

ALONG THE FRONTIER: FLANNERY O'CONNOR, JUAN RULFO AND THE FORM OF THE AMERICAN GROTESQUE

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I

One of the most arresting details in modern Anglo-American fiction is the “long strand of iron-grey hair” discovered on the pillow next to the “profound and fleshless grin” of the decayed corpse of the late Miss Emily Grierson’s lover (Faulkner, 500-1). In “A Rose for Emily,” William Faulkner unexpectedly converts what initially appears to be humorous Southern realism into something both horrible and haunting, focusing onto that single strand of hair two conflicting literary traditions at once: the psychological darkness of Poe, Melville and Crane together with the regional humor of writers such as Mark Twain. A generation later, primarily during the 1950’s and 60’s, two distinct literary phenomena were to occur in Anglo and Hispanic-American literatures, the Southern school and the Latin American Boom, both of which are marked by this same convergence of humor and horror, of realism and the extraordinary. The grotesque, as this quality has been called both by its admirers and detractors, is perhaps even more than an essential ingredient in the fiction of these two parallel movements, one which sets many of these works apart from other modern fiction employing the same narrative techniques. Due to the quantity, quality and uniqueness of such fiction appearing almost simultaneously in both American hemispheres, it is possibly time to consider the American grotesque not merely as a flavor but as a form of fiction, one which can take its place alongside of the romance and the short story itself as a distinctive form developed in the Americas.

It is no mere historical coincidence that the American grotesque gained prominence in both of these movements during this particular period. The colonial relationship between the North and the South has long mirrored a similar one between the United States and Latin America. From the end of World War II through the 1960's the South as well as Latin America was undergoing a dramatic acceleration of a process long underway, the transition from a basically rural, semi-feudal social structure toward and industrial development as engineered by Northern capitalist interests. Just as the share-cropping Bible Belt was being transformed into an urbanized Sun Belt, a similar process was occurring in Latin America, where the Monroe Doctrine of the fruit companies was being converted into an Alliance for Progress between multinational corporations and a cheap urban work force. In Latin America, as in the South, rural areas with traditional cultures, once isolated by geography and frozen in history, were being invaded by not only a new power structure but by a new mentality from the expanding industrial centers. "En el interior del país," writes the Latin American critic Hernán Vidal, "se observa un arcaísmo, un atraso general, un 'tradicionalismo' en flagrante conflicto con la modernidad de los lugares anteriores." (33) In both regions this same phenomenon has formed a frontier, a variation on the previous one between civilization and wilderness, along which a conflict between regional "backwardness" and impinging "development" has produced what Flannery O'Connor calls a "wild" fiction which is "of necessity going to be violent and comic because of the discrepancies it seeks to combine." (*Mystery and Manners*, 43)

The only discrepancy associated with the grotesque, however, is not just that relating to its subject matter. On every level the grotesque is an art of contradictions, not the least of which is the writer's own attitude toward subject and language. There exists among writers identified with "backward" regions what Vidal terms a "dependencia" or cultural inferiority complex which propels them toward world centers for self-definition. Southern and Latin American local talents have long been encouraged in the most sophisticated directions of New York and Paris, respectively, in order to avoid the pejorative label "regionalist." Yet in the midst of these two movements quite a different response developed among its writers, typified by O'Connor's assertion

That the anguish that most of us have observed for some time now has been caused not by the fact that the South is alienated from the rest of the country, but by the fact that it is not alienated enough, that every day we are getting more and more like the rest of the country, that we are being forced out not only of our many sins, but of our few virtues.

(*Mystery*, 28)

This point of view represents a reaction against what Vidal calls a "difusionismo" of the values of development into traditional rural worlds, a reaction which is perhaps at the heart of the social meaning of the grotesque. Yet the grotesque is not a *naïf* form, not literary folk art by any means. It represents, on the one hand, the triumph of regionalism, yet on the other, one executed with techniques borrowed from the very dominant cultures it ultimately opposes. Opposition to the values of New York and Paris often results in great successes in these centers, and to the extent that the later work of such Southern and Latin American writers as Truman Capote and José Donoso was cosmopolitanized, it ceased to embody the grotesque.

In view of this tension between the conflicting demands of regionalism and technique, it is ironic that the Latin American writers are far more Faulknerian than their Southern counterparts. García Márquez observes that Faulkner "está metido en toda la novelística de la América Latina," that the significant difference between his generation of writers and the previous one is the influence of Faulkner, whom he claims as "un escritor del Caribe, de alguna manera... un escritor latinoamericano." (*Novela*, 53) The Faulknerian method, he continues, "es muy eficaz para contar la realidad latinoamericana," a method in which the traditional devices of time, voice, narration and character are distorted in order to capture a complex history and consciousness with multi-perspectives. The method has been utilized not only by García Márquez, but by others of the Boom writers who have worked in the grotesque form, such as Juan Rulfo, Miguel Angel Asturias and Mario Vargas Llosa. In effect, they have "killed their fathers" in the Harold Bloom sense of influence by finding a foreign one, yet they have remained regionalists. The Southern writers have accomplished the same, not by repeating the identical narrative experiments of Faulkner, but by eschewing his Modernist distortions. Writers such as Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty and Walker Percy turned toward what appears as an almost hyper-realism by comparison, which Carson McCullers claims owes much to the influence of writers such as Gogol and Chekhov in her essay "The Russian Realists and Southern Literature." Here she cousins the Russian Realists in the same manner in which García Márquez cousins Faulkner, explaining how much "the South and old Russia have... in common sociologically... Economically and in other ways it has been used as a sort of colony to the rest of the nation. The poverty is unlike anything known in other parts of the nation. In social structure there is a division of classes similar to that in old Russia." (260) Yet the Southern grotesque is no more derived from the Russian Realists than the Latin American grotesque is derived from Faulkner. What both represent are influential treatments formalized by previous writers and what was borrowed were the formalizations, not the grotesque itself. The importance in these comparisons, however, is that the grotesque may be developed using a wide variety of tech-

niques, from the Faulknerian to the Russian Realist, and that the sociological kinship expressed, beyond any evidence of a "dependencia" on foreign influences, indicates a common cultural basis for its generation as a form. In addition, it is significant that the Russian Formalist critics, such as Eichenbaum and Bakhtin, two generations removed from the Russian Realists, were the first to formulate many of the dynamics of the grotesque, and it is to them that we shall turn now for a terminology useful toward defining it in its American form.

