Grotesque Figures
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A woman is caught in a gilded cage. It’s evening; the setting sun glints off the golden bars that keep her in. She admires the way it illuminates the clear rivers and green landscape surrounding her prison. Brilliant tropical birds fly by, singing an arresting metallic song. Overhead, monkeys frolic and satyrs mock her, while mythological gods smile encouragingly, urging her to be patient. She dreams of Sleeping Beauty in her enchanted woods, of necessary expiations and future deliverance.

The woman is on a drug trip. She’s been experimenting with hashish and is spending the night at an old chateau owned by her friends. The room in which she is to sleep is a faded but charming boudoir in an uninhabited section of the building, decorated in the rococo style of the eighteenth century. Her experience of being in a beautiful cage is a drug-induced distortion of the room’s arabesque decor. In reality, the boudoir is a narrow little space. At the level of the cornice, the ceiling is rounded off into a vault; the walls are covered with long mirrors, separated by panels of painted landscapes. Running around the room near the ceiling are various allegorical figures, and above them brightly colored birds and flowers (“diverses figures allégoriques, les unes dans des attitudes reposées, les autres courant ou voltigeant. Au-dessus d’elles, quelques oiseaux brillants et des fleurs”). Behind these figures a simulated trellis follows the curve where the walls and the ceiling meet. The room’s shape and the ornate gold leaf that covers much of it lend it the air of a distinguished cage for a very large bird. Lying in the center of this space, the intoxicated woman is fascinated by the moonlight on the boudoir’s vivid colors, golden

Rococo Rhetoric

Figures of the Past in “Le Poème du hachisch”
“embroidery” and mirrors (“les lueurs s’accrochaient à toute cette broderie d’or, de miroirs et de couleurs bariolées”). The decor has the magical quality of a fairy kingdom (“ces paysages féeriques . . . ces horizons merveilleux”), and the woman enters fully into the experience of the marvelous, as if she were truly living in an eighteenth-century world.

Her intoxicated state, however, belies this time-travel. The woman is a thoroughly modern inhabitant of nineteenth-century France, whose singular vision is a sign of her participation in the avant-garde world of experimentation with drugs. Drug-taking was decidedly an activity of the artistic elite in mid-nineteenth-century Paris and had no counterpart in the previous century’s literature or mores.\(^1\) The confrontation of this woman’s modern proclivities and the charmingly outdated aesthetics of her surroundings (their “vieux style” and “vieilles décorations”) might be jarring, in fact, if the two worlds were not so seamlessly enmeshed in her hashish high. Instead, the fantasy world elaborated in the rich decor becomes the perfect foil for the fantastic troping of her intoxicated mind. The illusion is so overpowering that, although the woman is first tempted to laugh, she soon finds the “magic” taking on a certain “despotic reality.” (“Je riais d’abord de mon illusion; mais plus je regardais, plus la magie augmentait, plus elle prenait de vie, de transparence et de despotique réalité.”) No longer just a spectator, she comes to believe that she is at the center of a fantastic drama—Sleeping Beauty herself.\(^2\)

This remarkable narrative stands out among the examples of drug highs that illuminate “Le Poème du hachisch” (“The Poem of Hashish”), the first part of Baudelaire’s poetic essay on drugs, \textit{Les Paradis artificiels} (1860).\(^3\) Baudelaire is wonderfully adept at capturing the hallucinations of ordinary men and women under the influence. Like a ravishing decor or a brilliant stage set, the strange and beautiful stories of their drug-induced dreams attract our attention and remain in our minds, leaving the more serious aspects of the essay in the shadows. The extraordinary visual richness of these tales is so captivating that it tends to distract the reader from attending to the moral and aesthetic import of the work as a whole. But the visions are not as ornamental as they seem. In “Le Poème du hachisch,” intoxication is a figure for the vertiginous experience of modern poetry, and the visions have much to tell us about Baudelaire’s ideas of poetic production and reception in the last decade of his life, the period during which he undertook his most modern poetic project, the \textit{Petits Poèmes en prose}. If the new genre of the prose poem emerged “out of precisely those elements of narrative prose which are . . . often construed as superfluous or merely ornamental digressions,”\(^4\) these dazzling visions constitute
little prose poems in themselves—prose poems that both reflect on and em-
body Baudelaire's ideas of modernity.

Viewed in this light, as an early example of Baudelaire's modernist project, the
story of the woman in the rococo boudoir is particularly curious. Why
does the modern woman's poetic hallucination fuse so easily with the “old
style” of the room in which she finds herself? What could be the point of sit-
uating a revolutionary new project, a project resolutely positioned in the pres-
cent, against the backdrop of the rococo aesthetic of the eighteenth century?
What do this exemplary anecdote, and the “Poème” that includes it, have to
tell us about the temporal basis of modernity and about its supposedly radical
innovations? The anecdote points to the conjunction of two seemingly oppo-
site approaches to art—the exciting new ideas of modernity and the dusty
remnants of the baroque. It also paves the way for the appearance, in the last
chapters of the “Poème,” of another eighteenth-century relic, “Jean-Jacques
Rousseau,” who surfaces as a figure for the “sensitive modern man” under the
influence of hashish. Between the description of the rococo decor and this rep-
resentation of a famous Enlightenment author, the eighteenth century as-
sumes an unexpectedly high profile in one of modernity's founding texts.

The intertwining of these figures of the past with the most modern of all
subjects—the recreational use of drugs—is intriguing, partly because Baude-
laire seldom alludes to the rococo aesthetic or enlists it as an illustration of his
own poetics, but also because contemporary criticism has largely ignored the
connection between Baudelaire and his eighteenth-century antecedents. The
insistence on Baudelaire's modernity, the literary historical assumption that
Baudelaire founded a new kind of poetry around a new worldview, has of
course been largely responsible for the discontinuity we perceive. A well-
entrenched disdain for the rococo may also account for the scant attention
critics have paid to the role of this art in Baudelaire's poetics. Often scorned as
mere “decorative allegorism,” the rococo is known as the “archaic,” “strange,”
and even “demented” style of France's Ancien Régime. Yet to dismiss Baude-
laire's description of the rococo boudoir as mere “decorative allegorism” would
be to overlook the crucial analogy between poetry and interior decor of which
it is the vehicle. As our reading of the “Poème” will show, this unusual piece
on the rococo dramatizes Baudelaire's ideas about poetry's effects. It thus raises
many of the questions about modernity and cultural memory that this book
attempts to address.
“Le Poème du hachisch” presents the rococo first and foremost as a visual style, synonymous with the “grotesque” or “arabesque” in art. Baudelaire’s interest in the grotesque is well known, and his essay on it, “De l’essence du rire,” has entered modern criticism as a seminal text for understanding literary irony. However, like Théophile Gautier and E. T. A. Hoffmann, whose works on the rococo and the grotesque he greatly admired, Baudelaire was especially taken with the grotesque in the plastic arts, and this artistic aspect of his grotesque has never really been explored. In “De l’essence du rire,” he evokes visual objects from antiquity (masks, bronze figurines, muscular statues of Hercules, pointy-eared little Priapuses with their tongues stuck out) and utilizes examples drawn from the theater to make his point; and even talking about a Hoffmann tale, he calls it “beautiful to see” (“beau à voir”). Baudelaire clearly recognizes a connection between visual art (especially the “old style” and “old decoration” of the rococo) and the poetics of modernity, and it therefore seems appropriate to begin this study with a review of the key elements of the pictorial grotesque in the eighteenth century. We shall then be in a position to ask how “Le Poème du hachisch” positions itself relative to this “outmoded” aesthetic. At this point, it may be sufficient to say that both turn around the key concepts of allegory and personification.

