Modern American Grotesque

Goodwin, James

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American Traditions of the Grotesque

In name, the grotesque has been present in American writing at least since the 1730s, and over the course of the eighteenth century the term appears in a host of literary contexts. One of its earliest uses is in comedy of manners and social satire, where grotesque is indicative of ill-suited language and behavior, and, in a more generalized sense, it applies to garish pretensions and self-delusion, as reflected in the character Whim from the 1730 play by James Ralph, The Fashionable Lady; or Harlequin's Opera. Where it retains the primarily topographical designation “like a grotto,” the term serves in the description of isolated, daunting natural settings, places that stimulate intense emotional experience and that are thus sought out by a restless or adventurous soul, as is the case in Francis Hopkinson’s poem of the 1790s, “Il Penseroso.”

Literary Grotesques

By the end of the eighteenth century the grotesque emerged within American writing as a feature of the gothic world, where it signals the extremes imaginable in the individual’s mental life and social interactions. A striking instance of the latter extremes occurs in Charles Brockden Brown’s novel Ormond; or, The Secret Witness (1799). The wealthy eccentric Mr. Ormond is a master of disguises that enable him to effect “the most entire and grotesque metamorphosis imaginable.” A particularly
favorite ruse with him is “to exchange his complexion and habiliments for those of a negro and a chimney-sweep” in order to gain access and a kind of invisibility within households in the highest rank of society. From this demeaned position, Ormond can spy upon potential victims and gain for future purposes superiority over them. The unsuspecting remain secure in a trust that their world is anchored by black-and-white distinctions as matters of social orthodoxy and civil law, which are visibly maintained through divisions along outward signs of race and economic class. What proves most grotesque about Ormond’s impersonation of a Negro chimney-sweep, a charcoal-sooted blackness done in reality in blackface, is that it redoubles an incommensurate position vis-à-vis respectable white authority. In its way the act is mystical, if not demonic, in a practice of a “black art” of imposture for the subversion of an order based on categorical surface discriminations. Social malformation, in this instance of an “inferior” in race and working caste, affords a vantage through which can be gained unique understanding of the powers that be. From such practices in gothic literature, the grotesque as a modern attitude toward history develops.

In the early decades of nineteenth-century American literature the grotesque is commonly invoked through the presence of strange, misshapen, or intimidating forms, and these in turn often reflect anxiety over an encounter with “foreign” or “alien” elements. The specific identity of such elements can vary from Native Americans, black slaves, Italians, the Dutch, and Turks to untracked nature, mysterious strangers, Catholic icons, masquerade disguises, and political spies. The canonical authors of the period who use the term with some frequency include James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and, of course, Edgar Allan Poe. Among these writers, with the exception of Poe, the grotesque is for the most part circumscribed in application to isolated or extraordinary appearances and situations, and it does not function as an attitude within consciousness or a defining perspective on experience to give a literary identity to the work as a whole. Poe gathered together for book publication in 1840 the various short prose pieces he had finished over the last seven years. In titling the two-volume collection Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque Poe distinctly claims “a certain unity of design” and of sensibility for it even with the many apparent irregularities in subject matter, tone, and literary type among the tales.

In origin, the arabesque refers to a unique style of ornamentation in the visual arts and crafts. Most specifically, the term names the distinctive vegetal designs that flourished in Islamic art from the tenth to the fifteenth century and that are found as well in Moorish decoration.
The designs are elaborately geometric and intertwined, with manifold correspondences among their patterns. These early exemplars did not include animal forms nor, following Islamic law, any human representation. Though in a literal sense it means “Arabian,” the term is European, and the style became part of a Western visual vocabulary somewhat later, during the Renaissance, when it was particularly favored in book design for page decoration and ornamental bindings. With Raphael, Western arabesque motifs freely introduced animal and human figures, rendered in both natural and grotesque styles. In a consideration of the functions of the sublime, the picturesque, the grotesque, and the arabesque within Poe’s work, Frederick Burwick finds strong interrelations among these four aesthetic categories, especially in their shared evocations of visual experience and their contributions to “the self-reflexivity of Poe’s insistent textuality,” which creates “an effective *mise en abyme*, replicating and compounding the verbal-visual strategies of his descriptive prose.”

Scholars have identified Sir Walter Scott’s essay “On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition” (1827) as a source that explains Poe’s selection of terminology and its aptness for tales of obsession and horror. But only some of the tales are composed in the supernatural vein. Others are farces, hoaxes, parables, fables, satires. At a generic level, the title *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* announces that the two volumes are distinctive foremost for their heterogeneous and disjunctive quality. A promise of variety and strangeness invites the reader into their contents. The collection assumes that imagination is responsive to novelty and juxtaposition and that it is drawn disparately to the fanciful, the beautiful, and the deformed. The title is indicative as well of a literary procedure of visualization. In tales of fixation (“Ligeia,” for example), mystery (“William Wilson”), and imposture (“The Man That Was Used Up”) alike, the process entails a gradual dual movement that by turns adumbrates/elucidates intricate, expansive, and often distorted layers of appearance and meaning.