II

The "grotesque" has become a considerably vague term, and every critic who writes on any aspect of the grotesque invariably begins by reinventing it. Few agree with each other, therefore the term has been stretched to include such an extensive variety of authors and texts as to seem meaninglessly elastic. If Mann, Browning, Kafka, Rabelais, Heine, Austen and Byron are all, in fact, writers of the grotesque, one might question the usefulness of using this term. If the grotesque is basically "the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response," as Thompson concludes (27), or what Kayser summarizes as "the stranded world" (184), is there any work either interesting or important in modern fiction which is not grotesque?

One universal assumption among these critics is that the grotesque refers to an exaggerated degree of unfamiliarity along that broad spectrum between the "familiar" and the "unfamiliar," using here the terms of the Russian Formalists for the normal or real and the abnormal or unreal. Although the basis for much discussion is the exact location of the grotesque along this continuum, where it is generally placed somewhere between the unusual and the bizarre, it follows that the grotesque is not inherent within the tension of a work but is another relativistic form of reader response. Kayser emphasizes that "the grotesque is experienced only in the act of reception." (181) This gives rise to an interpretation of the grotesque as an almost touristic phenomenon, given that a reader from outside of a culture will certainly find a much greater degree of unfamiliarity than one from within the same culture about which the work is written. As Anglo-American readers, therefore, must we dismiss the grotesque as an integral part of Hispanic-American fiction because, as García Márquez claims, "soy un escritor realista, porque creo que en América Latina todo es posible, todo es real"? (19) Likewise, Flannery O'Connor maintains that "I have written several stories which did not seem to me to have any grotesque characters in them at all, but which have been immediately labeled grotesque by non-Southern readers. I find it hard to believe that what is observable behavior in one section can be without parallel in another." (*Mystery*, 32) If the non-Southern reader finds any degree of unfamiliarity in her stories, is it only because of the "observable behavior" to which he is

accustomed? In this case, the grotesque is a relative aspect of the exoticism of regional writing, as perceived relativistically in each reader's imagination, and has a minimal connection with the form of the work.

These critics, most of whom are oriented toward European literature, thus define the grotesque as a quality of reader response to certain detachable elements of the work: descriptions, events, characters or even language may seem grotesque, that is, demonstrate a high degree of unfamiliarity. The critics are quick to point out grotesque elements in works of parody or fantasy, and then are equally inclined to incorporate into their definitions of the grotesque the attributes of these other literary forms, spawning many hyphenated sub-species of the grotesque such as the playful-grotesque or the satiric-grotesque. It is not until one turns to the grotesque in Anglo or Hispanic-American fiction that the possibility occurs that the grotesque may not only be a quality present in other forms, but that it may be a literary form in itself. As such, the grotesque has its own structural and ontological basis, one which is equal to but different from those of such similar forms as parody or fantasy, absurdist or surrealist fiction. Whereas for the critic of European literature the grotesque is primarily an adjective, the critic of American literature must come to terms with its existence as a noun, as a distinctly American form. The difference between the grotesque as an adjective (*lo grotesco*) and the grotesque as a noun (*el grotesco*) is in many ways parallel to the difference between the romantic and the romance. The romantic is an adjective which is used to describe certain qualities in works as dissimilar as the novels of Sir Walter Scott and the poetry of Juan Ramón Jiménez; like the grotesque, it has become a term of such a broad and confused meaning that it must be reinterpreted everytime it is used. The romance, on the other hand, is a distinct literary form first developed in Spain's Siglo de Oro as a form of poetry and later by Nathaniel Hawthorne in the 19th century United States as a form of short fiction. In a similar fashion, the American grotesque as a form developed as a response to conflicts inherent in the culture out of which it grew.

The grotesque represents yet another approach to the conflict between wilderness and civilization which both Anglo and Hispanic-American critics such as Richard Chase and Carlos Fuentes find central to the meanings of these American literatures. In both hemispheres, for Puritan as well as Conquistador, nature was a fierce enemy to be conquered: "Quién iba a pensar," writes Fuentes, "en la serenidad del alma recorriendo un río de pirañas y esperando la flecha envenenada de una tribu de jíbaros desnudos?" (9) On one side was "la serenidad del alma," God, European civilization and the Higher Selves of the colonists which they represented; on the other, the devil incarnate as the threatening wilderness, the "jíbaros desnudos" who lived there and the colonists' Lower Selves which they embodied. Two of the earliest uses of the word grotesque in art history illuminate its relationship to this conflict. Both the paintings excavated from the *grottos* of

Augustan Rome as well as the Paleolithic cave frescoes discovered in Spain and France feature the hybrid depiction of human and animal forms, including “inter-species intercourse, cannibalism, necrophagy, and sacrifice –all of which were intended to emphasize affinities with the natural world...” (Harpham, 64) This “first step in the articulation of the human personality,” this biassociation of human and animal forms, is necessarily linked to that raw edge where civilization and wilderness entwine, either temporally in history or spatially in geography. After the Romanization of Western Europe, this frontier was not to appear again as part of Western experience until the colonization of the New World, which is why the grotesque persisted as a theme or element of folkloric derivation in the developing European literatures but did not emerge as a full literary form. The wild folk rituals which Mikhail Bakhtin finds as a basis of the grotesque elements in the satires of Rabelais were the lingering traces of an original confrontation that has since been repeated along the American frontier, which has given birth to new forms of relating the tamed and untamed.

