Grotesque Figures
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Reading Rousseau’s writings on opera, Baudelaire came into contact with a theory and practice of allegory that inspired his own. Rousseau’s aesthetic musings gave Baudelaire not only an understanding of the mechanical operation and narrative effects of allegory, but a sense of its comic potential as well. Yet, as I have already begun to show, Rousseau’s work on opera was more than a literal critique of the rococo’s favorite themes and style. In taking aim at French music and particularly the Paris Opéra, Rousseau and his associates were also contesting the absolute monarchy that underwrote the Opéra and perpetuated, through the Opéra’s extravagant productions, an image of itself as a lavish and frivolous regime. Rousseau’s attack on the Opéra had social and political implications; it represented a strategy for challenging the monarchy without incurring censorship. Given Baudelaire’s own personal experience with the repressive practices of the Second Empire, he must have found Rousseau’s oppositional stance intriguing. Evidence in the prose poems shows that the poet not only borrowed from the letter on the Paris Opéra in Rousseau’s novel Julie but also carefully analyzed Rousseau’s dictionary article “Opéra” and rewrote it for his own ends.

Although Baudelaire’s prose poems make occasional reference to despotism, conspiracy, usurpation, fratricide, and warfare, they have generally been deemed apolitical. Yet, as the preceding analysis of the poems as topical cartoons suggests, the apparent ahistoricity of Baudelaire’s poetry is deceptive. Baudelaire’s prose poems, like the duplicitous modern texts they are, mobilize behind their mildly provocative surface narratives “a call for a more subversive
“Les Yeux des pauvres”

“Les Yeux des pauvres” (“The Eyes of the Poor”) is one of several prose poems in which critics have seen a political intention. As its title suggests, it features a poor family depicted in some detail and therefore exemplifies, in Jonathan Monroe’s words, “the turn taken by the Petits Poèmes en Prose toward more concretely and explicitly social motifs.” Its explicit theme—love—extends beyond the solipsistic confines of the couple and includes the altruistic desire to draw other people into a loving family. Put another way, the poem is about the possibility of bringing individuals together into a collective whole. As we shall see, “Les Yeux” contemplates a project not unlike Rousseau’s dream of creating a new, more inclusive society through the intermediary of the theater. Baudelaire’s poem tells the story of a love that thrives on communication, engendering, in turn, the hope that a whole society might be based on such exchange.

However, “Les Yeux” is not an optimistic poem. The analogy between the two ideals (love and a loving society) is predicated on the simple assumption that people have something in common. The two lovers in the poem make the usual promise that all their thoughts will be held in common and that their two souls will be as one. Since this is a dream “rêvé par tous les hommes [mais] réalisé par aucun” (“dreamed by all men [but] realized by none”), however, finding the common ground on which to base the potential family of man...
turns out to be an impossible challenge. The love affair the poem depicts turns sour; and through its narrative of this failure, the poem evokes the corruption of the utopian belief in the universal family frequently associated in the nineteenth century with Rousseau.

However, the meaning of the poem goes well beyond its overt thematic content. The love theme also has implications for the reader, inasmuch as the love relationship (the possibility of a certain kind of communication) is also a figure for reading. The poem is a narrative in the past framed by a direct address in the present to an ambiguous “vous,” who is simultaneously the reader and the female lover. By collapsing the two addressees into a single vocative, the frame succinctly sets up a parallel between the interpersonal relationships in the text and the structure of reading and thus makes clear the larger stakes of the poem. Even beyond the anecdotal love story and its extended social meaning, there is a lesson here about how to read. Perhaps the most political message of the poem is not what it has to say about the relations between social classes, but what it has to say about reading class subversively.

In fact, we might say that reading is underscored in the poem. When the couple sit down outside a dazzlingly decorated café, on the corner of one of the new Paris boulevards, the narrator, obviously a man of means who can afford to stop here, encounters the family in rags, which absorbs his attention. The narrator looks into the poor family’s eyes, while they look beyond him into the café. This looking leads to reading, as the narrator plumbs the family’s eyes and translates their unspoken thoughts into words. Some current of emotion passes into him and a community of sorts is established. But the moment doesn’t last. The narrator begins to feel ashamed about the signs of excess consumption at his own table, the glasses and carafes “larger than our thirst.” In search of reassurance, he turns to look at his lover, expecting to read his own thoughts in her eyes (“Je tournais mes regards vers les vôtres, cher amour, pour y lire ma pensée”). Searching for the commonly held idea he hoped to find there, he recognizes the signs of capriciousness and “lunacy” instead. The woman is indifferent. She wants nothing more than to have the “maître du café” remove the poor family from the premises. Comparing their eyes to carriage-house doors, she makes it clear that she wants to send them away from her “maison [house or establishment]” and back to the servants’ quarters where they belong. Whereas the narrator hoped to extend his almost conjugal bliss by including the poor in their family, the woman will have none of it. She reinforces the class differences that make the idea of a family of man impractical.
The shock of her indifference and the difference it creates between the lovers registers in the frame and, ultimately, throughout the poem. The narrator has learned some hard lessons about the incommunicability of thoughts and about the unlikelihood of creating a workable utopian community, which he sums up in the final lines of his story: “Tant il est difficile de s’entendre . . . et tant la pensée est incommunicable, même entre gens qui s’aîment!” (“How difficult it is to understand one another . . . and how uncommunicable thought is, even among people who love each other!”). Presumably it is this devastating discovery in the past that causes the narrator to lash out in the present at his addressee(s), “Ah! vous voulez savoir pourquoi je vous hais aujourd’hui” (“Ah, you want to know why I hate you today”). The last sentence of the poem brings us up to the present moment, when “vous,” the lover/reader, has become “le plus bel exemple de l’imperméabilité féminine qui se puisse rencontrer” (“the most beautiful example of feminine impermeability anyone can meet”). Love, the figure of direct and transparent communication, has given way to hatred, which destroys society—and figures the difficulty of reading. But in the very same move, which appears to write off communication and render community impossible, the narrator sets up a new category, “impermeability,” to replace the hackneyed and useless categories of “love” and “family.” Including the reader in this new class, the narrator ups the stakes for us personally. Even as he excoriates us, he seems to warn us about the importance of choosing our terms, and reading them well.

*The Politics and Rhetoric of “Opéra”*

The idea that Baudelaire’s political poem could be related to an entry on the opera from an eighteenth-century music dictionary seems almost preposterous. At its most literal, Rousseau’s article “Opéra” is an essay about musical drama. But read allegorically, or outside the frame of the *Dictionnaire de musique*, as the autonomous essay Rousseau also intended it to be,8 “Opéra” is not just about the lyric theater, but about texts—the written “opus” or “opera” of an author. In this sense, “Opéra” is a rhetorical treatise with broad aesthetic and political ramifications.9 Taking its place alongside the other heuristic fictions created by Rousseau (the fictional state of nature and the hypothetical origins of language), it writes out its rhetorical concerns as an aesthetic history, which parallels the creation and evolution of society from the first encounter of primitive men, to the golden age of perfect social harmony, and culminates in the current degraded state of civil society. Read alongside the *Essay on the*
Origin of Language, the article provides us with a fairly comprehensive picture of the aesthetic and political connotations of the opera, according to Rousseau.

Opera is meant to participate in the creation of a new man for the republic Rousseau imagines. The right kind of performance should contribute to establishing a bond of sympathy and identification with others that will, in turn, foster a more cohesive and egalitarian society. Opera will thus generate a new citizen-spectator, on whom a new social and political order may be predicated. We already recognize some of the ideas hinted at, albeit in a very different context, in Baudelaire’s poem. But the influence on “Les Yeux des pauvres” of Rousseau’s article is not limited to its political undercurrents. For the essay furnishes most of the images and rhetorical strategies, the dramatic framework, and the tripartite structure of Baudelaire’s poem as well.

