Grotesque Figures

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In 1861, a year after Rousseau appeared as the type of the “sensitive modern man” in “Le Poème du hachisch,” Baudelaire proposed two possible titles for the new collection of prose poems he was readying for publication—titles that suggest that he again planned to adopt “Rousseau” as a distinctive and recurrent type in his last poetic work.

Over the years, the poet had considered and discarded various collective titles for the prose poems he began writing in 1855—titles such as “Poèmes nocturnes” (Nocturnal poems) or “Petits Poèmes lycanthropes” (Little werewolf poems), which appeared only once, as well as some, like “La Lueur et la fumée” (Light and smoke), that were never used. But in a letter dated “Noël 1861,” Baudelaire suggested two more concrete titles to his editor, Arsène Houssaye. Both “Le Rôdeur parisien” (The Parisian stroller) and “Le Promeneur solitaire” (The solitary walker) painted a picture of an errant and isolated man, an overarching figure who would preside over the collected poems, presumably bringing them together as reflections of an individual experience. While both titles have a similar meaning, one of them, “Le Promeneur solitaire,” specifically calls to mind Rousseau’s unfinished autobiography, Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire (The Reveries of the Solitary Walker), published almost a century earlier.

However, Baudelaire’s proposed titles were never adopted (the poems instead appeared under the generic heading “Petits Poèmes en prose,” which is still used today), and in the published dedication to the collection Baudelaire claims to have been inspired by Aloysius Bertrand and by Houssaye himself.
The provocative reference to Rousseau was erased, relegated to the margins of Baudelaire’s work, where it tantalizes the curious critic and raises questions that have never received a satisfactory answer: Why would Baudelaire tip his hat to Rousseau? Did he intend this salute as an homage? Is there a substantial connection to Rousseau in these poems, or is the allusion ironic? Did the editor veto the title or did Baudelaire change his mind? And if he did have second thoughts, why? The title’s meaning and the reasons for its disappearance remain uncertain.

Critics who have taken note of the discarded title have dismissed it as a putdown of an author Baudelaire abhorred. Jean Starobinski, the touchstone for recent readings of Rousseau’s influence on Baudelaire, sums up the prevailing attitude:

Baudelaire, who knew Rousseau and did not like him, had thought for a moment of giving the collection of his prose poems a Rousseauist title: Le Promeneur solitaire. It would have manifestly attached a work in which so many pages are inspired by urban strolling (flânerie) to an antecedent that evoked, in numerous pages, the encounters and the train of thoughts engendered by a walk outside the city walls. With such a title the prose poems would have been read as an echo of Rousseau, or as a response to Rousseau. There is no doubt that that is not the proper light in which to view the whole collection: but certain poems should be approached (and have been) with reference to Rousseau.5

Despite the numerous links between the two authors to which Starobinski alludes, there is surprising agreement among the critics that Baudelaire simply detested Jean-Jacques, and that “he set the title aside as an homage deemed illegitimate.”6

But many other reasons not having to do with Baudelaire’s attitude toward Rousseau could have intervened to make the title both appealing and unusable. Baudelaire might well have thought of this title, not only because of what his prose poems owe to the work of Rousseau, or because it evoked a characteristic of the best modern artists, but because the sign “Rousseau” encapsulated the political foment and the high anxiety of several key moments before and during the Second Empire. Precisely because of its allusion to the past, “Le Promeneur solitaire” was a reference to highly visible political debates that marked contemporary French life in the middle of the nineteenth century.

“Rousseau” was not a transparent name or essence in mid-nineteenth-century France but a cluster of aggressively contested meanings, which do not
settle into any uniformly shared understanding. In the years in question (roughly 1845 to 1865), Rousseau was represented either in the most glowing of terms, as a literary genius unsurpassed by contemporary authors, and even as the father of modern France, or else with revulsion, as a utopianist and hypocrite responsible for the worst excesses of the French Revolution and the nineteenth-century revolutions that followed it. Both sides made available many clichéd portraits or caricatures of Rousseau, on which I believe the prose poems ultimately drew.

**Modernity and the Memory Crisis**

As Richard Terdiman has argued, the traumatic upheaval of the French Revolution caused a “memory crisis” in France in the nineteenth century by disrupting the link between the French and their cultural past. Pierre Nora describes this crisis as the loss of “memory” and the turn to “history.” If ever there was a golden age in France when memory was a collective, unselfconscious, “perpetually actual phenomenon,” it definitely did not survive the French Revolution. In the absence of such a “living” memory, the nineteenth century called upon history instead to provide a “national definition of the present,” a new basis for national unity. This far from simple task involved, not only “reevaluat[ing] the monarchical past,” but determining the meaning and effects of the French Revolution for the present day. Although not an actor in the great Revolution himself, Rousseau was considered its principal author, and as such he figured prominently in the nineteenth century’s efforts to define “the spirit of France.”