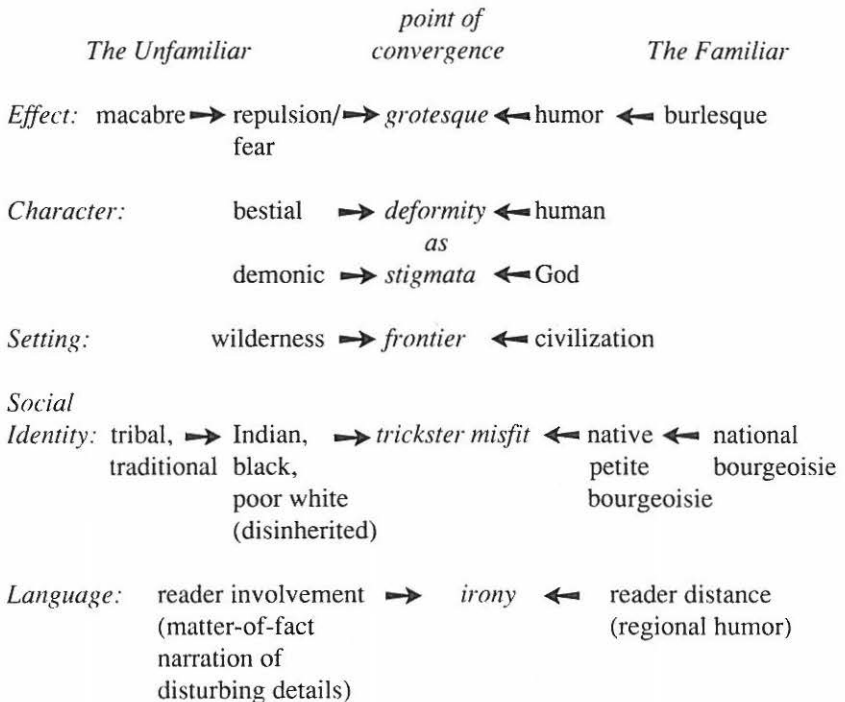
Upon the colonization of the Americas, the Europeans not only confronted again the wilderness out of which they once developed, but the presence of pre-literate, tribal peoples, both the native American as well as the African slave, all of which represented an atavistic memory of the very *grottos* and caves in which the painful process of civilization had initially been worked out in their culture. In a real sense, the colonization process was and continues to be a descent into this “heart of darkness,” as the European sees it, a re-entry into those *grottos*, armed this time with pen and ink rather than sharpened flints, and what has emerged often resembles the original hybrid forms. The grotesque grew as a distinct form following this frontier. In Anglo-American literature it first appeared with the supernatural romances of Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown” being a classic example, and then followed the Westward expansion in the tall tale, the folk legend and much of regional humor, in which human-animal transformations and deformed trickster characters abound. Many of these tales are thinly disguised versions of native American and African folk tales, with a thin overlay of Western values over which the untamed elements usually triumph. With the spread of European civilization, the conflict inherent in the frontier was arrested in certain isolated, agricultural areas such as the South and those large areas of Latin America yet undominated by urban culture, where the transculturated descendants of native Americans, African slaves and wild frontier whites still live. This conflict between wilderness and civilization has since been translated into the terms of a conflict between “backwardness” and “development,” and it is out of this fertile ground that a complex form of fiction has grown which can be defined as the grotesque.

The American grotesque is an inverted form of the picturesque in regional fiction, in which form the victory of the familiar (civilization) over the unfamil-

iar (wilderness) is usually celebrated, as in cowboy and *gauchesco* epics. In the grotesque, however, *the familiar is violated by the unfamiliar*, the human and bestial presented as simultaneously interpenetrating, producing an effect of both humor and repulsion as a means of confronting this conflict between civilization and wilderness. While the grotesque almost atavistically reasserts the power of the wild, unlike in the horror genre this element is tamed by humor, which “disarms the demonic,” according to Jennings (16), rendering it ludicrous yet haunting, palatable yet disturbing. On many levels, the grotesque is the re-enactment in a new form of the old story of the missionaries and the savages, or of the cowboys and Indians, of the struggle between their values, yet with the picturesque turned upside down as an assault on the “civilized” point of view. Part of the society, always regional and usually rural, consists of native Americans, blacks or poor whites. Much of the action, however, takes place in the less defined spheres of transculturation, in the mulato or mestizo areas between groups, in which Indians, blacks and poor whites act like the native petite bourgeoisie, or they in turn act like the Indians, blacks or poor whites. This inspires a confusion of identities, the low becoming high, the high, low, as a basic comic device. The grotesque hero embodies this confusion as a trickster who moves freely between both worlds yet belongs to neither, just as on another level he is composed physically and psychologically of both human and animal attributes. His deformity, whether as physical or psychological characteristic or as gesture, is a usually shocking convergence of both these human and animal qualities which in some way violates the norms of the society in which he lives, functioning at the same time as a stigmata of his blessed union of higher with lower: higher with lower self, higher with lower body, animal with human, primitive with civilized, demonic with religious.

As a form, the grotesque is structured by a complex of levels upon which these polarities of the familiar and the unfamiliar converge. Yet not only the development of the grotesque character and its relation to society are significant, but the use of narrative language is itself an essential part of this complex. Boris Eichenbaum defines the narrative of the grotesque as an essentially serious or even sad story related in comically exaggerated language. In “Cómo está hecho ‘El capote’ de Gogol,” he maintains that Gogol’s story contrasts a melodramatically declamatory style with a loose, conversational anecdotal voice, as well as juxtaposing pathetic details with puns, ridiculous names and other forms of word play. In a parallel yet distinctive manner, the American grotesque combines elements of regional humor, a *sermo remissus* or low style—including use of dialect, stock comic types, slapstick situations, regional vocabulary and preprosperous names—with a *sermo gravis* or high style of detached, often elliptical narration of gruesome or sordid details, which might include techniques ranging from the naturalistic to the Faulknerian. The regional humor distances the reader from identifica-

tion with content, modifying the full effect of the latter, which involves the reader on an unfamiliar level of fear and/or repulsion. This reader-distancing/reader-involvement weaves into a form of structural irony, which serves as a basis for the presentation of the complex of polarities centered around the opposition between civilization and wilderness, thus assuring the contradictory effect of the grotesque. Laughter as a familiar, civilized response acts as a form of control, allowing the reader to “laugh off” –almost but not quite– the effects of the more serious style of narration, transforming the horrible into the “sick.” Although the grotesque utilizes black humor as a form of structural irony, all black humor does not conform to the formal patterns present in the grotesque, in which the series of converging relationships can be visualized in this way:



