In “A André Chénier,” Hugo wrote:

Oui, mon vers croit pouvoir, sans se mésallier,
Prendre à la prose un peu de son air familier.

Les Contemplations, 1, v

His poetry and drama have often been considered in the light of this and similar statements. The connotations of mésallier show that we have to do with a discussion of what is noble (and thus what has a place in verse) and what is considered “low.” It is Hugo who is usually given the major credit for enlarging French poetic vocabulary, and it is certainly his texts that are most often cited in the context of discussing the perceived “revolution” in poetic diction in nineteenth-century France. Indeed, it is his work that has codified the very language we use to talk about this change. The only French text holding a place similar to that of Wordsworth’s “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” in English literature is Hugo’s “Réponse à un acte d’accusation,” from Les Contemplations: it is the text regularly cited in discussions of the changes in poetic diction brought about by romanticism. In his history of the movement, Gautier writes of the “secret du style romantique” and those who criticized its “mâles poètes et le vigoureux prosateur (Hugo)”: “C’est cette veine de langage qui leur déplait dans les poètes
modernes et chez Hugo en particulier” (Histoire, 122). In studying this “veine de langage,” I would like first to show how Hugo set the terms in which the problem of diction was to be discussed throughout the nineteenth century and beyond; then, to examine in more detail the poetic manifesto that set out to oppose the neoclassical manner, “La Réponse” itself; and finally, to explore in some of Hugo’s other work two of the questions this poem raises: the use of the literal term rather than periphrasis and the mixing of styles in lyric verse.

I. The Fortune of a Literary Manifesto

Hugo was responding to no particular accusation in his “Réponse”; many critics of the time were hostile to his “famil­ iar” style. One went so far as to call it “le râle de l’agonie universelle”; and though others opposed this view, then and more recently, it is Hugo who is usually blamed or credited by critics with the perceived shift in poetic diction.1 It should be remembered that Hugo himself went through several stages with regard to poetic diction, both in theory and in practice. In his 1824 preface to what would become Odes et ballades, he claimed for Boileau and Racine the merit of having “fixed” (immobilized) the French language; and in the 1826 preface, he maintained, “Un écrivain qui a quelque souci de la postérité cherchera sans cesse à purifier sa diction . . . Des fautes de langage ne rendront jamais une pensée, et le style est comme le cristal, sa pureté fait son éclat” (Pléiade, 1:275n; 282). It is significant that in the former of these prefaces, he set up the analogy between poetics and politics that will be at the foundation of the “Réponse” in order to talk about the “battle” between the romantics and the Classics; but here Hugo the royalist rejects any association of romanticism with revolution: the former may be the result of the latter, he asserts, but it is not its expression.

By the 1827 “Préface de Cromwell,” however, Hugo felt that languages were not fixed, but in constant flux; and in the 1834 Littérature et philosophie mêlées, he stated that each age has its own language and linked linguistic change to historical and social developments. The “langue propre” of the nineteenth
century was a “langue poétique” (*O.C.*, 5:33). In the 1856 *Contemplations*, the “Réponse,” its “Suite,” and “Quelques mots à un autre” make the assertion that this language has been found, and found by Hugo himself. Although in “Réponse” he claims that others have better furthered the cause, he also writes “Alors, brigand, je vins,” responding to Boileau’s famous line “Enfin Malherbe vint” in *L’Art poétique*.

The elevated language of poetry had been known at least since Ronsard as “la langue noble,” opposed to “low” language; and it was Delille who first called the latter *roturier* (“low-class”), thus making explicit the resemblance of this classification to the social order. This link between politics and style was noted in 1806 by Bonald as well, who saw in it a “nouvelle preuve de la distinction des deux sociétés; distinction aussi fondamentale en littérature qu’en politique” (1005). It is this concept that is thematized in “Réponse,” and it is the pronouncements of this poem that have been taken by critics as affirming and as proving that Hugo altered the diction of poetry in France.

Not only do critics almost always refer to this work when discussing either French poetic practice in the nineteenth century or many other works of Hugo, but, from the first, critics have used or transposed expressions from the poem to describe the change in diction they have perceived. Already in 1872, Banville writes that nine-tenths of French words “exiled” from poetry were “délivrés” by Hugo (*Petit Traité*, 59). He quotes the famous lines beginning “Je fis souffler un vent révolutionnaire,” but the poem was echoed already in the idea of imprisonment (as in “le bagne lexique”) and subsequent liberation. In an 1876 article, Naquet first describes Hugo’s achievement in what is more or less a paraphrase of the poem, goes on to quote the well-known section beginning “Quand je sortis du collège,” and concludes: “Voilà quelle fut cette Révolution que Victor Hugo a accomplie. . . . Ou . . . Victor Hugo est dans le vrai contre Racine, c’est la langue moderne qu’il faut adopter, ou bien, il nous faut continuer la langue des auteurs classiques. . . . (Ou) Racine et Louis XIV, ou Victor Hugo et la Révolution. Nous sommes pour Victor Hugo et la Révolution” (180). It is remarkable to see what extent Hugo’s
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poem had codified the ways it was possible to talk about the question.

Later critics have followed suit. Bruneau in the classic *Histoire de la langue française* also accepts Hugo’s characterization of his influence as a “revolution” and merely transposes the words of the text: “Mais Victor Hugo allait bientôt libérer la légion sépulcrale des vieux mots damnés” (12:54). More recent students of the French language, too, have repeated these received ideas, these received phrases.

Hugo himself, discussing poetic language in *William Shakespeare* (1864) reverts to the language of his earlier poem: “En France . . . la littérature tendait à faire caste. Être poète, cela revenait un peu à être mandarin. Tous les mots n’avaient pas droit à la langue. . . . Sortons, il en est temps, de cet ordre d’idées; la démocratie l’exige. . . . Sortons du collège, du conclave, du compartiment du petit goût, du petit art, de la petite chapelle” (*O.C.*, 12:276). The échos of the poem in this quotation are obvious; even the words “sortons du collège” recall the opening of the often-quoted section, “Quand je sortis du collège, du thème.”

