ASK PEOPLE WHAT THEY FIND GROTESQUE in American life and many will readily offer examples from popular culture and its venues of tabloid journalism, talk shows, celebrity gossip, network reality programs, Internet Websites, and extreme movie genres. What Flannery O’Connor said in the 1950s of American mass culture—that the problem for a serious writer of the grotesque is “one of finding something that is not grotesque”—is incalculably truer today. In making her assessment O’Connor acknowledges a familiar idiomatic sense of the grotesque that touches only the surface of the long cultural tradition designated by the term. This conversational sense commonly refers to an event or appearance noteworthy only for its bizarre or perverse qualities and only for its effects of shock or scandal. As contemporary culture is increasingly given over to these superficial senses of the grotesque, it is an appropriate time to understand the deeper, modern meanings the grotesque has in American culture.

Over the course of the twentieth century, a powerful cultural lineage of the modern grotesque evolved in the fiction of American writers Sherwood Anderson, Nathanael West, and Flannery O’Connor and in the images of American photographers Weegee and Diane Arbus. In their work the grotesque deploys a willfully oblique, partial, deforming, and contentious perspective that yields a comprehension of society and culture not otherwise possible. Their work presents by way of the grotesque an attitude toward history, to adapt a concept from the social thinker and literary critic Kenneth Burke. For all the excesses in imagination and
form manifest in the grotesque, at a latent level the mode can be profoundly reductive. The grotesque figure and its meanings are designed to be detected and understood in terms of pronounced, and often absolute, contrasts. Much modern American literature and photography of the grotesque depends upon iconographic processes that enlarge awareness of the social sphere through delimiting one’s perspective on it to antitheses such as perception/obscurity and light/dark. Contrastive structure is not only a formal property but a persistent theme of the grotesque as well in modes of both literary description and graphic depiction. The reductiveness one can associate with the grotesque is not in the end a matter of oversimplification but rather a radical procedure intended to disclose meanings otherwise obscured from apprehension in the phenomenal senses of this word: presentiment, perception, and comprehension.

Writing in the mid-1930s, Kenneth Burke asserted that the grotesque had persisted at least since the Renaissance as a common strain within cultures of the West to the point where it presently functioned as one of the underlying “attitudes toward history” evident in contemporary life. Along with tragedy, comedy, the elegy, satire, and didacticism, the grotesque operates, in Burke’s estimation, as a primary poetic and symbolic mode and configures “the mental equipment (meanings, attitudes, character) by which one handles the significant factors of his time.” While its categories reiterate canons of literature, Burke’s discussion is as concerned with “ideological architecture” and questions of belief in matters of politics and religion as it is with poems or novels (Attitudes, 58). His account of specific attitudes toward history derives from a general principle that guides much in Burke’s work, namely that mind, in being “formed by language, is formed by a public grammar” (Attitudes, 341). And thus linguistic and symbolic modes or “actions,” no matter how seemingly individualized in their expression, are always to be understood within larger frames of shared consciousness.

The grotesque gains insight into the historical meaning of a current situation whether in politics or culture, according to Burke’s definition, through a perspective animated by incongruity. As distinct from the genre of comedy, however, the grotesque is a “cult of incongruity without the laughter” (Attitudes, 58). In using this idea, the present study does not claim that the grotesque is without comedy. Indeed, sometimes the comedy is great, as with the fatuous and narcissistic Hollywood types that Nathanael West delineates in The Day of the Locust and with the encounters between preacher and wanton women that Flannery O’Connor renders in Wise Blood. And a viewer will find much deadpan humor in photographs by Weegee and Diane Arbus. The modern grotesque does
not require, however, any of the staples of comedy. Pure comedy is the most convivial of genres. While the grotesque is no less significant as a social genre, it is not sociable in its cultural means. The current discussion does not treat comedy as a dominant strain of the modern grotesque.

