Grotesque Figures
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Why did Charles Baudelaire invoke Jean-Jacques Rousseau in a title he proposed for the prose poem collection now known as *Les Petits Poèmes en prose*, or *Le Spleen de Paris*? Although the title—“Le Promeneur solitaire” (The solitary walker)—was never used, the apparent reference to Rousseau’s autobiography “Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire” is surprising, for Baudelaire rarely alluded to his predecessor in his letters, criticism, and poetry. And why would he choose to bring up another author, let alone one whom he seldom discussed, in connection with his own new—and innovative—poems?

Baudelaire was not normally averse to sharing his critical opinions about other writers, having extolled the talents of Edgar Allan Poe and written with enthusiasm about Théophile Gautier and other contemporaries; and if he was affected by the style or ideas of Rousseau, he could have joined the frequent literary and political debates about Rousseau’s legacy. However, he did not spell out his reaction to Rousseau in writing. Baudelaire’s sporadic references to the eighteenth-century author do not yield a coherent explanation of his views. Baudelaire mentions Rousseau favorably in his *Salon de 1846*, choosing Rousseau’s supposed suicide as an example of a singularly modern phenomenon. However, in the 1850s, Baudelaire’s cursory remarks about him are full of scorn. Rousseau is an “auteur sentimental et infâme” (“a sentimental and vile author”), a liar who has the audacity to claim that he puts truth above life. As if that were not enough, he is undoubtedly one of those fools who believe in the innate goodness of man, and an abhorrent author given to public confessions. Yet, Baudelaire also makes notes in his journals recognizing himself in
some of Rousseau’s actions, and in 1861 and 1863, he tells his mother that when his own “book about [him]self” is published, “J[ean]-J[acques]’s Confessions will appear pale” by comparison. In sum, Baudelaire’s infrequent and contradictory comments offer precious little information that would illuminate his intentions regarding “Le Promeneur solitaire.” We can only turn to the poems themselves for answers.

Indeed, in the last several decades, scholars have noted significant borrowings from Rousseau in prose poems such as “Le Gâteau,” as well as phrases and attitudes reminiscent of Rousseau in “L’Etranger,” “Le Confiteor de l’artiste,” “La Chambre double,” “Le Mauvais Vitrier,” “Les Foules,” “Le Joujou du pauvre,” “La Solitude,” and “Les Fenêtres,” among others. Not all of these cases have been studied in depth, but when they have been analyzed, they have generally been interpreted as manifestations of Baudelaire’s hostility toward “Jean-Jacques.” (Jean Starobinski asserts, for example, that Baudelaire rereads Rousseau “in order to refute him with his own images.”) However, it has always seemed to me that, in the absence of a comprehensive investigation, it was important not to foreclose the questions raised by the proposed title and the more general question of Baudelaire’s relationship to Rousseau. This book is my attempt to provide a more systematic treatment of this poorly understood aspect of Baudelaire’s work. Nonetheless, it is not my aim to provide a definitive interpretation. Rather, I hope my efforts will encourage further research and discussion, from which our understanding of Baudelaire and modernity can only benefit.

I have uncovered many previously undetected borrowings from Rousseau in Les Petits Poèmes en prose, and as a result, this book presents six completely new readings of prose poems, based on Baudelaire’s hidden, yet extensive, rewritings of Rousseau. At the same time, my research and analysis have convinced me that many of the central characters in the poems, not just “The Solitary Walker” of the proposed title, are caricatures of Rousseau drawn from the ideological debates about the post-Revolutionary identity of France that marked the nineteenth century. If Rousseau was not just a source of textual material for Baudelaire, but also a recurrent character in his prose poem collection, as I believe, then I could only conclude that, contrary to the closely held opinion of Baudelaire scholars, the poems were intended to be more than random vignettes of Paris life.

