Grotesque Figures
Swain, Virginia E.

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Swain, Virginia E.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/60319

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2151594
When Baudelaire puts into play, in “Le Mauvais Vitrier,” the perennial code words for allegory—words like *engin* and *démon*, which refer to the trope’s machinelike or demonic agency—he points obliquely to his project in that poem and others. In the *Petits Poèmes en prose*, Baudelaire writes out the eternal structure of allegory as the ephemeral story of a nineteenth social type or the topical story of the contemporary politicization of Rousseau. Combining timeless rhetorical structures with time-bound elements relative to the era of their creation, the prose poems serve as so many examples of Baudelaire’s idea of beauty, as he defines it in “Le Peintre de la vie moderne”:

> Le beau est fait d’un élément éternel, invariable, dont la quantité est excessivement difficile à déterminer, et d’un élément relatif, circonstanciel, qui sera, si l’on veut, tour à tour ou tout ensemble, l’époque, la mode, la morale, la passion. Sans ce second élément, qui est comme l’enveloppe amusante, titillante, apéritive, du divin gâteau, le premier élément serait indigestible, inappréciable, non adapté et non approprié à la nature humaine. Je défie qu’on découvre un échantillon quelconque de beauté qui ne contienne pas ces deux éléments.

The beautiful is made up of an eternal, invariable element, the quantity of which is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you will, alternately or all at once, the era, fashion, psychology or mores, passion. Without this second element, which is like the amusing, titillating, stimulating envelope of the divine cake, the first
element would be indigestible, unappealing, poorly adapted and inappropriate to human nature. I defy anyone to discover any example of beauty that does not contain these two elements.

Baudelaire was obviously fascinated by his contemporaries’ caricatures of Rousseau, their political connotations, and the implications of this ongoing obsession with the traumatic past (represented by Rousseau) for any delineation of the present. What we might call the Rousseau phenomenon was a key characteristic of the society and times in which Baudelaire lived, and by foregrounding it in the poems, Baudelaire provides an amusing, provocative, and digestible surface for his little “cakes.” But as our reading of “Le Mauvais Vitrier” demonstrates, the poet was also fascinated by Rousseau’s own analysis—and use—of rhetoric. Baudelaire was a perceptive student of Rousseau’s rhetorical practices, who saw through even Rousseau’s most persuasive autobiographical texts to the core rhetorical devices at work there. Very much like the poet in “Le Poème du hachisch” observing his “man” as if he were a mechanism under glass, Baudelaire scrutinized Rousseau’s autobiographical narratives (and other writings) and observed the rhetorical machinery operating in them.

Indeed, I believe Baudelaire learned from Rousseau how a rhetorical figure that was dismissed as dry, hackneyed, and mechanical in the late eighteenth century could mechanically generate stories that were lively, titillating, and new. Thus Rousseau’s influence over the prose poems extends far beyond the surface manifestations of the “Rousseau” caricatures. Even where “Rousseau” is absent as a type or a caricature, Rousseau’s work is frequently present as an intertext. Rousseau’s talents as a storyteller and a rhetorician had a tremendous impact on Baudelaire, and we cannot calculate their effects solely on the basis of the presence of Rousseau types in some of the poems.

In order to better grasp the fresh ideas that Baudelaire derived from his reading of Rousseau, therefore, we must look back at Rousseau’s rhetorical theory and practice and his role in the Enlightenment attack on the rococo. This necessary step back in time will allow us to understand the eighteenth century’s increasingly negative concept of the grotesque, which Baudelaire knew well and against which he defined his own theory and practice. It will also give us the opportunity to test the assertion of Sainte-Beuve, Baudelaire’s sometime mentor, that Rousseau’s artistic legacy lies in his realism. This evaluation of Rousseau’s contribution to modern aesthetics, although controversial, goes some way toward explaining the convergence of the grotesque and the real, or the eternal and the topical, in Baudelaire’s poems.
This chapter, then, falls loosely into three sections. First, drawing on Sainte-Beuve, it examines the claim that Rousseau was a realist. Then, in order to provide an explanatory context for the tension between the grotesque and the real in Rousseau’s work, it briefly reviews the debate surrounding the grotesque in the mid-eighteenth century. Finally, an analysis of Rousseau’s satirical letter on the Paris Opéra in his epistolary novel Julie; ou, La Nouvelle Héloïse, where the struggle between grotesque and real asserts itself with comic vigor, sets up a reading of four Baudelaire poems that incorporate key elements of Rousseau’s text: “Le Vieux Saltimbanque,” “Le Crépuscule du soir,” “Une Mort héroïque,” and “La Corde.” In the Petits Poèmes en prose, as we shall see, Baudelaire enters into a complex dialogue with Rousseau regarding the real and the grotesque; and in the process, he reinvigorates a rhetorical genre that had been given up for dead.

Sainte-Beuve on Rousseau’s Realism

It is often alleged that Baudelaire got his ideas about Rousseau from the arch-conservative Joseph de Maistre, whom he read in or after 1851. However, although Baudelaire openly credited de Maistre with teaching him “how to think,” the notion that de Maistre taught the poet what to think about Rousseau, in particular, has always seemed needlessly reductive to me. Given the widespread discussion of “Jean-Jacques” throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, it is more than likely that Baudelaire had imbibed ideas and images of Rousseau from other sources long before he read de Maistre. Furthermore, I submit that if anyone was Baudelaire’s maître à penser when it came to Rousseau, it was not de Maistre but Sainte-Beuve, whom Baudelaire also considered an intellectual midwife. Baudelaire had admired Sainte-Beuve even as a young man, and he turned to him on many occasions for advice and help in the pursuit of his literary objectives. Baudelaire’s correspondence shows that he kept up to date with Sainte-Beuve’s work as an influential critic, and his prose poems bear important traces of that reading.

Sainte-Beuve differed from most essayists writing on Rousseau in his detailed analysis of Rousseau’s originality, and his praise of Rousseau seems to have inspired Baudelaire. Where other critics paid only lip-service to Rousseau’s eloquence, Sainte-Beuve interspersed his commentary on Rousseau’s life and morals with perceptive asides about Rousseau’s aesthetic achievement. Sainte-Beuve extols Rousseau, not as the author most often deemed responsible for the French Revolution, but as a revolutionary talent whose...
Grosesque Figures

genius was unsurpassed even in the nineteenth century. His columns bring into focus the artistic side of Rousseau at a time when this aspect was overshadowed by the political impact of his thought, and in these columns the critic lays down a challenge and some guiding principles, which I believe the younger poet took up.

Of the three articles that Sainte-Beuve devoted to Rousseau during the period that concerns us (in April and November 1850 and in July 1861), the first two left discernable marks on Baudelaire's work. In the first essay ("Madame de la Tour-Franqueville et Jean-Jacques Rousseau," April 29, 1850), the critic sets out to explain Rousseau's rude behavior toward an eager female correspondent. Madame de la Tour-Franqueville was an admirer of Rousseau's novel Julie and considered herself to be the living incarnation of Rousseau's fictional heroine. In a passage that was very likely the origin of Baudelaire's poem "Laquelle est la vraie?" Sainte-Beuve concludes that Rousseau was too enamored of his fictional ideal to accept the existence of a real-life Julie:

[L']amour de Rousseau n'était pour aucune femme vivante, ni pour une de ces beautés d'autrefois, que ressuscitent les rêves du poète. Son amour était celui de l'idéale beauté, du fantôme auquel lui-même prêtait vie et flamme: c'était ce fantôme seul, tiré de son sein, et formé d'un ardent nuage, qu'il aimait, qu'il embrassait sans cesse, à qui il donnait chaque matin ses baisers de feu . . . et quand il se présenta une femme réelle qui eut l'orgueil de lui montrer l'objet terrestre de son idéal et de lui dire: Je suis Julie, il ne daigna point la reconnaître; il lui en voulut presque d'avoir espéré se substituer à l'objet du divin songe.

Rousseau's love was neither for any living woman nor for one of those beauties of yesteryear that the poet's dreams recall to life. His love was for ideal beauty, for the phantom to which he himself gave life and passion: it was that phantom alone, drawn from his breast and formed of an ardent cloud, that he loved, that he endlessly embraced, that he kissed with passion each morning . . . and when a real woman presented herself who had the proud daring to show him the earthly object of his ideal and to say to him: "I am Julie," he did not deign to recognize her; he was almost angry with her for having hoped to substitute herself for the object of his divine dream.