Storylines in these tales often advance through an interplay between unfamiliar appearances and the confusing or contradictory disclosures that alternately complicate or clarify these appearances. In some, the admixture of visual motifs proceeds by way of differentials as elemental as that of black/white. “Shadow. A Fable” (retitled “Shadow—A Parable” in later publication) is a vivid case in point. Narrated by Oinos (One) from beyond the tomb by some centuries, the tale is a lesson in death’s impositions upon the living. Identifying himself at the outset as one who has “long since gone my way into the region of shadows,” Oinos is confident that readers will “find much to ponder upon in the characters here...
graven with a stylus of iron” (Poetry and Tales, 218). Two superimposed
graphic referents are unmistakably present in this initial statement: the
words Oinos once wrote upon a manuscript and the words now read
from the printed page.

In “Shadow. A Fable” language itself is to be viewed as an intricate
sequence of shaded shapes engraved upon a lighter surface. For both
substance and manner the parable depends upon an elaborate interaction
of light and dark tonalities. The opening tableau is a study in degrees of
darkness. The time is a plague year during the Dark Ages. The setting is
a spacious chamber at nighttime, and black draperies have been drawn to
shut out moonlight, the stars, and the “dim city” beyond the walls. The
chamber’s few lamps cast only a “gloomy” hue (Poetry and Tales, 218).
In their faint light, the ebony surface of a table becomes a dark mirror.
From the obscure reaches of the scene, a shadow emerges to join the
persons gathered together that night in refuge from the plague. Though
unnamed as such in the tale, one intelligible identity of this physically
vague, formless figure is the Black Death. The people present dare not
regard it directly. They experience this visitation instead with downcast
eyes that “gazed continually into the depths of the mirror of ebony”
(Poetry and Tales, 220).

In the end the figure announces itself as “SHADOW.” Through its utter-
ance, Oinos and his companions recognize the embodiment of count-
less untimely deaths. The “cadences from syllable to syllable fell duskily
upon our ears” at that moment, as now the reader’s eye encounters them
upon the page (Poetry and Tales, 220). Medium and message are insepa-
rable in the tale: man’s fate is to be read in the darkest signs decipherable
on the surface of the human scene. Exaggerated, multiplied obscurity in
the end provides a kind of clarity. “Shadow. A Fable” is exemplary of
the modern grotesque in the manner by which perspective and, finally,
comprehension are gained through overdetermination and incongruity.
An additional feature of the modern grotesque here, as often with Poe’s
writings, is a pronounced reflexivity in the descriptive visualizations and
in the appearance of graphic and textual forms, not the least of which is
the typographical presence of the text itself. An early enthusiast of the
daguerreotype—he posed for eight portraits, more than any other major
American writer at the time—Poe valued the reflective/reflexive proper-
ties of the image in the mirrored surface of the daguerreotype plate: “The
closest scrutiny of the photogenic drawing discloses only a more absolute
truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented. The
variations of shade, and the gradations of both linear and aerial perspec-
tive are those of truth itself in the supremeness of its perfection.”

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The Poe tale “Von Jung” (retitled “Mystification” in later publication) treats the grotesque as a psychological property. In appearance and bearing the Baron Ritzner Von Jung is the picture of sobriety, decorum, and intellectual gravity. The “mystery which overshadowed his character” lies in the remarkable, adverse influence he has upon the behavior of others (Poetry and Tales, 254). Over his acquaintances Von Jung reigns as a lord of misrule and he remains all the while an unmoved mover. Without any apparent premeditation or obvious effort the Baron prompts them to ludicrous, foolhardy actions: “he contrived to shift the sense of the grotesque from the creator to the created” (Poetry and Tales, 255). The tale’s conclusion reveals the secret of his power. It depends upon the principle of maintaining “all the outward signs of intelligibility, and even of profundity, while in fact not a shadow of meaning existed” (Poetry and Tales, 260–61). A measure of absurdism in the modern sense thus emerges from the story’s sense of the grotesque.