My study grew in unexpected ways and took on broader significance still when I made the surprising discovery that the common ground on which Baudelaire and Rousseau meet is the unstable terrain of the grotesque. The
idea that anyone would consult Rousseau to learn about the grotesque is itself novel and startling. Baudelaire’s insight into this unsuspected element of Rousseau’s work has given me a new appreciation of both authors’ breadth. More important, however, as I read their works together, I became aware that their convergence and disagreement concerning the grotesque was a key moment in the development of a modernist aesthetic. Reading Baudelaire with Rousseau shows how the modern grotesque is historically rooted, structurally unchanging, and yet radically new. By focusing on these two authors, both of whom influenced the course of European literature, this book thus seeks to shed light on a major aesthetic shift that continues to have repercussions for art in our time.

The history of the grotesque is usually described as falling rather neatly into two distinct moments. The trauma of the French Revolution and its aftereffects throughout Europe, which also divide Baudelaire from Rousseau, can be seen as a watershed between the two.8 Grotesque productions of the earlier period, extending from the Renaissance through the mid-eighteenth century, bear the stamp of the carnivalesque, described by Mikhail Bakhtin as “a festive perception of the world.” In France, Italian theater (or commedia dell’arte), street theaters and fairs, opera, and the arabesque paintings so preponderant in interior decor recall the “folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers” that Bakhtin associates with the carnivalesque. They all contain elements of the “culture of folk carnival humor,” and they call for “ever changing, playful, undefined forms.” In this early period, the grotesque “consecrate[s] inventive freedom, . . . permit[s] the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, . . . liberate[s] from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted.”9 In sum, the early grotesque has a carefree, utopian flavor.

In contrast, the grotesque that arises after the French Revolution is anything but happy-go-lucky or optimistic. Bakhtin observes that in the nineteenth century, “Laughter loses its gay and joyful tone [and its positive regenerating power].”10 In Wolfgang Kayser’s view, interest in the grotesque arises in periods of insecurity, when “the belief . . . in a perfect and protective natural order cease[s] to exist.” Basing his understanding largely on literary works from the romantic period to the twentieth century, Kayser asserts that the grotesque is “the estranged world,” a world that has ceased to be reliable and therefore instills fear. The post-Revolutionary grotesque, then, is not an ex-
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tension of the carnival spirit; it does not evoke feelings of freedom and the possibility of change. If anything, it may “carry the [artist] away, deprive him of his freedom, and make him afraid of the ghosts which he so frivolously invoked.” At best, according to Kayser, the later grotesque represents the artist’s struggle to overcome feelings of “helplessness and horror” by “attempt[ing] to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world.”

This is the historical paradigm that would normally segregate Baudelaire from Rousseau and place the former squarely in the modern camp. But the Baudelaire–Rousseau relationship is not susceptible to this kind of dichotomous reading. In the first place, Baudelaire’s work is on the cusp where the pre-Revolutionary and the later grotesque meet. His prose poetry is a liminal case, partaking of both the early and the modern styles. The juxtaposition is obvious at a glance. Baudelaire mobilizes the themes and actors of the carnivalesque in texts that have a world-weary or melancholic tone. He produces joyful scenes of street fairs and mimes alongside down-and-out characters and ironic narrators representing the inescapable misery of the real world. But it is in his poetic response to Rousseau, in particular, that Baudelaire offers us the opportunity to witness the shift within the grotesque from the artistic inventiveness of the rococo to the manifestation of forces that threaten to render the artist helpless. Baudelaire sees beyond the epiphenomena of the grotesque (its themes and styles) and locates the real grotesque in the realm of language. For him, the real grotesque arises as a folly or madness of language, which threatens to override the poet’s control. This grotesque is apprehended in the vertiginous experience of reading, and Baudelaire comes to this awareness in reading Rousseau.

Reading Baudelaire reading Rousseau, then, I address both the specific features that make Baudelaire’s poetry a distinctive example of the modern grotesque and the underlying principles that attach his work unmistakably to the unchanging or eternal grotesque. In his dialogue with Rousseau, Baudelaire serves not just as an example of a new grotesque style but as a point of entry into the grotesque as a timeless phenomenon.

