fact is hardly surprising. Saúl may remind us of the Apostle (Saul of Tarsus) who changed his name to Paul after his conversion to Christianity, a fact that various critics have already noted.<sup>47</sup> Although

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<sup>46</sup> Standish, 148.

<sup>47</sup> Standish makes the point that Zuratas is almost an anagram of Tarsus. He also links Saúl's parrot to the idea of the dove, which in Spanish is *zurita*, and notes that Saúl's story about the parrots beginning to talk to him reflects this spiritual conversion to storyteller. See, Standish, 148-9.

some critics have identified the Saul-Paul link of the Christian religion, none have really identified or even reflected further or more deeply on the relationship between the connotations of the name Saul with the Jews: a fact that might be significant considering he is in fact a Jew. The Jewish Saul was the first King of Israel before being reinstated by David and then Solomon.<sup>48</sup> Significantly, Saúl's father is called Don Salomón which directly links him to the Jewish King Solomon and thus by implication leads us back to the first Jewish king: King Saul. I think this point is worthy of further examination especially given that Vargas Llosa's allusions to the act of naming in the novel are almost always highly significant. Moreover, this also follows the theme of unmasking and is one of the first of the many intertextual strands interspersed throughout the novel.

One of the reasons why King Saul lost his throne to David (who followed him) was because he disobeyed the prophet Samuel, and thus by implication disobeyed God himself. As the prophets were the mediators between God and Man, (they were known as the Judges) and thus the tellers of God's law, their will had to be obeyed. One of the key commandments that God gave to the Jewish people was 'to wipe out the Amalek' who were the sworn enemies of the Jews and whose religions were founded on idolatry, paganism and barbarism. In this sense, they represented the war against good and evil; moreover, the implication was that if Amalek was not destroyed, its people would forever seek to destroy the Jews in turn. As a result, it was given to Saul to wage genocide against the Amalekites. However, although Saul did kill the majority of them, he did not kill them *all*. This effectively resulted in the loss of his throne as leader of the Israelites.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> More curiously perhaps, King Saul belonged to the tribe of Benjamin which reminds us of Walter Benjamin and his essay "The Storyteller"!

<sup>49</sup> See, 1 Samuel, 8:6-8, 1 Samuel 15:1-35 To this day some Jews believe that the consequences of Saul's mistake are still apparent, and some even see Hitler as a descendant of Amalek as he espoused the Amalekite ideology, highlighted in the following speech: "Yes, we are barbarians! We want to be barbarians. It is an honourable title to us. [...] Providence has ordained that I should be the greatest liberator of humanity. I free man from [...] the degrading self-mortification of a false vision called conscience and morality. [...] Conscience is a Jewish invention." However, my point here is not to enter into a debate as to whether this is true or not, as this raises not only contentious but very delicate issues, but rather to make the point that Vargas Llosa's novel does bring up these issues for investigation. See, Adolf Hitler, and Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler Speaks, a Series of Political Conversations with Adolf Hitler on His Real Aims* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939) 87, 220-222.

As we have seen, Saúl, our storyteller-to-be, is a displaced Jew brought up in Peru who later leaves his 'second' home to be part of a third: the ancient Amazonian tribe known as the Machiguengas. Although the last thing our narrator hears of Saúl, following the death of his father Don Salomón, is that he returned to Israel, to his own nation, his own spiritual home, he later finds out that this was, in fact, not the case: Saúl had abandoned Israel for the Machiguengas. Instead of this return to his ancestral land, to the home of (his father) 'Solomon's temple', Saúl had chosen a new homeland, one that is seen to embrace some of the very traditions that the Amaleks were originally known for: specifically, paganism and idolatry. In this sense, our storyteller-Saúl mirrors King Saul's disobedience, which is again compounded by the fact that he was also duping his father whilst at university, claiming that he was studying 'Law' and not 'ethnology': both subjects that are highly relevant to King Saul's story. Although he does not renounce his Jewish roots, in that the stories he tells later to the Machiguengas allude to them, he does at least re-interpret his religion, and chooses instead to believe and tell stories. This is the true sense of "cultural conversion" that Vargas Llosa seems to be foregrounding. Doris Sommer makes a similar point here stating that:

The Jewish Saul becomes a figure for the Machiguengas for reasons beyond a general affinity between one marginalized group and another. He is more than a metaphor for the minority culture condemned to extinction by majoritarian redemption campaigns. For one thing, both nomadic tribes cling to, and are sustained by, ritually repeated narratives that amount to the Law. Diasporic Jews know, in the words of a folk refrain, that "Torah is the best Skhorah (merchandise)," because learning is one thing that cannot be confiscated. And oral – postbiblical – "Torah" is traditionally as important as Scripture itself. For another thing, the Jew as *hablador* is the kind of metaphor that earns some of its evocative power through a shared history.<sup>50</sup>

The fact that the storyteller-Saúl was a student of ethnology now becomes relevant. Through the sharing, reinterpreting and reinvention that storytelling allows, the storyteller becomes the prophet of *ethnos-creating*, a concept that might remind us

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<sup>50</sup> Sommer, 115.

of Benedict Anderson's 'imaginary communities'<sup>51</sup> and curiously, also Salman Rushdie's 'imaginary homelands.'<sup>52</sup>

### Storytelling and the Politics of Ethnos-Creation

Notably, then, these ideas of metamorphosis do not simply link the idea of individual narrators and their masks, but they also link us to the community, the transformation that is happening on a national and perhaps even global level within communities themselves. If we take this one step further and look specifically at this idea of transformation in terms of the Machiguengas as an endangered tribe, we are forced to question the ethical implications of the change that results from their penetration by the incoming anthropologists, who bring with them their own cultural agenda, and their own idea of what is ethically 'good'. Naturally, this mixing changes them into something new, a fact that is highlighted by the narrator when he visits the tribe. Initially, however, he describes them in terms of their mythologized image:

When we reached the tribes [...] there before us was prehistory, the elemental, primeval existence of our distant ancestors: hunters, gatherers, bowmen, nomads, shamans, irrational and animistic. This, too, was Peru, and only then did I become fully aware of it: a small world still untamed, the Stone Age, magico-religious cultures, polygamy, head-shrinking [...] that is to say, the dawn of human history. (S 73)

But he is soon forced to question:

Why did he cling to that illusion of his: wanting to preserve these tribes just as they were, their way of life just as it was? To begin with, it wasn't possible. All of them, some more slowly, others more rapidly, were being contaminated by Western and *mestizo* influences. (S 73)

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<sup>51</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 1991.

<sup>52</sup> This is the title to a collection of essays by Rushdie of which 'Imaginary Homelands' is one. Rushdie and Vargas Llosa do seem to echo each other on various points and this idea of nation and memory is but one. Rushdie says: "It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back [...] we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost [...] we will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind." See, Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books in association with Penguin, 1992) 10.

This echoes a conversation he described earlier in the novel, that took place the last time he had seen Saúl. He tells us that Saúl “maintained that we’ve taken up where the colonial missionaries left off. That we, in the name of science, like them in the name of evangelization are the spearhead of the effort to wipe out the Indians” (S 33). Is the West and its all-encompassing modernity, with its spearheading of progress and technology, an evil force that contaminates the last remains of primeval man that exist in the world? And does this represent the ‘true’ Fall, the destruction of the myth of Eden, and the Utopian dream? Can the jungle be tamed?

The novelist-narrator tries to offer us answers: first, he thought “socialism” was the answer as it “would make possible that coexistence between modern and primitive Peru that Mascarita thought impossible and undesirable” (S 78). However, years later, he realises that this too was not realistic. “[...] we were as unrealistic and romantic as Mascarita with his archaic, anti-historical utopia” (S 78). The question remains then: how do they move forward when the time of change happens? In Jim Crace, the community looked to the storyteller for answers; he was to be their guide. Indeed, the position in which Vargas Llosa’s novelist-narrator places his storyteller equally follows suit. A closer look at his narratives reveals that it is the blending of various traditions that creates something new.

The message that *The Storyteller* seems to send out is that we cannot stop progress and change, we cannot preserve or re-create the “noble savage”, but we can perhaps return to the idea of ‘stories’ rather than ‘truths’ and to ‘community’ rather than individuality. *The Storyteller* reflects these concerns in a fictionalised image that presents us with both a real and mythologized storyteller. Beyond the question of whether Saúl is the storyteller, or whether it is Vargas Llosa, what of the real storytellers who are fighting for the survival of their tribes? Reflected in this is the reality of the Machiguenga community, previously untouched, that is now being threatened by the invading arms of modernity. The storyteller, the keeper of the stories of the lost tribe, the first man, is like a hunted animal becoming an endangered species. The photograph of the storyteller is thus necessarily ‘alarming’ and leads both him and readers to assess their own, and the storyteller’s worth.

However, the 'reality' of the storyteller is rendered even more problematic by the fact that the novelist assumes he is a Westerner, his friend Saúl who has adopted this ancient role. The question then is not only, 'is this possible?' but, 'does authenticity matter?' Moreover, although this story is a fiction, do these storytellers exist?

In an interview with Lois Parkinson Zamora in 2002, Vargas Llosa talks about some of the issues that come out of this juxtaposition between local (represented by the storyteller) and national cultures as represented in *The Storyteller*. Here, Llosa admits that the survival of that culture is specifically due to the "cultural mechanism" which the storytellers embody. If the storytellers die then the tribe loses its identity and tradition and finally is overtaken by the larger national culture that seeks to engulf it. In the novel, this situation is reflected in the anthropologists, the Schneils, whose aid and role is a necessary reality of modernity. Saúl, of course, provides the other solution, one that one might think more inconceivable in reality: he abandons anthropology and his studies and prefers to return to this culture as *their* storyteller. And if it rests on the storytellers to keep the culture alive, then Saúl's transformation really ensures a true preservation. Real nations are therefore fictitious nations which in turn become real to the people that hear them; they are created by the imaginary landscapes that the storyteller brings alive and are constantly in flux, transforming and metamorphosing like the storyteller.

This novel, in its investigation of the storyteller and the novelist, attempts to 'universalise' these positions by linking both the storytellers and novelists of various cultures together. Vargas Llosa has emphasised this fact both in his self-conscious mixing of traditions in this novel and in his choice of intertextual references. This mixing and learning from other traditions is reflected in his own reading which is more 'global' than national. As he tells us:

What I read mostly, and probably this was the case of most Latin Americans of my generation, were foreign authors; we read American novelists: Hemingway, Dos Passos, Faulkner; we read French authors: Flaubert, Sartre, Camus; Italian authors: Moravia; English authors; German authors. I think that this has given Latin American literature a perspective that is not at all provincial [...]. It is very important not to be secluded in your own tradition if you want to



write works that are universal, that is, works in which people from other traditions can recognize their own worlds.

By bringing all these discourses and traditions together, Vargas Llosa seems not only to promote but also 'de-mythologize' the storyteller by attempting to bring him back into literary history. The literary tradition itself, or more correctly perhaps 'the tradition of storytelling' in its purest form, by its very nature, not only moves between, but actually feeds off, the merging or mingling of the local, the national and the global. Llosa, (like other contemporary writers: for example, Crace, Rushdie) seems to promote the belief in the inherent universality of stories – in their ability to question and bring to light current contentious issues and preoccupations that often take us back through our own histories and stories. In this novel in particular, it seems this is what Llosa is striving to attain. By returning to the archetypal storyteller, and to a story of the loss of local culture by the sweeping hand of a rising modernity, he presents us with a story that people have heard over the world numerous times.

On the one hand, this 'universalising' and 'globalizing' of 'literature' echoes the utopian dream that Crace also reflected in his novel *The Gift of Stones*. The critic Keith Booker has noted this, observing that: "In *The Storyteller* Vargas Llosa directly addresses the role that literature plays in the Utopian tradition", which reflects the "Utopian strain in all of Vargas Llosa's fiction". On the other hand, Booker notes that "in Vargas Llosa Utopia is never realized",<sup>53</sup> a fact that indicates perhaps that his return to the primitive storyteller is not 'real' but 'fictitious' for a purpose. Moreover, although this might seem like a 'noble' cause, or in the very least, the harmless pursuit of a modern day fabulist, the specific insertion of the storyteller into the reality of a 'primitive' tribe has its risks. Despite his self-conscious attempts to pre-empt critics' responses, as Debra Castillo notes, the danger is that Vargas Llosa is simply telling "the continuing story of the Western intellectual's long monologue about himself."<sup>54</sup> Her question is thus:

[...] to what degree does Vargas Llosa's affirmation of the political

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<sup>53</sup> Booker, 122.

<sup>54</sup> Debra A. Castillo, "Postmodern Indigenism: Quetzalcoatl and All That," *Modern Fiction Studies* 41.1 (1995): 63.

and artistic complexity of such work as his lay claim to Western attention through a deployment of stylistic techniques that are both white male canonical and “universal” rather than local in orientation; and secondly, how much of the authority of Vargas Llosa’s novel derives from the reader’s sense that in it, unlike in traditional ethnographical accounts, the novelist speaks for the margin because in this book he licenses his own, differently constituted, margin to speak for itself?<sup>55</sup>

Conversely, Booker sees this as positive, and part of the postmodernist tradition. He says:

What especially complicates and enriches Vargas Llosa’s dialogue with Romanticism is his apparent recognition of the fact that an unequivocal rejection of the past, however modernist it might seem, is seriously in danger of degenerating into a mere repetition of the antinomian energies of Romanticism itself. After all, these energies imply a faith in the Western tradition of progress in which the new is by definition superior to the old, a tradition that *The Storyteller* explicitly denies. Even as Vargas Llosa rejects an exclusive turn to the past to solve the problems of the present, he also suggests the folly of an arrant modernism that would reject the past entirely in favor of the supposedly superior knowledge of the present. *The Storyteller* undermines nostalgic appeals to the past, but its postmodernist interrogation of the myth of progress asks whether change is necessarily good and whether modern technological know-how is necessarily superior to ancient wisdom.<sup>56</sup>

As we have seen, although the questions Vargas Llosa has raised and placed in the mouth of the storyteller, this prophet of postmodernism, nation and culture, are contentious, they are undoubtedly not only valid but, more importantly, they are questions that we are still not able to answer. In this sense, he shows us that storytelling again becomes a political act. Stories are not only entertainments: they are powerful. The grand narratives of history, religion, philosophy and especially the discourses of political leaders, the leaders of nations, have again and again shown us this. Davis in fact states: “In the profusion of dialogues, extended ‘conversations’ between authors, texts, characters, mythologies, and epochs, Vargas Llosa questions modern assumptions concerning the motives of anthropology, linguistics, cultural

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<sup>55</sup> Castillo, 59.