To develop perspective, the grotesque often transposes a paradigm across logical boundaries even though such an application may seem at first irrelevant, incoherent, or anarchic. In the process the grotesque functions as a method ultimately for disclosing a deep, shared structure among political, spiritual, and aesthetic domains. As an attitude adopted toward history for such purposes, the grotesque is by definition iconoclastic. To characterize the symbolic function of the grotesque, Burke terms it a means of “seeing in the dark” conducted through a “mystical reversal of the customary meanings for dark and light” (*Attitudes*, 59). Modern conditions that provoke consciousness to resort to the grotesque result from confusion within mass society over cultural values and from fissures within traditional institutions of power. At the time of Burke’s reflections on the grotesque the dominant causes of such conditions in the West obviously were pandemic economic depression and the rise of fascism. Preliminary to further consideration of the grotesque in modern American contexts, it is helpful to retrace some paths that the term’s meanings have taken.

**ORIGINS**

From its origins in Renaissance Italy to its frequent associations with modern art and literature, the term *grotesque* reflects a far-ranging migration in meaning. The Italian word *grottesco* was coined in the late fifteenth century in response to archaeological discoveries made at the time of an unfamiliar ornamental style that dated back to the classical era of Rome. Examples of this style were first found among underground rooms (*grotte* in Italian, *cryptae* in Latin) of excavated Roman palaces and villas. Painted on the wall and ceiling sections, pilasters, and other prominent architectural features, these designs employed a variety of organic, ordinary, metamorphic, and purely imaginary forms, and the forms were brought together in irregular, unexpected combinations, unrelated in scale or subject matter. The play of fantasy and the direct appeal to visual delight in the grotesque style, without apparent thematic import, seemed to belong to a cultural realm set against the formalism, symmetries, and solemnity of the classical architecture and design that were familiar up to the time of these Renaissance discoveries.
At the time of its origins, long before the word grotesque was available, the Roman engineer and architect Vitruvius of the first century BCE condemned the new fashion for fantastic compositions in wall decorations. Vitruvius was affronted by an “improper taste of the present” that disdains “definite representations taken from definite things” and that has displaced the “reasoned scheme” of realist architectural motifs traditional to such decor. His account of the style provides a detailed depiction of the early grotesque: “Instead of columns there rise up stalks; instead of gables, striped panels with curled leaves and volutes. Candelabra uphold pictured shrines and above the summits of these, clusters of thin stalks rise from their roots in tendrils with little figures seated upon them at random. Again, slender stalks with heads of men and of animals attached to half the body.” Particularly offensive to him are the style’s free use of heterogeneous and hybrid forms and its casual animation and anthropomorphism. Irrespective of any such protestations, the style that would be named grotesque in the Renaissance gained great prominence in Imperial Rome.

The palace complex Domus Aurea (literally, “Golden House”) designed in 64 CE for Emperor Nero, and located in the center of the ancient city, featured such decoration extensively (fig. 1.1). The Domus Aurea was one of the major ancient sites excavated and studied later in the fifteenth
The main building far exceeded the dimensions of previous palaces, and its murals and painted vaults were rich with fanciful designs unmotivated by nature or reason. Roman craftsmen and artists were profligate with their powers of invention in producing motifs commonly associated with the early grotesque. These motifs often entail an impossible mixture of vegetal forms with real and imagined life figures. Thus, a vine can be entwined with an architectural feature that supports a human or divine figure that is decoratively linked with savage animals or nightmare beasts. The linkage is often compressed to the point where a process of transmogrification is suggested. In a comparative treatment E. H. Gombrich has demonstrated the broad presence of such grotesque motifs within the world history of art, with examples dating from the second millennium before the Christian era and stretching regionally across Asia, the South Seas, Europe, and the Americas. Gombrich offers this vast reach of examples to confirm his general thesis that “there are invariant dispositions in the human mind which account for the development of certain common features in . . . art.” To indicate the specific disposition involved, Gombrich has named his chapter on the grotesque “The Edge of Chaos,” where he defines the mode as a “mixture of the sacred and the profane, the serious and the playful” and, following a remark by Albrecht Dürer, likens its heterogeneity to “dreamwork.” Dürer’s mixed use of the grotesque mode is quite apparent in the coat of arms he fashioned in 1500 for Emperor Maximilian (fig. 1.2).