What Poe admired in the tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne was an “extraordinary genius” for “dreamy innuendo” and their variations upon a tone of “melancholy and mysticism.” Hawthorne also possessed a keen awareness of the grotesque. In his fiction its effects are sometimes horrible (as in The Scarlet Letter, 1850), at other times capricious (as in “The Hall of Fantasy,” 1846) and humorous (“The Toll-Gatherer’s Day,” 1842). A frightful grotto dominates the hellscape depicted in “The Celestial Railroad” (1843): “the dismal obscurity of the broad cavern-mouth, whence, ever and anon, darted huge tongues of dusky flame,— . . . strange, half-shaped monsters, and visions of faces.” In The House of the Seven Gables (1851) Hawthorne weighs the implications of a severely contrastive method of description and disclosure and draws a connection with an early phase of photography. While some townspeople in the story suppose daguerreotypes to be connected with the black arts, Holgrave values the medium as the embodiment of a “wonderful insight in heaven’s broad and simple sunshine,” however dark “the secret character” of the truths ultimately revealed.

“Wakefield” (1835), a story in Twice-Told Tales that received Poe’s special praise, considers how readily an individual can overstep the routines and boundaries of normal daily life. Hawthorne presents the tale as a meditation upon the possibility for profound eccentricity in behavior. Wakefield’s aberration is not easily condemned, however, for it reflects a potential for the grotesque inherent in humanity. To recall the plot line in “Wakefield,” a London man of middle age decides without much forethought to absent himself from wife and home. By dint of habit rather than through any original intention, Wakefield prolongs the separation
for two decades. All the while he lives in a lodging house located only one street away. Then one day Wakefield returns to his wife, though the reunion scene remains untold. The tale is offered as an exemplum in “marital delinquency,” one “as remarkable a freak as may be found in the whole list of human oddities” (Hawthorne’s Tales, 75). Though Wakefield is imagined to have assumed a disguise consisting of a reddish wig and “sundry garments” for years, the tale’s grotesqueness consists mainly in his prolonged, perverse choice of separation, “this long whim-wham” (Hawthorne’s Tales, 79). Notwithstanding efforts to change his appearance, Wakefield bears “in his whole aspect, the hand-writing of no common fate, for such as have the skill to read it” (Hawthorne’s Tales, 80). With a reflexive purpose traditional to such character studies, the tale equates the unusual features of Wakefield’s situation to a rhetorical figure of irregularity.

In the introductory section of Mosses from an Old Manse (1846), Hawthorne suggests one explanation for the power of the grotesque upon our imaginations by way of analogy to a time-worn apple orchard: “An orchard has a relation to mankind, and readily connects itself with matters of the heart. . . . There is so much individuality of character, too, among apple trees, that it gives them an additional claim to be objects of human interest. One is harsh and crabbed in its manifestations; another gives us fruit as mild as charity. One is churlish and illiberal, evidently grudging the few apples that it bears; another exhausts itself in free-hearted benevolence.”

The sketch “The Old Apple Dealer” advises readers that “the lover of the moral picturesque may sometimes find what he seeks in a character which is nevertheless of too negative a description” for colorful treatment (Mosses, 495). Such is the case with a “faded and featureless” vendor, whose face and clothing consist of indistinct grays and browns (Mosses, 495). Upon close attention, however, one oddity emerges to give definition to his personality: “there is a continual unrest within him, which somewhat resembles the fluttering action of the nerves in a corpse from which life has recently departed” (Mosses, 497).

To a remarkable extent, as shall become clear, these passages prefigure tropes essential to Sherwood Anderson’s concept of the grotesque.

The early novels of Herman Melville utilize the grotesque in limited senses. The characteristic is associated in Typee (1846), Omoo (1847), and Mardi (1849) with unusual visual aspects in the landscape or in human appearances, as in cases of the elaborate pattern of tattoos on island warriors, which cause in the narrators a startled first reaction and a subsequently more informed understanding. In Redburn (1849) the term is
associated with the narrator’s overactive thought processes, which are “mixed with a thousand strange forms, the centaurs of fancy; half real and human, half wild and grotesque. Divine imaginings, like gods, come down . . . and there, in the embrace of wild, dryad reminiscences, beget the beings that astonish the world.” Many of the sublime effects in *Moby-Dick* (1851) involve grotesque extremes in appearances and situations, as with the appalling whiteness of the whale, the cosmic desolation of the black cabin boy Pip, and the unholy alliance of officers and crew in Ahab’s obsessive quest. In *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852) Melville renders the absolute passions that overcome Pierre, Isabel, and Lucy—and that lead to an incestuous relationship, murder, and double suicide—through overdetermined and tortured psychological conflicts.

In the mature phase of Melville’s literary career the presence of the grotesque, as conveyed descriptively through profound tonal contrasts, extends to the textuality of the books themselves. A primary conceit in the “Whiteness of the Whale” section of *Moby-Dick* is that whiteness “shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe,” an image that confounds the norms of object/shadow relationships within a figure-ground context. The section additionally refers to itself as “this white-lead chapter about whiteness” in an allusion to the whitening pigment used in paper but also tangentially to the metal used for movable type, a material origin of the black printface we read. Such conceits are further elaborated in *Pierre* where one “book,” as its textual divisions are named, is dedicated to the topic “More Light, and the Gloom of that Light; More Gloom, and the Light of that Gloom.” In that novel as a whole, truth is dark and forbidding and it is inscribed upon light-hued, vulnerable surfaces, both actual and metaphorical. Pierre’s father, for instance, is idealized in the son’s memories “without blemish, unclouded, snow-white, and serene.” Over against memory, however, stands a painted portrait of his father that Pierre owns and that obsesses the son as a “shadowy testification” that opens onto depths of darkness.