This unique convergence of the familiar and the unfamiliar in the American grotesque provides both the meaning and the form of the work. The grotesque, however, is often confused with other forms of the strange in fiction, with parody and satire as well as with absurdist and surrealist fiction. It might prove useful at

this point to contrast the unique relationship between the familiar and unfamiliar in the grotesque with different patterns in similar forms. The three examples which Philip Thomson presents as examples of the grotesque in his book are actually classic instances of grotesque description in the service of these other forms. (1-9) Swift's grotesque description in "A Modest Proposal" of the sale and eating of Irish babies is part of a larger *parody*, that is, *the unfamiliar* (cannibalism) *is seen in terms of the familiar* (home economics) Kafka's grotesque description in "The Metamorphosis" of the transformation of Gregor Samsa into a beetle sets the scene for an extended *fantasy*, that is, *the familiar* (waking up, getting around as a human) *is seen in terms of the unfamiliar* (the body of an insect). Beckett's grotesque description in *Watt* of the geriatrically infirm Lynch family in part of the larger context of an *absurdist novel*, that is, *the familiar* (family life) *completely disappears into the unfamiliar* (the Bosch-like presentation) with no particular meaning. Since nothing makes sense here anyway, little is violated as the familiar is rapidly estranged and dissolved into a pervasive alienation. In addition, one might choose almost at random any of the non-parodic passages in a William Burroughs novel to illustrate grotesque description in the service of *surrealist fiction*, in which *only the unfamiliar exists, in no relationship at all to any unrepresented familiarity*: the unexpected is expected, the unreal the only norm.

The relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar in the American grotesque most closely resembles that of the absurd, with which it is often confused. For instance, several critics have called the Theater of the Absurd a theater of the grotesque, as does Kaiser-Lenoir in *El grotesco criollo*. In the absurd, however, the unfamiliar is introduced in the interest of meaninglessness, *without meaning*, leaving no basis for anything happening or not happening, as in an Ionesco play. The image of an albino dwarf dressed in a military uniform in the New York subway would be an absurdity, since within the context of a major metropolitan subway system, the alien and chaotic are commonplace, providing a perfect setting for the absurd. In the grotesque, however, the unfamiliar is presented *against a meaning* firmly established by a highly structured familiar. The image of an albino dwarf dressed as a priest celebrating a mass in a Mexican cathedral would be grotesque, for it depends for its meaning on the meaning which it violates. As the violation of a static, hierarchal social reality centered in religious belief by a more primitive or uncivilized reality, the American grotesque is as rooted in religion as is blasphemy itself. This is an essential part of the reason why it has emerged in the South and in Latin America, where there remains a strong social, moral and religious hierarchy to violate. Flannery O'Connor writes that

Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to identify one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological... while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted.

(*Mystery*, 44)

The mummified creature in *Wise Blood* which Enoch calls the "new Jesus" would be simply another absurd detail were the novel situated in a large world capitol rather than in a small Georgian town, for the grotesque depends on its region to define the meaning which it violates. In a similar fashion, Carlos Monsivais claims that "un eje del mundo Rulfiano es la religiosidad" (*Inframundo*, 31), and as such, the grotesque in his fiction is defined by the social context of Jalisco, in which a fierce Mexican Catholicism dominates the lives of his characters, underlining their actions with special although often inverted meanings. O'Connor and Rulfo have much in common, and both are centrally associated with the two movements which brought the American grotesque into prominence in modern fiction. The complex contradictions at work within the grotesque might best be illustrated by a close comparative reading of two of their works of short fiction, so that the grotesque can be considered on the same level from which it draws its power: the physical, the particular, the concrete.

III

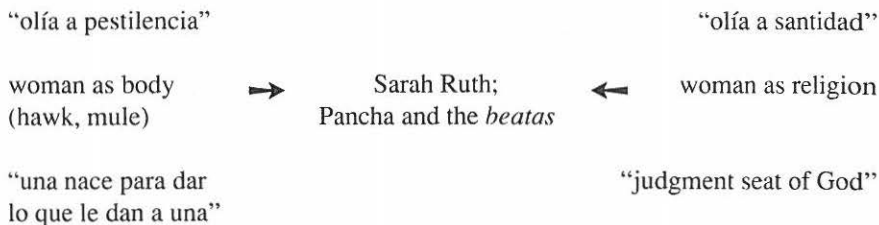
One of the central myths in frontier fiction is the role of the woman aligned with religion as the civilizer of the wild, drifting man identified with the sexual profligacy of nature. The conflict between civilization and wilderness is interiorized in the struggle between religion and sexuality, between spirit and body, which is then acted out as the "good woman" attempts to tame the savage man. This relationship is reversed in a parallel treatment in two classic examples of the American grotesque, Flannery O'Connor's "Parker's Back" from *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965) and Juan Rulfo's "Anacleto Morones" from *El llano en llamas* (1935), both important collections of short fiction from the Southern and Latin American movements. In the O'Connor story, a tattooed drifter named Parker courts and marries a Bible-spouting backwoods preacher's daughter, only to undergo a spiritual revelation with a literal burning bush of vision, which inspires him to have a Byzantine Christ tattooed on his back. In Rulfo's story, the shiftless son-in-law of a Jalisco-style Elmer Gantry is confronted by ten pater-noster-bleating *beatas* who want to have their "Santo Niño" canonized, since he

has taken the trouble to affectionately make love to most of them. In both stories, the polarities of pagan/Christian, demon/saint and woman-as-body/woman-as-religion converge into a formal elaboration of the grotesque, at once repulsive and comic, as the holier-than-thou beast-women interact with the amoral men whose deformities become the very emblems of a shamanistic form of genuine spirituality.