Grotta is a linguistic adaptation in Italian of the earlier Latin term for a cave, cavern, underground vault, chamber, or passage, as is the Latin in relation to an earlier Greek word. Well before the erection and consecration of temples to gods in ancient Greece natural caves and grottoes were identified as sacred places. Naomi Miller attributes to such natural and man-made grottoes in antiquity, and well into the Enlightenment, a cultural dualism: “Contemplation and creation constitute the higher forces, the Apollonian side of the grotto. But in a world also connected with Pan, Dionysian agents may rule. Surely primal elements are present in the association of caves with preterhuman existence—with rites of birth and death, magic ceremonies, mantic powers, erotic bacchanalian orgies.” To some degree, a misattribution of the root word grotta may be involved in the Renaissance derivation of grottesco. In ancient Greece the natural rock cavern had been considered to be an abode for nymphs and deities, and for the Muses in particular. While the cavern retained a traditional role as a sacred site, its distinctive topographical features were as often valued for the novel sensory and aesthetic experience they provided, and the term equally identified a picturesque, refreshing human retreat. This
meaning was quickly extended to spaces either excavated or erected for the purpose of providing such repose. Though discovered underground near the end of the 1400s, some of the decorated Roman rooms called grotta probably stood above ground originally. Writing in the 1560s, Benvenuto Cellini thought that this was the case. Their subterranean location centuries later could be explained as the consequence of cycles of ruin and construction on the same site. Whether a misattribution has occurred or not, one root, literal meaning of the word grotesque retains the reference to a place of shade or semidarkness unearthed, brought to light.

[6]
To Renaissance artists and humanists the grotesque contradicted standards of representation, whose visual norms were defined by geometry in perspective and definitive categories of subject matter and genre. For all the associations of the grotesque in later centuries with repulsiveness, depravity, and terror, we do well to remember the grotto’s original significance as an accommodating, hospitable, restorative place. In the contexts of classical aesthetics and Platonic metaphysics, Mark Dorrian has argued, the qualities of deformity and aberration attached to the grotesque are to be differentiated from monstrosity and the utterly terrifying. According to this distinction, the monstrous stands apart “as a sign of sin and transgression” and defies any prohibition or antidote that common culture can offer, while the disorder or defiance encountered within the grotesque is in the end contained and recuperated within a stronger sense of encompassing, even if at times contradictory, cultural values. It takes the epic hero of classical tradition, who functions as a cynosure of society’s idealized power and promise, to overcome the monster and its threat of annihilation. The vision of the modern age advanced by the Americans discussed here is, by comparison, certainly not epic or valorous, nor does it provide the reassurances possible when a worldview is aligned along an axis hero/monster. This circumstance remains true even for Flannery O’Connor, irrespective of her abiding interests in encounters with grace and in matters of the Devil.

In derivation, the grotesque refers explicitly to forms and themes that belong to the visual, decorative arts. Michel de Montaigne appears to be one of the first writers to effect a transfer in its meaning to include nonvisual expression, and literary style in particular. His essay “Of Friendship” from the 1570s opens with this reflection upon his creative process, quoted here in the Florio translation of 1603:

> Considering the proceeding of a painter’s work [as] I have, a desire hath possessed me to imitate him. He maketh choice of the most convenient place and middle of every wall, there to place a picture labored with all his skill and sufficiency; and all void places about it he filleth up with antic boscage [foliage] or crotesko [grotesque] works, which are fantastical pictures having no grace but in the variety and strange-ness of them. And what are these my compositions, in truth, other than antic works.⁸

The earliest meanings of *grotesque* in English, a word which appears in print by 1561, directly render the original Italian definitions and connotations, as evidenced by the variant above in Florio’s translation. In
stipulating “There are no Grotesques in nature; nor any thing framed to fill up empty cantons, and unnecessary spaces” some decades later, Sir Thomas Browne in Religio Medici (1643) dissociates the term from any purely natural feature and places it in the domain of artifice and human intentionality.