Melville’s most elaborate and original use of the grotesque is to be found in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). The Mississippi river steamer that provides the book’s setting is, by virtue of the intricacy of its design and the complexity of characters and events aboard, a “daedal boat.” It transports a full complement of outright grotesques, like the soldier of fortune, the wizened and sickly miser, the Missouri backwoodsman in bearskin, and the cosmopolitan attired in parti-color. The novel deploys outsized and reflexive effects to create even greater incongruities. In the case of the mute stranger of the book’s first scene,
attributes of whiteness and gentleness are emphasized to an “extremist sense” (Confidence-Man, 1). With his flaxen hair, white fur hat, cream-colored suit, and “lamb-like” demeanor, the stranger is as pale and pure as “sugar-snow in March” (Confidence-Man, 4). When this stranger figure vanishes an avatar as suddenly appears, one diametrically opposite in appearance and manner. The new stranger is a Negro crippled beggar who gives his name as Black Guinea. A garrulous minstrel figure, he is eager to engage passengers in banter and he moves among them like a “black sheep nudging itself a cozy berth in the heart of the white flock” (Confidence-Man, 8). From the outset, Melville’s novel indicates that only through such extreme contrasts can the fate of humankind be read.

Many aspects of the grotesque within The Confidence-Man involve the very textuality of what we read. Assorted cabins, alcoves, and passages on the riverboat Fidèle serve as stages for the novel’s puzzling human encounters, and they are likened to “secret drawers in an escritoire” (Confidence-Man, 5). One early encounter takes the form of competing inscriptions when the mute white stranger writes on a small slate a succession of appeals, each beginning “Charity.” In short time a riposte is made by the boat’s cynical barber, who when he opens for business hangs in front of the shop a placard warning bluntly “No Trust” (Confidence-Man, 3). By comparison to the motley host of tricksters that Melville has rendered, the confidence man Mark Twain created to engineer the plot of “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg” (1900) is not in the least a grotesque shape-shifter.

Writers of the American Renaissance like Hawthorne and Melville thoroughly complicated and intensified contrasts between light and dark that once seemed univocal in their moral senses. Hawthorne, for example, writes in his preface to Mosses from an Old Manse of a clergyman whose life was enveloped within “a veil woven of intermingled gloom and brightness” (Mosses, 12). Harry Levin in his influential study The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville proposes a graphic equivalent in order to explain literary themes of blackness, which he compares to “a set of photographic negatives. . . . We stand in slight danger of forgetting that black is merely one side—the less popular side—of a famous polarity. The union of opposites, after all, is the very basis of the American outlook.” Levin’s interpretative analogy fails, however, since in the technology of the photograph it is polarity and reversal—not union—that are the basis for the black and white image in forms of both the film negative and the positive print.

As one consequence of the histories of exploration, conquest, and slavery in the West, differences in skin color were inescapably incorpo-
rated into structures of cultural value founded upon moralized contrasts of light and dark. In North American colonies local Puritan theocracies codified such differences into spiritual doctrine. In matters of categorical racial judgment, Melville’s “Benito Cereno” (1856) provides an excruciating exploration into the antinomies of white and black, master and slave. At the end of the century Stephen Crane in his novel The Monster (1898) imagines through the fate of Henry Johnson, a Negro stableman, the redoubled social isolation and victimization of black Americans after Emancipation. The savior of a white boy from a terrible house fire, Johnson is mistakenly reported as dead by the local newspaper and he is eulogized in the community as a great hero. But Henry survives. Horribly disfigured and traumatized, he as quickly becomes a pariah. Henry continues to live in town but he is shunned by white and black society alike. He survives as a charred ruin of humanity, his head swathed in heavy, black crêpe to protect society from his horrible appearance. To convey this social condition Crane, American literature’s foremost colorist, reduces his descriptive palette to intense darks and a few light hues, much as he had done in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893) to depict the fate of a prostitute.

Matters of race have strongly inflected attitudes of the grotesque within American culture. The approach to the racial grotesque in a study by Leonard Cassuto explains it as a psychological dynamic of confusion and potential horror for whites in situations that jeopardize racial hierarchy and transgress categories of race identity. To defend itself against such uncertainties, dominant culture constructs an ideology of “the inhuman race,” and this ethnic imperative is evidenced in textual designations of the racial Other. The scope of Cassuto’s discussion extends from colonial times through part of the nineteenth century, with attention directed mainly toward captivity and slave narratives, abolitionist fiction, works by Melville, and the Sambo type as an ideological cru in the system of slavery.