Drawing as it does on Rousseau's letters and extracting from them psychological insights such as these, Sainte-Beuve's analysis is unparalleled: he is a master at singling out character traits that pin "Rousseau" to the page for our scrutiny.
But the critic's most important contribution to Rousseau reception is his
November column, where he goes beyond the stereotype of Rousseau as a
dreamer or a mawkish sentimentalist to focus instead on Rousseau's original-
ity as a writer and a realist. From Sainte-Beuve's point of view, Rousseau had
revolutionized the French language more than any author since Pascal, and de-
spite his many imitators, Sainte-Beuve argued, Rousseau remained unique.12

For Sainte-Beuve, the singular difference between the eighteenth-century
genius and his nineteenth-century look-alikes is Rousseau's class back-
ground—his lower-class origins and his experiences as a servant. These roots
give Rousseau his distinctive language, full of “rough accents” and “raw earth-
iness” (82), “details in bad taste in which he speaks of theft and of grub”13—in
sum, “certain ignoble, disgusting, cynical expressions, which the upstanding
man wouldn't use and doesn't know.”14 Rousseau is not “a man of the proud
aristocratic race” like Chateaubriand, and his language sometimes reveals his
poor breeding, but Sainte-Beuve concludes that his inferior background is ul-
timately Rousseau's strength. Lacking an aristocratic sense of honor, Rousseau
dares to speak of subjects that others deem insignificant. He is willing to show
his love of simple things, simply expressed. Sainte-Beuve considers him better
than his closest disciple; “at bottom he is truer, more real, more alive” than
Chateaubriand (87). It is this realism, discernible especially in Rousseau's use
of detail, that attracts the astute critic.

Sainte-Beuve gives several examples. First, Rousseau knows how to capture
the essential element that will anchor his fictional characters in a recognizable
and unforgettable place. Like a painter, he makes sure that nothing is missing
in his “dessin” (92) or “tableau” (93).

En tout, comme peintre, Rousseau a le sentiment de la réalité. Il l’a toutes
les fois qu’il nous parle de la beauté, laquelle, même lorsqu’elle est imagi-
naire comme sa Julie, prend avec lui un corps et des formes bien visibles, et
n’est pas du tout une Iris en l’air et insaisissable. Il a le sentiment de cette
réalité en ce qu’il veut que chaque scène dont il se souvient ou qu’il invente,
que chaque personnage qu’il introduit, s’encadre et se mue dans un lieu
bien déterminé, dont les moindres détails se puissent graver et retenir.

In everything, like a painter, Rousseau has the feeling of reality. He has it
every time he speaks to us of beauty, which, even when it is imaginary like
his Julie, takes on a body and very visible forms, and is not at all an ungrasp-
able rainbow in the air. He has the feeling of this reality in that he wants
every scene he remembers or invents, every character he introduces, to be
framed and to move in a well-delineated place, the smallest details of which can be engraved and remembered.\textsuperscript{15}

Second, Rousseau even includes realistic details about meals and food in his fiction. Rousseau has been hungry, Sainte-Beuve notes; and his difficult life, his experiences as an “homme du peuple” (92), lend “guts” to even his most ideal scenes: “Therefore he will never forget, even in the ideal picture he later gives of his happiness, to include those things from real life and from common humanity, those things from the guts [ces choses des entrailles]. It’s through all these true aspects, combined with his eloquence, that he grabs hold of us” (92).

Sainte-Beuve insists particularly on a passage in which Rousseau describes how hunger overtakes him after he’s had a nap in a beautiful country spot. He walks to the city, “resolved to spend two pieces of ‘six whites’ that I still had on a good lunch” ("résolu de mettre à un bon déjeuner deux pièces de six blancs qui me restaient encore").\textsuperscript{16} Sainte-Beuve comments:

All the natural Rousseau is there, with his reverie, his ideal, his reality; and this six blancs coin itself, which comes after the nightingale, is enough to bring us back to earth and to make us feel all the humble pleasure that poverty harbors when it is joined with poetry and youth. I wanted to extend the quotation as far as this coin to show that with Rousseau we are not only in the world or the style of [Chateaubriand’s] René and [Lamartine’s] Jocelyn.\textsuperscript{17}

By emphasizing the differences between Rousseau and his romantic disciples, Sainte-Beuve’s analysis goes to the heart of what is unique about Rousseau and what Baudelaire himself will emulate.

Sainte-Beuve issues a kind of challenge in his commentary on the \textit{Confessions}—a challenge to those who themselves want to be “nouveaux.” No one has yet gone beyond Rousseau, he claims. He is “still superior to his descendants” (97); “Rousseau’s style still remains the surest and most solid example one can offer of modern innovation” (96).\textsuperscript{18} It is not difficult to imagine
Baudelaire picking up the glove and focusing on this high standard as he worked on his “second poetic revolution.”

Elements in the prose poems suggest that Baudelaire took note of all the realistic traits singled out for comment by his friend: the desire to paint a scene, evoked in “Le Confiteor de l’artiste” and in the title of “Le Désir de peindre”; the frame and setting that anchor a description so it can be visualized and fixed in the mind, characteristic of most of the prose poems; the tension between “la vie réelle” and “le tableau idéal” that structures “La Chambre double,” “Laquelle est la vraie?” and others; the use of realistic details such as money and food in poems like “La Fausse Monnaie” and “Les Yeux des pauvres”; a language throughout the poems that is often less than seemly or poetic; and the class-consciousness of so many of the texts. Ambitious to become the modern innovator whose work would be the new benchmark for successive generations, replacing that of Rousseau, Baudelaire must have found useful guidelines for his own undertaking in Sainte-Beuve’s acute analysis of Rousseau’s unmatched contributions to literature. By accepting the challenge of excelling in the very areas where Rousseau remained uncontested, Baudelaire staked out for himself a terrain where no one else had succeeded— a terrain, that is, among the fertile fields already delimited by Rousseau.

The Enlightenment against the Rococo: La Querelle des Bouffons

It is clear that Baudelaire carefully parsed the works taken up by Sainte-Beuve; but although he incorporated many of the traits that the critic underscored, it was not exactly in the service of realism. Baudelaire detested this relatively new literary trend and had no desire to adopt it. In his notes for an article now entitled “Puisque réalisme il y a,” he admits that people had tried to pin the “realist” label on him, “although I have always worked hard not to deserve it” (“bien que je me sois toujours appliqué à le démériter”). His reading of Rousseau led him, instead, to the intersection of the real and the grotesque.

There is no doubt that Rousseau was a proponent of a certain realism, but whether his work can be called “realist” is another matter. Like the beautiful Bénédicta in Baudelaire’s “Laquelle est la Vraie?” Rousseau’s realism has an ugly double. The grotesque haunts the real and divides the texts on style that Baudelaire read, copied, and rewrote. Rousseau frequently says one thing and does another; his aesthetic theory and his own style are often at odds. Rousseau’s writing on style calls realism into question, while it brings out its political consequences; and Baudelaire was well aware of these implications.
Rousseau’s work can help us recognize and understand the aesthetic values and political subtext of Baudelaire’s prose poems.

This chapter and the next focus on two texts about opera, composed between 1758 and 1761, when Rousseau was thinking about language, music, and the theater in relation to the state—texts that Baudelaire knew in detail and rewrote. The famous satirical letter on the Paris Opéra in Rousseau’s Julie and the entry “Opéra” in his Dictionnaire de musique reflect and extend the campaign against the Paris Opéra, known as the Querelle des Bouffons, waged by Rousseau, Grimm, Diderot, and other contributors to the Encyclopédie, beginning in 1752. This quarrel, which weighed the relative merits of the Italian and French operatic styles, ostensibly focused on the weaknesses of the French lyric drama and the unsuitability of harmony (as opposed to melody) for expressing human emotions. But, in fact, the Querelle was far more than a critique of the French musical practices of the day. As Rémy Saisselin observes, it “signal[ed] the end of the baroque world” and its “aesthetics of pleasure” and marked the beginning of “the Enlightenment as a philosophical movement . . . . The attack on French opera was thus also an attack on the entire Rococo.” What Baudelaire found in Rousseau’s satirical letter on the Paris Opéra and the entry in the music dictionary, then, was a critique of rococo aesthetics and particularly of the marvelous, machines, and allegory (three almost interchangeable terms in the mid-eighteenth century).