In early English usages, the effect of the grotesque upon an observer or reader is associated with fancy and the lightly humorous rather than with fear or the nightmarish, but by the end of the seventeenth century such connections are made.

A general idea of the sister arts that links verbal and visual expression has been active in Western thought since the classical period. The subject is of special interest to W. J. T. Mitchell, whose Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology examines the notions of complementarity between word and image among art theorists from Lessing and Edmund Burke to Nelson Goodman and E. H. Gombrich. In this study, as in his later collection of essays Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation, Mitchell concludes that material and cultural differentials between the verbal and the visual predominate over all claims of reciprocity.

Nevertheless, when applied strictly to literature, the grotesque retains strong visual assumptions about its means and its impact. Within English and German Romantic literature, as Frederick Burwick has demonstrated, evocations of grotesque experience are typically correlated to disturbance or derangement in visual perception. The two scholars to have conducted the most extensive surveys of the grotesque in Western art and literature, Wolfgang Kayser and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, offer divergent accounts of its development and of its presence in the modern period.

In Kayser’s view, over its history the mode typically features the unnatural and monstrous products of the artist’s imagination, and it often engages in a dissolution of reality with ominous and sinister effect. It creates an estranged world that remains finally incomprehensible to audiences. From his perspective in the 1950s, the contemporary fulfillment of the grotesque tradition is the theater of the absurd, and indeed Kayser’s generalizations about aesthetic principles clearly have been made with this outcome in mind: “the unity of perspective in the grotesque consists in an unimpassioned view of life on earth as an empty, meaningless puppet play.” Where a satiric purpose was often ultimately served by the imagination’s exploration of a fantastic, alienated, deformed world in previous centuries, the grotesque in the twentieth century, according to Kayser, traces an arbitrary course and it no longer signals a need for moral or social correctives.

To mount his inquiry, published in the early 1980s, Geoffrey Galt Harpham starts from premises of indeterminacy and of imaginary and
intellectual free play, assumptions indebted to ideas in poststructuralism and deconstruction. For Harpham the grotesque has no narratable history as an artistic mode and thus it has no clear lines of cultural evolution. In the event, the grotesque marks a situation of the indefinable, “a condition of being just out of focus, just beyond the reach of language.” Fostered by conditions of paradox and parody, of language and aesthetic style turned against themselves, the grotesque in Harpham’s account strongly inclines toward ambivalence and anomaly. Rather than social or historical understanding, it stimulates subconscious and mythopoeic responses. The grotesque does not mediate between the terms of its contradictions, and in not doing so it discloses the properties of contradiction essential to the artistic process itself. In his conclusions, Harpham associates the grotesque with the cultural origins of metaphor as two primal means of visual and literary figuration wherein “form itself resists the interpretation that it necessitates” (Harpham, 178).

In making correlations between the grotesque and the absurd Kayser presents the modern examples he has chosen as expressions of either a void condition or a chaotic fantasy state bordering on madness. While Kayser acknowledges a connection to tragicomedy, his idea of the absurd excludes any sense of tragic pathos or insight and any existential notion of individual fate. Harpham, through his own synchronic, nonhistorical approach, positions the grotesque among the farthest, aboriginal traces of human culture, in the earliest cave and burial sites and, equally, in the id, as well as alongside contemporary notions of an uncentered, endless process of signification in language and culture. By considering the grotesque to be in the final analysis a cultural mode that operates through “self-abolishing incongruity,” Harpham situates it at a degree zero of representation and meaning (Harpham, 178). In these respects, the accounts by Kayser and Harpham prove unserviceable for my purposes in the present study, which aligns the modern grotesque with conventions of depiction and description in the arts and which recognizes its referential ground and its oppositional functions in regard to society’s orthodoxies.