Throughout the nineteenth century, but particularly between 1845 and 1865, Rousseau was the subject of intense debate among various segments of the intellectual elite—the members of the Académie française, professors at the Ecole normale and the Collège de France, and literary critics, as well as political philosophers and politicians. “Between 1830 and 1878, the debate about Rousseau lost none of its pertinence and its virulence,” observes Raymond Trousson, who has inventoried Rousseau’s reception from the Revolution through the first half of the twentieth century. “Pulled to one side and another by the right and the left, venerated by Georges Sand or Michelet, abominated simultaneously by Lamartine, the Catholics and Proudhon, he never ceases to be present in the political and religious conscience [of France].” The competition to elevate or debase Rousseau was coterminous with the struggle to seize or maintain power over the dominant discourse (that is, to determine which
past would underpin the national identity of France), and this conflict inevitably came to inhabit his name. “Rousseau” is a classic example of the “ideological sign” identified by V. N. Volosinov, in which “differently oriented accents intersect. . . . The sign becomes an arena of the class [or, in this case, intraclass] struggle.”11 Any attempt to understand what Rousseau represented for Baudelaire must therefore address the difficult issue of what “Rousseau” (i.e., the name Rousseau) stood for in the mid-nineteenth century generally.12

A detour through a few works of history and literary commentary dating from shortly before and just after the Revolution of 1848 and from 1861 (when the Risorgimento in Italy brought revolution to France’s door) will help us comprehend the dramatically different ideas and the extraordinary passions that were attached to the name “Rousseau.” Even this brief and far from exhaustive survey will provide a compendium of images of Jean-Jacques, both damning and dithyrambic, on which Baudelaire evidently drew; and it will point up his dilemma. Like other artists of the time, Baudelaire was unavoidably positioned by the ongoing struggle over national self-definition raging around him, both the overt political battles and armed skirmishes of the February Revolution and the more diffuse discursive struggle of the later years. These ideological conflicts opened to criticism all but the most innocuous or veiled use of Rousseau’s name and works. The purpose of the following review is therefore twofold: to take note of some important contemporary ideas about Rousseau and the ideological tensions informing them; and to show how these ideological forces impinged upon Baudelaire’s writing, resulting in the caricatured images of Rousseau that punctuate the Petits Poèmes en prose. Baudelaire hid his debt to Rousseau under the appearance of mockery, and his duplicitous treatment of Rousseau is a particularly apt sign of his poems’ modernity.13

“Rousseau” and “the Spirit of France”

Jules Michelet’s ambitious Histoire de la Révolution française (1847–53) tackles only the history of the French Revolution, and Désiré Nisard’s Histoire de la littérature française (1844–61) completely skirts it, but both have as a more or less explicit subtext the work of “social bonding and reconstitution” that was the Revolution’s legacy.14 Writing in a post-Revolutionary era that was still subject to revolutionary upheaval, both Michelet and Nisard were concerned to create an image of “l’esprit français” or “l’esprit de la France” with which their readers could identify. In other words, they wanted to represent “France” to herself, endowing her with a history or a past that would give the nation a
Because they came at this common project from very different spots on the political spectrum (Michelet was a republican, Nisard a conservative), the representation of this “spirit” and the appropriate mode of its reception or recognition is quite different in each; and these differences are readily apparent in their treatment of “Rousseau.” Read together, these two authors give us a picture of the politics of representation in the mid-nineteenth century.

In the 1847 preface to *L’Histoire de la Révolution française*, Michelet makes explicit the link between “the spirit of the Revolution” and “the spirit of France”:

> Only in [the spirit of the Revolution] did France become aware of herself. In every moment of weakness when we seem to forget ourselves, it is there that we must search for ourselves, seize hold of ourselves again. . . . The Revolution is in us, in our souls. . . . Living spirit of France, where would I grasp you, if not in myself?

Believing that recent generations of Frenchmen had lost touch with this powerful living spirit, however, Michelet conceives it as his mission to recall the spirit and place it before them. At the same time, he reminds his contemporaries of their debt to their “father,” the eighteenth century:

> That century founded liberty by freeing the spirit [l’esprit], until then bound by flesh, bound by the material principle of the double—theological and political, priestly and royal—incarnation. That century, the century of the spirit [l’esprit], abolished the gods of flesh, in the state, in religion, so that there were no longer any idols, and the only God was God.