<sup>56</sup> Booker, 126. See Booker’s article for a postmodern reading of the novel.

imperialism and of history itself.”<sup>57</sup> Perhaps, then, the return of the storyteller in this novel, as Davis observes, is more a way of raising these issues without claiming responsibility for any one position?

In conclusion then, Vargas Llosa’s return to the primitive storyteller does attempt to move out of ‘the literature frame’, but at the same time, he recognises, perhaps poignantly, following Rousseau’s dictum, that the return to Eden is impossible. The storyteller as prophet recognises that though a return to Eden is impossible, our tradition of storytelling (which is a hybrid tradition of varying discourses, ideas and strands) must be preserved: this is the conversion that we should hope for. Thus, although Vargas Llosa may not have achieved a successful return to the Utopia of romantic nostalgia, he has certainly returned the storyteller to contemporary fiction. In so doing, he has also preserved the storyteller’s character: that of the shape-shifter, whose narratives have to keep being told as a means to survive.

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<sup>57</sup> Davis, 141.

## STORYTELLER AS SATAN

Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*

Can an "author" exist, apart from the work and the name attached to it? The authorial part – the part that is out there in the world, the only part that may survive death – is not flesh and blood, not a real human being. And who is the writing "I"? A hand must hold the pen or hit the keys, but who is in control of that hand at the moment of writing? Which half of the equation, if either, may be said to be authentic?

Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead* 45.

Salman Rushdie's controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* (1998)<sup>1</sup> has engendered a huge body of writing and response which has moved both inside and outside literary interpretations. This seemed to begin almost immediately from the time of its publication and has only recently subsided. Already a successful novelist, with novels such as *Midnight's Children* (1980) and *Shame* (1983), the events that followed the publication of *The Satanic Verses* took a life of their own. Nearly twenty years have passed since its original publication. Though positioned within 'the literature frame', Rushdie himself sees his work more generally as part of a storytelling tradition.<sup>2</sup> Rushdie has said, "In *The Satanic Verses* I tried to answer the question, how does newness enter the world? Influence, the flowing of the old into the new, is one part of the answer."<sup>3</sup> In this chapter I argue that one of the answers to Rushdie's question lies in the figure of the storyteller, who is the medium through which we see the world anew. The storyteller translates and retells our stories and in so doing invents new worlds.

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<sup>1</sup> Rushdie, Salman. *The Satanic Verses*. 1988. Great Britain: Vintage, 1998. All subsequent quotations in this chapter are taken from this edition. All subsequent in-text quotations in this chapter are taken from this edition and will appear in the text in the abbreviated form *SV* followed by the page number.

<sup>2</sup> c.f. See, chapter 1 of this thesis 'Who are you labelling a storyteller?'

<sup>3</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Step across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction, 1992-2002* (London: Vintage, 2003) 73.

As we observed in the previous chapters, the storyteller can be seen as the voice of the tribe and in some way can approach the voice of the prophet, soothsayer or wise teacher. On the other hand, he can just as equally tell the truth as twist it, mesmerising his audience through his spell of fiction, (one of the reasons perhaps why Plato ultimately saw the poets as dangerous to his vision of the ideal Republic, the impossible dream which was the utopian state). As a result, these sets of seemingly contradictory characteristics of the storyteller, prophet or soothsayer on the one hand, and trickster, devil or liar on the other, seem to exist side by side. Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1998), as its title clearly denotes, places itself within a tradition that involves the telling of lies. As we saw in Jim Crace's *The Gift of Stones*, the birth of the storyteller led us back to the Fall and thus to the devil himself. A fallen angel, outcast by the God father, Satan tries to find a brother in humanity. The Devil is powerful, duplicitous, clever; with his transformation into a snake, whose poisonous tongue marks his power to seduce and conquer, he is also a symbol of metamorphosis.

Arguably, the story of the fall embodies one of Satan's most triumphant moments: his storytelling seduction led Eve down the garden path and compelled her to eat from the tree of knowledge. Seducing her with the power of his tongue, his use of rhetoric and language, he promises her a new way of seeing the world and with it a universe. Eve, now poisoned, becomes aware of her nakedness and her belief in his illusion leads her to the discovery of death. In this way, the devil becomes a powerful symbol for the storyteller. His words are magical: with them he can create real and imaginary worlds, worlds which can be both beautiful and dangerous. Satan is thus the quintessential storyteller. He is the artist as outcast that transforms truths into fictions. To conjure the Devil is not only to conjure the age-old battle of 'good' versus 'evil', but also to question authority and truth through fiction. Satan, as the original liar, felicitates discourses or 'satanic verses' which trick and seduce us into believing their 'truths'.

In this chapter, I argue that Rushdie follows the tradition of the storyteller as Satan, supposedly a liar who is set against the authoritative author-god and his claim to 'Truth'. Much of the controversy about the meaning of *The Satanic Verses*

revolved around our (misguided) conceptions of the author. I propose that if we shift our focus from Rushdie as 'author' to Rushdie as 'storyteller,' this will provide some new insights into both this particular text and the way we read and approach any fictional text.

### **Reality or Fiction?**

"It is hard to express how it feels to have attempted to portray an objective reality and then to have become its subject",<sup>4</sup> says Salman Rushdie in his essay "In Good Faith" written in 1990, two years after his controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* was published. Can fiction objectively represent reality? And is Rushdie accountable for his version(s) of this so-called 'objective reality' as an author-God figure working behind the fiction, or is his role more complex than that? Could he be mediator-storyteller rather than authority-author: Satan rather than God? Who judges the nature of any given text and defines it as fact or fiction, history or story, truth or lies?

*The Satanic Verses* opens with the miraculous escape of its two main characters from an exploding plane which we are told is "a universal beginning, a miniature echo of the birth of time" (SV 4). Gibreel Farishta, whose name literally means The Angel Gabriel and Saladin Chamcha, a Satan-figure in the guise of a goat, are 'in reality' two Indian nationals on a transatlantic flight which bears the name of Bostan (one of the two paradise gardens of heaven). Here begins the journey of rebirth, transmutation and metamorphosis for the two angels and we are told that "to be born again, first you have to die" (SV 3). Plunging headfirst towards the fabulous country of Vilayet, we watch the two falling/fallen angels begin their journey of rebirth. Here, in the capital of Vilayet, Ellowen Deewen (the literal alphabet-sound spelling of London), their adventures unfold until the end of the book when only one of them returns, fallen angel number one Saladin-Satan on another sky-bound journey on a plane called Gullistan (the second of the paradise gardens). This time the plane does not blow up and blow them out of paradise. Instead one of them returns, the doors to the garden are open, and Heaven beckons

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<sup>4</sup> Rushdie, *Homelands* 404.

under the guise of India. Saladin is let back in. Will Satan be forgiven and allowed to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven? Can he be an author? Whose words count?

From the beginning, this sense of duplicity of a battle between two (seemingly) opposing forces is echoed throughout the novel in themes such as east-west, reality-fiction, belief-unbelief, heaven-hell, God-the devil, revelation-madness, love-hate and belonging-rootlessness. The focus on duality, on opposites, draws attention to itself and raises the question: are they hierarchically fixed? Or are they indeed, mutually exclusive categories? And if so, how do we choose? More specifically, if what we are seeking is the voice of an authority, where does this voice come from and who holds the key to such 'black and white' truth? Such problems are bound in complex ways to the issue of the authority of 'written texts' versus 'speech' and further bound to this are issues around: the authority of a 'sacred text' versus a 'non-sacred text'; the authority of 'history' versus 'story'; the authority of a 'Logos' or a 'truth' versus a 'fantasy' or a 'fiction'; the authority of 'individual' versus 'social' truth; the authority of a 'constructed' versus a 'forever changing version of reality'.

Let us begin with the simple question: *Who is the author?* This question is significant and its consideration will involve entering the maze which surrounds critical ideas on authorship.

### **Who is the Author?**

The question of authorship has been crucial in modern literary criticism and much has been written about it. According to Boris Tomaševskij, "the author becomes a witness to and a living participant in his novels, a living hero."<sup>5</sup> This is why we not only ascribe the authorial voice of the author to any given text but why we might also go as far as providing a "double transformation," whereby "heroes are taken for living personages, and poets become living heroes."<sup>6</sup> But can we apply this point of view to the word of God, to his sacred text? What does this say about authorship? Jean-Paul Sartre believed that the role of an author is to "write for one's age, as the

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<sup>5</sup> Boris Tomaševskij, "Literature and Biography," *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader*, ed. Seán Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) 84.

<sup>6</sup> Tomaševskij, 84.

great writers have done,” to seek transcendence, “real transcendence [which] requires one to want to change certain aspects of the world”,<sup>7</sup> in order to surpass him/herself and to help modify a concrete situation for the good of the future. Rushdie’s novel has obviously sparked much controversy, but what kind of change, if any, has it brought about? Is it for good or for evil, satanic or divine? Rushdie argues that “the book’s real themes” are “about the merits of purity and those of hotch-potch, and about how human beings really become whole: through the love of God or through the love of their fellow men.”<sup>8</sup> But does anyone listen to him? Is his interpretation any more valid than anyone else’s?

According to Roland Barthes, we do not need the author at all since we know “that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological meaning’ (the message of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings none of them original, blend and clash.”<sup>9</sup> The author is not the author but rather a ‘translator’ and his writing is a mere imitation of “a gesture that is always anterior [and] never original.”<sup>10</sup> If we follow Barthes’ logic, and no author exists and no-one is responsible for the fictional text, Rushdie need not have had his life threatened. All accusations therefore were false, as there was no ‘real’ author to dispute them. Rushdie indeed claims that “books choose their authors; the act of creation [being] not entirely a rational and conscious one.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite Barthes’ famous proclamation of the ‘Death of the Author’ and Foucault’s deconstruction of the author-function within discourse, the location of the authorial voice is still sought by critics. One of the reasons for this is that it is hard to imagine the existence of meaning without the concept of intention. If there is no speaking voice, ‘a real locatable presence’, no authority behind a text, then can one ever arrive at a definitive meaning? Most – dare I say, all – readings of a work of literature are read and interpreted consciously or unconsciously, with the idea of the author lurking behind them. Of course, we know who the author is, he or she always

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “Writing for One’s Age,” *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader*, ed. Seán Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) 227.

<sup>8</sup> Rushdie, *Homelands* 395.

<sup>9</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader*, ed. Seán Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) 128.

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, 128.

<sup>11</sup> Rushdie, *Homelands* 408.



has a name, and most works of art are not anonymous. The very idea of a work being recognised, praised or abhorred has a great deal to do with our concept of authorship. Praising the same work as if it were anonymous, would force us either to strive to attribute it to an author, to disregard or discard it. Surely this implies that someone is responsible for this work; that the words *belong* to someone, even if that named someone is, in Foucaultian terms, simply an author-function. However, all this neither helps us to determine precisely the location of the authorial voice, nor shows us how we might find it. Perhaps we should be asking not *who is the author*, but *where is the author?*

### Where is the Author?

Let us look at some of the ways in which the author has been identified within *The Satanic Verses*. James Piscatori claims "an obvious intrusion of the author's voice"<sup>12</sup> where the poet Baal is sentenced to death for writing poems for his twelve prostitute wives; Feroza Jussawalla says that Rushdie "through the voice of Saladin Chamcha",<sup>13</sup> seems to approve of racism; Bruce King describes Saladin and Gibreel as "contrasting aspects of their author";<sup>14</sup> and Shabbir Akhtar claims that "certain characters such as the Persian companion of [the] Prophet Muhammad, Salman-al-Farsi, are created afresh specifically as mouthpieces through whom Rushdie can parody the principles of Islam."<sup>15</sup>

From this small but significant cross-section of criticism, we can see that the author, in this case Rushdie, is being sought within the fiction. His voice is identified; opinions and ideologies are attributed to *him*. However, whose 'reading' do we believe in? Whose critical 'voice' gives us the 'true' or 'correct' interpretation? In order to argue my point, I am equally trapped within the confines of interpretation. I must begin by reading the writings of others in order to make my comments and to substantiate my arguments. I might even seek other writings by

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<sup>12</sup> James Piscatori, "The Rushdie Affair and the Politics of Ambiguity," *International Affairs* 66.4 (1990): 772.

<sup>13</sup> Feroza Jussawalla, "Resurrecting the Prophet," *Public Culture* 2.1 (Fall 1989): 109.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce King, "Who Wrote *The Satanic Verses*?" *World Literature Today* 63.3 (Summer 1989): 443.

<sup>15</sup> Shabbir Akhtar, "Back into the Fold," *Africa Events* 7.2 (1991): 36-7.

this author who wrote elsewhere in its defence, trying to explain the intention of the book. Indeed, I began this argument with precisely this: Rushdie's own words claiming that he was trying to express an 'objective reality' and about how he then became its 'subject'. Does authorship give Rushdie and all authors rights to meaning and intention and therefore to exclusive interpretation? And how does this relate to fiction: is it simply a story, a something-not-believed, an entertainment? Where do the stories come from if not from the author?

Sitting here with my metaphorical 'pen' in hand, I recognise that I am the author of this chapter. However, it cannot be proven to the reader(s) who was/were not here to witness my moment of writing. 'I' the absent author, am thus a fiction; as fictional as the character in a story. The late Argentinean writer Juan Louis Borges wrote a poignant essay on this very subject of the reader's understanding of authorship, entitled "Borges and I".<sup>16</sup> In this essay, Borges sees himself through the idea of 'Borges', the author, as created by his collective readers, or more specifically, as the idea of a writer *as a name* as created by his text. Borges' reflections on the author, here himself, but not himself, highlight how our understanding of authorship is in fact linked to a concept of author which in fact can be separate from the person writing. To highlight this further, we can see that Borges the man, the human being, can read and talk about Borges the writer as if this second Borges exists somewhere else, somewhere outside of where the 'real' Borges knows himself to be. Foucault's linguistic examination of the author-function within discourse can provide an answer to Borges' problem, but it cannot eradicate it entirely. Similarly, Barthes' focus on the fact that it is language (and more specifically written language) that creates the author points us to a direction but still leaves us half-convinced. Barthes writes:

Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows no 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices that is to say to exhaust it.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Juan Louis Borges, "Borges and I," *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodernism, A Reader*, ed. Seán Burke. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) 339.

<sup>17</sup> Barthes, 127.

Both Foucault's and Barthes' point of departure is helpful, but I want to propose this is not the only idea of authorship that matters. It is my contention that authorship is not only determined and problematised by the author and the idea of *what an author is*, but also that the concept of authorship is further problematised and changed by *the text the author writes*. In order to elucidate this, let me return to the present reading of this thesis. And let me turn to this simple question: what text does the reader read and how does this affect his/her idea of authorship? Reading this present text, the reader will know to approach it as a piece of literary criticism and recognise that the writer has followed certain rules and conventions in order to write it. However, how might we approach authorship of a fictional text? Should we not judge the author of a novel differently from the author of an academic paper, for example? Perhaps the relationship to the 'author' could also be different, as we are dealing here not with argument *per se*, but with story.