The artistic genre known alternately as grotesque or arabesque (or, less often, as Moor-esque, or moreque) was practiced in France from the Renaissance to the French Revolution. Because it first proliferated in the sixteenth century, it is sometimes assimilated to the baroque in art. However, new French interpretations of the grotesque, as well as the “new arabesque”’s widespread adoption throughout Europe at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, made this later period the genre’s high point.

The eighteenth-century grotesque, like earlier versions, took much of its vocabulary and grammar from the designs written about by the Roman architect Vitruvius and subsequently discovered in the ruins of Nero’s palace (the Domus Aurea) and houses at Pompeii. Vitruvius, who disliked what came to be called the “grotesque,” thought of it as an “unreal” style. He described it as having no “fixed or regular model. It’s all only monsters now; they substitute reeds for columns . . . we see candelabras holding up little temples, from the roofs of which extend delicate, flexible leaves that, against all verisimilitude, bear little figures, some with animal heads, others with human faces, all things
that do not exist, did not exist, and cannot exist." This “free, funny and unsettling painting” (“peinture libre et cocasse”), this “ornament without a name” (“ornement sans nom”), was revived during the Renaissance in France and used extensively in the decoration of François I’s palace at Fontainebleau. The fashion grew from there.

André Chastel has pointed out that the grotesque owes its originality to the two laws that govern it: the negation of gravity and the fusion of species (“l’apesanteur des formes et la prolifération insolente des hybrides”). In a world entirely defined by graphic play (“le jeu graphique”), unnamable figures that are half-vegetable, half-animal spiral into and around each other creating the gracious or tormented curves of the ornament. The play of these figures, unimpeded by any sense of concrete space and unconscious of any distinction or hierarchy of being, gives rise to a feeling of liberation and prompts analogies with the dream-state. Indeed, one sixteenth-century synonym for the grotesque was sogni dei pittori (painters’ dreams), designating a world characterized by “the dissolution of reality and . . . a different kind of existence.”

The grotesque refused the demand for verisimilitude (vraisemblance), eschewed any regular order or rules, and thus exactly inverted the classical aesthetic that was beginning to take shape in France at the same time.

Although the eighteenth-century arabesques tamed some of this profusion of animal and vegetable life and promoted a more ordered composition, often focused around a single allegorical figure or scene, the genre continued to defy the hegemony of classicism. In designs of the later period, thin stalks of elongated plants still support architectural structures, heads detached from bodies still swing suspended from branches, and fairies, chimeras, and other imaginary fauna still caper playfully throughout. The theatrical traits that Chastel identifies with the older versions of the grotesque also continue to have a prominent part in the interior decors of Claude III Audran (1658–1734), Claude Gillot (1673–1722), Antoine Watteau (1684–1721), and Christophe Huet (1700–1759). Characters from the commedia dell’arte and acrobatic monkeys drawn from the parades at the Foire St. Laurent or the Foire St. Germain are regular features of these wall paintings, rendering explicit the grotesque’s affiliation with the arts of the spectacle:

Two models (patterns) intervene with a rather striking insistence: acrobatics and the triumph, which introduces [the grotesque] effortlessly into the domain of circus games and buffoonery. The figures lend themselves to contortions that may make us think of gymnasts elaborating with their bodies
The “theater” of the grotesque, featuring acrobats on a platform or stage. 

who knows what decorative curves; and, on the other hand, we see appearing some sort of falsely solemn parades or extravagant processions . . . a rather obvious mockery of the usual street festivals. The “poetics” of the decor thus became completely explicit. . . . what we might call the *theatrums*, the theatrical play, of the grotesque: a podium, a filiform structure with more than one floor, crowned by an elegant cornice, composes a kind of box for marionettes where silhouettes are deployed. . . . A miniature spectacle is instituted. . . . An enduring affinity with the “Italian” comedy thus becomes apparent. The grotesque can draw to itself all the visual aspects of buffoonery.19

Undergirding this relationship between acrobats, marionettes, theater and the grotesque is the primary concept of the genre: metamorphosis or shape-changing.20 Mutant vines and hybrid beings lead easily to scenes from Ovid or depictions of Momus and Bacchus, whose names evoke the mind-bending effects of irony and intoxication. Bruno Pons notes: “The arabesque is often associated . . . with drunkenness, if not with artificial paradises; one of the favorite themes is the bacchanalia where goat-footed worshipers and bacchantes get drunk and draw others into their pleasure.”21
Bacchus, represented under the title *Le Faune*. Wall panel. Antoine Watteau, ca. 1707–8.
The connection between these ornaments and the human activities with which they were associated is not hard to divine. In the eighteenth century, grotesques formed the backdrop for theatrical performances and costumed balls held in the homes of wealthy aristocrats; they adorned beds and presided over lavish banquets where the wine flowed freely. The style extended to personal objects such as tobacco boxes as well, for the arabesque was often associated with smoking: “In the *Livre premier des essais de gravure* by Pierre Bourdon, we see associated precisely with different ornaments—of which some are destined to decorate tobacco boxes—a man smoking a pipe. The curlies of smoke are beautiful examples of changing forms that we can associate with an agreeable stupor.”

In their *Dictionnaire des arts de peinture, sculpture et gravure* (1792), Claude Watelet and Pierre Lévesque confirm this association between the arabesque and drug-induced lethargy. Reviving the old term for the grotesque, *sogni dei pittori*, they extend the dream analogy to include—apparently for the first time—the effects of opium:

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One can only find probable models in the chimeras produced by sleep. Arabesques can thus be called the dreams of Painting. Reason and taste require that they not be the dreams of sick people, but reveries similar to those that opium, in artistic doses, procures for voluptuous Orientals, who prefer them sometimes to less chimerical errors.24

From role-playing and dreams to drinking and drug-taking, the arabesque’s themes have in common the elements of illusion and illogic, the escape from the world of the here-and-now to a world no longer governed by nature’s laws and man’s conscious control. It is not surprising that critics have also linked the genre to madness. As Pons argues, the arabesque brings together strange apparitions and fleeting impressions that the mind and memory can scarcely seize hold of, for the apparent logic we think we perceive in these works takes a crazy turn when we try to understand it.25 This is why critics like Vitruvius, Watelet, and more recently Wolfgang Kayser, have found the genre more than a little unsettling.26 The grotesque can “make us feel as if the ground beneath our feet were about to give way; . . . order is destroyed and an abyss opened where we thought to rest on firm ground.”27

The Grotesque in “Le Poème du hachisch”

The themes and forms that distinguish the eighteenth-century grotesque find many an echo in Baudelaire’s Paradis artificiels, especially in the work’s first part, the “Poème du hachisch” (the only part Baudelaire created in toto). As I have already begun to suggest, the themes of the painterly grotesque (intoxication, theatricality, metamorphosis, the dream state, fusion of worlds, and the absence of clear hierarchies) are also the themes of the “Poème,” and even its shape is reminiscent of the pictorial style.

Just as a rococo wall painting typically encloses an allegorical figure or tableau within a proscenium arch or an overarching bower, the “Poème” too proclaims its own circular, self-contained structure, framing a central motif. The last paragraph of the text (in chapter 5 of the “Poème”) explicitly refers back to the beginning of the work, with the narrator’s statement that “Conclure, c’est fermer un cercle” (“To conclude is to close a circle”). The narrator then reprises some of the statements with which he opened the “Poème.” These retrospective remarks encourage the reader to compare the first and last chapters, where the narrator sets out two different visions of poetry and poetic creation. Taken together, these chapters make it clear that, although “Le
Poème du hachisch” is ostensibly a straightforward meditation on the physical properties, delusional effects, and moral connotations of hashish, it is also an exploration of poetry, its creation and its effects. (The title itself suggests as much. If the poem “about” (du) hashish is also a poem “engendered by” (du) hashish, then reflections about the drug are simultaneously reflections about poetic production.)