The Rousseau article opens with a definition that furnishes the key terms: opera is a representation of passion (or “action passionnée”) that combines poetry, music, and visual art in such a way as to excite the spectator’s interest and foster illusion:

Spectacle dramatique et lyrique où l’on s’efforce de réunir tous les charmes des beaux Arts, dans la représentation d’une action passionnée, pour exciter, à l’aide des sensations agréables, l’intérêt et l’illusion.

Les parties constitutives d’un Opera sont, le Poëme, la Musique, et la Décoration. Par la Poésie on parle à l’esprit, par la Musique à l’oreille, par la Peinture aux yeux; et le tout doit se réunir pour émouvoir le coeur et y porter à la fois la même impression par divers organes. (Rouss., OC, 5: 948)

A Dramatic and lyric Spectacle in which one endeavors to bring together all the charms of the fine Arts in the representation of a passionate action in order to arouse interest and illusion with the help of pleasant sensations.

The constituent parts of an Opera are: the Poem, the Music, and the Decoration. Through the Poetry one speaks to the mind, through the Music to the ear, through the Painting to the eyes, and the whole should bring them together in order to move the heart and convey to it the same impression simultaneously by the various organs. (Rouss., CW, 7: 447–48)

If the immediate goal of the opera is to speak to the heart, its unspoken aim, which we can deduce not only from the article but from other Rousseau texts about language and the theater, is the creation of a community or nation bound by like feelings. As in the contemporaneous Essai sur l’origine des langues and the Lettre à d’Alembert, “the spectator who is actively engaged in
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the creation of meaning through passion [is] an implicit metaphor for the citizen.”10 The opera must produce a “reasonable illusion,”11 which will move the “man of good taste” (“l’homme de goût”) and bind him to his fellow man.12 The question is how best to achieve these results.

The problem with which the article grapples, then, is finding the proper balance among the opera’s three components: music, poetry, and scene design. Although these might appear to be three separate languages, which come together loosely in the lyric drama, Rousseau treats them as three aspects of the single operatic sign, which appeal to emotion, reason, and imagination respectively.13 Music, poetry, and visual art exist in a supplementary relation to each other such that one is always primary, while the others are either useful or extraneous adjuncts. Thus when Rousseau considers the positive and negative combinatory possibilities of these three, he writes a rhetorical treatise in the guise of an aesthetic history. Baudelaire sees through this conceit, when he condenses, applies, and contests Rousseau’s three aesthetic “phases” in “Les Yeux des pauvres.”

Three Historical Stages, Three Rhetorical Styles

Tracking the relation between inner meaning (“le coeur”) and outward sensation (“les yeux” and “les oreilles”), Rousseau follows the opera’s transformation from a hybrid spectacle appealing to the senses, through a moment of perfect but unstable realism, to its present condition, which Rousseau sums up as “pas un tout aussi monstrueux qu’il paraît l’être” (Rouss., OC, 5: 956): “not as monstrous a whole as it appears to be” (Rouss., CW, 7: 454). Although the article rejects “le merveilleux” and exhibits a preference for transparent language over the figural, the history it relates culminates, not with the realist aesthetic Rousseau prefers, but in a mixed state that is not politically neutral.

Throughout the article, Rousseau emphasizes the role of music, in keeping with the fact that he is writing an entry for his Dictionnaire de musique, but also because music has special qualities that Rousseau does not find in poetry and decoration. Music is clearly Rousseau’s preferred medium, and he ranks the three “eras” of opera “history” by the degree to which music is uppermost in each. According to Rousseau, opera began in a figural mode. Its depiction of gods, devils, fairies, and other esoteric creatures reflected the incoherence of opera’s mission—to bring about the improbable and unnatural union of music and speech, while imitating human life:
A la naissance de l’Opéra, ses inventeurs voulaient éloigner ce qui avait de peu naturel l’union de la Musique au discours dans l’imitation de la vie humaine, s’avisèrent de transporter la Scène aux Cieux et dans les Enfers, et faute de savoir faire parler les hommes, ils aimèrent mieux faire chanter les Dieux et les Diables, que les Héros et les Bergers. (Rouss., OC, 5: 951)

At the birth of the Opera, its inventors, wanting to avoid what was scarcely natural in the unison of Music with discourse in the imitation of human life, took it into their heads to transport the Scene into the Heavens and into Hell, and, for want of knowing how to make men speak, they preferred to make Gods and Devils sing rather than Heroes and Shepherds. (Rouss., CW, 7: 450)

Although, from Rousseau’s point of view, it would have been far better to depict “the meanest of mortals” (“le dernier des mortels”) or “the valets of Molière” than “the King of the Gods” (“le Roi des Dieux”),14 the first opera put gods and devils on stage because it was inconceivable that men should express their thoughts in music. The marvelous or grotesque was an expedient substitute for the unlikely imitation of human life in song.

Since the opera’s founders could not hope to touch the heartstrings with their subject matter or action, they appealed to the senses instead.15 They relied on every possible visual trick and musical combination to engage the audience: “tous les prestiges de la baguette furent employés à fasciner les yeux, tandis que des multitudes d’instruments et de voix étonnaient les oreilles” (“all the magic tricks of the wand were employed to fascinate the eyes while multitudes of Instruments and voices astonished the ears”) (Rouss., OC, 5: 952; Rouss., CW, 7: 450). The public was astounded and transfixed, rather than moved. Without any human drama at its core, early opera was “cold” (“l’action restait toujours froide” [OC, 5: 952]); it made no connection to the heart. In short, the grotesque style was superficial, sterile and infantile:

[Les contemporains] ne voyoient pas que cette richesse apparente n’était au fond qu’un signe de stérilité, comme les fleurs qui couvrent les champs avant la moisson. C’était faute de savoir toucher qu’ils vouloient surprendre, et cette admiration prétendue n’était en effet qu’un étonnement puérile dont ils auraient dû rougir. (Rouss., OC, 5: 952)

[Its contemporaries] did not see that this apparent richness was at bottom only a sign of sterility, like the flowers that cover the fields before the har-
vest. It was for want of knowing how to touch that they desired to surprise, and this pretended admiration was in effect only a puerile astonishment at which they should have blushed. (Rouss., CW, 7: 451)

The first opera is figural because it represents mythological or imaginary objects that call forth childish wonderment or fascination, without conveying any meaning: “tous les Chants . . . n’étoient qu’un vain bruit” (“every Song . . . was merely vain noise”) (Rouss., OC, 5: 955; CW, 7: 453). This original, figural stage correlates to the initial use of language described in Rousseau’s Essai sur l’origine des langues, which was written at about the same time as “Opéra” and borrows from it. There Rousseau tells the fable of the primitive man who meets another man for the first time and, paralyzed by fear, mistakenly calls him “giant.” But if that giant was actually an ordinary individual, whom the primitive man misperceived and misnamed, on stage “giant” is the right name for the monster (or chimerical being) who stands in for the missing man, opera’s proper object. Although the grotesque is not an error based on passion, it nonetheless reproduces the discrepancy between idea and object or sign and thing that passion provokes, and produces the same effect as passion—an illusion that has no basis in the world.16 Although this is an empty sign, like passion it, too, “fascinates the eyes” and takes the spectator in.