When we pronounce the word 'story' we know that what we are about to hear-read is fictional, in other words, not necessarily true to fact. Although we know this might not be something to be trusted 'materially' and 'literally', it does contain meaning. This is our first stumbling block. What meaning does it contain exactly? And where is this meaning to be found? Is it all-encompassing, all-knowing, like the word of God, or is it multifarious, contradictory and plural, like the satanic verses of the Devil? This is the crucial question and it takes us back to the question of intention and interpretation.

This chapter exerts an influence and informs the reader on the nature of a text following the lines of an argument. But is fiction also an argument? Does it *intend* to argue, to convince? And if it does, must it not therefore move along linear lines? Of course, its very nature suggests that we do not read it as 'fact,' as 'history,' or as an 'idea of history', but as 'story', and that the nature of 'story' is fluid and can be read 'metaphorically' or in a different way. We all understand that metaphor is integral to the mechanics of all narrative. One could argue that the Qu'ran and the Bible are types of story inasmuch as they can be seen as being written either in narrative or poetic forms, and that the 'stories' they tell might also be metaphorical and thus

open to interpretation. Despite this, they are susceptible to debate around the establishment of a 'true' interpretation. But is this part of the story or does it exist outside of it and why should it need to be found? Can we then tell Rushdie we agree with his story or not? From this perspective, we could argue that it is not narrative and its 'stories' that are there to convince, that become an argument, but rather it is their subsequent interpretations. Seen in this way, that interpretation is the 'argument' of narrative, where does this leave the idea of the author and with it the quest for truth?

Returning to the critics I quoted at the beginning of this section, we can see that their search to locate the author is misguided for (s)he is impossible to find: indeed, it is the very nature of fiction which dictates this. Joel Kuortti, in a chapter entitled "Naming the Problem: Salman Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses*", argues against these placings of the authorial voice by drawing on Paul de Man's essay 'The Resistance to Theory', and reminding us of the materiality of the signifier and the signified, or in other words, that "the linguistic sign remarking 'the self' should not be mixed with 'the remarking self'."<sup>18</sup> Kuortti states that if we are to take this novel as a fiction then we cannot assume that the authorial voice is held within any one particular character or instance. Similarly, if we take the Bakhtinian approach and look at a character as "not an object of authorial discourse, but rather a fully valid, autonomous carrier of his own individual word",<sup>19</sup> we could see Rushdie's characters as "autonomous subjects", free and independent from the author. As Bakhtin states, a particular character "does not serve as a mouthpiece for the author's voice", but rather, "possesses extraordinary independence within the work; it sounds, as it were, *alongside*, the author's word and in a special way combines both with it and with the full and equally valid voices of other characters."<sup>20</sup>

These lines of argument lead to two possibilities for the positioning of the 'author'. The first is that the author is to be regarded as the ultimate authority on and therefore key to the 'true' interpretation of the text, which as we can see is beginning

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<sup>18</sup> Joel Kuortti, *Fictions to Live in: Narration as an Argument for Fiction in Salman Rushdie's Novels* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1998) 128.

<sup>19</sup> Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics* 5.

<sup>20</sup> Bakhtin, 7.

to seem more and more unconvincing, at least for a text that claims it is a fiction. The second is that the author fades into the background and the 'truth' of his work is interpreted by others. This second position implies that the text *has a truth of its own* that needs to be revealed, or in other words, that truth was somehow hidden by someone other than or besides the author. But who might this be? Do we take this to mean that truth resides outside the author or indeed outside the self? Rushdie says that books write themselves, but he says nothing about truth. Perhaps a more pertinent question would be: to what extent is truth created? If books do write themselves, and their words are thus revealed, who is doing the revealing: A muse? God? Language? If books choose their authors, then the question moves from *where is the author?* to *what is the author?* Is it so simple to denounce or to ignore the authority of the written word or the authority of voice for that matter? Can we disregard authority altogether because the words are contained within a fiction, something that, by its very nature, claims not-to-be-true? If in storytelling it is the story that ultimately matters, and the storyteller is only responsible for the story's telling, who is responsible for the story's meaning and intention? Do we need an authority-author in order to find a particular story's meaning? Evidently not: plenty of criticism has been written about many stories whose origins are unidentifiable - fairy stories, myths, even certain epics whose authorship has been called into question.

The storyteller is not then synonymous with authority. Perhaps this is because he is not a writer, but exists within an oral tradition as a kind of bard who performs stories for our entertainment. In the oral tradition, the bardic performer uses language that is not simply his individual expression but a collective expression of a story or stories that have been passed on. The contemporary writer seeing himself as a bardic performer, writing out of this oral storytelling tradition, has to reflect the fact that it exists alongside the 'written' tradition. If the role of the storyteller is to represent the world, in order to represent it truly, he must include all the voices and articulate both traditions. In other words, the storyteller - in this case Rushdie - is performing the stories around him and drawing on multiple forms:

lyric, epic, films, everyday dialogue, old and new modes of writing, rhymes, dialects, which in turn move across cultures and times.

### **What is the Author: a Voice?**

Turning now to Rushdie's novel, we can observe that a closer reading reflects this feeling of distrust in any particular voice, pointing to the idea of 'voice' being ultimately linked to the idea of truth and lies, reality and fiction. More specifically, it is voice as issuing from the two main characters, Gibreel and Saladin, that these ideas are played out. Gibreel, an all-Indian actor playing films known as "theologicals," falls ill and although he recovers, a fact that is seen by all to be "an act of the supreme", he wakes up to find that he has lost his faith which is replaced, to his horror, by "a terrible emptiness, an isolation, as he realised he was talking to thin air" (SV 29). This cataclysmic event is the beginning of a struggle to find an identity and a truth in a world where words float around in the air, and to try to attribute them to someone or something concrete is problematic. Gibreel is suddenly thrust into a journey of rebirth, where he no longer "acts out" the voices of India but is forever engaged on a quest to find the one true voice, the one he can believe in and find himself again. Whose voice is this uncontrollably pouring out of him again "like sick?" (SV 123). The reader is forced to ponder, along with Gibreel, what the truth is and whether or not to trust in the voice he hears as revelation.

Gibreel trusts nothing, not even his dreams. In fact, he goes on to blame these for both his own and humanity's problems.

Mother-fucking dreams cause all of the trouble in the human race, movies, too, if I was God I'd cut the imagination right out of people and then maybe poor bastards like me could get a good night's rest. (SV 122)

Yet his dreams are trusted by other characters within the novel: Mahound, Ayesha, Mizra Saeed. Are they real or are they fictitious? They remind us of stories of historical characters but are these previous stories "real?" We are told that "fictions were walking around wherever he went [...] fictions masquerading as real human beings" (SV 192), which raises further questions: is Mahound a fiction? Is Allah? Is Gibreel? Is Shaitan? Who do we believe in? What is real? If everything is reversible,

dualistic, and can be turned on its head, does reality masquerade as fiction? Is this what it is all about?

Through the character of Gibreel we, the reader, become involved in this quest for finding truth, reality, as we follow him with questions about the nature of stories as they are revealed to him. If we read Gibreel's visions as "story" we find ourselves a path which leads to the realms of the not-to-be-trusted, into a clearly magical-fictional space. Gibreel's visions, we are told, are "serialised" as if they are part of an ongoing television drama that both he and the reader are waiting to see the what-happens-next part. These visions go by the name of night-sagas, or simply "narratives" and Gibreel finds some "more bearable than others" (*SV* 216) much like a child (adult or listener) would a fairy-story. He feels "almost pleased when the next narrative begins" and the mood changes again to "a nostalgic sort of tale, of a lost homeland" (*SV* 216) and he drifts into it much like a listener, following the words of the storyteller, drifts into believing the story as if it were truth. In fact, we find him constantly above the action of the narrative, viewing things from behind a lens or on the silver screen. He is distant, above events, as if he is not part of them. "Gibreel [is] the dreamer, whose point of view is sometimes that of the camera, sometimes that of the spectator" (*SV* 108). But where does this leave us?

The relationship that Gibreel has with the voices he hears reflects the way the reader interprets the text and the voices that he or she also hears. The narration is unreliable, Gibreel wondering himself, "what the hell is going on in my head?" (*SV* 83). He questions the truth of the things he sees and the people around him, not knowing whether they are dreams, visions or some sort of minor madness or worse, schizophrenia. Further on, Mahound questions his revelations on the mountain. Whose voice came into his own through the Angel Gibreel? He decides: "It was the Devil" (*SV* 123). It was he who "came to him in the guise of the Archangel, so that the verses he memorised, the ones he recited in the poetry tent, were not the real thing but its diabolic opposite, not godly but satanic" (*SV* 123). Is this the storyteller? Hence, the creation of the so-called "satanic verses", or at least so we think, until we hear more from Gibreel. Again, we see that the narrative dupes the duped. Gibreel tells us that:

[...] *it was me both times baba, me first, and second also me*. From my mouth both the statement and the repudiation, verses and converses, universes and reverses, the whole thing, and we all know how my mouth got worked. (SV 123)

But do we know how Gibreel's mouth got worked? He says, "this isn't my voice, it's a Voice" (SV 112). Once again, we are left with the questions, 'Was it the voice of the author? And who is the author? God? Rushdie? Or was it some kind of delusion or dream? And what does this imply for Mahound: is he making up the voices also?' It seems that if these verses are Satanic, and not authorial like God's word, then it is precisely in the character of Satan that we see the storyteller revealed.

Saladin hardly inspires our trust much more. He is "the man of a Thousand Voices and a Voice, "an actor, a pretender whose father claims "has made himself an imitator of non-existing men" (SV 60). Again, it is Saladin's shape-shifting instability which leads us to question whether our beliefs, and when and how we believe, are constant. Are we constants or do we shift and change according to our environment, according to the voices that surround us with their own calls for truth? Through Saladin we are led eventually to one of the fundamental cornerstones of belief: do we create ourselves or are we created? And of course, we are given a possible answer:

[...] a man who sets out to make himself up is taking on the Creator's role, according to one way of seeing things; he's unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of abominations. (SV 49)

Again, we question the voice. Who is this Creator? Is he the Devil, the mighty *Shaitan*? Saladin turns into him, or what looks like him. Not only has he "fallen from grace", but he metamorphoses before our eyes into a "demi-goat". What nature of creature is he, "a fucking Packy billy", a "Beelzebub?" (SV 163-67).<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the narrative, both characters are ironically played out against each other as each one assumes a particular role: the angel of darkness versus the

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<sup>21</sup> Again, as with Vargas Llosa, Rushdie points to the marginalisation of ethnic groups and our ability to 'demonise' them. In this sense he makes us question our beliefs about 'good' and 'evil' and the origins of our own moral codes.



angel of light; Shaitan versus Gibreel on their descent to what is later described as “Babylondon”. But are they really so dissimilar? Which one is good and which one is evil; which one true and which one false? It is suggested (by the author-God), that perhaps these characters are in fact “two fundamentally different types of self”, a pair of “conjoined opposites [...] each another man’s shadow” (SV 427).

Gibreel, for all his stage name and performances [...] has wished to remain, to a large degree, *continuous* – that is joined and arising from his past; that he chose neither near-fatal illness nor transmuting fall; that in point of fact, he fears above all things the altered states in which his dreams leak into, and overwhelm his waking self, making him the angelic Gibreel he has no desire to be; - so that his is a self which for our present purposes we may describe as ‘true’ [...] whereas Saladin Chamcha is a creature of *selected* discontinuities, a *willing* re-invention; his *preferred* revolt against history being what makes him, in our chosen idiom, ‘false’. (SV 427)

This passage reveals the idea that if we stay ‘true’ to our cultures, to where we belong, if we do not question and simply believe in the world as it presents itself within our own cultural bubble, then we will be like Gibreel: angelic, accepted, but potentially mad. For if we do this we ignore the wider world; we ignore our dreams and questions; we ignore what *exists* and also claims to be ‘true’ from what seems more and more like another world. However, Saladin, who re-invents himself, who changes, is deemed as ‘false’, a Satanic figure, but perhaps one who gains a certain freedom within himself. Saladin finds his own version of truth; nothing is revealed to him.

In Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, we can clearly see that it is this question of ‘authority’ and ‘truth’ versus ‘fiction’ and storytelling that is the debate at the heart of the novel. It is evident that Rushdie’s ‘story’ cannot lay claim to ‘truth’ in the end, because it rests between two different worlds where ‘truth’ means very different things. Returning to an idea I touched upon earlier, that of metaphor, we can thus see that the metaphoric is integral to Rushdie’s work. Here, it doubly represents not only story, but also the nature of the migrant. He makes us see how it is ‘translated’ by various people from various perspectives according to their individual histories. As Kelly Hewson points out, “the act of migration translates people. They enter the condition of metaphor and so look at the world more metaphorically”, which is also

as Rushdie explains, “part of the reason for the imagistic, metaphorical quality of his own writing.”<sup>22</sup> In this way he presents a world ‘translated’, and as we know, ‘translation’ always loses something, changes, and in effect, calls for interpreters and interpretations. From another point of view and returning for a moment to Benjamin, we see in the image of the migrant, of course, the storyteller as wanderer, leaving his homeland to collect, reinterpret and tell tales of what he finds out there.<sup>23</sup> But what then, of the reader-listener? How does he react to this travelling, displaced storyteller-creature who is spinning more and more tales of unknown lands?

### The Role of the Reader

In order to answer this let us consider the relations between story and responsibility for a moment from the perspective of the reader. As Umberto Eco suggests, we observe that:

[...] in a narrative text, the reader is forced to make choices all the time. Indeed, this obligation to choose is found even at the level of the individual sentence [and] whenever the speaker is about to end a sentence, we as readers or listeners make a bet (albeit unconsciously): we predict his or her choice, or anxiously wonder what choice will be made.<sup>24</sup>

But perhaps the paths we choose within the narrative, the metaphoric roads which the characters take, or the way the plot moves, is to some extent pre-conditioned in us, especially if we feel the story is familiar. For example, what if the story reminds us of a story we already know; a popular fairytale, a myth or other ‘well-known’ story, perhaps? Or the story could be following the lines of a well-known plot which might help us to ‘expect’ or ‘predict’ its outcomes. Eco goes on to argue that it is

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<sup>22</sup> Kelly Hewson, “Opening up the Universe a Little More: Salman Rushdie and the Migrant as Storyteller,” *Span* 29 (1989): 89. In fact, Kelly Hewson’s entire paper is centred around the idea of the migrant as storyteller which again, although from a different perspective, supports my reading of Rushdie as storyteller.

