Grotesque Figures
Swain, Virginia E.

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1

The Grotesque
Definitions and Figures

Charles Baudelaire was bent on creating an art for his era. Indeed, many believe that it was Baudelaire who brought about the literary revolution that established modern art. But although we know Baudelaire as the poet of modernity, the poet of alienation and melancholy who describes the grim reality of city life, his poetry, even the last and most modern of his works, retains the imprint of what went before.

Baudelaire’s relation to the past is more complex than is often acknowledged. In his important essay on modernity “Le Peintre de la vie moderne” (“The Painter of Modern Life”), Baudelaire draws a parallel between fashion and the artistic representation of the present; he makes the point that decorative or stylistic elements that are often dismissed as superficial may in fact hold the key to the moral, psychological, and aesthetic climate of the times (“la morale et l’esthétique du temps”). Yet he also understood that the frequent “metamorphoses” of the present make its representations, like styles in dress, quickly passé. Styles in art or fashion stamp beauty with the mark of time, simultaneously tying it to the present and subjecting it to decay. Paradoxically, however, styles also allow the past to come back to life. An eighteenth-century garment, for example, may seem stiff and funny when viewed objectively; but it becomes lively and serious when we imagine it worn by a person or see it animated by an actor in the theater:

L’imagination du spectateur peut encore aujourd’hui faire marcher et frémir cette tunique et ce schall. Un de ces jours, peut-être, un drame paraîtra sur
un théâtre quelconque, où nous verrons la résurrection de ces costumes . . . et s’ils sont portés et animés par des comédiennes et des comédiens intelligents, nous nous étonnerons d’en avoir pu rire si étourdiment. (Baud., OC, 2: 684)

The spectator’s imagination can still today make this tunic and this shawl walk and tremble. One of these days, perhaps, a drama will appear on some stage or other, where we shall see the resurrection of these costumes . . . and if they are worn and animated by intelligent actresses and actors, we shall be astonished that we were able to laugh at them so thoughtlessly.

Just as an old garment can be given a new life in a subsequent age, the past can be resuscitated—animated or personified: “Le passé, tout en gardant le piquant du fantôme, reprendra la lumière et le mouvement de la vie, et se fera présent” (“The past, while retaining the piquancy of a phantom, will once again have the light and movement of life, and will make itself present”). If the present is always passing, the past is always on the verge of coming alive. Baudelaire’s modernity is the uneasy negotiation between the two.

This book examines the way the phantomatic past of the eighteenth century “makes itself present” in Baudelaire’s modernity. I argue that Baudelaire looked to eighteenth-century aesthetics to help him develop his theory of the grotesque, which is the basis of his modern art. Baudelaire may have founded a new era in French literature, and a new style that inspires artists even today, but that era and that style are beholden to the eighteenth-century art of the rococo and to eighteenth-century reflections on it. This book, then, is about Baudelaire’s grotesque as it relates to the previous century’s esthetic theory and practice. The grotesque dominated the literary and visual arts in France throughout much of the eighteenth century—at least until the philosophes, led by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, attacked the rococo aesthetic in their campaign against the Paris Opéra. Baudelaire was well aware of this history and had studied both the eighteenth-century applications of the grotesque and Rousseau’s criticism of it. Not only does Rousseau’s essay on the Paris Opéra inform Baudelaire’s theory of the grotesque, but “Rousseau” also appears as the representative of the grotesque in Baudelaire’s poems. Taking up “Rousseau” in his own poetry, Baudelaire uses the traits of a historical personality (a historical figure) to give a human form (an allegorical figure or personification) to the grotesque (itself bound up with figuration). The grotesque figures to which the title of this book refers are thus multiple, both historical and rhetorical, and thoroughly interconnected.
Defining the Grotesque

