A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction

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I have chosen to call a certain element in contemporary Southern fiction “grotesque.” This choice involves more than one risk. In fact, the further one explores contemporary Southern fiction, the more numerous and urgent these risks become. The chief problem seems to be that the term “grotesque” has been applied so frequently and so recklessly by so many contemporary critics to so many different literary occurrences that it now becomes increasingly difficult to use the term with any high degree of clarity and precision. For example, when Thomas Mann speaks of the “grotesque” in one of his essays, he speaks of a twentieth-century literary genre which combines the older genres of comedy and tragedy in a new way: “The striking feature of modern art is that it sees life as tragedy, with the result that the grotesque is its most genuine style.” William Van O’Connor, who views the grotesque as not only a modern phenomenon, but also a peculiarly American one, has entitled the lead essay in his collection of essays, “The Grotesque: An American Genre,” and proceeds to link such seemingly unlinkable novels as *Winesburg, Ohio, The Day of the Locust,* and *As I Lay Dying* on the grounds that all three have “sought to incorporate the antiquated into the traditionally poetic, the cowardly into the heroic, the ignoble into the noble, the realistic into the romantic, the ugly into the beautiful.” In *Waiting for the End* (1964), Leslie Fiedler, using the term in a different and more restrictive way, defines it as the “mode of expression” of the “Southern Gothic,” and later describes the group of writers working in this “mode” as the “Distaff or Epicene Faulknerians.”

In these examples, we see that the first two writers use “grotesque” as a broad, inclusive term to cover all that is incongruous, outlandish, and unique in modern fiction, European as well as American; while the third writer uses “grotesque” as a narrow term of mute disapprobation to refer specifically to certain aspects of contemporary Southern fiction. If we follow the first line of thinking, we not only find it impossible to distinguish Southern fiction from the rest of American fiction, but we tend to lump together much of American fiction with European fiction, and, for that matter, much of modern fiction with all that is bizarre in fiction anywhere at anytime. If on the other hand, we wish to apply the second definition, we then have at our disposal a pejorative term, “grotesque,” to describe an exotic or extravagant subject-material (very often of a perverse sexual nature) which appears most prominently in contemporary Southern fiction. We can, then, use this term to censure satisfactorily what takes place, say, in Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* or Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms,* but can we also use the same term to account for what takes place in *Absalom, Absalom!* or Flannery O’Connor’s *A Good Man is Hard to Find?* These last two works also employ an exotic or extravagant subject-material, but do we wish to censure them? Do we wish to censure such exotic and extravagant books as Algren’s *The Man With the Golden Arm* or Purdy’s *Malcolm,* neither of which takes place in the South, and neither of which is written by a Southerner?

Moreover, Fiedler, as we have seen, also finds the “grotesque” to be the “mode of expression” of the “Southern Gothic.” Is this Gothicism a necessary adjunct to the “grotesque”? Can a novel be “grotesque” and not Gothic? *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Sanctuary* are obviously “grotesque” and Gothic, whereas *As I Lay Dying,* *Wise Blood,* and *Member of the Wedding* do not seem to contain overt Gothic elements. Does this fact also mean that they are not “grotesque?”

One can see how these problems tend to compound themselves the further one explores this material. One can also see how any study which hopes to deal adequately with these problems must devote much of its space to the clarification and redefinition of an already muddled and misused terminology. In the following discussion, therefore, I am going to treat old terminology in a new way and attempt to establish the theoretical foundations for a fresh approach to certain aspects of Southern literature. First, I will try to define the exact nature of that literary idea which has come to be called “grotesque,” and to show how and why it appears in its special form in contemporary Southern literature. Second, I hope to demonstrate how this idea both derives and departs from the classic Gothic novel with which it has often been associated, and ultimately, how it helps us to distinguish contemporary Southern literature from the literature I am going to call contemporary Northern. (For convenience I use “Northern” here and throughout this study as a figurative epithet which refers to all non-Southern, American writers). I think we have got at the very least two distinct bodies of literature in this country and that the concept of the grotesque provides a satisfactory means of learning to tell one from the other.