The visual signifiers of the grotesque in the rococo period, the political and aesthetic connotations of the Paris Opéra in the mid-eighteenth century, the debates over “Rousseau” and the identity of “France” between 1848 and 1861, and the role of (social and allegorical) types in caricature in the mid-nineteenth century are among the subjects discussed in this book. In its fusion of historical, cultural, and rhetorical elements, my work thus differs from the writings of the critics who discuss Baudelaire’s use of allegory or even his rela-
tion to Rousseau. By emphasizing the grotesque over the allegorical in Baudelaire’s poetry, and by linking his modernist aesthetic to Rousseau’s rejection of the grotesque, I bring forward the connections between Baudelaire’s art and the visual and literary styles of the eighteenth century, as well as the differences that make Baudelaire’s work new.

The book’s seven chapters pursue my argument from several different points of view. Chapter 1 establishes the structural link between Baudelaire’s ideas about allegory, grotesque figures, and fetishes. Briefly reviewing the commonly held ideas about the grotesque, I disregard the numerous differences of value and historical emphasis among scholarly texts on the subject and focus instead on the traits on which all agree. I then consider the similarities between the grotesque, as it has been defined, and the traditional view of allegory as a restricted figure or trope. By positing the structural affinity between grotesque and allegory I pave the way for a new understanding of the grotesque as an unchanging feature of language. Finally, basing my own analysis on Baudelaire’s “De l’essence du rire” (“Essay on Laughter”) and selected verse poems, I establish the crucial premise that Baudelaire’s grotesque is both traditional and new, inasmuch as for him, allegory is not a restricted but rather an open and unpredictable “grotesque figure.”

Chapter 2 takes up the visual elements of the decorative allegorism (or grotesque style) of the rococo and shows how this visual style becomes a figure for modern poetry in “Le Poème du hachisch.” Baudelaire elaborates on his ideas about allegory in this “Poème,” likening the open figure to the painted arabesques of the rococo. Here he not only sets out the equation between intoxication and reading but also catches us up, as readers, in the delirious experience of allegory as it spirals out of control. Since the “Poème” is also the first text in which Rousseau figures as a character—the prototype of modern man, it foreshadows the use to which Baudelaire puts Rousseau in the prose poems he published the following year. There is thus a logical link between “Le Poème du hachisch” and the prose poems discussed in the last four chapters of the book.

However, in Chapter 3, in order to establish how and why Rousseau came to personify modern man in Baudelaire’s poems, I address the thorny subject of Rousseau’s reception in nineteenth-century France, specifically the ideological debates over the legacy of the French Revolution and its meaning for the identity of France. I demonstrate that between 1845 and 1865, “Rousseau” is already in use as an allegorical figure, a personification of the good or evil effects of the Revolution—the “god” or “devil” of modern France. Inasmuch as
“Rousseau” exemplified and focused the nineteenth century’s preoccupation with the past, “he” encapsulated the ethos of the present, an essential aim of Baudelaire’s modernity. Baudelaire makes ample use of the Rousseau caricatures put into circulation in the ongoing ideological debates. But the poet also turns to “Rousseau” to express his alienation from the values of his time. By taking up the images of Rousseau made available by contemporary discourse and appearing to endorse the dominant conservative view of the eighteenth-century author, Baudelaire both points to and cagily covers over his extensive engagement with Rousseau.

Beginning with Chapter 4, I turn specifically to Rousseau’s role in Baudelaire’s prose poem collection and its relation to the modern grotesque. I argue that types are the nexus where allegory, the grotesque, and caricature converge in Baudelaire’s poetry. Baudelaire’s long-standing interest in caricature and his desire to create a poetic version of the popular Physiologies make themselves felt in his use of “Rousseau” as a prototype of various social outcasts who traverse the prose poems and in “Rousseau”’s role as an overarching figure for the poems as a whole. Analyzing this insistent presence of “Rousseau” in the poems, I suggest that “Rousseau” personifies the grotesque for Baudelaire. This hypothesis is borne out by a close reading of Baudelaire’s poem “Le Mauvais Vitrier,” which relies on Rousseau’s theory and practice of personification. In particular, the “Huitième Promenade,” the eighth of Rousseau’s Rêveries du promeneur solitaire, shapes Baudelaire’s understanding of the generative function of the modern grotesque.