It should be noted that some critics have taken Hugo at his word regarding the dating of the poem as well as its import. It is now generally considered to have been written in 1854; and its predating to 1834 has been explained in various ways: as a means to antedate Hugo’s adhesion to liberal views (in this regard see “Ecrit en 1846”); as a setting of the text in the context of the romantic battles of the 1830s; or as a revisionist reaction to Janin’s history of French drama, which appeared in 1854. It was also in the 1830s that Hugo’s plays had evoked the most vehement criticism of his irregular division of the alexandrine line and his “low” diction. But in any case, the historian of literature may have found it a neater picture of the century to have the battle over diction won in the 1830s by the “Romantics”; the text is not so useful, not such an event, published just a year before the *Odes funambulesques* of Banville and *Les Fleurs du mal*, both of which, as we shall see, make use of contrasts and dissonances in diction. Through this poem then, Hugo has indeed accomplished a revolution, at least in the way we talk about poetic diction.
II. "Réponse"

It should be asked to what extent Hugo carries out, in this poem itself, the "revolutionary" precepts he enunciates. We would expect a poem of the *ars poetica* genre to be to some extent self-referential. Although it is clear that it self-consciously violates certain of the precepts of the neoclassical code for the composition of poetry, it is interesting to see what becomes of these innovations in the texture of the poem. I will look first at the prosodic rules Hugo infringes, then at his most important—or at least most famous—claim, that of renewing poetic vocabulary, and finally at the relationship he seeks to establish between this kind of diction and figurative discourse.

Hugo lays claim to several innovations: the freeing of the alexandrine from its rules, the liberation of rhymes, and most importantly, a rejection of the neoclassical diction, rhetoric, and division into genres. With respect to the rhythm of this and other Hugo texts, it has frequently been noted that many of the innovations for which he spoke out had been accomplished already by Delille and his school at the end of the eighteenth century. We do see in this text a certain amount of suppression of the *césure*, as in lines 7-8:

\[ \text{Toute cette clarté s'est éteinte, et je suis} \]
\[ \text{Le responsable, et j'ai vidé l'urne des nuits.} \]

The enjambement between these verses and the trimeter of the second line are striking examples of the points he wishes to make. But in general the verses are quite regular, even in the section where he discusses the transformation of the alexandrine:

\[ \text{Le vers, qui sur son front} \]
\[ \text{Jadis portait toujours douze plumes en rond,} \]
\[ \text{Et sans cesse sautait sur la double raquette} \]
\[ \text{Qu'on nomme prosodie et qu'on nomme étiquette,} \]
\[ \text{Rompt désormais la règle et trompe le ciseau,} \]
\[ \text{Et s'échappe, volant qui se change en oiseau,} \]
\[ \text{De la cage césure, et fuit vers la ravine,} \]
\[ \text{Et vole dans les cieux, alouette divine.} \]

All of these lines may be divided into hemistichs; most have
the classic four accents, and two (the third and sixth) are perfectly symmetrical. Enjambements and rejets are to be found elsewhere in the text, and it is curious that Hugo rejected the self-referentiality one might expect from such a passage, that here, at least, he should not escape from "la cage césure."

As for demolishing "la bastille des rimes," it is difficult to determine just what is meant by such a declaration. The rhymes in this poem are extremely rich; they are correct for the eye as well as for the ear; and they follow the rule of alternation between masculine and feminine rhymes. On the other hand, as Banville noted, the introduction into poetry of various kinds of words formerly considered inappropriate—and words like madrépores or mob would be among them—created the possibility of much richer and more varied rhymes. Banville also considered that this expansion of vocabulary relieved the necessity for distortions in syntax, inversions in particular, and Hugo claims to bring peace to syntax. Inversions, however, are frequent in this poem: "De la chute de tout je suis la pioche inépitable," for example. Nonetheless, a more casual tone has indeed entered serious poetry in lines like:

En somme,
J'en conviens, oui, je suis cet abominable homme;

a tone brought about by the broken line, natural syntax, the enjambement, and conversational lexical elements (en somme, oui).

Before going on to examine the ways Hugo uses such elements, we should note that it is not clear where in the poem the subject is lyric poetry and where it treats the language of the theater. Of course, Hugo maintains that he has reformed both, but he alludes primarily to theatrical diction. It is especially his dramas that had aroused such vigorous denunciations at the time the poem is set; it is in Hernani that a king is heard to ask the time; and it is in his plays that he most strikingly breaks up the alexandrine verse. Further references to the theater in this poem include allusions to Phèdre and Athalie and to the Paris conservatory of music and drama. The word conservatoire is important for its incorporation of the concept of conservatism as well. And although he claims here to have released the ode from its conventions, his own Odes et ballades
of the 1820s, as the preface quoted above indicates, were relatively conventional.

Although it is clear from this text that Hugo has introduced many words from fields formerly excluded (that is, words that evoked milieux or thoughts considered unseemly, like *cadavre fumant*, *cochon*, or *ânerie*), and that he uses a more natural syntax, it is also evident that he does not descend below the bounds of the middle style or at least of the lowest acceptable genre in point of style, the satire. The line “j’y fis entrer le chiffre” is justified in this poem where the words “quatre-vingt-treize” appear, but the impact of using this date is mitigated by its historical prestige. On the level of the signifier, despite the polemical tone and claims, there are almost no words that would be classified as familiar, let alone vulgar, according to the dictionaries of the time. So the words that “Vaugelas . . . / Dans le bagne Lexique avait marqués d’une F” (for both *forçat* and *familier*) are still in jail. The only exceptions are the expressions *tas de*, *bastringue*, and the childish terms *papa* and *toutou*. Pejorative words and expressions of insult abound: *ânerie*, *croquant*, *mâchoire*, etc., but these had all been used by such writers as Saint-Simon, La Fontaine, or even Malherbe. There would certainly be a good number of slang or even familiar terms equivalent to *grimaud* or *catin* or *maraud* (or even *nez* and *mâchoire*); and so, a certain amount of censorship has been imposed. The language of the *gueux*, the poor, is not in fact included. Hugo prided himself on his introduction of popular language and slang into his novels, especially *Le Dernier Jour d’un condamné* and *Les Misérables*, where there is a section on argot that amounts to an essay on the subject. In this novel there is also an allusion to his innovation in an earlier work: “Ce mot, *gamin*, fut imprimé pour la première fois et arriva de la langue populaire dans la langue littéraire en 1834. C’est dans un opuscule intitulé *Claude Gueux* que ce mot fit son apparition. Le scandale fut vif. Le mot a passé” (*Les Misérables*, pt. 3, bk. 1, chap. 7). That he refrains from including such language in his poetry in general and in such a polemical work as “Réponse” in particular, shows that he is still to a certain degree bound to the conventional distinctions between genres.

