

Carnivalization in Poe's "The Man of the Crowd"

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The concept of carnival is commonly associated with Bakhtin, who used the historical, ideological aspects of carnivalistic folklore as a model for an understanding of the ambivalence of revolutionary epochs and their influence on literature. Bakhtin's primary concern was how official aesthetic norms lapse and how the concept of text becomes problematised in serio-comical genres. These aesthetic considerations give reason to connect Bakhtin's ideas with Nietzsche's theory elaborated in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The links between Bakhtin and Nietzsche originate in the basis of their theories: carnival and Dionysia are different forms of the same process. Nietzsche used the notions of Apollonian and Dionysian as aesthetic abstractions. The Apollonian tendency can be associated with Bakhtin's idea of the experience beyond carnival, both sharing the characteristics of orderliness and control, whereas the ambivalent, irrational carnival time is reconcilable with the Dionysian experience of contradiction and dissolution. Apart from the similarities, it is perhaps more instructive to point out the differences between Bakhtin's and Nietzsche's understanding of the carnival. In Bakhtin's view, the carnival has strict temporal boundaries, it is not permeable with noncarnivalistic experience: "while carnival lasts, there is no life outside it" (*Rabelais and His World* 7). For Nietzsche, however, Dionysian and Apollonian tendencies are not strictly successive. He draws on a model of double ambivalence when he claims that the Dionysian experience, which is contradictory itself, can be synthesised with its opposite, the Apollonian. Arguably, rejection of this higher synthesis prevented Bakhtin from applying the mechanism of carnival directly to psychological issues. As soon as he reflects on the psyche, he cannot exclude this kind of synthesis. It was Vyacheslav Ivanov who pointed out the psychological significance of carnival. In his view, the irrational, contradictory rituals of carnival or Dionysos' cult are projections of inner, emotional tensions. Ivanov thus completed Bakhtin's and Nietzsche's concept of historical and aesthetic carnival with a psychological aspect [1].

The present essay aims at demonstrating how these broader implications of the carnival are applicable to literary analysis. The combina-

tion of Bakhtin's, Nietzsche's and Ivanov's concepts can be a revealing approach when tracing the elements of carnivalization in Poe's "The Man of the Crowd." Such a complex theoretical background gives a deeper insight into the three-layered carnivalization of the text.

In the main part of the short story, the narrator relates his carnivalistic experience in and outside the D— Coffee House, which includes his search for the secret of the "man of the crowd." This retrospective account is framed by the lesson he infers from it. He concludes that the human heart, like certain books, is inexplicable. The parallel between the psyche and texts is crucial in that it suggests a possible interpretative strategy which is based on the self-referentiality of the text. The investigation of the soul depicted in the short story is thus comparable to the reading act of both the narrator and of us, readers.

The narrator's recalled, carnivalistic, "peculiar state of mind" and his sober, beyond-carnival consciousness are closely intertwined. These two perspectives co-exist throughout the text, in varying proportion. The most Apollonian, least carnivalistic part is the frame, where the lesson of the quest is summarised and the formal device is laid bare. The metaphor in the frame juxtaposing the inexplicability of certain texts and of certain layers of the soul forces the reader to distrust the referentiality of the tale and interpret the narrator's real experience (historical carnival) as his reading act (aesthetic carnival), and as a wandering through his unconscious (psychological carnival). The three-layered construction is not alien to carnivalistic logic. Another carnivalistic feature can be identified in the structural arrangement of the text. When we read the narrator's conclusion at the *beginning* of the short story, it appears to be an idea which is put to test. This idea can be traced to the "naked ultimate questions" of the *menippea*, the Menippean satire being a carnivalistic, serio-comical genre (Bakhtin 1984, 107). Testing the idea includes testing the person who represents it, and both are transferred from the abstract sphere to the concrete plane of life. As collective actions are intertwined with the catharsis of individuals in the carnivalistic pageantry, external and internal carnivals are similarly interlinked in Poe's tale. The narrator observes the events from a typically carnivalistic point of view, from behind the window, which is a permeable threshold between the inside and outside worlds. This smoky window both connects and divides inside and outside events. Inside here refers to what happens in the mind of the observer-narrator.