In the modern period Ralph Ellison has proven masterful in the critique of such discourse. To take a telling example from Invisible Man (1952), the pride of the Liberty Paint Company’s product line is advertised through the slogan “If It’s Optic White, It’s the Right White,” which capitalizes upon the common saying within segregated society “If you’re white, you’re right.” The unspoken truth of the special formula for this cover-all white paint, however, is the secret addition of a few drops of a “dead black” pigment (Invisible Man, 200). The book’s black narrator has rigged up more than one thousand electric bulbs to illuminate his cellar retreat, an urban grotto if you will, and he claims with pride: “I doubt if
there is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine, and I do not exclude Broadway. Or the Empire State Building on a photographer’s dream night” (Invisible Man, 6). This black refugee from American racism has come to understand the paradoxes of white and black: “I now can see the darkness of lightness. And I love light, . . . maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form” (Invisible Man, 6).

The literary grotesque in the modern instance has origins in the thought and creative work of Poe, Baudelaire, Daumier, Hawthorne, and Melville. The modern grotesque evinces qualities of violence and darkness that are overdetermined and that are not circumscribed by an author’s intentions of moral judgment or satiric commentary. On a formal level, the modern grotesque relies more often upon a set of appearances than upon a series of events. In modern literary and graphic modes alike, the grotesque is predominantly visual and descriptive rather than ideational or narrative. Not confined to expository or explanatory functions, the modern grotesque stands at a threshold to alluring, intimidating obscurity. Such modern traits are contradistinctive to attributes Mikhail Bakhtin identifies in giving an account of the grotesque within medieval and Renaissance forms of the carnivalesque. There, the grotesque functions as a principal force within a demotic metanarrative that promises cultural revitalization. Operating from deep-rooted folk humor and collective wisdom about humanity’s material experience, the grotesque in a carnivalesque tradition is “a triumphant, festive principle” that is “gay and gracious” in spirit. In its forms and purposes, carnival is always to be understood at a collective, politically progressive level. Bakhtin maintains that contemporary understandings of the grotesque (and here he cites Wolfgang Kayser’s study at some length) are imbalanced by Romantic preoccupations with alienated and irrational states of mind and with thoroughly individualized dimensions of human experience.

AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE GROTESQUE

Though photography became fully a part of American life during the 1840s, the grotesque did not enter its visual thematics prominently until well into the twentieth century. To be sure, subject matter typically associated with the grotesque was part of American photography of the nineteenth century. While working in San Francisco during the 1860s Eadweard Muybridge photographed an Asian man over eight feet tall on
exhibition as “The Heathen Chinese Giant” at Woodward’s Gardens, an amusement park. The stereoscope images present the subject as elegant in his embroidered traditional costume and quite at ease in the company of park visitors as he poses for group portraits (fig. 2.1). The composition has posed and framed him as an exotic incongruity without asserting any grotesque dimension to the scene.

An archive of speciality portraits made by New York photographer Charles Eisenmann, whose studio was located in the Bowery, is available for comparison to the Muybridge approach. From the mid-1870s until he quit business in 1892, Eisenmann produced many cartes de visite of the performers and attractions in dime museums and traveling shows for sale as souvenirs. Most of these human attractions—midgets, giants, “wild”
men and women, people born with physical anomalies—are pictured with the same backgrounds, furnishings, and poses that befitted middle-class patrons. Grotesque incongruity in the Eisenmann images involves visual discrepancies between the utter uniqueness of each human attraction and the utter familiarity of the other compositional elements in the mass-style photograph portrait of the day.

In the 1880s Muybridge compiled an extensive, systematic photographic record of the movements of different human body types, a few of which could have been rendered easily as grotesques through other compositional approaches. Muybridge’s central purposes in documenting animal and human biomechanics, however, steered clear of any such intentions. In 1885, as he conducted the project at the University of Pennsylvania, Muybridge stated a general preference in models: “Artists’ models, as a rule, are ignorant and not well bred. As a consequence their movements are not graceful, and it is essential for the thorough execution of my work to have my models of a graceful bearing.” Yet at the same time, with the assistance of Dr. Francis Dercum, Muybridge selected patients from the University and Philadelphia hospitals as photographic subjects. Dr. Dercum was a pathologist on the medical faculty at the University of Pennsylvania, where he also lectured on nervous diseases. Muybridge’s motion studies had the sanction of the university’s prominent physiologists, anatomists, and neurologists, and they fit within the medical discourses of the time.