In Michelet’s narrative, the Revolution begins not in 1789, but forty years earlier. In the mid-eighteenth century, the writings of the philosophes freed the nascent French spirit from its unhealthy ties to earthly institutions and thus founded the true France, creating individual rights and constituting man. Partly as a result of their work, the king became an object of horror. The “dogma of the royal incarnation” perished forever, to be replaced by “the royalty of the mind.” But Michelet makes it plain that the all-important marriage of feeling and ideas, the basis of a new national unity, was the unique contribution of Rousseau. It was Rousseau who had given birth to the “living spirit of France” that Michelet now resurrects in his history.

Not only is Rousseau the father of the new French spirit, but Michelet’s narrative makes him its pure embodiment. Although Michelet rejoices in the
release of the spirit from the flesh, in the crisis of faith that caused France to turn away from the divine right monarchy, he needs to give a life to this liberated spirit in order to show it at work. There must be men imbued with the new spirit if there is to be a French Revolution. Michelet thus turns to Rousseau in order to give a name and an existence to the “spirit of Revolution,” the true “spirit of France.”

Rousseau fills the void in Michelet’s version of history between the death of the monarchy in midcentury and the birth of the people during the Revolution. Therefore it is fitting that the story Michelet tells about him interweaves the ideas of death and rebirth. According to Michelet, Rousseau speaks of renascence to a dying society and carries it off, because he delves into his own heart to anchor his philosophy there. Rousseau speaks to an enslaved world and makes the people into gods. The new spirit of France that passes through Rousseau is pure Logos: it sings more than speaks, it is a warm breath of youth and love, a melody from the heart. The essence of “France” is not encapsulated in the philosophical phrases that create the new world. Instead, it is the “young and moving voice” that sings out in the *Confessions* and the *Rêveries* and touches everyone: “The Confessions, which appear after the death of Rousseau, seem like a sigh from the tomb. [Rousseau] comes back, he resuscitates, more powerful, more admired, more adored than ever.” Rising from the dead, Rousseau raises France with him. Resurrected, he becomes the material for a new foundation legend, which, thanks to Michelet, will give the people of France a new national tradition, a new life.

Rousseau gives his name to the new spirit of France, and with it a kind of body. But unlike the stifling body of the king, this body is acceptable because it is imprecise: at once decaying flesh and youthful passion, it is neither precisely young nor precisely old. As a figure of transition, according to which the old (institutional) bodies die, leaving the spirit of Revolution to flourish in a new age, Rousseau balances the best of the past with hope for the future. More heart than mind, more melody than thought, Rousseau allows the French spirit to come to life in its least encumbered form.

Well before Baudelaire, Michelet chose Rousseau as the personification of the modern era, a kind of “man-God” for modern France. By evoking Rousseau in the title of his prose poems, Baudelaire would have linked up with a republican current that wanted to make “Rousseau” the allegorical figure of the *new* France. But this was not the only resonance of the name at the time. Rousseau was considered in other quarters to be a despicable figure tying France to its unwanted revolutionary past. Rousseau was treated with con-
tempt by the conservatives like Désiré Nisard, who yearned to put the past upheavals as far away as possible from the new, stable nation they hoped to create.

Nisard, an educator and critic, published the first volume of his *Histoire de la littérature française* in 1844. Like Michelet, he prefaced his work with an evocation of “l’esprit français,” which he identifies as “the most complete and purest image of the human mind.” Nisard, too, aims to be the medium through which this “spirit” will come alive for a new generation. By transmitting to younger readers only the essential, “permanent” works of French literature, the works of the “beloved masters,” he intends to settle France’s future on the best examples of its cultural past. Given the prevailing doubts about the social and political order, Nisard asserts, there is clear value in knowing “the very nature of the spirit (or mind) of our country” (“la nature même de l’esprit de notre pays”).

Nisard wants to show the French “spirit” in the healthiest, most vigorous expression of the French intellect. But in order to produce his “portraits” of “l’esprit de la France,” he also had to identify what the French spirit (or mind) was not. “We must distinguish its healthy state from its illnesses; its eras of vigor from its eras of weakness,” he writes. So that the reader may learn to guard against them, Nisard adds a few examples of the weakness or disease he has in mind—and Rousseau is foremost among them.