The grotesque is a slippery term, which has defied definition. Depending on which authority one consults, the grotesque may designate either the lively mood and social inversion of the carnival (Mikhail Bakhtin) or the bleak fantasies and ironic expression of the alienated individual (Wolfgang Kayser). Scholars also disagree about the grotesque's history. It may span several centuries or several millennia, beginning in antiquity, the Middle Ages, or the Renaissance, and continuing today—indeed, one commentator (Bernard McElroy) notes “an affinity which makes the grotesque not only typical of [twentieth-century] art, but perhaps its most characteristic expression.” Yet despite their varying assessments of the use, tone, and history of the grotesque, critics agree on several of its characteristics. First and foremost, the grotesque refers to the improbable “fusion of different realms.” Grotesque images are “double, tense, and contradictory.” Monstrous or chimerical, they interweave heterogeneous forms in creative ways that have no obvious model; they ignore nature and the hierarchical ordering of the world. Indeed, the grotesque is removed from any origin or foundation that might undergird it. The opposite of “the indisputable and stable,” it opens “an abyss . . . where we thought to rest on firm ground.” The “pure product of the imaginary,” the grotesque is “exactly the antithesis of . . . representation.” Another important trait of the grotesque, whether condensed in an individual figure or written out in an extended narration, is the relation to time. Like the terra-cotta figurines of “senile, pregnant hags” that Bakhtin describes, grotesque images incorporate a temporal gap that is often responsible for the illusion that not just time but “species boundaries” have been “overleaped.” Grotesque figures can thus be read “as images of instantaneous process, time rendered into space, narrative compressed into image.” The grotesque keeps us balancing tentatively at the limit between “death and rebirth, insanity and discovery, rubble and revelation.” By virtue of its double nature and its defiance of logic, the grotesque strands our understanding “in a ‘liminal’ phase, for the image appears to have an impossible split reference, and multiple forms inhabit a single image.” Depending, it seems, on the author’s tolerance for disorientation, the grotesque is therefore judged to be either “ridiculous” or “terrifying,” if not both at once.

Striking as they may be, these basic criteria scarcely limit the number and types of images and subjects that are grouped under the heading of the grotesque. Books on the grotesque tend to spread in all directions, drawing into...
their purview many apparently distinct phenomena, although, here again, certain examples receive universal assent. Examples of the grotesque in art and literature that are repeatedly cited by critics include literary and visual depictions of demons; the sketches of the seventeenth-century artist Jacques Callot (particularly his Italian actors); the productions of the commedia dell’arte, with their dizzying repartee, extraordinary gymnastics, and “masks” or stock characters; caricature; fair performances; puppet shows; and human beings reduced to “puppets, marionettes, and automata, . . . their faces frozen into masks.”

Nonetheless, despite these points of agreement, the grotesque continues to appear as a catchall term lacking any precision. As Geoffrey Golt Harpham observes: “Curiously, [the grotesque] remains elusive despite the fact that it is unchanging.” One of the principal difficulties surrounding discussions of the grotesque, I submit, is that the term refers both to a specific artistic and literary style and to a condition of language that is associated with the “demonic” and perceived as “an impersonal force, an alien and inhuman spirit” inhabiting (or haunting) the productions of art. Grotesque imagery or grotesque narrative may hint at this other grotesque, conceived as condition or force, but the two do not (and cannot be made to) completely cohere. Any attempt to make sense of the phenomenon called the grotesque must first untangle these two.

Baudelaire, for his part, understood this problem. He knew that the grotesque is not just a style or a mood but also an intangible process, which can only be represented indirectly, in the most improper of terms. For Baudelaire the grotesque is not only a visual phenomenon, apprehensible as “graphic play” or a “painter’s dream.” Although it may be associated with endless, spiraling forms and implausible hybrids (monstrous chimeras, mutant bodies, and the like), it is not reducible to them. Instead, this overt playfulness, this evocation of illogical or unnatural fantasy, seeks to express the “other” grotesque—what I call the generative play of language—the “non-thing” that resists representation. “The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis,” and the changing forms or visible shapes can only hint at this invisible and never-ending process.

For Baudelaire, the grotesque names the paradox of allegory, which is central in the texts and visual productions of the rococo, as it is throughout the poet’s own work. Without delving into Baudelaire’s theory at this point, it is sufficient to recall rhetoricians’ descriptions of allegory to see that the structural elements of the grotesque on which critics generally agree are quite similar to the structure of allegory as it has traditionally been understood. First,
allegory, like the grotesque, is double and disparate. César Chesnau Du Marsais (1676–1756), who contributed articles about grammar and rhetoric to the *Encyclopédie* until his death, said of allegory:

L’allégorie est un discours, qui est d’abord présenté sous un sens propre, qui paraît tout autre chose que ce qu’on a besoin de faire entendre, et qui cepen-
dant ne sert que de comparaison pour donner l’intelligence d’un autre sens qu’on n’exprime point. . . . dans l’allégorie tous les mots ont d’abord un sens
figuré; c’est-à-dire que tous les mots d’une phrase ou d’un discours allé-
gorique forment d’abord un sens littéral qui n’est pas celui qu’on a dessein
de faire entendre.

