

Introduction

Literature and Skepticism¹

THE ARGUMENT

In his essay on “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin proposes the idea of an *end of the art of storytelling* (see section 1 in this chapter) grounded in a radical crisis of the possibility of experience. What is formally at stake is a variation of the Hegelian thesis on the *end of art*. However, in view of the content of Benjamin’s idea, one should say that it points to a radicalization of that thesis: if the latter maintains the insufficiency of art as a supreme mode in which Spirit takes charge of its actual—that is, *modern*—experience, Benjamin’s formulation states that it is precisely the development of modernity as a world that brings about the crisis of the possibility of experience. If the beginning of the end indicated by Benjamin lies in the origin of the emergence of literature as a general form of the art of the word, which universally imposes itself from the Renaissance on (in Benjamin, the end of the art of storytelling gives place to the novel), then the modern condition of literature testifies precisely to this crisis. But this would mean that the end of the art of storytelling carries with itself *in nuce* the *end of literature as such*.

To this historical argument (see section 2), which refers the transformations of literature to the changes in the social modes and relations of production as a matrix for experience, it is perhaps possible to add a structural argument in order to make intelligible the inherence of both ends: storytelling, which seeks to give place to and inscribe the singularity of

experience, is affected by a contradiction in terms, by a paradox, as it were—the impossibility of narrating (that is, repeating) the unrepeatable. In a certain way, then, the “end” is prescribed in this impossibility, and storytelling would prepare, laboriously, silently, and reluctantly, the crisis of experience. No doubt, it would be perfectly admissible to argue that the paradox is in itself speculative and that the history of storytelling in the broad sense—and all throughout what we call the “modern age”—is its practical overcoming: that storytelling belongs to the kind of “tasks” that, like translation, as Franz Rosenzweig says, are theoretically impossible but practically feasible. Moreover, one can maintain that the crux of this overcoming consists in the (impossible) repetition of experience becoming an (actual) experience of repetition, marked by the interest, participation, and enjoyment of narration itself.² But precisely for this reason one could assume that there is also a structural limit to this overcoming and that the limit is reached when such peculiar experience goes into crisis. Accordingly, the Benjaminian formulation could perhaps be modulated to say that modernity is the time in which this limit becomes the essential problem of literature, of its very possibility: the time in which literature as such becomes essentially uncertain.

And this could be the first sign of a relation between literature and skepticism (see section 3). Affected by the categorical evidence of the limit, faced with the inevitable urgency of the problem, literature acquires a peculiar lucidity: now it learns—now, in the context of modernity—that literature itself is no longer possible other than as the knowledge of that end, of that impossibility, of its primordial incertitude. It is left to ask if a knowledge of this kind was not lodged from the beginning in the bosom of literature, and if it is not precisely a certain lethargic state of that knowledge that determined its exercise and its articulation as a constructive principle of the space of fiction and as a basis for the legitimacy of repetition. If this is the case, this orphan knowledge, this paradoxical knowledge of incertitude, would determine in literature, in its own foundation, an essentially skeptical character.

But this is only one aspect of the problem we shall examine here.

We find a second remark in Benjamin’s essay that can help us to round out the picture (see section 4). In characterizing the birth of the novel at the dawn of the modern age as the earliest sign of the process that will end up as the decline of the art of storytelling, Benjamin points to the break with the collectivity and with its shared ground of experiences (*Schriften* 2, pt. 2: 442–43/*Selected Writings* 2: 146–47).³ The book is the essential destination of the novel; consequently, it resists oral transmission, which remains immersed in

the existence of the community. The technical mediation of communication is connected to a fundamental distancing from experience, which the novelist is no longer capable of coining paradigmatically. He has lost that most peculiar certitude that is congenital to genuine experience. A certitude that does not tower over it, presuming to scan it from the pinnacle of universality—allegedly equipped with the sure organ of the concept—but a certitude that knows—with the knowledge, simultaneously fragile and firm, that suits the witness—that something has happened, that something has taken place, and that what has happened demands its memorable institution: in short, a certitude that knows about the event. Instead, the novelist, although he may have the feeling of what has happened, does not know exactly what or precisely where and, in order to find out, has to force his way through the thicket of language, searching the half-erased traces, extracting from the insufficient words at least the mere possibility. Radically uncertain, maintains Benjamin, the novel signs the perplexity of the subject—the isolated individual—in the middle of the euphoric existence.

This original position of the individual marks (see section 5) at once the source of a purely problematic narration *and* the principle of another literary form, which consists no longer in “the representation of human life [*Lebens*]” (Benjamin, *Schriften* 2, pt. 2: 443/*Writings* 2: 146, translation modified) but in the exposition of the primary perplexity that afflicts the living being, the self of that life. This form is the essay.

