

**LES
« BATAILLONS
D'ANORMAUX »
DE FLANNERY
O'CONNOR**

CM #3

TERMINOLOGIE

Freak

1560s, "sudden and apparently causeless turn of mind," of unknown origin. Perhaps it is from a dialectal survival of a word related to Middle English *friken* "to move nimbly or briskly," from Old English *frician* "to dance" [OED, Barnhart]. There is a *freking* attested in mid-15c., apparently meaning "capricious behavior, whims." Or perhaps from Middle English *frek* "eager, zealous, bold, brave, fierce" (see **freak** (n.2)).

The sense of "capricious notion" (1560s) and that of "unusual thing, fancy" (1784) preceded that of "abnormally developed individual or production" (first attested in *freak of nature*, 1839, which later was popular in variety show advertisements for bearded ladies, albinos, etc.; compare Latin *lusus naturæ*, which was used in English from 1660s). As "drug user" (usually appended to the name of the drug) it attested by 1945. The sense in *health freak*, *ecology freak*, etc. is attested from 1908 (originally *Kodak freak* "a camera buff"). *Freak show* is attested from 1887.



early 14c., *monstre*, "malformed animal or human, creature afflicted with a birth defect," from Old French *monstre, mostre* "monster, monstrosity" (12c.), and directly from Latin *monstrum* "divine omen (especially one indicating misfortune), portent, sign; abnormal shape; monster, monstrosity," figuratively "repulsive character, object of dread, awful deed, abomination," a derivative of *monere* "to remind, bring to (one's) recollection, tell (of); admonish, advise, warn, instruct, teach," from PIE **moneie-* "to make think of, remind," suffixed (causative) form of root ***men-** (1) "to think."

Abnormal or prodigious animals were regarded as signs or omens of impending evil. Extended by late 14c. to fabulous animals composed of parts of creatures (centaur, griffin, etc.). Meaning "animal of vast size" is from 1520s; sense of "person of inhuman cruelty or wickedness, person regarded with horror because of moral deformity" is from 1550s. As an adjective, "of extraordinary size," from 1837. In Old English, the monster Grendel was an *aglæca*, a word related to *aglæc* "calamity, terror, distress, oppression." **Monster movie** "movie featuring a monster as a leading element," is by 1958 (*monster film* is from 1941).

Monster

PLAN

I. LE CORPS GROTESQUE

- A) Reconnaître les freaks
- B) *Lusus Naturae*

II. TROUBLE DANS LE CORPS, ORDRE TROUBLE

- A) « Le sublime vu de dos »
- B) Renversements

III. Du corps à l'âme

- A) L'âme mutilée des corps anormaux
- B) Revendiquer la *freakery*



PARTIE 1

Le corps grotesque

1.A RECONNAITRE LES FREAKS

“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 recognize one.”

Flannery O'CONNOR, *Mystery and Manners*, 44.

1.A RECONNAITRE LES FREAKS

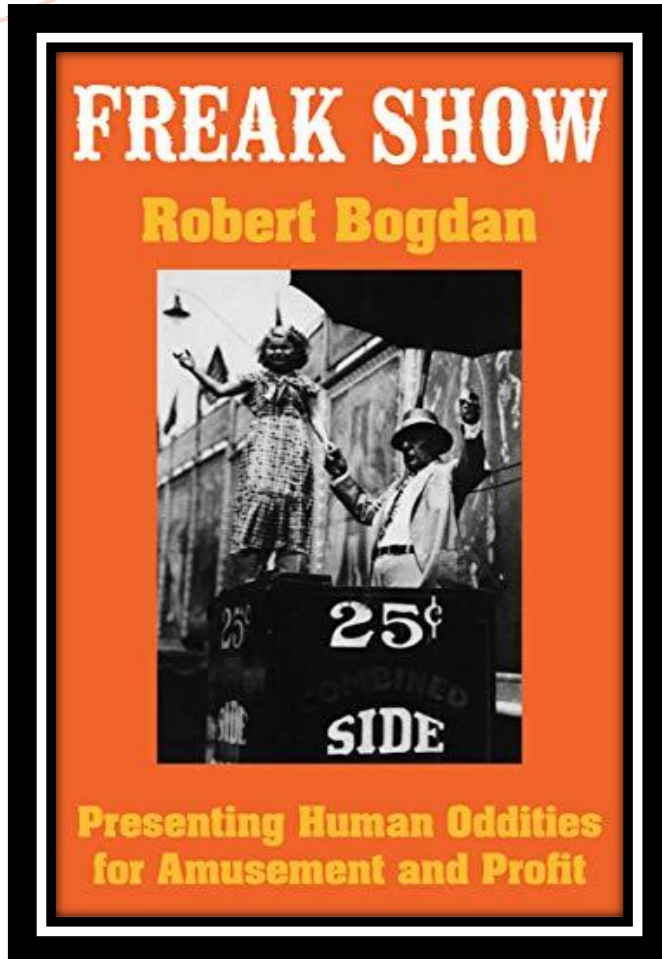
“To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological.