Moreover, when in this text Hugo turns from his claims of
liberation to a description of the new poetry, his diction becomes markedly more elevated. After line 191 precise numbers become *au front triple* or *millions d'ailes*.Conventionally "poetic" words (l'azur, lyre, zénith et nadir) reappear at the moment when "la muse reparaît." "Low" expressions, then, are excluded from the subject of poetry, which is still called "sacrée." The poetic revolution described in this text, then, is announced and furthered, but not completed.

In "Réponse" Hugo thematizes the ways in which poetic diction had been considered and makes them part of the poem's figural structure. Thus Delille's division of language into noble and "roturier" becomes the evocation of a revolt compared in all points to the French Revolution: it has a taking of the Bastille, proclamations, executions, a terror, even reminiscences of the "Marseillaise" (throughout the text, but especially in the line "'Aux armes, prose et vers! Formez vos bataillons!' "). This extended metaphor represents more than a stylistic device: Hugo reveals a belief in a metaphoric relationship between history and art. As he says in "Réponse": "L'idiome, / Peuple et noblesse, était l'image du royaume." And he writes in *Littérature et philosophie mêlées*:

Nous l'avons déjà dit ailleurs et plus d'une fois, le corol­naire rigoureux d'une révolution politique, c'est une révo­lution littéraire. Que voulez-vous que nous y fassions? Il y a quelque chose de fatal dans ce perpétuel parallélisme de la littérature et de la société. L'esprit humain ne marche pas d'un seul pied. Les moeurs et les lois s'ébranlent d'abord; l'art suit. (*O.C. 5:29*)

So not only is there a link between the two, but it is a necessary, a causal link. It is thus by a kind of metalepsis that he expresses the desire to influence the course of French history and thought itself through his writings: as he reminds us in this poem, "Qui délivre le mot, délivre la pensée." We can see in this conception of literature a motive for writing polemical, political pieces like "Ecrit en 1846" or *Les Châtiments*.

What Hugo seeks is to make his words actions. In "Réponse" he turns them into people through their personification as the men and women of the Revolution, and he makes them act in lines like "Les préjugés . . . Se dissolvent au choc de tous les
mots flottants / Pleins de sa volonté, de son but, de son âme.”

The catachretic power of language, the moment where figure and action join, is alluded to explicitly in a parody of the creation of light, the performative “j’ai dit à l’ombre: Sois! / Et l’ombre fut.” It is clear that in the optic of this poem, language is not just described in terms of the revolution; it is to become a revolutionary force itself. The poem, then, is not merely an account of the French revolution nor of the Romantic reform in poetic diction; it represents a political act. Its success (at least its success as literary polemic) may be gauged by the critical reaction outlined above.

The tying together of literature and society in a forward-moving progression leads to the thematic contrast between old and new in this poem. It is presented in explicit references to the old order and, on the lexical level, in archaisms (anciens vers français, force mots). Furthermore, it is central to the very structure of the poem, which takes on an historical or narrative movement, summarized by the words progrès saint and “Le mouvement complète ainsi son action.” The movement alluded to is not only that of historical development and change, but also the movement of the tropes that parallel it, its tropisms.

The other metaphor traditionally used to describe language unsuitable for poetry, linked with the metaphor of social class, is the pair bas / élevé, another thematic contrast developed in this text. Hugo presents himself as accused of the “chute” of everything, reminiscent, of course, of the Fall, an idea carried out through references to God and the evocation of Genesis in lines 4-5 and in the allusion to the tower of Babel. In the old order, noble words are said to be “montant à Versaille,” in contrast to the “genres bas,” that were dégradés, the etymology of this last word completing the idea of a lowering.

The poem reverses this order of things: “sur le sommet du Pinde” (the mountain of the muses), “on dansait Ça ira”; and damned words are “tirés de l’enfer.” By the same token, the “spirals” of periphrases are crushed, and good taste is “foulé aux pieds.” The ending relates an apotheosis of poetry that rises “à l’éternité par les degrés du temps,” assisted by the flight of the muse and joined by the Revolution. It might seem paradoxical that it is by descending into the “profondeurs du
langage insondable" (already an oxymoron) that the Revolution raises up “la foule dégradée,” but this final image makes explicit this turning upside-down, this “revolution,” and it further joins together the two revolts, the political and the linguistic or poetic. In the lines “J’ai . . . mêlé, confondu, nivelé sous le ciel / L’alphabet, sombre tour qui naquit de Babel,” the idea of a leveling of social class is tied to even the smallest elements of poetic language (as “dévastateur du vieil ABCD” had shown earlier); and the words sous le ciel, enlarging the perspective, show that the whole system has its basis in a kind of transcendence. This is not another paradox: as the last section makes clear (“Et Dieu le veut”), the wheeling movements of the Earth exist as motion only with respect to the fixed point represented by God or Heaven.