Unlike the art of storytelling, which has entered the dominion of literature and stands suspended in the space of fiction, the essay’s intention is directed to truth. In principle, then, its movement is one of overcoming that elemental perplexity. Nevertheless, the truth that is at stake here can only be constructed by means of criticism, through the destruction of truths that have been handed down and transformed into prejudiced or scholastic heritage. It remains therefore always in suspension, menaced by the labor of trenching that gives place to it: its statute is, then, perennially provisional, and if the result of a particular essay may temporally overcome the perplexity that has motivated it, there is no guarantee that new material or a new point of view will not destroy the verisimilitude that was achieved. In consequence, the essay determines a perspectivist comprehension of truth and a disposition to appeal to the *vérité de faits* as the touchstone of every discursive truth. So, those who are judged the founders of the genre, Montaigne and Bacon, although they may be flagrantly opposed to each other in view of their respective projects and attitudes—the former’s fortuitous, digressive,

and personal, the latter's methodic, analytic, and detached—both have experience as a leveler of their “essay,” as a medium of contrast and as a technique for the critical discernment of discourse's pretensions to truth. Whether as performance or as procedure, skepticism is notoriously the rule of the essay.

Lastly, we Latin Americans take a cue from the general consideration of the essayistic form, a sign toward the locality out of which we spell this “us.” Montaigne as well as Bacon have at their backs the discovery of America. The uniquely experimental strategy of their works expresses the incalculable effect that this first *de facto* essay, which seems to verify the space of fiction, provoked in the European intelligence and imagination. With an unequivocally skeptic vein, Borges, one of “us,” suggested that metaphysics could or should be esteemed as a branch of fantastic literature. Starting from the sketch attempted here, we may perhaps risk the assertion that it is possible to consider literature as a variant of skepticism.

If the preceding conjectures are somehow plausible, it would be advisable to follow the track of this skeptical connection, which would manifestly engage two fundamental forms of the literary. This is what I will do here, asking in general about the relationship between literature and skepticism. In view of this, it will be necessary to establish a rigorous concept of skepticism, one conceived under the guidance of its philosophic orchestration, ancient and modern, and to inquire into the character that adopts experience in such a context. Meanwhile, and referring to these two forms, I will say that both essay and narration, being different, even opposed, provide evidence that a certain non-knowing, and above all a certain relationship to non-knowing, open the possibility of writing.

THE DEVELOPMENT

1

Walter Benjamin's essay “The Storyteller” has as a subtitle, “Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov.” Certainly, these remarks are not restricted to a commentary on Leskov, but they seek to make his work, as well as its narrative power, comprehensible from a historical perspective. Written in 1936, it is based on multiple notes that extend from 1928 to 1935 and aims, according to Benjamin's own declaration, at a “theory of the novel” or, more generally, at a “theory of epic forms.”⁴

This perspective takes a peculiar turn. To present Leskov as a storyteller, says Benjamin, is not to bring him closer but rather to increase the distance that separates us from him. “This distance,” he says, is

prescribed for us by an experience which we may have almost every day. It teaches us that the art of storytelling [*die Kunst des Erzählens*] is coming to an end. . . . It is as if a capability that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, has been taken from us: the ability to share experiences. (*Schriften* 2, pt. 2: 439/*Writings* 3: 143)

Continuing with his argument, Benjamin takes up a previous remark he made about the muteness of the soldiers who came back from the front during the Great War:

Beginning with the World War, a process became apparent which continues to this day. Wasn't it noticeable at the end of the war that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent—not richer but poorer in communicable experience [*an mitteilbarer Erfahrung*]? What poured out in the flood of war books ten years later was anything but experience that can be shared orally. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body. (*Schriften* 2, pt. 2: 439/*Writings* 3: 143–44)

The point was already present, with little differences, in the essay “Experience and Poverty,” probably written around 1933. The main difference was about the war as “one of the most monstrous [*ungeheuersten*] experiences of world history” (2, pt. 1: 214/2: 731). In a certain sense, the war that was destined to end all wars appeared to Benjamin as the experience that sealed the end of all experience. In the same text, with the intention of giving an account of the connection indicated in the title, he referred this unforeseen event to the dominion of technology and its devastating consequences for the individual and collective attempts to build and configure experience. “With this monstrous development of technology [*mit dieser ungeheuren Entfaltung der*

Technik],” Benjamin stresses, “a completely new poverty has descended on mankind,” a poverty that brings about the eroding of culture. “For what is the value of all our culture if it is divorced from experience?” This new poverty is, then, a poverty of experience, one that “is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism” (2, pt. 1: 214–15/2: 732, translation modified). In this continuation of the earlier essay, Benjamin advocates for a positive concept of barbarism, consisting in the need to begin anew and to get by with few resources. By contrast, “The Storyteller” focuses on the crisis that affects the very possibility of sharing experiences by relating them.