According to Rousseau’s telling of the story, this first deplorable stage in opera’s history was gradually left behind. Becoming more sophisticated and better able to produce a compelling imitation of human emotions, the lyric drama took on a nobler and less “gigantic” form over time. Putting man on stage instead of monsters, it moved away from the grotesque or marvelous toward a greater realism: “l’intérêt fut substitué au merveilleux, les machines des Poëtes et des Charpentiers furent détruites, et le Drame lyrique prit une forme plus noble et moins gigantesque” (“interest was substituted for merveilleux, the machines of the Poets and of the Carpenters were destroyed and lyric Drama took a more noble and less gigantic form”) (Rouss., OC, 5: 953–54; CW, 7: 452). This progress was made possible by music’s growing independence. Music gradually assumed a new innerness and no longer functioned as the sensual supplement for the rational or analytical character of poetry or speech. The point of perfection in the opera was reached when music fulfilled its potential for awakening the emotions directly, bypassing poetry altogether.

In this second phase, music dominates poetry to such a degree that it seems to “speak without the help of words” and makes the spectator believe he hears the language of the heart itself: “l’effet de la seule Musique . . . pouvoit aller
The Sociopolitical Implications of the Grotesque

jusqu’au coeur” (“the effect of the Music alone . . . could be conveyed all the way to the heart”) (Rouss., OC, 5: 953; CW, 7: 451). This illusion of direct communication is fostered by excluding from the drama anything “cold” and “reasoned”: “Toutes les délibérations politiques, tous les projets de conspiration, les expositions, les récits . . . en un mot, tout ce qui ne parle qu’à la raison fut banni du langage du coeur” (“All political deliberations, all conspiratorial plans, expositions, narrations . . . in a word everything that speaks to reason alone was banished from the language of the heart”) (Rouss., OC, 5: 954; CW, 7: 452). Still, despite these exclusions, the illusion is unstable; it can be maintained only as long as the spectator’s emotions are engaged. The spectator can never be left alone:

L’énergie de tous les sentiments, la violence de toutes les passions sont donc l’objet principal du Drame lyrique; et l’illusion qui en fait le charme, est toujours détruite aussi-tôt que l’Auteur et l’Acteur laissent un moment le Spectateur à lui-même. (Rouss., OC, 5: 954)

The energy of every feeling, the violence of every passion are thus the principal object of lyric Drama, and the illusion that produces charm is always destroyed as soon as the Author and the Actor leave the Spectator to himself for an instant. (Rouss., CW, 7: 453)

The opera at its high point recapitulates the first social moments leading away from primitive isolation and toward the creation of civil society, as depicted in the Essai: “Là se formèrent les premiers liens des familles; là furent les premiers rendez-vous des deux sexes. . . . Là des yeux accoutumés aux mêmes objets dès l’enfance commencèrent d’en voir de plus doux. Le coeur s’émut à ces nouveaux objets, un attrait inconnu le rendit moins sauvage, il sentit le plaisir de n’être pas seul” (“There were formed the first ties between families; there the first meetings between the two sexes took place. . . . There eyes accustomed to the same objects from childhood began to see sweeter ones. The heart was moved by these new objects, an unfamiliar attraction made it less savage, it felt the pleasure of not being alone”). This is the period Rousseau called “cet âge heureux où rien ne marquait les heures” (“that happy age when nothing marked the hours”); at this time, “se firent les premières fêtes, les pieds bondissoient de joye, le geste empressé ne suffisoit plus, la voix l’accompagnait d’accens passionnés, le plaisir et le desir confondus ensemble se faisoient sentir à la fois. Là fut enfin le vrai berceau des peuples” (“the first festivals took place, feet leaped with joy, eager gesture no longer sufficed, the
voice accompanied it with passionate accents; mingled together, pleasure and desire made themselves felt at the same time. There, finally, was the true cradle of peoples”). Indeed, the lyric theater at its best operates rather like “the first fires of love” that marked the origins of society: the spectator is so emotionally involved in the passion represented on stage that he forgets the differences that exist beneath the appearance of unity.

Forgetting difference is the key to social harmony. Therefore, in this ideal phase, the opera relies on music to make the public forget the difference between the conventions of song and the harsh “accents” that accompany life’s events.

[L’]on sentit que le chef-d’oeuvre de la Musique étoit de se faire oublier elle-même, qu’en jetant le désordre et le trouble dans l’âme du Spectateur elle l’empêchoit de distinguer les Chants tendres et pathétiques d’une Héroïne gémissante, des vrais accens de la douleur....

Cyrus, César, Caton même, ont paru sur la Scène avec succès, et les Spectateurs les plus révoltés d’entendre chanter de tels hommes, ont bien-tôt oublié qu’ils chantoient, subjugués et ravis par l’éclat d’une Musique aussi pleine de noblesse et de dignité que d’enthousiasme et de feu. L’on suppose aisément que des sentiments si différents des nôtres doivent s’exprimer aussi sur un autre ton. (Rouss., OC, 5: 954-55)

[I]t was felt that the Masterpiece of Music was to make itself forgotten, that by plunging the Spectator’s soul into disorder and turmoil, it prevented him from distinguishing the tender and pathetic Singing of a moaning Heroine from the true accents of distress....

Cyrus, Caesar, Cato himself have appeared on the Stage with success, and the Spectators most repulsed at hearing such men sing soon forgot that they sang, subjugated and delighted by the brilliance of a Music as full of nobility and dignity as of enthusiasm and fire. One readily supposes that feelings so different from our own should also be expressed in another tone. (Rouss., CW, 7: 453; trans. modified)

Music works by causing disorder in the mind. Playing on the emotions, it inhibits critical reason and makes the spectator forget the difference between operatic and street language, between song and speech. At the height of the opera, music promotes communal awareness: “This idealized community—utopian mirror of the origin—is formed by subjects both present to themselves and present to each other within the participatory mimetic experience.” Yet, paradoxically, the erasure of difference that permits this mirroring
depends on the acknowledgment of a different difference, the supposed gap between heroes and just plain folks. The moment of greatest immediacy, when the emotions represented are communicated with the least distortion and resistance, depends on difference and otherness.

Although in this second evolutionary phase the operatic sign seems full and adequate ("la plus propre à l’illusion" [Rouss., OC, 5: 954]), because man is on stage and man’s emotions are represented, this properness is based on engaging the audience’s passions and encouraging them to forget the difference between stage and street, while recalling the difference between the heroes and the common man. The spectator now attributes different, nobler feelings to the heroes on stage and thus infers a moral hierarchy that may or may not exist. The drama that brings together man (the hero) and man (the spectator) depends for its effectiveness on a fiction—a suspension of meaning between sameness and difference that can never be decided with certainty one way or the other.21

Man may have replaced the giants and monsters, but the hypothetical differences among men stand in the way of the commonality connoted by the noun; “man” is a metaphor, a singular idea referring to a plural (and uncertain) object. Thus the realism of this moment is not the aesthetic equivalent of a nonfigural or literal mode of expression. The illusion of reality is based on passion, which “fascinates the eyes,” just as the grotesque did. As Rousseau explains in the Essai: “Voila comment le mot figuré nait avant le mot propre, lorsque la passion nous fascine les yeux et que la première idée qu’elle nous offre n’est pas celle de la vérité” (“That is how the figurative word arises before the proper word, when passion fascinates our eyes and the first idea it offers us is not the true one”) (Rouss., OC, 5: 381; CW, 7: 295). In this golden age of the opera, which harks back to the harmonious early society described in the Essai, the transmission of fellow feeling depends on the mobilization of the spectator’s passions and can easily fall victim to critical distance if the spectator is left “alone.”