For a fuller sense of the grotesque as a visual tradition we should turn to John Ruskin’s monumental study The Stones of Venice (1851–53). There Ruskin separates the grotesque into categories of the ignoble and the noble in accounting for the art and architecture of Venice in the medieval and Renaissance eras. In periodizing a decadent phase of Venetian life and culture that began in the 1420s, Ruskin designates it a “Grotesque Renaissance” that is characterized by “a delight in the contemplation of bestial vice, and the expression of low sarcasm, which is, I believe the
most hopeless state into which the human mind can fall. This spirit of
idiotic mockery is, as I have said, the most striking characteristic of the
last period of the Renaissance.”¹⁴ For Ruskin, meaningful distinctions
remain to be made between this false grotesque and a legacy of the true
grotesque. The task is complicated, however, by the hybrid nature of the
mode: “It seems to me that the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed
of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful; that, as one or other of
these elements prevails, the grotesque falls into two branches, sportive
grotesque and terrible grotesque; but that we cannot legitimately con-
sider it under these two aspects, because there are hardly any examples
which do not in some degree combine both elements; there are few gro-
tesques so utterly playful as to be overcast with no shade of fearfulness,
and few so fearful as absolutely to exclude all ideas of jest” (*Venice*, 3:115).
The terms of conceptualization here point directly to the hybrid tragi-
comedy.

The basis for distinctions between the ignoble and the noble that
Ruskin devised amounts to a differentiation of the unreflective craft of
a mere artisan from the intentions and mastery of an artist. While a
craftsman “can feel and understand nothing, and mocks at all things with
the laughter of the idiot and the cretin,” a “master of the noble grotesque
knows the depth of all at which he seems to mock, and would feel it at
another time, or feels it in a certain undercurrent of thought even while
he jests with it” (*Venice*, 3:128). Pathos in response to human weakness
and mortality ennobles the grotesque. With a master, “it is because the
dreadfulness of the universe around him weighs upon his heart that his
work is wild” (*Venice*, 3:130). Through the power of empathy a master’s
imagination is “narrowed and broken by the inconsistencies of the human
capacity; and it would seem to be rare that any very exalted truth should
be impressed on the imagination without some grotesqueness” (*Venice*,
3:139). The noble strain of the grotesque arises ultimately from thoughts
of death, and the stress consequently falls upon the tragic within tragi-
comedy: “these [thoughts of death], partly degrading us by the instinctive
and paralyzing terror with which they are attended, and partly ennobling
us by leading our thoughts to dwell in the eternal world, fill the last and
the most important circle in that great kingdom of dark and distorted
power, of which we all must be in some sort the subjects” (*Venice*, 3:143).
It is interesting to note here that Ruskin attributes a fundamental dark-
ness to the powers of the grotesque.

With the third volume of *Modern Painters*, published in 1856, Ruskin
returns to these considerations, now more broadly within art history.
While the artist’s imagination in its most noble work obeys the laws of reason and historical objectivity, Ruskin argues, imagination also possesses inalienable capacities to function independently from natural appearances and social proprieties. In the latter instance there is “a strange connection between the reinless play of the imagination, and a sense of the presence of evil, which is usually more or less developed in those creations of the imagination to which we properly attach the word *Grotesque.*” For Ruskin, as for Flannery O’Connor in the next century, the terror and evil perceived through the grotesque abide as persistent, ungovernable forces.