There are many things, I guess, that are worth underlining in Benjamin’s argument. I am especially interested in one of them; notwithstanding the fact that it cannot be literally read in the text, I think it is possible to infer it without risking overinterpretation. Of course, Benjamin does not only restrict himself to recording a transformation of the ways in which human experience takes place, due to historical changes and profound social upheavals; nor does he remark, properly speaking, on a merely factual disturbance of the truth content of common and communitarian experience.⁵ No, the historical *factum* to which Benjamin refers brings along with it a transcendental effect: it is the very *possibility* of experience that is radically questioned, inasmuch as those transformations take away the very conditions of truth, sharing in common, appurtenance, and identity that determine it as such.⁶ Precisely in these terms may be understood the assertion that in the soldiers’ silence there begins to appear a thorough “denial” of the experiences that give subjects place and orientation in the world: if “the experiences” are the way in which human beings relate to the truths of existence, their “denial” involves a structural crisis. Consequently, the war is not conceived here as an event inserted in a chain of events, no matter the magnitude attributable to it; it isn’t an event in a series of meanings (under the name of history), but the subversion of the meaning of history itself. A symptom of this perspective is the use of the term *ungeheuer* (“monstrous, violent, terrible, utterly unusual”) to describe both war and technology, and the former precisely because of its being an essentially technical war; this designation indicates that war itself is conceived as the radically unusual event—that is, as the advent of the technical dominion.

It is precisely this nucleus of Benjamin’s argument that allows us to confront sharply his assertion with the judgment that Hegel pronounced more

than a century before and with which it has a close link, although this link is not remarked upon. The idea of an “end of art” became meaningful for Hegel inasmuch as it could be maintained that the advance toward a new form of historical experience of Spirit demanded a different kind of configuration and appropriation of experience, whose truth could not be satisfied anymore by fantasy as the essential source of art.

What is this experience—the experience that determines the present from which the “end of art” is decreed? As Hegel formulates it in the *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, it may be said that the crucial index of the “present” is the *complexity* of relations that constitute the modern world, a complexity that imposes everywhere the work of mediation (*Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* 24–25/*Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* 12–13). Nevertheless, it is not complexity as a given fact but as the result of the world as such being progressively construed by diligent and patient human agency. The world as a human work removes the work of art as the reflection of the world: this would be the meaning that modernity has for Hegel at the aesthetic level. Thence, also, the only condition by which it is possible to take charge of such a complexity, leading to the concrete fulfillment of that world as a historical space of accomplished freedom, is the same condition that is at the base of its progressive construction—that is, the full development of *reflection*. The latter, in a general sense, could be described as the mode of production of the modern world as such, whose chief experience will have to be, from now on, reflexive, not reflected.

What distances Benjamin from Hegel on a *theoretical* level is the materialistic reinterpretation of mediation by Marx, for whom it can only be (figuratively) spoken of as the work of mediation on the condition of understanding that it is actually the mediation of work, which acquires in the modern context the character of a universal system of production. This entails consequences for the conception of art, as becomes manifest in the sketches that Marx left about the issue (cf. *Ökonomische Manuskripte* 43–45/*Foundations* 109–11). In developing these sketches, Benjamin conceived that it was possible, indeed necessary, to approach the development of art starting from the transformations of the modes and means of production inasmuch as these condition and affect the changes in artistic creation: he proposed, then, to establish a historical and systematic relationship between the transformations of both technology and art in order to make the latter intelligible from a materialistic point of view, emancipated from ideological burdens.

But it was precisely this unrestricted technical disposition and realization of mediation (to which Benjamin refers, in his celebrated essay on the work of art, as “technical reproducibility”—that is to say, as a mode of production based on reproduction) that resulted in an essential transformation affecting the experience of Spirit, so that this experience can no longer be thought of as a space or reappropriation of Spirit through the process of reflection, can no longer be elaborated and purified as an identitary capital of the metaphysical subject. Spirit’s experience could only now be described as the experience of a loss, one that is not merely the loss of an attribute or property but the loss of Spirit itself, and therefore the experience of the mourning for this loss, which is formulated in Benjaminian terms as the evanescence of the aura.

It is this evanescence that marks the critical historical situation to which Benjamin refers under the title of the “end of the art of storytelling,” meaning by that the termination of an atavistic mode of transmission of experience based on craftwork or artisanal production.

This is, then, what allows us to think that the Benjaminian assertion of the end of the art of storytelling involves a radicalization of Hegel’s thesis.

2

I have pointed to the intimate connection between these aforementioned “ends”: the end of the “art of storytelling” and the end of literature in general. My argument has, as a trait associated with its thetic character, an interpretive nuance concerning the Benjaminian approach, as I presume is by now obvious. This is the thread linking a conceptual point of view with the “end of the art of storytelling”; in other words, the collapse of the “epic form” with the end of “literature” as a whole is the common reference to *experience*. This reference, which is consubstantial to what Benjamin says, presupposes a certain characteristic of experience itself, to which I am alluding here in a summary way under the notions of the singular and the unrepeatable: in a word, under the theme of the *event*. And it is precisely this question, the acuteness of the event, that could allow us to confront the problem or, better, the paradox, of narrativity in the way I’m trying to sketch here, as the repetition of the unrepeatable. By this I refer to the idea—or, if you prefer, the *desideratum*—of narration, which would tell the event so that it would be possible for narration to satisfy both requirements: to render the event disposable for its remembering while indicating at the same time its absolute singularity—that is, the whole said at once, to institute the event as such.