<sup>23</sup> Simona Sawhney actually argues that Satan himself is presented as a nomadic character in this text. She says that Satan becomes “an emblem for the wanderer or the migrant” which again links to this notion of storyteller. See, Simona Sawhney, “Satanic Choices: Poetry and Prophecy in Rushdie’s Novel,” *Twentieth Century Literature: Scholarly and Critical Journal* 45.3 (1999): 269.

<sup>24</sup> Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994) 6.

precisely this element of surprise, which stems directly from the plot taking a different path to the one we expected, that makes a story 'good'.

In Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, however, the 'familiar' story is (for some readers) not only one they recognise, but one that is in fact deemed 'sacred'. This is a story with special rules. It *cannot* be re-used, or changed, and is thus fixed or constant. This is a story which does not allow for interpretation. This is a story which is there to be believed. This story cannot be questioned; this story cannot be dreamed into another story; and yet, Rushdie has done precisely this. This so-called 'author' has re-used the story of how Mohammed received the Qur'anic verses via the Angel Gabriel, and has then set them down in stone and placed it into a fictional space. How then, can Rushdie be the author of a story that 'belongs' to someone else, namely, to the divine author, God? And thus, if he is not the author, then who is he? I want to suggest that part of the problem which derived from the placing of responsibility on Rushdie, and all that ensued regarding the *fatwa*, lies in the word 'author' being seen as synonymous with authority. The real problem about where to locate truth and fiction, blasphemy and freedom of speech, lies here.

If we see Rushdie as storyteller we might recognise that there is nothing new about what he has done; storytellers have re-used and re-told stories for thousands of years. In some ways, Rushdie's storytelling is in keeping with this tradition, one type of tradition, that is. But the difference is perhaps that now it is committed to writing, and leaves the space of 'voice', the story becomes more dangerous. Undeniably, to any reader familiar with the 'original' story, it is too close to have been 'made-up' from scratch. It is a story spawned from another story. It is a re-telling: a storyteller's tale. But what about Eco's element of surprise? The Western reader perhaps is unlikely to know what the *original* story said and likely to be encountering the story as 'new', whereas the reader educated in Islam is very unlikely to (and indeed did not) react positively to the 'surprising' changes in it. By writing these unsacred, satanic verses, he has profaned a 'sacred' story. As a result, his, this, unsacred, fictional novel further serves to heighten the dichotomy between truth and fiction, East and West, what can and cannot be said. His novel highlights this not only by its *having been written*, (in other words the blasphemy is complete)

but by its having been named after a text which has already been seen (by some) as a counter-discourse to the Qur'an: 'the satanic verses.'

In Simona Sawhney's reading of *The Satanic Verses* we are told that it is in fact "the very narration of the 'satanic verses' incident [which] becomes perhaps the text's most powerful strategy for questioning the authority and transmission of revealed words."<sup>25</sup> She claims that the main source of anxiety for the Islamic tradition, as well as for Muslim scholars, is "the incident's skilful subversion of the very phenomenon of revelation."<sup>26</sup> For it is in this very question of revelation and *where that revelation came from* (my emphasis) that the idea of truth-belief and fiction-fantasy resides. The clue to this, she finds, resides in the character of Gibreel, whom she sees as 'a figure of deference', a character who complies with the wishes of another. This brings us back to the role of the author and makes us wonder whose voice Gibreel is complying with. Whose voice is Mahound hearing? Is there a one, true voice, or do we blasphemously believe that "what is imagined as revelation is but the desire of the prophet?"<sup>27</sup> Are these words written in stone or can they be fluid like story? Is this the work of God or the Devil? In fact, this is not the only instance within Rushdie's book when the two types of self, angelic and Satanic, are brought into question; the angelic and the Satanic are constantly being interwoven into the text through the voices of many different characters. Are they part of the same thing?

It seems that the very themes and questions that Rushdie raises pertain ultimately to the question of Truth with a capital 'T'. Who is responsible for our beliefs in the nature of good and evil? Are we subject to cultural conditioning or do we make our own choices? Indeed, are these roles definite, unbending, unchanging, in need of no interpretation? What is diabolic and what angelic? Do we know what is definitively true and what is definitively false? "Is it possible that evil is never total, that its victory, no matter how overwhelming, is never absolute?" (SV 467). It seems as if Rushdie evades offering us a definitive answer, and instead, throws the question back to the reader. In other words, the question is not who we want to

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<sup>25</sup> Sawhney, 261.

<sup>26</sup> Sawhney, 261.

<sup>27</sup> Sawhney, 261.

believe but, rather, *how* we want to believe. What if evil is “not as far beneath our surfaces as we say it is – that, in fact, we fall towards it *naturally*, that it is *not against our natures*” (SV 427). Moreover, depending on how we interpret how and what ‘we’ are, then the question of evil belonging to ‘our’ nature is also problematic. Rushdie the storyteller is letting the story speak for itself. He is not giving definitive answers, but asking us questions that shake us and go beyond cultural and historical places, to the very the core of what it is to be human.

Following this logic, as William Arfin suggests, “the reader is also an inventor, or perhaps that it is the author *in a reader’s function* who creates; that rather than simply pulling strings in some rehearsed fashion, rather than actually becoming the grammatical (or writing) subject of his fictions, he is in fact subject to them.”<sup>28</sup> For a story to exist, the reader has to make it exist, or the author, pre-empting the reader, has to make it exist. This is the same sense in which God could not exist without our belief in him. But, whereas the idea is that God’s word is definitive and absolute (as long as we believe that his word is true), the author of a book begins with the premise that his word is a lie, a fiction, a story. Here is a place where multiple versions of truth can co-exist, a space for the voices of various different realities to co-exist along with their contradictions. In this sense, the author then is more like a ‘translator’ of his own fiction, a creator of a reality which in the end does not and *cannot* present itself as Truth. The author is thus more like a storyteller, telling us a story. His purpose is not to make us believe in it, for we do not need to believe; rather his purpose is to question, to make *us* question. This is Rushdie the Storyteller’s blasphemy: that it is the reader, in the end, who passes judgement. And it depends from which perspective we are questioning his questioning: in other words do we ‘interpret’ his novel from a godless or a God-fearing world? The reader asks: what is a book? He receives the answer, “a book is the product of a pact with the Devil” (SV 459). The reader asks: “what does a poet write?” The answer he receives is: “Verses” (SV 459). The author is much like Satan

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<sup>28</sup> William Arfin, “Reading the Reading of Metafiction: A Philological Approach,” *Reading Reading: Essays on the Theory and Practice of Reading*, ed. Andrew Bennett (Finland: University of Tampere, 1993) 143.

(the trickster, the opposite of truth), preferring to live under the invisible cloak of storyteller.

### The 'Real' Satanic Verses

The incident of 'the satanic verses', already largely controversial within Islam, serves as the backdrop to Rushdie's story-argument as it marks a crucial change in the Arab world when polytheism was pushed away and monotheism became the dominant world religion. How did 'the satanic verses' appear? How was Mohammed, if only temporarily, duped? Rushdie explains:

The story of the 'satanic verses' can be found, among other places in the canonical writings of the classical writer al-Tabari. He tells us that on one occasion the Prophet was given verses which seemed to accept the divinity of the three most popular pagan goddesses of Mecca, thus compromising Islam's rigid monotheism. Later he rejected those verses as being a trick of the devil – saying that Satan had appeared to him in the guise of the Archangel Gabriel and spoken 'satanic verses.'

Historians have long speculated about this incident, wondering if perhaps the nascent religion had been offered a sort of deal by the pagan authorities of the city, which was flirted with and then refused. I felt the story humanized the Prophet and therefore made him more accessible, more easily comprehensible to a modern reader, for whom the presence of doubt in a human mind, and human imperfections in a great man's personality, can only make that mind that personality, more attractive. Indeed, according to the traditions of the Prophet, even the Archangel Gabriel was understanding about the incident, assuring him that such things had befallen all the prophets, and that he need not worry about what had happened. It seems like the Archangel Gabriel, and the God in whose name he spoke, was rather more tolerant than some of those who presently affect to speak in the name of God.<sup>29</sup>

It does indeed seem that the angel was a lot more tolerant. However, as we might remember, it was this very act of *naming* that initially sparked all the controversy which led to what is now called 'The Rushdie Affair', for it primarily brought people's attention to the 'real' or 'first' satanic verses, which originally referred to the passage deleted by Mohammed. But the 'satanic verses' depicted in Rushdie's story are understood by literal-minded Islamic critics to be blasphemous because, as

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<sup>29</sup> Rushdie, *Step across This Line* 205.

Leonard Levy points out, they make Mohammed seem “self-seeking”.<sup>30</sup> Levy continues to say that “Muslims preferred to believe that the term ‘satanic verses’ stood for the Koran [Qur’an] generally, or as one said ‘Rushdie’s use of the name of the devil responsible for the fraud is intended to indicate that the whole Koran is fraudulent and Mohammed a mean impostor; not a question of the two verses spotted as such but all the 6,236 verses making up the entire book.’ In other words, the title is a *double entendre*.”<sup>31</sup>

John McLaren in his essay, “The Power of the Word”, reminds us that the “laws of libel, obscenity and blasphemy [...] are based on the proposition that words matter, that they can cause actual harm to individuals or society.”<sup>32</sup> However, he still deems it correct to continue to write and therefore use the verses, stating that this “defence of the freedom to write and publish must rest on the proposition that words can do actual good, that writing enlarges our freedom, our control over ourselves and our history.”<sup>33</sup> This is all very well, but one could argue that Rushdie goes a bit too far by challenging the words of dogma. Are not some words simply beyond our reach? What if there is a distinction between ‘satanic’ and ‘divine’ verses? Is there a need for any other writing at all when a ‘Final text’ and a ‘Final Author’ already exist?

Sophie Massé reminds us of the “primal single language, the original *Logos* which God literally spoke to the world.”<sup>34</sup> Between this language (according to a certain truth found in stories and text) and reality, as we saw it, there was a perfect congruence, which made language ‘transparent’, where truth could be seen as plainly as the light of day. But when this was lost at Babel “the original resemblance between words and objects was erased, thereby leaving an empty space”<sup>35</sup> (or so we thought, until ‘The Sacred Book’ arrived). For, in the idea of the sacred book the

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<sup>30</sup> Leonard W. Levy, *Blasphemy: Verbal Offense against the Sacred. From Moses to Salman Rushdie* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) 561.

<sup>31</sup> Levy, 561.

<sup>32</sup> John McLaren, “The Power of the Word: Salman Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses*,” *Westerly: Quarterly Review* 35.1 (1990): 61.

<sup>33</sup> McLaren, 61.

<sup>34</sup> Sophie Massé, “Language Versus Languages in *The Satanic Verses*,” *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 20.1 (1997): 72.

<sup>35</sup> Massé, 72.

truth is found; the words once again become transparent and reflect ultimate truth, ultimate reality. As Massé goes on to explain, “consequently, in this book, nothing is random, whereas such is the case in human or secular writing [and] this explains why to mutilate a single word [...] might imperil the tenuous links between fallen man and the divine presence.”<sup>36</sup>

It is only God who can claim total authority over his ‘word’: the voice of God is one and everything he says is truth. In fact, this line of reasoning leads us to deduce that all written texts (or all discourses that are not God’s word) are fictions or part-fictions whatever they claim to be, as no one text or discourse can presume to reflect reality and truth completely. A text that is presenting itself as a fiction is in fact more ‘truthful’ than some histories in that it is self-consciously aware of itself as not being ‘true’. However, if the world is a place where God’s truth is suddenly disputed and thrown into question, like that of the migrant who moves from a world where God exists to a Godless world, then God’s truth is one of many truths. And if the purpose of the novel is to reflect all the fictions or truths or stories the world has to offer, then the novel can be nothing but a place where multiple versions of truth can co-exist, along with their multiple contradictions. In this sense also, the author’s words (following Bakhtin) are not entirely his; but rather like a ventriloquist, he lets the story work through him.

What is interesting about the story that surrounds ‘the satanic verses’ is the fact that Mohammad was duped in the first place. Again, Satan reveals his nature as being able to tell lies, lies that are so powerful that they can present themselves as ‘truths’, as ‘the word of god’ himself. Curiously, this possibility of plagiarism of God’s word by Satan is perhaps the first defiant answer to at least five further instances in the Qur’an where God challenges mankind to ‘add a sura’ (verse). Of course, it is also made clear that this attempt would be impossible. Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, from this perspective, could thus be read simply as a continuation of Satan’s profane word. If all truth lies in God, then everything else, including story, must come from Satan: in other words it must be fiction; it must be lies. Already deemed to be ‘satanic’, these verses cannot claim to hold the key to truth. Not unless

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<sup>36</sup> Massé, 72.



the Devil is allowed back into heaven. Not unless the answer to Gibreel's question is: it is *his* words that count. In the novel, the authority of the author is thus put into question again by the idea of a scribe, who takes notes and changes the words of a questionable prophet, who in turn is quoting the words that he may or may not have heard correctly from a questionable angel, who in turn takes words from a voice that could be either holy, from God, or Satanic, from the devil. *The Satanic Verses*' quest to reveal itself as story therefore rests in the character of Satan. Satan is at once godly and human, a monstrous figure, a fallen angel, who by his very nature contests the word of God. In the novel it is Shaitan who uses rhetoric to perform realities; it is Shaitan who renders infelicitous discourses and shape-shifts into the narrator's role. However, yet again, the reader (depending on who that reader is) might know that this is not the first time that Satan tries to subvert the word of God.

*The Satanic Verses* is not a sacred book as its name implies, but a novel. Thus the very fact that Rushdie has chosen to name his novel after these verses not only gives us a vital clue to the way we are to 'read' this text, but also serves to provide the key to Rushdie's true intention. The 'satanic verses' incident is crucial to this idea of the sacred and the profane, the divine and the human. If the author really is a God-like figure and his words are set in stone, then the author becomes a version of the *Logos*, the Law or the ultimate word of truth. Rushdie seems to be questioning the authority of the author as a man 'translated', a man who lives in a world where constant 'metamorphoses' are happening between cultures and people and places and beliefs. But again, it is up to the reader which heaven or hell (s)he chooses to believe in, or equally, whether to believe in them at all. Through the scribe, Salman the Persian, he introduces the idea of the writer as a kind of heretic who takes on a God-like function in order to subvert the *Logos* and turn it on its head. Salman, to test Mahound's 'law', decides to write a different version of Mahound's/God's words: words that therefore become 'satanic'. How did he do it? What did he change?

Little things at first. If Mahound recited a verse in which God was described as *all-hearing, all-knowing*, I would write, *all-knowing, all-wise*. Here's the point: Mahound didn't notice the alterations. So

there I was, actually writing the Book, or re-writing, anyway,  
polluting the word of God with my own profane language. (SV 367)

By re-writing the 'satanic verses', Rushdie seems to suggest that it is the priestly tradition that creates the Author-God and sets things in stone. The 'satanic verses' incident is therefore crucial to this idea. What does this say about the fixity or indeed the reliability of words?