Both stories begin with the inversion of the picturesque, the regionally familiar described in bizarre comparisons which are patently grotesque in the "union of disparate parts from the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms or from the worlds of man and beast." (Jennings, 8) The dynamic of the man/beast convergence structures the stories, undercutting with irony the other convergences of pagan/Christian and demon/saint. The O'Connor story opens on the picturesque scene of Parker and Sarah Ruth sitting like good country people on the porch of their rented shack, the wife "snapping beans" into a newspaper on her lap. She, of course, does not "smoke or dip, drink whiskey or use bad language or paint her face, and God knows some paint would have improved it, Parker thought." (220) She is as ugly as she is religious, her skin "thin and drawn as tight as the skin on an onion and her eyes were grey and sharp like the points of two ice picks." (219) When Parker first meets her, her hand is seen as a "terribly bristly claw," and she seems "some creature from above—a giant hawk-eyed angel." (221) This onion-hawk pregnant woman does little but rant about "the judgment seat of God," when "Jesus is going to say to you, 'What you been doing all your life besides having pictures drawn all over you...'" (230) The beginning of "Anacleto Morones" is an even more dramatic inversion of the picturesque. The ten middle-aged religious women, dressed completely in black, of course, walking in procession through a Mexican village—an almost postcard image—are seen in the first-person narration of Lucas Lucatero as "hijas del demonio," who are "sudando como mulas" in "una recua levantando polvo" (117). The sweat of these religious mule-women, ugly as "pasmadas de burro" (118), is dripping over their enormous black scapularies, which they use to mop the sweat from their brows. Their description continues in animal/vegetable/excretory imagery: they are "marchitas como ploripondios engarruñados y secos" (119), their clothes are "puercos de tierra," and they are given eggs to hatch between their breasts. A reference to their digestion foreshadows a scene in which one, known as "La Muerta," sticks her finger down her throat to vomit "toda el agua de arrayán que se había tragado, revuelto con pedazos de chicharrón y granos de huamúchiles," just after Lucatero comments on another's sudden departure, "Entre menos burros más olotes." (127) Lucatero finally requests that another, Pancha, cut "los cuatro pelos que tenía en sus bigotes" before he sleeps with her. (127) Mixed in with these bestial descriptions are many religious exclamations on the part of the women ("Ave María Purísima"), much talk of the

saintliness of their “Santo Niño,” until “aquellas viejas se arrodillaron, besando a cada Padrenuestro el escapulario donde estaba bordado el retrato de Anacleto Morones.” (126)

The entwining of bestial and religious references to the women in both of these stories is the function of the grotesque convergence of their characterizations as religious/sexual women/animals:



Although Sarah Ruth initially recoils from Parker’s almost completely tattooed body “as if she had accidentally grasped a poisonous snake,” “he did not for one minute think that she didn’t like the tattoos. He had never met a woman who was not attracted to them.” (222) His tattoos become an integral, snake-like part of his sexuality: “He found out that the tattoos were attractive to the kind of girls he liked” . . . (224-25) Likewise, the *beatas* are stirred up by Lucatero’s questions about their sex lives (“Ayer me confesé y tú me estás despertando malos pensamientos” (122)) as he continually flirts with them, reminding them of affairs and asking one who was once his lover if she still has dimples behind her knees. In both stories, every insistence of woman-as-religion is met by the men with as insistence of woman-as-body. After tolerating Sarah Ruth’s attempt to convert him, Parker replies, “I’d be saved enough if you was just to kiss me.” (229) The *beatas’* assumption that the “Santo Niño’s” daughter “olía a santidad” meets this bestial response from Lucatero:

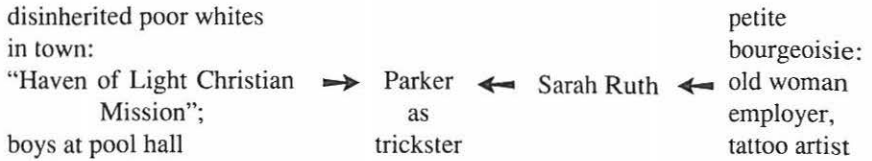
Olía a pura pestilencia. Le dio por enseñarles la barriga a cuantos se la paraban enfrente, sólo para que vieran que era de carne. Les enseñaba su panza crecida, amoratada por la hinchazón del hijo que llevaba dentro. Y ellos se reían. Les hacía gracia. Era una sinvergüenza. Eso era la hija de Anacleto Morones. (128)

The convergence of woman as body/religion is an aspect of the men’s reaction to them: attraction to woman-as-body/repulsion to woman-as-religion. Since women represent the whole of their contact with or commitment to civili-

zation, the polarity which they represent is an internalization of the conflict which the men embody between wilderness and civilization.

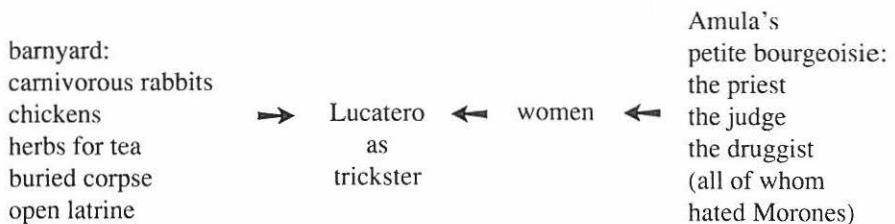
The insistence upon the body as the only answer to religion is reflective of a more primitive form of spirituality which seeks the union of bodies as opposed to their separation. Sexuality is a pivot upon which both stories turn, yet it is not the only expression of those bodily functions or parts which are emphasized in the grotesque as a means of linking bodies to each other and to the world outside. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin enumerates several, explaining that "All of these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation." (317) Bakhtin includes as part of the body language of the grotesque sweating, defecating, eating, drinking and copulating, along with all those parts that protrude from the body. In spite of their function as women-as-religion, the *beatas* are portrayed as sweating, vomiting, tea-drinking bodies framed amidst their own accounts of abortions and syphilis. Lucatero's first gesture toward them is to show them his anus, "acuclillado en una piedra, sin hacer nada, solamente sentado allí con los pantalones caídos" (117), hoping they will not approach but they do, shouting prayers. He then offers them tea to drink, eggs to eat and eventually, sex. In both stories, the women are depicted in terms of their physical protrusions: Pancha's (a play on *panza*) moustache hairs protrude, as do the pregnancies of Morones' daughter and Sarah Ruth, who is initially characterized by her "ice pick" eyes. Their bodies appear meshed in a visceral arabesque of biological interrelation, which makes even more ironic the imposition of religion as an attempt to artificially separate them. Emblematically, this more pagan religion of physical interconnection is mirrored in the arabesque of tattoos on Parker's body, which marks him along with the "demonically" earthy Lucatero as a heroic grotesque protagonist.