In its first and last chapters, the “Poème” posits a poetic ideal, a “paradise,” a “garden of true beauty,” the only “miracle” over which man has God-given power. This miracle is a creation in which the poet’s moral judgment (sens moral) balances or checks his powerful imagination and in which his intended meaning (sens moral) is transparent or clear. The ideal poem bears the stamp of Christian values, such as hierarchy (subservience to God’s will and creation), order or balance (especially the control of the imagination and the senses), and clarity (of meaning and purpose). It conforms to conservative, or classical, norms. The first and last chapters also point up the opposite of this Christian ideal: that is, the dubious, demonic pursuit of an artificial “paradise.” A shortcut approach to creation, this involves the use of intoxicating substances to avoid the hard work and effort of will that should ideally undergird creativity, and the narrator assimilates it to the folly of replacing “solid furniture and real gardens with decors painted on canvas and mounted on [moveable] frames [des décors peints sur toile et montés sur châssis].” We recognize it as the illusory, theatrical ideal associated with the woman in the rococo boudoir. This opposition between the two “paradises” structures the “Poème,” and in presenting it, the first and last chapters “Le Goût de l’infini” (“The Taste for the Infinite”) and “Morale” (“Moral”) frame the middle three.

Within this outer frame, chapters 2 and 4 also form a pair, sharing a “scientific” bias, as well as an emphasis on definition and analysis. The title of the second chapter, “Qu’est-ce que le hachisch?” (“What Is Hashish?”), calls for a definition, which the chapter duly gives; and the narrator explicitly states that his objective in the fourth chapter, “L’Homme-Dieu” (“The Man-God”), is to “define and analyze” the psychological and moral effects of drugs on a carefully chosen scientific subject. Only the doubly framed central chapter, “Le Théâtre du Séraphin,” stands apart. Not only is it not paired with another chapter, but in the exemplary story of the woman in the rococo boudoir, it develops an elaborate allegory for the experience of poetry. Although the woman explicitly wonders whether her hallucinations resemble “the enthusiasm of poets,” her reaction to the golden “embroidery” and allegorical figures around her—her progressive surrender to the “despotic reality” of the ornate decor—is simulta-
-neously an extended metaphor (or allegory) for the reader’s own relationship
to this text. The woman may assimilate her “poetic delirium” to the poet’s cre-
ative high, but she is also experiencing the poetic effects of the ornate decor as
she enters into the artful realm of the rococo, where rhetoric is rewritten as vis-
ual ornament and tropes are disguised as tropical birds (les oiseaux brillants des
tropiques). With its thoroughly allegorical character and its emphasis on the-
ater (including the reference in its title to a popular marionette theater
founded in the eighteenth century), this chapter resembles the theatrically
staged and framed allegories of metamorphosis so common in the eighteenth
century’s painted grotesques.

Given these arabesque features—the circular structure of the “Poème” and
its double frame surrounding a central allegory—it is reasonable to wonder
whether Baudelaire deliberately chose the subject, hashish, for its associations
with the Arab world. When the narrator of the “Poème” repeatedly cites
hashish’s Arab origins in discussing the drug’s provenance and uses (in chapter
2), the connection hardly seems coincidental. Under the cover of a factual
presentation (including dosages in grams and centigrams), the narrator man-
gages to assert the “Arab-esque” filiation so often that it becomes one of the
chapter’s primary themes. We are reminded that, although French eighteenth-
century grotesque paintings do not often evoke comparison with Arab art,
some commentators of the period considered grotesque, arabesque, and Moor-
esque (or moresque) to be synonymous terms.

But this pictorial resemblance is neither the only nor the most important
link of the “Poème” to the painted grotesque. Judging from its reception his-
tory, the “Poème” is a text that confounds its readers, who find it maddening,
if not rather mad. Their comments point to the problem of distinguishing fig-
ure from ground in the “Poème”—that is, ascertaining whether there is any
ground at all on which to base an interpretation. For example, as critics regu-
larly note, the text puts forward two divergent attitudes toward drugs, hesitat-
ing between the moral condemnation of hashish as inimical to the production
of poetry and the seductive portrayal of the drug’s poetic effects. Alexandra
Wettlaufer cogently sums up the problem: “While ostensibly preaching the
evils of opium and hashish, the author presents and even reproduces these
states of intoxication in vivid and evocative detail, and while adamantly deny-
ing any points of intersection between the supernatural experiences of drugs
and of art, his text creates a striking set of parallels between the two states.”

On a first reading, however, the problem may not be particularly apparent.
The poet presents himself as a stable authority figure, an analyst and a moral-
ist (or ironist), who guides the reader firmly through the alternating “artistic” and “scientific” chapters of the “Poème.” Although he presents numerous poetic anecdotes of drug hallucinations, he retains his position as a distant observer and wise commentator throughout, and there is little positive evidence to suggest that he has himself experienced any of the effects he describes. Furthermore, what I am calling the “scientific” chapters of the “Poème” seem to provide the very ground of which we speak. The second chapter, which matter-of-factly discusses the composition and typical doses of the drug and reviews the inconclusive experiments by the pharmacologists Smith, Gastinel, and Decourtive, provides a very literal basis against which to measure the figural excursions that make up “Le Théâtre du Séraphin,” for example. And the fourth chapter, which proposes a pseudo-scientific experiment of its own, analyzing a fictional drug-taker’s reactions to hashish, concludes with the narrator’s very ironic description of the intoxicated subject’s “monomania,” and thus further reinforces his stable—negative—point of view. Firmly grounded by these reference points, a first reading of the “Poème” might well suggest that this is nothing more or less than a text condemning drug use. And yet, as critics repeatedly emphasize, the poetic, or figural, dimension of the work tends to overwhelm the rest.

As we have already seen, the “Poème” has an allegorical dimension, in which drugs and the experience of drugs serve as an extended metaphor for poetic production and reception. Once the topos of drug-taking is understood as a pretext for a discussion of poetics, the whole “Poème” becomes allegorical, and even its most literal chapters take on a new figural meaning. Furthermore, the circular structure of the “Poème” urges us to return to the beginning and reread, and this second reading, coming after the discovery of the central allegory, transforms our comprehension of the text. In order to understand the “Poème” at this figural level, we must first analyze how allegory functions here—how it comes to overrun its frame and play such a dominant role.

Allegory, or the Indistinction of Figure and Ground

Allegory is the feature that most closely connects the visual and the literary forms of the grotesque—and in the “Poème,” as we shall see, it logically leads to Rousseau. Because it sets into motion the dizzying indistinction of figure and ground, allegory is responsible for the difficulty of reading this text. It is therefore appropriate that the role and operations of allegory are primarily conveyed through two important figures for the reader: the woman in the rococo
boudoir and the “sensitive modern man” whom the narrator-poet ultimately conflates with “Rousseau.”