Allegory is a discourse that is first presented under a proper meaning, which appears to be something completely other than what one needs to convey, and that nonetheless only serves as a comparison to make clear another meaning that one doesn’t express. . . . in allegory, all the words have first a
figural meaning; that is, all the words of an allegorical phrase or discourse
first form a literal meaning that is not the meaning one intends to convey.²⁴

Proposing two dissimilar meanings with a single expression, allegory is per-
petually and constitutionally different from itself. Allegory literally designates
the speech of the “other” (in Greek, *allo*), and otherness is its very structure.

Furthermore, if the grotesque’s heterogeneity requires us to unpack its tem-
poral structure in order to recapitulate the evolution of a species or imagine
the possible violence that might have thrown disparate elements together, al-
legory’s doubleness, too, requires a double understanding, which, pragmati-
cally speaking, can only be arrived at sequentially. Explicating this passage
from Du Marsais, Tzvetan Todorov writes: “[I]ci, tous les mots . . . semblent
bien former un premier sens littéral; mais, dans un deuxième temps, on décou-
vre qu’il faut chercher un sens second, allégorique” (“[H]ere, all the words . . .
seem to form a first literal meaning; but, *in a second time,* one discovers that
one must seek a second, allegorical meaning”).²⁵ Allegory requires us to read
in “two times” in order to comprehend its double, differential meaning. In
other words, in the world of allegory, as in the world of the grotesque, “time is
the originary constitutive category.” “Allegory designates primarily a distance
in relation to its own origin,” Paul de Man argues, and “it establishes its lan-
guage in the void of this temporal difference.”²⁶

Finally, allegory is anything but stable and well-grounded. The confusion
over “sens propre,” “sens figuré,” and “sens littéral” evident in Du Marsais’s

13
definition, which Todorov’s reformulation attempts to eliminate (by directly inverting the terms), hints at the uncertainty allegory promotes. Pointing toward an “object” or meaning that it cannot name or present (“l’objet principal . . . disparaît entièrement dans l’allégorie”), allegory is both “illustrative” (as sign or basis of comparison) and resistant to illustration. The difference and deferral of meaning within the figure guarantee that allegory will always chase after itself, in a movement of perpetual regression. As a figure, allegory has the same enigmatic or elusive quality as the grotesque.

In the pages and chapters that follow, I show how Baudelaire’s idea of allegory (which builds upon but goes beyond the rhetoricians’ traditional definitions) converges with his idea of the grotesque. In our common parlance we may speak of a thing or a situation as “grotesque,” meaning odd, deviant, or morally dubious, and Baudelaire himself sometimes uses the word in this loose way. In this book, however, I reserve the term “grotesque” for the visual and operatic art of the rococo (which was regularly called “the grotesque” in the eighteenth century and which informs Baudelaire’s practice) and for the well-thought-out theory of the grotesque propounded by Baudelaire.

**Baudelaire’s Theory of the Grotesque**

Since Baudelaire does not elaborate his theory of the grotesque in any systematic fashion, it must be gleaned and pieced together from various sources, including verse poems such as “Le Masque,” the prose “poem” on hashish, and the essays on caricature, as well as from his reflections on the essence of laughter (“De l’essence du rire” [1857]), where it is available to us in its most complete form. This chapter and the next take up all these sources, but here I want to turn first to “De l’essence du rire.”

In the course of this short piece, which began as thoughts about caricature and grew into a work on the grotesque, Baudelaire draws on examples as heterogeneous as the English romantic novel (notably *Melmoth the Wanderer*) and German literature of the fantastic (the novellas of E. T. A. Hoffmann), lithographs in the style of the French illustrator Gavarni, Jacques Callot’s seventeenth-century drawings of Italian actors, English mime theater in the tradition of the commedia dell’arte, and bronze figurines, masks, and phallic objects from Greek antiquity. The broad sweep of these illustrations recalls, perhaps a bit too much, the endemic problem that seems to characterize books on the grotesque. But Baudelaire’s examples do more than suggest the far-ranging implications of the grotesque, its thematic affiliations, and its associa-
the function and effects of this “unnamable” condition, which Baudelaire also calls “the absolute comic” ("le comique absolu"). Through an examination of some of these examples, we can begin to fathom Baudelaire’s idea of the grotesque and why he considered it the highest achievement of art, an unsettling performance at the top of the comic scale.

