Carl Sandburg once defined poetry as "the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits"(x). But this is a post-nineteenth-century view of poetry. As an old word for flower, as a precious stone, or as the standard literary metonym for reddish-gold, hyacinthe is eminently "poetic." But biscuits? The fact that biscuits have in fact become a part of poetry reflects the change in poetic diction that occurred during the nineteenth century, when the introduction of formerly banned terms into French poetry overthrew the conventional, restricted lexicon and created new possibilities for poetic expression. Asselineau wrote that "La fonction du romantisme fut la reconstitution, la création de la langue poétique et du style littéraire au XIXe siècle" (quoted in Brunot, "Les Romantiques," 309). French poetry was long overdue for such a reform: from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries it had distinguished in a very rigid way between elevated and low diction, the noble and the roturier ("common"). Poetic conventions covered all the dimensions of what has been defined as linguistic register and prescribed both acceptable subjects of verse and the language proper to express them.

Those poets who breached this code, using colloquial or familiar words and even vulgar and slang expressions, were clearly writing in opposition to the accepted canon. Hugo claimed a revolutionary role for himself in the line beloved of literary critics and survey textbooks, "Je mis un bonnet rouge au vieux dictionnaire." But many of the other major poets of
the century had a part in the elaboration of this new poetic language. Gautier praised the richness and range of Baudelaire's language; Verlaine was described as a "grand marieur de mots, l'un de l'autre étonnés" (Dictionnaire néologique); the task Rimbaud set himself was to "trouver une langue" ("La Lettre du voyant"). Of course, each poet developed this poetic program in a different mode, raising different questions about the use of unconventional language in a highly conventional context.

I will not attempt to provide a history of French poetic language, a task already masterfully accomplished by the great historians of the French language. Nor will I try to determine influences among these poets. The object of my analysis is, rather, language in context. I will study the functioning of familiar discourse in individual poems, examine in what ways each poet exploited its stylistic potential, and show how the use of colloquial language can take on a figurative dimension. Intruding into the texture of poetry, familiar discourse becomes a kind of trope: it calls attention to the surface of the work, complicating and interfering with the poem's referential dimension. This renewal of poetic language and the figurative uses it made possible are of primary importance both to these poets and to those who came after them, for whom hyacinths and biscuits, as well as the colloquial, slang, or technical terms referring to them, have become the stuff of poetry.