The woman’s positioning as a figure for the reader is the culmination of a process at work throughout the central chapter of the “Poème,” “Le Théâtre du Séraphin.” Reading is an important theme in the chapter, which opens with the naïve fictional reader of the “Poème” plying urbane consumers of hashish with questions. To quiet this impatient fellow and tame his fantasies, the narrator proposes to take him on a trip of his own—not a literal drug high, but a vicarious drug trip made possible by the stories the narrator recounts. The narrator positions the fictional reader before his narrative as if the reader (and, by extension, we) were about to take a drug:

Voici la drogue [ou le “Poème”] sous vos yeux. . . . Vous pouvez avaler sans crainte; on n’en meurt pas. Vos organes physiques n’en recevront aucune atteinte. Plus tard peut-être un trop fréquent appel au sortilège diminuera-t-il la force de votre volonté, peut-être serez-vous moins homme que vous ne l’êtes aujourd’hui; mais le châtiment est si lointain, et le désastre futur d’une nature si difficile à définir! Que risquez-vous? . . . Ainsi c’est dit. . . . Vous êtes maintenant suffisamment lesté pour un long et singulier voyage. La vapeur a siflé, la voilure est orientée, et vous avez sur les voyageurs ordinaires ce curieux privilège d’ignorer où vous allez. Vous l’avez voulu; vive la fatalité! (Baud., OC, I: 409–10)

Here is the drug [or the “Poème”] before your eyes. . . . You can swallow without fear; you won’t die from it. Your physical organs will not receive any damage. Later on perhaps a too frequent recourse to the magic may diminish the force of your will, perhaps you will be less of a man than you are today; but the punishment is so far off, and the future disaster so difficult to define! What do you risk? . . . So the word is said. . . . You are now sufficiently ballasted for a long and singular voyage. The whistle has blown, the sails are hoisted, and you have the curious advantage over ordinary travellers of not knowing where you are going. You have desired it; long live fate!38

If the experience of the stories is tantamount to a drug “trip,” then the anecdotes of various drug highs that punctuate the text are so many mises-en-abyme of our reading. The narratives foster or enable our metaphorical voyage, just as the extraordinary decor—the tropical birds and allegorical figures of the rococo boudoir—prompts the woman’s time-travel. Indeed, the narrator underscores the importance of the right “milieu” for our experience: “Si, toutes...
ces conditions préalables observées, le temps est beau, si vous êtes situé dans un milieu favorable, comme un paysage pittoresque ou un appartement poétiquement décoré, si de plus vous pouvez espérer un peu de musique, alors tout est pour le mieux” (“If all these preliminary conditions having been observed, the weather is beautiful, if you are located in a favorable environment, such as a picturesque landscape or a poetically decorated apartment, if in addition you can hope for a little music, then all is for the best”). If the right decor—or text—promotes the best possible drug—or reading—high, then the woman’s reaction to the rococo boudoir is a protracted metaphor for the reader’s own “hallucinatory” experience of this text.

Similarly, at the outset of chapter 4, the poet provides another figure for the reader, “a single fictional character” purposely created to serve as the subject of the poet’s pseudo-scientific observations about hashish’s effects. He calls this fictional character a “sensitive modern man,” someone “analogous to what the eighteenth century called l’homme sensible, to what the romantic school named l’homme incompris, and to what families and the bourgeoisie generally damn with the epithet original”—and indeed he later assimilates him to “Jean-Jacques [Rousseau].” The poet then imagines how this man would react if pushed to an extreme by the drug. Before his study has progressed very far, however, the poet collapses his fictional character and the reader into one: “If you are one of these souls,” he begins, and throughout the rest of the paragraph, he addresses himself to “you.” This brief apostrophe is sufficient to establish the connection between the reader and his surrogate. The sensitive man suffering from the effects of hashish takes his place alongside the intoxicated woman in “Le Théâtre du Séraphin” as a figure for the reader’s experience.

As if to confirm this similarity, the poet begins his “scientific” experiment by placing his intoxicated man in a room that recalls the rococo boudoir: fleshy nymphs gaze out from the room’s painted ceiling, characters from antiquity seem to exchange confidences with the viewer, and the sinuous lines of the room’s arabesques constitute “a perfectly clear language in which you read the agitation and the desire of souls” (“la sinuosité des lignes est un langage définitivement clair où vous lisez l’agitation et le désir des âmes”). Making explicit the function of the rococo boudoir to which it is analogous, the poet forthrightly presents this room as a text, or more precisely, an allegory: “ce genre si spirituel, que les peintres maladroits nous ont accoutumés à mépriser,
mais qui est vraiment l’une des formes primitives et les plus naturelles de la poésie” (“that ever so spiritual genre, which awkward painters have accustomed us to regard with scorn, but which is truly one of the primitive and most natural forms of poetry”). In this allegorical setting, he goes on to explain the mechanics of allegory and so prepares us to understand the operation of his own “Poème.”

According to the poet, allegory discovers its “rightful dominion” in the “intoxicated mind” (“l’allégorie . . . reprend sa domination légitime dans l’intelligence illuminée par l’ivresse”), where it enriches and enlivens whatever it touches. In the theater, for example, allegory allows dance, gesture or declamation to take on an unexpected “glory”; and through its mediation, music, “another language,” becomes a meaningful poem for its listener. Thanks to allegorical personification, even the driest sentence in a book comes alive: “La grammaire, l’aride grammaire elle-même, devient quelque chose comme une sorcellerie évocatoire; les mots ressuscitent revêtus de chair et d’os, le substantif, dans sa majesté substantielle, l’adjectif, vêtement transparent qui l’habille et le colore comme un glacis, et le verbe, ange du mouvement, qui donne le branle à la phrase” (“Grammar, even arid grammar, becomes something like an evocative witchcraft; words resuscitate clothed in flesh and bone, the noun, in its substantial majesty, the adjective, transparent garment that clothes it and colors it like a glaze, and the verb, angel of movement, that sets the sentence in motion”).

If allegory betokens a state of mind that disposes the reader to enter into the text and become one with it, this disposition is promoted by personification, which brings language to life—“les mots ressuscitent revêtus de chair et d’os . . . le poème entier [est] un dictionnaire doué de vie” (“words resuscitate clothed in flesh and bone . . . the entire poem [is] a dictionary endowed with life”). It is obviously this liveliness that the poet seeks to create by presenting allegorical figures like the woman in the rococo boudoir and the “modern sensitive man” to act as proxies for the reader. They bring the abstract or scientific discussion of drug effects down to a concrete level of personal experience with which the reader can identify. As figures of rhetoric, they transport the reader into their fictional world.

As elaborate allegories of poetic production and reception, based on the analogy between poetry and the rococo decor, the anecdotes of the intoxicated woman and her male counterpart are proof and explanation of allegory’s central role in the “Poème.” From these important passages, we understand that “hashish” and “intoxication” are code words for allegory, and that the “Poème
“du hachisch” is an allegorical exposition of how allegory works—a theory and its practical demonstration rolled into one. By getting his allegory of the “sensitive man” off to a start with an explanation of allegory’s operations, the poet gives the real readers of the “Poème” the tools we need to read (or reread) it. Although he claims that allegory finds its ideal home in the “intoxicated” mind, the narrator as poetic analyst or “scientist” apparently wants us to see and understand the “drug” we are taking before it has us under its spell. Once the drug has its way, we will be in no position to notice. Ignoring the difference between our everyday existence and the lives of fictional characters, just as the woman in the rococo boudoir believed that she was “the center of a fantastic drama,” we too shall enter the realm of fiction. Intoxication or allegory effaces difference and bridges the abyss of time, allowing the reader (the nineteenth-century “drug-taker” or his twenty-first-century counterpart) to enter fully into an earlier life. Like a reverie or a painted grotesque, allegory correlates and fuses disparate states of being, entities, and eras into a single composition.

In fact, the examples show that allegory has the tendency to draw everything into itself, as when the woman acknowledges that her vision “frequently absorbed all my other thoughts.” Allegory is so pervasive that, even when the woman comes out of the drug high and feels a “prosaic satisfaction” (“une satisfaction prosaïque”) at taking up her “real life” again (“je me suis enfin sentie chez moi, dans mon chez moi intellectuel, je veux dire dans la vie réelle”), she is still an allegorical figure. By virtue of the very idea that she has a “real life” outside the hallucinatory state of intoxication, she continues to function as a figure for the reader and thus blurs the boundary between fiction and reality, poetry and prose.

