Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction

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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 borderlines are approximately set by the beginning and the end of crisis situations. 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.*

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).

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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

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, “lash[ing] 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 Jasieński’s The Lay of Jakub Szeleń) and when it is ritualized as an in-group’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, an 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

10. Colacurcio refutes the parallel between Robin’s rejection of his uncle and the Bostonians’ rite of passage to maturity through active resistance to British colonial rule; Budick (1989: 117) adds that instead of exculpating Robin, the analogy inculpated the community.

11. On the difference between the Golden Age utopias and those of “moderation and restraint” see Kumar 1987: 7–9.

12. John N. Miller attributes this disparity between the subject matter and the tone to Hawthorne’s residual Puritanical preferences (see 1989a: 111–23).
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. 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),

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, 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. The

15. 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,’ said 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

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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), 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, 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.