Nisard makes this point with particular force in the preface to the fourth volume of his *Histoire*, which came out in 1861, although parts of it were written earlier (presumably in the late 1840s). Publication of this last volume, devoted to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was suspended as a direct result of the revolutionary events of 1848. Explaining this interruption, Nisard says only that he did not wish to engage in polemics by taking a position completely opposed to the prevailing view, which favored “the most dangerous doctrines of the eighteenth century.” By the time he finally brought out the fourth volume, Nisard was quite serene about the past, but on the subject of Rousseau he had lost none of his vehemence: “However, regarding J.-J. Rousseau in particular, I sense that the calm that has taken hold in me has hardly modified my feelings, and I had to change very little as to the substance in the chapter that is devoted to him, the oldest one in this volume,” he writes. “Rousseau has two defects of which I am not about to become tolerant: a chimerical mind [l’esprit de chimère] and bombast [la déclamation].” Nisard locates the essence of the French spirit in the love of order and discipline and believes that its natural expression is the logical order of the French language.
For him the high point of French literature is the seventeenth century, and the exemplary text is Descartes’s *Discours de la méthode*. Nothing could be more unlike this natural order of the mind than the “spirit of anarchy” or the equivalent “chimerical spirit” that he attributes to Rousseau. The Revolution of 1848 may have prevented Nisard from articulating this view publicly, but there is nothing about it that isn’t already implicit in his concept of French history. For Nisard, the eighteenth century—Michelet’s “heroic age of the spirit”—is an era of decline or decay, when the great French spirit of order and discipline was dangerously weakened.

If Michelet resurrects Rousseau as the personification of “France,” Nisard would rather consign Rousseau to the grave. For him, Rousseau is the very type of the diseased mind. Rousseau represents everything Nisard detests, and he hates the bloodshed Rousseau’s ideas have provoked. Although he does not conceal his loathing for the ideas he finds in Rousseau’s political writing, Nisard reserves his harshest judgment for the *Confessions*. Rousseau’s personal narrative obviously departs from the standard set by Nisard’s ideal model, the seventeenth-century poet, who only reveals in his work those aspects of himself which he has in common with all men. (The seventeenth-century artist, conforming to strict poetic rules, was most apt to represent the French mind—and spirit—because he did not represent himself.) Nisard is particularly repelled by the discontinuity between Rousseau’s life and his writing, which the autobiography reveals. Far from building his philosophy on his own suffering (as Michelet asserts), Nisard’s Rousseau is only a dreamer, a “speculator,” who cares little about the practical application or implications of his work. He is a utopianist—a hypocrite, a “charlatan.” In support of his claims, Nisard repeatedly cites Rousseau’s abandonment of his children. Rousseau was a bad father who had no right to counsel others on how to raise their own offspring. He was even the father of bad (i.e., utopian) works. Rousseau was thus not properly a father at all; certainly, he could not be the “father” of modern France.

For Nisard, “l’esprit français” is synonymous with the superior mind of the great French authors, and Rousseau’s “esprit de chimère” is its antithesis. Far from representing the “spirit of France,” Rousseau represents instead the mental illness (“la folie”) that threatens to sap France’s strength, the health of its great minds. “[I]n the seventeenth century,” Nisard exclaims, “[the mind] believed that it was made only to serve truth; in the eighteenth century, it began to take pleasure in itself; in the nineteenth, thanks to the example of Rousseau, it values itself more than the truth and less than its reputation [literally, the
noise that it makes].” If Michelet’s Rousseau is a man-God, Nisard’s Rousseau resembles a devil, responsible for the evils that beset France.

Nisard never mentions Michelet at any point in his *Histoire*, but he implicitly attacks him throughout his chapter on Rousseau. In what is clearly a calculated, almost point-for-point rebuttal, he turns Michelet’s Rousseau on his head. As these dueling histories attest, the content of France’s national memory was very much at issue not only during Baudelaire’s formative years but also in the last decade of his working life. Versions of the past played themselves out in the collective consciousness of French society, not just in Baudelaire’s personal iconography, and in 1861, Baudelaire’s allusion to Rousseau was overdetermined. In proposing to give his new collection of prose poems the title of Rousseau’s last autobiographical work, he was toying with a reference that had immense political implications.