Flannery O'CONNOR, *Mystery and Manners*, 44.

1.A RECONNAITRE LES FREAKS

- « curiosités humaines » (*human curiosities*)
- *Freak shows* (*Sideshow, Odditorium, Museums of Nature's Mistakes*).
- Epoque victorienne (1837–1901)

1.A RECONNAITRE LES FREAKS



Robert BOGDAN, *Freak Show, Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (1990) :

- ❖ êtres issus de contrées lointaines, « exotiques », « mise en étrangeté » (Leonid HELLER, 333)
- ❖ « monstres » (*monsters*) = êtres difformes nés avec des malformations physiques.
- ❖ Aussi *lusus naturae*, « monstres de la nature ».

1.A RECONNAITRE LES FREAKS

- “Good Country People”: **Joy-Hulga HOPEWELL**
- “The Life You Save May Be Your Own”:
Thomas SHIFTLET
- “A Circle in the Fire”, **Powell**
- « **made freaks** »

1.A RECONNAITRE LES FREAKS

“He had stopped having lifeless ones like anchors and crossed rifles. He had a tiger and a panther on each 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. He did not care much what the subject was so long as it was colorful; on his abdomen he had a few obscenities but only because that seemed the proper place for them .

O'CONNOR, *Complete Stories*, "Parker's Back", p. .

1.B LUSUS NATURAE

“Parker’s wife was sitting on the front porch floor, snapping beans. Parker was sitting on the step, some distance away, watching her sullenly. She was plain, plain. The skin on her face was thin and drawn as tight as the skin on an onion and her eyes were gray and sharp like the points of two icepicks.

O’CONNOR, *Complete Stories*, “Parker’s Back”, p. .

1.B LUSUS NATURAE

- ❖ Mrs. GUIZAC : “a woman in brown, **shaped like a peanut**” (p. 194).
- ❖ Mrs SHORTLEY : “She stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand confidence of a **mountain** [...]” (p. 194).

1.B LUSUS NATURAE

« le mélange de traits humains et animaux est une des formes du grotesque les plus anciennes »

Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *L'œuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen-Âge et sous la Renaissance* (1965), p. 314.

1.B LUSUS NATURAE

The girl's sharp eyes peered at the back of the stubby reddish hand she held. There emblazoned in red and blue was a tattooed **eagle** perched on a cannon. Parker's sleeve was rolled to the elbow. Above the eagle a **serpent was coiled about a shield** and in the spaces between the eagle and the serpent there were **hearts**, some with arrows through them. Above the serpent there was a spread **hand of cards**. Every space on the skin of Parker's arm, from wrist to elbow, was covered in some **loud design**. The girl gazed at this with an almost stupefied smile of shock, as if she had accidentally grasped a poisonous snake; she dropped the hand.

O'CONNOR, *Complete Stories*, "Parker's Back", p. 512.



PARTIE 2

Trouble dans le corps, ordre trouble

2.A « LE SUBLIME VU DE DOS »

« [...] le grotesque, pour O'Connor, est toujours à deux pas du sublime. Le grotesque, c'est le sublime vu de dos ».

André BLEIKASTEN, *In Extremis*, p. 17.

2.A « LE SUBLIME VU DE DOS »

« D'emblée, la notion fut donc frappée d'un double sceau, celui de l'effrayant et celui d'un certain comique [...] »

Philippe WELLNITZ, « Le grotesque littéraire : simple style ou genre à part entière ? », 16.

2.A « LE SUBLIME VU DE DOS »

« On a basic level, the term grotesque describes images of degraded physicality with an effect at once humorous and disturbing ».

Marshall Bruce GENTRY, *Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque*, 10.

2.A « LE SUBLIME VU DE DOS »

« The notion of degradation, of descent from a higher to a lower grade, separates the ‘grotesque’ [...] from related terms such as ‘absurd’ or ‘bizarre,’ for the grotesque always depends upon **an attraction to the ideals** that the grotesque declines from ».

Gentry, op. cit., 10.

2.A « LE SUBLIME VU DE DOS »

« [h]er interest was in combining what she saw in the concrete world around her with what existed 'in a point not visible to the naked eye,' which embodied the mystery of human existence ».

Margaret Earley WHITT, *Understanding Flannery O'Connor*, 40.