No doubt, you may recall immediately in this context the paradox of iterability as proposed by Jacques Derrida with reference to the date in Paul Celan's poetry: "How can one date what does not repeat if dating also calls for some form of return? But how can one date anything other than that which never repeats itself?" (*Schibboleth* 13/*Sovereignties* 2). In a similar way to what, according to Derrida, constitutes the possibility of this repetition of the unrepeatable—of "an event without witness, without other witness" (37/15)—that is to say, similar to the erasure of the date by the very act of its inscription, similar to the announcement of a reappearance (*revenance*), to a spectral return of what cannot return by virtue of the same erasure that assures the legibility of the date: in this way, narration repeats the event that it narrates to the extent that it denies its status as the impossible repetition of the event, doing so precisely in and through the event that now comprises the narration itself, and insofar as it disposes itself as the place of a spectral (i.e., fictitious)⁷ return of the event itself. Beneath the story of the event narration tells, it whispers at the same time its own end as the condition of possibility of such a story.

Put differently, a narration is never a *simple* repetition, if it is even possible to think that there is such a thing. Consequently, it is necessary to take into account that narration is determined by the structure of a *repetition of the repetition*. The paradox of the iterability of the event can only be solved by iterability itself. This structure not only allows for a relation to the narrated event that repeats the event in another time—the time of writing, of hearing, of reading—but also administers all the possible repetitions of this relation (from hearing and understanding to commentary, explanation, interpretation, etc.). In a certain sense, one could say that the repetitive structure of narration not only makes possible the repetition of the event in its singularity and the encounter of the hearer's or reader's singularity with the former—as well as, if you prefer, the encounter of the hearer's or reader's idiom with the idiom of the repetition—but also governs the reiterative repetition of the impossibility and therefore of the end. As I have tried to suggest, each narration not only repeats the event it narrates but also repeats (also in the mode of anticipation) its own end, in order to make the inscription of the event possible. Every narration contains its own denial with respect to the truth of the narrated event, but, in doing so, it incorporates this truth into the space that opens this auto-critical operation: the space of fiction.⁸

It is from this point of view that I maintain that narration's character could be associated with what Franz Rosenzweig, at the beginning of his essay

“Scripture and Luther” (1926), defines as the task of translation, which is a paradoxical task too. I think it won’t be pointless to transcribe the two initial paragraphs. Let us begin with the first:

Translating means serving two masters. It follows that no one can do it. But it follows also that it is, like everything that no one can do in theory, everyone’s task in practice. Everyone must translate, and everyone does. When we speak, we translate from our intention into the understanding we expect in the other—not, moreover, some absent and general other, but *this particular* other whom we see before us, and whose eyes, as we translate, either open or shut. When we hear, we translate words that sound in our ears into our understanding—or, more concretely, into the language of our mouth. We all have our own individual speech. Or rather: we all would have our own individual speech, if there were in truth such a thing as monologic speaking (as logicians, those would-be-monologists, characteristically postulate) and all speaking were not already dialogic speaking and thus—translation. (“Schrift” 749/“Scripture” 47)

The (theoretical) impossibility of translation, if conceived as the repetition of the same in a medium essentially different than the one in which the same has been coined, is its (practical) necessity. This necessity is evinced by the fact that all speaking is translating. Therefore, the true significance of the theoretical impossibility of translating, “in the succession of ‘impossible’ and necessary compromises we ordinarily call life,” consists in giving us “the courage of modesty, which asks of itself not what is recognized as impossible but what is given [*aufgegebenen*] as necessary” (749/47). This is Rosenzweig’s “task of the translator,” which, as a task (*Aufgabe*), has the fundamental ethical meaning of recognition of and openness to the other:

In speaking and hearing, what is asked is not that the other possess our ears or our mouth—in that case translation would be of course unnecessary, as indeed would be speaking and hearing as well. And in speaking and hearing between peoples it is not asked that the translation be either the old original—in which case the hearing people would be superfluous—or a new original—in which case the speaking people would be annihilated. Only a mad egoism could desire either of these, mad enough to imagine itself satisfied with its own personal or national being, and to long for empty desert all around it. But the world was not made an empty

desert, but rich in distinctions and kinds; and there is no room in it for such an attitude. (749–50/47–48)

In Rosenzweig's account, the whole of language, from common talk, intimate or public, to the most complex literary creations, and even to the divine word shaped in text, is susceptible to being conceived and experienced under the model of translation. Such a model has not only a descriptive value but a prescriptive dimension as well. The peculiarity of Rosenzweig's proposal consists in offering, under the concept of translation, an ethics of communication that has its core in its dialogical articulation. Obviously, not every communication is *in fact* a dialogue in the sense of a relationship between free subjects mutually irreducible; but every communication *ought* to be a dialogue, with a duty of opening to free otherness. To steal oneself from this duty, to enter into a unidirectional communication that would not expect from the other the revelation of an unforeseen meaning, brings with it the risk not only of turning the world into a desert but also of abolishing it.