The events outside exhibit a carnivalistic pageantry, in which ordinary life is combined with the extraordinary. Simultaneity of darkness and light contributes to the sharp contrasts of the pageantry. The great city and the city crowd are features of the Bakhtinian carnival. The symbolic space includes the three Menippean planes of heaven, earth, and nether world, each of which is carnivalized by being reflected in each other ("There were many individuals of dashing appearance, whom I easily understood as belonging to the race of swell pickpockets. . . , how they should be mistaken for gentlemen by gentlemen themselves" 390).

The dominant movement in the symbolic space is descent ("descending in the scale of what is termed gentility" 391). Time is also descending because autumn and nightfall are traditionally associated with fall. This time of the year and of the day is a transition, typical of carnival, and symbolises the growing influx of the Dionysian power. Another carnivalistic feature of time in Poe's tale is that it is both retrospective and synchronic ("but was now. . ." 388), and it is both exact and relative crisis time. The narrator frequently refers to the exact time. Nevertheless, the moment often loses its temporal restrictiveness ("I could frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years" 392). Carnivalistic contrast is emphasised in the hidden parody of works of art and in statements permeated with the sense of profanation ("suburban temples of intemperance - one of the palaces of the fiend, Gin" 396).

The enumeration of people from various social classes is a kind of encyclopaedia of the epoch in which the narration takes place. This concern with current issues is typical of the *menippea*. The contemporary figures are characterised by carnivalistic ambivalence both in their appearance and behaviour. They make up a heterogeneous crowd of masquerades, in which hierarchical barriers are penetrable. The most eccentric figure of the crowd is the anonymous man who, in contrast to the other members of the crowd, does not occupy any definite social position. He behaves outside the norms of ordinary life. Both his external and internal descriptions are conflictual.

The narrator's bitterly ironical comment on the outcome of the pursuit is both tragic and comic, characteristic of the carnivalistic genres. Nevertheless, his wandering through the labyrinth of the city crowd following the man helps him to learn that the man is ambivalent and impossible to finalise. Although he cannot reveal the secret of the man, he is able to conclude that this secret must be a painful truth of destructive ("crime") or contradictory nature (the diamond and the dagger, hidden under the roquelaire of the man, can be associated with this secret). The narrator also discovers that the man suffers from being an integrated whole (which gives the explanation for the choice of the epigraph). The only aim of the man is to lose his self in the carnivalistic crowd, to be a part of the people's mass body, to shatter the Apollonian "*principium individuationis*." He is constantly prevented from fulfilling this aim, because the carnivalistic crowd is always dismembering into individuals, signalling the activity of the Apollonian principle. In his drives the man is a Dionysian figure. Whether he represents a Dionysian man dissolved in the crowd, possessing and hiding some essential knowledge, or he himself is on the never-ending way to discover a secret knowledge, which, in Nietzsche's terms, is graspable only in total Dionysian disintegration, cannot be decided. The narrator's situation is similarly ambiguous. Does he see the crowd incorporating the man as a unity, or as a mob dismembered into individuals? Does he learn the essential inexplicability of things, the contradictory Dionysian truth which is embodied in the figure of the

man, or is it a failure that he is unable to come to know the man's secret, that is, to grasp an essential knowledge hidden by the man? In the ambivalent context of the tale, both parts of these questions can be justified. The moment of looking into the eyes of the man without receiving an eye-response can imply the intervention of the Apollonian instinct, due to which the Dionysian world is transfigured and the narrator leaves the scene of carnival. It cannot be decided when Apollo intervened: just before the moment of reaching the Dionysian essence, in the very moment, or just after. Accordingly, the narrator's comment on his experience implies two different attitudes: "It will be *in vain* to follow; for I shall *learn no more* of him, nor of his deeds. . . it is but one of the great *mercies* of god [might be specified as Apollo] that 'es lasst sich nicht lesen'" (396, italics added). Inexplicability thus causes both frustration and release. The ambivalent evaluation of the outcome of the quest implies a hidden debate between Bakhtin's theory of joyful relativity and Nietzsche's concept of painful Dionysian wisdom.

The complexity of the last sentence ("The worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the 'Hortulus Animae,' and it is but one of the great mercies of God that 'er lasst sich nicht lesen'") allows the reader to graft the ambivalent outcome of the quest onto aesthetic and psychological layers. In this sentence, the initial metaphor of the text is repeated and intensified by a cross-reference: the heart is compared to a book and vice versa, the book referred to is entitled "Garden of the Soul" (*Hortulus Animae*). The word "heart" is open to both its dictionary meanings. If we understand the text directly as the pursuit of the man, "heart" refers to feelings, soul. However, if we read the text in a broader context of the Dionysian quest, "heart" implies the "depth" or "essence" of the world. Hence, the possessive construction "heart of the world" is simultaneously understandable in a metonymical, metaphorical and straightforward sense. The metaphorical cross-references, the thematic use of "heart" and the indefiniteness of the pronoun "es" throw new light upon the whole text, by suggesting its three-layered carnivalization.