Sawhney reminds us of an old tradition which Arab writers based their work on, which "had little basis in historical accuracy and instead [relied] largely on gossip and myth."<sup>37</sup> She claims that Rushdie follows this tradition and does not take on any definitive, authorial-authoritarian role. Furthermore, she explains that the way this tradition worked often produced inconsistencies, contradictions and unreliabilities; in other words, the tradition was based on fluidity rather than on truth, fact, or the Law. Sawhney argues that it is precisely those modern commentators whose "demands for evidence and rational cogency, that are properly characteristic of the desire for a scientific, empirical history",<sup>38</sup> who are making a generic error when judging these traditions. For here history "has not yet emerged as distinct from legend and poetry" and is instead a fluid storytelling form and is not what it has now become, nothing but "an alien social science."<sup>39</sup>

Similarly Barthes's idea of a text as a multidimensional place, where the author is rather a 'translator' of other texts, is very relevant here. We tend to have a scientific image of causality, to 'translate' the world in terms of a monologic, linear narrative that proceeds from one thing to another. From a scientific viewpoint, therefore, it is as if the written words of Author-God translate into an absolute causality that is unchallengeable. In fact, the original texts were much more multifarious and were thus engaged with each other as if in dialogue. Writing, from this perspective, creates a dialogic space. It is involved in a battle of discourses. This happens not only within any one given text but within the written tradition itself.

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<sup>37</sup> Sawhney, 263.

<sup>38</sup> Sawhney, 263.

<sup>39</sup> Sawhney, 263.

## History, Story and Postmodernism

Anthony Close states, following Hobbes, that “we need to explain historical patterns in a way that is ‘intelligible in relation to conscious action’ even though this may not ‘issue from conscious action’” as this is the criterion by which “much of our modern literary theory is defective.”<sup>40</sup> But Rushdie is still an author and his voice is one amongst many and as such is open to interpretation. Indeed, it is precisely the question of interpretation which always leads us down evermore spiralling paths. Both Close and Christine Brooke-Rose offer a reading of Rushdie’s work taken from his own words as “a species of postmodernist novel which we may dub as ‘palimpsest history’.”<sup>41</sup> If palimpsest is, according to dictionary definition, “a manuscript on which two or more successive texts have been written, each one being erased to make room for the next”,<sup>42</sup> then this is the spirit of Rushdie’s fiction, the spirit in which he wrote *The Satanic Verses*. In this sense, *The Satanic Verses* becomes the place where “two palimpsest countries, India and England, and one palimpsest religion, Islam”<sup>43</sup> are re-discussed and interpreted albeit under the guise of a novel.

For Rushdie the storyteller, his story is there to contest divine history with story and yet for the Imam (dreamt by Gibreel-Mahound-Rushdie-God?), it is history which is contested.

History is the blood-wine that must no longer be drunk. History the intoxicant, the creation and possession of the Devil, of the great Shaitan [...] History is a deviation from the Path. Knowledge is a delusion, because the sum of knowledge was complete the day Allah finished his revelation to Mahound. (SV 210)

Again the Devil creeps his way into the narrative, taking over not only story, but also history, which arguably, again finds its roots in ‘story’. If “history is itself a fiction”<sup>44</sup> then the novel is as much a continuing version of history as it is of story,

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<sup>40</sup> Anthony Close, “The Empirical Author: Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*,” *Philosophy and Literature* 14.2 (1990): 248.

<sup>41</sup> Close, 248.

<sup>42</sup> Hanks, Patrick. Ed. *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*. London and Glasgow: Collins, 1979.

<sup>43</sup> Christine Brooke-Rose, “Palimpsest History,” *Umberto Eco: Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 126.

<sup>44</sup> Brooke-Rose, 125.

fiction, and the writer is a continuing version of author as opposed to one definitive author. From this perspective, Rushdie is a (hi)storyteller and his material is the very stuff of (hi)story itself. Therefore, he can borrow and re-write, or over-write any particular version of (hi)story he likes.

If Rushdie wants to over-write history with story, to where history itself is already written out by Allah's revelation to Mahound, Rushdie must then write out Allah's revelation to Mahound in order to assert his power to gain back the authority to keep writing stories. In this sense, Rushdie's novel is a plea for imaginative freedom. He cannot write out the words of the Qur'an and he does not want to. The Qur'an exists, it has been written into existence and cannot and will not be denied. It is there to be believed in and followed as an individual choice. More specifically, what the novel is claiming is the right to exist alongside the Qur'an, to be allowed to talk, to imagine, and to reinterpret 'present' history-historical time through story-storytime. It is arguing for the right of history and story to co-exist. Rushdie the storyteller thus assumes a dialogic relationship with the Qur'an by re-using and re-interpreting the satanic verses as story. Indeed, the impetus of Rushdie's use of the verses says as much.

Returning now to my initial questions: *Who is the author? Is he the storyteller?* As I have pointed out, the answer lies in our understanding of their roles. My interpretation serves to emphasise this point: the meaning of any story ultimately lies in the interpretation of it. The reader has the power over interpretation and the storyteller has control over his telling. Of course, this is not to dispute the storyteller's power of persuasion; he can have clear intentions in the telling of his story(ies). What I am arguing for is not a death of the author *per se*, but a shift from author to storyteller. This allows us to see the writing not as something fixed and unbending, but as more fluid like speech, allowing the boundaries between history and story, reality and fiction to blur, to become looser. Salman the scribe is thus no authority, but neither are Mahound's words (easily changeable) nor those of the other potential authors Gibreel, God, Shaitan. In this sense, Sawhney's reading of the novel seems particularly apt:

But the text also makes a larger claim: it seems to say that perhaps all verses could be satanic and that literature itself is migrant, not only because it wanders wantonly from reader to reader, but also because it does not derive authority from its source or origin.<sup>45</sup>

In this sense, Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, takes its authority from Satan as storyteller. It does not present itself as truth, but rather celebrates its own fictionality and lies or inventiveness. It is not claiming to be God's word, or to derive its truth from any other authority than stories themselves. The tradition of storytelling and that of the storyteller thus follows the original storyteller-Satan, not the original author-God. Rushdie is merely writing what he sees as a version of reality and is working within the space of a fictional text:

At the centre of the storm stands a novel, a work of fiction, one that aspires to the condition of literature. It has often seemed to me that people on all sides of the argument have lost sight of this simple fact. *The Satanic Verses* has been described, and treated, as a work of bad history, as an anti-religious pamphlet, as the product of an international capitalist-Jewish conspiracy, as an act of murder ('he has murdered our hearts'), as the product of a person comparable to Hitler or Attila the Hun. It felt impossible, amidst such a hubbub to insist on the fictionality of fiction.<sup>46</sup>

Rushdie insists that it is the fictionality of fiction which serves as the foundation-stone in his defence of the novel in the wake of 'The Rushdie Affair' and we, as literary critics, would do well to observe this. Indeed, it is this communal 'we' held under the label 'critic' who are the key interpreters of the storyteller's story and hold part of the responsibility for its reception in the world. The storyteller, as always aware of his audience, knows who he has to seduce, or even bow down to:

So here it is once more [...] the death of the Novel. [...] The death of the Author having been announced [...] and the death of Tragedy. [...] that leaves the stage strewn with more bodies than the end of *Hamlet*.

Still standing in the midst of the carnage, however, is a lone, commanding figure, a veritable Fortinbras, before whom all of us, writers of authorless texts, post-literate readers, the House of Usher

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<sup>45</sup> Sawhney, 267.

<sup>46</sup> Rushdie, *Homelands* 393.

that is the publishing industry [...] and indeed books themselves, must bow our heads: viz., naturally, the Critic.<sup>47</sup>

In conclusion then, *The Satanic Verses* is a novel engaged in a battle between history and story, truth and lies, the divine and the profane, closed and open, monologic and dialogic. In this sense, it moves towards what Bakhtin calls the 'polyphonic novel', in that within it exists "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses [...] with equal rights and each with its own world."<sup>48</sup> Rushdie is returning to an idea of history which is closer to story and an idea of the writer which is in fact closer to storyteller. He denounces the authority of an author-god, preferring instead to speak in the voice of a Storyteller-Satan. He is rebellious, presenting us with multiple truths and multiple voices. From this vantage point, Rushdie allows us to see a wholly (holy?) different reality, one where truth can be contained in the lines of fiction, where demarcation lines do not exist and where belief hovers above our heads like a question mark. Moreover, if history and story are contained in one another, are hard to separate, then truth and fiction must surely follow suit.

Looking back at the various ideas in this argument, I hope to have shown that Rushdie's fiction presents a version of reality holding multiple truths. By going beyond the borders of what is accepted as *Logos* or truth; by reversing realities and turning them upside down; by choosing infelicitous discourses and identifying with the storyteller rather than the author, with Satan rather than God, Rushdie presents a world which lives in what has long been known as the 'postmodern condition'. As Patricia Waugh states:

'Postmodernism' as a concept has emphatically spilled out of the boundaries of literary critical debate [but] it still carries with it, wherever it goes, the idea of 'telling stories.' But the stories are now indistinguishable from what was once assumed to be knowledge: scientific 'truth', ethics, law, history.<sup>49</sup>

*The Satanic Verses* is characteristic of this condition in its self-conscious questioning of the nature of religion, individual, truth, history, ontology and dogma.

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<sup>47</sup> Rushdie, *Step Across* 55.

<sup>48</sup> Bakhtin, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London, New York: Edward Arnold, 1992) 1.

In a world where “‘truth’ cannot be distinguished from ‘fiction’”, it goes without saying that “the aesthetic has incorporated all”,<sup>50</sup> even when this ‘all’ happens to include the ultimate ‘truth’, the word of God. Based on these fictional, fabulative premises of “questioning” and “re-imagining”,<sup>51</sup> *The Satanic Verses* offers a view of the world which is just as real as any other and Rushdie’s desire to produce ‘an objective reality’ has thus succeeded. For some, however, not all things can be re-imagined or even questioned. It is precisely because Rushdie has gone beyond what is normally accepted as sacred that his questioning has itself been questioned and abhorred. Are his words Satanic? Are his words divine? As he says himself, “Of course I did it on purpose. The question is [...] what is ‘it’ that I did?”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Waugh, *Postmodernism* 6.

<sup>51</sup> Rushdie, *Homelands* 395.

<sup>52</sup> Rushdie, *Homelands* 410.

## STORYTELLER AS ORATOR

### Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. [...] even the reader of a poem is ready to utter the words, for the benefit of the listener.

Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 100.

Whenever real storytelling takes place, an essential human freedom exists.

Kroeber, *Retelling* 4.

In this chapter, my focus is on the oral versus the written word, an opposition implicit in all the texts looked at thus far. The relationship between the oral word of the storyteller and the written word of the author marks one of the fundamental differences between the storyteller and the author. In this thesis I have not been arguing that the return of the storyteller in literature is an attempt to reproduce or replicate the oral word, but rather that it is a way of recognising that the oral word carried through the oral storytelling tradition, still informs 'literature'. In the next chapter on John Barth, I will show how Barth's idea of postmodern literature as a literature of 'replenishment' moves away from the purely 'literary' tradition to source its stories, and his use of *The Arabian Nights* further emphasises the links between traditions, revealing the novelist to be a descendant of the storyteller. Similarly, Mario Vargas Llosa, by evoking the many storytellers of past traditions and by attempting to include orally derived narratives in the storyteller's narratives, again stresses this relationship between the two traditions. Finally, as I argued in chapter two, in Crace's *The Gift of Stones*, both the storyteller and his daughter are presented as telling their stories orally.

In this chapter, I approach Salman Rushdie again to consider the storyteller as an embodied, speaking person. In reading *The Satanic Verses*, I showed that Rushdie evoked the storyteller through the character of Satan who followed the



tradition of storytelling which he saw as a form of lies or 'fiction'. However, as I noted in that chapter, albeit sketchily, the interpretation of Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* and its insistence on its 'fictionality', was overlooked in the wake of what came to be known as the "Rushdie Affair". One of the main reasons for reading *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990)<sup>1</sup> here is that it was written and published during the period when Rushdie remained in hiding, under the protection of the British Government. A hunted man and curiously echoing the plight of Scheherazade, Rushdie also began to story-tell for survival. However, the story he produced did not receive even a third of the critical attention of his previous novels. I believe one of the main reasons for this is that it was partly a 'story in disguise'. Hiding behind the guise of a children's storybook, Rushdie was shouting out a powerful message, one that the critics, the public, and the world in general, had failed to take heed of: Rushdie was speaking out for the survival of 'the storyteller', the storyteller as personified in himself and in all writers and tellers of fictions anywhere in the world.

It is from this vantage point that I approach my reading of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. I view the text as Rushdie's reply to the reception of *The Satanic Verses*, which was not read through the 'storyteller', but through the 'author'. Although the novelist can never truly speak to us directly but only through the fictional text, what he can do is create the illusion of such intimate speech. By re-creating the storyteller in the text he brings voice, performance and orality back into literature. Moreover, he reinforces his message that it is the storyteller with whom he identifies. We have already examined several novels which have specifically told the story of a storyteller and led us to reflect on the relationship between the storyteller and the author. However, in this chapter, the story of the storyteller sends out a more powerful and urgent message. Rarely, does a writer or a novel achieve such publicity and so, like it or not, Rushdie has become the mouthpiece for defending and voicing

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<sup>1</sup> Rushdie, Salman. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. London: Granta, 1990. All subsequent in-text quotations in this chapter are taken from this edition and will appear in the text in the abbreviated form *H*, followed by the page number. I will refer to the novel in text using the shortened title *Haroun*.

the question of what literature is, and its role and function on the global stage. As representative for the international writing community, Rushdie received numerous indications of support in the form of letters, newspaper articles from writers all around the world. In this sense, Rushdie's reply, after a few years of hiding and silence, is highly significant, and could be seen as an oration, a message disguised in the form of a children's fairy-tale to a specific, as well as general, audience.<sup>2</sup>

The way I propose to approach this idea, is by investigating two aspects of Rushdie's *Haroun*, both of which focus on how it links to the oral world of storytelling and to the oral rather than to the written tradition. The first aspect arises because the book is not a novel, but rather a 'storybook' that is marketed for a younger audience. My point of departure here is how the book lends itself to be 'read aloud' by a parent to a child. By locating the storyteller in the very person of the parent-storyteller and by mirroring this in the subject of the story itself, Rushdie provides a powerful message that teaches both adult and child about the power of stories, reinforcing his broader message about the status and role of storytelling (literature) in the wider community. But Rushdie also performs another storytelling trick: disguised within the numerous layers of Rushdie's *Haroun*, the storyteller also becomes orator, speaking through the voices of every parent reading the story to their children, (poignantly an activity not open to Rushdie when he wrote the book). *Haroun* can be read as a compelling response to the implications of the *fatwa* which effectively tried to silence him through his bodily incarceration.

