Narrative Theology

By Harald Weinrich

In those days Jesus of Nazareth gathered tax collectors and sinners around him and told them a story. "Once upon a time," he began, "there lived a man who had a hundred sheep. One day one of the sheep was lost. The man left the flock on its own and went off to look for the lost sheep. After a long time and much trouble he found it, happily put it on his shoulders and brought it back to the flock."

Now among the audience was a young woman who was carrying a purse with money in it. While Jesus was telling his story a coin fell out of her purse and rolled away. She immediately jumped up and ran after the coin until she caught it. The rest of the audience looked very severe and said to Jesus, "Sir, tell this woman not to distract us while we're listening."

Jesus smiled and told them another story. "Many years ago there lived a woman who had ten drachmas. One day she lost one drachma. She searched through the whole house and shone a light into every corner until at last she found the coin she had lost. Full of joy, she called all her friends and neighbours together and told them the good news of how she had found the drachma."

II

What have I just been doing? I have been telling a story. I'm afraid, though, that my story may have caused a double scandal. First, I have produced an apocryphal gospel. As everyone knows, (47) the message of Jesus has been announced once and for all, and not a jot of it may now be changed. Second, I have told a story in an academic journal. You don't tell stories in academic journals, you argue. Take for example *Concilium* for September 1970, which was devoted to the subject "Church History at a Turning Point". Even the titles of the contributions show that arguments, not stories, are to be expected: "Church History and the Reorientation of the Scientific Study of History", "Towards a Displacement of Historicism and Positivism", "Church History in the Context of the Human Sciences", and so on. So my hi-story will, I'm afraid, be a rare exception in this journal. And even I, with my story hardly over, am already beginning to argue. . . .

To begin with, an apologetic argument. Why shouldn't I tell stories in an academic journal if Jesus of Nazareth spent a good part of his public life telling stories? I will be even more precise. He told and retold stories. He did not make up the story of the lost sheep himself, but found it in another storyteller, the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 34. 5-6), and we cannot even say for certain whether Ezekiel was the first to tell it. Jesus passes on the story by retelling it. If we now compare the two stories, we find that they do not agree word for word. Retelling therefore doesn't mean literal repetition; its meaning includes altering the text; this is allowed within limits and is even a normal part of the genre. Immediately after, in the biblical text (Lk. 15), we find the story of the lost coin. The evangelist implies that this story is also connected in tradition with the story of the lost sheep. The story of the lost coin can also be seen as a retelling. It transposes the story of the lost sheep from its setting in a pre-monetary economic system (where sheep were the standard units of exchange) into a literary form appropriate to a monetary economy.[1] In the language of linguistics, this is a case of the common phenomenon of metaphor modernization producing a variant of a story within a relatively fixed structure of tradition.

I have now devoted a moment to linguistic arguments, and if I can also succeed in defending

this literary thesis against all (48) attempts at falsification, the rules of the academic game will be satisfied: *habemus veritatem.* Nevertheless I am still troubled by the question as to whether the story I told at the beginning does not contain the same truth, even though parts of this story were obviously my own invention. The story Jesus of Nazareth tells in Luke is, in both its pre-monetary and its monetary variants, a made-up story, a parable, and yet it never occurs to anyone that this is a reason for thinking it unimportant. The meaning of the story does not suffer from the story's indifference to historical fact. Similarly, from my reading of the Bible, I know of no case in which the disciples or other listeners asked the storyteller Jesus at the end of a story whether what he had said ever really happened. There is no trace of an historical interest in the truth of the story, in the sense of Ranke's "as it really was", either in the disciples' questions or in the Master's answers.[2]

For this reason, I cannot get away from the suspicion that the question about history in theology may be a false one. The biblical tradition seems to imply much more a question about stories. Whole sections of the texts canonized as the Bible, like many of the other oral and written texts of Christianity, are stories. The Bible does of course include in both Old and New Testaments texts of a different character, laws, moral precepts, rules of hygiene, letters of exhortation and expressions of praise and thanksgiving, but it is certainly no exaggeration to say that the most important texts, the ones most relevant to religion, are stories. Jesus of Nazareth is presented to us primarily as a person about whom stories are told, and frequently also as a person about whose storytelling stories are told, and the disciples appear as listeners to stories, who then spread and retell, orally or in writing, the stories they have heard. This is how the stories have come down to us, and when we retell the biblical stories to our children —if we are wise, we don't repeat them word for word—we too become part of an unbroken tradition of storytelling. Christianity is a community of storytellers. No doubt that is not an exhaustive definition; it is equally true to say that it is a community at table together. But after all the two are not so very different: in both (49) cases everyone sits round, with the master of ceremonies in the middle, as in Leonardo's *Last Supper.*