2.B RENVERSEMENTS

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2.B RENVERSEMENTS

« À l'opposé de la fête officielle, le carnaval était le triomphe d'une sorte d'affranchissement provisoire de la vérité dominante et du régime existant, d'abolition provisoire de tous les rapports hiérarchiques, privilèges, règles et tabous. [...] [La langue carnavalesque] est marquée, notamment, par la logique originale des choses 'à l'envers,' 'au contraire,' des permutations constantes du haut et du bas ('la roue'), de la face et du derrière [...]. »

BAKHTINE, op. cit., 18-19.

2.B RENVERSEMENTS

“O'Connor's grotesque characters are mostly outcasts who provoke an ambiguous reaction in the reader who does not know how to apprehend them: Her grotesques, too, are marginal, literally living on the margins of legitimate society: backwood prophets, bastard children, escaped criminals, shiftless farmhands, sharecroppers, migrants, hitchhikers, refugees. Rather than engage our sympathy, however, O'Connor's displaced persons arouse uneasy laughter, an amused contempt.”

Anthony Di Renzo, *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque*, 12.

2.B RENVERSEMENTS

“And I’ll tell you another thing, Hulga,” he said, using the name as if he didn’t think much of it, “you ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!” and then the toast-colored hat disappeared down the hole and the girl was left, sitting on the straw in the dusty sunlight. When she turned her churning face toward the opening, **she saw his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake.**

O’CONNOR, « Good Country People » in *Complete Stories*, 291.

2.B RENVERSEMENTS

« She suddenly grabbed Mr. Shortley's elbow and Sarah Mae's foot at the same time and began to tug and pull on them as if she were trying to fit the two extra limbs onto herself ».

O'CONNOR, « The Displaced Person », 213.

« Legs where arms should be, foot to face, ear in the palm of the hand. Who will remain whole? Who will remain whole? Who? ».

O'CONNOR, « The Displaced Person », 210.



« Il [le grotesque] fixe les inquiétants contours d'un monde enténébré par le mal ».

André BLEIKASTEN, *In Extremis*, p. 27.



PARTIE 3

Du corps à l'âme

3.A L'ÂME MUTILÉE DES CORPS ANORMAUX

“ [t]he link between humanity and God, between O'Connor's grotesques and O'Connor's Christ, is human flesh. The body - its dimensions, its functions, and its attributes – is one of the major concerns of her fiction.

DI RENZO, *op. cit.*, 59.

3.A L'ÂME MUTILÉE DES CORPS ANORMAUX

“O'Connor's characters are grossly, graphically physical. They are overweight, suffer from acne and eczema, have enduring chills, swollen joints, and missing limbs. They suffer heart attacks and strokes, are beaten, gored, and sodomized.

DI RENZO, *op. cit.*, 64.

3.A L'AME MUTILÉE DES CORPS ANORMAUX

“ [...] Joy/Hulga's wooden leg corresponds to her 'maimed soul'.

WHITT, op. cit., 76.

3.A L'ÂME MUTILÉE DES CORPS ANORMAUX

“Mr. Shiftlet’s eye in the darkness was focused on a part of the automobile bumper that glittered in the distance. “Lady,” he said, **jerking his short arm up** as if he could point with it to her house and yard and pump, “there ain’t a broken thing on this plantation that I couldn’t fix for you, **one-arm jackleg or not**. I’m a man,” he said with a sullen dignity, “**even if I ain’t a whole one**. I got,” he said, tapping his knuckles on the floor to emphasize the immensity of what he was going to say, “a moral intelligence!” and his face pierced out of the darkness into a shaft of doorlight and he stared at her as if he were astonished himself at this impossible truth .

3.A L'ÂME MUTILÉE DES CORPS ANORMAUX

“In O’Connor’s fiction, the outcast—often marked by disability or “freakishness”—is the redemptive figure who can transform the readers’ souls. The transformation rests not on the distancing of the “freak” of disability as some radical other but rather on the recognition of the spiritual brokenness that the figure causes us to recognize in ourselves. The disabled figure presents a mirror for all of humanity spiritual brokenness in a fallen world .

Lisa OLIVIERO, « Disability in Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction », 2.

3.A L'ÂME MUTILÉE DES CORPS ANORMAUX

“The tent where it was had been divided into two parts by a black curtain, one side for men and one for women. The freak went from one side to the other, talking first to the men and then to the women, but everyone could hear. The stage ran all the way across the front. The girls heard the freak say to the men, “I’m going to show you this and if you laugh, God may strike you the same way.” The freak had a country voice, slow and nasal and neither high nor low, just flat. “God made me this way and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. **This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain’t disputing His way. I’m showing you because I got to make the best of it.** I expect you to act like ladies and gentlemen. I never done it to myself nor had a thing to do with it but I’m making the best of it. I don’t dispute hit.” Then there was a long silence on the other side of the tent and finally the freak left the men and came over onto the women’s side and said the same thing.