Both of these protagonists are marginalized tricksters in flight from religion, in particular, and civilization in general, types who might disappear into their own wildness were it not for the conflicts which they express through their relations with women. In Parker's case, this relationship is sought out as part of an inarticulate longing to belong: "He could account for her one way or another; it was himself he could not understand." (220) Yet long views depress him, "you begin to feel as if someone were after you, the navy or the government or religion." (227) After running away from his mother as she dragged him, significantly, to a revivalist tent meeting, after the navy, the brig and a dishonourable discharge, he retreats as far into the wilderness as he can, having "decided that country air was the only kind fit to breathe." (225) Like Lucatero, he lies freely to everyone, particularly women, and with great embarrassment hides his Biblical name, Obadiah Elihue, which is shared only with his wife, his link to both God and society. His social identity can be visualized in this way:



The other poor whites, ostensibly the world he is trying to escape by marrying, treat him badly, literally throwing him out of the pool hall when his Christ-tattoo betrays that he has "gotten religion," an act which is compared to Jonah being cast into the sea. (241) Parker, in turn, treats badly the members of the petite bourgeoisie with whom he comes into contact, wrecking his employer's tractor and refusing to admire the tattoo artist's work. He moves freely between these worlds without being a part of either, projecting onto his body, in the only way he knows how, what he hopes will please the wife he hates and thus become a badge of social inclusion.

Lucas Lucatero is also "un vaquetón" who is "sin domicilio ni quién dé razón de ti." (119) Although he is from the same town as the women, Amula, where he knew each of them and their families, he also has moved as far into the wilderness as possible: "No me escondo. Aquí vivo a gusto, sin la moledera de la gente". (119) As the former sidekick to the charlatan Anacleto Morones, one who carried the saints that he sold, he is completely identified with Morones' trickery, lechery and blasphemy, although not with his religious hypocrisy. Although he takes great pleasure in defrocking the saintliness of Morones, he is constantly thinking of means to trick the women: "Encaminarlas por otro rumbo, mientras buscaba la manera de echarlas fuera de mi casa y que no les quedan ganas de volver. Pero no se me ocurría nada." (120) His constant trips between the porch and the yard, where he goes to cut myrtle for tea, gather eggs before his curiously carnivorous rabbits eat them, and uncover Morones' grave, are attempts to include the women in his wildness before they include him in their civilization. As with Parker, the women represent his only link with society:



It is in this variety of barnyard where Lucatero murdered Morones over money, buried him, and covered his grave with river stones "por miedo de que saliera de su sepultura y viniera de nueva cuenta a darme guerra." (133) This barnyard is not only a spatial representation of the bestial and bodily, but of fiercely uncivilized emotions and a superstitious pre Christian religion. His social identity is indicated spatially in his constant movements between this world and the porch, where he discusses the petite bourgeoisie of Amula with the women. It is significant that the mustachioed Pancha, the protruder, ultimately joins him in that barnyard to recover Morones' grave before she sleeps with him (woman-as-body), but that she, on the other hand, finally convinces him to return with her to Amula as an alibi for their night together (woman-as-religion). Like Parker, Lucatero the trickster is also tricked by the woman as body religion duality into further contact with the civilization from which he is in flight.

Both Parker and Lucatero are "converted" to their freakdom at fairs, the carnivalesque atmosphere of which is for Bakhtin an important area where "all the dividing lines between man and beast" are erased. (226) The carnival is a microcosm of the frontier, bringing the wild to display before the civilized and civilization to dazzle the semi-barbaric; here the tamed and untamed, human and bestial as well as the demonic and saintly are fused and deformed into each other. In this light, Leslie Fiedler's *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* is a fascinating study of "the message of the side show" and the social role of the exhibition of human grotesques, particularly considering the repeated appearance of the circus, the carnival and the fair as transformative environments in both Southern and Latin American fiction. It is at such a sideshow that Parker is paganized as Ishmael is by the tattooed Queequeg in *Moby Dick*. Parker watches the tattooed man in a circus tent "flexing his muscles so that the arabesques of men and beasts and flowers on his skin appeared to have a subtle motion of its own." (223) This grotesque arabesque instigates his individuation as a trickster "as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction." (223) Likewise, Lucatero and Morones are selling their saints at a fair when they kneel on an antnest, Morones teaching Lucatero how "mordiéndose la lengua no pican las hormigas." (125) Morones raises his arms in the shape of a cross and informs pilgrims that he has just returned from Rome with a splinter of the Cross. With this grotesque association of ants-man-Cross they begin their careers as "saints." In both instances, the fair represents the turning point against the values of civilization and the birth of the trickster-freak, although Parker's conversion is an authentically spiritual one, whereas Lucatero's is a mock conversion into religious charlatanism which is even more of a threat to social standards.

Both of these protagonists' deformities are actually emblematic of the bodily shamanism they represent: deformity as stigmata. Sarah Ruth tells Parker that his tattoos are "no better than what a fool Indian would do. It's a heap of vanity."

(223-24) Parker is, in fact, a white Indian, his tattooed body reflecting a fusion of the wild and the European, with “a tiger and a panther on either shoulder, a cobra coiled about a torch on his chest, hawks on his thighs, Elizabeth II and Philip over where his stomach and liver were respectively.” (224) The grotesque entanglement of wild animals with kings and queens, emblematic in itself of the convergence present in the American grotesque, is the essence of his own conflict projected onto his body. His pagan religion of instinct and sexuality is more than skin deep., however, for he feels “as if the panther and the lion and the serpents and the eagles and the hawks had penetrated his skin and lived inside him in a raging warfare.” (225) This integration of interior with exterior underlines the cant and hypocrisy of Sarah Ruth’s fundamentalist Christianity superimposed on her beast-like body. Yet Parker’s contact with her precipitates a deeper need to articulate his belonging, thus he ponders the right tattoo to bring Sarah Ruth to hell.” (232) His religious vision in the form of a tractor accident with a burning tree becomes literally a burning bush of vision, during which he is thrown “on his back” and hears himself “yelling in an unbelievably loud voice, GOD ABOVE.” (232) It is equally important that when he first tries to make love to Sarah Ruth before marrying her, she pushes him “flat on his back on the ground.” (229) Parker’s back, the only untattooed space left on his body, being the only anatomical part that he himself cannot see, represents this incompleting relationship with God, religion, society: the otherness beyond body. Bakhtin emphasizes that the grotesque body exists “in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed.” (317) Parker feels this incompleting: “The effects was not of one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched. A huge dissatisfaction would come over him and he would go off and find another tattooist and have another space filled up.” (225) This desire for completion is always realized in terms of his body, therefore it is on his “invisible” back where he tries to translate the unphysical into the physical, give pagan expression to the Christian, using an image which he thinks will please that link which joins him to this threateningly bodiless form of otherness. Parker chooses the “haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all demanding eyes” from the more primitive and less reassuring pictures of God near the beginning of the book which the artist shows him.” (234-35) The “all demanding eyes,” of course, match Sarah Ruth’s “ice pick” ones.