Although Rousseau and the other participants in the Querelle typically refer to the marvelous and do not use the term grotesque per se, it is important to realize that the same grotesque principles inform both painting and the visual spectacle of the opera in the rococo period. As we saw in Chapter 2, the painted grotesque borrowed some of its vocabulary—its acrobatic performers, stagelike platforms, and “proscenium” arches—from the popular Parisian fair theaters (heirs to the commedia dell’arte) and is thus visibly tied to the dramatic arts. Furthermore, if the grotesque in painting is the product of an extraordinary liberty of thought, evidenced by the “fictive beings, and even [composite] creatures” it puts into play, the marvelous in the theater is similarly associated with freedom of invention or the imagination run riot. The marvelous, like the grotesque, eschews the usual hierarchy of beings and defies the laws of nature. This is precisely the aspect of the opera that Friedrich Melchior Grimm derides as ridiculous in his Encyclopédie article “Poëme lyrique”:

Thus the visible marvelous is the soul of French opera; the gods, the goddesses, the demigods; shades, genies, fairies, magicians, virtues, passions, ab-
abstract ideas, and personified moral beings are the actors. The visible marvelous has appeared to be so essential to this drama that the poet cannot conceive of treating a historical subject without mixing in some supernatural incidents and imaginary beings of his own creation.29

Operas might include “an aerial genie, a game, a laugh, a pleasure, an hour, a constellation, all these bizarre allegorical beings, whose names we read with astonishment in the programs.”30

As the above quotations from Grimm’s article suggest, the obvious artificiality of the marvelous spectacle bore the brunt of the philosophes’ attack. In particular, they disliked the use of what they called “machines,” which were found in both epic poetry and on the stage. The term apparently originated in the theater, where it designated the real machinery used to bring the supernatural characters on and off the set “in a manner that imitates the marvelous.”31 In poetry, by analogy, “machines” designated the often crude or mechanistic interventions of gods, genies, or other supernatural creatures to solve problems the poet (or the mortals in the poem) couldn’t handle in any other way.32 In this poetic context, a “machine” (also referred to as an *engin*) was synonymous with allegory.33 Often “machines” crossed over from one genre to another when an epic poem, such as Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*, became the basis for an opera.34 Thus, the term “marvelous” encompassed the creation of various allegorical characters, ranging from pagan gods embodying distinct ideas to fictional creatures sprung from the poet’s imagination, brought into play through the use of literal or rhetorical “machines.” The marvelous, machines, and allegory are so bound up with one another in the philosophes’ discourse on the opera as to become almost indistinguishable.

Clearly, the rococo aesthetic permeated and united the visual, poetic, and dramatic arts (whether “grotesque” or “marvelous”) in the period leading up to the 1750s.35 By the mid-eighteenth century, however, a portion of the theatergoing public was no longer impressed with these extravagant effects. This shift away from “le merveilleux” is clearly in evidence in an influential treatise by the abbé Charles Batteux, *Les Beaux-Arts réduits à un même principe*, originally published in 1746,36 which lays out many of the issues involved in the Encyclopedists’ critique. Batteux declares that the underlying principle uniting the arts should be the imitation of “beautiful nature.” He decries anything that transgresses this rule—and he is therefore adamantly opposed to the “monsters” so rampant in recent (grotesque) art. His second chapter begins with a crisp statement of his position:

---

115
Les monstres mêmes, qu’une imagination déréglée se figure dans ses délires, ne peuvent être composés que de parties prises dans la nature: et si le génie, par caprice, fait de ces parties un assemblage contraire aux lois naturelles, en dégradant la nature, il se dégrade lui-même, et se change en une espèce de folie. Les limites sont marquées: dès qu’on les passe, on se perd; on fait un chaos plutôt qu’un monde, et on cause du désagrément plutôt que du plaisir.37

Even monsters, which an unregulated imagination pictures in its delirium, can only be composed of parts taken from nature: and if genius capriciously makes of these parts an assemblage contrary to natural laws, by degrading nature it degrades itself and becomes a kind of madness. The limits are set out: as soon as a person crosses them, he is lost; he creates chaos rather than a world, and he causes displeasure rather than pleasure.

Batteux’s fear of the unruly imagination, its “delirium,” its “madness,” and the “chaos” it can cause, leads him to police the productions of genius. He knows nature’s laws and patrols the limits of the natural. “Qu’ai-je à faire de cette Forêt enchantée du Tasse, des Hippogriffes de l’Arioste, de la Génération du Péché mortel dans Milton? Tout ce qu’on me présente avec ces traits outrés et hors de la nature, mon esprit le rejette: incredulus odi.” [“Je n’en crois rien, et je m’indigne.”] (“What do I care about that enchanted forest in Tasso, the hippogriffs in Ariosto, the generation of mortal sin in Milton? Everything that is presented with these outlandish and exaggerated attributes, my mind rejects: incredulus odi.” [“I don’t believe a word, and I am indignant.”]).38

The grotesque results, Batteux believes, when the basic rule of harmony of style is flaunted. This is the rule that requires the style to agree with the content and that looks for a proper balance or proportion between them. As Batteux explains, “Les arts forment une espèce de république, où chacun doit figurer selon son état” (“The arts form a sort of republic, where each one should appear in proportion to its status”). When the poet fails to achieve the appropriate balance—when he doesn’t adopt the right tone for the genre he has chosen, or when he has commingled two or more genres—then the harmony of the whole is missing and the poem becomes “une mascarade: c’est une sorte de grotesque qui tient de la parodie” (“a masquerade: it’s a kind of grotesque that is close to parody”).39

By applying this rule of proportion between form and content or appearance and being, Batteux wants to rescue the arts from collapsing irremediably into the grotesque. But when it comes to the opera, which surpasses the usual laws of verisimilitude, Batteux relents. Opera concerns itself with extraordi-
nary actions and can accommodate the old-style “merveilleux” with its magi-
cal, fairytale events: “C’est le ciel qui s’ouvre, une nue lumineuse qui apporte
un être céleste; c’est un palais enchanté, qui disparait au moindre signe, et se
transforme en désert, etc.” (“It’s the sky that opens, a luminous cloud that
bears a celestial being; it’s an enchanted palace, which disappears at the least
signal and transforms itself into a desert, etc.”). With Batteux, at midcen-
tury, we find ourselves at a turning point, where the standard of the reasonable
imitation of the best in nature imposes itself with vigor but has not yet com-
pletely eradicated the old aesthetic principles and styles.

When the philosophes took up the cause of operatic reform in 1752, they
espoused some of the same ideals Batteux expressed but applied them with
greater uniformity. Their thinking about the Paris Opéra reflects not only their
desire for verisimilitude in art but their rejection of the luxury and magnifi-
cence long associated with the monarchy. The Paris Opéra, which had its roots
in Louis XIV’s love of spectacle and dance, had changed remarkably little since
its creation. As an extension of the royal “fêtes” that exalted the Sun King,
his grandeur and his glory, the standard repertory operas of Lully and Quin-
ault bore the mark of the great monarch, who was often both the principal or-
ganizer or “machinist” of these events and a featured player, disguised as a pa-
gan deity or other allegorical figure. Everything about the Opéra bespoke its
royal heritage long after its famous patron’s demise. Thus, the philosophes’
campaign for operatic reform had political overtones; it marked the develop-
ment of a new link between republican views and aesthetic theory. As William
Weber observes, “Through the use of code words—la musique française, to
mean the court musical tradition—the Encyclopédistes made their political
point on a relatively safe ground.”

This political point involved the need for greater freedom of thought and
speech; a new emphasis on the common man or the bourgeoisie instead of the
social elite (or the gods); the closure of the breach between reality and appear-
ance in language, art, and social interaction; and the creation of a theater that
would truly reflect (or promote) a more egalitarian idea of the public and the
nation. Beginning with his Lettre sur la musique française, Rousseau became
the “most eloquent spokesman” for these ideals—and the symbol of revolu-
tion. His satirical letter on the Paris Opéra in Julie and his Dictionnaire de
musique article “Opéra” follow this line.
Grotesque Figures

The Letter on the Paris Opéra: The Grotesque

Letter 2.23 in Rousseau’s Julie, written by the protagonist St. Preux to his friend Claire d’Orbe, is one of several letters in the novel that describe life in Paris, contrasting its decadent pleasures with the gentler and far more satisfying recreations in the pays de Vaud. But letter 2.23 is not about the perils of the city per se, even though it takes aim at the Paris Opéra. The letter’s real subjects are aesthetics and representation, and beyond the uproarious descriptions of French operatic practice lie several important issues for both小说ists and poets: the ability of language to convey meaning and truth, the proper use of figural versus literal language, the politics of rhetoric, and the creation and place of illusion in the world.

References near the beginning of the letter place it under the sign of Momus: St. Preux makes it clear that right-thinking visitors to the Paris Opéra would make fun of it if they could, but government censorship makes it impossible to laugh in public at this supposedly august institution. Pope is evoked, and Macrobius’s Saturnalia is the subject of a long editorial note—two deictic references designed to alert the reader to the letter’s thoroughly satirical intent. The object of all this aggressive humor is the grotesque aesthetic that still dominates the lyric theater. St. Preux contests both the Opéra’s subject matter (its bizarre melange of “Gods, leprechauns, monsters, Kings, shepherds, fairies, fury, joy, a fire, a jig, a battle and a ball”)47 and its means of production, which are so inept and ill-adapted that they destroy any illusion of reality. The elaborate machinery set up to depict both natural and supernatural objects is so ungainly that it calls attention to its artifice and interferes with the verisimilitude that supposedly governs theatrical representations. The Paris Opéra exactly inverts the proper order of priorities; instead of representing great men of history in a simple and economical manner, “on fait de petites choses avec de grands efforts” (“small things are achieved with great efforts”).48 The means of production are out of proportion to the trivial subject of representation. The Paris Opéra is grotesque both because it puts “monsters” (and hybrid spectacles) on stage and because its staging is mechanical, obtrusive, and therefore excessive. And yet the public is happily taken in. St. Preux remarks sarcastically: “Cet assemblage si magnifique et si bien ordonné est regardé comme s’il contenoit en effet toutes les choses qu’il représente” (“This most magnificent and well arranged ensemble is considered as if it indeed contained all the things it represents”) (Rouss., OC, 2: 281; CW, 6: 231).