Paradoxically, the conclusion that the essence of things can never be reached or directly described is itself a kind of knowledge. Another paradox is concealed in the last sentence of the short story. Here the narrator refers to *Hortulus Animae*, a book that he finds incomprehensible. He also suggests that inexplicability applies to this present text because, due to its subject, it can intertextually be related to *Hortulus Animae*. Both are texts about the soul, and texts like the soul: inexplicable. Yet Poe's short story does become accessible by its self-referential feature revealed in its last sentence. This sentence both claims the openness of the text in which it is embedded, and confines it by suggesting to read it on three planes.

Throughout the short story, it is not only the human soul that is metaphorically identified with texts, but also real-world experiences. There are other allusions to the similarity of real-world experiences and works of art (texts in a broader sense). The narrator compares women to the

statue in Lucian (391), the man to Retzsch's engraving of Mephisto from the story of Faust (392), the "dark yet splendid" atmosphere to Tertullian's style (392). Another explanation for interpreting outside actions as text can be that the narrator was actually reading in the Coffee-House. In his peculiar mental state, real-world experience and what he was reading could easily merge. Several phrases of the narrator suggest that he took up a reader-like approach to the outside events: "I descended to details" (389); "in my then peculiar mental state, I could frequently *read*, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years" (392); "as I endeavoured. . . *to form some analysis of the meaning conveyed*" (392, italics added). Reading carnivalistic events as text demonstrates the process of carnivalization of literature, in the course of which a carnival sense of the world is not only transposed into the text, but transformed into a carnival sense of the text as well.

Allegorically unfolding the metaphorical frame, the following correlations can be found: the crowd corresponds to the content of the text, the man of the crowd can coincide with a unit of the text, the contemplating narrator acts as a reader of this text. Yet he is also the writer, and, since he will be a member of the crowd, he is also a character of the text. The typically carnivalistic, Dionysian position of being, simultaneously, reader, writer, and character of the same text, is textualised by the reader-narrator's absorption in contemplation, with his eyes glued to the panes.

Following the process of reading gives an insight into how carnival operates on an aesthetic plane. When investigating the act of reading, it is instructive to rely on Y. Lotman's theory. Initially, the narrator-reader just describes the crowd outside, i.e. passively grasps the content of the text. This attitude is termed by Lotman as "I - He" communication. This is the way of reading newspapers or realistic prose, when the reader looks through the text (like through a clean window), without noticing that there is a text (or pane) between him and what he reads (or sees). This type of reader passively consumes the information given in the text. (When we interpret Poe's tale on the single plane of external carnivalization, we take up this approach.) Nevertheless, Poe's narrator-reader quickly takes up another position. In Lotman's terms, he enters into "I - I" communication when he goes beyond what he experiences or reads. When he reveals the past and the inner characteristics of the members of the crowd, he derives information from inside himself. He writes himself into the text, and he gets closer and closer to reading himself from the text. His attitude oscillates between the "I - He" and "I - I" communication types, which is comparable to the simultaneity of Apollonian and Dionysian experience. The Apollonian spectator or reader sees events as independent of himself, he does not "enter into" or does not identify with what is presented. He trusts and relies on the referential, direct sense of language. The Dionysian spectator or reader, on the other hand, ignores reality and becomes participant, loses himself in what he sees or reads. In this state, he is able to realise that the referentiality of language can