This tendency for allegory to spread itself out over all the parts of a narrative, even those that appear the most literal or real, accounts for the “monomania” that is the subject of this fourth chapter of the “Poème.” Under the effects of the “drug,” the “sensitive man”’s self-aggrandizement culminates in his taking himself for “God.” This allegorical figure, the “modern sensitive man,”

se fait bientôt centre de l’univers . . . il devient l’expression vivante et outrée du proverbe qui dit que la passion rapporte tout à elle. . . . Tous les objets environnants sont autant de suggestions qui agitent en lui un monde de pensées, toutes plus colorées, plus vivantes, plus subtiles que jamais, et revêtues d’un vernis magique. (Baud., OC, 1: 436)

soon makes himself the center of the universe . . . he becomes the living and exaggerated expression of the proverb that says that passion relates every-
The allegorical man has become the center of the textual universe. As the “living” and “exaggerated” expression of a proverb, he draws to himself all the rest of the textual material and infuses it with his allegorical “life.” All the attributes, including the accoutrements and even the thoughts, of the personified figure are part of the allegory too.

Allegory expands in the manner of hyperbole until it encompasses the whole text. This is what the narrator means when he evokes the “monstrous growth of time and space,” “that abnormal and tyrannical growth” (“accroissement monstrueux du temps et de l’espace,” “cet accroissement anormal et tyrannique”) that applies to all the “man-God’s” feelings and all his ideas. This exposition of allegory’s “monomania” prepares and explains what happens during the “second” reading of the “Poème,” when the central allegory overruns its bounds to infuse the rest of the text with a new, figural meaning. Allegory upsets the usual hierarchies and blurs the distinction between figure and ground.

Errant Figures: “Le Thyrse”

Allegory’s tyranny is such that it not only causes the reader to forget the reality of his life (transforming “man” into “God”) but also threatens to overpower the poet as well, and this is another reason why it is blameworthy. Allegory has the propensity to exceed the poet’s intentions and take away his control. Baudelaire’s prose poem “Le Thyrse” (“The Thyrsus”) gives a pointed example of the problem and underscores its relation to the arabesque. The poem describes the double composition of the Bacchic wand (the thyrsus), made up of a staff around which stems and flowers twine “in capricious meanderings” (my translation). The staff, the poet explains, is the artist’s will, straight and sure; the sinuous flowers with their arabesque lines are the various rhetorical means at the artist’s disposal for expressing his intention: “Ligne droite et ligne arabesque, intention et expression, roideur de la volonté, sinuosité du verbe, unité du but, variété des moyens, amalgame tout-puissant et indivisible du génie, quel analyste aura le détestable courage de vous diviser et de vous séparer?” (“Straight line and arabesque line, intention and expression, tautness of the will, sinuosity of the word, unity of goal, variety of means, all-powerful and indivisible amalgam of genius, what analyst would have the
hateful courage to divide and to separate you?”).47 “Le thyrse,” as a metaphor for poetry, represents the fusion of the poem’s elements into a single, indivisible whole.

But having asserted the unity of will and expression in art, the poet repeatedly raises questions that tend to undermine the indivisibility of this “all-powerful amalgam.” What if the rhetorical arabesque is not subordinate to the will, does not dance around it in “mute adoration”? What if the decorative ornament proliferates on its own, independent of the poet’s intention? The unanswered questions in the poem make us aware of the anxiety allegory can arouse. The questions point to the threat posed by allegory’s proliferation and raise the moral issue implied in allegory’s deviation from the straight and narrow course set out by the poet’s will:

Ne dirait-on pas que la ligne courbe et la spirale font leur cour à la ligne droite et dansent autour dans une muette adoration? Ne dirait-on pas que toutes ces corolles délicates, tous ces calices, explosions de senteurs et de couleurs, exécutent un mystique fandango autour du bâton hiératique? Et quel est, cependant, le mortel imprudent qui osera décider si les fleurs et les pampres ont été faits pour le bâton, ou si le bâton n’est que le prétexte pour montrer la beauté des pampres et des fleurs?

Doesn’t it seem that the curved and spiral lines are courting the straight line and dance around it in mute adoration? Doesn’t it seem that all those delicate corollas, all those calices, explosions of odors and colors, are executing a mystical fandango around the hieratic staff? And yet what foolhardy mortal would dare decide if the flowers and vines were formed for the staff, or if the staff is but the pretext for highlighting the beauty of the vines and flowers?

The poet’s fear of discovering his own impotence comes through clearly in his questions. Although he begins by assuming the subordination of rhetoric to meaning, he quickly loses his assurance. Evoking the “foolhardy mortal” who would try to impose a hierarchy on language, he seems to shrink from this risk.48 Yet, ultimately, the poet does unfold the meaning of his figure. Even as he suggests that it would be nearly impossible and certainly unseemly to do so, he takes the figure apart, in an act apparently intended to demonstrate his power over the rhetoric he puts into play. However, in the perverse fulfillment of his own subtle prophecy, his masterful analysis of the figure’s many levels of meaning exposes the figure’s tendency to spiral away from his control: The thyrsus is a “sacerdotal emblem” of the Bacchic priests and priestesses, who represent

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the poet celebrating Beauty, incarnated here by the musician Liszt, who wields his “thyrsus” (or genius) with more “capriciousness” than any nymph and “improvises” songs in “the eternal city’s splendors or the mists of the dreamy lands consoled by Cambrinus [the inventor of beer].” One can imagine the list of metaphors going on and on “capriciously.” With every layer of figural meaning he exposes, the poet points up the figure’s potential for endless meandering. By reinforcing the idea that the thyrsus is a “metaphor of metaphor,” he contributes to the “peculiar vertigo” inherent in the figure’s self-reflexiveness. As Richard Klein notes, “only when the figure has been elaborately extended, does it circle round and point obliquely to its own development. Which suggests that . . . all metaphor, if sufficiently extended [as in allegory], tends constantly to displace its center and to lose itself in the self-generating play of its spinning periphery.” The poem’s references to Bacchus and Cambrinus prefigure these disorienting results.

In the “Poème du hachisch,” the poet faces a similar threat. Describing how allegory’s tendrils extend their grasp ever wider, in a tyrannical bid to encompass everything, he is careful to maintain a visible hold over his allegorical creation, reiterating that the intoxicated “sensitive man” is “mon homme supposé, l’esprit de mon choix” (“my man, the mind of my own choosing”), a fictional character he has created in order to “rendre mon analyse plus claire” (“make my analysis clearer”). He distinguishes himself from this specimen the way a lab technician might observe with detachment a culture that he has cultivated in a petrie dish: “J’assiste à son raisonnement comme au jeu d’un mécanisme sous une vitre transparente” (“I observe his reasoning as I would the play of a mechanism under a transparent glass”)—a method in keeping with his objective to “définir et analyser le ravage moral causé par cette dangereuse et délicieuse gymnastique” (“define and analyze the psychological and moral damage caused by these dangerous and delicious gymnastics”).

But the very emphasis on analysis, which suggests a poet in full control, becomes less convincing when his scientific object—the intoxicated “sensitive man”—begins to use the same language of analysis and judgment as his creator. The poet imagines his “man” converting feelings of remorse into one more source of narcissistic self-satisfaction and quotes him as saying:

Cette action ridicule, lâche ou vile, dont le souvenir m’a un moment agité, est en complète contradiction avec ma vraie nature, ma nature actuelle, et l’énergie même avec laquelle je la condamne, le soin inquisitorial avec lequel je l’analyse et je la juge, prouvent mes hautes et divines aptitudes pour la
vertu. Combien trouverait-on dans le monde d’hommes aussi habiles pour se juger, aussi sévères pour se condamner? (Baud., OC, 1: 435; my emphasis)

This ridiculous, cowardly or vile action, the memory of which made me momentarily agitated, is in complete contradiction with my true nature, my real nature, and the very energy with which I condemn it, the inquisitorial care with which I analyze and judge it, prove my lofty and divine aptitude for virtue. How many men would you find in the world as capable of judging themselves, as severe in condemning themselves?