**The Year 1861**

Broadly stated, in mid-nineteenth-century France, the name “Rousseau” had come to represent the French Revolution’s excesses for the champions of stability and order, whereas it represented the sovereignty of the people to those who sought social and political reform. The debate raged for years, with first one side, then the other gaining dominance. Depending on whether sympathies lay with the restoration of the monarchy or with the republic, Rousseau was alternately revered as the divine inspiration of “a generous and liberating Revolution” or—more often—vilified as the abhorrent instigator of France’s worst troubles, “purveyor of the guillotine, responsible for bloody excesses.” In January 1848, the July Monarchy suspended Michelet’s popular course on the Revolution and Rousseau at the Collège de France—the authorities clearly believed that Michelet’s passionate retelling of France’s history was igniting the emotions that would soon explode in fighting at the barricades. Then, in February, the monarchy collapsed, and the tables were turned. Michelet’s course was reinstated, opponents of the new republic kept mum about their views, and arguments about Rousseau temporarily subsided. Finally, with the creation of the Second Empire, harsh new laws ushered in an era of government censorship, and the renascent republican fervor was quelled. The repressive regime sent Michelet into exile and restored Rousseau’s detractors to power. However, the capacity of the name “Rousseau” to arouse political passions did not dissipate so quickly. When the regime relaxed some of its most draconian laws in the early 1860s, and liberals and republicans be-

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gan again to agitate for reform, even the Académie française found itself embroiled in political debate, and Rousseau became once more the focus of attack.\textsuperscript{32}

Baudelaire, in his twenties in 1848, took to the streets with many other young men and lived out the February Revolution with enthusiasm for the new socialist or démo-soc ideals.\textsuperscript{33} But, like others of his generation, he was quickly disillusioned by the subsequent election and coup d’état of Louis-Napoléon, and he pronounced himself “physiquement dépolitiqué.”\textsuperscript{34} Critics generally agree that in his later life and work, Baudelaire was either apolitical or downright reactionary. If, in his early years, he took the side most often associated with Rousseau, in his later life, he apparently turned against his utopian impulses. However, in a letter to Nadar in May 1859, Baudelaire devoted several paragraphs to commentary on the political events of the day, noting that although he had tried, he hadn't been able to give up his interest in the subject: "Je me suis vingt fois persuadé que je ne m’intéressais plus à la politique, et à chaque question grave, je suis repris de curiosité et de passion" ("I have persuaded myself twenty times that I was no longer interested in politics, and each serious question stirs up my curiosity and passion");\textsuperscript{35} and as late as 1862, in a letter to Sainte-Beuve, he intimated that he still felt the occasional effects of “un vieux fonds d’esprit révolutionnaire” ("an old reserve of revolutionary spirit").\textsuperscript{36} Baudelaire may have aligned himself at times with the dominant reactionary discourse, but when the conservatives launched their most scathing attacks against the “utopian Rousseau” in 1861, he did not follow suit. On the contrary, Baudelaire’s old utopianism seems to have resurfaced just as he was readying the first twenty-six prose poems for publication in \textit{La Presse}.

The early 1860s were a period of liberalization, when the Senate and the Assembly won the right to address the government (\textit{décret} of November 24, 1860), to publish their debates in \textit{Le Moniteur} (\textit{sénatus-consulte} of February 1, 1861), and to vote on specific items of the budget (\textit{sénatus-consulte} of December 31, 1861). A few legislators took advantage of the new openness to call for freedom of the press, and the government did soften its repressive measures slightly. As a result, the daily newspaper \textit{Le Temps}, founded in April 1861, quickly became the \textit{porte-parole} of liberal thought.\textsuperscript{37}

The government’s perceived opening to the left was compounded during these years by Napoléon III’s controversial war in Italy, which turned many former supporters against him. Catholics who feared the war’s effects on the papacy, bankers and businessmen who worried about the state of the nation’s finances (and their own), and moderates repelled by the idea of revolutionary

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contagion and the revival of socialist thought, all saw the Italian campaign as a major crisis for France. In the Assembly, Emile Keller, a deputy from the Haut-Rhin, openly protested the emperor’s policies (January 13, 1861) and called on the regime to choose between conservatism and revolution.38

In the midst of this ferment, the dominant conservative discourse became even more extreme—and, as we might expect, its violence was particularly evident in its virulent attacks on Rousseau. Texts by influential authors at different places on the conservative spectrum paint strikingly similar pictures of Rousseau’s “utopianism” and its disastrous effects on the nineteenth century’s troubles. For the increasingly conservative Lamartine, the revolutionary activities of the Risorgimento were a warning at France’s door of things to come.39 Writing to a correspondent in February 1861, Lamartine evoked his fear of a return to chaos:

Literary business [Les affaires littéraires], so good for me last year, is suffering terribly from the awful enigma into which the inexplicable Italian adventure is plunging Europe. France, internally, is on the eve of an 1848. I don’t see any way out of the situation if we continue to let ourselves be led by that blind dog the king of Piedmont.40