The second aspect I investigate in this chapter is the book's relationship to the storyteller as a live performer who is telling his tales to a real audience. I show how Rushdie has borrowed techniques from the storytellers of the *Nights* and in this sense, follows a similar tradition to Barth. However, Rushdie's appropriation of the *Nights* has a different origin to Barth's. His use of the *Nights* in *Haroun* is to tell a deeply personal story. Unlike Barth, whose storytelling for survival is more so an existential motif, Rushdie's was literal fact. By connecting his situation to that of

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<sup>2</sup> I draw part of this argument from a paper by Clara Clairborne Park, who makes a link between John Milton's *Aeropagitica* and Rushdie's *Haroun*. See, Park, Clara Clairborne. "Horse and Sea-Horse: *Aeropagitica* and the Sea of Stories." *AAS (New York)* 46.3 (1993): 451-70.

Scheherazade, Rushdie reinforces the necessity and power of stories and the storyteller in the modern world. In *Haroun*, Rushdie was able to bring the storyteller back to life, to take him off the page and throw him back into the world, whilst still speaking and performing miraculously through the medium of print.

Finally, as I pointed out in the introduction, the notion of orality in the storyteller has been associated with postcolonial literatures and has mostly been directed to novels which come out of cultures whose people still have an active oral tradition. I want to show how this element of 'orality' is actually also present in first world literatures. Rushdie's position between East and West makes him a crucial figure in my study for, more than any other writer, he makes explicit the mixing of oral and written traditions.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as a 'hybrid' mode, his writing also breaches the gap between 'postcolonial' and/or indigenous or minority literature and 'western' literary traditions. Rushdie's fiction opens up key themes that have preoccupied contemporary writers since: hybridity, authority, replenishment and sources of literature and the democracy of storyteller. More broadly, however, in terms of my wider argument, I hope to show that this focus on orality and storytelling is yet another aspect of the way in which we see the storyteller returning to contemporary fiction.

### **Children's Fairy-Tales**

From the very first pages of Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, the reader led by the young-hero Haroun, is invited to follow the narrative's numerous story threads and search for clues to two perplexing questions: "Where do all these stories come from?" and "What is the point of stories that aren't even true?" The reason Haroun asks, is because his father, Rashid Khalifa, is a storyteller by profession and his life has been constantly surrounded by stories. Haroun wonders what the sources of stories are, deciding that "they can't just come out of thin air?" However, the story is set into motion when Rashid, a legendary storyteller who "was so often on stage that he lost track of what was going on at home" (*H* 16), loses his wife to another man, who stands for the very opposite of the fiction-creating Rashid: facts.

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<sup>3</sup> See, Rushdie, *Homelands*. Rushdie talks about his drawing on both 'oral storytelling' and written traditions specifically here.

Mr. Sengupta is an office clerk, a man who "has no imagination at all", and unlike Rashid, whose "brain is not full of make-believe, so there is no room for facts" (*H* 20) knows that "life is a serious business" and not "a storybook or joke shop" (*H* 21). Haroun is not only searching for the origins of story, but is also forced to question the storyteller's role and the truth or reality of fictions.<sup>4</sup>

The story borrows from fairy-tale structures and becomes a type of quest narrative, with Haroun stepping into the role of hero. Rashid, as a result of his wife's departure, loses his ability to storytell and so Haroun, in an attempt to answer his questions and return to his father his ability to tell stories, embarks on journey which begins with the appearance of a curious Water Genie. Iff, the Water Genie, has come to disconnect Rashid from the story source, the "Ocean of the Streams of Story", which, as it is in liquid form, Rashid has been accessing via a 'story tap'. Haroun, driven by the 'Iff', that the genie personifies, steals the Disconnecter Tool before it can disconnect it, and turn off his father's storytelling abilities forever. He then encounters a Hoopoe, a magical bird called Butt, who in bringing together the two words "if and but" creates the circumstances for Haroun to enter into the world of story. It is from this starting point that both the reader and Haroun might find the answers to both of his questions.

In the fairy-tale, Haroun learns more about the nature and source of stories. He learns that stories do not simply come from the mind of an individual person, nor do they begin and end in the lines of a book, but they come from a more fluid place, a great sea, the "Ocean of the streams of story." And it is precisely because "all stories were held there in fluid form [that] they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and so become yet other stories; so that unlike a library of books the Ocean of the Streams of Story was much more a storeroom of yarns. It was not dead but alive" (*H* 72). Rushdie's metaphor for the sources of stories is not inconsequential of course: he seems to be saying that books and the written tradition are actually synonymous with dead stories: stories that are fixed in the reality of the written word and cannot be

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<sup>4</sup> As I mentioned this situation mirrors real life for Rushdie at the time. He was a storyteller, who by telling stories that 'weren't true', lost not only the ability to tell stories, but also, poignantly, to be with his son.

changed. We might want to read between the lines here and question which 'book(s)' he is talking about.<sup>5</sup> But if dead stories are to be found in libraries where the authority of the written word and written tradition fixes them into stone, then where are the living stories to be found?

The fluidity of the ocean gives us a clue: stories are more likely to live if they also have one foot in the oral tradition and the oral world. In fact, the oral world allows for change and adaptability; therefore, it is appropriate that Haroun's father is a storyteller not an author. Stories do not come from an authoritative author, as in the written tradition, but they come from a storyteller, and the oral tradition. Thus, at the end of the novel we learn that Haroun's story becomes the story we are reading: *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is the story Haroun's father tells of Haroun trying to save his father's storytelling abilities. As Dean Flower aptly says, "what the story is really about is the story",<sup>6</sup> which links to the theme of *The Arabian Nights* and also to the frame-stories that John Barth uses in *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (examined in the next chapter). But the story does not become a story for no reason: its wider purpose, as in the frame story of the *Nights*, is to answer Haroun's second question: "what's the point of stories that aren't even true?" The point is that that storytelling has the ability to save: stories save Haroun's father Rashid from losing his gift of storytelling, and they may even save Rushdie who was trying at this moment to save his own very real neck. The wider implication is that stories have the ability to save the world and release it from different kinds of oppression and that to be silenced is to lose the ability to tell our stories, which whether true or not, would be catastrophic. Marketed as a children's story, but one that can also be read by adults, either alone or to children, Rushdie's message or "lesson" reaches the whole of society.

### **Reading Aloud and the Parent-Storyteller**

Oral storytelling is immediately flagged up in that the novel is classed as a 'fairy-tale' or a story for children. Aside from the fact that the fairy-tale is associated with

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<sup>5</sup> We might remember *The Satanic Verses* at this juncture.

<sup>6</sup> Dean Flower, "Not Waving but Drowning," *The Hudson Review* 44.2 (1991 Summer): 319.

an oral tradition (as opposed to the literary one), what is also inherent in the fairy-tale and/or children's story is that it calls to be 'read aloud' by a parent to a child, more often than not at bed-time. Although reading aloud is not necessarily the only way to read *Haroun*, its investigation in these terms leads to some useful insights into Rushdie's use of speech and oral storytelling techniques.

As a modern 'fairy-story' written for children, the novel might seem to be irrelevant to the concerns of adult readers. However, there are a number of reasons why Rushdie meant it very specifically to be read by *both* adults and children, and that it was to be read *collaboratively*. Firstly, Rushdie serves to remind us of the fairy-tale storytellers that we imagine from the past. We saw in the introduction that the romantic imagination often presents tellers of fairy-tales as old women that sit by the fire spinning yarns. Although one may imagine the oral tradition in this representation to have largely disappeared, it still continues, albeit in a disguised form, in the bedtime stories that adults read to children, especially those that have a "lesson" to teach them. However, it is not only the fact that the book is marketed as a children's story which calls for it to be read aloud. Writing may not be able to reproduce oral storytelling, but it can be written to aid the reading aloud storytelling performance. This is particularly apparent in children's stories. As children are often learning to read, it helps them to read aloud and mouth the words with the parent. Rushdie's fairy-story thus aids this process in numerous ways.

For example, in the act of reading, the storyteller-parent might use his or her voice for emphasis, for intonation, tone and even to act out or differentiate between the speech of various characters. The character of Haroun might be thus 'read out' mimicking a child's voice, whereas of course, his father might take on a deeper, more authoritative voice and so on. Another possibility would be that the text was read together by both parent and child. The parent might encourage the child to read along, or to read out certain parts, with which the child might identify. This mimics 'real storytelling', as the audience often knows the tale due to its constant repetitions. *Haroun* is about a young boy and his father and about the nature of storytelling; cleverly, Rushdie has made sure that the roles are already mapped out for parent and child to find identifications. Whether or not this is done by voicing

and performing these roles together, which would make the experience even more powerful, or by other kinds of shared reading, there is a pedagogic function and a lesson in the collaborative reading experience both for and between parent and child. In this sense, Rushdie's novel becomes an instruction book for the parent-storyteller and the child. In both its themes, and its content, it guides them both on how to tell stories, encouraging them to continue this tradition for themselves. On yet another level, this collaborative storytelling experience is part of the tradition of oral tales, particularly fairy-tales and folktales that are not only told communally, but are often told together.

By turning the parent-reader into a storyteller who acts as a medium for the story performance, the author becomes ever more distant. The juxtaposition between the voiced text of the storyteller and listener, and silent reading, reinforces the distance between reader and author, creating the absence that Derrida points out is a necessary consequence of writing. Reading aloud thus cheats writing out of absence, by acting out presence. The storyteller may not have written the words, but his speaking them into existence, allows him or her to own them if only in the moment of performance. Thus, another aspect of the reading aloud experience of the novel might prompt the parent to perform and read in such a way as to bring the story 'alive'. The act of reading then becomes a storytelling performance just as the reader becomes the storyteller.

It could be argued that Rushdie's use of language in the novel also cries out to be read aloud as opposed to being read silently. For example, the text is littered with unusual instances of capitalisation not tied to proper nouns. By breaking the rules of writing, Rushdie creates the overall effect of reinforcing speech. Capitalisation seems to emphasize meanings almost as if the words are meant to be stressed in a certain way if spoken. [e.g. *The Unthinkable Thing* (*H* 26); *Different Sort of Thrill* (*H* 36); *Middle of Nowhere* (*H* 68) etc.] It seems as if this use of capitalisation is meant for the reader who reads aloud, the reader-storyteller. Furthermore, the text is littered with a plethora of onomatopoeic words, rhymes and jingles, which all reinforce the oral word. The idea of speech, chatter and "excessive talk in general" (*H* 84), is reflected in the very names of numerous characters within

the novel. For example, 'The Plentimaw Fishes,' who live in the 'Great Story Sea,' have mouths (maws) all over their bodies, mouths which are "constantly at work sucking in story streams and blowing them out again; pausing only to speak" (H 84). The names of Princess Batcheat and Prince Bolo stand for 'chit-chat' and 'speak.' The young heroine who helps Haroun is called Blabbermouth. The Land of Gup, which Haroun travels to when his adventure begins, stands for 'gossip', 'nonsense' or 'fib'. Rashid Khalifa Haroun's father, a storyteller by occupation, goes by the names of "The Ocean of Notions" and "The Shah of Blah" and when his wife runs off with the office clerk, he loses his 'Gift of the Gab'.

Another example of this focus on orality and speech is in Rushdie's constant and consistent references to it. His use of verbs describing different types of speech is numerous. Characters are constantly in the process of: speaking, yelling, yodelling, quarrelling, arguing, chattering, moaning, hissing, reciting, chortling, snorting, muttering, or even harrumphing. The Plentimaw fishes who "always go in twos" and "are faithful partners for life", express their "perfect union" by speaking "only and always in rhyme" (H 85). Princess Batcheat is noted for her singing, albeit through her "horrible voice" (H 186). Examples of onomatopoeic words include: "Phoo!" (H 47), "Ka-bam, Ka-blooe-y-ka-patt!" (H 74), "hic, cough" (H 122). Clichés include: "it's raining cats and dogs," "frozen like statutes," and "as large as life" (H 207-10). The list is endless.

According to Ong, the oral world is "highly polarised and agonistic"; it is "a world of good and evil, virtue and vice, villains and heroes."<sup>7</sup> Reading Rushdie's novel we find ourselves also to be situated within these worlds. The ideas of right and wrong, good and evil, satanic and divine, are again as in *The Satanic Verses* implicitly reflected in *Haroun*. Yet again, both the child's world and the oral world are implicit in this. The sad city where the Khalifas live eventually becomes happy and the story, which starts off with disappointment and unhappiness, turns out to have a happy ending. The two Lands that Haroun visits, the 'Land of Gup', which lives in perpetual light, and the 'Land of Chup', which lives in perpetual darkness, are the lands of 'gossip' and 'quiet'. The heroes, Haroun, Rashid, and all the

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<sup>7</sup> Ong, 45.



characters and armies from the land of Gup are fighting a war, “a war between Love (of the Ocean, or the Princess) and Death (which was what Khattam-Shud had in mind for the Ocean and for the Princess too)” (H 125). For Khattam-Shud, “the Cultmaster of Bezaban” (without-a tongue), “is the Arch-Enemy of all stories, even of Language himself. He is the Prince of Silence and the Foe of Speech” (H 79) and his very name means ‘completely finished,’ ‘over and done with,’ ‘the end’. His army comprises Shadow Warriors whose eyes “instead of whites [...] had blacks” and whose “irises were grey as twilight and the pupils were white as milk” (H 125).

Personification is yet another way that Rushdie makes the book come alive. General Kitab (his name means book) is in charge of the Army or “Library” of Chup, whose “Pages are organised into Chapters and Volumes. Each Volume is headed by a Front, or Title Page” (H 88). According to Ong, “texts assimilate utterance to the human body. They introduce a feeling for ‘headings’ in accumulations of knowledge [...] Pages not only have ‘heads’ but also ‘feet’ for footnotes. References are given to what is ‘above’ and ‘below’ in a text when what is meant is several pages back or further on [...]. All this is quite a different world of order from anything in the oral sensibility, which has no way of operating with ‘headings’ or verbal linearity.”<sup>8</sup> This personification of the book into actual characters reinforces the fact that words can jump from the page and become embodied. This embodiment of the book, its chapters and volumes, points to the oral word and to the embodiment of the storyteller who is telling it. Moreover, it points to each teller who retells it again in the act of reading.