Interwoven in these metaphorical networks are the related pairs of light / darkness and large / small or free / restricted. The light / dark imagery parallels that of height / depth: Hugo presents himself as accused of bringing darkness, but this situation is reversed in the course of the poem, as signaled by the line “J’ouvrís les yeux.” By the end the new poetry is described as moving freely in light, as having “regards éclatants” and a flight that is an “ouragan d’étincelles.” Thus the shadow of the poem’s beginning becomes divine light of reason and beauty in another inversion of imagery.

The contrast between Hugo and his adversaries is cast throughout the poem as that between the petty and the enormous; and because he is a “monstre énorme,” he is presented as too large for the categories and restrictions of the neoclassics; he “overflows.” The imagery of liberation is tied to this concept of breaking out of boundaries: prisons, jails, “bornes,” images of circles are opposed by the many references to freedom and motion, like “Je bondis hors du cercle et brisai le compas.” In the following verses:

“Voyez où l’on en est: la strophe a des bâillons,
L’ode a les fers aux pieds, le drame est en cellule,”

several strands of imagery interact: fers aux pieds indicates obstacles to movement, en cellule, a closing-in, and bâillons, the incapacity of speech imposed on writers. Opposed to such images are evocations of the movement of the masses, the many
indications that poetry and theater have been freed, like “sa langue est déliée,” references to great size (immense, énorme, déborde), and the claim, “J’ai mis tout en branle.”

Thus, the metaphors of this poem are linked to each other, they have metaphorical relationships among themselves, generating the movement of the text in their continual shiftings and intermeshings. It is surprising, then, that a text so dependent on metaphorical articulation should be at the same time a text that disparages figurative language. But such is the case: reform in poetic diction is presented, both explicitly and implicitly, as a rejection of the metaphoric in favor of the literal. In this Hugo was reacting against the “horreur du mot propre” that Gautier saw in the restrictions of neoclassical diction (Bruneau, Histoire, 12:49) and the consequent overuse of periphrasis. Hugo reacts against such fastidiousness by including “la vie abjecte et familière” (line 53) in lines like “j’ôtai du cou du chien stupéfait son collier / D’épithètes” and expressions like bagne, terroriste, rustre, and so on. But Hugo enlarges his criticism to figurative language in general. His declaration, “Guerre à la rhétorique,” is amplified by lines like “Syllepse, hypallage, litote frémirent” and the description of the pursuit of Dumarsais, author of the Traité des tropes. Tropes are seen as under the protection of the Academy, the literary establishment. This point of view is clear, too, in the lines:

Je massacrai l’albâtre, et la neige, et l’ivoire;  
Je retirai le jais de la prunelle noire,  
Et j’osai dire au bras: Sois blanc, tout simplement.

In other words the metaphoric term, which had become conventional, is replaced by the literal color word. But in this connection, it must be noted that the words jais or albâtre were terms that had lost a good deal of their figurative status: they had become in a sense, if not the literal words for black or white, at least the “proper” terms, the only possible terms. The gap between what is said and what could have been said which Genette sees as the prerequisite for the existence of figure is somewhat diminished with the virtual elimination of the original term (Figures, 208-11).

The style Hugo opposed to periphrasis is called explicit and
“honnête,” that is, there is a conception of figure as deceitful, in contrast to the truth of the literal, which somehow attains nature. This concept can be seen in the lines:

J'ai dit à la narine: Eh mais! tu n'es qu'un nez!
J'ai dit au long fruit d'or: Mais tu n'es qu'une poire!
J'ai dit à Vaugelas: Tu n'es qu'une mâchoire!

Here there is a clear repudiation of both metonymy (narine for nez) and metaphor (in the next line); while the mais, tu n'es que form implies a discovery of truth. But the third line undermines the first two: the word mâchoire, in the sense of a man without intelligence or wit, is of course figurative. The same contradiction can be seen in the lines,

le mot propre, ce rustre,
N'était que caporal: je l'ai fait colonel;
J'ai fait un jacobin du pronom personnel,

where the mot propre itself is personified.

“Je nommai le cochon par son nom” is another instance of the elevation of the propre, implying again that each thing has a name, and its own, correct name. All of this presupposes a ground in nature, in a real world to which words can be said to refer. Words that denote, then, are a means of apprehending the world, whereas figurative language is opaque. The stability this concept gives to the reeling world evoked by this text can be seen in the final lines, where Hugo claims that art is the “porte-voix” of God. It is in the Suite to this poem that Hugo makes explicit the connection between the word, le verbe, and God, but it is evident here also, as the words Et Dieu le veut make clear. This idea of Hugo’s poetry being somehow more true-to-life has been carried on by critics. Bruneau writes, “Ce qui frappe, quand on examine les corrections de Vigny, de Lamartine et de Hugo, c'est que l'expression simple remplace souvent dans leurs vers l'expression figurée. . . . La révolution romantique a donc été, à ce point de vue, un retour au naturel” (Histoire, 12:46, 48). This is an echo of lines like “Sois blanc, tout simplement” from the poem “Réponse,” but it is remarkable that Bruneau should find Hugo’s language “simple.”
Of course, it is impossible for Hugo to rid his discourse of figures, even of those he mentions in a deprecatory way. He makes use of syllepsis in line 216, “Sa langue est déliée ainsi que son esprit,” in which the word déliée means at once “loosened” (as “loose tongue”) and “liberated.” An example of hypallage might be the line “populace du style au fond de l’ombre éparsé,” where the word éparsé seems to modify ombre, whereas it would be more logical for the populace to be scattered. When Hugo writes “Je pense . . . avoir un peu touché aux questions obscures,” un peu, in its contrast with what follows, certainly qualifies as a litote, or understatement. Emphase is a question of degree, but this poem has at least its moments of grandiloquence. Hugo may avoid the kind of periphrasis that obviates the need for concrete nouns, but he still uses expressions typical of neoclassical verse like l’azur and set phrases like la marche du temps. And he clearly does not avoid figure. Indeed, at times his metaphors seem to stumble over each other, as in the lines: “L’Alphabet,/Sombre tour qui naquit de Babel,” or the description of the French language as a salon where the literal word changes from a corporal to a colonel and where the participal, a slave, becomes a hyena. Hugo claims to have “écrasé les spirales” of periphrasis, but his figures multiply in a dizzying whirl. Thus it is again surprising to find that the movement portrayed in the poem is said to “complexe ainsi son action”: as the word révolution shows, the movement it “describes” is continuous and unending. And indeed, motion is not halted in the poem after these words. Rather, the Revolution is portrayed as vibrating, entering, and teaching at the same time as it is called a lantern and a star in the sky, images of stability by which people can be guided. For the stars in the sky are themselves in constant revolution. Thus, the end of the poem controverts rather than confirms the concept of a transcendent, immobile poetry, a revolution completed.