And two months later, he went further still:

There is no more salvation. Those people, possessed by the Satan of ruins, think that they can wage [17]93 externally without having [17]93 at home. They are wrong. We should expect everything and anything. The emperor doesn’t seem to be his own man. His evil genius is leading him who knows where. There is great demagogical agitation; upright people of every stripe are very intimidated.41

In this fearful political mood, Lamartine attacked the “utopian” Rousseau in the 65th entretien of his Cours familier de littérature:

After Fénélon, J.-J. Rousseau was the great, the fatal utopianist of society. He was obviously inspired by Fénélon, who was inspired by Plato. Thus errors are seductive, just as truths are: going back through the centuries to the origin of the world, sophists engender themselves and perpetuate themselves through the generation of smooth orators [en génération de rhéteurs].

When there occurs among these masters of social rhetoric a writer who is more inspired, more contagious than the others, and when the birth of this author, the sovereign of error, coincides with a moral upheaval or a po-
litical cataclysm of his country’s institutions, then, instead of simply finding some readers who are pleased to have their imagination cradled by his dreams, this utopian writer has followers to propagate his chimeras, and arms to execute his ideas.

Such was, on the eve of the French Revolution, J.-J. Rousseau.42

Threatened by the specter of revolution and worried about his own finances and the financial state of the country, Lamartine accuses Rousseau of sophistry, impossible dreams, or chimeras, and overblown language. These are typical features of the conservative, anti-utopian discourse aimed at discrediting Rousseau—and the socialists—once and for all.

From within the ranks of Napoléon III’s most loyal supporters came equally vitriolic outcries against Rousseau. Indebted to the emperor, under whom his career had flourished, Nisard shared Lamartine’s fear of revolutionary activity. As we have seen, the Revolution of 1848 had interrupted his ascent in the bureaucratic ranks and caused him to suspend publication of his Histoire after the third volume. The new revolutionary stirrings might have the same effect. The political circumstances in 1861 explain why Nisard unleashed all his vehemence against his archenemy in the preface to the fourth and last volume of his literary history. “Of all the utopias of J.-J. Rousseau, the most vain and the most dangerous is the one of which he is the hero,” Nisard states, referring to the Confessions.43 Rousseau’s “honnêteté” (his moral uprightness) is only in his head, like a kind of “intoxication, in which he forgets what morality commands in those people whose virtue comes from the heart.”44 Rousseau’s utopian political philosophy is, therefore, nothing more than an attempt to redeem his scandalous personal behavior—the fact that he abandoned his children to foundling homes (les Enfants trouvés):

To desire the union of a people in a single family, the union of nations in a single people, to make the state a father and all the citizens children among whom his hand divides equally the fruits of a common labor; all that calms the utopianist about what he has neglected to do to spread a little happiness around himself. His chimera takes the place of his conscience.45

Nisard obviously feels it his duty to warn his readers against the evil that once again threatens France by showing them its source:

[If the primary cause of this utopia is a fault against nature and honor, we must not be afraid to discredit it by pointing out its cause. We live in a time...
when it is of great interest to French society to know that all the anarchical ideas of the past sixty years were born from this utopia, born itself of a fault so great that one is tempted to look for an excuse for it in the beginning of madness [dans un commencement de folie].

To Nisard, this warning against the (socialist) anarchy and madness stemming from “Rousseau” is just as urgently needed in 1861 as it was thirteen years earlier.

Baudelaire’s Double-bind

The fear and loathing expressed by Lamartine and Nisard in the face of a new revolutionary “utopianism” is worlds away from the rekindled enthusiasm Baudelaire was experiencing at the same moment. Baudelaire was clearly moved by the new relaxation of censorship and the ensuing political foment. It must have seemed to him that he was reliving some of his “utopian” past. Around 1858, after a hiatus of many years, he took to reading Proudhon again, and he may have been aware of Proudhon’s book Du principe fédératif et de la nécessité de reconstituer le parti de la Révolution (1860), which undoubtedly contributed to the conservatives’ unease by encouraging the reestablishment of a revolutionary party. It was in the spring of 1859, barely a month before Napoléon III’s victories at Magenta and Solferino in Italy, that Baudelaire confessed his ongoing interest in politics to Nadar. And the “old reserve of revolutionary spirit” that he later mentioned to Sainte-Beuve was almost certainly behind his decision to apply for a seat in the Académie française in 1861. This event, which has baffled so many commentators, is consonant with the resurgence of Baudelaire’s “utopianism” during this key period and illuminates the nature and place of that utopianism at this time in the poet’s life.