Thus, as a direct consequence of reading aloud the reader disappears or, if not, shape-shifts into someone else. From a solitary reader reading a text with an absent author, the reader becomes like the storyteller, addressing the story to a listener and thus an audience. Just as absence is a consequence of writing, presence, therefore, is a consequence of speech. Reading aloud indicates the necessary *presence* of a speaker, a voice, and because we do not usually speak stories to ourselves, this implies an audience, the listener(s). In this sense then, it could be

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<sup>8</sup> Ong, 100.

argued that if the novel is read aloud, the parent is taking on the role of storyteller. In fact, the story of the novel mirrors this perfectly, as Pierre Durix points out:

As in many traditional oriental tales, the initial plot involves the thematization of the essential poles of an oral performance with the teller (Rashid) and the listener (Haroun).<sup>9</sup>

Like Rashid, the storyteller in the novel, the parent is telling the child the story about storytelling and teaching them something about the natures of stories and tradition along the way. As speech is dialogic, so the reading aloud of the text to a child allows the text to become a dialogue between the story and the readers (storytellers and listeners), but also promotes a dialogue between the storyteller and listener who re-creates it.

Being present also has repercussions on experience which are linked to memory. Unlike the real experience of reading aloud that the parent and child might be sharing in the reading of *Haroun*, Rushdie could not be physically present to read to his son as he was in hiding following the very real death-threat imposed by the *fatwa*. Rushdie's focus on storytelling as an oral experience to be shared, and his choice of the father of the young boy Haroun as a storyteller rather than a writer, could point in one sense to Rushdie's attempt to reconcile his own physical absence from his son. Although Rushdie could not overcome this absence, his focus on speech and orality and the storytelling between a young boy and his father reinforces his presence, and returns to his son his lost voice from far away. Writing offered him a medium to send a message to his son and he used his skills as a writer to recreate an oral storytelling experience, so that his presence might more palpably be felt through the words of the storyteller.

Taken that *Haroun* is read aloud, the parent and the child's experience of the novel becomes both oral (as in related to speech) and aural (as in related to the ear) and this changes the way it is both read and experienced. Reading aloud to a child (or children) makes it both an oral and communal experience. This communality of experience links primarily to the oral storytelling tradition: to fairytales and their

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<sup>9</sup> Jean-Pierre Durix, "'The Gardener of Stories': Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 28.1 (1993): 117.

storytellers, to grandmothers and fireplaces, and Old Mother Goose. However, it also links to the archetypal storyteller that Walter Benjamin evokes, one who lives in a communicative, communal and experiential world. The child's experience of hearing a story is very different from reading one, which is a more solitary, internalised and individual experience. The silently read book is an escape into imagination and a loss of self, whereas the story-performance is physical, spatial, temporal and shared. This communal and sharing experience that orality and speaking provides is, in fact, linked both to Rushdie's own childhood and to his situation when writing the novel.

The novel was written for his son Zafar, for as Rushdie says, "I had to keep this promise to Zafar because it was the only thing I *could* keep to him [...]. There's no more absolute thing than a promise to your child."<sup>10</sup> Yet the novel becomes more than a story for Zafar. It is published and read by many people, potentially even many parents of children around the world. Returning to the parent-child storytelling experience, we can clearly see another interesting parallel: the adult parent aware of Rushdie's situation when reading *Haroun* might be more inclined to empathise with Rushdie's predicament, as unlike Rushdie, they would be aware whilst engaged in the act of reading of the fact that they are physically present, reading to their own child. Because they *can* read to their child and Rushdie cannot, the act of reading the novel prompts them to engage in the larger issue that led to Rushdie's ten-year hiding in the first place.

Therefore, whether or not her or she knows much about the facts surrounding what has come to be known as "The Rushdie Affair," the adult reader, in the act of translating the real story to his/her own child, might be led to recognise Rushdie's underlying fight for his rights to "Freedom of Speech". Every parent reading this out to a child, or indeed, anyone reading the story, thus becomes part of what one critic has described as Rushdie's "script of liberation".<sup>11</sup> By reading the novel, by speaking out the words, the reader becomes an accomplice in Rushdie's call for freedom. In a curious mix of the modern day speaker, "Speaker's Corner" style, and

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<sup>10</sup> Park, 453.

<sup>11</sup> Janet Mason Ellerby, "Fiction under Siege: Rushdie's Quest for Narrative Emancipation in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 22.2 (1998): 215.

the traditional storyteller, the reader comes to speak out the truth through the medium of story. Rushdie's novel is multilayered, but written to reach everyone. From both the child's reading, to that of the most erudite critic, Rushdie's message is clear: storytelling can not be banished and the storyteller can never be killed. If this were to happen, if we follow the story of *Haroun*, we would see 'the end' (personified in the character of "Khattum Shud") of all our liberties; the world would turn on its head and all would be darkness. Rushdie's story seems to shout out from between the pages the message that the storyteller must live. In this way Rushdie's *Haroun* "can be read not only as a children's story but as a politically subversive narrative of resistance."<sup>12</sup>

### Family Storytelling Traditions

Rushdie once informed an interviewer that his parents were great storytellers, his mother as a keeper of family stories and his father as a teller of serial tales generously using material from the storehouse of *The Arabian Nights*.<sup>13</sup> As Indian languages in particular have strong connections to oral storytelling traditions, this is hardly surprising. In fact, Rushdie has made explicit in numerous places the direct influence on him of oral storytelling traditions, admitting that his novels do directly borrow from oral forms. As one critic has pointed out, "the greatest influence of all on him seems to be that of his own ears: he is a lover of gossip, a trait he likely inherited from his mother, the keeper of 'family' stories."<sup>14</sup> Consequently, Rushdie's writing does reflect this influence from listening as opposed to reading stories.

In *Haroun* the focus on oral modes as opposed to purely written ones, reveals itself in a number of different ways: *Haroun* works as a fairy-tale to be read out for children and an oration addressed through story to the world on the "Freedom of Speech". In each sense, there is a focus on the fact that it is a tale told by a storyteller to a listening audience. This does not mean to say that *Haroun* does not use written sources. On the contrary, it has been noted by various critics that *Haroun*

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<sup>12</sup> Ellerby, 212.

<sup>13</sup> Syed Amanuddin, "The Novels of Salman Rushdie: Mediated Reality as Fantasy," *World Literature Today* 63.1 (1989): 42.

<sup>14</sup> Amanuddin, 42.

is highly inter-textual, borrowing from both Eastern and Western, oral and literary traditions. Although it is written in the style of a fairy-tale, *Haroun* alludes to other fabulative narrative forms (sagas, legends, fables) stories and novels, and borrows rhymes, jingles, names and allusions from various places in popular culture. For example there are references to: *The Wizard of Oz*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Arabian Nights*, *The Katha Sarit Sagara* or *The Ocean of the Streams of Story*; Kafka, Shakespeare, as well as to cartoon characters and superheroes. Moreover, following the tradition of fairy-tales the novel comes “complete with sorcery, love-interest, princesses,” (*H* 17) but mixes these with modern-day characters and references to ‘factories, machines, super computers, gigantic gyroscopes and unidentified flying objects.’

The sources of Rushdie’s intertextuality are borrowed from oral storytelling traditions and oral sources, albeit from children’s literature, Eastern and Western, modern and old stories. In *Haroun*, it seems, Rushdie wants to escape the absence that comes with being an author, and tries to make his presence felt by shape-shifting into a storyteller. In so doing he follows the tradition of his father and other *Arabian Nights* storytellers of old who mix both old and new stories, renewing and reenergising the oral (and written) storytelling tradition. On another level, his use of a storyteller, rather than an author, sends a message to his son who is acutely aware that his father, the absent author, cannot be with him in person. In this sense, Rushdie is following the tradition of his mother explaining through story what has happened to him and what it all means through storytelling.

As we have seen from this brief exploration, there are numerous strands that can be investigated in terms of reading *Haroun* as part of an oral storytelling tradition rather than a written one. I now want to examine how in *Haroun* more explicitly than in any of his other novels, Rushdie has continued the storytelling tradition learnt from both his father and mother, who in turn learnt theirs from the oral storytelling traditions of both the *Nights* and their Indian heritage. Suchismita Sen takes this focus on oral storytelling and speech in *Haroun* one step further, revealing that Rushdie’s use of language in the novel has direct links to an Indo-English language. Sen gives examples of expressions which she says are “almost

literal translations of Hindi or Urdu syntax” and shows how repetition is also a very real feature of Indian-English speech patterns.

Many of the languages of the subcontinent use word repetition to express degrees of intensity, or plurality and other adjective functions. [...] A speaker may also repeat a verb within a sentence to connote degrees of intensity.<sup>15</sup>

As we have seen, in *Haroun* there are numerous examples of these oral features which help to reinforce the text as “spoken discourse” and/or its oral storytelling aspects borrowed from Indian-English and whose features are most pertinently expressed in oral rather than written forms. Sen states that the oral storytelling tradition has had a broad influence on South Asian communication processes so that:

The highway jingles [that intersperse the novel] resemble the rhyming phrases or set oral formulas in the repertoires of storytellers which act as keys to the process of recollection and recitation. Rhymes are particularly useful tools of communication in societies like India where a large percentage of the population is illiterate and the ear assumes greater importance as a channel of information exchange.<sup>16</sup>

Rushdie is borrowing directly from ‘the repertoires of storytellers’ that are common in his native India. Sen points out here:

[...] the Indian habit of naming friends and acquaintances by kinship terms to denote favour and respectful familiarity. That is why Tagore is often referred to as *Gurudev* (honoured teacher), Gandhi as *Mahatma* (great soul) [...]. Thus Rashid the storyteller’s titles – the Ocean of Notions to his friends and the Shah of Blah to his enemies – are very much appropriate within the Indian context.<sup>17</sup>

The two names of Rashid here are significant on yet another level: is he just talking nonsense, implied by the idea of “blah blah blah”, or is he really “an ocean of notions”? Rushdie lets the reader-listener decide.

As I have noted above, *Haroun* is also a deeply personal story. One of the reasons his text employs Indian words perhaps is to talk to his son in a language that is close to his heart. On the most basic level then, we can say that Rushdie is

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<sup>15</sup> Suchismita Sen, “Memory, Language, and Society in Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*,” *Contemporary Literature* 36.4 (1995): 664-5.

<sup>16</sup> Sen, 669-70.

<sup>17</sup> Sen, 668.

therefore continuing his mother's tradition of telling family stories albeit disguised in the form of a children's fairy-tale. However, his father also came from a storytelling tradition. In the following section I begin by looking at how this is connected to his father's storytelling influence: Rushdie has also continued a legacy that he inherited from his father, the storyteller of the *Nights*.

### **The Arabian Nights**

*The Arabian Nights* has held a fascination for a wide variety of writers since the first manuscript came to Europe. In the next chapter, I examine that influence on John Barth, but there are many contemporary writings from varied cultural backgrounds which have also been inspired by *The Nights*. These include: direct revisions in the Nobel Prize Winner and Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days* (1981); South Asian writer Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1993) which was the Winner of the 1993 Commonwealth's Best First Book Award; and Robert Irwin's *The Arabian Nightmare* (1998). In fact, there has been a fascination with these tales and their teller ever since they came over from the East and even their own history, of the transition from East to West, re-tells the story of the symbiosis of oral to written forms.

The *Nights* tales are specifically linked to *Haroun* both thematically and through direct allusions to the text sprinkled throughout the narrative. Although a few critics have noted this, none has really investigated how the *Nights* has influenced *Haroun*. An investigation into the history and composition of the tales in this collection leads us to discover some interesting technical transgressions of oral and written modes as the oral storytellers of the *Nights* move into the 'mode' of literature. Rushdie mirrors many of these techniques both explicitly by alluding to the *Nights*, and implicitly, through his use of a language which mimics oral telling (repetitions, memory techniques, *lietwörter*). On a more thematic, political, ethical and ontological level, the *Nights* also shapes the narrative of *Haroun*, linking Rushdie not only to oral traditions in general, and thus to the storyteller, but to the storytelling tradition of his own family.

The *Nights* has no definite origins, because the mode, time and place of the transmission of the stories and their circulation lie in the oral storytelling tradition, whose history is not reliably established. As David Pinault notes in his book, *Storytelling Techniques in the Arabian Nights*,<sup>18</sup> none of the stories can be attributed to one author. Each story, which was taken on by a storyteller,<sup>19</sup> “transmitted and embellished the given tale before it was committed to writing.”<sup>20</sup> Stories were thus borrowed from many different sources, and in this way “all the tales were accumulated as they went on, as the frame-story weaved its way through history and cultures.”<sup>21</sup> Eventually as stories began to be collected and committed to writing, they began to alter a little according to grammatical structure. What survived constituted “the crafted composition of authors who used various forms of literary Arabic to capture an oral narrative tradition.”<sup>22</sup> Pinault goes on to say that when evaluating the *Nights* in written form, “the two influences – literary and oral – should be borne in mind.”<sup>23</sup>

*Haroun* is littered with allusions to the *Nights*, both explicitly and under the surface. To begin with, the father and son relationship is linked to the *Nights* by the very naming of the characters. We are told that both the storyteller Rashid and his son Haroun, “are named after the legendary caliph of Baghdad, Haroun al-Rashid, who features in many *Arabian Nights* tales” (*H* 218). Moreover, their surname ‘Khalifa’ also means caliph. But there are many other threads that show that it is a continuation of a tradition, a tradition the story pointedly argues that should not be lost. For example, the houseboat that lives on the Dull Lake is called “Arabian Nights Plus One” and Snooty Buttoo boasts it is better than the real *Arabian Nights* (*H* 50-1). Moreover, names from stories in the *Nights* are also echoed in the text and are mixed in with other stories, which in turn become part of the metaphor of the Sea of Stories. When in the Palace of Chup, Haroun notices that:

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<sup>18</sup> Pinault, David. *Story-Telling Techniques in the Arabian Nights*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992.

<sup>19</sup> Pinault’s word is “redactor.”

<sup>20</sup> Pinault, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Pinault, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Pinault, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Pinault, 12.



[...] the Pages of the Royal Guard were dressed in half-familiar stories. One Page wore the title of 'Bolo and the Wonderful Lamp,' another 'Bolo and the Forty Thieves.' Then there was 'Bolo the Sailor,' 'Bolo and Juliet,' 'Bolo in Wonderland' (H 99).

Rushdie not only uses mixed up titles from the original tales, but also brings in modern story references in order to emphasise that stories do not just die and that "popular romances", or "children's stories", have not become "just long lists of shopping expeditions" (H 83), but can be re-used and re-worked, for that is the nature of storytelling. In this way he mirrors what oral storytellers used to do in the tradition of the *Nights* and in so doing, both continues the tradition, and paves the way forward for more storytellers to come.