In his own account of the grotesque, E. H. Gombrich subscribes to some of Ruskin’s conclusions about the hybrid makeup of the mode. Gombrich’s main interests, though, lie in the complex of perceptual responses stimulated by grotesque compositions. Such compositions contain uncodable visual information that “outrages both our ‘sense of order’ and our search for meaning,” the two tendencies that dominate behaviors of perception. Where “normally, as we scan any configuration we have learned to ‘extrapolate,’ . . . [these] creatures defy our classifications. . . . There is nothing to hold on to, nothing fixed, the *deformitas* is hard to ‘code’” (*Sense of Order*, 256). Uncertainty in a viewer’s response carries over from the perceptual sphere to the emotional one. And as a visual means to otherwise unseen truths the grotesque is profoundly “self-contradictory” in seeming to offer “a pattern for ‘dreamwork,’ a guidebook to chaos” (*Sense of Order*, 281). Grotesque images, “which oscillate between decorative form and representational images,” are vastly ambiguous in relation to everyday appearances (*Sense of Order*, 256).

In assessing the aesthetic revival of the grotesque in the course of the 1500s, Gombrich observes that these treatments, in contrast to the drollery and diablerie of the medieval period, tend to submit such motifs to formal principles of symmetry and balance and to thus temper its spirit of license. Nonetheless, even within structured patterns the grotesque retains tangible potential for contradiction and disruption: “The grotesque has moved from the margin to the centre and offers its inconsequential riddles to focussed vision. . . . They are not mere designs, but signs” (*Sense of Order*, 281). Leonardo da Vinci on occasion drew casual studies in deformed or distorted physiognomy, starting in the 1490s until his death in 1519. The real and imagined facial features in these drawings are obvious signs of human personality (fig. 1.3). The cultural energies released through such renderings would lead by the late 1500s to the establishment of caricature as a distinct visual genre.
While mimicry and mockery were certainly present in early forms of social expression and are amply evident in ancient literature and theater, the reinvention of the grotesque and the related rise of caricature embody for Gombrich a profound advance in visual culture: “In many periods of the past the ornamental border had given most scope to the artist’s free play of imagination. In the late sixteenth century, however, this free play itself becomes emancipated from its shadowy range on the margin of a book or under the seat of the choir stall. Series of engravings or woodcuts proudly displayed the artist’s power of creating grotesques.” The recodification of physical appearances through caricature marks a new cultural freedom.

By applying Gombrich’s ideas to present contexts, we can understand how the modern visual grotesque often isolates and individuates the human figure to the point where there is no longer any ability to temper or recuperate the grotesque through inclusion in larger, balanced and aesthetically pleasing patterns. As noted, the art historian considers an epochal change to have occurred during the Renaissance when grotesque motifs shift in their compositional role from the decorative margins to become a central feature.
MODERN GROTESQUE

In explaining the attitude of modernity from his perspective in France during the 1850s, Charles Baudelaire specified as a definitive component the new inflections of the grotesque prominent in the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe. For Baudelaire, close visual counterparts to these modern literary inflections are found in the graphic work of Francisco Goya and Honoré Daumier. In Baudelaire’s mind the grotesque aspects of modern sensibility are often associated with the individual’s exceptional responses and with cruel turns in circumstances. One immediate aesthetic consequence is that the familiarly human is suppressed or negated. While this property accords with Kenneth Burke’s definition of the grotesque as an attitude that cultivates incongruity, for Baudelaire the grotesque does evoke laughter, albeit laughter of a distinctive kind. The effect of the “absolute comic” that Baudelaire attributes to the grotesque differs fundamentally from what he calls the “significative” humor of conventional comedy. Significative comedy, by providing a social corrective or a psychological discharge of tension, is integrative and compensatory in effect. For its part, absolute comedy is unnerving, dissociative, and antisocial. An expression of humanity’s heritage of “physical and moral degradation,” grotesque laughter has its closest emotional counterpart in grief (Art and Artists, 143). Baudelaire associates qualities of cruelty, solemnity, and primitivism with grotesque laughter as well, but with a flourish of paradox he generalizes that the most profound correlation of the grotesque is to “the life of innocence and to absolute joy” (Art and Artists, 152). Some aspects of Baudelaire’s ideas here, as we shall see, have unexpected relevance to Flannery O’Connor’s practices of the grotesque.