Baudelaire did not run for just any seat in the Academy. Rather, he chose specifically to replace Lacordaire, the passionate priest whose sermons and lectures in the cathedral of Notre-Dame had galvanized the Parisian public in the 1830s and 1840s, and who had been one of the idols of Baudelaire’s republican youth. Lacordaire had only been elected to the French Academy in 1860 and had died shortly after his reception the following year; the brouhaha surrounding his candidacy was still very much alive. In light of his well-known republican sympathies, the prelate’s election had been an obvious polemical move by the Académie and a clear sign of its opposition to the emperor. Lacordaire’s republican past, his brief role as a representative in the Assemblée constituante in 1848, and his notorious last sermon at the Eglise Saint-Roch in
1853, made his election in 1860 a political scandal. No one, least of all Baudelaire, could have mistaken the meaning of the Académie’s actions, its will to mount a worldly revolt (a “fronde mondaine”) against the regime.

Although Baudelaire did not say so directly, he must have had this background in mind when he campaigned to replace the priest. In a letter addressed to the Academy’s secretary, Villemain, but sent in the form of a draft to Sainte-Beuve and another Academician, the poet Alfred de Vigny, Baudelaire explained why he had chosen to apply for Lacordaire’s seat:

Que, le père Lacordaire excitant en moi cette sympathie, non seulement par la valeur des choses qu’il a dites, mais aussi par la beauté dont il les a revêtues, et se présentant à l’imagination non seulement avec le caractère chrétien, mais aussi avec la couleur romantique . . . , je prie M. Villemain d’instruire ses collègues que j’opte pour le fauteuil du père Lacordaire.

That, Father Lacordaire exciting in me this sympathy, not only because of the value of the things he said, but also because of the beauty in which he clothed them, and presenting himself to my imagination not only with a Christian character but also with a romantic color . . . , I beg Mr. Villemain to instruct his colleagues that I am opting for the seat of Father Lacordaire.

Sainte-Beuve, who supported the emperor and hoped to add some like-minded thinkers to the Academy’s rosters, was quick to reproach Baudelaire for this decision: “This express choice of Father Lacordaire, the Catholic/romantic, appears excessive and shocking, which your good taste as a candidate does not want to do.” Sainte-Beuve, himself a former romantic, does not emphasize the real reason why Lacordaire was an “excessive and shocking” choice, and Baudelaire too slides over the political point. But his vague allusion to “la valeur des choses que [Lacordaire] a dites” is undoubtedly a reference to the priest’s oppositional rhetoric in the 1830s and 1840s and his overt republicanism in 1848. And in Baudelaire’s letter to Vigny, he more or less admits as much: “le sentiment et l’instinct me persuadent qu’il faut toujours se conduire utopiquement,” he states, before adding, “c’est-à-dire comme si on était sûr d’être élu, quand même on est certain de ne pas l’être” (“feeling and instinct persuade me that one should always conduct oneself utopically, that is as if one were sure of being elected, even when one is certain of the opposite”).

Baudelaire had good reason to suspect that he would not be successful, but the upwelling of his utopian sympathies continued even as his candidacy foundered. In a letter addressed to Sainte-Beuve in January 1862, for example,
he exclaims over an article by his friend on the upcoming elections, which he saw as supportive of his own bid. Baudelaire, who had been coolly received by most of the Academicians he visited, was impressed by Sainte-Beuve’s proposal for a structural reform of the Academy and comments enthusiastically:

Ah! et votre utopie! Le grand moyen de chasser des élections le vague, si cher aux grands seigneurs! Votre utopie m’a donné un nouvel orgueil. Moi aussi, je l’avais faite, l’utopie, la réforme. . . . Il y a cette grande différence que la vôtre est tout à fait viable, et que peut-être le jour n’est pas loin où elle sera adoptée.56

Ah! and your utopia! A great way to banish from the elections the vagueness, so dear to the great lords! Your utopia gave me a new pride. I too had come up with it, utopia, reform. . . . There is this big difference that yours is entirely viable, and that perhaps the day is not far off when it will be adopted.