be an illusion: language does not always describe things directly, it is often metaphorical, non-representational. (If the reader becomes engrossed deeply enough in Poe's text, he becomes able to read it on its metaphorical planes.) The oscillation between the "I - He" and "I - I" communication types is best expressed in the image of the smoky window, which does and does not let the eye see through. The decisive moment of crossing the threshold is preceded by the narrator's "I - I" dialogue. This can serve as a proof for claiming that crossing the threshold is an ambivalent carnivalistic act: going *outside* into the texture of reality symbolises the reader's deep engrossment in the book, which facilitates him to get *inside*, to read himself in the text. This gives grounds for bringing the topic of duplicity and self-discovery into the interpretation of Poe's tale. Arguably, the narrator does not reach the depth of pure "I - I" communication (he cannot set up a mutual eye-contact with that part of himself which is his double), but he does descend into himself in the course of reading, while maintaining the "I - He" attitude. He gains information not only from outside events depicted in the text, but also from himself and, arguably, about himself. In this sense, the German quotation can be explained as follows: the text does not permit *itself* to be read, it makes the reader read *himself*. Or, substituting the indefinite pronoun "es" with the other metaphorical element of the frame, the sentence could be paraphrased like this: the heart, i.e. the man, i.e. a unit in the text does not permit *itself* to be read because he is the man of the crowd, i.e. it is a unit of the text, inseparable from that context (and that context makes it ambiguous). Both the text and the psyche are inaccessible for detached interpreters. Only those who enter into them deeply can discover their inherent ambivalence.

The narrator's conclusion implies two different voices: one is that of a naive reader approaching the text with "I - He" communication, expressing failure; the other voice is that of a reader who oscillates between the "I - He" and "I - I" communication types. The voice of the latter implies a carnival sense of the text: certain texts cannot be taken just in their literal sense, they are open to different, even contradictory readings. This is a profoundly ambivalent experience, a knowledge about the impossibility of any defined, single meaning. This dilemma of interpretation is the source of a constant struggle towards meaning, which can be termed as "aesthetic carnival."

The metaphorical parallels in the frame reveal that the carnivalistic uncertainty and inexplicability apply to this short story as well as to the human heart. Paradoxically, the very statement about the inaccessibility of texts makes this short story accessible by allowing to interpret the quest for the secret of the man as a quest for meaning in the reading act. When the narrator lays bare his device by giving the clue that the text can be read on three planes, he takes an Apollonian attitude: he controls the Dionysian experience, gives a coherent, apprehensible form, and implies a hidden meaning (though it is a paradoxical knowledge about the impossibility of any one-sided meaning).

When transplanting this idea onto the psychological layer, it is helpful to recall Vyacheslav Ivanov's theory of the carnival. Ivanov agreed with Nietzsche's aesthetic treatment of the Dionysian and Apollonian principles. Ivanov, nevertheless, used these terms in a broader sense for an understanding of the human mind (West 76-81). Ivanov concentrated on the psychological aspects of the Dionysus-cult when he claimed that these carnivalistic rites are projections of internal, emotional contradictions. Internal tensions deriving from the struggle between the conscious and unconscious realms are resolved when they are lived out in the concrete physical form of the contradictory, carnivalistic ceremony. This idea allows the reader to interpret the labyrinthine town in Poe's tale as an internal space. The narrator's wish to reveal the man's secret thus becomes his longing to encounter the depths of his own psyche. The exploration of the hidden labyrinths of the unconscious mind is what Ivanov believes to be the psychological foundation of carnivalistic rites. Ivanov's theory in its many aspects has close affinities with Freud's. Ivanov made it possible to understand carnivalistic descent as a descent into the Freudian Id, as a growing influx of the pleasure principle, which is followed by a symbolic rise, by the regained dominance of the reality principle, Ego and Superego. Ivanov, unlike Bakhtin, did not divide these phases sharply. Instead, he explained the process of descent and rise as a transformation between the carnivalistic, irrational unconscious and the noncarnivalistic, controlling conscious realms. In Ivanov's theory the borderline between these realms receives a special emphasis. It is a borderline in time, a turning point when, in the most ecstatic Dionysian moment, the Apollonian drive intervenes and reunites the divided self. This is the moment when the carnivalistic, Dionysian, inward experience is ordered in terms of noncarnivalistic, Apollonian outward reality. A balanced proportion of these tendencies is understood by Ivanov and Nietzsche as the crucial moment of artistic creativity (West 81). The profoundly ambivalent carnival and the contradictory Dionysian mind share significant similarities with the Freudian concept of the unconscious. The unconscious is irrational, contains the contradictory drives of life and death. Repressed desires are also ambivalent: they may return in dream or in works of art, but always in a disguised, censored, acceptable form, in a carnivalistic mask.