Baudelaire first uses the word “grotesque” in the essay on laughter when he proposes the comic example of some “grotesque figures” of antiquity. His discussion aligns the grotesque with figures, masks, and “monstrous apparatuses of generation,” all of which have lost their initial meaning or seriousness with the passage of time:

As for the grotesque figures left to us by antiquity, the masks, the bronze figurines, the muscle-bound Herculeses, the little Priapuses with their tongues curled in the air and their pointy ears, all cerebellum and phallus,—as for those prodigious phalluses on which the white daughters of Romulus innocently ride, those monstrous apparatuses of generation decked out with bells and wings, I think that all those things are full of seriousness. Venus, Pan, Hercules, were not laughable characters. We laughed at them after the coming of Jesus, with Plato and Seneca helping. I believe that antiquity was full of respect for the drum-majors and for those who accomplish all sorts of feats of strength or skill [tours de force], and that all the extravagant fetishes that I cited are only signs of adoration, or at the most symbols of force, and not at all emanations of an intentionally comic spirit. Indian and Chinese idols do not know that they are ridiculous; the comic is in us Christians. (my translation)
This dense example proposes a preliminary explanation of the grotesque as a turn of events in which one (mythological) signifying system is supplanted by another (focused on the Christian deity). The substitution causes the original seriousness or meaning of the pagan beliefs to fall away and brings about the laughter that marks this loss (one diagnostic sign or symptom of the grotesque). In the Christian world, Venus and Hercules no longer act as forces, as they once did; instead of bringing an idea of beauty or strength into being, their names merely connote it. Formerly viewed as supernatural entities endowed with power, movement, and life, the gods have been stripped of their subjectivity and reduced to material objects of misplaced adoration; they have become, to use Baudelaire’s phrase, “extravagant fetishes.” As inanimate or artificial objects whose value arises not out of any inherent power, but from the irrational or arbitrary attribution of supposed power, the fetishes are conventional signs, functioning in a system where inner properties are no longer the key to meaning.

Although as a result of long habit, “Venus” and “Hercules” still stand for beauty and strength, this remnant of meaning is a poor substitute for the omnipotence that was once their essence. The original, proper meaning of the names, which designated superhuman beings, is replaced by an eroded, conventional meaning, with at best a limited power. Although not all ideation is lost, what remains of the proper name is a shadow of its former self: not a revered god, but an allegorical figure (Venus, Hercules, Pan, Priapus). Baudelaire presents allegory under the guise of “grotesque figures” that once had a sacred fullness of meaning but that function now as comic “fetishes” or conventional signs. Allegory is a fallen or lapsed language, consonant with the acknowledged vanity of the gods.

Baudelaire is thus not taking up unchanged the grotesque figures of the past. Although the essay on laughter puts forward several of the grotesque images typically associated with Renaissance and rococo art, we should not be misled by their familiarity. Unlike the half-animal, half-human forms frolicking in the arabesque scrolls of a rococo painting, Baudelaire’s “grotesque figures” suggest that the grotesque is not the monstrous union of two disparate bodies—a physical hybrid—but a cleavage within a proper name or a sign.

As the example of the grotesque figures suggests, Baudelaire’s essay on laughter is concerned primarily with rhetoric. Although he draws several of his illustrations from the visual and dramatic arts, Baudelaire is ultimately writing about the aesthetic categories and laws that govern his own poetic production. Thus, when he turns his attention to the example of a troop of English mimes
working in the commedia dell’arte style, he laments the impossibility of capturing their play with “pale and glacial” words: “Comment la plume pourrait-elle rivaliser avec la pantomime? La pantomime est l’épuration de la comédie; c’en est la quintessence; c’est l’élément comique pur, dégagé et concentré” (“How could the pen rival pantomime? Pantomime is the purification of comedy; it’s the quintessence of comedy; the pure comic element, detached and condensed”) (Baud., OC, 2: 540). Watching the pantomime play, Baudelaire has his own poetry in mind. His poignant comment on the mimes reveals his own desire as a poet, even as it underscores the constraints that handicap all poetry. The mimes represent what Baudelaire wishes most to capture on the page, but his enthusiasm for their “marvelous” aura is matched by his acute sense of his own impotence. Poetry can never reproduce the atmosphere that attends the mime’s silent play. At best, words can suggest the grotesque indirectly; they cannot bring it to the page.