Baudelaire acclaimed Daumier as an early master in the grotesque vein of modernity. He had in mind not so much Daumier’s topical, political caricatures as drawings in which everyday life of the city is overshadowed by conditions that prey on defenseless humanity. Caricature depends upon a degree of clarity to convey an incisive idea or judgment about the character or situation depicted, and the mode obviously belongs to significative comedy, whereas the grotesque suggests an inherent obscurity and mystery. A specific Daumier lithograph that Baudelaire considered at length is Rue Transnonain, le 15 avril 1834 (fig. 1.4). It is a death scene in a small room where a murdered man lies stretched across the floor and a small child, also apparently dead, is crushed beneath the corpse. In the semidarkness two more slain adults lie sprawled on the floor. Visual
Figure 1.4. Honoré Daumier, *Rue Transnonain*, le 15 avril 1834 (1834)
impact from this image operates in ways far removed from the sharply targeted invective that commands awareness in the same artist’s political caricatures.

For Baudelaire the Rue Transnonain drawing, through an open and unblinking attention to “trivial and terrible” particulars, achieves an extraordinary impression of presence: “it is history, it is reality” (Art and Artists, 218). While Baudelaire normally rejected realism as the nemesis of inspiration and the intangible, in the case of such subject matter harsh, pitiless outward appearances can render in totality an aspect otherwise unimaginable. To be sure no joy attaches to the scene, but in its unsparing depiction of the aftermath of violence an absolute in human experience and an exact measure of destroyed innocence are portrayed.

In commenting more than twenty years after the event that provoked Daumier to make the lithograph, Baudelaire focuses on the immediacy of the atrocity rather than on its specific causes. For the record, on that day in Paris many innocent civilians in a Rue Transnonain tenement were massacred by government troops who stormed the building.18

Given one guiding purpose of the present book, it must be acknowledged that Baudelaire deplored the inroads photography had made upon the arts, especially painting, over the first two decades of the new technology. But Baudelaire also recognized that the photographic sensibility is entirely modern and that the medium served some appreciable cultural purpose as a sign of the times in its startling and often “cruel” allure. In response specifically to the polished silver of a daguerreotype plate, Baudelaire attributes to photography the “cold clarity of a mirror” in its indiscriminate power of replication, content to simply reflect whatever passes by (Art and Artists, 225). Irrespective of the static, calculated composition required in order to secure clear daguerreotype pictures, in making this remark Baudelaire has in mind the increasingly arbitrary and ephemeral manner in which a city person encounters and regards the finished images. They possess an undeniable potential for visual frisson precisely because they contain only a surface of appearances taken in quickly by the eyes. Thus, in their shallow yet unsparing actuality photographic images are possessed of a characteristic that is generally true of modern experience.

Writing in the 1890s, Henry James also expressed admiration for Daumier’s genius, and the American novelist considered the grotesque style of his lithographs to exert great psychological power and cultural influence. This fact is all the more noteworthy because the high value he placed upon Daumier’s work marks one of the few areas where James is in agreement (though for different underlying reasons) with Baudelaire’s
aesthetic judgments. In reaction against the aesthetic cultivation of corruption, Henry James held Baudelaire partly responsible for a modern tendency to lower “the moral complexities of life . . . down into [a] very turbid element . . . and there present them to us much besmirched and bespattered.” According to James this tendency, as proves equally true for him with the example of Poe, serves only in the end to demonstrate a “dulness [sic] and permanent immaturity of vision.”

In James’s estimation, the most forceful images created by Daumier are the product of a measured kind of extremism based in a technique of “black sketchiness” and a tonality of “abnormal blackness” that both freely mingle the strange with the real. While “coarse and formidable” in the specifics of their depictions, for James these lithographs achieve “an almost symbolic generality” of darkness that functions well beyond any manifest content as satiric commentary on moral weakness or political corruption. For James, then, the essential modern ingredient in the grotesque is a pandemic blackness. For Baudelaire, it is an axiomatic, clarifying violence.