When the scrutinized object speaks the same language as the observer-creator, the sanitary distance between them begins to vanish. As we have seen, the poet, too, wants to suggest that his “true nature” is “inquisitorial,” that he judges, condemns, and thus separates himself from the drug-takers whose examples he puts before us. He is an ironist, capable of self-knowledge in a way he believes his “sensitive man” is not. But despite the poet’s precautions, the difference he seeks to establish proves elusive. When the “sensitive man” shows that analysis can be a tool of narcissistic self-aggrandizement and is not confined to the practice of scientific detachment and objectivity, the clear demarcation between the poet’s rational analysis and the sensitive man’s delirium begins to blur. In the end, the poet’s ironic condemnation of the “man-God” comes to apply to him too, as we shall see.

“Morale”

At the end of chapter 4, the poet conflates his sensitive man with “Jean-Jacques” and lambastes him for confusing dreams and action, mistaking ideas of virtue for virtue itself, and decreeing his own apotheosis:

[L’homme sensible] confond complètement le rêve avec l’action, et son imagination s’échauffant de plus en plus devant le spectacle enchanteur de sa propre nature corrigée et idéalisée, substituant cette image fascinatrice de lui-même à son réel individu, si pauvre en volonté, si riche en vanité, il finit par décréter son apothéose en ces termes nets et simples, qui contiennent pour lui tout un monde d’abominables jouissances: “Je suis le plus vertueux de tous les hommes!”

Cela ne vous fait-il pas souvenir de Jean-Jacques, qui, lui aussi, après s’être confessé à l’univers, non sans une certaine volupté, a osé pousser le même cri de triomphe . . . avec la même sincérité et la même conviction? L’enthousiasme avec lequel il admirait la vertu, l’attendrissement nerveux
Grotesque Figures

qui remplissait ses yeux de larmes, à la vue d’une belle action ou à la pensée de toutes les belles actions qu’il aurait voulu accomplir, suffisaient pour lui donner une idée superlative de sa valeur morale. Jean-Jacques s’était enivré sans hachisch. (Baud., OC, 1: 436)

[The sensitive man] completely confuses dreams with action, and his imagination warming more and more before the enchanting spectacle of his own corrected and idealized nature, substituting this fascinating image of himself for his real self, so poor in willpower, so rich in vanity, he ultimately decrees his own apotheosis in these clear and simple terms, which contain for him a whole world of abominable pleasures: “I am the most virtuous of men!”

Doesn’t that remind you of Jean-Jacques, who also, after having confessed to the universe, not without a certain voluptuousness, dared to give the same triumphal cry . . . with the same sincerity and the same conviction? The enthusiasm with which he admired virtue, the nervous tenderness that filled his eyes with tears at the sight of a beautiful action or at the thought of all the beautiful actions he would have liked to perform, was sufficient to give him a superlative idea of his moral worth. Jean-Jacques got high without hashish.

The sensitive man’s (or “Jean-Jacques”’s) narcissism, with its blasphemous connotations, provokes the narrator’s sarcasm. Damning his “man”’s deluded belief that he has “become God,” the narrator charges that this “deplorable” creature would never be susceptible to the inference that there’s “another God” and would certainly not defer to Him. These scathing attacks lay the basis for the “Morale” of the last chapter, where the poet-analyst explains at length the moral basis for his critique.

Chapter 5 brings out the moral dichotomy that subtends the opposition of the “artificial” and “real” poetic paradises. The poet-analyst condemns the passive, voluptuous enjoyment of “drugs” and praises the hard work and willpower involved in genuine poetic creation. According to the narrator, the drug-taker’s egocentrism and the passivity it entails cause him to lose his freedom. “Hashish” vitiates the will, “de toutes les facultés la plus précieuse” (“the most precious of all the faculties”). Under the drug’s spell, the man is caught up in his dreams and unable to take action in the world; the poet cannot summon the determination to write. Like “magic and witchcraft,” allegory, the “drug,” interferes with God’s intentions; it obliterates “the harsh accent of reality and the disorder of external life.” As long as it operates, the real world that requires us to make decisions, invoke our will, and confess our sins does not exist. This is its danger. The irony of allegory is that it builds upon but
completely ignores the disproportion between itself and the environment that surrounds it. Allegory masquerades as a totality capable of taking over the world, while the world it seeks to control is in ruins. Only when time intervenes, “the next day” (“le lendemain! le terrible lendemain!”), when the intoxicated individual wakes up after the orgy, can she or he assess “hideous nature, stripped of its illumination of the night before” and see the “melancholy debris of [the] party.” For these moral reasons, the “Poème” ends with the narrator extolling the values of willpower, hard work (“l’exercice assidu de la volonté”), and intentionality (“la noblesse permanente de l’intention”) as the only legitimate, moral means to achieve the poetic ideal, the “garden of true beauty.”

The “Poème” appears to end where it begins—with the poet’s praise of the true poetic paradise, the classical ideal. The apparent decisiveness and authority of this conclusion are opened to question, however, by the figures and style the poet puts into play. Although he propounds a work of art in which imagination, moral judgment (“sens moral”), and meaning (“sens moral”) are well balanced, in the last paragraph of the “Poème,” he reverts to a vocabulary and a stance familiar to the reader from the chapters on allegory.

After rejecting the recourse to “la pharmacie et la sorcellerie” as an aid to genius, the poet paints a picture of artistic success that could serve as an allegorical frontispiece to Les Paradis artificiels itself. In this tableau “a man (a brahman, a poet or a Christian philosopher)” stands on Mount Olympus, gazing down on the mass of humanity in the mud and brush below. This “man” represents the superiority of the sagacious artist who has preferred hard work to “black magic” as a means of attaining paradise. Muses dance around him, looking at him with loving eyes and brilliant smiles, while Apollo plays his lyre in accompaniment: “un homme (dirai-je un brahmane, un poète, ou un philosophe chrétien?) placé sur l’Olympe . . . ; autour de lui les Muses . . . le regardent avec leurs plus doux yeux et leurs sourires les plus éclatants; le divin Apollon . . . caresse de son archet ses cordes les plus vibrantes.” Except for the boudoir setting, which is missing here, the scene is reminiscent of the woman’s intoxicated vision, in which “toutes les divinités mythologiques me regardaient avec un charmant sourire, comme pour m’encourager à supporter patiemment le sortilège” (“all the mythological gods looked at me with a charming smile, as if to encourage me to bear up patiently under this magic spell”). Both the poet and the woman fantasize that they are at the center of a world of delights, in which the gods look upon them approvingly. Despite the Christian frame of this last chapter, the poet’s mythological tableau does not represent the
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Christian world in which hard work (or its opposite) may be rewarded by election or damnation; rather, it is an ego-gratifying image, a narcissistic ideal.

This is the type of vision that the poet excoriated in his ironic remarks on the “man-God,” and that he found lacking in moral depth in the intoxicated woman’s story: “le tempérament féminin, qui est peu propre à l’analyse, ne lui a pas permis de noter le singulier caractère optimiste de ladite hallucination. Le regard bienveillant des divinités de l’Olympe est poétisé par un vernis essentiellement hachischin” (“the feminine temperament, which is not well suited to analysis, did not allow her to notice the singularly optimistic character of [her] hallucination. The benevolent gaze of the gods of Olympus is poeticized by an essentially hashish-induced veneer”). In this last chapter of the “Poème,” however, the poet is indulging in the same kind of optimistic fantasy. Significantly, he gives up all use of the vocabulary of analysis in these last pages, in favor of an emphasis on figuration. (The verb se figurer recurs here with the frequency of a refrain.) His imagination is getting the better of his rational—and moral—judgment.