If we link this postulate with what we have previously seen of the Benjaminian approach (with whose general premises finds such affinity in Rosenzweig), we can assume that what Benjamin calls "war" in its transcendental efficacy denies precisely the possibility of the "mad egoism" to which Rosenzweig refers.

A hint of the suppression of dialogue that Rosenzweig warns against and that Benjamin underlines with his idea of the "communicability of experience" (there seems to be some justification for approaching both notions together) is given by the attention that the latter dedicates to the emergence of a new form of communication in mature capitalism, which has its proper medium in the press: this new form, which bears the principal responsibility for the crisis of narration, no matter the degree of affinity that could be found between both, is *information*, which encompasses "almost everything" that happens (Benjamin, *Schriften* 2, pt. 2: 444–45/*Writings* 3: 147–48). This hint may help us to complement what we have said about the crisis of experience. Benjamin quotes a declaration of Hyppolite de Villemessant, the founder of *Le Figaro*, in which he claims to recognize "the essence [*Wesen*] of information": "To my readers . . . an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important than a revolution in Madrid." To which Benjamin replies, "This makes strikingly clear that what gets the readiest hearing is no longer intelligence coming from afar, but the information which supplies a handle for

what is nearest” (2, pt. 2: 444/3: 147). I set aside the meaningful addenda to this commentary (the verifiability and verisimilitude of information as confronted with the authority and the wonder of narration) in order to focus on the change to which Benjamin points: the dissolution of the experiential opening proper to narration in the exactness of the explanation that gives access to what has happened. If one would wish to update Villemessant’s statement with respect to the renewed conditions of information brought by late capitalism, it would probably be suitable to say, “For my readers any event, no matter if near or distant, is equivalent, to the extent that it is already formatted by the technology of information.” This, which by now is a moderate way to announce those conditions, should also show not only how the Benjaminian “art of storytelling” sinks into the night of the archaic under the weight of the informational totalization of communication, but also how “literature” in general is thrown by this totalization into a critical situation. A consideration of the relations in course between literature and globalization may help to clarify the point.

The mere mention of this issue awakens contrariety: what we call “literature” and are accustomed to subsuming under the general principle of possibility—in that peculiar variant that is fiction—gets on badly with the idea of a saturation of contexts involved in the regime of globalization, whether it be understood from the point of view of the thorough integration of markets or conceived from the perspective of the planetary expansion of communication. Immediately seen, it gets on badly with that integration, for the dictatorship of the “sellable” obstructs the freedom of the play of signs and meanings (otherwise, if it does not obstruct it, it becomes predictable) and fixes and puts in order—in a sort of preestablished menu—the viscous matter of desire, which the so-called literature thickens and helps in its slow fluidity. And it gets on badly, too, with the communicative expansion, because the linguistic homogeneity that this promotes with no respite cheapens the nuances and slippages and paves the narrow passes of translation. But more decisively, in one way or another in globalization—and of course between both there is a bond as strict as it is indiscernible—the saturation to which I refer suppresses the diversity of experiences, the difference of places. In speaking of both—places and experiences—I mean to refer to one and the same complex: that which may happen, the eventful, that which “takes place” or is in course of taking place. Whether this “place” is envisaged in terms of geographical locations or as knots in a web of relations, in terms of situations and circumstances, of happenings, of subjects, each bears the

signature of an experience, as encounter or discovery, as warning or wonder, as routine or incident—a diversity of experiences, a diversity of places, then, as one and the same constellation, which the regime of information suppresses. And it happens that the so-called literature is—or is supposed to be—the production and inscription of that difference, of such diversity.

Almost with a nostalgic aftertaste, one could say that this was formerly the case: “literature” worked as the drilling (or even the blowing up) of the granite of indurate experiences, which brought back the vertiginous instant of the irruption of the unexpected in experience itself: for the same reason, the instant of the susceptible to remembrance, the worthy of being narrated. For this exercise of the “literary,” the context of experience was always—one could say by definition—a porous block, and the “place” was, in turn, the proper dimension of that experience, as the gap through which it opened to otherness. But now the subtle fabric of the webs proper to globalization serves to unnerve that altering force. In the multiple intersections of the reticular system, the “things,” the facts and events, the “lived” itself are no more than fugacious flickerings and titillations. All that was known under the name of “experiences,” which hinged on the possibility of its exchange on precisely its reciprocal irreducibility, on its “usage value,” is now subsumed under a general faculty of format whose application is as unlimited as it is indifferent. Nor is experimentation still an option: it has lost its point, which consisted in producing the experience not yet lived, and even the impossible experience. The “possible” as much as the “impossible”—and the very difference between the two—turn out to be atmospheric variations in the space of the virtual. The context of globalization brings along with it the virtualization of experience, wherein the latter tends emphatically to its extinction.⁹