Predictably, this second era of carefully honed perfection is short-lived (“la perfection est un point où il est difficile de se maintenir”), and in the third and current phase, apparently equivalent to contemporary French opera, the inherent competition between music and poetry becomes an outright conflict: “[La Musique] prend, en quelque sorte, un autre langage, et, quoique l’objet soit le même, le Poète et le Musicien, trop séparés dans leur travail, en offrent à la fois deux images ressemblantes, mais distinctes, qui se nuisent mutuellement” (“[Music] takes on another language, after a fashion, and although the
object is the same, the Poet and the Musician, too separated in their work, offer at the same time two similar, but distinct images, which work against one another”) (Rouss., OC, 5: 955; CW, 7: 453; trans. modified). Rousseau deems that this crisis can only be resolved by subordinating poetry to music. In his scheme, human emotion and the illusion of sameness among men, represented by music, are the preeminent values. Poetry, which is associated with critical reason and the acknowledgement of differences, interferes with the promotion of fellow feeling and must be kept in check. Otherwise, the forced union of the two arts shocks the ear and destroys the operatic sign: “l’on sent dans l’union forcée de ces deux arts une contrainte perpétuelle qui choque l’oreille et détruit à la fois l’attrait de la Mélodie et l’effet de la Déclamation” (“a perpetual constraint felt in the forced union of these two Arts shocks the ear and destroys at the same time the appeal of the Melody and the effect of the Declamation”). Rousseau comments, “Ce défaut est sans remède” (“This defect is without remedy”) (Rouss., OC, 5: 956; CW, 7: 454).

Given this impossible tension between music and poetry, Rousseau opines that the visual, although it has less in common with music than poetry does, is a better match for melody. Because scene design is truly supplementary (that is, exterior and inferior) to music, it can combine with music more cohesively, resulting in a more effective representation:

Quoique la Musique . . . ait encore plus de rapport à la Poésie qu’à la Peinture; celle-ci . . . n’est pas aussi sujette que la Poésie à faire avec la Musique une double représentation du même objet; parce que l’une rend les sentiments des hommes, et l’autre seulement l’image du lieu où ils se trouvent, image qui renforce l’illusion et transporte le Spectateur partout où l’Acteur est supposé être. (Rouss., OC, 5: 957)

Although Music . . . has an even closer relationship to Poetry than to Painting, the latter . . . is not, like Poetry, as subject to making a double representation of the same object with the Music, because the first renders the feelings of men and the other only the image of the place where they are found, an image which strengthens the illusion and transports the Spectator everywhere the Actor is assumed to be. (Rouss., CW, 7: 455)

If music makes the spectator forget difference, poetry pulls in the opposite direction. Poetry is aligned with doubleness or “duplicité” and therefore must be overcome. Meaning (the transmission of emotion) is disrupted if the sign (in this case, poetry) and the idea (music) fail to coalesce. Then the mind, unwilling-
ing to divide its attention, must choose one or the other representation, di-
viding instead the operatic sign and weakening the force of the illusion. Un-
like the shocking combination of song and speech, which conveys difference
(the difference between stage and street, for example), the coming together of
painting and music unites two distinct (visible and invisible) representations
that are only tangentially related. The result is the perfect marriage of sight
and sound (“l’accord parfait”).

Painting is cold and static—“la peinture est toujours froide”; “tout est dit
au premier coup d’oeil” (Rouss., OC, 5: 958)—and is limited to the direct rep-
resentation of objects that appear in the mind’s eye. In a kind of Platonic hi-
erarchy, music has greater value, precisely because it “warms” the heart and
“excites” the mind without representing its object directly:

[L’]art du Musicien consiste à substituer à l’image insensible de l’objet, celle
des mouvemens que sa présence excite dans l’esprit du Spectateur: il ne
représente pas directement la chose, mais il réveille dans notre ame le même
sentiment qu’on éprouve en la voyant. (Rouss., OC, 5: 959)

[T]he Musician’s art consists in substituting for the imperceptible image of
the object that of the movements its presence arouses in the mind of the
Spectator; it does not represent the thing directly, but awakens in our soul
the same feeling experienced in seeing it. (Rouss., CW, 7: 456)

Music is capable of awakening “presence” in the absence of the object itself
and thus outstrips painting, which cannot imitate what does not appear, and
which is necessarily intermediate between the object and the eye. Painting’s
function on the lyric stage is therefore not to render into its visual medium the
invisible emotions aroused by music, but to create a setting (“la décoration”)
that allows the invisible to appear. By transporting the spectator into the world
of the actor, it effaces the very difference between stage and world that poetry
threatens to make clear: “Voilà comment le concours de l’acoustique et de la per-
spective peut perfectionner l’illusion, flatter les sens par des impressions di-
verses, mais analogues, et porter à l’ame un même intérêt avec un double plaisir”
(“This is how the combination of Acoustics and Perspective can perfect the il-
lusion, flatter the senses by diverse, but analogous impressions, and convey to
the soul a single interest with a double pleasure”) (Rouss., OC, 5: 958; CW, 7:
456). The operatic staging or imagery literally replaces one world with another
and thus covers up the problematic “duplicité” of the operatic sign.

Visual imagery seems ideally suited for its role because it is not significant
in itself. Rather, it is an empty sign—a mere “place”—ready to be filled up with the emotion that music conveys. However, this union of image and music is, at best, a compromise; and Rousseau’s ambivalence about this third phase of operatic history comes through when he concedes that “à certains égards l’Opéra, constitué comme il est, n’est pas un tout aussi monstrueux qu’il paroit l’être” (“in certain regards Opera, constituted as it is, is not as monstrous a whole as it appears to be”) (Rouss., OC, 5:956; CW, 7:454). The problem with the reliance on the visual is that painting and stage design, although they are poor imitations of imaginary constructs, can in turn cause the imagination to take flight and create extraordinary chimeras on its own. The image can acquire an unintended dynamism quite apart from the music, skewing once again the operatic sign and potentially returning opera to the grotesque state in which it began. Despite the prior disappearance of the grotesque from the operatic stage, it continues to haunt the lyric theater:

Un beau Palais, des Jardins délicieux, de savantes ruines plaisent encore plus à l’œil que la fantastique image du Tartare, de l’Olympe, du Char du Soleil; image d’autant plus inférieure à celle que chacun se trace en lui-même, que dans les objets chimériques il n’en coûte rien à l’esprit d’aller au-delà du possible, et de se faire des modèles au-dessus de toute imitation. De-là vient que le merveilleux, quoique déplacé dans la Tragédie, ne l’est pas dans le Poème épique où l’imagination toujours industriuse et dépensière se charge de l’exécution, et en tire un tout autre parti que ne peut faire sur nos Théâtres le talent du meilleur Machiniste, et la magnificence du plus puissant Roi. (Rouss., OC, 5: 957)

A beautiful Palace, delightful Gardens, clever ruins please the eye still more than the fantastic image of Tartarus, of Olympus, of the Chariot of the Sun—an image all the more inferior to that which everyone can trace for himself, as with chimerical objects it costs the mind nothing to go beyond the possible and to make up models beyond any imitation. From this it follows that merveilleux, although out of place in Tragedy, are not so in the epic Poem, in which the imagination, always industrious and spendthrift, sees to the execution and draws from it a completely different component than the talent of the best Machinist and the munificence of the most powerful King could produce in our Theaters. (Rouss., CW, 7:455)

The vitality and independence of the imagination are such that the grotesque (that “mauvais supplément”) will always be a potential threat to a reasonable or tasteful representation. Insofar as it requires a step beyond the
given, into the realm of images and the imaginary, the figural is always apt to become “excessive.” Rousseau acknowledges this fact even as he declares the grotesque inappropriate for tragedy and relegates it to the domain of epic poetry (or the popular fair theaters) instead. The immanent threat of the figural explains why, having declared the grotesque out of place in the lyric drama, Rousseau still has to resort to the language of laws, boundaries, and prohibitions to restrict the use of images on the operatic stage:

Mais ce transport d'un lieu à un autre doit avoir des règles et des bornes: il n'est permis de se prévaloir à cet égard de l'agilité de l'imagination qu'en consultant la loi de la vraisemblance, et, quoique le Spectateur ne cherche qu'à se prêter à des fictions dont il tire tout son plaisir, il ne faut pas abuser de sa crédulité au point de lui en faire honte. (Rouss., OC, 5: 957)

But this transportation from one place to another must have rules and limits; in this regard it is permissible to take advantage of the agility of the imagination only while consulting the law of plausibility, and, although the Spectator seeks only to lend himself to the fictions from which he derives all his pleasure, his credulity must not be abused to the point of making him ashamed of it. (Rouss., CW, 7: 455)

Images (“l'appareil des yeux ou la décoration”) require constant surveillance lest they overrun their limits and detract from the effective transmission of emotional meaning. The third stage of opera is a conscious attempt to transport the spectator a little, but not too much.

