Grotesque Figures
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Throughout this book I have tried to make clear that Baudelaire’s relationship to Rousseau is not a simple matter of literary influence. Although Baudelaire may from a certain point of view be seen as Rousseau’s heir and rival in the nineteenth century, and although his poems and letters do manifest some of the oedipal impulses often associated with the relationship between literary generations, the impetus behind Baudelaire’s prose poems is not primarily a private, psychological one. If Baudelaire revels in his ability to match Rousseau’s rhetorical prowess and occasionally enjoys himself at Rousseau’s expense, this personal pleasure by no means explains the complex use the poet makes of Rousseau, not only as a reference for understanding allegory and the grotesque, but as a political figure and contemporary cliché. There is much more to the Rousseau–Baudelaire relationship than the hackneyed features of a father–son pair.

Rousseau is Baudelaire’s poncif—his “cliché,” or commonplace. Both a device for generating multiple images and a means of capturing the shifting shapes of the present, Baudelaire’s Rousseau is the modern equivalent of the metamorphoses so prevalent in rococo art. Adopting “Rousseau” as a generative motif in the Petits Poèmes en prose, Baudelaire updates the look or style of the grotesque while personifying its transformative function. For Baudelaire, “Rousseau” is both a modern man and an allegorical figure; like a modern-day Venus in the Luxembourg Gardens, he is a way of bringing out the allegorical in everyday life.1

Baudelaire understands that Rousseau is one “face” of nineteenth-century
France, the personification of his contemporaries’ fascination with and fear of the past. Rousseau both haunted and repulsed the French ideologues of Baudelaire’s day, and their discourse about Rousseau and his legacy marks the political debates of the mid-nineteenth century. “Rousseau” is a sign of Baudelaire’s times. When the poet uses “Jean-Jacques” as a type and trades on the caricatures of Rousseau put into circulation by the political discourse, he relies on the figure of Rousseau to capture the ethos of the “present.” “Rousseau” marks the nineteenth-century’s obsession with the past, its need to work through the trauma of the French Revolution and the difficulty it had in defining itself as something new.

Yet, even as he is a time-bound character, “Rousseau” also serves as Baudelaire’s point of entry into the timelessness of the grotesque. The Rousseau figure in the prose poems points to the persistent and uncontrollable (grotesque) effects that are liberated in Baudelaire’s reading of his predecessor’s works. Inasmuch as Rousseau’s texts are the site of an unresolvable tension between allegory as a restricted figure and allegory as an open-ended and inevitable play of language that threatens authorial control, “Rousseau” names the slippage and resistance of allegory, its inability to coalesce into a stable and transparent meaning. Reading Baudelaire reading Rousseau thus delivers us up to a perpetually regressive and disorienting world, which resembles nothing so much as a painted arabesque. The visual twists and turns of the rococo that inspire Baudelaire disappear in his poems, becoming instead the imperceptible spiraling of the poems’ tropes. In Le Spleen de Paris, the rococo’s “decorative allegorism” gives way to the unrepresentable play of allegory, which might be called the “most spiritual” of designs and “most ideal of all.”

Baudelaire’s poems take their place, not in a present that can be separated out as the future of Rousseau’s work, but within the rhetoric of Rousseau’s texts. The prose poems put into play the doubleness, duplicity, and unassimilable excess that are “Rousseau.” Like the beheaded Pierrot in “De l’essence du rire” or the two-faced statue in “Le Masque,” “Rousseau” is simultaneously one, double, and capable of the endless generation of extraordinary effects. Representative of a present unable to let go of the terrible past, figure for the timeless but ineffable play of language, “Rousseau” is anything but a stable ground or point of origin for Baudelaire’s poems. For all these reasons, the Baudelaire–Rousseau relationship cannot be construed as a linear history, a progression in which the new generation replaces or eclipses the old.

This book, then, is not a literary history in the usual sense. And yet it does make a contribution to aesthetic history by exploring something like a turn-
ing point in the way the grotesque is understood and used. Although both Rousseau and Baudelaire acknowledge the grotesque as a phenomenon of language, they experience it and deal with it very differently.

Writing in the context of a bankrupt and ineffective monarchy in the decades leading up to 1789, Rousseau looks forward to the possibility of social and political change. He views the excesses of the grotesque with suspicion. He wants to sweep aside allegory’s morally unsavory and politically dubious dominion in favor of a more sober use of language, consonant with his hopes for man and his republican aspirations. Writing in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the revolution of 1848, Baudelaire cannot subscribe to Rousseau’s reformist ideals. Instead, he welcomes the grotesque as the appropriate aesthetic for a generation still coping with the wreckage of the Terror. Baudelaire accepts the pervasiveness of the grotesque in everyday life and the way it challenges closely held beliefs in the ultimate powers of man and creation. Despite the poet’s intermittent utopian yearnings, the world of Le Spleen de Paris is essentially marked by the demise of man and the fall of God.3

Baudelaire embraces the excesses that Rousseau despised. For Baudelaire, language is not a tool for mastering the demons, but the exhilarating, overpowering, even “comic” medium in which they are met. Thus by making the “ruin of man” the locus of his allegory and adopting “Rousseau” as its personification, Baudelaire both exposes his own pessimism about the human condition in post-Revolutionary France and “laughs” at what he knows. What is new and modern in the prose poems is not Baudelaire’s understanding of the grotesque, but his now giddy, now ironic acceptance of its inevitability in life and art.
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