It would be wise, then, rather than taking Hugo at his word, to take the poem at its words. Although it seems to oppose rhetoric, it can only exist—as can any language—as figure. Indeed, even the literal is described by means of tropes. The assimilation of the Revolution to all aspects of human life in the last section accomplishes on a metaphorical level the fusion of
linguistics and politics implied by the noble/bas classification of words and the central metaphor of the poem. History itself becomes literature: "Dans le mot palpitant, le lecteur la [la Révolution] sent vivre . . . Elle est la prose, elle est le vers, elle est le drame;/Elle est l'expression, elle est le sentiment." But the totalization effectuated here seems dispersed by the centrifugal force of the fragmented metaphors used to describe it: the accumulating figures of lines 215-25 seem themselves to dissolve "au choc de tous ces mots flottants." These figures are supported by air, as the imagery of floating, flying, and breathing would suggest, not by any direct, referential relationship with nature or reality. The line "Elle entre aux profondeurs du langage insondable" is logically a paradox; that the Revolution should make Liberty enter man through his pores is inconceivable: only words make it possible.

In the history of French language and literature, a restricted poetic lexicon has been tied to stylized periphrasis. But freedom in diction, in fact, implies a greater range of possible figures. The standard neoclassical metonymies and metaphors give way, as in this poem, before the introduction of striking metaphors like those mentioned above, or "L'imagination, tapageuse aux cent voix,/Qui casse des carreaux dans l'esprit des bourgeois." The pattern found in this poem, a rejection of rhetoric leading to its reintegration at another level, is one to be seen repeatedly in the work of philosophers as well as poets. In this respect Hugo resembles writers as different as Locke, Nodier, or Mallarmé. It is not surprising that critics, like several of those quoted above, should also have followed this pattern.

We have seen in the introduction that the enlarging and the restriction of poetic diction or language in general are two poles of a controversy that has traversed French culture at least since du Bellay. Both points of view are present in the work of Victor Hugo. Whatever the truth of his claims in "Réponse à un acte d'accusation," the poem has come to represent the side supporting vocabulary expansion and a general lifting of rules. Thus the poem itself is an example of the power of language; it is effective rhetoric, in the sense of persuasion; and its words seem to have obeyed his—or their own—injunction: "Soyez/La fourmilière immense, et travaillez!"
III. The Poetics of the mot propre

It is of course impossible to treat the whole of Hugo's production, even within a limited perspective. On the other hand, it is a critical commonplace to say of a particular poem or group of poems that it is in this work that Hugo realizes the aims set forth in "Réponse." I would like to look at some of these works to see how he carries out the precepts enunciated in "Réponse" regarding the mot propre, i.e., the rejection of neoclassical periphrasis and valorization of the literal.

It was periphrasis on which Hugo concentrated in the attack on neoclassical tropes he mounted in "Réponse," and there are reasons for his choice. It was by means of periphrasis that "low" expressions could be avoided in literary works. Among the uses of the trope that Dumarsais points out (154-55), the first ("Par bienséance, . . . pour envelopper les idées basses ou peu honnêtes") and the third ("pour l'ornement du discours, . . . la périphrase poétique présente la pensée sous une forme plus gracieuse ou plus noble") depend on the distinction between noble and low expressions Hugo denounced in his poem. Periphrasis was also an easy—and a common—target. Voltaire, for instance, criticized a poet for not saying right out, "le roi vient" (quoted approvingly by Fontanier, 362). The most famous mocking of the device is probably Molière's in "Les Précieuses ridicules," but he is by no means alone. Theoreticians of rhetoric all warn against its overuse or misuse (See Dumarsais, 156; Fontanier, 362-63; Morier, 299-300). Thus, Hugo's derision of "le long fruit d'or" is itself conventional; it arises from a long tradition of caricaturing preciosity.  

But as I have already suggested in discussing "Réponse," there is a deeper reason for his concentrating on this figure: his belief in the coincidence of the word and the thing. This concept can perhaps be seen most clearly in the poems he wrote about the "book of nature," poems like "A André Chénier," "La Vie aux champs," and especially "Je lisais. Que lisais-je?" (all from the Contemplations). In this last poem we find the lines:

Le monde est l'oeuvre où rien ne ment et ne dévie,
Et dont les mots sacrés répandent de l'encens.
If the world is a book, then Hugo's words can reproduce it perfectly; his poetry can mime the universe. But periphrasis goes around the word: it is the very figure of deviation. Hugo is committed to the correspondence theory of truth, to the direct expression of the world through language. Hence the importance of the literal.