3

Obviously, this is the critical point of my argument. What consistent relation could be established between literature and skepticism? Does this imply that we must refer literature to knowledge, conceiving it, for instance, as a form of knowledge of the world in order to show it immediately, and paradoxically, as a form that teaches the impossibility of such knowledge? And am I not taking the notion of “skepticism” in a looser way?

Of course, I cannot offer here an exhaustive determination of this putative relation. Moreover, I’m afraid that there cannot be a conclusive demonstration that could make the hypothesis of such a relation fully persuasive. This

problem is established as the horizon of the essays that follow in this book, and this also means that the legitimacy of the approach to this sort of problem can only be decided by means of a work that tries to prove it by dwelling upon certain instances that may have some force of suggestion. Anyway, it is necessary to secure at least a principle of verisimilitude for that relation, which, although suggestive, is not patently obvious.

To begin with, it is useful for us to try an explanation of the concept of literature with which I'm working here. This concept has already been insinuated in my first paragraph, although in a surreptitious and therefore ambiguous manner. This I have done by suggesting that what Benjamin conceives as the end of the "art of storytelling" coincides with the emergence of literature "in the proper sense" (not only with the novel), and this "propriety" has to do with the meaning of what in the long term has been understood as "belles lettres": I'm referring to literature as a *system* whose primary criterion of validity rests in aesthetic experience. The Benjaminian concept of an "art of storytelling" points already to this sense, inasmuch as it supposes an artistic intentionality of form and effect, which, although not entirely alien to everyday narration, is in no way a thematic or preexisting aspect of it. By the way, one could ask if it is possible to give a thorough account of this art by taking as a measure of the narrative act its artistically elaborate forms as such, much in the way the notion of the "art of storytelling" refers the universe of narration to the archetypes of the sedentary peasant and the merchant seaman as "past masters of storytelling" (Benjamin, *Schriften* 2, pt. 2: 440/*Writings* 3: 144). Would it not be beneficial to look at the incipient and spontaneous forms and usages of everyday storytelling, from the gossip to the confession and the testimony? Certainly, for the argument Benjamin is interested in developing this consideration could be relatively superfluous, but for our present aim it may have some relevance. This relevance comes into greater focus when we pay attention to what in the Benjaminian approach constitutes the essential difference between the "art of storytelling" and the "novel" as successive, historical articulations of the epic form. As we have already seen, the difference rests in the continuity of a substantial ground of common and communicable experiences (common as communicable and communicable as common) at the heart of that "art": a ground that one naturally also has to presuppose with respect to the spontaneous everyday storytelling but that would no longer be in force in the "novel."

Following this track, we could say that literature "in the proper sense" arises with its eradication from experiences, not at all with the loss of the

ability to communicate experiences proper to the radical crisis of the “art of storytelling” in Benjamin’s conception, but rather in a process that tends to diminish the value of actual experiences—a process, then, in which these experiences gradually prove to be somewhat superfluous to the configuration of individual and collective life. Put differently, it may be possible to maintain that literature arises as *vicarious experiences* become more and more important. From a historical point of view, this is the moment that Aristotle marks for the first time when he defends poetry’s aptitude for universal truth in contrast with history (*Poetics* 1451a39–b11). This distinction is crucial if we are to recognize the turning point in narration itself, by virtue of which it becomes an “art”: the point at which, starting from a common ground where history, myth, and invention remain more or less confounded (as is indicated by the double meaning of the word *(hi)story* in Western languages), these discursive forms begin to separate from each other. As is well known, Aristotle distinguishes history and poetry by the fact that the former tells things that happened while the latter tells things that should happen (*hoia an genoito*). With poetry’s reference to the domain of the possible (*to dynaton*), a space is opened where the discourse of non-actual experience can prove its relevance and efficacy.¹⁰

Starting from this characterization, it is perhaps possible to lend an appearance of verisimilitude to the relation I am outlining. To this end, it will be necessary to turn now to philosophical skepticism, providing a minimal review of its fundamental traits. Obviously, this will have an allusive and provisional value and is no substitute for the indispensable precisions and distinctions on the basis of which one can trace the full picture of this school.