Baudelaire is reduced to giving a written resume of the mime sketch, which, in and of itself, is germane to the poetic problem at hand. Not only does the poet suffer from a sense of impotence as he recognizes the discrepancy between his medium and that of the silent players, but the mime play also dramatizes and reinforces the themes of discrepancy and loss. In the mimes’ sketch, Pierrot is punished for thievery by being guillotined on stage. After “struggling and bellowing like a bull approaching a slaughterhouse,” he undergoes his fate. His detached head rolls onto the floor, revealing the bloody wound, the severed vertebra, and “all the details of a piece of meat at a butcher shop recently cut up for display.” Suddenly, moved by an “irresistible monomania,” Pierrot’s torso snatches up his head “like a ham or a bottle of wine,” thrusts it deep into his pocket, and carries on as before. Pierrot’s head loses its seriousness as the seat of intellect and becomes merely another material object to be collected—or consumed. This transformation and degradation recalls the fate of the pagan gods, which became objects of ridicule or fetishes when they lost their religious meaning. But the mime story does not merely repeat the radical cleavage that transforms the sign into a grotesque figure; it relates this metamorphosis to the loss of rational control.

Pierrot’s physical comedy embodies the transgression of natural laws. Cut in two, the dead body goes on living, with a mind of its own, as it were, independent of its cranium. Matter, which first seemed as ordinary and natural as beef cattle and ham, now operates like a machine moved by its own laws, which are not those of organic nature. Pierrot’s character, his “monomania,” continues to find expression in a body without a head. In “death” (which re-
Grotesque Figures

fuses to be a conclusion), Pierrot’s body takes over from his mind and continues to inscribe ambiguous gestures in space. The “dead” Pierrot practices automatic writing. Pierrot is not so much a “person” as an automaton, mechanically generating figures without reference to an origin or end. His fate dramatizes the untimely demise of the poetic subject or intentionality that might have controlled this astonishing play. The public’s laughter springs from the unsettling shock of this discovery.

Pierrot’s story reveals allegory to be a kind of “graphic play”—a runaway form of writing, propelled by and compensating for a fearful loss. Like the spirals of the painted arabesque, allegory is “a rhetorical mode of exuberant representation whose signs, because they can never reach the object they designate, move in random, arbitrary, and extravagant patterns. . . . No coincidence with an origin controls them or keeps their meanings from slipping, blurring, or sliding.” The example of the guillotined Pierrot carrying on as if nothing has happened makes a powerful statement about what is at stake in the grotesque. Pierrot’s severed head dramatically underscores the anxiety and sense of impotence Baudelaire expresses in his presentation of this exhilarating play.

The example of the English pantomime players exposes the “impersonal force,” the “alien and inhuman spirit,” that inhabits the productions of the grotesque. The grotesque is not a simple point of origin, an event arising at a single moment in time, or even a narrative—although it is often experienced as “narrative compressed into image” or written out as the history of consecutive moments (before and after, then and now, early and late). Baudelaire himself frequently has recourse to this narrative doubling, as this very example proves. Yet he also insists that the grotesque is “une espèce eue, et qui veut être saisie par intuition” (“an indivisible species, which must be grasped by intuition”). Pierrot brings out the grotesque’s paradoxical character: simultaneously “one” (Pierrot is always and ever “Pierrot” by virtue of his ongoing “monomania”), “double” (the guillotine cuts him in two but leaves him equally “dead” and “alive”), and capable of the endless generation of extraordinary effects.

Neither an object nor an entity, the grotesque cannot serve as a ground or an origin, of which allegory would be the re-presentation or copy. Rather, it is an impersonal force impelling allegory, beyond the reach of the poet’s will. The grotesque is the condition of language that makes allegory both the antithesis of representation and a principle of poetry—the “center of poetic play and appearance.”
A “Monstrous Apparatus of Generation”

Baudelaire’s verse poem “Le Masque” (1859) makes a similar point with respect to “an allegorical statue in the Renaissance taste.” The poem is of particular relevance to the present study for several reasons. First, by virtue of its stated subject (the allegorical statue in the Renaissance style), it acknowledges the historical link between allegory and the aesthetics of the rococo (considered as the outgrowth or culmination of the Renaissance baroque). Second, as an allegory of allegory, it offers an opportunity to evaluate specifically the difference between allegorical representation and the principle of the grotesque that drives it. And, finally, as a complex series of perpetually regressive layers, it provides further evidence of the temporality of allegory—its structure of perennial belatedness or yearning—which is so important in understanding Baudelaire’s relation to Rousseau.