The public’s willingness to accept the Opéra’s “magnificent” admixture of
objects at face value, their belief that lavish appearance betokens abundant substance, is in turn the basis for the more general belief in the Paris Opéra’s “majesty”—a belief propagated by the Académie royale de musique and supported by the monarchy’s vigorous censorship. Noting that the Paris Opéra is said to be “le spectacle . . . le plus voluptueux, le plus admirable qu’inventa jamais l’art humain. . . . le plus superbe monument de la magnificence de Louis quatorze” (“the most voluptuous, the most admirable spectacle that human art ever invented. . . . the most superb monument of the magnificence of Louis XIV” [trans. modified]), St. Preux comments: “Voilà . . . comment, dans certains pays, l’essence des choses tient aux mots, et comment des noms honnêtes suffisent pour honorer ce qui l’est le moins” (“That . . . is how in certain countries the essence of things hangs on words, and how honest names suffice to exalt what is least honest”). The language applied to the theater suffers from the same grotesque disjunction between appearance and essence as the operatic productions themselves. The aesthetic problem of the proper choice and alignment of subject matter and means of representation applies not just to the drama but also to the relation between words and the essence of the things they designate. St. Preux’s critique of the opera and the implicit values that underlie it can be read as a commentary on rhetoric and on representation in general, and certainly Baudelaire understood this.

St. Preux’s satire is a frontal assault on blatant figures and particularly allegory, which is the most unbearable form of figuration, according to him, because it conveys “no feeling, no tableaux, no situations, no warmth, no interest, nothing that could give rise to music, flatter the emotions and nourish illusion.” St. Preux’s comments echo Rousseau’s condemnation of allegory in his Dictionary entry on the ballet. Allegory is an intellectual exercise, Rousseau asserts; it presents metaphysical ideas in the form of sensory images and makes the spectator work hard at understanding the relationship between the two. Rather than facilitating the spectator’s involvement with the performance or the text, allegory obscures meaning and constantly engages the mind in deciphering its figures and its “puns, allusions and epigrams.” It is the obverse of compelling illusion.

St. Preux’s description of the opera’s machines and special effects underscores the distracting discrepancy between the sensory sign and the idea it represents. For example, he describes the backdrop as:

un grand rideau [grossièrement peint] et presque toujours percé ou déchiré, ce qui représente des gouffres dans la terre ou des trous dans le Ciel, selon la
**Grotesque Figures**

a large curtain painted [sketchily], and almost always pierced or torn, which represents chasms in the earth or holes in the Sky, according to the perspective. Every person who passes behind the stage and touches the curtain, produces in shaking it a sort of earthquake that is rather amusing to see. The Sky is represented by certain bluish tatters, suspended on sticks or ropes, like a washerwoman’s clothesline. The sun . . . is a torch in a lantern. (Rouss., *CW*, 6: 231–32)

The chariots of the gods and goddesses are four beams in a frame suspended from a rope and adorned with a roughly painted canvas, which serves as a cloud. And trapdoors opening in the stage are the sure sign that little “Demons are about to emerge from the cellar.” In short, natural and supernatural phenomena occur on stage through the intervention of all-too-obvious contraptions, which destroy not only the illusion but also the uplifting connotations that might otherwise attach to the sun, the heavens, and the gods.

These same defects are immediately apparent in St. Preux’s own style, which parallels the elaborate and ungainly productions he relates. Even as he describes how the stage is set and how the visual effects are created, his language displays the verbal counterpart of the Opéra’s extravagance. St. Preux repeatedly names the relationship between two terms, stating in the most flat-footed manner that one thing “represents” or “is represented by” another. Or he uses similes that make pitifully clear the association of the noble and the base, as in the comparison of the sky to the washerwoman’s laundry. Sometimes he makes bad jokes: speaking of the “dragons, lizards, tortoises, crocodiles [and] huge toads” that shuffle “menacingly” around the stage, he remarks, “Chacune de ces figures est animée par un lourdaut de Savoyard, qui n’a pas l’esprit de faire la bête” (“Each of these figures is animated by a dumb Savoyard, who hasn’t enough presence of mind to horse around”)!52 The very visibility of St. Preux’s play on words, the amusing way his own rhetoric calls attention to itself, is part of the point Rousseau wants to make. St. Preux’s poor figures are like the trapdoors in the Opéra stage or the ropes that hang down from on high; they call attention to their own operation and announce the lumbering transfer of meaning of which they are the vehicle. As we begin
to understand, these awkward attempts at figuration make emotional identifi-
cation with the action almost unthinkable. One may be entertained, but it is
hard to become emotionally engaged when confronted with such intrusive
mechanical devices. That is undoubtedly why Rousseau elsewhere refers to the
Opéra’s machines as “those bad supplements” (“ces mauvais suppléments”) and
why he wants to exclude them from the Opéra stage.53

In this critique of allegory, Rousseau has much in common with the au-
thors of the Encyclopédie articles on “Machine” and “Merveilleux,” who make
explicit the connection between machines, the marvelous, and overworked
rhetorical figures. The anonymous author of the entry “Merveilleux” rejects
the marvelous in literature and the opera on at least two grounds. First, refer-
ences to Greek and Roman gods and goddesses have no reality, that is, no
emotional meaning for the modern public;54 and second, intermingling real
and metaphysical beings destroys the unity of a work.55 In short, the unwar-
ranted and meaningless use of mythological figures or allegories is little more
than an ornament covering over a void.56 This is clearly what Rousseau wants
to illustrate through the satire of the Paris Opéra. Empty signs, like so many
“dragons, lizards, tortoises [and] huge toads” moved by mindless Savoyards,
may amuse a childish public, but they do not make sense—they are meaning-
less in themselves and they detract from the sense of the whole.

St. Preux designates this same void when he cites the example of the tragic
death, on stage, of the little chimney sweeps who sometimes play the part of
devils. These youngsters are hoisted up to the “skies” on ropes, until they dis-
appear “majestically” in the rags representing clouds. But sometimes the ropes
break, and then “the infernal spirits and immortal Gods fall, are maimed,
[and] sometimes killed” (“les esprits infernaux et les Dieux immortels
tombent, s’estropient, se tuent quelquefois”).57 The blatant contrast between
the spirits or gods and the mortals who portray them ceases to be funny at
such a moment, and the full and tragic consequences of allegory are revealed.
The connection between the sensory representation and the metaphysical idea
it represents is so tenuous that it sometimes fails altogether, thus destroying
any semblance of meaning or understanding. In some ways, allegory—the
“demonic agency”—is tantamount to death.

The Letter on the Paris Opéra: The Real

Rousseau’s goal is to communicate meaning without recourse to the type of
detrimental figure or “mauvais supplément” exemplified by St. Preux’s own de-
scriptions. At the very least, Rousseau wants to do away with the obvious link or middle term between the two elements of the figure—the “this represents that” style of representation. Nonetheless, if his objective is to achieve a kind of transparency, he is not proposing some immaterial ideal. Rousseau's aim is to produce a “reasonable illusion,” by putting on stage a worthy subject (a man of noble character, for example), and establishing production values appropriate to this subject. He states these values clearly in his dictionary entry on “Opéra,” but they are also implicit throughout the satirical letter; and they are dramatized in the subtle but telling story of Laberius, which St. Preux advances as a counterpoint to the French practices he scorns. The example of Laberius gives us the opportunity to assess what Rousseau's realism might be.