On the modern opera stage, conditions are carefully controlled. Figuration involves a risk, which must be checked. The prospect of a kind of anarchy underlies the fear of the figure and motivates the policing of the sign. The potential for images to run wild requires the imposition of the law of verisimilitude, which in turn reinforces the status quo. In sum, the opera cannot do without censorship. Critical judgment is suspended through the exclusion of poetry (or critical thought), and limits are applied to painting (or imagery) to curb the freedom of the imagination. Unable to maintain the illusion of spontaneous feeling that characterized its “golden age” and the free society to which it refers, the opera makes a pact with the powers-that-be. It accepts civil society for what it is, a construct that replaces utopian dreams with pragmatic pleasures. Ultimately, the nation fostered by the transmission of emotion across the ramp is a figure limited by the possible and monitored by the powerful.

In the final analysis, although Rousseau’s essay manifests many of the same
concerns as the satirical letter in Julie, the two works come out in very different places politically. As we saw in the previous chapter, Julie makes a point of turning away from the French monarchy and its aesthetic institutions. St. Preux’s letter on the Paris Opéra criticizes Louis XIV, the opera’s founder; attacks “le faux goût de la magnificence” (“the false taste for magnificence” characteristic of both the opera’s productions and the kings who sponsor them); and finally displays Rousseau’s political preferences in the example of Laberius, whose dissidence was a stance in favor of republican values. The dictionary entry, on the other hand, ultimately accepts the French status quo. Furthermore, while Julie puts forward a certain kind of family life as a model for society,26 there is no such alternative to the French monarchy in the article “Opéra.” In Rousseau’s historical account, the opera passes beyond the point of perfection that is the aesthetic equivalent of the harmonious society gathered, like a family, to sing and dance at spontaneous “fêtes.” “Opéra,” perhaps because it has a pragmatic aim, recognizes the tenuousness of the ideal that Julie, as a fiction, can afford to maintain.

Writing his response to Rousseau in “Les Yeux des pauvres,” Baudelaire acknowledges the very different political stances Rousseau takes in these two works and refuses them both. Baudelaire proposes the family as a political ideal, only to show how flawed the concept is and how impossible it is to realize. But he does not come out on the side of the powers-that-be. Where Rousseau wavers between two political models, to the point of sometimes contradicting himself, Baudelaire, in his rewriting of Rousseau’s essay, single-mindedly pursues his challenge to the dominant discourse.

**Dramatizing Rousseau’s Theories**

Difficult as it may be to discern, “Les Yeux des pauvres” recapitulates the three stages of Rousseau’s operatic history. Since music is not a feature of Baudelaire’s poem, we can only understand the parallels between the two texts at the level of allegory. Rousseau’s three operatic epochs—the primitive period marked by the excessiveness and sensual pleasure of the grotesque, the golden age of so-called transparency and realism, and the current age of authoritarian control and censorship—represent a ranking of three types of figure, judged by the criteria of efficacy and pragmatic possibility. Within this allegory, music serves as a figure for inwardness or meaning, the vehicle for a desired return to a supposedly originary, but lost moment of plenitude when there was free and harmonious communication and a society characterized by love. If we
keep in mind the shifting rhetorical and social paradigm represented by these three eras or moments in Rousseau’s article, we shall see how they are taken up and put to use in Baudelaire’s poem.

The poem borrows its basic structure and many of its terms from Rousseau’s dictionary entry; it strives (in vain) for the fellow feeling among men that is the implicit sociopolitical goal motivating Rousseau’s theories; and it tries out the three types of figuration explored by Rousseau. Within the frame of the love/hate relationship, “Les Yeux des pauvres” depicts three distinct (albeit almost simultaneous) moments of theatrical viewing, corresponding to the three stages of the opera and the three kinds of figures set out in Rousseau’s article: (1) the poor family in the street gaze at the luxurious café, (2) the narrator and his lover stare at the poor family, and (3) the narrator looks into his lover’s eyes. The first moment situates us immediately in the realm of the primitive, which is offensive to good taste. The extraordinary mural decorating the café, described in detail by the narrator, reminds us by its very placement that the grottesque derived its name from the decorative art found on the walls of old Roman ruins (or grotte). But more important, like the first stage of the opera that Rousseau described, the painting on the café wall throws together pell-mell historical and mythological references, in which, as Maurice Delcroix has observed, “man is missing” (“l’homme fait défaut”). Just as the grotesque in the opera was a poor substitute for opera’s proper subject matter (man), these scenes in the new café of pages walking dogs, ladies taming falcons, and mythological gods and goddesses serving fruits, pâtés, and ice cream exclude the adult male and his emotions. In fact, as Marie Maclean argues, “[t]here is nothing human, nothing moving” in this painting: “The depicted women and boys, the Hebes and the Ganymedes, are themselves objects of consumption to the eyes, frozen as they endlessly proffer their wares. They are the equivalent of the fruit, the pâtés and game, the mousse and the ices.” The elaborate mural is a feast for the eyes, but it has no other point—or, as the narrator puts it, all of history and all of mythology are here in the service of gluttony (“la goinfrerie”). The café’s decor—which reduces a whole culture to a commercial package designed to appeal to the nouveaux riches of the Second Empire—is vulgar, “a hyperbolic instance of economic [and aesthetic] excess.”

This vulgarity is only visible from a certain point of view, however. Like Rousseau’s “homme de goût,” Baudelaire’s narrator sees and scorns it, whereas the poor family does not. Confronting the fanciful depictions on the café walls, they react just the way the first opera audiences did: they are fascinated.
If in early opera, “tous les prestiges de la baguette furent employés à fasciner les yeux” (“all the magic tricks of the wand were employed to fascinate the eyes”), the same tricks have the same effect on the poor family, especially the youngest child: “Quant aux yeux du plus petit, ils étaient trop fascinés pour exprimer autre chose qu’une joie stupide et profonde” (“As for the eyes of the smallest, they were too fascinated to express anything other than a stupid and deep joy”). The baby’s “stupid joy” literalizes Rousseau’s condescending assessment of the opera public’s amazement: “cette admiration prétendue n’était en effet qu’un étonnement puerile” (“this pretended admiration was in effect only a puerile astonishment”). The father and his children resemble the spectators of the primitive opera, who failed to see that the apparent riches on stage were only a sign of sterility (“cette richesse apparente n’était au fond qu’un signe de stérilité”). The poor family is taken in by the lavish display and confuses superficial signs for rich meaning. At least this is what the father’s eyes seem to say: “on dirait que tout l’or du pauvre monde est venu se porter sur ces murs” (“All the poor world’s gold seems to have fallen upon these walls”).