When Muybridge published Animal Locomotion: An Electro-Photographic Investigation of Consecutive Phases of Animal Movements, 1872–1885 in 1887, its limited edition of eleven volumes—eight on human subjects, three on animals—contained a total of 781 plates of series photographs. One volume with twenty-nine plates documents Abnormal Movements of male and female subjects, both nude and seminude. The physical conditions and disorders among these patients identified in captions to the plates include locomotor ataxia, lateral sclerosis, epilepsy, spastic paralysis, partial paraplegia, muscular atrophy, infantile paralysis, orthopedic malformation, a single amputee, a double amputee, and curvature of the spine. There is also one identified case of stuporous melancholia and one of convulsive seizures. Not a single one of these conditions constitutes in and of itself a visual grotesque, and Muybridge’s principal interest in biomechanics meant that normal and abnormal movements alike are recorded through strict and consistent protocols of camera position and background grid. In published form a series in this volume can contain as many as forty-eight separate photograph images of the individual on a single plate; the majority of the plates consist of either twenty-four or
thirty-six images. Such a serial presentation, even where a pronounced malformation is evident, helps prevent the individual from being arrested or essentialized into a singularly grotesque subject. In being presented strictly as physiometric studies the images effectively avoid overtones of the grotesque, which typically involve distorted, reflexive appearances. Muybridge also clearly intended to study a normative range of physical activity; abnormal human movements receive less than four percent of coverage in the project overall.

A severe case among the studies in *Abnormal Movements* involves a boy stricken with infantile paralysis, who walks on all fours. Most frames in the sequence of twelve photographs depicting his movement, however, capture a wide, winning smile on the boy’s face. In this, the plate departs from the publication’s general emphasis on physique and motor movement rather than on physiognomy. While physiognomy is often a prominent aspect of the human grotesque, here the boy’s expression undoes the likelihood of any such association. The sole case of identified mental impairment in the volume *Abnormal Movements* is that of an adult male with “Stuporous melancholia, walking.” This series leaves the subject’s face indistinct in twelve profile photographs and out of view entirely in the twelve taken from a rear perspective. In its attention to body movement, the series contributes a new dimension to clinical efforts of the time to establish by means of photography a visual record of mental illness. Unlike this Muybridge series, the clinical interests of medical photography of the day fell almost exclusively upon facial portraits of the emotionally or mentally disturbed patient, with the intention to establish a physiognomy of insanity.

In his study *The Grotesque in Photography* (1977), A. D. Coleman includes institutional imagery made for medical, anthropological, forensic, and military purposes on grounds that an identification of a particular image as grotesque is as much a function of the viewer’s response as it is one of image content or structure. Following this rationale, his book contains photographs of war casualties, from the Civil War to Vietnam, and of executions, among them two frames from Alexander Gardner’s series on the Lincoln assassination conspirators. It also contains postmortem daguerreotype portraits of children and the Muybridge series on the paralyzed boy. Yet in none of these instances are the compositions intentionally grotesque, as Coleman comes to acknowledge in conceding that the images were produced by “photographers who, by their own lights, were not creating grotesqueries or even addressing the theme.”23 Nor can the visual effect in these examples be termed manifestly grotesque by the traditions of the mode within the graphic arts. For my purposes,
Coleman’s admission demonstrates the general point that the visual and literary grotesque do not propose clinical or journalistic objectivity and that instead they engage at obvious levels in a manipulation of perspective and forms to deepen one’s recognition of incongruity and/or to intensify one’s psychological response.

The main argument of The Grotesque in Photography builds upon propositions, particularly those with “metaphysical implications,” first set forth by Wolfgang Kayser. In the specific application to photography, Coleman identifies three principal modalities of the grotesque: 1) documented realities; 2) staged and directed realities, or “false photographic documents”; and 3) outright irrealities. Images in the first two categories violate cultural norms and psychological expectations; in the third they violate one’s sense of natural order. It is in the last category, further explained as “descriptions of inner states rather than external phenomena,” that for Coleman photographs “come closest to the traditional meaning of the grotesque in art-historical terms: non- or antiliteral evocations of dreams, fantasies, visions, and hallucinations.”

The present study argues, to the contrary, that the strongest visual diacritics in grotesque photography are marked by adumbrations and disclosures about the often anomalous quality of shared reality rather than by utter departures from reality.

Humorous effects on a scale that reaches from whimsy to slapstick and caricature seem to be readily achieved in photography, especially in informal street portraiture done in a straight style. The nonstudio, straight style of camera portrait taken with minimal preparation became fully possible by the start of the twentieth century through the availability of hand-held equipment and rapid film exposure. The sheer density of human life on city streets once excerpted by the camera into static postures and expressions can convey an unanticipated comedy of the everyday. Moreover, the often insistently graphic textures of the urban scene—from advertisements to graffiti—offer in visual form a vulgate expressive of experience in mass, man-made consumer society, one that contains rich veins of urban vernacular humor. Such comic possibilities are widely explored in the American street photography of Paul Strand, Helen Levitt, William Klein, Roy DeCarava, Garry Winogrand, and Lee Friedlander. In general, to return to the distinction made by Baudelaire, most of their candid street portraits serve the ends of significative social comedy, not the absolutes of the grotesque.