Laberius was a popular playwright during the last days of the Roman republic, under Julius Caesar. As a writer of mime plays or satires, which frequently criticized the ruling powers, he offended Caesar with some of his attacks. Caesar's response, his challenge to Laberius to go on stage and show off his talents as an actor, was an insult and a humiliation, which changed the author's life. An explanatory note by the novel's fictional editor recounts Laberius's plight:

Forcé par le Tiran de monter sur le théâtre, il déplora son sort par des vers très touchants, et très capables d'allumer l’indignation de tout honnête homme contre ce César si vanté. Après avoir, dit-il, vécu soixante ans avec honneur, j’ai quitté ce matin mon foyer chevalier Romain, j’y rentrerai ce soir vil Histrion. Hélas, j’ai vécu trop d’un jour. O fortune! s’il falloit me deshonorer une fois, que ne m’y forçais-tu quand la jeunesse et la vigueur me laissaient au moins une figure agréable: mais maintenant quel triste objet viens-je exposer aux rebuts du peuple Romain? une voix éteinte, un corps infirme, un cadavre, un sepulcre animé, qui n’a plus rien de moi que mon nom. Le prologue entier qu’il récita dans cette occasion, l’injustice que lui fit César piqué de la noble liberté avec laquelle il vengeoit son honneur flétri, l’affront qu’il reçut au cirque, la bassesse qu’eut Ciceron d’insulter à son opprobre, la réponse fine et piquante que lui fit Labérius; tout cela nous a été conservé par [Macrobe], et c’est à mon gré le morceau le plus curieux et le plus intéressant de son fade recueil. (Rouss., OC, 2: 282)

Forced by the Tyrant to go on stage, [Laberius] deplored his fate in most touching verse, capable of provoking the indignation of any honorable man against this vaunted Caesar. After living sixty years with honor, he said, I left my home this morning a Roman knight only to return there this evening a vile Histrion. Alas! I lived one day too long. O fortune! If I had to be dishon-
ored one day, why did you not do it when youth and vigor at least left me with an agreeable figure? But now, what a sorry and repulsive object I put before the Roman people. A spent voice, a decrepit body, a corpse, a living sepulchre, which has nothing left of me but the name. The entire prologue that he recited on this occasion, the injustice that Caesar did him, annoyed by the noble freedom with which he avenged his tainted honor, the affront he received in the circus, the baseness of Cicero in jeering at his shame, and the shrewd and tart reply that Laberius made; all this has been preserved for us by [Macrobius]; and this is to me the most curious and interesting piece in [Macrobius's] insipid collection. (Rouss., CW, 6: 231; trans. modified)

The Laberius example teaches many stylistic and rhetorical lessons. First, the story restores the proper order of priorities, which is inverted by the Paris Opéra. Instead of creating “small things with a great effort,” it represents, in a simple and economical manner, a great man of history. The dramatic intensity of Laberius’s misfortunes, hinging on his plight as a man and a citizen of the endangered Roman republic, contrasts with the “false magnificence” of the French opera—and of the monarchy that sponsors it. Where the Opéra takes as its subject matter gods, devils, monsters, and other hybrid creatures, Laberius is on the side of the real. The pain he experiences, the lamentable condition of his body, and his unjust fate are altogether human and recognizable in the world.

Not only is Laberius a noble and dignified man, concerned with important matters like honor, freedom, and civic responsibility, but he goes on stage to represent himself and speak in his own name. He uses the opportunity to address his own fate. Laberius’s performance is remarkably self-referential. He speaks to the moment, as it were, and his words exemplify an ideal coincidence of speech and event. Unlike the performances of the Opéra, where the means of representation and the entities represented are disparate and disjointed, Laberius shows himself on stage in a uniquely transparent moment.

But a closer look at Laberius’s performance reveals the example’s complexity. Laberius’s speech captures the moment when he is suspended between two states, no longer simply the Roman knight and not yet fully the vile actor. When the performance is over, Laberius will no longer be able to take his seat with the other Roman gentlemen in the arena; however, while the performance lasts, the metamorphosis is incomplete. When Laberius says, “I left my home this morning a Roman knight, only to return there this evening a vile actor,” he allows us to understand his time on stage to be the transition between the two. The present moment of his speech is the turning point in this
process of substitution and degradation, a liminal moment juxtaposing past and future, life and death. What Laberius gives his audience, then, is a hybrid or an oxymoron—“an animated tomb” (“un sépulcre animé”).

Forced to make a public spectacle of his decimated body and feeling the shame of having his reputation reduced to his name alone, Laberius views himself as a kind of monster. He calls himself “a sorry and repulsive object” and laments his barely audible voice and his deformed body, saying they have “nothing left of me but the name.” His situation—the discrepancy between his name and his condition—returns us to the problematic relation between words and things that St. Preux has been discussing all along. In fact, when Laberius takes to the stage, he has nothing to show but the process of degradation—or figuration—itself. Laberius gives face and form to the problem of allegory (as the liminal or hybrid state between life and death, meaning and the void), which is at the very heart of St. Preux’s letter.

The story of Laberius’s misfortunes may be more directly related to the life-and-death issues that affect the audience, and may therefore come across as more “real” (having more feeling, warmth, and interest) than the activities of the gods and goddesses that the marvelous puts on stage. But the example of Laberius is not a complete repudiation of allegory, nor a rejection of the material reality or sensory image on which allegory relies. If Rousseau objects to the mechanics of rhetoric as inimical to the creation of illusion, he nonetheless retains and makes powerful “realistic” use of allegory, that rhetorical “machine.”

Without saying as much, Rousseau seems to come to the same conclusion as the author of the Encyclopédie article “Merveilleux,” who remarks: “Ce n’est donc plus dans la poésie moderne qu’il faut chercher le merveilleux, il y serait déplacé, et celui seul qu’on y peut admettre réduit aux passions humaines personifiées, est plutôt une allégorie qu’un merveilleux proprement dit” (“We should no longer look for the marvelous in modern poetry, for it would be out of place there, and the marvelous reduced to personified human passions, the only kind allowable today, is rather an allegory than the marvelous proper”). Rousseau’s modern aesthetic detaches allegory from other marvelous traits, such as the representation of supernatural creatures and obvious rhetorical devices, but does not do away with it altogether. Allegory continues to be the foundation for representation, now disguised as the real.
Realism and the Grotesque in Baudelaire’s Poems

St. Preux’s comic letter dramatizes the vacuousness and obscurantism of rococo allegory, yet it presents, in its margins and interstices, the model of another allegorical mode, in which presence and meaning are apparently restored. Rousseau views allegory as having one of two forms (either blatantly and comically improbable or serious and human), and he wants to replace the one with the other. However, when Baudelaire takes up the satirical letter and works it into at least four of his prose poems—“Le Vieux Saltimbanque,” “Le Crépuscule du soir,” “Une Mort héroïque,” and “La Corde”—he intermingles the two. Baudelaire learns from Rousseau and borrows from him, but he does not always adhere to his model. Baudelaire’s prose poems are hybrids, not only because they draw together poetry and prose, but also because they bring together the real and the grotesque in a radically new and unsettling way. Baudelaire turns the hybridity characteristic of the grotesque opera productions away from the monsters they represent and the excessive machinery they use and puts it to work in the rhetoric of his poems.

This is immediately obvious in “Le Vieux Saltimbanque” (“The Old Acrobat”), which sets the story of a poor, decrepit acrobat against the backdrop of a popular fair, chock-full of activity and fun. The presence of “danseuses, belles comme des fées,” “un escamoteur éblouissant comme un dieu,” and “les Her- cules, fiers de l’énormité de leurs membres” puts the fair squarely on the side of the grotesque, with its mythological and magical subjects;62 and in fact, the poem takes its setting from St. Preux’s comparison of the Opéra and “la foire”: “je suis persuadé qu’on applaudit les cris d’une Actrice à l’Opéra comme les tours de force d’un bâteleur à la foire” (“I am persuaded that they applaud an Actress’s cries at the Opéra as they do an acrobat’s feats at the fair”).63 Baudelaire’s lively description of the fair derives much of its imagery and vivacity from St. Preux’s physical description of the opera stage. St. Preux’s long enumeration of odd devices used in the representation of both natural scenes and mythological characters, combined with the juxtaposition of opposites: “les Dieux immortels . . . se tuent quelquefois” (“the immortal Gods . . . sometimes are killed”); ironic word choice: “ce magnifique char” (“this magnificent chariot”), “cette agréable musique” (“this agreeable music”); silly analogies: “le Ciel est représenté par certaines guenilles . . . suspendues à des bâtons ou à des cordes, comme l’étendage d’une blanchisseuse” (“the Sky is represented by certain . . . tatters, suspended on sticks or ropes, like a washerwoman’s clothesline”); and outrageous puns: “chacune de ces figures [dragons, lézards, croco-
diles, et crapauds] est animée par un lourdaud de Savoyard qui n’a pas l’esprit de faire la bête” (“each of these figures [dragons, lizards, crocodiles, and toads] is animated by a dumb Savoyard, who hasn’t enough presence of mind to horse around”) make St. Preux’s description a verbal playground. (Perhaps we need look no further for reasons why Baudelaire found it so appealing!)

The description is so outrageous that it sets the tone for the verbal extravagance and thematic gaiety of Baudelaire’s fair, but it also provides images and expressions that Baudelaire uses almost verbatim to represent the excitement and the tragedy that unfold in that place. The “mélange de cris, de détonations de cuivre et d’explosions de fusées” (“blend of shouts, booms of brass, and explosions of rockets”) that is the hallmark of the fair scene in the poem recalls the “pétard au bout d’une fusée” (“firecracker at the end of a squib”) that stands in for lightning at the opera and mixes with the “cris affreux” (“awful whines”) of the opera singers themselves. But the “deux ou trois chandelles puantes et mal mouchées” (“two or three stinking and ill-trimmed tallow candles”) that St. Preux describes, whose smoke covers the “divinity” like incense as he swings above the stage, come to accent the tragic rather than the comic elements of Baudelaire’s fair. The candles no longer shine on the movements of an actor crudely representing a god; instead, they illuminate the spent acrobat and his distress:

Je vis un pauvre saltimbanque, voûté, caduc, décrépit, une ruine d’homme, adossé contre un des poteaux de sa cahute; une cahute plus misérable que celle du sauvage le plus abruti; et dont deux bouts de chandelles, coulants et fumants, éclairaient trop bien encore la détresse.