Skepticism maintains that, because our information about the world is grounded merely in our experiences, it is impossible for us to forge a secure or certain knowledge of the world. The beliefs we have, the opinions we pronounce about the world, its elements and conditions, cannot be grounded so that we could defend an opinion—concerning a determinate issue or set of issues—as true and incontrovertible without it being possible to put forward reasons of equal weight supporting the opposite opinion. To the extent that the doubt concerning the truth or falsity of opinions provokes mental unease in the doubtful subject, skepticism commends as a general strategy the suspension of judgment—that is to say, leaving undecided the matter with which those opinions deal. Such suspension provides the abstinent with the cure for the obsessive search for truth, opens him to the plain presence of the phenomenon, and gives him the consequent tranquility of mind.

Granting for the sake of hypothesis the concept of literature previously advanced, and admitting this brief sketch of skepticism, it would be entirely natural to ask whether the relation between skepticism and literature is not immediately suppressed by the confrontation of both. While the former seems to insist on rescuing phenomena from the attempts of colonization and reduction undertaken by the philosophical *logos*, the latter seems to be occupied in providing the discourse with new modes of interpretation of experience, new modes of relation to it (I was alluding to this in speaking of experiences that are no longer actual), by virtue of which those phenomena usually appear in a light as different and unsuspected as any metaphysical explanation. In both cases the phenomenon—as an irreducible remnant of the suspension of judgment—would tend to be obliterated under the weight of a powerful, discursive articulation. However, there is something that literature manifestly does not share with the reductive *logos* of metaphysics: its *dogmatism*—that is, the marks of universality, necessity, and exclusiveness that this *logos* claims for itself. The pluralism of the experiences that are no longer actual, its particularity (its specification in a determined universe of meaning), its suspension in the dimension of possibility (the hypothetical projection of this universe), indicates another configuration of *logos*.

To the extent that literature exposes us to non-actual experiences, it contributes to the sense that it is not possible in the end to establish the truth or falsity of the judgments we form about every experience. In fact, implied in the literary exercise is a primary suspension of judgment, which lends fiction (as the domain of possibilities) its peculiar efficacy. Without this suspension of judgment, the structure of the repetition of repetition, which solves the paradox of iterability, would be impossible. If, as we have seen before, every narration more or less implies its own denial with reference to the truth of the narrated event, literature “in the proper sense” actualizes this denial in the very configuration of the non-actual experience.¹¹

It is this suspension that emerges as such through the exercise of literature in modernity, rendering evident literature’s inveterate skeptical affinity.

In any event, it is necessary to say that I’m not simply defining literature as a form of skepticism. Rather, I would suggest that there is a skeptical matrix in the literary phenomenon, and I am suggesting, too, that the discernment of this matrix should help us to better understand the structural traits of the literary phenomenon, as much from the point of view of forms as of realizations.

The second remark appears in the fifth chapter of Benjamin's essay. It is worth quoting the whole passage:

The earliest indication of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrow sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. What can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic, is different in kind from what constitutes the stock in trade [*Bestand*] of the novel. What distinguishes 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 enters into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the individual in his isolation, the individual who can no longer speak of his concerns in exemplary fashion, who himself lacks counsel and can give none. To write a novel is to take to the extreme that which is incommensurable in the representation of human life [*Leben*]. In the midst of life's fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living. Even the first great book of the genre, *Don Quixote*, teaches how the spiritual greatness, the boldness, the helpfulness of one of the noblest of men, Don Quixote, are completely devoid of counsel and contain not a scintilla of wisdom. If now and then, in the course of the centuries, efforts have been made—most effectively, perhaps, in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*—to implant instruction in the novel, these attempts have always amounted to a modification of the novel form. The bildungsroman, on the other hand, does not deviate in any way from the basic structure of the novel. By integrating the social process with the development of a person, it bestows the most brittle justification on the order determining that process. The legitimizing of this order stands in direct opposition [*steht windschief*] to its reality. The unattainable is event—precisely in the bildungsroman. (Benjamin, *Schriften* 2, pt. 2: 442–43/*Writings* 3: 146–47, translation modified)

In Benjamin's explanation, the reference to technology plays a central role. We have already seen that what he himself calls the "monstrous development of technology," which finds in the Great War the laboratory in which its crucial experiment is carried out, is what stipulates the transcendental crisis of experience. The paragraph just quoted indicates another milestone of this tension between technology and experience, an inaugural milestone in the process that reaches its pinnacle with the war. The technique of printing introduces a crisis in communication, in the mutual sharing of experiences within a community, which is equivalent to the crisis or the auratic experience of the work of art brought about by the intermittent expansion of the techniques of reproduction.¹² This critical condition, if it does not suppress the possibility of sharing experiences, eradicates them from the communitarian context of meaning and tends to expose them to the nude facticity that remained latent in them and that narrative communication—indeed, in an imperceptible way—has kept in line. The "subject" of experience, who is not yet a subject in the proper sense within its communitarian configuration, becomes in this way an individual.¹³