To begin to understand the comic effects possible through straight and candid camera portraiture, as distinct from grotesque effects, we can turn to Henri Bergson’s monograph Laughter, published in 1900. While his study does not refer specifically to photography—it turns to litera-
ture, popular entertainments, and comic theater for examples—Bergson’s concepts remain relevant in the present context. According to Bergson, laughter is based chiefly in the perception of human beings as inanimate and conversely, in a minor key, in the perception of inanimate things as alive. A deflection of human animation into the mechanical, into automatism of thought or action, and into a fixed expression or mind-set are all circumstances that provoke laughter. Comic circumstances, then, are in the main ones of “mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being.” Human vitality that would otherwise be mobile and fluid is suddenly exposed as arrested and rigid. Bergson considers this eventuality to be a condition of mental and physical “absentmindedness.” Undeniably, situations in candid street photography where an animated action or expression are stopped short and made to appear awkward are a ready source of humor. Though Bergson had yet to formulate fully his ideas on élan vital, in the study on laughter he portrays the soul that animates humanity as a force “infinitely supple and perpetually in motion” and he explains that “the immateriality which thus passes into matter is what is called gracefulness” (Laughter, 78). But the material world, to which the human body largely belongs, is resistant and recalcitrant. It easily thwarts the purposes of soul and the results are comic.

Comedy, to summarize Bergson, arises within the circumstances of everyday life when humans stray from the innate purposes of creative evolution, neglect to follow the inherently progressive ingenuity of life, and lapse into mechanical patterns of repetition, inversion, and interference in behavior and language. Bergson’s idea of comedy is based in larger concepts of emotion, behavior, thought, and soul and upon an analytical induction from affect to genre. For him, where there is laughter there is comedy and laughter is categorically intellectual: the comic “appeals to the intelligence pure and simple; laughter is incompatible with emotion. Depict some fault, however trifling, in such a way as to arouse sympathy, fear or pity; the mischief is done, it is impossible for us to laugh” (Laughter, 150). Laughter, furthermore, is the instrument of a social, corrective process. Society is “suspicious of all inelasticity of character, of mind and even of body, because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as of an activity with separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common center round which society gravitates: in short, because it is the sign of an eccentricity” (Laughter, 73). Laughter is a “social gesture” that “restrains eccentricity” and serves utilitarian purposes of collective amelioration (Laughter, 73). And through laughter “society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it” (Laughter,
187). Thus, the comic can be viewed as a diagnostic mode that has identified offending instances of rigidity and eccentricity and laughter as a therapeutic process that purges these conditions in order to restore elasticity and sociability. Bergson’s ideas are thus categorically antithetical to the grotesque. Instead, they approximate in substantial ways Baudelaire’s thinking on significative comedy, and in terms of Kenneth Burke’s distinctions they explain comedy as a genre of incongruity dependent upon laughter.

That there was a mass audience for the visual grotesque in America by the 1920s is demonstrated by the movie box office success of Lon Chaney for more than a decade, up to his unexpected death in 1930 at the height of his screen career. Prominently among the many feature roles taken by this acclaimed “man of a thousand faces,” Chaney played a contortionist who fakes the miraculous faith healing of a disabled man, a legless criminal mastermind, a grossly stereotyped Fagin, an ape-man, Quasimodo, a crazed inmate who takes over the asylum, a thief who disguises himself as an old woman, the Phantom of the Opera, a crook masquerading as a benevolent cripple, a circus performer who poses as an armless knife thrower and who is in the end actually dismembered, a vampire, a paralyzed English magician who becomes a local tyrant in Africa, and a heavily scarred animal trapper. Among Hollywood movies this trend of the grotesque continued until enforcement of a new Motion Picture Production Code in 1934.