In place of a satirical piece making sport of the lyric theater, Baudelaire has written a tragedy set off against a background of lighthearted pleasure. His text juxtaposes the comic and the tragic, uniting them by placing them in a single theatrical setting and evoking the idea of change (or loss) over time: the ruined acrobat has “survived” the generation he used to amuse; he “no longer” attracts the forgetful world. These modifications relate back to the Laberius story, where time (the events of one day) also makes the difference between a robust
life and a kind of death. Baudelaire’s poem takes Rousseau’s anecdote from the margins (in the footnotes of St. Preux’s letter) to the center of the text. By locating the “realistic” description of the impoverished actor’s desperate plight within the extravagant setting of the fair, the poem directly raises the question of the relation between the grotesque and the real that underlies Rousseau’s work.

But this question implies another; for before we can determine the relation between the two styles, we should be sure that we know which is which. If the grotesque is the name for a certain subject matter—supernatural gods, devils, monsters and fairies, for example, then the old acrobat is on the side of the real. His pain and his dire circumstances tie him to the world; it’s the fair that represents a much-needed respite from this all-too-difficult reality: “un armistice conclu avec les puissances malfaisantes de la vie, un répit dans la contention et la lutte universelles” (“an armistice contracted with life’s malevolent forces, a respite from universal disputes and struggles”). But if, on the other hand, the grotesque names the disproportion of means to ends, or the imbalance between the sign and what it designates, then doubt is shed on the realism of the old man’s story. While the old “saltimbanque” is described in sober terms befitting his unhappy state, he himself is an empty sign. Only the narrator’s retrospective interpretation of the acrobat as a “figure of the old poet” eventually fills this void. The worn-out acrobat raises important questions about the nature of the grotesque and whether (or how) it differs from the real. The Baudelaire poems that borrow from Rousseau’s letter all return to these issues.

The same dichotomous structure that “Le Vieux Saltimbanque” borrows from Rousseau is featured again in the early prose poem “Le Crépuscule du soir” (“Twilight”), which Baudelaire revised substantially in 1862. Evening (meaning both the twilight of life and the end of the day in this poem) is the moment that precipitates important changes of mood and behavior in men. The poem opens quietly. But the peaceful thoughts of tired laborers coming home for the evening are suddenly interrupted by the jarring cacophony that descends around them from the insane asylum above the city. “Cette sinistre ululation,” “cette imitation des harmonies de l’enfer,” “un grand hurlement, composé d’une foule de cris discordants, que l’espace transforme en une lugubre harmonie” (“This ominous ululation,” “this imitation of hell’s harmonies,” “a great howling, composed of a multitude of discordant shouts . . . transformed by the space into a dismal harmony”) sets the tone for the featured stories of two madmen whose illness is aggravated by the setting sun, as if dusk were for them “un signal de sabbat” (“a sign of witches’ sabbath”).
These analogies between madmen's cries and music at its worst, together with the references to “l’enfer” (“hell”) and “[le] sabbat” (“[the] witches’ sabbath”), tie the poem’s theatrical frame (¶¶ 1–3, added in 1862) to St. Preux’s assessment of the awful music at the Opéra:

But you could have no idea of the awful whines, the long howls with which the theater reverberates during the performance. The Actresses are seen almost in convulsions, violently forcing these yelpings from their lungs, their fists clutched against their breasts, head thrown back, face inflamed, veins bulging, stomach throbbing; . . . their efforts cause as much suffering to those who are watching them as their singing does to those who are listening, and even more inconceivable is the fact that these howlings are almost the only thing the audience applauds. . . . Picture the Muses, the Graces, Cupids, Venus herself expressing themselves with such refinement, and imagine the effect! Where the devils are concerned, it is good enough, something infernal about this music is not unsuited to them. And so feats of magic, evocations of spirits, and all the rites of Sabbath are always the things most admired at the French Opéra. (Rouss., CW, 6: 233; my emphasis)

St. Preux rails against the disparity between actor and role and calls on us to imagine how awful it is when allegorical figures such as Grace, Love, or Beauty (Venus) are represented by ham-fisted performers. The singers make no attempt to hide their excruciating efforts and the result is a painful war between the real and the ideal. The singers’ contortions so disfigure the idea they are meant to incarnate as to make the representation monstrous—hardly less grotesque than the excited behavior of the hospice’s inhabitants. If Baudelaire has
 transformed the context of Rousseau’s description, in so doing, he has rendered the “madness” of Rousseau’s artistic nightmare as literal lunacy.

However, in the last three paragraphs of the poem (¶¶ 7‒9, also added in 1862), Baudelaire’s narrator sets himself apart from this insanity. Night for him is not “un signal de sabbat,” but “le signal d’une fête intérieure” (“[the] signal of an inward celebration”) heralding the arrival of “la déesse Liberté.” The narrator views twilight as a deliverance, and he describes it in the most positive terms. The poem opposes the frenzy of madness to internal peace, both brought about by the coming of night. Yet, different as the beginning and ending of the poem may be, they both take their cue from the “grotesque” opera. The last paragraphs of the poem describe something like a fair—St. Preux’s metaphor for the lyric stage. The onset of night is a “fête,” involving dancers and at least one goddess (“the goddess Liberty”) and marked by fireworks whose name in French, feu d’artifice, emphasizes the artifice involved. Furthermore, the poem’s ending borrows verbally from St. Preux’s description of the Opéra. The “explosion des lanternes,” the “feu d’artifice,” the “lourdes draperies qu’une main invisible attire” (“heavy draperies drawn by an invisible hand”) and the “robes étranges de danseuses, où une gaze transparente et sombre laisse entrevoir les splendeurs amorties d’une jupe éclatante, comme sous le noir présent transperce le délicieux passé” (“strange dancing dresses, whose transparent and dark gauze reveals a glimpse of the muted splendors of a brilliant skirt”) all refer to details of the operatic staging, with its “lanternes,” its “pincées de poix-résine qu’on projette sur un flambeau” (“pinch[es] of rosin tossed into a flame”), and especially its backdrop, “un grand rideau . . . presque toujours percé ou déchiré, [qui] représente des gouffres dans la terre ou des trous dans le ciel, selon la perspective” (“a large curtain . . . almost always pierced or torn, which represents chasms in the earth or holes in the Sky, according to the perspective”). But if Baudelaire has captured St. Preux’s light-hearted mood, he appears to use it in the service of a far different aesthetic; for in place of a satirical critique, he proclaims the positive benefits of this nightly performance. The end of the poem is a celebration of the “fires of fantasy” (“ces feux de la fantaisie”) that run directly counter to the “realist” subject matter and production values propounded by Rousseau.

Like “Le Vieux Saltimbanque,” with its light and dark moods, “Le Crépuscule du soir” is structured around a contrast between a positive reaction to twilight and a lugubrious one; and both the poem’s literally mad and more reassuring aspects draw on the hyperbolic language of St. Preux’s satire. Illustrating
the narrator’s observation that “la même cause [peut] engendrer deux effets contraires” (“the same cause [can] beget two opposite effects”), the poem suggests that the grotesque is everywhere, usurping any semblance of the real. If “Le Vieux Saltimbanque” posits a link between the grotesque and the real, “Le Crépuscule du soir” calls into question the very distinction between the two terms. It raises the possibility that the grotesque may not be a style at all, but a principle or structure capable of masquerading in different stylistic guises. In “Le Crépuscule du soir,” Baudelaire prepares us to understand allegory as a “machine” capable of the indiscriminate generation of serene or mad effects. Baudelaire’s idea of allegory runs counter to Rousseau’s, while nonetheless building on Rousseau’s work. Where Rousseau opposes an ideal (“realistic” and therefore meaningful) form of allegory to the mechanical hijinks of the rococo, Baudelaire sees no fundamental difference between the two.