The sculpture the poem describes represents a beautiful woman, whose stunning face turns out to be “un masque, un décor suborneur” (“a mask, a seductive decor”) (v. 20). The statue is double: Behind the beautiful features it initially presents to the viewer is a second, “atrociously contorted” face, dissolved in tears (v. 22)—the face of a woman grieving over the tragedies of life, mourning what she has lost. Conforming to the traditional understanding of allegory as a double figure, which points beyond itself to its ultimate object, the statue conveys the lesson that Beauty (or allegory) is a deception, a dressed-up death.41 For all intents and purposes, Beauty is a grotesque figure.

If we stop with this first idea of the poem as a (paradoxically) literal rendition of allegory, however, we miss its other face. Like the statue, Baudelaire’s poem is also double. “Le Masque” recreates the experience of two spectators (the poet-guide and an interlocutor), who discover this “two-headed monster” (v. 19) as they “turn around” it (v. 16). The poem traces their evolving reactions to the immobile figure. During their initial moments of contemplation, when the beautiful face is all they have seen, the poet’s friend manifests his unease. Commenting on Beauty’s “mocking glance” and her “conquering attitude” (vv. 10, 12), he expresses the sense that the allegorical figure is a threat to her admirers (v. 30). This threat is borne out, but only partially, by the statue’s deception.

As they gradually recover from the shock of their discovery, the poet begins to identify with the statue’s sorrow. The figure becomes increasingly animated through the poet’s interpretation of “her” plight, until the distance between this conquering beauty and her admirers is replaced by the identification that
concludes the poem. Beauty has come down off her pedestal; in the poet’s mind “she” is “like us” (v. 36). Unlike his companion, who continues to be impressed by this “perfect beauty” (v. 29), the poet is drawn to the statue’s “human” side. This becomes obvious when he domesticates the “monster,” separating it into “a lying mask” and “a sincere face” (v. 23). Dismissing the beautiful mask as an ornament or “ruse,” he can then recover the security of truth and meaning. He seeks in this way to guarantee the authority of his interpretation. Indeed, his haughty attitude toward his companion, whom he calls “crazy” or “stupid” (“insensé” [v. 32]), effectively silences the other speaker, and the poem concludes with the poet’s uncontested statement of the allegory’s “true” meaning.

Like the examples of the pagan gods and Pierrot, whose stories involve two sequential moments of perception or understanding, “Le Masque” seems to conform to the received idea of allegory as a double figure that requires two readings, which can be characterized in terms of right and wrong, reason and delusion. Through its vocabulary of truth and lies, of transparency and masks, the poem falls into line with the long-standing view of allegory as a relation between “decor” and ideas, which Angus Fletcher summarizes as follows:

[I]n allegory there is clearly a disjunction of meanings. Allegoria manifestly has two or more levels of meaning, and the apprehension of these must require at least two attitudes of mind. When, for example, one witnessed a court masque with decor by Inigo Jones, one no doubt lavished considerable attention on the mere ornament of the play, on the costumes, the decor, the dancing, the music, and so on, and to shift from this kind of sensuous world to the world of ideas must have engaged a secondary train of thought.42

Baudelaire writes out these “two attitudes of mind” as different voices or speakers and thus underscores the duplicity—the doubleness and deceptiveness—implicit in allegory. But in fact the poem, like the story of the comic mime, goes well beyond this dualism.

What it takes some acuity to realize is that the poem undermines the felicitousness of the poet’s “true” interpretation, just as the statue destroys the happiness its divine body initially seems to promise (v. 18). The classical ideal of unity and harmony, which applies to texts and their interpretation, just as it does to sculptures, is undone by the difference that is permanently inscribed in—and constitutes—this work of art. This fact becomes clear when we step back from the description of the statue to examine the poem in itself.
The division inherent in the statue finds a counterpart in the poem, in the relationship between the two speakers. Although they are never explicitly named, we identify these two voices as those of the fictional poet and his reader, whose unequal relation is apparent in the poet’s high-handed rejection of the reader’s ideas. But the poet’s consecutive responses to the statue (one blinded, the other supposedly true) do not entirely obscure the reader’s reaction, which continues to emphasize the strength and beauty of the statue despite its tears (vv. 29–31). Rather than writing off the beautiful face as a mere mask in order to focus on the statue’s “human” qualities and reducing the figure to a single (trite, if pathos-ridden) meaning, the reader sees the figure as a vitiated “whole.” He wonders what possible “mal” (illness, defect or evil) could infect allegory from within. We might say that this reader proposes a more comprehensive view of allegory, which takes its forceful beauty into account, in contrast to the poet’s humanizing approach, which focuses only on allegory’s relation to life and death. The two speakers represent two different and incompatible understandings of the enigmatic figure.