His introduction of the "real words for things" can be seen especially in the works in which he treats scenes from domestic life. Bonald had pointed out that the general rule delimiting what was acceptable and what was not in the high style came down to the distinction between the public and the domestic spheres, the latter involving "détails familiers" which had to be avoided (1005-8). Hugo was among the first to turn his attention to that sphere as a subject for serious verse, as he announced in the preface to Les Feuilles d'automne: "Ce n'est point là de la poésie de tumulte et de bruit; ce sont des vers sereins et paisibles, des vers comme tout le monde en fait ou en rêve, des vers de la famille, du foyer domestique, de la vie privée, des vers de l'intérieur de l'âme" (Oeuvres poétiques 1:715). Such poetry naturally tended to incorporate elements from the semantic fields that had been proscribed. Thus we find in this collection references to particular objects from everyday life in lines like "Table toujours servie au paternel foyer" (I), "Dans l'alcôve sombre" (XX), or "L'autre jour, il venait de pleuvoir, car l'été,/Cette année, est de bise et de pluie attristé/. . . J'avais levé le store . . ." ("La Pente de la rêverie"). This last example shows the way such elements are commonly associated with prose syntax. Brunot (in Petit de Julleville, 7:731) points out that laver, perfectly acceptable when used figuratively, was familiar in the line from "La Prière pour tous," "Comme un pavé d'autel qu'on lave tous les soirs." Although not "familiar" as a dictionary classification, laver was a term that could be considered surprising both because it came from the domestic sphere and because of this literal use, showing the link between the detail of everyday life and the rejection of periphrasis. Such usage can be found throughout Hugo's poetic career and especially in works where he treats interior scenes or the "simple life" as in Les Chansons des rues et des bois. As he wrote in Les Voix intérieures XX: "La vie aux mille soins, laborieux et lourds,
poésie!” It will be useful to look at two such works, “A des oiseaux envolés” (from *Les Voix intérieures*) and “Les Pauvres Gens” (from *La Légende des siècles*) to see what role these elements can play in the functioning of particular texts.6

“A des oiseaux envolés” is an interesting example because of the many devices Hugo uses to create its poetic effect and because of the claims it makes about poetry. In this poem the poet calls to the children he has evicted from his study for having put some of his verses into the fire in their play. Examples of conversational speech combine with natural syntax to give a casual tone and the impression of spoken discourse, as in expressions like *Voilà tout, Belle perte! en effet!,* and *oh non!—dicter des vers?/A quoi bon?* and in the following lines:

Il pleuvait ce matin. Il fait froid aujourd’hui.
Un nuage mal fait dans le ciel tout à l’heure
A passé. Que nous veut cette cloche qui pleure?
Puis on a dans le cœur quelques remords. Voilà
Ce qui nous rend méchants.

Here the two enjambements and the simple syntax combine to create a prose rhythm. The diction is likewise both simple (there is not a word that goes beyond the vocabulary of a very young child) and colloquial (“Que nous veut cette cloche,” “Un nuage mal fait,” and so on).

There are many mentions of the particular accoutrements of the poet’s study: his table, his chair pushed against the wall, “mon grand fauteuil de chêne et de tapisserie,” pencils, crayons, and the books and various objets d’art displayed around the room. This emphasis on the concrete detail will be examined further in the context of the realism of “Les Pauvres Gens”; here the objects are important especially because they are explicitly opposed to poetry. Indeed, the poem is, in large measure, about the opposition of poetry to everyday life. Not only have the children already destroyed some of the poet’s verses, his other children (“embryons près d’éclore”), but they continue to be opposed to his work when he calls them back to his study. He tells them to go on distracting him, to bump his arm, to cast shadows on the book he is reading, and even to throw more verses into the fire. The children’s charm, beauty, and grace are contrasted with his verses, “boiteux, difformes,
Hugo: Responding to "Réponse"

Furthermore, the burning of the poems is opposed to a serious crime they might have committed instead, breaking one of the china vases: "Quel crime? quel exploit? quel forfait insensé?/Quel vase du Japon en mille éclats brisé?" There is a series of references to fine porcelain throughout the poem, all preceded by the first person possessive adjective ("mes tasses de Saxe," "mon vieux Sèvres," "mes vases de Chine"), until at last to woo the children back he makes the sacrifice of letting them touch "Mes gros chinois ventrus faits comme des concombres." (It is the Bible, however, that is presented as the ultimate treasure). So poetry is one pole of a dichotomy with domestic life (represented by children and fine china) at the other extreme.

When the poet claims to value the latter more than the former, the reader cannot avoid the feeling that Hugo protests too much. We cannot accept as fully ironic "Belle perte, en effet!" the description of his poetry as ugly, nor the opposition between the useless poetry of Hugo and the beautiful verses of Méry, "qui demain s'enverleront aux cieux." These works he would not let his children touch. Méry's "birds" (or his children: "les vers nouveau-nés") are his verses; Hugo's birds are his own children: "des oiseaux envolés." Had Hugo chosen a more serious candidate as his rival, it might not be so difficult to accept his modesty as sincere. Hugo cannot even bring himself to characterize Méry as great: he calls him "le poète charmant." Furthermore, the opposition between family and poetry can hardly stand up when it appears in a poem. At least we know Hugo has not allowed his children to burn the lines we are reading.

In fact, this poem brings together the two spheres it seems to contrast, linking them on several levels. First, the lines "Toute ma poésie,/c'est vous, et mon esprit suit votre fantaisie" explicitly unites the children with the poet's work. Moreover, the children are presented as able to approach directly the "poem of nature," again a kind of poetry opposed to his own:

Ce livre des oiseaux et des bohémiens,
Ce poème de Dieu qui vaut mieux que les miens.

If the poet wants to follow their fantasy, it is to approach their direct access to this true poetry. Indeed, he wants to carry to
the realm of domestic life the direct representation of nature he believes poetry capable of attaining.

The highly rhetorical nature of this poem (both in the sense of figure and as relation to the reader) precludes our seeing in it the destruction of rhetoric "Réponse" called for. But it does not diminish what he has accomplished in this poem: through his introduction into verse of the subjects, the objects, and the language of everyday life, he has made those elements the carriers of poetry. In this text his children have become his poetry, not because these pretty creatures seem like "real" children to us (in fact, they don't), not because he can give us direct access to their lives, but because he has made poetry out of them. In the opposition children/poetry, poetry has won.