deformity as stigmata

paganism
“arabesques of
men and beasts
and flowers”



tattoo of Byzantine
Christ on his back



“GOD ABOVE”
“on his back”
woman-as-
religion

The meaning of this grotesque deformity is the social meaning which it violates, and in the fundamentalist, rural South, the tattoo of a Byzantine Christ is as close to blasphemy as one can get, both in form and content. In a culture where women avoid cosmetics, the tattoo itself is seen as a form of moral depravity, and one of a sinister "Papist" Christ would be an outrage, a defilement of the already defiled. Sarah Ruth's reaction immediately transforms her into woman-as-civilization: her first words are "And you ain't going to have none of me this near morning," as she then screams, "Idolatry! Enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree! I can put up with lies and vanity but I don't want no idolator in this house!" (243) She then beats Parker on his back with a broom "until large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ." (244) His deformity becomes literally the bleeding stigmata of his misunderstood paganism and defeated in his inarticulate longing to belong, the white Indian with the Biblical name –"who called himself Obadiah Elihue"– is seen "leaning against the tree, crying like a baby." (224)

Lucatero and Morones as distinct characters appear to play almost identical roles as grotesque tricksters, yet the deformity which they display as emblematic of their bodily shamanism is a gesture, not an actual deformation of their bodies. The polarities between the bestial nature of Lucatero and the religiosity of the *beatas* is immediately established in the first scene, as Lucatero squats with his pants down while the old women approach shouting "Ave María Purísima." This polarity is played off with extensive irony during their encounter, as the women are portrayed in even more radically bodily terms. For example, Lucatero pretends not to recognize one of the women, an ex-lover who grew old waiting for him and who finally identifies herself. After he rhapsodizes about her ticklishness, she informs him that she aborted his baby like "un pedazo de cecina." (122) Like the egg-eating rabbits which Lucatero claims to keep, both he and Morones are moral aberrations somewhere between the human and animal. Lucatero married Morones' daughter four months pregnant with her father's child. Even though for the women Morones is the "Niño Santo," Lucatero calls him "el vivo demonio," one who "dejó sin vírgenes esta parte del mundo." (128) The interplay between "santo" and "demonio" culminates when we learn that Morones slept with most of these *beatas*, showing great tenderness.

Ahora está hablando *la Huérfana*, la del eterno llorido. La vieja más vieja de todas. Tenía lágrimas en los ojos y le temblaban las manos:

–Yo soy huérfana y él me alivió de mi orfandad; volví a encontrar a mi padre y a mi madre en él. Se pasó la noche acariciándome para que se me bajara mi pena...

La única noche feliz la pasé con el Niño Anacleto, entre sus consoladores brazos. Y ahora tú hablas mal de él. (129)

situations, preposterous names used as ironic characterizations, word play, dialect speech and regional language suggestive of barnyard humor.

Both stories are narrated in a detached, economical manner with no authorial interference. Although "Parker's Back" is narrated in the third person and "Anacleto Morones" in the first by Lucatero, both begin their past tense narrations with the man/woman confrontation, progressing the action backward and forward in time by omniscient flash-backs in the former and dialogue and interior monologue in the latter, until they culminate in the deformity which punctuates each ending. Both acts of deformation are products of a structural tension which they resolve. Yet both narratives are filled with gaps or leaps which invite reader identification and participation as the missing connectives solicit the conversion of surface realism into psychological depth. Both authors have made perceptive comments on this important aspect of their styles. Rulfo claims that he suppressed "las ideas con que el autor llenaba los vacíos y evité la adjetivación entonces de moda... La práctica del cuento disciplinó, me hizo ver la necesidad de que el autor desapareciera..." (*Inframundo*, 6) O'Connor likewise comments that "connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored... there are strange skips and gaps." These gaps make the narrative "lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected." (*Mystery*, 40) This elliptical structuring of scenes, dialogue and description forms narrative spaces which cause the reader to move from the level of the highly concrete, in which the grotesques is anchored, toward the religious, to which the grotesque points.

Yet converging with this narrative high style is a comic low style which simultaneously reverses this direction, preventing reader involvement and disarming the more disturbing level to which the high style elliptically points, holding it in ironic tension with regional humor. In "Parker's Back," the symbolic implications of Parker's back are ironically undercut by the slapstick circumstances under which he always lands on his back. After Sarah Ruth refuses his advances and pushes him out of the truck, on his back, "he made up his mind then and there to have nothing to do with her." The next sentence flows with pure comic timing: "They were married in the County Ordinary's office because Sarah Ruth thought churches were idolatrous." (229) There, we get a slice of regional humor as "an old woman with red hair who had held office for thirty years and looked as dusty as her books" marries them "from behind the iron grill of a stand up desk and when she finished she said with a flourish, 'Three dollars and fifty cents and till death do you part.'" (230) Another comic exaggeration are the names, which are themselves a form of ironic description. "Obidiah" and "Elihue" are both Biblical names which mean "worshipper of Jehovah" and "whose God is He," respectively. Sarah Ruth's last name, Cates, means "a rich and delicate food," no doubt as commentary on how she "just threw food into the

pot and let it boil.” (231) The use of these ironic names, as well as the “red neck” dialect of the dialogues, the stock types and other forms of regional familiarity creates a tone of glossy caricature which contrasts with the details of poverty, suffering and emotional ferocity which draw the reader into the narrative.