In the second theatrical moment, the narrator stares at the individuals in tattered rags who face him. He is the spectator of a different, “realist” spectacle, which corresponds to the high point of the opera in Rousseau’s aesthetic history. In place of the aristocratic ladies, nymphs, and other ornamental figures on the café wall, the narrator contemplates a man of such lowly stature that he could easily be “le dernier des mortels”—a far more worthy subject, Rousseau argued, than the kings and gods of the marvelous. Indeed, when the narrator compares the father of this little family to a maid taking the children for a walk—“Il remplissait l’office de bonne” (“He was filling the charge of nursemaid”)—he evokes Rousseau’s idea that it is better to put “les valets de Molière” on stage than many heroes. The poor family, the only element of the poem that does not attract the epithet “beau,” gives Rousseau’s realism a nineteenth-century spin: the real is not just any man, but a poor man with children, worn out and prematurely grey from hard labor and worry.

If the sight of the poor family is not exactly beautiful, it has an important advantage over the extravagant decor of the café, at least for the narrator. As during opera’s golden age, a current of emotion passes from one world to another (from the street to the sidewalk), and the narrator believes he can read the family’s thoughts. The narrator becomes emotionally involved in the spectacle before him and says: “Les chansonniers disent que le plaisir rend l’âme bonne et amollit le coeur. La chanson avait raison ce soir-là, relativement à moi” (“Popular singers say that pleasure makes the soul kind and softens the
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heart. The song was right that evening, relative to me”). The family speaks to his heart, without ever uttering a sound. In opera, as described by Rousseau, this communal effect was accomplished when music began to “speak without the help of words” (“la symphonie même apprit à parler sans le secours des paroles” [Rouss., OC, 5: 953]) and transmitted emotion across the ramp, straight into the spectator’s heart (“l’effet de la seule musique . . . pouvait aller jusqu’au cœur”). And, like the audience during the era of operatic perfection, Baudelaire’s narrator more or less forgets the difference between himself and the family he observes as he reads the family’s eyes. At least his interpretation facilitates the communication of meaning and equality between “men,” even as it suggests the differences (of class, age, and number) that divide them.

However, this new “golden age,” this momentary suspension of difference via the communication of emotion, is, like its counterpart in Rousseau, a work of fiction. On the one hand, the narrator assumes that the family’s innermost feelings are transparently joined with the outward signs of wonder in their eyes. On the other hand, he translates the family’s gaze into words, attributing to them sentiments that he can never verify, and substituting speech for their silence. His supposedly literal reading is inseparable from this metaphorical substitution, which makes the narrator an author, writing his actors’ lines. The feel-good moment of equality among men, based on shared emotions, depends for its effectiveness on the suspension of meaning between the literal and the figural, which is both produced by the narrator as author and consumed by him as spectator. If the poor family are naïve spectators whose admiration for the café’s splendor is unalloyed, the narrator’s position as a man, author, and spectator is not so simple.37

The moment at which the narrator turns to his lover, in the third scene, is the moment when he acknowledges a quantitative imbalance between himself and the family before him. Feeling a little ashamed (“un peu honteux”) of the signs of his own excess consumption (“de nos verres et de nos carafes, plus grands que notre soif”), he averts his gaze and looks to his lover for reassurance instead. This third theatrical moment reflects Rousseau’s judgment that perfection is impossible to maintain. As if to demonstrate how illusion is imperiled when the author and the actors neglect the spectator, the female lover, who has been marginalized by the narrator’s involvement with the poor family, boldly rejects the illusion of commonality among men in which the narrator wants to believe. In this third moment, the tension between similarity and difference, which lay submerged in his connection to the family, is made explicit by the narrator’s female companion.
This third stage takes us back to the third phase of Rousseau’s operatic history, where poetry and music find themselves in conflict, with music playing on the emotions to make the spectator forget the differences among men, and poetry aligned with critical reason, which brings differences to the fore. Rousseau worried that the forced union of these two semiotic systems would be too much of a shock and would destroy the carefully honed illusion of transparent communication—and community—promoted by the ideal operatic sign. The creation of understanding and harmony would be disrupted if critical analysis and emotion failed to coalesce. Of course, this is exactly what happens to Baudelaire’s narrator when his lover fails to share his sentiments. Instead of fostering his sympathy for the poor family, she shocks him and the reader with her cold indifference: “Ces gens-là me sont insupportables avec leurs yeux ouverts comme des portes cochères! Ne pourriez-vous pas prier le maître du café de les éloigner d’ici?” (“I can’t stand those people with their eyes wide open like carriage-house gates! Can’t you ask the manager to send them away?”). Instead of seeing eye-to-eye with the narrator, the woman debunks his idealization of the poor. Not only does she read the eyes as empty (open wide “like carriage-house doors”), but with her analogy, she sends the family back to its place—in the servants’ quarters. The lover brings forward the class hierarchy that makes the dream of a society based on shared inner qualities appear highly improbable. Her negative reaction to the poor destroys the transmission of meaning and prompts the hatred the narrator expresses at the beginning of the poem. As Rousseau commented, this situation is “without remedy” (“sans remède”).

Curiously, however, the woman’s critical response enacts the very program that Rousseau condoned in the third phase of his operatic history. Not only does she reject the poor, whose eyes repel her, but she calls on the “maître du café” to remove these visual signs that make her lover dream. In accordance with Rousseau’s ultimately pragmatic proposals for the opera, she asks the manager or “master” of this place (Baudelaire’s sardonic representation of Napoléon III?) to exercise his role and police the perimeters of the café, keeping unwanted onlookers—and their enticing eyes—away. Acting as a censor, she ensures the stability of the current class hierarchy, the status quo. Through the woman’s behavior, the third sequence of the poem showcases the mobilization of the powerful to suppress the disruptive threat inherent in the “wild” visual sign.
The Politics of Rhetoric

“Les Yeux des pauvres” follows Rousseau’s model in his article “Opéra” to a surprising degree. Although Baudelaire refashions his predecessor’s rhetorical treatise as a narrative of human relations, giving it a topical nineteenth-century setting, a simple plot, and a memorable punch line, Rousseau’s work thoroughly informs the poem. Even the political overtones of Rousseau’s article are retained. Nonetheless, despite all the signs to the contrary, Baudelaire does not espouse Rousseau’s rhetorical program, any more than he accepts Rousseau’s political compromise.

By rewriting Rousseau’s theories within a different frame, by situating the problem of representation not in the exclusive world of the Paris Opéra but on the city streets, Baudelaire brings forward the underlying issues of class and force that are hidden away in Rousseau’s “Opéra.” However, Baudelaire does not exactly spell out his own political stance. The poem, like Rousseau’s article, is an allegory that offers its political message between the lines. Obliquely, through its own use and problematization of Rousseau’s rhetorical ideas, the poem both displays the power of rhetoric to shape political belief, or put ideology into practice, and warns us of the need to read well, if we want to resist this political manipulation. By virtue of its own duplicitous practices, however, the poem hides its warning from those—like the government censors—who read only for the most explicit content. Simultaneously foregrounding and resisting Rousseau’s rhetorical and political categories, the poem teaches the importance of reading between the lines, of reading against censorship. In order to see how this is so, we must examine Baudelaire’s own rhetorical practices in this poem.