This poem has often been compared to the fifteenth poem of *Feuilles d'automne* and "Le Pot cassé" from *L'Art d'être grand-père*. The former opposes poetry to children as in this text and claims that rather than being a distraction they serve to enrich the poet's work. But there are no familiar expressions and almost no details of everyday life. Even the line cited by Brunot (in Petit de Julleville, 731-32) as examples of the *mots proscrits ou suspects* Hugo introduced into verse, "Ebranlez et planchers, et plafonds, et piliers!" ends in a word evocative of grander constructions than a bourgeois house. The same attitude is taken in "Elle avait pris ce pli" (*Les Contemplations*), where the daughter's morning visits give the poet new strength. The point of departure for "Le Pot cassé" is a broken china vase, but there is no opposition established between poetry and the family. On the other hand, in this late work the diction is free enough to admit *water-closet* in a description of paradise.

Of course, there are many other instances of the poetry of ordinary life in Hugo. But the question we should ask is the extent to which such poetry's use of concrete details represents the rejection of the figurative in favor of the literal advocated in "Réponse." A text that can help us to answer this question is "Les Pauvres Gens." Its title alone makes it clear that Hugo is claiming to depict a class of society usually absent in poetry and leads us to expect the introduction of lexical elements appropriate to the milieu and probably inappropriate to serious verse.
The poem begins as follows:

Il est nuit. La cabane est pauvre, mais bien close.
Le logis est plein d’ombre et l’on sent quelque chose
Qui rayonne à travers ce crépuscule obscur.
Des filets de pêcheur sont accrochés au mur.
Au fond, dans l’encoignure où quelque humble vaisselle
Aux planches d’un bahut vaguement étincelle,
On distingue un grand lit aux longs rideaux tombants.
Tout près, un matelas s’étend sur de vieux bancs,
Et cinq petits enfants, nid d’âmes, y sommeillent.
La haute cheminée où quelques flammes veillent
Rougit le plafond sombre, et, le front sur le lit,
Une femme à genoux prie, et songe, et pâlit.
C’est la mère. Elle est seule. Et dehors, blanc d’écume,
Au ciel, aux vents, aux rocs, à la nuit, à la brume,
Le sinistre Océan jette son noir sanglot.

It is obvious that Hugo bases his picture on a series of concrete details calculated to give the reader an impression of the household and its inhabitants in much the same way as a realist novelist might do. Particular elements carry particular sorts of information: the adjectives pauvre, humble, vieux reinforce the title; the net hanging on the wall gives us the profession of the husband; the gleaming of the dishes indicates the cleanliness of the family; the praying wife, their piety. The bed with its long curtains would seem to be a gratuitous detail, a kind of “effet de réel” were it not that Hugo needs the curtains to hide the children in the bed to prepare for the “surprise” (though it is doubtful that readers are in fact surprised) of the poem’s last line: “Tiens, dit-elle en ouvrant les rideaux, les voilà!”

Several remarks should be made about these elements. First, they are primarily carried by nouns: cabane, filet, bahut, and so on. Second, like all realist details, they are typical. As Aragon pointed out about “Souvenir de la nuit du 4” (Châtiments), (a work he sees as fulfilling the “credo du réalisme en poésie” of “Réponse”), the top in the child’s pocket is “le détail qui fait croire au tout, le détail typique du réaliste” (Hugo, 46, 54). Aragon goes on, however, to make a further point about such details: “Pas un mot qui ne soit la description des choses telles qu’elles sont, qui ne suppose l’existence des choses indé-
pendamment de celui qui les dit” (48). But if the motivation of elements like those in the first section of “Les Pauvres Gens” is so easy to recuperate, it is just because they are not simply brute facts. Rather, the relation between even these simple nouns and their referents is accomplished by a detour, by figure. It is their figurative quality that invests them with their meaning. They are metonymic in nature: the net is a metonymy for the husband’s profession, the “humble vaisselle” is another metonymy for their poverty; its gleaming is a synecdoche for the objects in their room, all, we are sure, equally clean despite their humbleness. Indeed, the dishes themselves can be taken as a synecdoche for the lives of these “pauvres gens”: humble but shining.

This is in fact the message carried by the poem’s language levels as well. Another look at the first lines of the poem shows that, though everyday objects are mentioned, the diction used to describe the scene, though simple, has no trace of familiarity, let alone vulgarity. Words like cabane and logis, for example, are perfectly acceptable. The allegorizing of the “Océan” in the last lines of this section prepares the richly metaphoric descriptions of the sea in the rest of the poem, where the language, far from incorporating colloquial elements, in fact includes “noble” words like “Dur labeur.” The reported speech of the fisherman and his wife later in the poem does include colloquial rhythms and expressions: “Tiens!” “cinq enfants sur le bras,” “c’est gros comme le poing,” and so on. At one point the husband refers to the orphaned children as “ces chiffons.” But even here there are examples of higher diction and expressions we would not expect in this milieu. As he considers adopting the children of his dead neighbor, the fisherman says “Ce sont là des accidents profonds”; and he imagines that “C’est la mère, vois-tu, qui frappe à notre porte.” It is instructive to contrast Hugo’s reproduction of popular speech in “Les Pauvres Gens” with Corbière’s in “La Balancelle.” Other than some familiar syntactical constructions and the use of chiffons, Hugo’s fisherman speaks mostly in standard, even somewhat elevated French:

“Je suis volé, dit-il; la mer c’est la forêt.
—Quel temps a-t-il fait? —Dur. —Et la pêche?—Mauvaise.
Mais vois-tu, je t’embrasse, et me voilà bien aise.
Je n’ai rien pris du tout. J’ai trouvé mon filet.
Le diable était caché dans le vent qui soufflait.”

Corbière’s sailors, on the other hand, speak a tongue rich in popular constructions, *argot*, and sailors’ terminology:

—Bon! Si j’aval’ ma gaffe avant toi, faut pas s’rendre.
—J’sais ça z’aussi bien q’vous. — Oui, mais faut m’foutre le feu
Dans la soute à poudre, et . . . Ta main, pilote, adieu!

Though reduced in its use, in “Les Pauvres Gens” noble diction is still a sign of nobility, not of social class but of character.