The grotesque, as it appears in Southern fiction, refers neither to the particular quality of a story (noble or ignoble, beautiful or ugly, etc.), nor to its mood (light or dark, sad or joyous, etc.), nor to its mode of expression (fantasy or
realism, romance or myth, etc.). The grotesque refers rather to a type of character that occurs so repeatedly in contemporary Southern novels that readers have come to accept—indeed, expect his appearance as a kind of convention of the form. In fact, so regularly does he appear, and so distinctive is his appearance, that the very Southern-ness of the novel can often be defined by his presence; that is, his presence attests to the fact that we are in the fictional universe of the South. Like any other stock character, the grotesque has his distinguishing set of character traits; and, like all stock characters, his success or failure as a literary creation does not depend simply on whether or not an author incorporates him into a novel, but on how well the author recreates and individualizes his typical traits.

The grotesque, as I view him, always appears in Southern fiction as either a physically or mentally deformed figure. If he appears as one of the physically deformed, he may be a cripple, a dwarf, a deaf mute, a blind man, or an androgynous adolescent (i.e., the deformed as the uniformed). If he appears as one of the mentally deformed, he may be either an idiot or a mad-man, a half-wit or a psychotic—a sub-normal or an abnormal figure. But whether he appears as a physical cripple or a mental cripple, he succeeds as a literary creation because his deformity never exceeds his humanity; that is, if we find him meaningful, his deformity will not separate him from us, but rather will bring him closer to us. Thus we can see why Joel Knox, the grotesque protagonist of Other Voices, Other Rooms is a weak character because his deformity merely refers back to itself and the very special world in which it appears, rather than beyond itself to the world we live in. By the same token, Benjy, one of the two grotesque figures in The Sound and the Fury, is a powerful creation because he transcends his deformity, his specialness, and evolves into a timeless and placeless embodiment of suffering innocence. When the grotesque calls attention to his grotesqueness, he becomes either picturesque, or repellent, or self-pitying, or all three; he becomes, indeed grotesque. On the other hand, when he transcends his grotesqueness, he becomes an archetype.

The archetype he invariably becomes is the scapegoat, the outcast, the pharmakos: that figure whose alienation from society never seems quite justified because his punishments always exceed his crimes. He is as old as Adam whose fall from paradise becomes the first act of social exclusion. He appears again as Christ, the second Adam, whose assumption of all the guilt in the world merely adds to his dignity and perfect innocence. We find his modern autotypes in Melville’s Bartleby, in Kafka’s Joseph K., in Chaplin’s Tramp and perhaps most notably, in Dostoevsky’s “underground man,” who becomes at once the experiencer of exclusion and humiliation, and yet a kind of chorus character whose ironic commentary unmasks the hypocrisies of society. We meet him, finally, in his most recent and perhaps most outlandish form, as the grotesque in contemporary Southern novels who wears his alienation, as it were, on his very sleeve (e.g., Benjy, Jim Bond, Quentin Compson, Mick Kelly, Hazel Motes, Joel Knox, etc.); who demonstrates the extent of his exclusion and victimization in the very distortions of his physical or mental make-up.

The reasons why the pharmakos appears as a deformed person in the twentieth century and in the fiction of the South are inextricably involved with the major changes that have taken place both in the twentieth century as a whole and in the South in particular. Of all these changes, perhaps none is more fundamental than the change in man’s conception of himself and of his relation to the universe. At the heart of the “pre-modern” conception was the belief that man could rely on spiritual and rational forces in the universe; that there was an order of things upon which he could depend for security, a sense of purpose, and the assurance he was rational. Nowadays he views the universe as neutral, without God and therefore without moral sanctions. If he wishes to establish these sanctions, he must do so within himself. One of the most important effects of this attitude in its influence on literature is an abrogation of the old moral boundary lines, particularly the distinction between the proper and the improper, between the high and the low. The classical rules of decorum—what belongs and what does not belong in the best literature—are now turned upside down. A writer in our time need not devote his best and most serious efforts to tell a story about kings and nobles when he may properly devote those efforts to tell a story about fools and knaves. In a like manner, the writer may now question the distinction between the normal and the abnormal, between sanity and insanity. In As I Lay Dying, Cash Bundren questions these distinctions this way: “Sometimes I ain’t so sho who’s got ere a right to say when a man is crazy and when he ain’t. Sometimes I think it ain’t none of us pure crazy and ain’t none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him that-a-way.” Thus the twentieth century epistemology extends the boundaries of “proper” literature and the modern Southern writer need no longer write a Thomas-Nelson-Page-novel about a genteel, plantation aristocrat; rather, he may write one about an idiot—indeed, if he is William Faulkner, he may even put the idiot and the aristocrat in the same novel.