In the typical carnivalesque-Dionysian threshold situation the narrator plays the role of reader, protagonist, and *writer* of the text: we receive the text through his perspective and voice. According to Freud, the repressed may return in the writer's text or in dream, which are similarly structured. The pursuit of the man can really be understood as the unreliable narrator's dream. He could easily be half-awake, half-asleep, and confuse reality with dream. This vague state of mind is comparable to the interaction of Dionysian and Apollonian drives, and to Freud's conflictual model of the mind. The contradictory, carnivalistic features of what the narrator sees might be explained as a redreamed-*rethought* version of his illness, when he was on the verge of life and

death, when he himself has gone through the ritual circle or labyrinth. The redreamed experience of being close to death is expressed in many hidden ways: "The whole atmosphere deemed with desolation" (395); "I grew wearied onto death" (396); "The spirits of the old man again flickered up, as a lamp which is near to its death hour" (395).

The narrator's real experience of returning from a stage very close to death, as well as its redreamed version, might permit the latent sides of his unconscious to express themselves. The dark, evil, mysterious man might be the dreamer himself, in a carnivalistic mask of the dream. He can also stand for a part of the dreamer, for his embodied repressions. In this sense, the texture of the dream corresponds to the unconscious realm. The man's inexplicable behaviour, his struggle to hide and reveal himself in the crowd is comparable to the Freudian concept of repression. Or, being contradictory himself, the man can represent the struggle between life- and death drives, according to the logic of dream, in a condensed form. The paired image of the diamond and the dagger is another condensation, which is likely to symbolise the Dionysian supreme intensity of rapture and horror. It is remarkable that, like emotional forces in a Freudian sense, they are concealed and revealed at the same time: "through a *rent* in a *closely buttoned roquelaire*. . . I caught a glimpse of both a diamond and of a dagger" (393, italics in the original). The evil, dark man of the dream can only symbolise the death drive. Facing the man, in this sense, can imply the state on the brink of death, as the narrator really has gone through such an experience. Descent into death is one form of the collapse of the individual, dissolving literally in the primordial oneness, a kind of Dionysian state. The death drive in its real sense was not satisfied, since the narrator has recovered from his illness. Accordingly, when the narrator in his carnivalistic experience was very close to grasping an essential, "Dionysian" knowledge, or in the very moment when he reached it, carnival time ended. Apollo intervened, the narrator regained his ego-consciousness, and left the scene of carnival.

It cannot be decided whether the narrator or the man, or both as doubles, as an already destructed wholeness, reached the Dionysian depth or not; whether there was a moment when the Apollonian instinct was completely ignored, or Apollonian and Dionysian components interacted throughout the whole text; whether the narrator saw himself from inside or from outside in the shape of his double; whether outsidership (the eyes of the other) is a necessary condition for (self-)understanding, or you can learn more and better about yourself if you look into the mirror of your own eyes; whether these eyes of your double are still your eyes, or already someone else's; whether the threshold situation of seeing the I as non-I while seeing the I as I is the cause of the failure of the quest, or it is the condition of the deepest understanding; whether after his journey the narrator restored his integrated wholeness or not; whether he lost his integrated wholeness or he just strove for it. The text provides explanation for both sides of these questions, expressing a carnival sense

of the individual: it is impossible to find a stable endpoint in the personality, his mind is by nature conflictual.

It is the carnival sense which connects the three layers of Poe's tale: the endless movement from one indefinite to the other characterises the historical, the aesthetic, and the psychological layers [2]. What makes the text more ambivalent is that the carnival sense is not separated from a noncarnivalistic, Apollonian attitude. Everything is viewed from two perspectives, everything is experienced by two minds of the same experiencer. In this sense, the pursuit of the man can be explained as follows: the outer, noncarnival self is chasing his more inner, carnival self; the Apollonian instinct endeavours to control the Dionysian; the Ego and the Superego attempt to discover or suppress the Id. In the pursuit both act on the same scene, at the same time, in interaction, inseparably from one another. This higher synthesis was reviewed in this essay in Nietzsche, Lotman, Ivanov and Freud's terms, which indicates their contribution to Bakhtin's model of the carnival.

Poe's text, drawing on a model of double ambivalence, leaving more questions than answers behind, is irreducible to a summary. The structural integration of opposite principles results in a high textual density, an exploration of which is both frustrating and pleasurable for the reader-interpreter.

Notes

- 1 For a more detailed approach see West, *Russian Symbolism* 76-81.
- 2 In his illuminating essay on Nietzsche and Freud, Antal Bókay points out that both thinkers claimed that hiddenness is an essential, inherent feature of existence, of language and of the personality. This idea finds artistic expression in Poe's tale, indicating his parallel way of thinking with Nietzsche and Freud.

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