Irrespective of Chaney’s screen success in such roles, aberrant appearances and behaviors received little attention in the extensive documentary project in photographs organized by the federal government first under the Resettlement Administration (1935–1937), then the Farm Security Administration (1937–1942), and finally the Office of War Information (1942–1943). The roster of men and women who worked at one point or another in the division of visual information for these agencies includes John Collier, Jr., Jack Delano, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Carl Mydans, Gordon Parks, Edwin Rosskam, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn, John Vachon, and Marion Post Wolcott, each of whom would later be ranked among the most important photographers of the time. In the course of these years the agency information services printed and put on file for a host of public uses some 88,000 photographs. Among these tens of thousands of images, however, only a tiny, fractional minimum can be related in subject matter to material commonly associated with the grotesque. And with few exceptions, some to be noted below, the visual treatment of such subject matter is not in any obviously intentional way associated with the traditions of a grotesque style.
A number of agency photographers submitted picture stories on side-show attractions, but the attention among them falls almost exclusively upon the exterior to the tent, the area of advertising banners, and the barker’s platform. Two posters in a Marion Post Wolcott photograph, for example, occupy half the frame and announce to a nearly empty midway: “Double Sex Person! Exposed Flesh” and “World’s Fair Oddities. Alive Freaks.” A tent front area fills another Wolcott image with its playbill cartoons of “Dolly Dimples: Personality Fat Girl,” one of them a low comic dialogue scene (fig. 2.2). The mundane inconsequentiality of the scene is generally typical of the tone of most photographs on the subject of side-shows in the government file. Ben Shahn also documented an exterior view of the “Dolly Dimples” tent attraction, taken a year earlier than the Wolcott photograph and in a different part of the country, but with the same prosaic attitude. The compositional approach in such images treats the freak attraction as an open and familiar amusement, documented exclusively in the form of publicity rather than in the flesh. The only suggestion of a forbidden side to the scene is usually verbal, not visual, and at that the rhetoric is so hyperbolic or clichéd as to be merely comic.

A few photographs in the agency files do qualify as grotesque images by virtue of their reflexive engagement with the social or psychological incongruities involved. On field assignment in the South in October 1935, Ben Shahn, an activist artist before becoming a Resettlement Administration staff photographer, stopped in the town of Huntingdon, Tennessee to document the sidewalk pitch delivered by a traveling medicine man to a small crowd. There are nine Shahn photographs on the event, and they vary the context and the perspective in order to provide sufficient reportorial coverage. The most immediate and interpersonal images among them involve the show’s Negro assistant. This man appears in blackface, a feature not uncommon in minstrelsy performed by African Americans, with a portion of his face further darkened so as to accentuate the wide swath of white greasepaint around his mouth.

In one photograph the Negro assistant shares the same portrait frame with a large, costumed wooden figure that serves as the show’s puppet or ventriloquist dummy (fig. 2.3). The foreground and centered position of the stereotype effigy organizes the portrait composition. It bespeaks the fate for a black man cast in the Sambo mold, as articulated through the guarded or at least noncommittal reaction of the man’s face to the camera, his person otherwise turned away, and the permanent symbolism and battered condition of the manikin, which is positioned completely frontward. In the historical and cultural senses of a phrase coined by Flannery O’Connor, each figure in the Shahn photograph amounts to an
Figure 2.2. Marion Post Wolcott, *Dolly Dimples: Personality Fat Girl* (1939). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-DIG-fsa-8a40648 DLC].
Figure 2.3. Ben Shahn, *Medicine Show, Huntingdon, Tennessee* (1935). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-USF331-006167-M4 DLC].
“artificial nigger.” While maintaining distinctions between the human and the artificial, in respect to the public fate of race the portrait delineates equivalences between the two figures. With this image Shahn compassionately decodes aspects of the racial grotesque in American social relations. Shahn’s double portrait registers aspects of the racial grotesque while it preserves the underlying humanity of the object of such stereotypes.

During his travels through the South under contract with the Resettlement Administration in 1936, Walker Evans turned his camera several times on circus and minstrel posters. The context for his images of this material was not the fairground or carnival but the streets and business districts in town. By the nature of its function, to publicize a limited or touring attraction, the material is ephemeral. To emphasize this feature Evans chose examples in varying stages of deterioration from time and the elements. With a graphic exactitude possible through the large format of his 8 × 10-inch view camera, these photographs partially expose the undersurface of earlier posters and the supporting wall. Effects of incongruity are particularly telling with the minstrel imagery.

The poster Evans documented while in Alabama of “J. C. Lincoln’s Sunny South Minstrels” is dense in the visual discourse of grotesque racialization (fig. 2.4). The image offers practically a catalogue raisonné of stereotype elements: thickened and animalized facial features, watermelon and chicken thieving, a handkerchief-headed mammy, a razor-wielding youth, a dandified musician, domestic turbulence, and violence. As a repository of current, active stereotypes the poster may materially wither away in the short run but the social structure underlying such images, the photograph’s iconography suggests, is as solid and long-lived as the brick wall that supports this kind of visual text. For its publication in American Photographs (1938) Evans cropped the image down to the borders of the poster illustration, thus emphasizing all the more its internal figure-ground relationships. With the exception of a few such images, the federal documentary project was disinclined to assert a grotesque attitude toward subject matter. In the 1930s it would be left to the press photographer known as Weegee to develop a definitively American grotesque style in photography.