Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction

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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 net\(^1\) 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

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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 carnivalesizes 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 orimpeding. 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.