This discrepancy between the two authors’ aesthetic theories is the almost explicit focus of “Une Mort héroïque” (“A Heroic Death”). Baudelaire seems to signal his borrowing from Rousseau (and Rousseau’s support of Italian music in the Querelle des Bouffons) by giving the “bouffon” in the poem an Italianate name—Fancioulle. In fact, it is possible to read Fancioulle as another caricature of Rousseau, and the first two paragraphs of the poem as a commentary on Rousseau’s participation in the operatic quarrel, as well as on his talents as a comic author (or “histrion”), who mistakes his vocation and becomes “fattely” interested in serious subjects like “la patrie” (the fatherland) and “la liberté.” But, most important, through its central figure, the poem foregrounds Rousseau’s artistic ideal, a performance that promotes illusion and engages the spectator’s emotions by concealing the mechanics that make it work. Fancioulle incarnates this Rousseauist ideal when he successfully hides “l’art, l’effort, la volonté” (the “art, effort, will”) that undergird his role. His performance is the opposite of the Opéra’s elaborate staging, which produces “small things with a great effort.”

If Fancioulle is in some ways Rousseau’s double, he also shares many traits with Rousseau’s Laberius, the mimus (writer of mime plays) who offended Caesar with his satire and was summoned to perform before the ruler as a result. Fancioulle, too, is a mime (a silent actor) accused of plotting to overthrow the despotic government under which he lives, and he is also forced by the prince to go on stage. Fancioulle’s life is on the line and, like Laberius, he might be considered “un cadavre, un sépulcre animé” when he performs “at the edge of the tomb” (“au bord de la tombe”) and succeeds in “animating” his role: “[il] arrivait à être . . . ce que les meilleures statues de l’antiquité, mirac-
uleusement animées . . . seraient relativement à l'idée générale et confuse de beauté” (“[he] succeed[ed] in being . . . what the best statues of antiquity, if miraculously animated, . . . might become relative to the general and vague idea of beauty”). Like Laberius, Fanciolle walks the impossible line between life and death. He is captivating because he projects the image of grace and immortality and makes the audience forget his distress. Finally, Fanciolle and Laberius share a similar fate: their powerful performances cause the despots’ jealous rage and both are put down for their success. Laberius loses Caesar’s patronage and Fanciolle dies, having fallen from the prince’s “favor.”

Fanciolle may be the embodiment of Rousseau’s ideal, an allegory that hides its rhetorical workings and veils the terrifying emptiness that inhabits it. But ultimately this ideal is undone, and inescapable reality (Fanciolle’s corpse/death) is exposed. Fanciolle is counterbalanced in the poem by the despot who presides over the mime’s performance. Rousseau’s aesthetic ideal—“une parfaite idéalisation, qu’il était impossible de ne pas supposer vivante, possible, réelle” (“a perfect idealization, which it was impossible not to accept as living, possible, real”), “un chef-d’œuvre d’art vivant” (“a masterpiece of living art”)—is set off against, and finally destroyed by, the prince’s grotesque excesses. The extraordinary equilibrium of ideal and real is upset by the discordant sound of a whistle, the sign of disapproval, which interrupts the illusion, like the cacophonous music or obtrusive mechanical devices at the Opéra. The prince, whose face seems to reveal the excessive emotions that motivate this act—“une pâleur nouvelle s’ajoutait sans cesse à sa pâleur habituelle, comme la neige s’ajoute à la neige. Ses lèvres se resserraient de plus en plus” (“a new pallor continuously increased his usual pallor, like snow added to snow. His lips tightened more and more”)—applauds “conspicuously” (“ostensiblement”), while the fires of jealousy and rancor (perhaps) burn within. The despot’s inscrutability, the difference between his apparent enthusiasm and the fatal act he apparently causes, reintroduces the question of meaning—the imbalance between appearance and essence—which the mime’s performance has temporarily obscured. A “monster” whose intentions will forever remain unknown, the prince partakes fully of the grotesque.

Refusing to respect the difference that Rousseau wants to enforce between realism and its grotesque double, Baudelaire interweaves a “realist” allegory with the grotesque it hopes to “overthrow” and shows the impossibility of this artistic insurrection. Indeed, by depicting the conspiring mime and the despotic prince in similar terms, he underscores the fundamental similarity between the two. Reading Rousseau against himself, Baudelaire brings out, in
a way Rousseau would have abhorred, the grotesqueness of all allegory. “Une Mort héroïque,” Baudelaire’s own fatal whistle, makes clear the vulnerability of Rousseau’s ideal.

Naturalizing Allegory: “La Corde”

The poems examined so far, which all borrow rather obviously from Rousseau’s satirical letter, either foreground the grotesque as a prominent feature alongside the “real” or underscore the enduring power of the grotesque to unveil allegory’s truth. But “La Corde” (“The Rope”) stands apart from this group. Unlike the others, none of this poem’s characters bears any resemblance to Laberius, and its language and plot owe no obvious debt to Rousseau’s delineation of the grotesque. On the contrary, “La Corde” demonstrates how the grotesque can be naturalized and made to disappear. Undoubtedly one of the most instructive of Baudelaire’s dialogues with Rousseau, “La Corde” simultaneously produces the grotesque and hides it, in a feat of rhetorical “magic.”

Based on an actual event (the suicide of Manet’s young model Alexandre) and written in a manner that Robert Kopp terms “precise and cold,” the poem seems thoroughly steeped in the real. Even the poem’s dedication, “A Edouard Manet,” suggests the poet’s desire to situate his work in the world. Yet this “cruel story,” with its long quotation of the artist and its almost clinical details, takes its point of departure, too, from the fanciful imagery of St. Preux’s satire. Nonetheless, in keeping with its emphasis on the real, “La Corde” eschews the overtly theatrical frame that ties the other Baudelaire poems thematically to Rousseau’s work. Instead, the poem draws out the theme of illusion in art from the example of the painter’s young model.

The artist uses the boy as a support for his visual allegories. He paints the child frequently, depicting him variously as a mythological Cupid, a bohemian, and an angel carrying the Crown of Thorns and the Nails of the Passion. However, when the youngster commits suicide by hanging himself on a rope (“une corde”) from a very real nail, he is reduced to a rigid body and is presumably incapable of producing any further illusions. The painter describes in gruesome detail the consequences of the young boy’s act. First, the artist has to cut the body down and prepare it, finding the rope in the swollen flesh and snipping it away:

Il était déjà fort roide, et j’avais une répugnance inexplicable à le faire brusquement tomber sur le sol. Il fallait le soutenir tout entier avec un bras,
et, avec la main de l’autre bras, couper la corde. Mais cela fait, tout n’était pas fini; le petit monstre s’était servi d’une ficelle fort mince qui était entrée profondément dans les chairs, et il fallait maintenant, avec de minces ciseaux, chercher la corde entre les deux bourrelets de l’enflure, pour lui dégager le cou.

He was already quite stiff, and I was inexplicably reluctant to let him drop abruptly to the ground. I had to support his whole body with one arm, and, with the hand of the other arm, cut the rope. But that being done, everything was not finished. The little monster had used very fine twine, which had entered deeply into the flesh, and in order to release it from the neck, with fine scissors, I now had to locate the rope between the two folds of the swelling. (Baudelaire, *Parisian Prowler*, trans. Kaplan, 78; trans. modified)

In this account, what appears to be just a detail—the rope used in the suicide—is already mentioned twice; but in the second half of the poem, “la corde” becomes the focus of the narrative. The rope turns into a semi-religious relic, an object of superstition and perverse desire, not unlike the “Nails of Christ’s Passion” represented in the painter’s art.

The little boy’s mother contacts the painter, hoping to see her son’s body. Ushered into the room where the corpse is laid out, however, she scarcely glances at the youngster and, instead, pointedly asks for the cord on which his body hung. The startled artist interprets the request as a sign of the mother’s despair and a displacement of maternal tenderness. Only when he receives letters asking for more pieces of the rope does he grasp the woman’s real motivation: she has profited from her son’s suicide by selling the cord as an object of veneration, an awful good luck charm.

Manet passes along this anecdote to the narrator as an illustration of how he was taken in by the most natural illusion—“singulièrement mystifié par l’illusion la plus naturelle” (“remarkably duped by the most natural illusion”)—his belief in maternal love. And, in fact, the story is about the mystification of natural illusion, although it is the reader who is deceived. When the narrator takes up the artist’s story, supposedly unchanged, it becomes a demonstration of the mystification of rhetoric. “La Corde” achieves Rousseau’s ideal of realistic illusion, by paradoxically putting into play a rather obvious device. Although it boldly displays its mechanics, the poem successfully masks its grotesqueness by taking up an allegory that is, in one sense, “real.”

Although the reference to Rousseau’s work is far more subtle here than in the other poems that borrow from it, “La Corde” takes its cue from St. Preux’s
repeated emphasis on the instrumental ropes used to hang various machines at the Opéra:

Le Ciel est représenté par certaines guenilles bleuâtres, suspendues à des bâtons ou à des cordes. . . . Les chars des Dieux et des Déesses sont composés de quatre solives encadrées et suspendues à une grosse corde. . . .