The *Nights* are also alluded to through the use of the number one thousand and one, which symbolises the number of stories in the collection. This number becomes significant and is echoed throughout the text, which Pierre Durix sees as "a paradigm for beauty, perfection or abundance."<sup>24</sup> For example, there are "a thousand and one violin strings" (H 70), "a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents" (H 72), and "a thousand and one small islands" on which Gup City is built (H 87). However, a thousand and one is also significant in that it points back to oral storytelling. It is interesting to note, from an orality versus literacy standpoint, that from the eighth to thirteenth centuries A.D. one thousand and one simply meant 'many'. It was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that it was used literally, when "it became necessary to add a great many stories in order to complete the number one thousand and one."<sup>25</sup> This expresses a common feature attributed to oral peoples and may also serve to shed light on the frequent openings of many folk stories, for example, 'once upon a time'. As Ong tells us, "before writing was deeply interiorised by print, people did not feel themselves situated every moment of their lives in abstract computed time [...]. The abstract calendar number would relate to nothing in real life."<sup>26</sup> If, in oral societies, time was not precisely conceptualised, this could only mean that their stories could not be placed securely within time

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<sup>24</sup> Durix, 121.

<sup>25</sup> Pinault, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ong, 97.

conceived as an abstract or spatial form. This non-sequential, non-situated, unspecified time is a feature of oral story-telling and is opposed to the often specifically located times found in realist novels, which are and can often be situated clearly within a location, time, day, year and century. Rushdie's opening, "there was once, in the country of Alfibay, a sad city, a city so ruinously sad, it had forgotten its name" (*H* 15), reinforces this return to oral storytelling and the storyteller.

At the beginning of the novel, Haroun's mother's sudden departure leaves Haroun to ponder the question, "what's the use of stories that aren't even true?" (*H* 22) which, repeated throughout the novel and the subsequent adventure-dream-fantasy-story within the novel, asserts another basic 'oral' technique, repetition. This repetition can come both in the form of single words and in the form of whole phrases. The term *leitwortstil* (leading word style), coined by Martin Buber and Franz Rozenzweig to apply to biblical narrative, designates the "purposeful repetition of words [...] or word-root"<sup>27</sup> in a literary piece in order to express a motif or theme important to the given story. The repetition creates a "dynamic" within the text and through its use of the combinations of sounds "a kind of movement" occurs, like "waves moving back and forth between words."<sup>28</sup> David Pinault finds evidence of this and goes on to extend Buber's model to include *leitsätze* (leading sentences). Pinault argues that these motif words or sentences, can "accent relationships among events within a story but can also demarcate an enframed minor narrative at both beginning and end and distinguish the tale from the surrounding major narrative."<sup>29</sup> In *Haroun*, the question, "What's the point of stories that aren't even true?", is in this sense a *leitsätze*, for it forces the reader to question the line between fiction and reality. Here we see how the repetitional device of the oral world which was used as a mnemonic tool, since there was no other way of recording sound (no writing technology), can also be employed by the fiction writer.

Rushdie's use of repetition, not only of this key sentence but of many other words and sentences throughout the novel, serves to engrain a theme into the

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 92.

<sup>28</sup> Alter, 92.

<sup>29</sup> Pinault, 18.

readers' memory, to make a point about the way in which we view reality and to question the very nature of fiction. Rushdie's metaphor of stories as coming from a 'sea' or 'ocean' mirrors the wave-like movement which repetition also expresses. In *Haroun*, there are countless references to many of these types of tales and tellings as well as numerous examples of such language games and techniques which involve all these modes: jingles, singing, rhymes and so on. Rushdie's use of constant repetitions and variations on the themes of speech and his incessant use of other such *leitwörter* and *leitsätze* brings the oral dimension of storytelling into his fiction and reinforces the thematic elements of the narrative.

From the first story collections of the *Nights*, which may have originated in Persia, "frivolous stories: such as evening conversations dealing with legends, tales lacking any basis of truth, the telling of fairy tales and jokes, excessive talk in general, unseemingly unpopular poems; also singing and acquaintance with musicians and so forth",<sup>30</sup> were attributed to a certain al-Nadir ibn al-Harith, a travelling merchant and storyteller, who would bring the stories back with him from his trips to Persia. The reasons behind his mixing up of various oral modes stem from the fact that these tales existed in often primary oral cultures where literacy was rare. As Ong notes, "to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you had to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns shaped for oral recurrence."<sup>31</sup> Thought, therefore, came into being "in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions, antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulaic expressions",<sup>32</sup> like the clichés and proverbs, which litter *Haroun*.

The *Nights* are described as being originally "oral-evening entertainments and were meant to be recited and listened to."<sup>33</sup> Stories were performance-orientated, and the storyteller himself was the medium by which the stories could be heard. No single text claimed to have authority over the words or the way the story was shaped. This was left to the imagination and craft of the storyteller. Stories

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<sup>30</sup> Pinault, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Ong, 34.

<sup>32</sup> Ong, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Pinault, 13.

transformed as they passed from one mouth to another. There was no authority except that of the storyteller himself at the moment of each retelling. Rushdie uses the very performance-orientated techniques of the oral storyteller to craft his fiction, as if he is trying to bring speech once again to life. This focus on performance, on speech and entertainment, is most clearly expressed through the figure of the storyteller who, we are told, at the time of speaking exudes "authority".

Everybody listen. This is very important, just stop talking. Not a word. Zip the lips. Dead silence is very important. On the count of one, two three (*HSS* 49).

Being a storyteller is thus both powerful and magical because the very nature of naming things – speech – endows words with power. This again is a feature of oral peoples who, as Ong reveals, "commonly think of names, as conveying power over things [because] sound and especially oral utterance, which comes from inside living organisms is dynamic."<sup>34</sup> The storyteller is, as Haroun sees his father, a "magician", or "juggler", the person who could bring fantastical worlds to life.

According to Pinault, there were certain manuscripts in circulation which "for those storytellers who could afford them [...] served as reference material and sources for narrative inspiration."<sup>35</sup> The written versions themselves only constituted 'core' stories not word-for-word recitations. The storytellers were invited to make of them what they wanted, to recite, perform and explore the new possibilities which stories gave birth to. Rushdie's metaphor for stories as coming from "The Great Story Sea", or "The Ocean of the streams of Story", reflects the way in which stories circulated within the oral culture and mirrors the way in which the stories of the *Nights* were used and created. Haroun is told that "different parts of the Ocean contained different sorts of stories, and as all the stories that had ever been told and many that were still in the process of being invented could be found here" (*H* 72). The Ocean is described as a "liquid tapestry" made up of (as I mentioned above) "a thousand thousand thousand and one" (*H* 72) different currents of different colours, each of which represented a different tale. Stories "were held in fluid form" (*H* 72), were not 'written in stone' and therefore with the passing of time, altered as they

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<sup>34</sup> Ong, 32-3

<sup>35</sup> Pinault, 13.

passed from one storyteller to another. Because they were fluid, “they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and become yet other stories; so that unlike a library of books, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was much more a storeroom of yarns. It was not dead but alive” (H 72). Stories are thus mutable, fluid like the sea, like speech. They are “yarns”, “currents”, “threads”. They can never be fixed, not even within books. They are not restricted to one culture, or one language. In the oral world, the world of images and memory, it is the message that is important, not the individual. Because stories were not the creation of one man, one voice, one ego, one self, they existed outside any definite boundary, beyond the voice and the ‘individual talent’, and because they existed, they mutated and transformed, led by the imagination. This is how they formed what we now call tradition. And it is the storyteller who is the medium through which tradition passes.

### **Storytelling for Survival**

Durix notes that: “*Haroun* can [...] be read as an allegory of the art of the storyteller. Rushdie obeys the rules of traditional oral narrative: to him, stories should first of all be “interesting and entertaining.”<sup>36</sup> Although this is true, the novel is much more than just purely entertainment. Like all of Rushdie’s novels and also in the tradition of the *Nights*, the novel makes explicit its links with the cultural tradition of Islam.<sup>37</sup> Tales were seen as “entertainments” on the one hand, whilst on the other they were also seen as threatening, for they distracted one from ‘the path of God’, challenging the existing belief systems and society of the time. In *Haroun*, it seems Rushdie has continued this tradition of using storytelling to voice political, religious, societal and ethical concerns. If we dig a little deeper, we cannot fail to see the parallels here. Despite his efforts to shape-shift into an oral storyteller who puts the emphasis on the story rather than the person telling, Rushdie remains the named author of *The Satanic Verses*. In terms of modern day Islam, his storytelling did

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<sup>36</sup> Durix, 118-9.

<sup>37</sup> Aron R. Aji, “All Names Mean Something: Salman Rushdie and the Legacy of Islam,” *Contemporary Literature* 36.1 (1995): 105.

threaten and was traceable: having endured ten years in hiding, he has more than suffered the consequences.

Of course, this does not mean that Rushdie stops trying to merge into the nameless author that Roland Barthes identified. In *Haroun*, his persistent return to orality and the oral storyteller is a plea for freedom from the confines of the written tradition, its laws and authority. The quintessential storyteller of the *Nights*, and perhaps of literary history, is the beguiling Scheherazade, who night after night, tells stories to save her fictional narrative neck. Rushdie's choice of Rashid as storyteller links him to her, and to all the tellers that came after her in the telling of her tale (him and his father included). However, Rashid is not the only storyteller in the novel. In *Haroun* we see the figure of the storyteller shape-shifting into various characters that live both in and outside the fiction: Haroun, Princess Batcheat, The Eggheads of Chup City, the Plentimaw fishes are all in the process of telling stories. Moreover, the storyteller has an important role extra-textually also. Unlike Scheherazade, Rushdie frames *Haroun* by a real-life Rushdie storytelling to save his real *and* his fictional narrative neck. In the world outside the fairy-tale, Rushdie is telling stories to his son albeit from afar, shape-shifting into the parent who, in reading *Haroun* to his or her child, becomes the storyteller in the reading performance. Rushdie, like Rashid, has lost his 'storytelling voice', but finds it again as Rashid does. Indeed, it is Rashid, revealed at the end of the story, who is the narrator. For Rushdie and Rashid then, the story of *Haroun*, the story from father to son, is a story of liberation from the loss of speech to freedom. Rushdie's son saves him as Haroun saves Rashid, by the telling of this children's story. As Rushdie has said in an interview: "I couldn't have written a grown-up novel. I didn't have the distance, the calm."<sup>38</sup>

The frame story of the *Nights* gives us another insight into the workings of *Haroun*. Haroun is transported into each magical land at night and through dream, which is where the story takes place. This mirrors Scheherazade who could only tell her stories at night, as by dawn she had to finish her story and hope that she would be saved from death and thus ensure the continuation of her presence through voice,

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<sup>38</sup> Park, 453.

through speech. In the novel there are constant repetitions of dreams, of going to sleep, waking up, yawning. Rashid appears in his nightgown; everything takes place at night. In fact, the land of Chup is threatened by perpetual darkness. In the original *Nights* tales this is when storytelling happens.

Although Rushdie tells us in the section at the end of the novel entitled "About the Names in this Book" that Khattam-Shud "means 'completely finished', 'over and done with'" (*H* 218), Pierre Durix notes another interesting use of the word which he tells us is "a Hindustani word uttered by story-tellers to announce the end of their narration."<sup>39</sup> In fact, this is a clue to another aspect of the novel which links it precisely to the tradition of the *Nights*. For Scheherazade the storyteller, reaching the end of the story at dawn would mean the end of her life. Put in this way, one cannot help but notice the striking parallel between Rushdie's real-life situation and the story of Haroun and his father. Rushdie must defeat Khattam-Shud the dark shadow warrior both in his real life and in the novel. Thus Khattam-Shud, "the end", works on various levels: he symbolises a release from the shadows and into the light (Rushdie was in hiding in the shadows); the end of the fairy-tale; the end of Rashid's silence and Rushdie's; and even the threat of the very real end of his life (which he hoped would not happen) imposed by his sentence of death.

In the real world then, unlike the fictional Scheherazade of the *Nights* frame-tale, Rushdie was also quite literally storytelling for survival, speaking to his son via the medium of fiction. The characters of Rashid the storyteller-father and the son, Haroun, who can only visit the stories through dreams, also parallel Rushdie's situation in real life.<sup>40</sup> Like Scheherazade, Rushdie did not know whether he would live to see another day and all he could do was to use his stories to fight back, to help him survive. Storytelling for Rushdie was important on many levels: not only a means to survival and a proof of his existence to his absent son, it was also a way of speaking back to his perpetrators, of insisting on his innocence as a storyteller, of convincing the real life King Shahryars, (again curiously we find the word 'Shah' or 'king' is mirrored here in both real life and in the fiction of the *Nights*) who were

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<sup>39</sup> Durix, 116.

<sup>40</sup> Rushdie actually says this himself that the book was written for his son and helped him get through the situation at the time. See, Park 453.

after him, to allow him to stay alive. On yet another level, the very frame story of Rushdie's predicament, frames *Haroun* in the way Scheherazade's story frames the stories in the *Nights*.

In conclusion, we can say that *Haroun* works as a fairy-tale to be read out for children and an oration on the "Freedom of Speech" addressed to the world through the medium of story. Rushdie's plea for a happy ending, although written into the tale of a story-book for children, was a wish that he hoped this story could and did grant him. Haroun's repeated sentence "what's the point of stories that aren't even true?" therefore finds its conclusion in the oral word, in the freedom and power of speech as story and oration. Following the tradition of his father and mother, Rushdie's personal story and his borrowing from *The Arabian Nights* has, like Scheherazade, led to both his real and narrative survival. In each sense, there is a focus on the fact that it is a tale told by a storyteller to a listening audience. The storyteller, again, shape-shifts into various people both in and outside the fiction, and in so doing, reveals his different faces. In *Haroun* we see them all: storyteller as performer, orator, inventor, magician. It is as if he wants us to forget that we are reading and instead hear the voice of the storyteller speaking and see him performing his stories as if he has jumped out from the binds of the printed page. Just like an orator on 'Speaker's Corner', Rushdie has used the fictional text as a powerful tool to call for the freedom of speech. "Save the storyteller!" he calls. "Let him continue telling stories!"

By animating the inanimate, by making the fictional real, Salman Rushdie demonstrates that there are no impassable borders between the real and the fantastic, between the opposite poles of an antagonistic world. The world of the imagination can be "set at war with the real world", challenging our preconceptions and breaking down "our conventional habit-dwelling certainties about what the world is and has to be."<sup>41</sup> Fiction is as necessary as fact. We need to re-use, dive into and remember the sources of fiction which reside in the Sea of Stories. We must not allow for the end of all fictions, for a world of pure facts. Our stories are as important as our histories

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<sup>41</sup> Rushdie, *Homelands* 122.



and provide us with a place to “play and invent the world.”<sup>42</sup> We must also not forget the storyteller, who although trapped within the pages of the book within writing, is still trying to be heard, to speak.

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<sup>42</sup> Rushdie, *Homelands* 123.