III

We should try to imagine the circle of the apostolic storytelling community in as much detail as possible. The apostles and disciples, whom we must imagine as present in every case, form the inner circle of listeners. But the circle is not cut off from other listeners. Jesus told his stories in public, as we can still see storytellers doing in some societies today. As a rule, the stories were not interpreted but they were continued after the story circle broke up by being spread and retold by their hearers. The stories did not try to produce a clear yes or no as to truth, but more or less relevance. The most relevant stories are directed at faith: they want the hearer himself to imitate the actions of the story. In this process of reception and imitation, an explicit interpretation is not needed, and so even the poor in spirit, to the extent that they are of good will, can receive some benefit from the stories. If Jesus afterwards explains the deeper meaning of the story to his disciples ("I am that good shepherd"), as we often find him doing in the biblical reports, that is an *arcanum,* an exceptional privilege for the first, chosen retellers. By this means they receive in their youth instruction which normally only turns into the wisdom of age at the end of a long life and after listening to very many stories. Time presses when there is a world to be changed, and in this way these young people can become old before their time, elders, *presbyteroi*, priests.

In imitation of Christ, the storyteller from Nazareth about whom many stories were told, we can imagine a Christianity which transmits itself from generation to generation in an endless chain of retellings of stories: "faith comes by hearing". Any resulting change in the characters

and situation of the story would be quite within the limits of narrative tolerance. It would therefore be no infringement of the laws of narrative if a story which in the beginning (but is there ever really a beginning in the storytelling tradition?) was about the killing of the children in Bethlehem was retold with a story of the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany or about the Vietnam war. Some people may (50) say that this is something different. It is true that these are different stories, but these are just the sort of variations with which a story circle can go from one story to another. One story is not necessarily followed by an exactly similar story, or by a directly contrary one, but, as in Boccaccio's *Decameron,* by a different story in some way connected. The point of the story cannot be extracted by an examination in terms of "true" and "false", but becomes part of the wisdom of the ages as a succession of stories gradually builds up our experience of life and salvation.

IV

Christianity, however, did not remain a storytelling community. In its meeting with the Hellenistic world it lost its poetic innocence. In Greek culture, storytelling (myth) had long been subordinate to argument (logos). We can see the subjection of the mythmakers' stories to the arguments of the philosopher very clearly in Plato's writings, even though Plato himself attempted to give a new and philosophical brilliance to myth. On the whole, however, Plato's attempt failed, and ever since philosophers have, with increasing severity, refused to tell stories. It is true that Augustine told the story of his life as confessions, Descartes told of his philosophical method and Pascal called for the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (the God of the stories), Rousseau told of the contradictions in human nature and Nietzsche tells the story of the wisdom of Zarathustra. But on the other side are the chariots of the other philosophers, who see their task as argument and discussion, distinction and theory, and who cannot be persuaded at any price in the scientific world to let a story be a tale. Telling stories, even listening to stories, counts in our society as an unscientific occupation.[3]

V

This places theology and some other disciplines which I will not list individually in a very weak position. Theology, of course, (51) is faced with a more or less canonical body of texts, of which a large and important part is made up of stories. No wonder that scientific theologians could imagine no more urgent task than the transformation of the traditional stories as quickly and completely as possible into non-stories. For a time it even looked as though the opposite would happen, and that the argument itself would be turned into a story: "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God. . . ." All the signals for a story are present in this text, just as in a proper—true or fictional—story. But in this aspect the Johannine prologue has remained barren. The logos was not turned into a story, but instead the biblical stories were turned into logos, an argument.

There is no need to describe this process in detail; one example of its work is the existence of theological journals such as *Concilium,* which also shows signs of the general and age-old tendency to drive narrative out of the Christian tradition through "demythologization". All forms of narrative? Here there is a slight difference between the two large Christian religious communities. Protestant theology as a rule has moved further away from stories than Catholic theology. But there is one strange thing. Even in the most logical demythologizing there remains one striking exception, the story of the Easter event. "He has risen". What does that mean, an event? Anyone who is used to listening to stories immediately hears the story signal: *Accidit ut* . . ., "It came to pass that . . ."—happening, hi-story, story. The Easter event formula

in this way becomes simply an event about which a story is told, and one which sums up all the other events about which stories have been or could be told. But this central event can also produce a situation in which those who have accepted the story of the Easter event as hearers and in this quality acknowledge themselves as members of the Christian storytelling community in the Easter greeting "Christ is risen," are thereby dispensed from accepting or retelling any other stories. The Christian now only needs to retell the story of the Easter event, and no other, an important dispensation in a post-narrative age.

Let us now say something in more detail about which literary forms can count as stories in the Christian tradition. In the first place there are those stories—true or fictional—which a modern (52) sensitivity to literary forms recognizes as stories by particular syntactic signals, especially narrative tenses and certain macro-syntactic adverbs. One such story is that of the prodigal son ("A man had two sons. The elder of them said to his father . . ."). We may also count as a story a style of speaking in which, for example, Luke reports the account of the lost sheep and the lost coin ("Which of you who has a hundred sheep, if he lost one of them, would not leave the other ninety-nine in the wilderness?"). This form could be called the hypothetical narrative: here possible situations are described. Finally, the idea of storytelling, which has already been separated from truth, should also be separated from the past. The question Danto asks at the beginning of his poem (and answers negatively), whether it is possible to tell the story of an event that has not yet happened, must be answered by theologians with a firm yes.[4] The prophecies in the biblical corpus can be regarded as rough sketches in story form of actions which have not yet taken place, as a pre-telling. The fulfilment (or filling out) of the prophecy enriches the outline story with elements of action which are then themselves re-told together with the pre-told prophecy. It is well known that typological structures of this sort, through which different stories are connected with one another, determined the early Christian attitude to history, until modern profane history drove them out of the Christian consciousness.[5]

VI

I have conducted my discussions so far—and this must be my third occasion of scandal—as if I had never heard of the scientific study of history. In what follows I will take the existence of this discipline explicitly into account, and this will shift the ground of our story problem slightly. Slightly, no more, because even the scientific study of history contains an irreducible element of stories. "History tells stories," says Danto. It is a *vera narratio* (53) (Bodin).[6] The science of history, however—and this is its tragedy—wants to tell only true stories and naturally stories with more than individual relevance. It has therefore concentrated a great deal of its theoretical energy on the question of how the truth of a story is to be found and protected against all falsification in the process of transmission.

Theology has been unable to escape from the influence of the scientific study of history, which increased steadily up to the nineteenth century. Theology has also begun to inquire with increasing urgency into the truth-content of its stories. It is open to discussion whether one should regard this process as beginning with doubts about the resurrection, which were answered not merely with a simple retelling, but with an "historical" assertion: "he really rose". Alternatively, the beginning of the alliance between theology and scientific history can be placed at the point where Christian theologians allowed historical textual criticism to be applied to biblical stories. However that may be, theology today is dominated by the unanimous and almost unquestioned view that the biblical stories, if they must be mentioned at all, should be allowed to stand as stories at the most when they can be proved by the recognized scientific methods of history to be true stories. This condition is, however, not

easy to meet, especially where transcendence is concerned, and theology in its rearguard actions likes to take refuge in peripheral stories which are better able to satisfy the methodological principles of the science of history.[7] Theology engages—and here I quote from a theological essay— in form criticism, redaction criticism, the history of traditions, the history of exegesis, church history, the history of theology, the history of popular devotion and the history of research: all to demonstrate the "complete historicity of Christianity".[8]

But the modern science of history is itself full of doubts about its methods, and is asking serious questions about its ability to form theories.[9] It is generally known and the process has been (54) exhaustively described and documented by Reinhard Koselleck, how the (more or less true) stories of the early historiographers became the collective singular of history (*historia ipsa*), and how as a result of the equivocation between history as teller and history as told every possible hypostasis takes the place of the narrator which historians have rushed to give up.[10] Modern historians do all they can in order to have to tell as few stories as possible. "This is not a story" (Diderot) or "No more stories" (Michael Scharang) would be suitable titles for many situations in which historians practise their profession. Golo Mann's vast historical tale of *Wallenstein* (Frankfurt, 1971) is the sublime and possibly the last exception which confirms our rule.

If it is true that storytelling is despised by scientific students of history, we have to ask whether there is any place at all in modern society where it remains unquestioned. Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno say no, and have diagnosed the end of storytelling as a general condition.[11] Nevertheless the novel still exists as a literary form and retains a strong (though not expanding) position on the book market. And "This is not a story" and "No more stories" are in the end titles of stories. I would describe the position in the terms used by the critic Reinhart Baumgart, that there still exists today an extensive narrative literature, but that this form of literature is characterized by a style in which story-telling itself is brought into the story.[12] This means that when writers writing at present tell a story they subject the process of storytelling itself to critical examination and make this examination in turn part of their story. Naive storytelling can be found today almost only in trivial literature. Even the literature of fiction has also clearly lost its narrative innocence and confirms our thesis that this society has, perhaps finally, adopted post-narrative habits of communication.

And now to conclusions. It is impossible simply to nullify (55) the holy or unholy alliance between theology and the sciences, especially the science of history. A merely narrative theology is now hardly conceivable, especially in our post-narrative age. But the criticism of theology, both inside and outside theology proper, may nevertheless be allowed to question the unquestioning acceptance of this old covenant with history. There is no particularly obvious reason why theologians should share the historians' fixation on the truth of a story. A factual basis is not a necessary condition for a story to say something to us or move us. Fictional stories can also produce this effect. It is a category of narrative in general and not specific to history, and a made-up story can do just as much as a story about actual events to produce in its hearers that further action and retelling which is the task of those who want to go and do likewise. Doctrine is not an unavoidable stage in this journey, and may even be a diversion, when one considers that narrative and practical ("political") theology are both concerned with actions. This is not to say that theology will be able to become to such an extent a practical discipline that it can withdraw from the alliance with the theoretical disciplines. Even as a theoretical discipline, however, it does not need, through lack of faith, to deny its traditional stories. A theory of stories would be a wide-ranging programme for such a discipline.[13] With its help theology could also offer assistance to various other disciplines, including history, which have themselves so far shown little interest in the rules governing the stories in their own fields. Nor would this research programme coincide with the familiar methods of form criticism. One important distinction would be that in this theory

of stories the fundamental discrimination in academic circles against stories in favour of discursive argument would be regarded as a negative quality. Even a consistent theory of stories would on (56) this view necessarily prove inadequate in the face of a simple pre-told or retold story which produced an effect on its hearers which made them "doers of the word" and retellers in their turn. If pastoral theology knows such stories, it has chosen the better part. Giuseppe Roncalli knew this intuitively, as he showed when he greeted a group of Jewish visitors with the words, "I am your brother Joseph". That was the retelling of a story which he, the twenty-third Bishop of Rome named John, shared with his Jewish brothers from Israel. The effect of a story on that day recreated a very old storytelling community.

Translated by Francis McDonagh

Endnotes

[1] Bernhard Laum, *Heiliges Geld* (Tübingen, 1924). Cf. H. Weinrich, "Münze und Wort. Untersuchungen an einem Bildfeld", in H. Lausberg and H. Weinrich (ed.), *Romanica. Festschrift für G. Rohlfs* (Halle, 1958), pp. 508-21.

[2] Ranke, *Sämtliche Werke* (Leipzig, and ed., 1874), vol. 33, pp. vi-vii.

[3] For further discussion of this, see my *Literatur für Leser* (Stuttgart, 1972), esp. the chapters "Erzählstrukturen des Mythos" and "Erzählte Philosophie oder Geschichte des Geistes".

[4] Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge, 2nd ed., 1968).

[5] Cf. Erich Auerbach, "Figura", in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* (Berne, 1967), pp. 55-92.

[6] Danto, *op. cit.,* p. 111. Jean Bodin, *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (Amsterdam, 1650; reprint Aalen, 1967), chap. I, p. 8.

[7] H. Peukert, in J. B. Metz and T. Rendtorff (ed.), *Die Theologie in der interdisziplinären Forschung* (Düsseldorf, 1971), p. 68.

[8] U. Wilckens, in Metz and Rendtorff, *op. cit.,* p. 85.

[9] Cf. R. Koselleck and W.-D. Stempel (ed.), *Geschichten und Geschichte* (Munich, 1972).

[10] Reinhard Koselleck, "Historia magistra vitae", in *Natur und Geschichte. Karl Löwith zum* 70. *Geburtstag* (Stuttgart, 1967), pp. 196-219.

[11] W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York, 1968; London, 1970); Th. W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt, 1965), vol. I, p. 63.

[12] R. Baumgart, *Literatur für Zeitgenossen* (Frankfurt, 1966, 2nd edn., 1970); id., *Aussichten des Romans oder Hat Literatur Zukunft?* (Neuwied, 1968).

[13] Suggestions for such a programme are to be found in the most recent work of literary structuralism, where it is not involved in what Alfred Schmidt has called "the latest attack on history". Cf. Roland Barthes, "Introduction a l'analyse structurale des recits", *Communications,* 8 (1966), pp. 1-27; Tzvetan Todorov, *Poetique de la Prose* (Paris, 1971); Karlheinz Stierle, "L'histoire comme exemple, 1'exemple comme histoire", *Poetique,* 10 (1972), pp. 176-98. Volume 18 (1972) of *Communications* is devoted to "L'Evenement" and contains interesting contributions on the place of stories in history.

Source: Johann Baptist Metz and Jean-Pierre Jossua (Ed.), *Fundamental Theology. The Crisis in the Language of Faith* (Concilium, Vol. 5, No. 9), London: Burn & Oastes, 1973, pp. 46-56.