In “Anacleto Morones,” the story itself is structured like the joke about the “ten little Indian maidens” as the ten little Indian *beatas* disappear one by one, leaving only “one little Indian maiden” to sleep with Lucatero. The slapstick tone of this elimination process is established in the first scene, as the ten women cover their eyes in unison as Lucatero buttons up his pants. The way in which the “ten little Indian maidens” talk and act in unison throughout the story makes them appear ridiculous in spite of the naturalistic terms in which they are described. As in the O’Connor story, the exaggerated names are each word plays which ironically characterize each character. The town where the mule-women come from is, of course, *Amula*. Anacleto Morones suggests “Anaclástica” (anatomical: bent backwards, deformed) as well as “Morón,” the “mound” of stones which he, in fact, has become in the yard. The alliterative Lucas Lucatero suggests Lucifer Lucifero, which means both devil and resplendent light. The names of the women make each a comic type: Pancha Fregoso suggests “panza” (belly) “fregona” (scrubgirl). The woman who aborted Lucatero’s baby like “un pedazo de cecina” is, of course, named Nieves. The one who vomits is Filomena (nightingale), and the “soltera” who knows how to distribute what God gave her is *Micaela* (female monkey). The use of *Mexicanismos* and almost constant word play adds to this tone of comic exaggeration. Lucatero has confessed “hasta por adelantado,” (125) plays on “santo” and “santero” and on Morones, who looking upon him with “ojos para perpetuarse,” gave him his daughter “ya perpetuada.” (127) The final five lines of the story, separated by a narrative jump, act as a structural punch line which focuses the irony resulting from the convergence of the two styles: “El Niño Anacleto. El sí sabía hacer el amor.” (133) The combination of naturalistic and humorous styles projects onto this lines an effect similar to Faulkner’s “long strand of iron-grey hair” as the repulsive (sex with *beatas*) yet pathetically amusing (they like it) truth is driven home. The effect of both of these stories, as with “A Rose for Emily,” is haunting: since the comic elements prevent a full emotional involvement and catharsis, yet the naturalistic descriptions restrict any full release by laughter, the reader is not permitted a satisfactory exit from the worlds in which he has been submerged. They remain with the reader as a troubling presence a little longer than usual, a slight smile that tends to furrow the brow more one thinks on it.

IV

The grotesque is a troubling, not an uplifting, form of fiction. Consequently, despite the interest in the grotesque aroused by the work of the Southern and Hispanic-American writers of the past few decades, the term continues to retain a negative connotation for many. Southern writers have been criticized for their grotesques by Christian critics such as Van Wyck Brooks for many of the same reasons that Hispanic-American writers have been criticized by Marxist critics, that is, in the words of the Marxist critic Hernán Vidal, the grotesque represents “los mitos demoníacos de la degradación humana.” (102) Even though, ironically, O'Connor was a devout Catholic and most of the Hispanic-American writers are outspoken Leftists, perhaps these critics are correct in one point: there is something profoundly subversive about the American grotesque. As a form, it not only undermines this theology or that ideology, but perhaps ridicules all such imported frameworks, whatever their content, all such attempts to uplift either the soul or the masses, and thereby to make literature the mirror and guide of society.

O'Connor, as she sees it, writes “about people who are poor, who are afflicted in both mind and body, who have little –or at best a distorted– sense of spiritual purpose, and whose actions apparently do not give the reader a great assurance of the joy of life.” (*Mystery*, 32) Rulfo's subject, according to Carlos Monsivais, is “la poesía secreta y pública de los pueblos y las comunidades campesinas, mantenidos en la marginalidad y el olvido programado por la nación (sinónimo de las clases dominantes)... Marginalidad y amnesia han sido tácticas indispensables de la estrategia de la modernización...” (*Inframundo*, 27) In either case, these country people are not part of some religious or social programmatic for their own development; as individuals, they seem to resist not only the politics of religion but the religion of politics. Nor are they romanticized, as European writers tend to portray their own picturesque cultural pasts. If anything, the pain, conflict and humor of their lives are exaggerated there along that frontier which most urban readers, awash in developmental ideologies, know little about in the amnesia of their modernization. As readers, we turn to the grotesque with the enormous pleasure that we do to confirm our own Americanness, our sense of America as a *place* rather than as an *idea*. It is to be expected, then, that those who first conceive of America as an idea –either for the betterment of the soul or society– should not approve of this shameless mythologizing of place, especially of one so recently snatched from the forest or jungle, where tattooed men seduce preachers' daughters, religious charlatans sleep with little old ladies, and nothing is quite as it should be.

Yet the grotesque represents a highly unrealistic form of regionalism. “I'm always having it pointed out to me,” writes O'Connor, “that life in Georgia is

not at all the way I picture it, that escaped criminals do not roam the roads exterminating families, nor Bible salesmen prowl about looking for girls with one leg." (*Mystery*, 38) Rulfo has a similar complaint, that his countrymen "creen que la novela es una transposición de hechos, que debe describir la región y los personajes que allí vivieron. La literatura es ficción y por lo tanto, es mentira." (*Inframundo*, 7) Although the grotesque strongly establishes this sense of place, it is never significant until it transcends it, exaggerating and otherwise distorting this place into more universal metaphor» O'Connor's Georgia, Rulfo's Jalisco, García Márquez' Macondo and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha are ultimately places only in the American mind. As such, "Los funerales de la Mamá Grande" is as much about the Long family dynasty in Louisiana as it is about Colombia, Faulkner's *Absalom Absalom* is as much about Central American *criollos* as it is the family history of a Mississippi plantation. More recent writers continuing in the Southern/Hispanic-American form of the grotesque would be Rosario Ferré in *Papeles de Pandora* and John Kennedy Toole in *A Confederacy of Dunces*, books which add Puerto Rico and New Orleans to these places in the American mind. As we have seen with the two stories by O'Connor and Rulfo, the writers of American grotesques seem to all be telling the same story in its myriad variations, using place paradoxically to move beyond it. This is the American story, one which we already know, but in its grotesque version, a deformed yet blessed trickster does battle with civilization along the frontier and, as in the Paleolithic cave drawings, leaves mysteriously frightening yet amusing signs which indicate that civilization did not win-completely.

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