Despite the poet’s multiple references in chapter 5 to the authority of religion and the postulation of a unique truth that will anchor language and stabilize values, the last page of the “Poème” is equivocal, as Michel Jeanneret points out:

Into the very midst of this edifying line of argument is insinuated the reference to another paradise, which is not that of religion, but of poetry. As the antithesis of the hashish user, the narrator imagines an allegorical character—“a man (shall I say a brahman? a poet, or a Christian philosopher?)”—a strangely composite figure, where the spiritual vocation and the practice of art appear interchangeable. . . . A significant slippage: religion is no longer vigorous enough to place an absolute norm in opposition to the wanderings of the subject, and it is another ideal that, surreptitiously, takes over: writing.55

Jeanneret’s perceptive comments highlight the reintroduction, at the moment when drugs are vehemently condemned, of the very rhetorical figure so prominently associated with drugs in “Le Théâtre du Séraphin” and “L’Homme-Dieu.” In this poem, allegory is the trope of hallucination and narcissism; it’s the “magic” or “witchcraft” that transforms the subject into a “god.” Bound up as it is with the drugs the narrator now condemns, it should by rights be dismissed, together with the drug experience. Therefore its persistence in the last paragraph of the “Poème,” with its florid style and overt
rhetoricity, leaves the moral and aesthetic lesson of the “Poème” oddly in doubt. As Jeanneret convincingly argues, “the poet does not reject the fantastic visions of the drug; he integrates them and goes beyond them. Neither does he line up on the side of univocal systems; we remain, with him, in immanence and in the sphere of subjective values. For these reasons, we shall refrain from concluding that the narcissistic temptation is an evil and that it has been truly controlled.”56 The flamboyantly allegorical ending of the “Poème” is thus quite ironic. Deploying a panoply of mythological deities, spiritual topographies, and rhetorical questions, the narrator raises the poet to the status of a “God” dominating mere mortals from the heights of Olympus (albeit the “Olympus of spirituality”), even as he evokes the poet’s submissiveness to God’s will. Under the guise of the Christian ethic, the poet glories in his own supremacy, in the manner of the “man-God” he was at such pains to revile. Through its imagery and its wording, the end of the “Poème” echoes the end of chapter 4, which pokes fun at Rousseau, the sensitive man-God, for his hubris:

Si par hasard un vague souvenir se glisse dans l’âme de ce déplorable bienheureux: N’y aurait-il pas un autre Dieu? croyez qu’il se redressera devant celui-là, qu’il discutera ses volontés et qu’il l’affrontera sans terreur. Quel est le philosophe français qui, pour railler les doctrines allemandes modernes, disait: “Je suis un Dieu qui ai mal dîné”? Cette ironie ne mordrait pas sur un esprit enlevé par le hachisch; il répondrait tranquillement: “Il est possible que j’aie mal dîné, mais je suis un Dieu.” (Baud., OC, i: 437)

If by chance a vague memory slips into the soul of this deplorably happy man: Mightn’t there be another God? believe that he will stand up before that one, that he will discuss his will and that he will confront him without terror. Which French philosopher, to make fun of the modern German doctrines, said: “I am a god who has dined badly”? That irony would not have any effect on a mind carried away by hashish; he would reply calmly: “It may be that I have dined badly, but I am a God.”

By concluding his “Poème” with a paean to “a poet . . . placed on the arduous Olympus of spirituality,” looking down on the unfortunate mortals who have not been as abstemious as he, the poet assumes the stance of the superior, virtuous man and recapitulates the very posture of the man-God he despises. After mocking the sophistry of Jean-Jacques’s reasoning, the poet’s own speech becomes contaminated with the same sense of self-congratulation. The poet’s irony does not prevent him from falling victim to the allegorical mechanism

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he intends to decry. At the end of the “Poème,” the poet, like the man-God he reviles, “se livre candidement à sa triomphante orgie spirituelle” (“indulges candidly in a triumphant spiritual orgy”).

The apparent convergence of the detached poet-ironist and his polar opposite, the allegorical man-God, in the final pages of the “Poème” casts doubt on the oppositional structure of the “Poème” as a whole. On the one hand, “Le Poème du hachisch” seems to take a cue from one of Baudelaire’s most admired authors, E. T. A. Hoffmann, of whom Baudelaire writes: “Ses conceptions comiques les plus supra-naturelles, les plus fugitives, et qui ressemblent souvent à des visions de l’ivresse, ont un sens moral très visible: c’est à croire qu’on a affaire à un physiologiste ou à un médecin de fous des plus profonds, et qui s’amuserait à revêtir cette profonde science de formes poétiques, comme un savant qui parlerait par apologues et paraboles” (“His most supranatural, most evanescent comic conceptions, which often resemble intoxicated visions, have a very visible moral aspect: you would think you were dealing with one of the most profound physiologists or alienists, who took pleasure in clothing this profound science in poetic forms, like a scientist who spoke in fables and parables”) (Baud., OC, 2: 542). But which is the “science” in “Le Poème du hachisch”: the science of drugs or the science of allegory? Whether or not it was the poet’s intent, the “folie” that the poet alternately condemns and inhabits is the madness of rhetoric, not the lunacy induced by drugs. In the manner of the spiraling vines described in “Le Thyrse,” the tyrannical “flowers” of allegory overrun and transform the poet’s clinical and moral analysis of the drug, the “scientific” premise of the “Poème” (the thyrsus’s “staff”). As one long allegory, the “Poème” develops the two aspects or faces of its central figure. It shows itself to be a hybrid text, which joins together extraordinary poetical exuberance and sober clarity as different attributes of the allegorical.

The Poet and “Jean-Jacques”

Allegory sweeps over the “Poème,” embracing even the most literal elements of the text. The poet, who positioned himself as an analyst rather than a victim of its operation, is caught up in it, and in that sense is no different than his own creation, the “modern sensitive man” (or “Jean-Jacques”). Like the painted grotesque to which it is compared in the “Poème,” allegory rides roughshod over rational judgment, intentionality, and will and nullifies the hierarchical order of beings that reason (or virtue) erects. This leveling effect brings the poet and Jean-Jacques into close proximity. But can we say that the
allegorical Jean-Jacques is the poet-ironist’s other? The answer, I think, is both yes and no.

Baudelaire scholars like Jean Starobinski and Marc Eigeldinger have argued that Baudelaire detested Rousseau and only mentioned him in order to take his distance from him. In “Le Poème du hachisch,” the ironic and analytical poet who introduces Jean-Jacques certainly heaps scorn upon the eighteenth-century author for his narcissism, his deluded belief in his own virtue, and his vain idea of his own superiority and innocence. The poet accuses Jean-Jacques of confusing sentimental ideas with virtuous actions and proclaiming his own moral superiority on the basis of enthusiasm alone. Jean-Jacques, who got high just by imagining his virtue, plays the part of the moral monster. These critiques go to the heart of Rousseau’s thinking, not only in his autobiographies (for instance his Réveries, where Rousseau does proclaim his virtue, while blaming others for preventing him from putting that virtue into practice), but ultimately in those works where he envisions the natural goodness of man. The poet of the “Poème” accuses Jean-Jacques of being so delusional that he mistakes himself—a mere man—for a God.

However, read as an allegory, the “Poème” also shows how inescapable this posture is. And in demonstrating the ineluctability of this attitude, it erects Jean-Jacques—the prototype of the modern sensitive man—as the perfect type to embody the dilemma shared by modern man, who glimpses but fails to attain the real paradise, and modern poetry. Aware of the classical ideal that calls for the careful balancing of imagination and judgment, sensory appeal and moral clarity, but fully in the grip of allegory’s hedonism, the modern poem—like this “Poème”—is unbalanced and demonic. “[M]odern art has an essentially demonic tendency,” Baudelaire wrote in his essay on the contemporary poet Théodore de Banville (1861). “And it seems that this infernal part of man, which man takes pleasure in explaining to himself, increases daily, as if the Devil was having fun fattening it up by artificial means” (Baud., OC, 2: 168). Thus, whereas the poet seemed to be the guiding light of the “Poème,” he ultimately cedes his place as its most important figure to “Rousseau.” Taking over from the intoxicated woman, whose story is explained by his own, Jean-Jacques becomes the principal allegorical figure—or “god”—of this “Poème.”