Baudelaire’s reaction, contradictory and ironic though it may seem, sheds light on the nature of his “utopian” thought at the time. Sainte-Beuve’s open dislike of the Academy’s self-perpetuating monarchist traditions obviously impressed Baudelaire. In an odd way, Sainte-Beuve’s opposition to the Academy’s old guard put him in a position roughly analogous to that of the “utopian” socialists and radical republicans who had fought against the monarchists in 1848 (notwithstanding that Sainte-Beuve was a loyal Bonapartist when he wrote this critique); and it is this analogy that Baudelaire picks up and applauds. Quoting the reference to “les grands seigneurs” whom Sainte-Beuve wishes to maneuver out of power, Baudelaire marks the social character of his mentor’s reform.

As a writer wholly outside the precinct of the Academy and one of the Bohemians who stood to benefit from Sainte-Beuve’s projected changes, Baudelaire quickly fell in with his mentor’s plans. He even published his approval of Sainte-Beuve’s ideas in an article in the *Revue anecdotique*, where he again underscored the positive “utopian” character of Sainte-Beuve’s proposal (“la très raisonnable utopie de M. Sainte-Beuve”).57 Nonetheless, Baudelaire thought it prudent to publish this article anonymously, which points up his difficult double-bind: a “utopianist” whose democ-soc past linked him more closely to Lacordaire and the “frondeurs,” Baudelaire also sought the support of the influential critic who wanted to eliminate oppositional politics from the Academy. Yet Baudelaire could scarcely afford to take credit for his piece in support of Sainte-Beuve, because to do so would have put an immediate end to his
hopes for membership in the Académie. His intricate dance between the two opposing camps testifies poignantly to the difficulty of surviving in the highly charged political atmosphere of the early 1860s.

Baudelaire’s covert activism is one example of the artist’s need to be duplicitous and double-dealing during this period. Although Baudelaire could not risk proclaiming his enthusiasm for the old-style “utopianism” of his past, he reasserted it obliquely and in distorted ways—to the very people who would be least receptive. In 1861 and 1862, it is this twisted oppositional or counter-discursive position that constitutes what he proudly names his “utopia.”

Baudelaire was patently not a reactionary in the common mold. When Baudelaire talked about “utopias,” it was with reference to both a period of his own life that he had not entirely abjured and an oppositional stance that was still in his mind. While he no longer believed in “the intrinsic goodness of man and nature,” he had not completely foresworn “l’amour de l’utopie, des idylles révolutionnaires” (“the love of utopia, of revolutionary idylls”).58 In the 1860s, Baudelaire was more utopian than critics have generally allowed, and this lingering sympathy makes itself felt in the polemical title he proposed to Houssaye in December 1861—“Le Promeneur solitaire.” In taking up and incorporating Rousseau’s work in his own and especially in invoking Rousseau in the title of his collected poems, Baudelaire had to be aware of the subversive political implications of his poetic activity.59

Flaunting a reference to Rousseau’s work at a time when Rousseau’s name was anathema to some of the most prominent men in French literary and political circles was a sure way to be noticed. As Starobinski remarks, such a gesture would have been read as a sympathetic echo of the controversial author or at least a response to his work. In either case, the title would have encouraged pointed attacks. Perhaps Baudelaire backed off his overt oppositional stance after his decision to seek election to the Académie française provoked such negative comment. Whether he himself withdrew the title or Arsène Houssaye refused it,60 the political circumstances at the time leave little doubt that the decision was the prudent one. Baudelaire’s title was probably intended as an homage to Rousseau, and whether or not it was “illegitimate”—that is, based on insufficient common ground—is one question that subtends this book. However, by one standard, that of the dominant conservative discourse, the answer is unequivocal: the homage did not conform to the “legitimate” point of view and therefore was best set aside.

Baudelaire’s involvement with Rousseau and Rousseau’s texts occurred at a time when he was revisiting his socialist past and may well partake of Baude-
laire's positive disposition toward the utopian. But Baudelaire's utopianism is not to be understood as a pure socialism à la Proudhon or Fourier. Rather, it is both a general dissidence—a critical energy and anger unleashed against the dominant discourses of Napoléon III’s regime—and a kind of idiosyncratic fantasy. Reflecting back on 1848 in a series of journal entries about his state of mind at the time, Baudelaire wrote:

1848 ne fut amusant que parce que chacun y faisait des utopies comme des châteaux en Espagne.
1848 ne fut charmant que par l’excès même du Ridicule. (Baud., OC, 1: 680)

1848 was only amusing because everyone built utopias like castles in Spain.
1848 was only charming because of the very excess of Ridiculousness.

“Utopia,” for Baudelaire, designated an aesthetic category (of whimsy and ex-
cess) as much as a political one. And it was on the basis of aesthetics, as much as by his power to connote political opposition, that Baudelaire was attracted to Rousseau.