The two novelistic paradigms Benjamin mentions account for the duality of fates that are reserved for this "individual" throughout the development of the modern novel. If *Don Quixote* may be described as a novel that precisely shows the individual exercising with importunate and comical heroism the derangement into which his primary perplexity throws him, if it may be said that the work is something like a story of the deformation of the subject, a story of its de-constitution *in statu nascendi*, the bildungsroman wants to show the itinerary through which, no matter how labyrinthine the path, one comes to be such an individual. But, despite the difference and even the flagrant opposition between both fates, at their bases lies the same premise of existence and (not) knowing. In the passage quoted above, two terms set the standard for understanding the way in which Benjamin conceives this premise: the incommensurable (*das Inkommensurable*) and the unattainable (*das Unzulängliche*). These concepts attempt to characterize the essential statute of what we call the "individual." Stressing the loss of a substantive *measure* of the organic relations between human being and the world, a measure that the narration was in charge of coining, recreating, and transmitting time and again, both indicate the radical change of experience that forces its way from now on. The notion of "event" lies at the center of this mutation, but in a very specific way, for there is also event in the universe of narration. The inherent

measure of the art of storytelling is the event of a continual refoundation of the community through the continual reference to the event that establishes it. Instead, what is thought under the heading of this notion in modern times is precisely the event of the incommensurable, of the insufficient, which refers the individual time and again to the loss that constitutes him.

Maybe this can give us occasion to insist on the intersection between the historical and the structural hypothesis about which I spoke at the beginning, in order to justify the idea of an implication of the “end of literature” in the “end of the art of storytelling.” For I think that from this characterization of the event there follows an essential modification of the relations between event and language with respect to the structure they assume within the narrative communication. Paying close attention to the statement with which Benjamin concludes his brief account of the *bildungsroman*—which presumably also sets the tone of his comprehension of the rise of the novel—we could say that the eventfulness of what Benjamin calls “insufficient,” and by virtue of which the advent of the individual is marked, makes manifest, for the individual, the insufficiency of the event. And if from the point of view of the individual’s being it is likely that this insufficiency may be the main stimulus of its becoming a subject, the same insufficiency raises, from the point of view of the appropriation of the event in language, the necessity of compensating for it by means of discourse. Discourse is now the institution of the event in an entirely different way than it could have been before and must involve—this is a question to which one should give the form of a hypothesis—an essential alteration of what I have formerly named the structure of repetition. Whereas in oral narration the event has an original certification (an original truth) due to its being the very condition that makes it possible to produce and receive its story, and the story has only the task of augmenting this certification (also in the sense of invention) without ever impairing it (without refusing the event, in the last instance, its primary right to truth). In the technically mediated narration, then, the discourse provides the event with the certitude of which the latter on principle lacks; that is to say, discourse does not share the event but mediates it. It is precisely this determination that contains as an essential possibility, starting from the mass communication that printing and print media permit, the new form that Benjamin characterizes as information, which does not offer anything of “what happens” without the addition of an explanation for the sake of the plausibility of information itself.

The essay, a literary form proper to the modern era, is undoubtedly the one that most immediately satisfies the relation of literature with skepticism. This relation also comprises the affinity that the essay has with the epistemological worries that drive the theoretical inquiries in the same epoch. Indeed, the weight that has skepticism as a problem and a strategy for the project of the foundation of knowledge—a gravitation that remains throughout the entire development of modern thinking in Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Hegel—finds one of its primary means of staging and exploration in the essayistic form, shaped as it is by the authors who may be considered its initiators: Michel de Montaigne (1533–92) and Francis Bacon (1561–1626). It is precisely in this sense that I am associating with the question of the essay what Benjamin says about the perplexity of the individual, linking the existential character that he attributes to it with the demand for knowledge—or a kind of knowledge—that may permit this individual at least to confront that perplexity, if not to administrate or overcome it.

Resorting to the same terms with which Benjamin establishes his thesis about the novel, I would say that in the essay the question concerns an *exposition*, not of life in its fullness, as with the novel, which presents the human being entangled in the dense web of reality, forcing his way through it or succumbing to its incidents, but an exposition of the primary perplexity that affects him because of this web, a perplexity that touches even the true meaning that may be attributed to the word *reality*, for the emphatic characteristics that may be attributed to it have been suffocated by the experience of incertitude.

In the warning *Au lecteur* of the grounding document of the essayistic genre, Michel de Montaigne's *Essais*, the idea of the *exposition* I'm talking about as origin of this form is appropriately expressed. This exposition is an intention and a passion of *truth*, but of a truth whose only content is Montaigne's "I myself"—whole, plain, and unadorned. "Good faith [*bonne foy*]," maintains the first statement of this warning (which is at the same time an exoneration and a dissuasive gesture), is the matrix and the mood of the book (*Essais* 27/*Essays* lix, translation modified). "Good faith," then, on behalf of which the author wants only to be seen "in [his] simple, natural, and everyday fashion, without striving or artifice" (27/lix), with no desire to hide one's faults and frailties: the truth of the self—the faithful picture of the self—is opposed to concealment, cosmetics, and makeup, in a word, to