This major change in epistemology was certainly not more relevant to Southern literature than were the major changes that took place in the social and economic processes of the South itself. It has become a critical commonplace to remark that the South happens to be the only section of the country left where there is still a living
tradition and a usable myth. The agrarian backgrounds and traditional social arrangements of the South have given it an abundance of distinct social types (the Kentucky colonel, the plantation belle, the colored mammy, the gentleman-rake riding to hounds). The industrial revolution, the new urbanization, and a world war, have all contributed to produce new and equally distinct social types (the city slicker, the encroaching Northerner, the avaricious poor white on the make). When the values, customs, and beliefs represented by the new types clash with the values, customs, and beliefs represented by the old types, the characteristic tensions of the modern Southern novel are generated. At the very center of these tensions stands the grotesque.

From one point of view, the grotesque represents the absolute and incontrovertible close of the old order; the butt-end of the Establishment; the most extreme departure from the solid norms of the old South without quite becoming opposed to them (e.g., Quentin, by his madness, and Jim Bond, by his idiocy, are both affronts to the old established families whose distinguished names they bear and whose decay they signify; yet Quentin is still a Compson and Bond remains the last of the Sutpens.). From another point of view, the grotesque represents the physical and mental distortions shaped by the new pressures of industrialism and the modern city (e.g., in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Jake Blount’s alienation from other human beings corresponds to his alienation from his work; just as, in Wise Blood, much of the moral anguish of Hazel Motes is caused by the spiritual poverty he finds in the modern city). But whether he represents the death of the old order or the aberrations of the new, the grotesque is always a thorn in the side of the society which produces him. His existence tells the society something about itself whether it wishes to acknowledge his presence or not. He informs the society that his deformity is real, that it is there, and will continue to be there because it is society’s deformity (which produced it) as well as his own. His deformity insists that the pride, complacency, and willful ignorance of society cannot be justified. What Quentin Compson says of the Negro can also be said of the grotesque, for both occupy similar positions in Southern society: “They come into white people’s lives like that in sudden sharp black trickles that isolate white facts for an instant in unarguable truth like under a microscope.”

The Southern novelist on the other hand, tells his story through the older communal modes of oral discourse. The Southern novelist’s style and tone may be biblical (The Violent Bear it Away), or lyrical (The Ballad of the Sad Café), or in the folk idiom (As I Lay Dying); but whatever voice it may assume, the tone itself never drops into the bitter hilarity that is characteristic of the Northern novelist. And whereas, the Northern novelist often chooses to disclose the narrative through the point of view of the one normal character in an abnormal world, the Southern novelist will characteristically tell his story from the point of view of the one abnormal character in a normal world. The distinction here, I feel, is a crucial one. For, in contrast to the Northern novelist’s detached, even contemptuous, attitude toward his characters, the Southern novelist, by choosing to relate his story from the point of view of the grotesque bestows upon him the pity and compassion that is withheld from him by the society at large. Not only does the Southern novelist treat the grotesque with commiseration, but, more than this, often gives him a spiritual life that is morally richer than the lives of those people who reject him as a social aberration (John Singer of The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, Dolly Talbo of the Grass Harp, and ultimately, Hazel Motes of Wise Blood). Once we get inside the skin of the grotesque, along with the novelist, we begin to experience Southern life from his particular angle of vision, and we extend to him the sympathy that we ordinarily might constrain if we viewed him objectively from the outside.

Critics who attempt to lump together Northern Gothic novels with Southern grotesque novels usually do so when they take the grotesque element in Southern fiction to be, not a character, but an entire world vision; hence, the Southern novel becomes as “Gothic” as the Northern novel. We must remember, however, that the Southern grotesque is only a single, deformed character in a literary universe that is still oriented towards the actual and the normative. When a grotesque appears in the Northern novel, he becomes part of a crowd, that is, part of an entire “deformed” universe. As unfashionable as the “actual” has become in literature these days, there still persists in the Southern novel a profound feeling for the life that is lived within a real society with awareness of custom and ceremony, and family and community life. The values and beliefs of this society may be questioned, and even severely criticized, at every point by the radical forces represented in the grotesque character; but, for better or worse, these values and beliefs continue to exist as a kind of moral shield which opposes all radical forces in the society (e.g., in Faulkner country, every Flem Snopes has a corresponding V. K. Ratliff, every Benjy, a Dilsey, every Darl, a Cash). It is precisely for want of such a shield that the Northern novelist must project his vision into an anarchic dream world, as did the classic Gothic novelists.