Quand [les Démons] doivent s’élever dans les airs, on leur substitue adroitement de petits Démons de toile brune empaillée, ou quelquefois de vrais ramoneurs, qui branlent en l’air suspendus à des cordes. . . . Mais ce qu’il y a de réellement tragique, c’est quand les cordes sont mal conduites ou viennent à rompre; car alors les esprits infernaux et les Dieux immortels tombent, s’estropient, se tuent quelquefois. (Rouss., OC, 2: 283–84; my emphasis)

The Sky is represented by certain bluish tatters, suspended on sticks or ropes. . . . The chariots of the Gods and Goddesses are composed of four beams in a frame and suspended by a heavy rope. . . .

When [the Demons] are to rise into the air, little Demons of stuffed brown canvas are skilfully substituted for them, or sometimes real chimney sweeps who sway in the air suspended on ropes. . . . But the really tragic thing is when the ropes are badly maneuvered or happen to break; for then the infernal spirits and immortal Gods fall, are maimed, sometimes killed. (Rouss., CW, 6: 232; my emphasis)

The ropes at the Opéra, which dangle down from the “sky” and lift various “deities” up, are so obvious that they intrude on the illusion they were supposed to produce. Not only do the ropes allow the spectators to see the crude machinery that makes the performance work, but like the rope with which Manet’s model hanged himself, they sometimes kill the children (the ramoneurs, or chimney sweeps) clinging to them. When this happens, the brutal reality of the youngsters’ death puts an end to the idea of immortality they were attempting to portray. Furthermore, their death shows how little bearing the immortal lives of the gods have on the existence of the human beings who act in or attend the performance. Death defies any hope of illusion, in every sense.

Baudelaire has taken this horrific example of the dead child and the broken rope and written it out, with all its implications, in his poem. Rousseau’s story is an allegory about the tenuous link between grotesque figures and the ideas they represent, as well as their lack of significance for the real world. Baudelaire’s anecdote leaves Rousseau’s meaning intact. His story, too, is about the
broken connection between the figural and the real, the artist’s idea and the model who embodies it—both in art and in life. As a model for the angel bearing the emblems of Christ’s death, the boy may take part in the allegorical representation of the Passion, but there is nothing immortal about him. Furthermore, his love of drink and his tendency to petty thievery do not put him in the company of life’s “angels.” Indeed, the boy confounds the painter, who has given the youngster a better life and therefore cannot comprehend his irrational behavior and his sadness. The youngster does not fit the artist’s expectations. Between the artist and the child, as between the model and the art, there is a gulf. Art and the artist both seem to neglect the real. As J. A. Hiddeleston notes:

The ultimate moral message [of “La Corde”] appears to be that art, whether the painter’s or the poet’s, is unable to come to grips with reality, which it sidesteps or fails to recognize. Art is a lie, a simulacrum, a comedy, which appeals only to the eye of the spectator or ear of the reader without involving any genuine emotion. . . . It appears, then, that in this deceptively straightforward piece Baudelaire is expressing his despair before what Proust called . . . the illusory magic of literature, and is asking the anguished question: what is the value of art if, in veiling the terrors of the abyss, it removes from men’s eyes the contemplation of real suffering?75

The boy’s demise is merely a pretext for Baudelaire’s poem, just as the boy, while alive, was an object to be transformed by Manet’s art. The child himself is of no consequence. Baudelaire apparently seconds Rousseau’s complaint about the inability of grotesque art, at least, to arouse passion and foster identification with others.

But the poem does not stop with the child’s death. Whereas, in Manet’s story, the painter’s work is disrupted by his model’s suicide, Baudelaire’s poem is propelled forward by this event. The instrument of the boy’s death, the rope, becomes the means to reconnect the literal (body of the boy) to the divinity he comes to represent (Christ). People who have heard of the child’s suicide want to buy pieces of the rope with which he hanged himself, as if it were an instrument of Christ’s passion. If in life the boy was asked to play the part of various mythological figures or gods, in death his body becomes even more divine. The “real” little boy is never more thoroughly transfigured than when he is dead.

“La Corde” is a complex reaction to Rousseau’s artistic and moral advice. On the one hand, Baudelaire flies in the face of Rousseau’s aesthetic theory by
flaunting rather than hiding the grotesque “mechanical” rope that Rousseau finds excessive, meaningless, and intrusive in the Opéra’s spectacle. On the other hand, by inserting it in the intimate context of the child’s act, in which it is appropriate and tragically meaningful, Baudelaire reclaims the obvious device as a subtle, even understated element of the poem’s realism. But Baudelaire then goes one step further: In the story of the mother and the neighbors who want pieces of the rope as quasi-religious objects, he shows how allegory functions as a real part of the everyday world. When they take the instrument of the boy’s suicide as a simulacrum of the instruments of Christ’s passion, or as an object of superstitious veneration, the mother and her ilk treat allegory as a worthy and integral part of their lives. The rope has become a fetish, but for that very reason, it has special meaning for them. Allegory is the prized possession of true believers.

By taking up allegory in an already allegorical context (by situating it first in the studio where making allegories is the artist’s daily occupation, and then by establishing the connection between Christ’s passion and popular superstition), Baudelaire naturalizes the allegory and makes it disappear. In this way, he follows the advice of the author of the *Encyclopédie* article “Merveilleux,” who argues that

la poésie est un art d’illusion qui nous présente des choses imaginées comme réelles . . . [et] l’illusion ne peut être complète qu’autant que la poésie se renferme dans la créance commune et dans les opinions nationales: c’est ce qu’Homere a pensé; c’est pour cela qu’il a tiré du fond de la créance et des opinions répandues chez les Grecs, tout le merveilleux, tout le surnaturel, toutes les machines de ses poèmes.

poetry is an art of illusion that presents imagined things as real . . . [and] the illusion can only be complete in so far as poetry involves itself with a common set of beliefs and national opinions: that is what Homer thought; that is why he drew from the store of widespread beliefs and opinions among the Greeks, all the marvelous, all the supernatural, all the machines of his poems.76

Baudelaire takes advantage of Rousseau’s “rope,” transforming it from a blatant machine into a realist detail, and then into a “realist” allegory. By assimilating the mechanical to the real and thus naturalizing it, Baudelaire accomplishes precisely what Rousseau wished to achieve; he obscures the poem’s rhetorical mechanism—by hiding it in plain sight.77
Machines, Monsters, and Men

This process does not completely resolve the questions surrounding the real and the grotesque, however. If the promise of realism is to make us forget that it’s the product of illusion, “La Corde” both does and doesn’t keep this promise. By telling us the story of how the mundane cord became a religious artifact and an object of savvy marketing, the poem foregrounds the very transformative processes and seductive techniques that make it work. The poem hovers on the cusp between literal and figural meaning, between real things and their allegorical functions. Of course, by “purport[ing] to illustrate mother love and moraliz[ing] on that theme,”78 the poem also diverts our attention away from its own rhetorical doings. By setting us up to believe that illusion has been dispelled and “le fait réel” is before us (the first paragraph explicitly philosophizes about the “bizarre sentiment” we experience when this happens), the poem urges us to buy into its own marketing techniques. It wants to trick us into forgetting the very hybrid status that it flaunts.

Baudelaire’s poem is not simple, as Hiddleston remarks. Since it demonstrates allegory’s functions in art, as well as in life, it cannot be read as simply a commentary on the artist’s elitist neglect of the real world. Insofar as Baudelaire uses the rope first as a concrete, meaningful, and appropriate sign, and then shows how it becomes a marketable commodity, he does not overlook the real. On the contrary, he shows precisely that allegory is at home everywhere and is not limited to the domain of art. Although the secondary narrator, Manet, does not condone the crass use that the boy’s mother makes of the rope, it is not clear whether his reaction predicts Baudelaire’s own. Manet is aghast that commercialism stands in for mother love (or that the rope replaces the boy in the mother’s interest), but Baudelaire’s point, I think, is different. He is fascinated, I would submit, with the process by which allegory, arising out of death or loss, generates a supposedly meaningful and therefore marketable sign.

Baudelaire’s ethics are not easy to discern. “La Corde” implies that all allegories, even Christian allegories like the Passion, amount to superstitions; they are “mere games, amusements, totally devoid of seriousness, for all their power to persuade and move.”79 But allegories are everywhere, and they may even function to relieve the distress and misery of the real world. Should the mother not try to improve her lot by making money from her trade in allegorical signs? Should people not harbor the illusion that a rope can ward off fate? “La Corde” may underscore the superficiality or excesses of allegory, but it does not necessarily condemn them. The poem seems to confirm what “Le Vieux Saltimbanque” presents so overtly: that allegory is a valid escape from
the misery and death that characterize the real. Converting “la corde” from a suicidal instrument into a source of fortune and good luck, allegory appeals to humanity’s real, basic needs. Whereas Rousseau pronounces a moral and aesthetic indictment of the grotesque, with its spectacular effects and comic machinery, Baudelaire, I believe, finds welcome relief or solace in the escape it provides. In any case, Baudelaire makes us aware that allegory itself (whether comic or tragic) is inescapable.