In some rather obvious ways, “Les Yeux des pauvres” departs from its Rousseau intertext. Despite its demonstrable adoption of Rousseau’s aesthetic categories, the poem does not follow the linear, historical aspect of Rousseau’s text. “Les Yeux des pauvres” collapses diachrony into synchrony and at the same time it foregrounds visual signs. Whereas Rousseau calls upon the visual as a necessary but dubious supplement only in the third phase of his narrative, Baudelaire’s poem is all about seeing and sight. From the brilliant decor of the café, to the “famille d’yeux” and the capricious eyes of the female lover, the poem takes the visual as its focal point, so to speak. This difference between the Rousseau and Baudelaire texts can lead us to an understanding of the authors’ rhetorical and political disagreement. For if, in Rousseau’s account, the visual is a supplement with the potential to run wild and obscure meaning, we
must wonder why Baudelaire allows the visual to overrun his poem. Baudelaire's poem brings forward the supplementarity that Rousseau struggles to control and uses it to make a point about reading.

By collapsing the three phases of Rousseau's history into a single event, Baudelaire is able to show rather succinctly how Rousseau's categories leak into each other. Each of the scenes in the love story reaches a point of disequilibrium, which is tied to the context that frames it. Thus the family's fascination with the café is tied to their exclusion from the premises, which the narrator then "reads" in their faces, and which forms the basis of his empathy. But this assumption of common humanity (based in part on spectatorship) begins to unravel, as the narrator becomes aware of his own excess consumption, which is out of reach of the poor. Expecting to read his own thoughts in his lover's eyes, he is then confronted with the ultimate sign of difference, when her eyes fail to serve as a mirror and return only the idea of his exclusion. Each category tips over into the next, until finally the narrator, in a fourth, framing moment, reacts with animosity and hatred, in the ultimate gesture of excess. The very existence of this fourth moment, which exceeds the three stages of Rousseau's aesthetic "history," can be understood as a patent statement of the supplementarity at work in the poem. As we might expect, this supplementarity is borne out by the tropes that Baudelaire uses in each scene, and by reading them now, we can see how the supplement becomes an instrument in the service of a subversive political strategy.

The poem puts into play a number of key words or phrases that reflect the narrator's desire to bring disparate individuals into a collective whole. These figural expressions both exemplify the rhetorical practices Rousseau describes and convey a variety of subtle political messages. In the example of the "grottesque" café, the play of singular and plural manifests itself in the description of the decorative mural, peopled by various unnamed characters and "les Hébés et les Ganymèdes." These mythological figures, whose names we scarcely recognize, recall the Enlightenment's critique of the marvelous for its reliance on pagan gods whose names meant nothing to contemporary readers. But here Baudelaire takes advantage of their "empty" status to reinvest them with meaning. Hebe and Ganymede were two lesser gods who served their superiors in the court of Jupiter; in the poem they are taken as figures for the whole category of waiters and servants. This transformation of unique individuals into a class of persons makes an important, if not very obvious point in the poem. It collects together, under a godly name, workers of the lowest social rank, and thereby introduces them into the highest echelons of society.

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(albeit still in their serving role). Even as it debases the gods by locating them in a vulgar café, the phrase works in the opposite direction by raising the poor to a kind of divine status. The allegory may represent an illusion that has no basis in the world, but it nonetheless hints at a revolutionary idea: the possibility of a society turned upside down.

The use of the mythological figure and the grammatical change from singular to plural, which suggest an unlikely inclusiveness not otherwise connoted by the café, find a well-hidden echo in the second scene of the poem, where the narrator confronts the poor man and his children. In the sixth paragraph, after the narrator has broken the poor family down into its component parts—three faces and six eyes—he gathers these parts up again into another odd collective phrase: “cette famille d’yeux.” This expression has always eluded critical attention, although it is rather bizarre (if we imagine disembodied eyes, it is especially disquieting). But when we stop to consider it, it reveals an incredible density of meaning. At the most obvious level, it plays an extremely complex game of substitution, using the plural “eyes” to represent a whole person, and the singular “family” to represent the collection of individuals. At the same time, while each of the two parts collapses singular into plural or vice versa, the entire phrase juxtaposes the individual components (“yeux”) and the whole (“famille”). The phrase plays in two directions simultaneously, although we can only begin to appreciate this when we take it apart piece by piece, reading each piece (“famille” and “yeux”) on its own.

For an excellent Latin scholar like Baudelaire, “famille” has ancient connotations that the rest of us are apt to miss. Derived from the Latin famulus, meaning servant (serviteur), the etymological sense of the word is: “The whole group of people (children, servants, slaves, relatives) living under the same roof, under the authority of the paterfamilias.”41 This meaning was recognized in France up through the seventeenth century, and the Grand Robert gives an example of this usage drawn from La Fontaine’s Fables. In the nineteenth century, however, the word famille had come to mean, not only the nuclear family, but any group of beings or things having a common origin or common characteristics, which presume analogies among them. For instance, under the influence of certain bourgeois ideologies, one might speak of “la grande famille humaine” or, to designate relations between boss and worker, “une grande famille” (which “connote participation in the paternalistic discourse of the employer or boss”).42 The narrator is clearly one of the bourgeois individuals who think along these lines. His inappropriate reference to the poor father as a “maid” (“il remplissait l’office de bonne”) borrows from a bourgeois
idea of family life, which is supported by a serving class, and suggests the narrator’s inability to wrench himself loose from that frame of reference. His discourse is paternalistic, even if his sympathy for the poor is sincere. Without modifying the class hierarchy, he wants to fold the poor man and his children into his own potential family, in the manner of an old-style paterfamilias. He would translate the confusion of aristocrats and servants depicted as superficial ornaments on the café wall into a more meaningful or real family group, loosely based on the idea of the great family of man.

At least, this is one set of meanings connoted by “la famille d’yeux.” When we turn our attention to the other part of the expression, the “eyes,” a very different and opposite set of meanings appears. In this poem, “yeux” are multiply figural. Not only are they a synecdoche for the whole person of whom they are a part, they are also a figure for the visual sign—a figure for rhetorical figures. As such, they exemplify the advantages and dangers of the visual, which were underscored by Rousseau. The “famille d’yeux,” in particular, brings these lessons together in condensed form. For if we read this phrase only with our eyes, instead of reading the “eyes” aloud, we tend to miss the pun it conceals. “Famille d’yeux” sounds like “famille dieu”—but because of the difference in spelling, we are apt to overlook this similarity. Baudelaire’s play on words, depending as it does on a homophony hidden by the written word, is an extraordinary example of how the visual can foster illusion, by covering over the sign’s duplicity. Not only does the written (visually perceived) sign prevent us from recognizing the aural homonym, but the visual image (of disembodied eyes) is disconcerting enough to prevent us from “hearing” the other meaning it conveys. The image hides the difference, allowing the easy transmission of a single meaning or emotion to occur. It effectively captures the readers’ attention and “transports” us into the scene, as if we were there. On the other hand, by calling attention to itself (to its own unsettling quality, for instance) and turning the imagination loose, the visual can be dangerous. As Rousseau predicted, it may skew the sign away from its apparent meaning and carry us into uncharted, uncontrolled territory. In this case, making the poor family into gods can upset the social hierarchy represented by the paterfamilias, his lover, and the “maître.” The image gives rise to two diametrically opposed meanings, one of which predicts the radical revolutionary practices that the other seeks to repress.

Baudelaire has written into a single expression two competing ideologies of the mid-nineteenth century: the revolutionary notion of the people as “gods” (which Michelet attributes to Rousseau), and the self-satisfied notion of the
powers-that-be that the servants or workers are just part of the family and that no change needs to occur in this family of man. Baudelaire’s humor, in creating through the “famille d’yeux” a parody of the “grande famille des hommes,” marks his critical stance relative to the conservative bourgeois ideology, the dominant discourse of his day, even as the punning phrase covers over his ennobling intent.