In making “Rousseau,” an actual historical figure, the personification of the grotesque in his prose poems, Baudelaire brings together the real and the grotesque, which Rousseau fought hard to keep rigorously separate. Rousseau criticizes the excessive use of allegory, and allegory itself as an excessive (or grotesque) figure; and, for reasons that have to do with his desire to reform society, he calls for a more restrained use of rhetoric in the service of the real. Baudelaire learns from Rousseau’s critical statements about the grotesque and even borrows extensively from them, but he does not completely adopt them. In Chapter 5, on realism and the modern grotesque, I continue my investigation of the aesthetic debate between the two authors, arguing that Baudelaire builds on and yet departs from Rousseau’s theory and practice to create a new, modernist idiom. After examining in some detail Rousseau’s satirical letter on the Paris Opéra in his novel Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse, which indirectly lays out Rousseau’s definition and critique of the grotesque, I show how Baudelaire puts textual and rhetorical elements of this letter to work in new ways in his
poems “Le Vieux Saltimbanque,” “Le Crépuscule du soir,” “Une Mort héroïque,” and “La Corde.”

My analysis of Rousseau’s theory of the grotesque continues in Chapter 6, which extensively compares Rousseau’s dictionary article “Opéra” and the Baudelaire poem that painstakingly rewrites it, “Les Yeux des pauvres.” “Opéra” is the text that most fully explains Rousseau’s position on the grotesque, complementing, in a much more serious vein, the comic treatment of it in Julie. Although both texts make clear the affiliation of the grotesque with the luxury and excesses of the absolute monarchy, they eventuate in rather different political positions, and in Chapter 6, I take up these sociopolitical implications of the grotesque. Both Baudelaire and Rousseau wrote under repressive governments whose censorship practices affected them directly, and both adopted a stance toward the grotesque that reflected their opposition to these regimes. But if Rousseau wanted to do away with the grotesque and, implicitly, the absolute monarchy that sponsored it, Baudelaire welcomed the grotesque, which he understood as a principle of instability or a destabilizing force. For Baudelaire, the grotesque was a subversive force in oppressive times.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I review “Rousseau”’s function as Baudelaire’s grotesque figure or fetish. In his essay on laughter, Baudelaire uses the term “grotesque figure” to refer to allegory as an eroded language, an arbitrary or conventional sign, giving as an example the goddess Venus. With the advent of Christianity and the loss of her pagan powers, Venus became a comical icon or, as Baudelaire puts it, an “extravagant fetish.” As a fallen revolutionary idol, “Rousseau” is just such a degraded sign or fetish for Baudelaire and his era. Of course, the fetish, in Freudian terms, is an object to be collected, a sign standing in for the lost object of the child’s desire and a way of warding off his fear of castration. This sense of the fetish is equally applicable to Baudelaire’s relation to Rousseau. Like his contemporaries, Baudelaire was at once fascinated and repelled by Rousseau, whom he saw as both an inspiration and a threat. The prose poem “Le Vieux Saltimbanque,” which tells the story of the narrator-poet’s emotional encounter with an “old man of letters” who has outlived the generation he once amused, perfectly captures this stance.

In mid-nineteenth-century France, and in Baudelaire’s prose poems in particular, “Rousseau” is the unforgettable sign of a past that haunts the present and prevents it from coming into its own. Although this dilemma presents itself to his contemporaries as the traumatic effect of the French Revolution, Baudelaire inscribes it in his prose poems as the trauma of reading. On one level, the poem “Le Vieux Saltimbanque” dramatizes this trauma as the psy-
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chological shock to the poet’s system resulting from his encounter with Rousseau’s works. But on another level, this autobiographical tale is yet another example of the personification so central to Baudelaire’s poems. Analyzing “Le Vieux Saltimbanque” in relation to its primary Rousseau intertext, the ninth of the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, I show how the poem acknowledges and tries to compensate for the shock of reading, which unleashes both the creative force and deadly threat of the grotesque.