O’CONNOR, *Complete Stories*, ‘A Temple of the Holy Ghost’, p. 245.

3.B REVENDIQUER LA *FREAKERY*

“Her mind began to get quiet and then empty but when the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it.

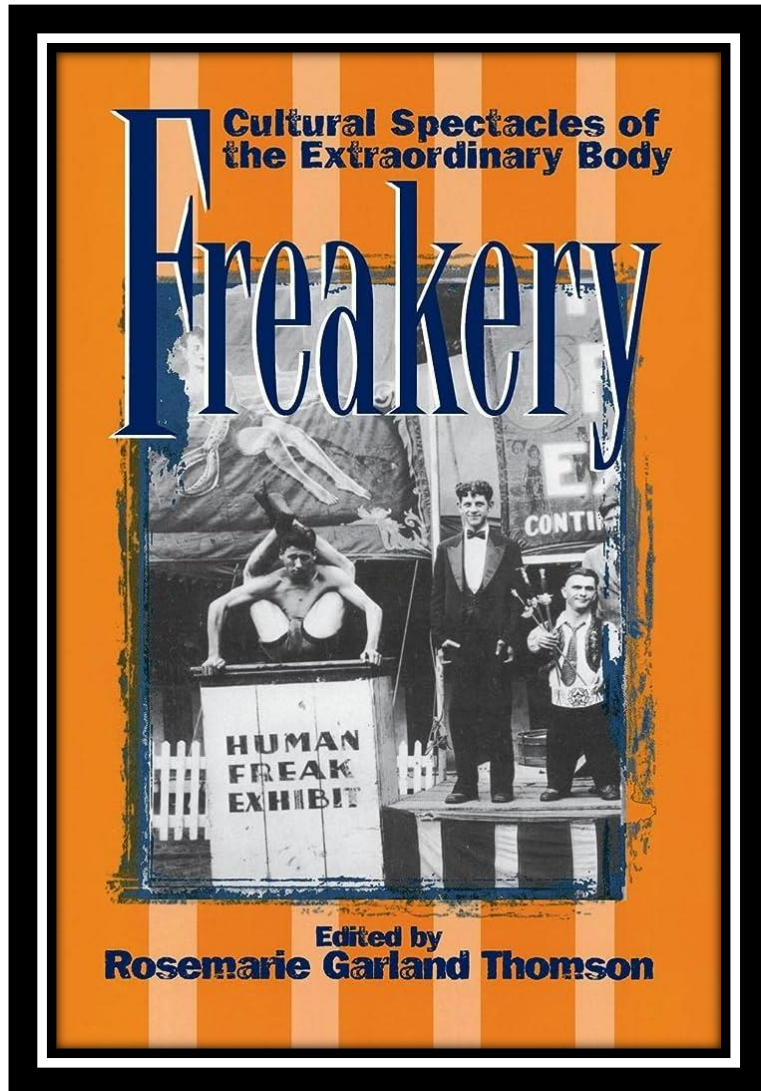
O'CONNOR, *Complete Stories*, 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost', pp. 247-248.

3.B REVENDIQUER LA *FREAKERY*

“The child observed three folds of fat in the back of his neck and noted that his ears were pointed almost like a pig’s.

O’CONNOR, *Complete Stories*, ‘A Temple of the Holy Ghost’, 248.

3.B REVENDIQUER LA *FREAKERY*



By constituting the freak as an icon of generalized embodied deviance, the exhibitions also simultaneously reinscribed gender, race, sexual aberrance, ethnicity, and disability as inextricable yet particular exclusionary systems legitimated by bodily variation – all represented by the single multivalent figure of the freak. Thus, what we assume to be a freak of nature was instead a freak of culture.

Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996), p. 10.

CONCLUSION

“The freak in modern fiction is usually disturbing to us because he keeps us from forgetting that we share in his state.

O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, “The Teaching of Literature,” p. 133.



The background features several overlapping geometric shapes. A large, light orange semi-circle is centered in the upper half. To its right, a thick ring is split vertically, with the left half in light orange and the right half in a darker brown. In the bottom left corner, there is a triangle split diagonally from the top-left to the bottom-right, with the top-left portion in dark brown and the bottom-right portion in light orange. The text 'ŒUVRES CITÉES' is centered horizontally within the light orange semi-circle.

ŒUVRES CITÉES

- BLEIKASTEN, André. *Flannery O'Connor: In Extremis*. Paris : Belin, 2004.
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