The supplementary nature of the pun (“d’yeux/dieu”), which sets the sensory (visual and auditory) signs at odds, disrupts the simple transmission of inner meaning that the narrator purports to carry out. The sensorial surface of the sign, as it were, intrudes upon our awareness and brings critical analysis into play. This is reflected both in the woman’s reading of the eyes as empty (too full of meaning, they convey no single meaning clearly) and in the “capriciousness” of her own “impenetrable” gaze. Yet it is only in this third instance of “lunacy” that the threat of the visual is brought under control. Through the play on the grammatical categories of singular and plural, the first two visual figures put forward (albeit surreptitiously) the idea of a new society that would incorporate and even deify the poor. But the third visual sign—the woman’s beautiful green eyes, “inhabited by Capriciousness and inspired by the Moon” (“habités par le Caprice et inspirés par la Lune”)—runs directly counter to the first two. Although the “inhabitants” of the woman’s eyes recall the mythological figures on the café walls (“la Lune” being another name for the virgin goddess Diana), and although the woman claims the café as her own (it is she who wants to stop there and who behaves as if it were her “home”), the gods of the café and those associated with the woman are actually quite different. If the proper names stand out in both cases as mythological or allegorical figures, “le Caprice” and “la Lune,” unlike “les Hébés et les Ganymedes,” are not collective nouns representing a class of persons. Rather they are common nouns transformed into exclusive names—personifications only of the woman’s eccentric character. As singular nouns, “le Caprice” and “la Lune” do not become categories; they do not open themselves up, like the servant gods, to include others.

In place of the fellow feeling or reassuring sameness the narrator expected from his lover, he finds only difference in his partner’s gaze. This difference is “capricious” or wild precisely because it falls outside and thus reveals the limits of the narrator’s reading of the poor. But this wildness does not go very far. Paradoxically, as he evokes “capriciousness” and “lunacy,” two attributes that raise havoc between the lovers, the narrator uses names that exclude any turbulence of meaning. Although they are allegorical, “le Caprice” and “la Lune”
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are abstract and impersonal. They may “transport” us, as all figures do, but only a very little. In fact, they conform nicely to Rousseau’s warning that images must be carefully monitored and restricted.

It is only in this third case, which features controlled figuration, that the threat of social upheaval is contained. A certain appropriate rhetorical balance (the infinitesimal difference between the literal and figural meanings, that is, between the woman’s capricious behavior and its personification) and a correspondingly “balanced” political result (the realization of class homogeneity, albeit at the expense of the poor) are finally brought about. This cohesion or closeness between the figure, the behavior it designates, and the political consequences it implies prompts the narrator to refer to the woman, in the frame of the poem, as the most impermeable, or closed, person he knows—“le plus bel exemple de l’imperméabilité féminine.”

The woman’s impermeability, and the near-suppression of figural difference associated with it, would seem to give a certain closure to the poem. But as we have seen in other Baudelaire prose poems, the enunciation of the moral lesson is in fact another figural turn, one that opens up the text to the full implications of supplementarity. It is part of the incredible genius of Baudelaire’s poem that each of the three theatrical moments it depicts demonstrates not only the practical application of Rousseau’s rhetorical theories but the political connotations of rhetoric as well. However, as we noted earlier, the poem goes beyond Rousseau’s essay on the Opéra to include a fourth, framing moment, which both exceeds its model and brings out, in a most unlikely manner, the political ramifications of the supplement.

Like the three other figures examined, the first paragraph of the poem subtly trades on the permeability of grammatical categories. The possible confusion of singular and plural is brought out in the very first sentence, when the narrator addresses his interlocutor(s) with an ambiguous “vous” (“Ah! vous voulez savoir pourquoi je vous hais aujourd’hui”). As we have already noted, the sentence leaves open the question of whether a singular person is being addressed in the formal manner or whether more than one person is designated. Coming at the beginning of the poem, with no prior referent, “vous” first appears to be the implied reader—already a figure for a larger group, the real readers of the poem.46 After all, Baudelaire was not known for being indulgent to his public, whom he treated as “dogs” in “Le Chien et le flacon,” so the hatred the narrator expresses here might well be another instance of the poet’s animosity towards “us.” The second sentence seems to clarify the matter, by specifying “vous” as “le plus bel exemple d’imperméabilité féminine” and thus
preparing the anecdote about the woman that follows. But coming here, in the first paragraph of the poem, the doubt is not entirely lifted. First of all, a feminine trait need not be confined to women; addressed to men, the epithet “feminine” could function as a hateful insult, in keeping with the tone of these lines. We may even wonder whether the woman in the poem is yet another caricature of that “femmelin,” Rousseau. Furthermore, the fact that “vous” is a superlative example (“le plus bel”) keeps the concept of a group of individuals alive, if only as a foil for this singularity. “Le plus bel exemple” suggests hierarchy within a class of people or things; as a superlative, “vous” stands out as a singularly apt member of a larger group. In other words, the statement condemning “vous” for being so exclusive and closed paradoxically leaves the door open to inclusivity. It seems that more is going on here than meets the eye.

This is precisely the problem Rousseau so feared; the imbalance between appearance and essence, between sign and idea, which he deemed grotesque, caused him to accept exclusion and call for the policing of boundaries in an attempt to contain the waywardness of meaning. But Baudelaire parts company with Rousseau at this point. Whereas Rousseau accepts the status quo and concludes, perhaps reluctantly, that the opera of his day—and the repressive government that sponsors it—is “not as monstrous as it seems,” Baudelaire’s poem does not leave matters there. By framing his little drama with a “definite” conclusion, Baudelaire actually destabilizes the carefully controlled language of the third and final scene, as well as the authoritarian civil society that requires it. And he tries to help his reader do the same. By making the female lover the prime example of a “bad reader,” while creating uncertainty about the implied reader’s inclusion in that category, he tries to discourage us from identifying with the illustration. If we refuse this representation of ourselves, if we reject our own categorization, we may find ourselves reading the other categories or classes in the poem differently. It is only by looking beyond the most visible signs of (rigid) class hierarchy in the poem and noticing the signs of instability or upheaval instead, that we can avoid being “bad readers” of “Les Yeux”—and any text about categories or class. By insulting us, Baudelaire urges us to see double, to see what the emphasis on visual signs tends to cover up. He tries to call attention, backhandedly, to his poem’s duplicity.

Baudelaire has written a poem opposing the politics of inclusion and exclusion that is the subtext of Rousseau’s aesthetic treatise. However, his opposition is nowhere stated as such. Instead, Baudelaire refuses to authorize any of the three vantage points proposed in this poem. Interpretation is a matter of point of view in “Les Yeux des pauvres,” but no single point of view holds
saw. None of the readers in the poem is advanced as an ideal; all of them (the family, the narrator, the lover) are presented as flawed, and their interpretations subjected to doubt. Even a close examination of the rhetorical examples in the poem fails to resolve the problem, since each one undermines the meaning (of exclusion, inclusion, or capriciousness) it is meant to illustrate. The imbalance between meaning and signs or the lack of correlation between statements and examples foils interpretation. Meaning in “Les Yeux des pauvres” is excessive and out of control. This point is made everywhere and nowhere; it cannot be pinned down. In this poem, where “impermeability” connotes its opposite, Baudelaire suggests the futility of the controlling and repressive practices of Napoléon III’s discursive regime.

Thus, although the usual approaches to interpretation are foreclosed in the poem, Baudelaire offers his readers a different possibility, not embodied by any character (except perhaps the ambiguous “vous”). He proposes that we eschew representation altogether and read instability, or the force of the grotesque, instead. Unlike Rousseau, Baudelaire adopts the grotesque wholeheartedly. For Baudelaire, the inherently unstable grotesque—“the antithesis of representation”—is a welcome subversive force in oppressive times.