By incorporating the two viewers, who supplement the two faces of the statue and allegorize the experience of reading, the poem sets in motion a second-order phenomenon that invites other interpretations in turn. The two viewers-readers double the allegorical statue’s own doubleness and provide for the possibility of yet other readings to come. Their movement in space as they “turn around” the statue—a movement equivalent to our (double) reading of this poem—sets into motion the figural spin through which the immobile statue generates multiple and often contradictory meanings. Like the masks and figurines of antiquity that did not change in and of themselves but became grotesque when they were read differently, “Le Masque” differs from “itself,” depending on whether we take it as a (literal) description of an (allegorical) statue, accept it as the “poet’s” (one-sided) interpretation, or view it as a complex work about allegory’s (multiple) effects.

By virtue of its own irreconcilable differences, the poem undoes the hierarchical idea of allegory, which opposes a sensuous ornament or decor to the world of ideas. It would be difficult to say with any certainty which of the poem’s various aspects is “primary” and which “secondary,” according to the traditional idea of the figure. Baudelaire does depict allegory as a “two-headed monster,” according to the traditional view of the figure; but he does not subscribe to the traditional understanding of allegory as the opposition of primary and secondary, surface and depth. In “Le Masque,” the “poet’s” decision to set aside the mask by labeling it a “ruse” or a “seductive decor” is revealed to
**Grotesque Figures**

be arbitrary, a deliberate silencing of the “crazy” possibility that allegory is an intrinsically open-ended and uncontrollable figure. In this poem, the grotesque is not one side of the allegorical figure (its distorted or disfigured “face”) or even its monstrous “bicephalism,” but rather allegory’s potential for limitless proliferation, which Richard Stamelman calls “the monstrosity of rhetoric.” The grotesque, then, is a name for the constitutive instability of the figure; it opens the text to “an endless succession of interpretations which undo each other. . . . There is no original head which is true once and for all.”

As the examples of Pierrot and “Le Masque” show, Baudelaire understands the grotesque as a dynamic and unnamable force of language that regularly wears (allegorical) masks. But these allegorical “faces” can never do more than cover a void, where the grotesque—which is neither a being nor a thing—has never “been.” The grotesque is the principle of allegory, its engine or “monstrous apparatus of generation.” As an elusive aspect of language that we might call its “play,” the grotesque names the *differance* that constitutes allegory, both its eternal divergence from its (hypothetical) proper meaning and the temporality of desire or bereavement that this divergence institutes. Grotesque figures—signs of modernity for Baudelaire—are always out of synchrony with the present.

**Personifying the Grotesque**

As a powerful yet intangible force, the grotesque does not yield itself up to direct representation. However, as Baudelaire’s examples attest, it is often personified. In their silent play, Pierrot, Arlequin, and Columbine enact language’s own surprising turns and unpredictable antics, the very mobility that no written text can directly present. According to Baudelaire, their action is set in motion when the “breath of the marvelous” (“le souffle merveilleux”) wafts over the stage and transforms them into zany comic types. Volition is wrested from the players, and they are propelled by an unnamable energy into their new existence (“ils se sentent introduits de force dans une existence nouvelle”). As if by magic, the mimes become different from themselves. The effect is palpable and yet the change itself is imperceptible. The actors’ transformation occurs through a strange wrenching, which can only be designated in the airiest or most surreal terms and experienced as dizziness and disorientation. Language has no proper terms to convey the force that affects the performers. (Only vocabulary borrowed from the “marvelous” genres—seventeenth- and
eighteenth-century fairy tales, operas, and other representations of the supernatural—can approximate the unsettling unfamiliarity of the moment.) The subtle metamorphosis that overtakes these “persons” renders the moment when the grotesque takes hold of the sign and whirls the viewer-reader away into a new, irrational world.

Similarly, “Le Masque” describes a statue of a seductive woman who personifies allegory and makes it seem human, just as the poem’s own personifications seduce us in turn. Typical interpretations of “Le Masque,” which give the full weight of authority to the “poet”’s last words, verify the pull of the personal. The ultimate statement of the statue’s “true” meaning is compelling because it simultaneously makes the statue and the poetic voice human. By identifying allegory as a woman and then identifying with the woman’s tragic plight, the poetic voice itself takes on human qualities, becoming the more sympathetic (as well as the more authoritative) speaker of the two. The poem catches us up in a proliferating allegory, in which the two sides of the statue are multiplied by the two voices; yet it tempts us to arrest this multiplication by choosing sides and fixing allegory in its most human posture—the posture that makes the figure most “like us.” Pretending to stabilize and concretize what is inherently unstable and evanescent, personification claims to make present, lively, and real what has neither presence nor life.