In this discussion of the poet and “Jean-Jacques,” it is crucial to recognize, however, that the poet in the poem is not fully congruent with Baudelaire. Within the “Poème,” both the poet and Jean-Jacques, each in his own way, are benighted. Jean-Jacques is blind to the ironic implications of his narcissism,
whereas the poet fails to acknowledge the impotence of his irony to contain
this negative force. Baudelaire, on the other hand, writes out with great per-
spicacity the impossible tourniquet in which these two protagonists are
caught. It is Baudelaire, rather than his two allegorical figures, who recog-
nizes the “permanent duality” of man. By writing out this duality (“the capac-
ity to be simultaneously oneself and another”) as personified by two separate
figures, Baudelaire is able to convey the way they converge without cohering.
In the final analysis, Baudelaire demonstrates his own superior understanding
and lives up to the definition of the artist with which he concludes “De l’essence du rire”:
“l’artiste n’est artiste qu’à la condition d’être double et de n’ignorer aucun phénomène de sa double nature” (“the artist is only an artist if he
is double and ignores no phenomenon of his double nature”) (Baud., OC, 2:
543). If anything, Jean-Jacques (“l’homme incompris”) and the poet (the dis-
dainful moralist) are united but distinct projections of the author himself.

In this roundabout and ambiguous way, Baudelaire seems to be hinting at
a complex relationship between himself and his eighteenth-century predeces-
sor, which does not reduce to a simple opposition. Although Baudelaire had
long been familiar with Rousseau’s ideas and with contemporary myths about
Rousseau (he first mentions Rousseau in connection with suicide in 1846), he
turned to Rousseau often as he put his ideas about the grotesque into practice
in “Le Poème du hachisch” and the Petits Poèmes en prose. Just as he openly
cited and rewrote Thomas de Quincey’s Confessions of an English Opium-eater
(1822) in the second part of Les Paradis artificiels, Baudelaire took up and re-
worked (albeit much more covertly) important sections of Rousseau’s autobi-
ographies and other writings in his prose poems. Baudelaire’s poet acknowl-
edges this way of working with others’ texts when he announces at the end of
chapter 1:

Aujourd’hui, je ne parlerai que du hachisch, et j’en parlerai suivant des
renseignements nombreux et minutieux, extraits des notes ou des confi-
dences d’hommes intelligents qui s’y étaient adonnés longtemps. Seu-
lement, je fondrai ces documents variés en une sorte de monographie,
choisissant une âme, facile d’ailleurs à expliquer et à définir, comme type
propre aux expériences de cette nature. (Baud., OC, 1: 404)

Today, I shall speak only about hashish, and I shall speak about it fol-
lowing numerous minutely detailed pieces of information, extracted
from the notes and confidences of intelligent men who had long been
addicted to it. Only I shall fuse these various documents into a kind of
monograph, choosing a soul, moreover one that is easy to explain and define, as a type proper to experiments of this nature.

Later, when he presented Les Paradis artificiels in 1864 at a conference in Brussels, Baudelaire called the work (particularly the section derived from de Quincey) “un tel amalgame que je ne saurais y reconnaître la part qui vient de moi, laquelle, d’ailleurs, ne peut être que fort petite” (“such an amalgam that I wouldn’t be able to recognize the part that comes from me, which, furthermore, must only be very small”) (Baud., OC, 1: 519). By giving an important role to “Jean-Jacques” in a text that proclaims itself very much beholden to the work of others, Baudelaire is already making an oblique and displaced assertion of his indebtedness to Rousseau.

The “Man-God”

In several key texts (which Baudelaire knew well and indeed reworked as prose poems, as we shall see in later chapters), Rousseau took up the question of allegory, particularly on the opera stage. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the rococo aesthetic in France was rapidly being overtaken by a new emphasis on nature as the primary referent of art, and the grotesque was on the wane. The Paris Opéra was the one major institution in the country that clung to the aging aesthetic and perpetuated its values. In the dispute called the Querelle des Bouffons (1752–54), the Opéra became the target of the insurrectionist philosophes, who wanted to do away with this manifestation of royal power, luxury, and bad taste. Rousseau, as the central figure in the Querelle, spearheaded the drive to reform the lyric stage. Much of his venom was directed at the disagreeable qualities of French operatic music and at the wrong-headed theories of the preeminent French composer of the time, Jean-Philippe Rameau. But Rousseau also addressed the insufficiencies of the drama itself. He wanted to replace the bizarre, heterogeneous, machine-driven spectacles, featuring pagan gods and mythological figures, with simpler dramas focused on mortal man. Rousseau attacked the grotesque aesthetic of the Opéra for its failure to create a “reasonable illusion,” singling out for criticism its exaggerated rhetoric (the unwarranted disparity between the trivial plot and its extravagant staging) and particularly its use of allegory. Rousseau regarded allegory as an intellectual exercise that prevented the spectator from becoming immersed in the action on stage, and thus as an obstacle to the creation of the reasonable illusion he wanted to achieve.

Rococo Rhetoric
Clearly, there is disagreement between Baudelaire and Rousseau where the theory and evaluation of allegory are concerned. Baudelaire praised allegory as “ce genre si spirituel . . . qui est vraiment l’une des formes primitives et les plus naturelles de la poésie” (“this genre, which is so spiritual [and which . . . ] is truly one of the primitive and most natural forms of poetry”).67 Rousseau railed against it. But despite his vociferations, Rousseau used allegory to an impressive extent, in works ranging from Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse to his autobiographies. It is not surprising that critics have singled him out as the founder of modern allegory.68 Indeed, as we shall see in Chapter 5, Rousseau’s “man” is as much an allegorical figure as Baudelaire’s. Replacing the gods of the rococo, Rousseau substituted another—more convincing and less obvious—allegorical figure in their place. “Man” became Rousseau’s new “god.”

Thus when Baudelaire identifies “Jean-Jacques” as the quintessential allegorical figure, “l’homme-Dieu,” he is both poking fun at Rousseau’s sleight of hand and making an important point. Like Rousseau, Baudelaire took allegory seriously and pondered its role in art. Like Rousseau, he utilized it to structure his prose narratives, both “Le Poème du hachisch” and the Petits Poèmes en prose. But unlike Rousseau, who rejected the marvelous aesthetic with its showy allegories and elaborate machines in favor of a more subdued and subtle version of the figure, Baudelaire adopted the splashy rococo and utilized it together with the “modern” form of allegory he learned from his eighteenth-century predecessor. Whereas Rousseau made a great pretense of rejecting the hybridity and phantasmagoria of the rococo, while smuggling allegory back into his work under the cover of human forms, Baudelaire joyfully accepted the hybrid, using it in the hybrid genre of the prose poem and the hybrid text of “Le Poème du hachisch,” while appearing to ridicule the hybrid “man-God”—Rousseau.

Rousseau is obviously an overdetermined figure for Baudelaire. Beyond his ambivalent personal feelings about this fallible man and literary god, Baudelaire also found in “Rousseau” a representation of the political turmoil of contemporary France and an emblem for the temporal and political dilemma of his own art. As a historical figure—the author deemed most responsible for the French Revolution—Rousseau was bound up with the chaos and anxiety created by that great upheaval, a link both to the Ancien Régime and to the emerging national consciousness that followed in the Revolution’s wake. In the two decades between 1845 and 1865, when the past of the French Revolution intruded obsessively into the urgent debate over the future of France, the desire to recover the classicism and stability of pre-Revolutionary, indeed pre-
eighteenth-century France became the driving force in the interpretation of the legacy of Rousseau. As a much-disputed icon, “Rousseau” was thus a kind of ongoing and impossible “representation of the present” for the French intellectuals and politicians of Baudelaire’s day. As we shall see in the next chapter, the name “Rousseau” captured the temporal conundrum of a past that haunted the present, preventing it from coming fully and uniquely into its own.