This kind of raising of low subject-matter to a higher level, where it can be treated in a dignified style, is frequent in Hugo. Gély has shown how in many of the *Contemplations* “toutes ces choses familières . . . se révèlent ‘chooses cosmiques’” (*Intimité*, 419). The eye of the dying horse in “Melancholia,” for instance, is “plein des stupeurs sombres de l’infini./Où luit vaguement l’âme effrayante des choses.” In other words they do not remain familiar objects; they turn into greater things, like the holes in the beggar’s cloak that become constellations. Concrete details turn into figures.

We can conclude that, at least in these texts, the rejection of periphrasis and the inclusion of concrete details from everyday life did not lead to the elimination of figurative discourse any more than “Réponse” accomplished the rejection of rhetoric it called for. On the contrary, we have seen that such details play an important role in the figural structure of these works. Furthermore, the language level of these texts cannot be said to be very low; very few words would be classified as familiar at the time. What Gély discusses even in the *Contemplations* is “images familières,” not familiar language. That is, there are elements from the field of everyday life, but informality of tenor is infrequent. We should not undervalue the importance and the novelty of Hugo’s turn to the domestic sphere nor the freedom from periphrasis that it entailed; but it is to other works, most often later works, that we should look in order to find more frequent and striking uses of colloquial diction.
IV. “Les mots en liberté”

In the neoclassical hierarchy, both songs and satirical verse had a less stringent code of vocabulary usage. The stylistic motivations of familiar language in these genres will be the subject of a section of the chapter on Verlaine. But Hugo also extended the limits of the constraints governing them, and he used the very breaking of these rules as a stylistic device. I would like to examine some of the ways he puts into practice in such works the liberation of language he claims in “Réponse” to have accomplished. It is in Les Chansons des rues et des bois (1865) that he exploited the possibilities of the song and in Les Châtiments (1853) and Les Contemplations (1856) that he created his most famous polemical pieces, “Réponse” among them.

Calling a work “songs” suggests that we are not to take these poems too seriously. They might be comparable to songs meant to be sung like those of Béranger, noted for their use of popular language. A literary antecedent is the “littérature poissarde” (written in vulgar language), which had a vogue in the eighteenth century. Hugo alludes to this light genre when he refers to its creator, Vadé, in describing the “temple” of nature where the poet has been worshipping:

Ce temple qu'eût aimé Virgile
Et que n'eût point haï Vadé.

(“Clôture”)

The theme and practice of emphasizing the mot propre are important in Les Chansons:

O fils et frères, ô poètes,
Quand la chose est, dites le mot.
Soyez de purs esprits, et faites.
Rien n'est bas quand l'âme est en haut.

As these lines from “Réalité” show, the use of the literal expression is tied to a program of mixing styles; in effect, Hugo sets out to accomplish in lyric poetry what he had done earlier for the drame. Pronouncements of this intention appear often in this collection in lines that echo those above: “Rien n'est haut ni bas,” “du fond de toutes les proses/Peut s'élancer le
vers sacré” ("Le Poète bat aux champs"); “Mêle les dieux, confonds les styles” ("Genio libri"). This poetic program is the major theme underlying several of the pieces, and it provides the motivation for the many instances of familiar words and expressions.

It is in this collection that we find in Hugo the contrasts in diction that are a central characteristic of Baudelaire’s style and that will be pushed to such an extreme in the poetry of Rimbaud and Corbière. Hugo does not just slip occasionally into the familiar style in the manner of Musset; he very consciously juxtaposes literary and classical allusions with elements of everyday, contemporary life and with familiar or even popular terms. In “Le Poète bat aux champs,” the line

Bergers, plantons là Tortoni

combines the traditional characters of pastoral poetry with both an allusion to a Parisian café popular at the time and the familiar expression *planter là*. The poetic value of the familiar is the subject of the poem, whose first section ends with the lines: “Amis, le corset de Denise / Vaut la ceinture de Vénus.” In keeping with this tenet, the poem includes words like guinguette, voyous, gamineries, and the “mot très familier” (according to Littré), ces calembredaines-là. Chronology and stylistic level are mixed in another text when the poet tells us the genie of his book to:

Cours, saute, emmène Alphésibée
Souper au Café de Paris.

and

Que ton chant libre et disant tout
Vole, et de la lyre de Thèbe
Aille au mirliton de Saint-Cloud.

It is in this poem, “Genio libri,” that Hugo enunciates his program most clearly, echoing “Réponse” once more and again mixing allusions and language levels: “remue/L’art poétique jusqu’au fond./Trouble La Harpe, ce coq d’Inde,/Et Boileau . . . Plante là toute rhétorique.” He finishes the poem by combining a traditionally poetic sentiment with a prosaic rhythm and an intrusion from everyday life:
Pourvu qu'on sente la rosée
Dans ton vers qui boit du café.

The combining of poetic styles and the suppression of the distinction between high and low that these poems present are an important aspect of the "genius" of this book, and Hugo is able to explore their possibilities in a variety of texts. The third part of "Clôture," "Le Poète est un riche," for instance, reverses the hierarchy rich/poor: nature is the true source of wealth, and there, "le poète est propriétaire." This theme motivates the use of vocabulary of commerce and finance, a conceit appearing in virtually every stanza and including terms like appartements meublés, à crédit, rentes, and payé comptant. One of the last stanzas shows the effects to be elicited from striking contrasts in diction:

Quand les heures font leur descente
Dans la nue où le jour passa,
Il voit la strophe éblouissante
Pendre à ce Décroche-moi-ça.

Hugo begins with what is in effect a périphrase for the evening, incorporating the noble word nue and the "poetic" epithet éblouissante, only to end with Décroche-moi-ça. Referring to a secondhand clothes dealer's shop, this term (with various spellings) is classified as popular in the Larousse du XIXe siècle, and it appears in the slang dictionaries of Delvau, Larchey, and Delasalle. In these lines, then, high and low are confused stylistically as well as thematically.

In "Choses écrites à Créteil," