Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction

Narratives of Cultural Remission

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To Iris Nadler, born July 19, 2009
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The book is a product of reading, teaching, research, thinking, and changes of mind that I have gone through over more than a decade. The work alternated with studies of the narratives of Gulag and Holocaust survivors; in the end, those narratives gave my reading of classical English literature a new perspective. All this time I have been fortunate to benefit from consultations with my teacher and colleague Professor H. M. Daleski, sometimes engaging in minor controversies but always radically improving the results of my work with the help of his critical attention (for over thirty years).

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Exploration of a theoretical issue with the help of a variety of narratives ranging between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries leads to lagging behind the newest scholarship on one writer while catching up with the advances in the studies of another. This is my apology for possible oversights. Ars longa vita brevis est; but the length of art is not a burden—it is a source of the never-ending joy of discovery.
C U L T U R E  M U S T  S O M E T I M E S  P A U S E. A non-genetically transmitted system of relationships that mediates between individuals and their world, culture evolves more slowly than the conditions that it processes; as a result, cultural patterns tend to become inimical to individual human life. One of the correctives to the gelling of these patterns is aesthetic experience. By aesthetic experience I mean moments of self-forgetful aesthetic heightening; I do not use this term in the broad sense of aesthetic practice (see Levinson 2003: 4–7). The latter, whether as active attention to the aesthetic side of everyday life or as joining the audience of the arts, is a part of cultural constraints rather than a remission, though it contributes to the conditions under which a remission can take place.

When not reduced to complacent contemplation of personal possessions or skills or of collective cultural products, aesthetic experience is a “time-out” from the consolidation of sociocultural determinacies, a space of inner freedom. Rainer Maria Rilke’s sonnet “Archaic Torso of Apollo” ends with the sense that “[y]ou must change your life”: according to Rilke, in response to great works of visual art, offspring of individual creativity and cultural semiotics, one halts. One then reflects and backtracks before moving on.


Remissions/Reprieves

It is in fact peculiar to Man to combine the highest and the lowest in his nature, and if his dignity depends upon a rigid distinction between the two, his happiness depends upon a skilful removal of the distinction.

—Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, Twenty Fourth Letter

I N T R O D U C T I O N
Great works of literature (which are not necessarily the same as canonical works) likewise constitute conditions for slowing down, for moments of aesthetic self-liberation from the linear temporality of the perception-process. Such conditions are, I believe, a proper object for the study of the ethics of literary form, though their actual fulfillment in individual reading is a matter of contingencies.

By the term “form” I mean not only style and those aspects of narrative structure that have been studied by descriptive poetics (Sternberg 1978, Genette 1980, Rimmon-Kenan 1983) but also what, following Hjelmslev, one might call “the form of content” in terms of the so-called Hjelmslev net: the substance of content vs. the form of content and the substance of expression vs. the form of expression.

The distinctions between these four coordinates cannot be watertight when applied to literary works, such as novels, but they are, nevertheless, helpful as correctives to the traditional juxtaposition of subject matter and technique or even of the “fabula,” as the sum total of information about the fictional world, and the “sjuzhet,” as the sum total of all the devices that render this information (see Toker 1993a: 5–7). The substance of content can be roughly identified with the subject matter, the fields of reference (mainly, the External Field of Reference; see Harshaw 1984), and the ideas that enter a narrative’s “repertoire” (Iser 1978: 69). The form of content is to be sought in

2. Cf. Victor Shklovsky’s (1965) rejection of the concept of the economy of (the reader’s) effort and emphasis on the prolonged contemplation of details of a literary text.
3. Wayne Booth regarded preoccupation with ethical ideas in the repertoire of literary works as one of the reasons for the eclipse of ethical criticism in the seventies and the eighties (1988: 49–79); discussion of such ideas is not an intrinsic literary analysis so long as it is divorced from the study of the formal features that stage these ideas and pit them against one another. For a helpful recent survey of ethical criticism see Mendelson-Maoz 2007.
5. See also Algirdas Greimas’s Aristotelian remark that “form and substance are merely operational concepts that depend on the chosen level of analysis: what will be termed substance on one level can be analyzed as form on a different level” (1974: 26; my translation).
6. Benjamin Harshaw’s (Hrushovski’s) 1984 article “Fictionality and Fields of Reference” has initiated the influential distinction between External Fields of Reference (history, geography, culture, philosophy, etc., which are accessible from sources external to a given text whose pertinent details claim referential truth value) and Internal Fields of Reference (a network of interrelated characters, themes, ideas, plot events) that the text constructs and refers to at the same time.
the relationships between the themes, patterns of imagery, the deployment of the motifs as parts of the Internal Field of Reference, and the corresponding shaping of the plot. The *substance of expression* is the verbal medium of literary communication; the *form of expression* is the style and such narrative techniques as the point of view, flashbacks, anticipations, heteroglossia, the monitoring of the flow of information, and the handling of blanks and gaps and of scene and summary. My 1993 book *Eloquent Reticence* was mainly concerned with the reader-response aspects of the form of expression. The current project will retain this concern but will shift its emphasis to the study of the form of content. Cora Diamond’s influential statement that the moral philosophy of a narrative is bound up with the appropriateness of a particular form for a particular content (1991) actually points to the convergence of the aesthetic and the ethical in the congruence of the form (of both the content and the expression) with the *substance* of the individual work’s content. It is suggestive that in his “Essays upon Epitaphs” William Wordsworth found in the congruence of the content and stance the explanation for the aesthetic effect of plain epitaphs written by the ordinary bereaved (1974: 63–93). The ethics of narrative form and the aesthetic experience of the reader are the solid base and the contingent epiphenomenon of the same conditions of perception.

The ethics of narrative form need not entail an expectation that a work should have a “moral in tow” (Nabokov 1970: 317). Nor is it solely defined by the novel’s repertoire of ethical issues—these are, as noted above, part of the “substance of content.” It is the congruence of a narrative’s form (the form of both its content and its expression) with the substance of its content that creates conditions for aesthetic experience. Against many odds, I still believe that aesthetic experience has an intrinsic ethical effect, irrespective of the presence or absence of “message.” Arthur Schopenhauer regarded aesthetic experience as morally positive because, for its (brief) duration, it silences the immanent Will (1969, I: 363). Subtracting the mystical touch of this theory, one can see the ethical value of genuine aesthetic experience in its momentary disinterestedness (cf. Kant 1946: 38–39ff.), its subject’s reprieve from social interaction, from needs of survival and pressures of self-advancement, or from more extended personal interests.

Much criticism, mainly but not exclusively on ideological grounds,7 was leveled at the notion of aesthetic experience in the past decades. This criticism was partly prompted by skeptical attitudes to disinterestedness, whether

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7. See, in particular, Eagleton 1990. The opposite side of the debate is represented by, for instance, Isobel Armstrong 2000, George Levine 1994 and 2001, Tzachi Zamir 2006, and Thomas Docherty 2003—as well as by the present study.
personal, cultural, or sociopolitical. The only thing that I concede to such skepticism is that spans of liberating disinterest seldom last long. Indeed, audience response to a work of art is usually characterized by a to-and-fro movement, now transcending the self, now returning to the self and its physical or psychological needs and social and cultural commitments. This to-and-fro movement has no intersubjective structure except when monitored by the grooves provided by specific (mainly formal) aspects of the work. A work of literary art invites aesthetic self-forgetfulness, but there is no guarantee that an individual reader will respond to its felicities with the aesthetic heightening that they merit. In other words, there is no guarantee for the movement “to”—but the conditions that the text creates for the movement “fro” have a firmer intersubjective basis: the text can disrupt the aesthetic heightening that it induces. In *Eloquent Reticence* I have shown how narratives can maneuver that part of the reader’s response which is not totally disinterested—the one that involves a power struggle with the text, the stakes being our sense of our own sagacity and our belief in the correctness of our own attitudes. Here I would like to emphasize that in addition to producing a variety of ethical effects, the text’s *agon* with the reader has the general effect of puncturing the reader’s complacency—the virtual ivory-tower complacency that gives aesthetics a bad name. Novels do not give us unalloyed aesthetic pleasure—they also strike at our belief in the correctness of our expectations or insights, our intellectual powers, our erudition, our Podsnappian habits of thought. Time and again they demand a counter-Narcissistic loss of disinterest and promote (without ensuring it) a self-critical self-reflexive twist—from reading the narrative to being read by it (cf. Toker 2008a). The process of reading tends to oscillate between moments of self-forgetful appreciation and spans of self-involved agonistic engagement with the text.

Paradoxically, most kinds of aesthetic experience (like, for that matter, other kinds of cultural remission) are possible only on the basis of suf-

8. George Steiner has succinctly formulated what troubles several post–World War II generations: “We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning. To say that he has read them without understanding, or that his ear is gross, is cant” (1998: ix). The objection that such a person’s enjoyment of his nation’s high cultural achievements is not aesthetic experience but complacent enjoyment of his own understanding, his cultural proficiency (a version of the same self-aggrandizement through art that Browning has explored in “My Last Duchess”) is irrefutable yet also insufficient. It must be complemented by the following claim: aesthetic experience merely creates the conditions for ethical growth—the actualization of this growth demands an appropriate prior ethical commitment (see Harrison 1994).

9. In practice, the conditions that promote a self-reflexive twist in some readers elicit the hostility of other readers, who choose, for instance, to accuse a writer such as Nabokov of cruelty and a writer such as Joyce of self-indulgence for the density of internal and external reference.
ficient cultural proficiency—which also threatens their purity by liability to self-congratulation. The ethics of narrative form is the other side of the to-and-fro undulation of aesthetic experience: as work-ethics it strives for the artistic feats that can invite cultural remissions; as ethics of interpersonal communication, it plants stumbling blocks that, on the contrary, discontinue such time-outs. The puncturing of aesthetic self-effacement may then lead back to aesthetic experience—in the shape of “meaning effects,” that is, the shapely congruence of conceptual structures (the work’s own, or ours in conceptual processing of the work) that is no less arresting than the “presence effects” (Gumbrecht 2004: 104–11) that, in a literary work, are associated with style, varieties of emotional appeal, and dramatic illusion.

The above remarks about the aesthetical background of the ethics of form are a broad declaration of faith. I shall now turn to a statement of specific intention: this book examines narratives that simulate the effects of aesthetic experience by staging three kinds of culturally determined cultural remissions: the oppositional, the carnivalesque, and the ludic. These narratives explore and thematize detours from the logical course of sociocultural determinacy, ultimately leading to a conscious reendorsement of the dominant culture but with a degree-of-freedom openings for change. While creating the aesthetic conditions for such detours in the individual reading process—a work of art “suddenly tears” (or perhaps gently releases) “the person experiencing it out of the context of his life, and yet relates him back to the whole of his existence” (Gadamer 1989: 70)—these narratives provide models, each in its own medium and manner, of parallel cultural remissions.

My choice of materials is associated with a private microhistory of attempts to understand what the ethics of narrative form might consist in and how it might be sought. The work began subliminally when, on reading Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay on Faulkner, I came across a sentence that would become the motto of several of my fiction courses at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: “A writer’s technique always relates back to his metaphysics” (1962: 84). This called forth the question whether such regularity would also be true of the writer’s moral philosophy.

Trained as a structuralist, I have watched the technique of all the narratives that I read, seeking, among other things, an answer to that question but always finding that similar techniques can be associated with totally

different ethical theories. Things changed when my attention shifted from rhetoric to broader morphological properties of narrative—to the “form of content.” Martha Nussbaum’s *The Fragility of Goodness* provided a test for my incipient hypothesis by associating different *genres* of Ancient Greek literature, for example, tragedy, dialogue, essay, with specific philosophical perspectives on the possibility of restricting the role of chance in human affairs. Though Nussbaum’s book (and her subsequent work) has been very stimulating for me, I found this kind of link between moral philosophy and literary genre tenuous—if only because it worked one way rather than both ways: it can be convincingly argued that Aristotle’s position, in contrast to Plato’s ethics, could best be presented in an essay rather than in a dialogue, but the genre of the essay is clearly amenable to representing sundry other ethical perspectives.

Yet Nussbaum also helpfully suggests that the relationship between the contents of an ethical theory and the kind of discourse suitable to it can emerge only given an appropriate classification of ethical theories—and that this classification should be based not on textbook distinctions between, for instance, rationalism and emotivism, or relativism and contractarianism, but on attitudes to specific issues. In *The Fragility of Goodness* such a touchstone is the topos of staving off the uncontrollable disruptions of the best-laid plans of men.

My touchstone in the following chapters is the *estimates of moral motivation*. The following regularity emerges, by way of induction, from the analysis of a series of literary works: a “high” view of human potentiality tends to be associated with the carnivalesque mode in narrative; and conversely, the carnivalesque mode can most often be read as a symptom of a high view of motivation.

I take the concept of the *high view* of human potentiality from Dorothea Krook’s *Three Traditions of Moral Thought* (1959), a pioneering work that combines literary readings of philosophical texts from Plato to F. H. Bradley with philosophical readings of literary texts such as novels by D. H. Lawrence.11 At stake is a belief in the efficacy of values that transcend self-interest and include “charity, or loving kindness (which is not the same as mere kindness); humility, which presupposes self-knowledge . . . , the desire to serve our fellow men before ourselves; the readiness to forgive those who have done us injuries; the power to renounce pleasure for the sake of good;

11. This book is seldom read these days; the changes in the tone of analysis and the effect of poststructuralism on philosophical vocabulary have relegated it to intellectual debris. Yet the brilliance of Krook’s analysis and the pedagogical clarity of her discourse could set a standard for further ethical criticism.
and, above everything, the belief in the power of love to conquer and transform all the tragic disabilities which belong to man by the condition of his humanity” (Krook 4–5). These are the nondenominationally religious terms in which Krook defines humanism, which she distinguishes from the Platonic-Christian tradition of moral thought (Plato, St. Paul, St. Augustine) insofar as humanism dispenses with “the necessity of a supernatural sanction” (6) for its transcendent order of values and treats such values as accessibly human. It is in themselves that men and women can find the strength for selflessness; it is in themselves that they can find the freedom from the self-interested ambitions of the social world (the one that is too much with us). However, while giving human nature credit for the lofty flights of the spirit, the high view likewise envisages the depths of iniquity into which a human being can fall.

Krook regards this type of humanism (which she distinguishes from other types; 7–8) as religious because it amounts to a faith in the possibility of selflessness and because its cornerstone is love. One might add, however, that the high view of human motivation has no absolute need for the difficult idea of “love” beyond the domain of private life. As a motive-force in the public sphere and in the relationships with one’s neighbors (in the scriptural as well as the municipal sense), love can be replaced by the more reliable secular idea of respect.

Such a replacement need not conflate the high and the low views of motivation, even though the “low” view of the human reach likewise replaces the unwieldy notion of love by approximations, such as friendship (Aristotle, Book VIII of Nicomachean Ethics) or social sympathy (Hume). The low view (Krook 3) is skeptical about the possibility of self-transcendence. “Low” here does not mean “sordid”; it means merely that motivation is traced to some form of self-interest, with self-sacrifice and idealistic supererogation reinterpreted in terms of extended personal interests, or contractarian calculation of reciprocity, or psychological egoism that redescribes the most selfless acts as those impelled by the subject’s pursuit of a pleasurable self-congratulatory state of mind. Strictly speaking, this is a “middle” rather than a “low” view: its skepticism concerning idealistic motivation goes hand in hand with a readiness to ascribe evil, even the absolute evil that the twentieth century has celebrated with uncommon gusto, to the intensification of understandable and semiotically analyzable conflicts of interest. Indeed, novelists who write in the “biographical” rather than the “carnivalesque” mode (Bakhtin 1984: 101) tend to keep murderous hatred, sadistic violence, slaughter, genocide away from the painstakingly evolved civilities of their fiction.

The high view of human motivation is easier to maintain in thinking of
fictional characters than of real people. It takes imagination to enter into the motives of fictional as well as of “real” people, but in the former case one may have narrative authority on one’s side. In “real life,” moreover, in these days of iconoclastic historiography and demystifying journalism, the public is trained to read human conduct in terms of a continuum between different scopes of self-interest and to withhold credit for disinterestedness: interests, we are taught to think, can be personal or variously extended—the welfare of the family, the group, or the nation is one’s own delayed interest, whereas altruistic motivation is all too often reduced to psychological egoism—one of the closed conceptual systems within which everything can be adjusted to the foundational idea or else explained away. Legends and novels, however, can still remind us that the agent’s motivation may transcend the prison house of actual or psychological self-interest and be conceptualized as a commitment to the good of others, that actions can be evaluated deontologically—as right or wrong in their own right rather than in terms of serving or impeding benevolent goals, that the self-congratulation at having done good can be perceived not as the purpose of doing good but as a byproduct (cf. Harrison 1994: 82–98). Since individual intention and the proportion of good and bad faith in its conceptualizations are seldom available to scholarly objectivity, literature, the work of imagination and memory, can supply no less workable material for the study of this subject than sociological fact-finding. And one of the numerous reasons why literature can overlap with moral philosophy (without providing an alternative for it) is that aesthetic impact involves a license for imaginative entering into human motivation and the kind of suspension of ethical skepticism that is akin to the suspension of disbelief in attending to the imaginary.  

Respect for others and commitment to the good of others are, of course, two-pronged notions. In the twentieth century, the utopian beliefs that privileged a single notion of universal happiness led to massively murderous despotisms. Care for the well-being of others (“happiness” is a taller order) is “intrinsically” good—and yet not a few crimes have been committed in its service.

When in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* Dorothea Brooke must reconcile herself to being barred from benevolent social action (her resignation follows several thwarted attempts at practical endeavor), she is aided by her

12. Bernard Harrison’s work on the issue (1989, 1994) argues that the theory of psychological egoism cannot be refuted on its own ground, by counterexamples, but it can be abandoned in favor of viewing the pleasurable state of mind that results from a good deed not as the goal but as the bonus of that deed.

13. The 1983 special issue of *New Literary History* (15/1) was almost entirely devoted to these problems. They are taken up in Nussbaum’s *Love’s Knowledge* and her later work.
belief that “by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don’t quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil—widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower” (1977: 270). A young intellectual praises this belief as “a beautiful mysticism” (271)—only to be asked not to give it categorizing names. With Kant, George Eliot is ready to grant moral credit to intention, even if the agent has no practical means of translating it into action. There may, indeed, be a touch of religiosity (some would say “superstition”) in the formula “widening the skirts of light” for the idea of commitment to the good of others, yet this kind of religiosity does not conflict with a secular deontology; rather it constitutes an imaginative type of externalism—that is, in tune with Feuerbach’s view of Christianity, it projects beyond the self what is the most noble, generous, and honorable in one’s own inner life.

The high view of human motivation is deontologically oriented, but it need not reject the hedged-in validity of utilitarian principles. The utilitarian view of the good (as what serves the greatest happiness of the largest number) may be the necessary balance to deontology which, when carried to its logical extreme, is liable to lead to tragic consequences (“May the world perish but justice be done”14). If one believes, with Iris Murdoch (1956), that freedom of the will consists not in the choice of action but in the ideological choices prior to action, endorsement of cultural remission may lead one to opt for productive tensions between such clashing criteria for ethical value: an occasional rethinking of a rigid principle can ultimately reinforce this principle by replacing automatic consistency by conscious choice. By staging cultural remissions,15 fictional narratives may loosen the hold of habitual maxims on individual conduct, subject the maxims to tests, and preempt their totalitarian control, whether over a society as a whole or over the moral economy of individual agents.

The structural pattern that applies to the principles of higher human motivation, namely the need to relax one’s hold on what one wishes to consolidate, is parallel to and aesthetically congruent with the semiotics of the carnival—and with oppositional practices in general. Letting go in order to hold on is what festive carnival is about:16 what it disrupts in order to

15. See Gumbrecht 2004: 85 on carnival as a self-suspension of the culture of presence.
16. But not only festive carnival; as H. M. Daleski has shown (1977), the theme of losing oneself in order to find oneself again recurs through the (predominantly non-carnivalesque) fiction of Joseph Conrad.
preserve is *individual discreteness* rather than social compartmentalization. The ruling classes of ancient Greece admitted the plebeian Dionysian festivities as a circumscribed safety valve: Euripides’ *Bacchae* stages the dire consequences both of a king’s rigid resistance to carnival culture and of the Bacchantes’ failure to set a temporal limit to their vertiginous transports. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche suggests that Greek tragedy celebrated a cooperative reconciliation of the Dionysian and the Apollonian impulses: the chorus in the orchestra part of the theatre extended the affects of the audience and enacted the ritual Dionysian intoxication whose outcome was the Apollonian dream of the gods and heroes on the stage. Nietzsche goes on to blame Euripides for destroying the classical tragedy by placing the audience on the stage, that is, by populating the stage not with the distilled artifacts of an Apollonian dream but with a mixed bag of human affects—an intellectual pabulum suitable for Euripides’ target audience of one, who, according to Nietzsche, was Socrates. If Nietzsche’s insight has truth value in addition to poetic appeal, it might further mean that when tragedy lost its function as an intellectually sublimating receptacle of Dionysian energies, this function may have been taken over, in a more diffuse way, by other literary genres. In modern culture, the circumscribed ritualistic carnival has likewise yielded to the less concentrated endemic carnivalesque that Mikhail Bakhtin, the leading interdisciplinary theorist of the carnival, traces back to Menippean satire and Socratic dialogue.17

This view of the carnivalesque should be distinguished from the conciliatory “safety-valve” theory of the festive, deservedly critiqued (see, for instance, Bristol 1985: 26–39) for the elision of other factors, such as the controlling influence of ancestral rituals in addition to that of the contemporary authorities. The main flaw of the “safety-valve” theory18 lies in its suggestion that when the festivity is over, the valve closed, things return to normal. This is not a necessary consequence of seeing the carnivalesque as a cultural remission: the degree of self-liberation that is created during the remission cannot be totally canceled, nor can the things said be unsaid.

17. Like numerous turn-of-the-century Russian intellectuals before him, Bakhtin was to a large extent influenced by Nietzsche (see Clowes 1988: 114–223; as well as Curtis (1986); Groys (1994); and Rosenthal 1986, 1994: 15–21). The Dionysian spirit described in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* the syndrome of vertiginous transport, intoxication, blurring borderlines between personalities and their environment, of vitality that transcends itself in mystical moves, of excess in body language, reversal of hierarchies, and dissolution of the individual in the mass—obviously presides over Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, especially in its Rabelaisian version, sharply contrasting with the Apollonian dream of discrete shape, individual grandeur, and hermetic finish.

again. The temporary release of the sociocultural safety valve shares some of the structural features of the middle part of the rites of passage (Van Gennep 1960 [1908]), travel through liminal spaces that allows for an almost Saturnalian freedom and creates intervals “of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance” (Turner 1982: 44) and the causal-temporal chain of necessity is loosened, pushed back, left in suspense.

The semiotics of the carnival presented in the chapter on genre in Bakhtin’s Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics and in his book Rabelais and His World may be seen as deployed along the horizontal and the vertical axes. On the horizontal axis, the carnival is defined as a pageant without footlights, a show during which the spectators merge with the participants. On the vertical axis, everyday hierarchical social order is turned, temporarily, upside down: kings are uncrowned and jesters elevated to thrones, comic mésalliances are formed and celebrated. The horizontal axis is characterized by the blurring of borderlines; the vertical by a volte-face, a radical role switch, often to the tune of profanation (Stallybrass and White 1986: 27–79). In fact, the distinction between the merging and the switching is more significant than the metaphors of the horizontal and the vertical: whereas social stratification is usually schematized in vertical terms, it can equally be seen as a matter of horizontal osmosis when people who usually stay in separate social compartments do not so much exchange places as enter into free and familiar contact with each other. The carnivalesque erasure of boundaries between classes and groups finds its extensions in the interpenetration of bodies and their physical environment, in the blending of individual minds into proximate intellectual niches, and in disruptions of self-containment, in temporary relinquishment of the discreteness of the self and its affects. 19

The chronotope of the carnival (see Bakhtin 1981: 84–258) is that of circumscribed time and open communal spaces. In fiction, in contrast to actual carnival celebrations, the carnivalesque spaces are open not only in the agora fashion (marketplaces, public squares, streets) but also in a fashion suggestive of transition (liminal spaces, the threshold, the gate, the ha-ha) or of...

19. This view presupposes the sense of self—not necessarily as a stable monolith but possibly, to adapt the language of George Eliot’s Middlemarch, as a “centre of self”—whose ultimate circumference may be nowhere but whose fractal boundaries are sufficiently defined to know a breach when one occurs. For a useful discussion of the recent critiques of the notions of the self, identity, and individuality as well as of the philosophical approaches that rehabilitate them, see Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 12–18.
perilous communication (windows, judas holes, keyholes, permeable partitions, leaks in a boat). The diametrical opposite of the carnivalesque chronotope is that of the totalitarian prison, with its severely limited space and seemingly endless time: carnival is a time-space of free act and thought. As I show in the chapters that follow, the blurrings, reversals, and chronotopical features of the carnival overlap with the morphology of related phenomena, such as crisis situations, crowd experience, games of vertigo, empathy, and practices of Lent.

In the past decades Bakhtin’s work has occasionally been criticized for factual imprecision or historically inaccurate conceptualizations (see, for instance, Berrong 1986, Averintsev 1992, Coronato 2003). Most of this criticism pertains to Rabelais and His World, which tends to put literary material at the service of anthropological analysis; in contrast, Bakhtin’s application of the phenomenology of the carnival to the study of Dostoevsky’s art, demonstrating the value of anthropological notions in literary analysis, has been seldom challenged. But the present study is not devoted to Bakhtin: his notion of the carnival is here used instrumentally, for the sake of drawing a phenomenological link between narrative morphology and moral vision.

I see the carnivalesque as a literary mode rather than a genre. A “mode” can be broadly defined as the manner in which a literary text can be perceived as truth-telling. In The Anatomy of Criticism Northrop Frye shows how several genres may belong to the same mode while different works of the same genre may span more than one mode; he divides literary works into modes according to the relative status of the main heroes with respect to their environment and with respect to the reader. Other modal classifications can be made for specific purposes—thus, if one wishes to explore the limits of referentiality, one can classify narratives into those belonging to the factographic, realistic, experimental, and self-reflexive modes (Toker 1997b). Examination of the nature and intensity of the carnivalesque elements in narrative can likewise establish a modal scale, ranging from the carnivalesque via mixed or intermediate cases to the strictly non-carnivalesque (Bakhtin’s “biographical”). As in Frye’s model, the basis of distinction here is the form of content: in the carnivalesque works, the plots, character portrayal, and the deployment of motifs stage the two main carnival topoi, reversals and boundary-blurring. In contrast, the “biographical” pole of this modal scale tends to be dominated by the representation of solid hierarchies (albeit with
a degree of vertical mobility) and, on the horizontal plane, social and psychic partitioning (with occasional switching of places). The distinction between the two is a matter of prevalence and emphasis; its modal character is bound up with the estimation that the works suggest concerning the stability or fluidity of ethical and sociocultural relations.

The intermediate cases are characterized by the absence of one of the two main carnival topoi.

Carnival and Lent are limited in time. On the expiration of the appointed period, the previous social and interpersonal relationships are restored, even though the psychological shifts produced by the interlude may remain irreversible. Unless carnival and (literal or figurative) fast are endemically contained and sporadically recurrent in a minor way amid everyday realities, the absence of the time limit for either feast or fast in individual narratives usually signifies a corruption of these phenomena: it is not so much what distinguishes the carnivalesque from the “biographical” as what signals the spuriousness or the deterioration of the carnivalesque, abuse of the values celebrated and enhanced by genuine festive expansion or by ritual self-purification. True carnival can be a vehicle of social protest, but a fake carnival may use the forms of a popular festivity for purposes of a radical attack on social structures (the case described in Carnival in Romans by Le Roy Ladurie, 1979). Carnival celebrates the liberty of the body and spirit even when there is an element of ad hoc secret power-play in the circumscribed license of specific carnival events. In contrast are the unhedged, corrupt, or fake carnivals that, instead of creating an interlude for such liberation, enact not cultural remissions but radical power struggles that seek to create their own legitimation.

Genuine carnival, like genuine Lent, is not revolutionary but “oppositional.” The theory of oppositional practices evolved in Michel de Certeau’s The Practice of Everyday Life (1984) has been fruitfully adapted to narratology by Ross Chambers.20 Chambers’s Room for Maneuver (1991) discusses narratives that stage social oppositionality and have the potential of affecting the structure of the audience’s desires.

Oppositional practices are “individual or group survival tactics that do not challenge the power in place, but make use of circumstances set up by that power for purposes the power may ignore or deny” (Chambers 1). They

20. See also Clabough 2003.
often consist in making subversive use of imposed structures or rules for unforeseen purposes:

I am perhaps a waiter, at the beck and call of a demanding general public that forces me to smile (through gritted teeth sometimes) for the tips I demeaningly live on—but I can give myself the mild satisfaction of punishing my more obnoxious customers by selective application of the house rules, blandly denying them a second roll or their first choice of salad dressing. Or again I am a student, attempting to achieve an education in the face of academic rules and a computerized bureaucracy; but I can use nice old Dr. X in the clinic to get a certificate that will oblige Professor Y to give me the extension I need on my term paper so that I can study for Professor Z’s final. (6)

Oppositional behavior eventually reinforces the prevailing systems “by making them livable” (7) and by helping preserve the individual dignity of the disadvantaged.\(^2\) It is thus a radical alternative to “the worse the better” principle of the anarchist agenda.

Carnival celebrates oppositionality as a cultural remission, a respite from the straitjacket of everyday social contracts. However, as the institution of the Lord of Misrule suggests,\(^2\) the disruptions that it wreaks usually proceed with reference to the prevailing power structures: \textit{awareness} of the hierarchies that are turned upside down and of the borderlines that are transgressed is part of the \textit{jouissance}. Oppositionality, however, is not always carnivalesque; when it is not carnivalesque, the ethical expectations behind it tend to be both more limited and, in a sense, less troubled. Carnival can be regarded as a special case of oppositionality.

21. Chambers goes on to say that oppositional practices ‘are in one sense what Michel Serres would call the ‘noise’ that seems to disturb the system but without which it would not work; they are in this sense needed by the system, and an integral part of it. Thus every rule produces its loophole, every authority can be countered by appeal to another authority, every front-stage social role one places has a backstage where we are freer to do, say, or think as we will. The \textit{diffuseness of power}, in short, both makes ‘opposition’ possible and supports the structures of power that are in place. In this respect, however, it is worth noticing that there are societies whose power structure is relatively ‘loose’ and those where, to the contrary, it is relatively ‘tight,’ and in the latter the degree of tolerance towards oppositional behavior that characterizes ‘loose’ societies is replaced by an effort to stamp it out. In particular, in societies in which the dream of a concentrated power, centralized in a single person or office, presupposes absolute control of the population, the effort is to penetrate the ‘backstage’ areas of the personal, the private, the informal (the ‘thought police’), to prevent the use of authority against authority (by making them all accountable to a central power), and to cut out loopholes (sometimes by abolishing rules themselves and substituting the reign of the arbitrary)” (7).

22. Tony Tanner (1977) discusses this institution as analogous to censorship.
Another form of cultural remission, compatible with the carnivalesque but constituting a new parameter, is the phenomenon of play—games, *paidēia*, the ludic experience of make-believe. In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* Friedrich Schiller discusses play as a corrective to culture, which he understands (with emphasis on the individual rather than social/cognitive dimension) as a search for balance between sense and emotion on the one hand and rationality on the other (1965: 68–69): play supplements distinction and equilibrium by a degree of osmosis between the “material impulse” and the “formal impulse” (72). Continuing, as it were, Schiller’s suggestion that “Man shall *only play* with Beauty, and he shall play *only with Beauty*” (80), Hans-Georg Gadamer discusses aesthetic consciousness in terms of play, a to-and-fro movement as of light and shade within the game (1989: 101–10), noting that “in playing, all those purposive relations that determine active and caring existence have not simply disappeared, but are curiously suspended” (102). With aesthetic experience, as well as with the carnival and with oppositional loopholes, play shares the effect of “an intermezzo” (Huizinga 1955: 9) in our daily lives, a subversion of the grim logical determinacies of homeostatic need, invidious emulation, resentment, biographical mission-orientedness, or social regulation. Carnival, oppositionality, and games constitute circumscribed cultural remissions that ultimately both reinforce the dominant patterns and call them into question, sometimes opening mental avenues for reform.

In *Man, Play, and Games* (1961: 11–35 and 44) Roger Caillois develops Johan Huizinga’s theory of play by classifying games into four types: (1) competition, or *agôn*, in which one relies only on oneself and one’s efforts; (2) chance, or *alea*, in which one counts on everything except oneself, submitting to the powers not under one’s control; (3) imitation, or *mimicry*, in which one imagines that one is someone else and invents an imaginary universe; and (4) vertigo, or *ilinx*, in which one “gratifies the desire to temporarily destroy one’s bodily equilibrium, escape the tyranny of ordinary perception, and provoke the abdication of conscience” (44).23 With the help

23. “Each of the basic categories of play has socialized aspects of this sort. . . . For *agôn*, the socialized form is essentially sports to which are added contests in which skill and chance are subtly blended as in games and on radio and as part of advertising. In *alea*, there are casinos, racetracks, state lotteries, and pari-mutuels. For *mimicry*, the arts involved are public spectacles, puppet shows, the Grand Guignol, and much more equivocally, carnivals and masked balls which are already oriented toward vertigo. Finally, *ilinx* is revealed in the traveling show and the annual or cyclical occasions for popular merry-making and jollity” (Caillois 1961: 41).
of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (2006) one can supplement such a scheme by the notion of *arête*, the striving for perfection, which may variously combine, in aesthetic experience, with each of the four types of games.

A pioneering application of Caillois’s discussion of four types of games to literature was experimented with by Wolfgang Iser (1988: 94–106; 1989: 249–61; and 1993: 247–80). Iser distinguishes between the games *represented in* the text, the games *played by* the text, and the spirit of the game with which the reader approaches a particular text. The three need not coincide either in the same text or in the same reading experience. My discussion of *A Tale of Two Cities* will show, for instance, that though the motif of vertigo (*ilinx*) recurs throughout the narrative along with the recurrent representation of *mimesis*, the narrative technique of the novel (the game played *by* the text) promotes *alea* and restrains *mimicry* in the audience response.

Though the game of *ilinx* is the closest to carnival morphology, in reader response it is *mimicry*, in the shape of sympathetic identification and vicarious experience (see Harding 1962), that actually constitutes the closest approximation to the carnivalesque boundary erosion and hierarchy reversal. “I was Raskolnikov,” said a well-known American writer in a Faculty of Humanities elevator, recollecting his younger days. One frequently hears similar admission: “I was Holden Caulfield,” or “I wanted to be Elizabeth Bennet, Prince Andrey, Scarlett O’Hara.” In contrast, it would be rather uncommon to hear that someone “was” or “wanted to be” Lucy Manette, Isabel Archer, or Clarissa Dalloway. And what about Emilia Gould in Conrad’s *Nostromo*? It is neither the traits of the character nor the morality of his or her conduct so much as the features of the narrative technique that allow or preclude vicarious experience—this is a major aspect of the ethics of literary form. For example, it is a shift in narrative technique that turns the reader who has identified with Dumas’ Edmond Dantès into a detached curious observer of the same character as the Count of Monte Cristo.

The tendency of the carnivalesque on non-carnivalesque reading also depends on period tastes: the sentimentality of sundry Dickensian passages whether in *Little Dorrit* or *The Old Curiosity Shop* swept along the bulk of its nineteenth-century target audience; in the twenty-first century it rather “throws” the reader, disrupting the mimetic response. The types of game played by the reader are, moreover, affected by the background of media culture—the experience of what Marshall McLuhan called the hot media,

24. Caillois’s use of the term *mimicry* is radically different from the use of the term *mimesis* in literary theory from Aristotle to Auerbach; in his system it is a type of game rather than a synonym of “representation.”
such as films in movie theaters, tends to be significantly more aleatic and vertiginous (and largely carnivalesque) than the response to the cold media, such as novels have become in the age of what Wordsworth would have called “gross and violent stimulants” (1956: 155). At the candlelit desks of the past, novels had a greater power of casting a spell on the readers and carrying them away from their own predicaments and routines. These days “readerly” texts are more likely to match this effect, whereas the rhythm of reading the “writerly” text (Barthes 1974: 4) is closer to a miniature model of sociocultural existence, with bittersweet daily discipline at times joyfully disrupted by interludes of fascination.

Works of fiction discussed in this book are instances of the carnivalesque, the intermediate, and the oppositional non-carnivalesque modes. Chapter 1 discusses the treatment of the carnivalesque in three of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s stories in order to isolate the literary counterparts of the anthropological features of the carnivalesque—in particular, those features of the form of expression that tend to accompany the topoi of topsy-turvydom and horizontal osmosis (the carnivalesque traits of the form of content). The chapters that follow distinguish between the carnivalesque and the non-carnivalesque works on the basis of these formal features and examine the ethics of narrative form mainly in terms of the relationship between the form and the substance of content in each work (rather than in terms of reader response as in Toker 1993a). Starting with chapter 2 the materials are arranged chronologically: from the corpus of each writer I have chosen a work that marks a slot in the paradigm of cultural remissions. I discuss Fielding’s *Tom Jones* as an oppositional narrative, but one that also displays numerous features of the carnivalesque. Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (chapter 3) is my example of a somewhat diminished yet almost endemic *carpe diem* carnival, one that resurges as a compensation for the harshness of the human predicament. Jane Austen’s novels *Sense and Sensibility* and, in particular, *Mansfield Park*

25. Barthes’ distinction between readerly and writerly texts may be vividly illustrated by the Jewish parable I heard from my father. When a young man tells his father that he wants to be a writer, the father replies by asking, “What kind of writer do you want to be?” He then draws two images. One is of a young girl reading a novel on a Friday night: the candle will soon burn down (and it is forbidden to light a new one on a Sabbath); she wants to know how it will all end; feverishly, she starts reading and turning the pages faster and faster, until, the candle having almost melted, she peeps into the last page. The other image is of an old man wheeled out into the garden in his chair, reading a book, putting it away and thinking, dozing off, awakening and reading again, thinking and dozing off again. “So what kind of books do you want to write?”
are examples of the non-carnivalesque oppositional (chapter 4). Chapter 5 analyzes the ambivalent treatment of the “bitter carnival” (Bernstein 1992) in Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Chapters 6 and 7 are devoted to narratives that prominently display one of the two central topoi of the carnivalesque: George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* thematizes the horizontal blurring of boundaries between the self and the other (chapter 6); and Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (chapter 7), set against the changes in the late-nineteenth-century agricultural trade, focuses on vertical reversals of hierarchies while also examining the submerged continuities of the past. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* can be regarded as a carnivalesque novel since the topos of horizontal osmosis is also present in it to some extent; *Daniel Deronda*, however, is an intermediate case.

Further down the modal scale, chapter 8 analyzes Conrad’s “The Secret Sharer,” which deals with a non-carnivalesque type of kinship between the self and the other—a kinship that excludes the pooling of affects. On the basis of this novella I also discuss the morphology of test situations, contrasting it with the morphology of carnivalesque crisis situations, and the narratological conditions for the games of *alea* and *agôn* played in and by the texts.

Chapter 9 moves from the carnivalesque to radical self-carnivalization. It analyzes an idea that Joyce’s *Ulysses* shares with Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*—and the way in which this novel carnivalizes not only the social mores it refers to but also the philosophical thought that is largely accountable for its own conceptual organization.

This chapter is followed by a remission, a caesura, an inter-section that points to a radical break in the history and the cultural history of the twentieth century. A short introduction precedes a reprinting of a story by Varlam Shalamov—to ease Anglophone readers’ access to one of the stories that are discussed in the last chapter of the book. These stories, Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist” and Shalamov’s “The Artist of the Spade,” shift the focus from carnival to Lent, or rather to forms of corrupted Lent. The former story foreshadows and the latter processes some of the atrocities that the logical cultural determinacies of the early twentieth century turned out to be powerless to anticipate or preempt.

Each of the ten chapters deals with ways in which the narratives explore cultural remissions and with the conditions they set for the reader’s experience of aesthetic or intellectual self-liberation. Implicit (and at times explicit) in the analysis is the semiological model of semantics/syntactics/pragmatics (cf. Morris 1946: 217–20; Toker 2008b and 2010): the morphological features of the carnivalesque and the oppositional are discussed in relation
to the semantics of the ethical vision, the syntactics of the aesthetic pattern, and, to a smaller extent, the pragmatics of the text–reader communication. Bakhtinian categories are, indeed, used instrumentally, but the narratives themselves are read not only as examples of phenomena that the book deals with but also for their own sake. The narratives discussed in the following chapters have been analyzed so often that an additional analytic iteration runs the risk of turning into what Umberto Eco has called Tetrapyloctomy, “the art of splitting a hair four ways” (1990: 64). To avoid that effect I focus on less discussed aspects of these works, and try to take advantage of their canonical status to show how a new theoretical framework can lead to new insights. Frankly, however, the relationship between a new theoretical basis and a new interpretive point is often etiologically circular.

Two more preliminary remarks:

(1) As is well known, the ethical system inferable from the text (and personified as “the implied author”) need not be unambiguously ascribed to historical authors. As Sheldon Sacks noted in 1966, the “signals which influence our attitudes toward characters, acts, and thoughts represented in novels” are often “postulated upon rhetorical signals dictated by purely aesthetic considerations; the signals, then, would have no specifiable relationship to the ethical predilections of the novelist who employed them” (230). Yet narrative details capable of generating ethical inferences unacceptable to the historical author can be revised or neutralized: one can argue, for instance, that Jane Austen has Lady Catherine de Burgh pay an unreasonable visit to Elizabeth Bennet so that the happy ending of the novel should hinge on the results of this debacle rather than on the breaking of a promise (see Karen Newman 1983: 704). Specific rhetorical effects may or may not be introduced for purely aesthetic purposes, and may not have been adjusted to the ethical implications of the plot events. Here one treads the slippery ground of intentionality. 26 Indeed, formal considerations may have acted as search instruments for the author, as an aid to ethical reflection—just as in classical poetry meter and rhyme often served as means of philosophical outreach. However this may be, formal features can be viewed as guidelines, or, conversely, as “stumbling blocks” (Harrison 1993/1994), in the reader’s construction of the ethical system for which the work has created a matrix.

26. For a new perspective on the issue of intentionality see Herman 2007: the idea of the concrete intentions of the individual author can be replaced by the operation of the craft “know-how” through which means are adjusted to goals, or rhetoric to poetics.
The *ethics of literary form* implies a *reciprocal* influence between the ethical ideas and the formal aspects of a literary work: not only does the idea-content call for a specific manner of articulation but the aesthetic subtleties of the shape of the discourse reflect back on, complicate, and adjust the ethical reality in whose creation the reader is invited to take part.

(2) The metaphor of “remission” for carnivalesque experience and oppositional practices implies that the logical determinacy of a cultural development is of the order of disease. Though emergent cultural self-organization can be beautiful in its own right, the ease of automatic cultural conformity (perceived as such when an individual’s acculturation or social self-organization has reached an advanced stage) is, indeed, in the longer run, a dis-ease, whose revolutionary cures produce their own counterconformities, replacing one determinacy by another. It is in the loopholes that open up in cultural development—loopholes represented in carnivalesque and oppositional narratives and constituted by all genuine aesthetic and ludic experience—that the work of the sociocultural causes and effects is discontinued, giving play to the intuitive, the creative, baffling predictability and liberating new strands of individual and cultural potential.
The topoi of vertical reversals and horizontal blurring of boundaries characterize the form of content in carnivalesque narratives even when the substance of the content is not carnival events. What are, then, the features of the substance of content that recur throughout the carnivalesque mode, and how do they connect with the form of both content and expression? I shall here suggest possible answers to this question on the basis of three of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s stories set in New England’s Puritan communities of the early and mid-seventeenth century. These stories do focus on carnivalesque events: the tar-and-feather procession in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” the nocturnal foul-is-fair gathering in the forest in “Young Goodman Brown,” and the maypole ceremony in “The Maypole of Merry Mount”; however, the carnival of the latter story is a corrupted relic and that of the former two is what Michael André Bernstein (1992) has described as the bitter carnival of resentment, the antipode of true festivity. In the three stories the anthropological characteristics of the carnival are associated with a number of themes (the substance of content) as well as formal narrative traits. In order to show that the connections between the carnival topoi and these particular themes and techniques represent regularities rather than specific cases, the analysis will be supplemented by examples from other narratives.
The features of the substance of content in carnivalesque narratives may be regarded as a translation of the features of the carnival as an anthropological phenomenon into the medium of verbal narrative.

Festive carnival takes place at an appointed, precisely circumscribed, and rather short period of time. Accordingly, the time span represented in carnivalesque narratives tends to be brief: its borderline are approximately set by the beginning and the end of crisis situations.\(^1\) This unity of time can stretch from a single afternoon as in “The Maypole of Merry Mount” to two days as in Solzhenitsyn’s *The First Circle* or two weeks in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*; in any case, the story-time tends to be relatively short in comparison with the amount of the text devoted to it. Carnivalesque narratives are thus characterized by expansion, or deceleration (cf. Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 52–53). The relative slowness of the representational time—its longueur, what is perceived as an almost disproportionate amount of the text devoted to a certain episode—can become unbearably oppressive when the reader feels caught up in scenes of the carnival’s bitter, violent corruptions—such as the interminable episode of the execution of the Blancos in Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or the episodes of mass murder and of delirium in Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones*.\(^2\)

Another feature of the carnival also largely reflected in carnivalesque fiction is its setting in open or liminal spaces. In non-carnivalesque narratives that incorporate crisis points (generally followed by a dénouement) but are not wholly devoted to them, the crisis points are usually also set in open spaces (e.g., Piazza St. Marco in Venice in Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove*) or in liminal spaces—on the balcony (James’s *The Golden Bowl*), in the garden or shrubbery (Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*), at the threshold (E. M. Forster’s *A Room with a View*). The phenomenology of the imagination associates even offstage crises in the life of secondary characters with liminal positions in space: in *Pride and Prejudice*, after Elizabeth Bennet has refused Mr. Collins, we find Charlotte Lucas at the window, listening to the uneasy conversation between Collins and Mrs. Bennet in the room behind her and getting ready for a turn in her own fortunes (91–92).

\(^1\) On “crisis time” as the subject of carnivalesque fiction, see Bakhtin 1984: 169.
\(^2\) This perception usually depends on the reader’s emotional attitude to the type of events recounted: in most cases, certainly in the ones above, even if the text is read out loud the duration of the reading might still be shorter than the duration of the represented events. Not insignificantly, in Littell’s novel the longueur of the wounded protagonist’s delirium rather exceeds that of the representation of the slaughter of the Jews.
The chronotope of carnivalesque narrative (crisis times and open or liminal spaces) usually entails two more morphological features: (1) the theme of the growth of a tendency in the narrative opening, and (2) the theme of the subversion of individual discreteness in the main plot.

(1) The opening of carnivalesque narratives is characterized by the *refus de commencement*. Whereas non-carnivalesque biography-type fiction, especially by nineteenth-century writers, tends to start with an external event—an arrival or a departure that changes the deployment of the forces on the board, the action of crisis-type narratives usually begins with a version of an *in medias res* moment, when some tendency has come to a head, as if at “the appointed time.”

Thus the action of *Crime and Punishment*, Bakhtin’s major example of the carnivalesque mode, starts when the feverish workings of Raskolnikov’s mind and the depletion of his body have reached a stage in which, to quote the dialectical principle, quantity turns into quality. Though his murder of the old woman is presented as stimulated by a few chance events and (in a bow, as it were, to the “biographical” tradition) by the arrival of his mother’s letter after two months of silence, Dostoevsky makes it clear that if these events had not taken place, other incidents would have performed their function. Indeed, the murder of the old woman is not averted when Raskolnikov’s plan to purloin an ax from the kitchen is thwarted—after a short while he is able to steal an ax from the caretaker’s room: when a goal is obsessive, the means of pursuing it present themselves, one contingency being compensated by another.

Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward*, a mildly carnivalesque narrative, is set in 1955, one of the transitional years in Soviet history, heralding the approach of the “Thaw.” The action begins when the cancerous growths that have been developing in the bodies of the two main characters assume dimensions that can no longer be ignored. The actual arrival of the main characters at the hospital is the consequence of the swelling of the tumors rather than a self-contained trigger of further action.

Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel that stages a tension between the carnivalesque and the anti-carnivalesque impulses in the individual soul, also starts soon after an event that has been, literally, in gestation: Esther Prynne has given birth to an illegitimate child. Her carnivalesque exposure to public shame coincides, however, with the arrival of Chillingworth, a kind of occurrence that usually initiates the action of non-carnivalesque narratives.

The pattern of *refus de commencement* is clearly discernible in Hawthorne’s carnivalesque short stories: they start when a certain tendency,
whether individual or cultural, with roots going back far into the fictional past, has risen to the pitch where it needs to be attended to or translated into action. In “The Maypole of Merry Mount” the relationship between Edith and Edgar has reached a stage when the midsummer night can double as the “appointed time” for their wedding. By confluence, the resentment of the Puritan community against the revelers of Merry Mount has likewise swollen to the point of bursting: indeed, the story makes no mention of any specific *casus belli* that may have provoked the Puritans to attack the Mount Wollaston settlement at this particular juncture. In “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” (in contrast to Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby*, where it is after his father’s death that the young protagonist goes to seek his fortunes in town), Robin travels to Boston not because something has happened in his family, nor because he has received any specific invitation in addition to the standing one from his uncle. Nor does his departure from home follow a specific age landmark that might call for a rite of passage: it is mentioned that Robin leaves home *before* he is eighteen, that is, while he is still immature, yet the symbolism of a road to travel before he reaches maturity—or, rather, learns to toe the line—is complemented by the suggestion that his spirits have evidently reached a stage when he has to leave home, break away, seek his self elsewhere. In “Young Goodman Brown” there is likewise no specific trigger for the protagonist’s expedition to the forest on that particular night “of all nights of the year” (1033)—no reason apart from the stage reached by the psychosexual tensions of a young couple (only three months married) in combination with the unavowed animus against the patriarchal authority of the first Puritan settlers: the collective memory of their heroica is now threatening the third generation (see Crews 1966: 103–6). Goodman Brown’s wife Faith also seems to be undergoing a crisis, both as a character of the story and as a personification of ideological attitudes that include imperfectly repressed religious doubts. Michael J. Colacurcio (1984: 289) reads the character of Young Goodman Brown as a product of the Half-Way Covenant, only recently granted a full, communing, church membership. However, the language of the text—in particular, the spectral Goody Cloyse’s reference to the protagonist as “the silly fellow that now is” (1036)—suggests that such a passage may not yet have taken place: Goodman Brown therefore needs the self-test of turning to the wilderness for the certitude of his salvation. What he finds, however, is the ground for his suppressed resentment against the

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3. Jane Austen anticipates such symbolism when making Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet *almost* twenty-one, that is, just under age.

4. The night in question may, as Daniel Hoffman suggests (1961: 150), be imagined as that of October 31—All Saints’ Eve.
pillars of his community. The ambiguity of the spectral plot of the story (was it or was it not a dream?) parallels the doubts that the protagonist is left with in lieu of the desired *certitudo salutis*.

(2) The main body of a carnivalesque narrative is usually devoted to the cracking, breaking, bursting, of individual entities—the loss (usually temporary) of the discreteness of identity. The individual does not retain his hold on the sense of his or her separate self; the self opens up to the physical or mental environment and allows some layers to blend with the Other.

This critical erosion of the limits of the self may lead either to death or to a profounder understanding of reality—or to both. A suggestive account of this danger, and of the need to maintain a hold on one's identity lest it dissolve in the magma of the collective flow, is given in Vladimir Nabokov's humorously ambivalent remarks on the protagonist's heart attack in *Pnin*:

I do not know if it has ever been noted before that one of the main characteristics of life is discreteness. Unless a film of flesh envelops us, we die. Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is the space-traveler's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego. (1957: 20)

The passage deals, literally, with the inroads of physical disease, swooning, death (the pores and other apertures of the body open up to the environment, wounds bleed, consciousness fades); yet its symbolism also pertains to the possible loss of a person's intellectual discreteness within a collective discourse. The mixing of one's physical self with the "landscape" is an apt metaphor for the dissolution of one's identity in a crowd, in a collective emotional heightening, in a prevailing ideology, or in a mystical transport. It may be lethally irreversible: "the dead are good mixers" (Nabokov 1972: 93). Yet an entrenched rejection of invitations to loosen internal boundary control can lead to pettily self-interested emotional and intellectual sterility.

5. Colacurcio chooses to emphasize Goodman's presumptuously simplified version of Calvinism—for example, his theologically inadmissible belief in his own infallibility (1984: 290–95). He notes, moreover, that if the Devil claims to have helped the grandfather lash a Quaker woman through the village, in Goodman Brown's economy this means that the motif for the act (the woman would be half-naked) may have been "devilish" (1984: 293). Emily Miller Budick continues this line of thought, suggesting that Goodman Brown may be developing doubts not merely about the motivation for such an act but also about its general moral value; such a doubt would be radically subversive of Goodman's upbringing, according to which, if motivated by ideology rather than by psychological drives, "lashing a Quaker woman through the streets or setting fire to an Indian village would hardly have constituted the devil's work" (1986: 221).
Nabokov’s texts enact the process of contact in which breaches in the armor of the individual self are at times, cautiously, allowed (see Toker 1999): like Hawthorne, Nabokov frequently stages dangerous tensions between the lure and the repulsiveness of the carnivalesque.

What any carnival sets the stage for is a mass merger of individuals into a whole, a respite from the sociocultural compartmentalization of everyday life. Associated with ancient fertility rites, it celebrates a natural life force—of the species or of the community rather than of separate individuals (Bakhtin 1968: 19, 88, 341). A pageant without footlights erases the divide between the participants and spectators (7), and, in a symbolic expression of belonging to a biological whole, the individual is swept along by the crowd—either physically, joining the movement of a street march or the transports of a demonstration in the square, or else psychologically, surrendering the discreteness and the intellectual autonomy of the self. The knowledge gained from this surrender is ambivalent—it may constitute a quasi-metaphysical insight but it may also amount to having one’s reason overruled by popular drives or the party line. The loss of the sense of the separate self in yielding to the communal forces is a form of cultural remission—“the oceanic feeling” of Arthur Koestler’s Darkness at Noon (1941: 256) or Freud’s Civilization and Its Discontents;6 “the discharge” in Elias Canetti’s Crowds and Power (1978: 17–18; see also note 9 in chapter 5). In the framework of Schopenhauer’s categories, it is an epistemological elevation (since it provides an insight into the illusory nature of individuality, which is nothing but an objectification of the will) and a moral debasement (since it aligns one with the workings of the amoral impersonal Will, red in tooth and claw). Post-Bakhtinian scholarship has, indeed, emphasized the close connection between the carnival spirit and the devastation wreaked by violent social or religious strife.7 The carnivalesque is corrupted both when the misrule is not limited (e.g., in a gory rebellion represented as a dance in Bruno Jasiński’s The Lay of Jakub Szelé) and when it is ritualized as an ingroup’s obligatory social routine (e.g., the “orgy-porgy” of Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World).

6. Freud denied having firsthand experience of this religious feeling of the limitlessness of the whole to which one belonged as a grain to the sand; he attributed his awareness of it, as is now known, to Romain Rolland (see 1961: 8).

7. Cf. M. F. Bernstein: “The viciousness that can be released by the carnival’s dissolution of the accumulated prudential understanding of a culture needs to figure in our thinking about the rhetorical strategies and ideological assertions within which utopian theorizing is articulated” (1992: 8).

The three Hawthorne stories discussed here provide a paradigm of motifs pertaining to the discreteness of identity and to the factors that threaten this discreteness.

“My Kinsman” is to a large extent a story of initiation. A shrewd country youth, Robin Molineux, crosses a threshold (the river) and enters the town of Boston, where he plans to serve his political apprenticeship and make his fortune under the guidance of his high-placed uncle. After a number of puzzling trial-and-error encounters, he discovers that, as a representative of the British crown, his uncle has incurred resentment. Weird preparations for something are going on during the evening, and at nightfall the uncle, a uncrowned ruler, is driven through the town, in a tar-and-feather carnival pageant, amid general derision. The procession stops in front of Robin and, as the eyes of the uncle and nephew meet in mutual recognition, Robin becomes the center of the crowd’s attention: the roles of the participants and the spectator are now interchanged. Up to this point Robin has successfully resisted the multitude of sins personified by the various citizens of Boston (see Broes 1964). Now, however, he succumbs to the impulse of a self-protective dehumanization of the other. In order to suppress the pity and terror that seize him at the sight of his uncle’s humiliation, Robin surrenders to the inarticulate psychological pressure of the crowd and joins the crowd’s contagious brutal laughter at the dethroned ruler. The narrative parts ways with him at this juncture: the focus shifts to the perspective of the uncle, the scapegoat, a position from which Robin’s laughter is registered as the loudest within this chorus.

The story is sometimes read as that of the young man’s asserting his independence from a patriarchal authority figure, with Robin’s experience possibly symbolizing the development of the young and self-assertive American nation. However, his laughter at a critical point is, conversely, a momentary but irreversible surrender of the separateness of his self, and an initiation into the guilt of the baiting crowd. His autonomy, moreover, turns out to be a mere change of allegiance: the last words of the story are an encouraging

9. Cf. John N. Miller’s (1989a: 51–64) attack on the allegorical readings of the story and his conclusion that “pageantry in Hawthorne’s historical fiction has lost its ritual innocence” (62) and, when “prostituted for questionable political ends in a particular colonial American setting,” becomes “a nightmare” (63). The use of carnivalesque forms for popular social protest was, however, a well-known channel of violence in continental Europe up to the late nineteenth century—this is strikingly described in E. Le Roy Ladurie’s Carnival in Romans, which deals with a history of tax-related mutinies in a fifteenth-century French town.
acceptance extended to him by an elderly person, another surrogate father figure, who has watched him before and during his near-tragic test. This patriarchal quasi-mentor, calm and apparently in the know, may well be seen as one of the conspirators who draw political profit from popular riots (Colacurcio 1984: 144–45). This interpretation of the story, reminiscent of Dickens’s treatment of the forces behind the Gordon riots in *Barnaby Rudge*, rejects “the all-too-reassuring view that revolutionary politics recapitulates adolescent psychology: maturation is painful but it knows nothing of conspiracy” (152). The would-be shrewd young provincial who bears the generic name of Robin (an eighteenth-century name for a stock character of a “country bumpkin”) is initiated not into the out-of-the-limelight ruses of a cabal but into the exultation of the crowd, the discharge, the carnivalesque dissolution of the self, a letting-go that prefaces a redefinition of cultural personhood.

“The Maypole of Merry Mount” explores the opposite phenomenon—the reconsolidation of the individual self following the pressures of the carnivalesque dissolution of identity. The midsummer celebrations of the maypole in the Merry Mount community are supposed to represent a carnivalesque unity with fertile nature. Hence the grotesque animal masks worn by the celebrants; hence also the absent or minimal individualization of the characters. Yet here the generic stag, wolf, or goat masks do not so much express the wearers’ genuine kinship with nature as hide and level out the features underneath; they thus facilitate the wearers’ blending into the crowd yet also provide covers under which the individuals can remain secretly nonconformist. The masquerade is a part of the carnival, but a part that contains the seeds of the carnival’s self-cancellation.

A *mandatory* permanent self-indulgence, such as that of the would-be Land-of-Cokaygne utopian community of Merry Mount, is a *corrupted* carnival: true carnival is entered voluntarily and circumscribed in time. The celebrants’ unity with nature is belied by the relative infertility of the community’s cornfields: at harvest time their crop is “of the smallest” (885). The tone of the description of the celebrants is pensively alienated and melancholy rather than joyous. Sadness amidst a carnival is a recurrent...
feature of Hawthorne’s work (prominently thematized in *The Marble Faun*): Romantic individualism resists the festive Dionysian impulses of aggressive fusion, being all too keenly aware of their attraction.

No masks are worn by Hawthorne’s May King and Queen, Edgar and Edith, whose marital union—not a carnival mésalliance yet vaguely reminiscent of the marriages of beggars in the cemeteries during plagues—is celebrated in the story. Nor does the young couple feel unalloyed happiness during the ceremony: “No sooner had their hearts glowed with real passion than they were sensible of something vague and unsubstantial in their former pleasures, and felt a dreary presentiment of inevitable change” (885). The narrative interprets their mood as the unavoidable concomitant of the acceptance of family responsibilities following frivolous adolescent joys, yet it also suggests that their sadness is consequent on the weaning of parts from the whole: true love (or “real” passion) is the love of separate individuals; it is anti-carnivalesque because nontransferable. The happiness of the communion in love both asserts and bridges the gap between the identities of the lovers (one has to be separate in order to unite), but it lays a moat between the private castle of the newly wed and the villages around it. The hostility of the traditional communities to those who live together “in sin” (powerfully evoked in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*) is partly rooted in their resentment of the couples’ self-excision from the whole. The communal ceremony of the wedding mitigates this self-excision by pretending to deny it, by appropriating the privacy of the young couple and turning it into a promise of its own self-perpetuation.13 Hence even the most liberal community, such as that of Merry Mount, needs wedding ceremonies as ritual enactments of the sanction granted to the lovers to renege from the crowd.

Edgar and Edith try to hide their melancholy because it is “high treason to be sad at Merry Mount” (884); they reassert their separateness from the crowd of the celebrants by the very attempt to conceal their sadness. Nor do they blend with each other: their love is presented as a caring companionship of two discrete individualities. However, unknown to themselves, their mood may be a projection of the concealed spirit of the whole Merry Mount community on which the frivolous, carnivalesque, and “masterless” state has, to some extent, been imposed from without.

Thus, upon the emergence of their individual selves as separate, Edgar and Edith remain representative of their community. Or rather, they remain what Joseph Conrad might have called its “secret sharers” (see chapter 8),

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13. Cf. Tanner on marriage as offering “the perfect and total mediation between the patterns within which men and women live” (1979: 16).
as they discover, firsthand, an aspect of that universalizable “truth of the human heart” (243) which transcends individual differences: the heart needs both the moods of “L’Allegro” and those of “Il Penseroso” (see Birk 1991). The people of Merry Mount who know that carnival has lost its meaning by becoming perpetual have to keep their awareness concealed. Their utopia has turned into a repressive ideology,\footnote{Cf. Mannheim 1955.} a cultural remission into a social disease.

Paradoxically, the turning of utopia into an ideology also characterizes the Puritans who come to arrest the merrymakers. The Puritans have to suppress their “Anglo-Pagan” neighbors not only in order to demonstrate their independence of the King (whose relatively recent edict permitted May-games) but also because in this forest “Comus crew” they recognize a rejected aspect of their own psyche. Despite their valorization of the individual self, Endicott’s Puritan saints and warriors remain parts of the human whole—in terms of psychological kinship, or “secret sharing” rather than in terms of ecological symbiosis or cultural uniformity. Denying themselves a cultural remission, they remain in the grip of a social disease that is the photonegative of the Merry Mount indulgence.

Yet at the moment of crisis the Massachusetts Puritans do not retain the discreteness of their selves; they too melt—not within the congregated body of biological humanity but in the body politic of the posse. Significantly, they are shown making their entrance into the arena of the story’s action as shadows that detach from the shadows of the forest around the maypole clearing (“some of these black shadows” rush forth in human shape, 887). Only two of the shadows are then granted individual identities and names: Governor John Endicott and Peter Palfrey, the latter variously defined as “the Ancient of the band,” “the lieutenant,” and “the officer” (888). Yet even this crystallization of personalities is not final, especially since Endicott seems to recognize in Edgar and Edith a part of himself, a part that he does not wish to suppress. By an ingenious authorial footnote, text masking as paratext, Hawthorne alerts us to the fact that the man whom Endicott addresses as Blackstone (and whom he arrests) could not have been the historical Rev. Blackstone (who never lived in Mt. Wollaston, alias Merry Mount): he thus sends us to background sources—and they tell us that the person arrested at Mount Wollaston was one Thomas Morton, the gun-peddling founder of the Saturnalian community after Captain Wollaston’s departure.\footnote{William Bradford recounts that Thomas Morton “got some strong drink and other junkets and made them a feast; and after they were merry, he began to tell them he would give them good counsel. ‘You see,’ saith he, ‘that many of your fellows are carried to Virginia, and if you stay till this
person who arrested him was not Endicott but Miles Standish; Endicott came along later to hack down the symbolic maypole (see Colacurcio 1984: 260–77). Thus, as the borders between the text, the paratext, and the External Field of Reference (Harshaw 247–49) dissolve, the Endicott of the story dissolves too, fading away in the diffuse historical oblivion that self-assertive personalities have always tried to retard.

“Young Goodman Brown” likewise explores the consolidation of personality, but here the focus is on the kind of consolidation that rejects even the “secret sharing,” the non-carnivalesque consciousness of kinship with one’s neighbor. The story also examines the consequences of the suppression of “L’Allegro” in the Puritan community. Denied institutionalized expressions, misrule breaks out in somber shapes, such as the tar-and-feather violence in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” or the skimmington ride in Hardy’s The Mayor of Casterbridge. Here it takes the shape of an internalized fantasy of the witches’ Sabbath, a prelude to the Salem witch trials.

This story is an example of what Tzvetan Todorov has called the genuine fantastic (1980: 25–42): it makes the reader hesitate between accepting the supernatural (Goodman Brown meets the devil and attends a spectral carnivalesque parody of a church ritual in the forest16) and reading the bulk of the story as an account of a dream. Whatever the case, the unusual experience gives Goodman Brown what he regards as a true insight into the sinful nature of his neighbors and friends. The insight may be a projection of his own secretly seething subversiveness; it may be crassly exaggerated; yet it may also be, to some extent, true. Throughout the story Goodman Brown struggles to dissociate himself from the evil that, as the devil tells him, is the nature of mankind. He is willing to concede that the elders of the community are lost souls but insists on his own salvation. Yet when he begins to doubt his wife, the Faith to whom he is wedded, his erstwhile cherished certainties are reversed: “My Faith is gone! . . . There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil; for to thee is this world given” (1038).

In a mixture of despair and pride, chief of the deadly sins, he continues to assert his identity, now turned upside down: “Let us hear which will laugh loudest. Think not to frighten me with your devilry. Come witch, come wizard, come Indian powwow, come devil himself, and here comes Goodman Rasdall return, you will also be carried away and sold for slaves with the rest. Therefore I would advise you to thrust out this Lieutenant Fitcher, and I, having a part in the Plantation, will receive you as my partners and consociates; so may you be free from service, and we will converse, plant, trade, and live together as equals and support and protect one another, or to like effect. . . . And Morton became Lord of Misrule” (1967: 204–10).

16. Cf. also David Levine (1962) and Harvey Pearce (1954).
Brown. You may as well fear him as he fear you” (1039). Without realizing it, however, he comes to share the “if-you-can’t-beat-it-join-it” impulse of many of his fellow congregationists (e.g., Martha Carrier, rumored—in the story’s Internal Field of Reference—to have “received the devil’s promise to be queen of hell,” 1040). The story can be read as suggesting that it is Goodman Brown’s suppressed doubt about his own identity as one of the elect that has sent him on his own “errand into the wilderness” (see Christophersen 1986). His predicament may represent that of his fellow congregationists, who, owing to a vague sense of guilt, are unable to come to terms with the indeterminacy and so choose a potentially carnivalesque “foul-is-fair” reversal to stabilize their identities, even if negatively defined. The description of Goodman’s rush through the forest to the witches’ meeting presents his demoniacal self-assertion as delusive—even one person alone can enact a dark bacchanalian pageant in which the borderlines between himself and the evil that he celebrates dissolve: “On he flew among the black pines, brandishing his staff with frenzied gestures, now giving best to an inspiration of horrid blasphemy, and now shouting like demons around him. The fiend in his own shape is less hideous than when he rages in the breast of man” (1039).

Goodman’s attitude to his fellow sinners remains one of alienated resentment. For him “the communion with [his] race” means only the power of insight into the evil in others: the devil, indeed, ascribes a ledgerful of iniquities to the Salem congregation and concludes with a promise: “By the sympathy of your human hearts for sin ye shall scent out all the places . . . where crime has been committed. . . . It shall be yours to penetrate, in every bosom, the deep mystery of sin” (1041).

At what is presented as the penultimate moment before the quasi-baptismal clinching of the “communion,” Goodman Brown rallies, calls on his Faith to “resist the wicked one” (1041),18 and awakes in the solitude of the forest path. Instead of baptismal drops on his forehead, cold dew falls from a branch upon his cheek.

This cooling liquid comes from the outside world—as a surrogate for the warm tears that a painful insight into sinfulness and suffering ought to call forth from the depths of the self (see Easterly 1991). Young Goodman’s

17. Cf. Colacurcio: “Especially in the latter days of Puritanism, when so many people lived out whole lives of spiritual tension in a half-way status, the temptations must have been both strong and various: simply to get the whole business settled; or authentically to accept the highly probable import of one’s unremitting sinfulness (and perhaps to enjoy some sense of true significance in the world); or even to join the Devil’s party out of sheer rebellion against such singularly infelicitous figures of covenant authority as Cotton Mather” (1984: 300–301).

bodily self retains its discreteness. It is not bruised; symbolically, it does not connect with the environment, not even to the extent of fusing tears with dew: Goodman Brown continues to insist on his separateness from his neighbors, a separateness that takes the shape of suspiciousness and gloom. Even if the spectral evidence of his neighbors’ sinfulness is understood as a projection of his own suppressed drives, its result is his complete dissociation of himself from the others (cf. Tritt 1991): as it often happens in the cases of psychological projection, he steels himself against all suggestions of his own guilt. If we believe Schopenhauer (1969, I: 372), the wicked person is one who totally dissociates himself from the life of others, denying the community of human experience. The rejection of the carnivalesque impulse of familiar contact and imaginative indulgence of forbidden carnivalesque drives are thus presented as conducive to the witch-hunt mentality—Goodman Brown’s snatching a little girl away from the pious instruction of Goody Cloyse may be the first motion towards the Salem trials. Like Arthur Miller a century later,19 Hawthorne represents the psychology of the witch hunt as a morbid convulsion of repressed carnivalesque impulses.

In the three Hawthorne stories discussed (as in, for example, Solzhenitsyn’s Cancer Ward), the crises in the lives of the protagonists overlap with the crises in the lives of their respective communities: it is as if, in order to participate in the formation of the national or communal identity, the individual temporarily surrenders his identity. The confluence of the personal and the political imposes limitations on the high view of human possibility that underlies Hawthorne’s carnivalesque narrative mode. “The Maypole of Merry Mount” and “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” refer to communal landmark events which, despite the attendant ethical problems, might be seen as sociocultural remissions that foreshadow the cataclysm of the War of Independence. By contrast, “Young Goodman Brown” emphasizes an entrenched self-assertion combined with a resistance to the call for relaxation of cultural/ideological control, a resistance aligned with the mysterious determinacy of developments leading up to witch trials.

Whereas “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” conjures up the sense of the variegated city life and stages a bitter carnival of urban abjections and resentments, “The Maypole” and “Young Goodman Brown” are part of Hawthorne’s

19. Miller’s The Crucible offers a different interpretation of the psychological roots of the Salem witch hunt, yet there too the corrupt carnival is traced back to a lack of legitimated oppositional loopholes for the suppressed resentments of the underprivileged.
attack on utopianism, which, judging by his two years at Brook Farm, may, at times, have held an attraction for him. Both the soft Garden-of-Eden/Land-of-Cokaygne utopia of Merry Mount and the stern City-on-the-Hill utopia of the Puritans demand visible outward conformity from their members. As Isaiah Berlin has pointed out (1990: 1–48), the decline of Utopian thought in the twentieth century is linked with a new consciousness of the incommensurability yet possible coexistence of different culturally and psychologically determined needs or views of happiness. One should perhaps not go as far as claiming that Hawthorne may have anticipated this modern development in the history of ideas, but he evidently sensed the threat of utopianism to the discreteness of the self. Hawthorne’s Romantic deontology recurrently betrayed a doubt that supererogation risks violating—in the language of *The Scarlet Letter*—the sanctity of the human heart. It also betrayed a doubt, more intimately understandable in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth, that spectacular supererogation can often be shot through with egoism or sociopolitical interest.

Thus, to extrapolate from the three stories, the main, mandatory but insufficient feature of the substance of content in the carnivalesque mode is not the representation of a carnival event but the theme of the individual identity’s loss of discreteness, usually a temporary loss, a remission before a reconsolidation. The carnivalesque elements in the works of Dostoevsky, Hardy, Solzhenitsyn, and even Dickens, are likewise associated with a variety of moral problems pertaining to the disruptions of individual discreteness, wholeness, inner independence, self-possession; these disruptions take the shape of scandal scenes, confessions, melodramatic dialogues, emotional lacerations, emotion-fraught ideological arguments, all often leading to radical character transformations. The associated formal features (meter suited to matter) are focus on crisis situations, limitations of the temporal frame of the narrative (a version of the classical unity of time), and the prevalence of open and liminal spaces in the topographical setting. The *refus de commencement* and the motif of the swelling of a tendency in the narrative *incipit*—features of the form of expression in which the substance of the content and the form of the content intersect—are early signals of the carnivalesque mode.
One day someone should write the history of “purity.”

—Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 92n177

**C O N C L U D I N G  R E M A R K S**

As noted throughout this study, the common denominator of aesthetic experience, of the carnivalesque, and of play is cultural remission, itself culturally or counterculturally constituted: the concerted marches of the social and intellectual causalities are interrupted, the rat race temporarily stopped, disciplined purities of principle are suspended, and new rules and options can be tried out. Even if such pauses help to perpetuate the order of things oppositionally, by perforating it, what they allow us to catch a glimpse of through the loopholes can no longer remain unseen.

With this common denominator in mind, I have examined the carnivalesque in narrative and the phenomena that bear a family resemblance to it (the discourse of non-carnivalesque oppositionality and the discourse of Lent). My immediate aim was to see whether the proposed method of analysis could yield new insights into well-loved texts, into their art of oppositional morphology and the specific ethical significance of their formal features. A remoter goal—to the remoteness of which these concluding remarks are devoted—was to begin to systematize the bearings that this analysis has on the ethics of narrative form.

The ethics of narrative form may be sought in the balance between, on the one hand, striving for maximal perfection according to a specific set
of poetic principles and, on the other hand, the pragmatics of addressing specific target and hurdle audiences as well as the general reader. Finding such a balance between the opposite terms of the Author-Text-Reader communicative model often means negotiating a conflict between the aesthetic goal and the pragmatic objective.

Most of the findings of this book pertain to the construction of the Author-Text relationship, that “purposiveness without purpose” which Kant saw as an integral part of aesthetic excellence. Analysis of the narrative representations and reenactments of cultural remissions points to the ethical significance of the congruence (and, potentially, lack of it) between the form of content, the form of expression, and the substance of the content. Well aware of the impossibility of uncoupling form from content even under laboratory conditions, I have made use of these three coordinates of the Hjelmslev net¹ to extend the notion of “form” from narrative technique to the deployment of the themes, motifs, and the shape of the fabula in a narrative, their place in the semiological triad of semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics.

Two criteria, borrowed from anthropology, were used to determine the position of the work in the scale of the carnivalesque mode: the reversal of hierarchies and the blurring of boundaries between the self and its human, social, and natural environment. The analysis of the relationship between these features of the form of content has demonstrated the following narratological regularities also involving (1) the form of expression and (2) the substance of content.

(1) Carnivalesque narratives (here, specific works by Fielding, Sterne, Hawthorne, Dickens, Hardy, and Joyce) focus on crisis situations and involve corresponding limitations on the time frame of the main action; the beginning of the narrative tends to be at a point of a near-critical intensification of a tendency—rather than associated with the event of arrival or departure, death or birth, or similar troupe redeployment characteristic of non-carnivalesque (“biographical”) narratives; the events of the story culminate in the temporary dissolution of identity; the story (the fabula) usually ends not with the return to the previous stabilities but with a shift, a change, a new beginning.

(2) The substance of the carnivalesque narratives’ content usually includes a high view of human possibility, a longing for a deontological ethics, and an

¹. The fourth coordinate, the substance of expression, the written narrative medium, is here a given. Lessing’s Laokoon, which focuses on the effects of the medium of time and space arts, can actually be redescribed as the study of the relationship between the form of content and the substance of expression.
exploration of its versions and limits; by contrast, the ethical system inferable from non-carnivalesque narratives tends to be of the middle-way kind, with rule-utilitarian or contractarian skepticism about both the possibility of a totally selfless virtue and, conversely, the existence of ultimate evil.

As examples of the non-carnivalesque oppositional, I have discussed narratives by Austen and Conrad that likewise constitute cultural remissions. These narratives stage the turning of the alienating system's force vectors against the system itself in order to create loopholes for individual survival or self-realization. In the contractarian ethics constructed in these narratives (and in Conrad partly yielding to a protoexistentialism), even moments of supererogation represent a quest for individual splendor instead of, or at least in addition to, a self-sacrificial commitment to a goal outside the self.

Whereas the oppositional element in Jane Austen’s fiction consists in her pointing to a system of values alternative to the ruling principles of her social setting yet mainly in such a way as to suggest that this alternative ethos is, in fact, the original contract on which society tends to renege, Conrad’s more radical oppositionality privileges individual commitment over institutionalized ethics and social regulation. In both cases, however, a reconciliation with the hurdle audiences is largely effected when the subversion of some ethical conventions is balanced by a reaffirmation of other conventions or shared beliefs.

Whereas an artistic narrative usually serves as a testing ground for ideas, in some of the works discussed here, in particular in Daniel Deronda (an intermediate formation between the poles of the carnivalesque and the non-carnivalesque), the ethical Weltanschauung seems to be prior to its narrative refraction; in other cases (e.g., Tristram Shandy) the narrative clearly participates in the elaboration of the ethical system. The “Doctrine” inferable from the narrative of Tom Jones has developed unexpected ramifications in response to the pragmatic challenge of mystification; in Austen’s novels, by contrast, the pragmatics of addressing the target and the hurdle audience leads to downplaying the oppositional force through poetic-justice endings that are, however, deftly integrated into the syntactic deployment of the novels’ motifs.
Most of Conrad’s fiction (“The Secret Sharer” being an apt example) stages test situations. Non-carnivalesque narratives of test tend to start not when a specific tendency in the protagonist comes to a head but when he is faced with an unexpected contingency—which, however, is the result of the swelling of a tendency elsewhere. As the protagonist is faced with the challenges for which he is not ripe, he recognizes in another the inclinations that he himself shares and that might, eventually, lead him to a crisis that has already overtaken the other. This “secret sharing,” a recognition of a psychological kinship, does not lead to the carnivalesque pooling of affects; nevertheless, it has the power to reinforce oppositional attitudes.

Oppositionality is a broader phenomenon than the carnivalesque—the latter is, almost by definition, also oppositional. Joyce’s *Ulysses* takes the liberating effect of a cultural remission almost to its logical completion when it carnivalizes its own sufficiently subversive brand of high seriousness—its own intellectual repertoire, one that aligns Joyce with some of the most innovative thinkers of his time but that, in its turn, is restrained by an aesthetic misrule that leaves the audience its intellectual freedom.

Modernist literature, of which *Ulysses* is one of the most admirable monuments, practically celebrates a liberation from its own artistic heritage—a liberation that, in retrospect, has proved to be a prolonged cultural remission with permanent effects rather than a radical aesthetic revolution. I believe that the end of this remission coincided with the historical “caesura,” whose deepest abyss opened towards the middle decades of the twentieth century. The massive body of literature that testified to and processed that caesura—prominently including narratives of concentration camp experience—has formed, as a by-product, the critical mass necessary for a retrospective recognition of a new kind of discourse, the discourse of Lent—or rather the discourse of the corruption of Lent, in which some of the morphological features of the carnival, such as the blurring of borderlines between the individual and the environment, are produced, in a stifled form, not by excess but by lack, not through festiveness but through extreme deprivation, not through temporally circumscribed pleasure but through continuous, chronic, inexorably depleting pain. Lent stands in the relationship of family resemblance to carnival and non-carnivalesque oppositionality in that
its dominant interpersonal relationship is not the carnivalesque pooling of affects but a serial enactment of the same fate, at times punctuated by moments of “secret sharing,” tacit mutual understanding of people who do not even need to project themselves into each other in imagination because they know, or have known, the same experience in reality.

As the notion of family resemblance may also suggest, the discourse of Lent, which cannot be identified with the carnival even as its photonegative, cannot be fully identified with oppositional discourse either—if only because it does not seek to merely lighten the oppressive system responsible for the experience that such narratives recount: it may describe but does not seek to effect loopholes that can make this regime more livable when slightly subverted. What such multifunctional narratives seek to accelerate is, rather, the cancellation of the regime, or, if it has already fallen, a reversal of its consequences (for instance, salvaging its defaced victims from the common grave of oblivion) and a preemption of its recidivistic resurgence. The history of Russia, China, North Korea, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur, to give but the best known examples, shows that the latter goal has not been achieved.

This issue is far beyond the question of the ethics of form in narrative, but it may be seen as its horizon. Representation of the carnival, the non-carnivalesque oppositional, play, “discharge” in the crowd, and aesthetic experience (with mystical transcendence remaining beyond, but only just, the threshold of these concerns) as cultural remissions entails viewing the logic of cultural determinacies as a disease, one likely to be lethal. I do not wish to retract this suggestion: it is, indeed, not an intrusion from outer space or an outbreak of madness but a concatenation of cultural causalities, with reactions to reactions and negations of negations, that, in the century which, some believe, started in 1914—or more likely in 1904 (the Herero genocide), or in 1896 (the first concentration camps, in Cuba)—has led states and communities over the brink of “caesurae” and may still lead to new precipices in the century that started with September 11, 2001. England may be seen as one of the few countries that have so far skirted the precipice, some of its literary works (e.g., the World War I poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon) coming sufficiently close to it. Though its charity would begin, and sometimes end, at home, its mainstream literary and philosophical tradition may well be credited with disseminating a culture that is complete with wholesomely endemic remissions. As noted above, the wilder offshoots of that march of mind and their further windings await a separate investigation.
I do not wish to end on that note any more than to make idealistically exaggerated claims either for literature or for aesthetics in general. In his book on “athletic beauty,” Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, one of the intellectuals who are painfully trying to conceptualize the movements towards and the aftermath of twentieth-century cataclysms, notes that he has never claimed that “enjoying sports—or enjoying beauty in general—has much of anything to do with moral improvement” (2006: 200). Not much, indeed. Moral improvement is predominantly a matter of individual moral commitment, whether instinctive, instilled by education, or endorsed by conscious choice—never an automatic effect of aesthetic experience, literary or other. Yet this does not deny the faith underneath my narratological analyses—that aesthetic experience can help fine-tune the ethical commitment by educating sensitivity, or perhaps even create the kind of individual cultural remission that is propitious for forming commitments. There is an indubitable ethical component in the history of the response that a text elicits from the beginning of the first reading to the end of the second, especially when it involves changes or reassessments of our attitudes—this is the ethics of the second half of the Author-Text-Reader communicative scheme. One should not, however, develop complacency on the basis of having lived through such literary experience: the ethical functioning that deserves credit is elsewhere, not in front of a book.

The regularities of the carnivalesque morphology, like other instruments of analysis, may be helpful in estimating and accounting for the aesthetic congruence that is perceived as striving for arête—which is also an ethical obligation of narrative form, whatever other ethical goals it may end up promoting or impeding. However, the possibility of different standards of perfection also means that, in view of a specific substance of content, the ethics of form may account for noncongruence, for self-contradictions, or for gaps.

One of the criteria for evaluating the measure of aesthetic congruence is the relationship between the modal status of the text and the predominant type of response that it elicits. The carnivalesque narrative mode need not entail carnivalesque experience on the part of the reader. Of the four games distinguished by Caillois, it is mimicry—in the sense of sympathetic identification and vicarious experience—that is the closest to a carnivalesque communion on the reader’s part. Though cultural conditions largely determine our readiness to forget ourselves when absorbed in the joys and troubles
of fictional characters or real-life narrators (as the case may be), narrative techniques, which can be only partly effective in creating such experience, can be fully effective in terminating or preempting it. The question whether the latter effect is an achievement or a failure is another juncture of aesthetic excellence and the ethics of form.

The substance of the narrative content includes ideas that belong to specific historically rooted ethical theories and to specific corrections to the schemata of those theories; narrative form produces effects that may or may not be congruent with the shape an ethical theory takes in the narrative’s repertoire of ideas. These effects may be local or cumulative. The local effects produce a connected sequence of reader reactions, involving various combinations of surmises, expectations, readjustments, suspense, surprise, alternations of vicarious and analytic responses. They also produce the local felicities, minor aesthetic achievements which, as Housman and Nabokov have put it, we appreciate with the spine (literal or metaphoric) rather than with the head; thereby they also influence (but cannot control) the unstructured oscillation between moments of aesthetic heightening and stretches of agonistic or aleatic engagement with the text. But it is mainly the cumulative effect of a work of art that gives us the sense of arête, a major difficulty overcome, an accomplishment in which an individual reader somehow becomes a participant, or a party, or a part.

Both types of effects are ethical and aesthetic in the broad (rather than laudatory) sense of these terms—in the sense that they are appropriate fields of study for the two branches of philosophy—ethical theory and aesthetics. They are also appropriate objects of criticism on ethical as well as aesthetic grounds.

Aesthetic experience is nothing to be particularly proud of. It is true that on seeing a rainbow Mr. Wordsworth might have a sense of his heart leaping up whereas his neighbor might just say that this is a nice day, but that same neighbor might not even know that his disinterested fascination with the elegant pacing of a thoroughbred horse or with the slow motion of a ship leaving the harbor is a form of ennobling aesthetic experience—a Mr. Wordsworth (or rather a Mr. Thoreau) might see in those only humdrum links in the chain of economic transactions.

Like happiness, aesthetic experience seldom comes when expected and often takes one unawares: one may fail to be awed in front of Mona Lisa in the Louvre but be arrested by a still life on the way to the cafeteria. Nor is this experience more pure than it is reliable. As I walked to an end of a block in a Paris street, map tucked away, the grim bulks of the Conciergerie swam into my field of vision from across the river. In the rush that transfixed me
there were emotions, memories, thoughts of connotations, visual presence, the illusion of the prison’s motion produced by a change of my own location in space. I recall that spot of time more vividly than more important events, and I recall that the indubitable aesthetic heightening of the moment was embittered by an unease about its source.

I sometimes suspect that in academic circles the hostility to the notion of aesthetic experience stems not only from the ideological critique of its being pressed into the service of bourgeois and imperial interests, and not only from a revolt against the highbrow scorn for “bad taste,” but also from our lack of control over aesthetic experience in our own exposure to the beautiful and from the lack of cognitive mastery over the production of aesthetic effect.

The fascination that at times takes over in the reading of narrative, even when the reading has been initially undertaken for academic credit or in quest of “facts,” is likewise unpredictable—and impure. At times it is practically indistinguishable from absorption in the “human interest” content of the narrative; it may actually be profoundly intermixed with it and extend towards imaginative identification, the game of mimicry. At other times it is produced not during the reading but on reflection about the semantic and syntactic patterns of the text—this is the case with the “effects of meaning” rather than the effects of imagined presence. The aesthetic enjoyment of the effects of meaning is not impaired even by the possibility that what we enjoy is not the intrinsic feature of a text but a construct of our own making, in response to the conditions created by the text.

More amenable to analysis, however, are points at which this experience of communion with something in the world of the text is interrupted by the consciousness of the vicissitudes of processing the flow of textual data—stumbling blocks that force us to backtrack and change our attitudes, conflicting instructions, surprises, veiled reference that points to the inadequacies of our training or attention (my *Eloquent Reticence* was devoted to some of these techniques of activating the reader’s nonvicarious and not-disinterested analytic response to narrative). The experience of reading a narrative is that of a to-and-fro movement, with various and varying rhythms, an oscillation between self-forgetfulness and self-awareness, disinterestedness and vested interest, communion and self-assertion.

The ethics of narrative form is, among other things, a matter of the conditions that set the rhythms of this movement in individual works.


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