Many different “faces,” both beautiful and comic (Venus and Beauty, but also Pan, Priapus, and Pierrot), come to incarnate the grotesque for Baudelaire. In the poems he published between 1859 and 1865, he added yet another face to this list: the figure of “Rousseau.” In the nineteenth century, “Rousseau” was both the name of a historical and literary personage (whose work exemplifies a modern, but conflicted, idea of allegory) and a cliché—a conventional sign evoking the cataclysm of the late eighteenth century, the French Revolution. Thanks to Rousseau’s reputation as the author whose writings had precipitated and informed the Revolution, the name “Rousseau” had become a metonym for the great social upheaval that post-Revolutionary France wanted either to extend or repress. However, by the time of the coup d’état that instituted the Second Empire in 1852, the name “Rousseau” had lost its heroic aura; to the conservatives in power, it connoted only the worst excesses of the Terror. Thus “Rousseau” was already a degraded figure when Baudelaire adopted “him” for his own ends. Stripped of subjectivity, reduced to a cliché, Baudelaire’s “Rousseau” is not the living, breathing man whom many in the eighteenth century revered. Rather, like the pagan gods who be-
came “extravagant fetishes” or “grotesque figures” with the passage of time, “Rousseau” is the fallen idol of an outmoded cult, which Baudelaire’s contemporaries had turned into an object of ridicule or revulsion. It is this “Rousseau” that Baudelaire takes up as a ready-made “poncif,” or commonplace, in his last poetic works.51

In Baudelaire’s “Poème du hachisch” and in his prose poetry, “Rousseau” is a caricature of his former self, a sign brought forward from the previous century to stamp the present with its mark—not as an object of intrinsic value, a dense remnant of the past, but rather as a kind of curio, invested with a new and ambivalent meaning by the current age. As a grotesque figure, “Rousseau” does not convey any truth of his era or his own life to his nineteenth-century descendants; instead, he adds to the delineation of the present, as an object of its fascination. “Rousseau” is a kind of collector’s item in the nineteenth century, a rather ambiguous fashion of Baudelaire’s time.52

This book examines how “Rousseau” functions as the grotesque figure or fetish that fascinates Baudelaire. In the “Poème du hachisch” and in the *Petits Poèmes en prose*, Baudelaire utilizes Rousseau’s writing as an essential intertext and “Rousseau” as the personification of the grotesque. As I have already suggested, Rousseau’s view of the grotesque informs Baudelaire’s own. Baudelaire both learns from and contests Rousseau’s use of allegory. Whereas Rousseau is acutely aware of, but fights to limit, allegory’s unruliness, Baudelaire espouses and occasionally delights in the untamable force of the grotesque. By taking up “Rousseau” as his grotesque figure, then, Baudelaire is both acknowledging Rousseau’s formative role in his own poetry and establishing his difference from his predecessor. Thus “Rousseau” is in several ways the “other” of Baudelaire’s allegory. Although it goes almost without saying that “[t]he ‘other’ named by the term *allos* in the word ‘allegory’ is not some other hovering above the words of the text, but the possibility of an otherness . . . inherent in the very words on the page,”53 in Baudelaire’s prose poetry this otherness is represented by the “person” of “Rousseau.” “Rousseau” is simultaneously the pre-text of Baudelaire’s allegory, a historical and textual past that Baudelaire’s poetry envelops, but with which it can never coincide, and the personification of his poetry’s modernity.

Baudelaire’s “faces” of allegory reveal the tricks of personification, the ability of an impersonal trope to masquerade as a “human” figure. Like the contemporary performer who puts on an eighteenth-century shawl and makes us forget its stiffness, personification acts out a role and “brings it to life.” Yet in its impersonal, mechanical way, it also defies the natural and organic. In
fact, allegory’s primary device, personification, kills as it resuscitates, conveying an impression of life to which the chill of death clings. (Thus when Baudelaire evokes the potential resurrection of the past in “Le Peintre de la vie moderne,” he observes that it will always have “le piquant du fantôme.”) At the intersection of life and death, past and present, personification is at the heart of the modernist dilemma—and, for Baudelaire, “Rousseau” is its principal figure.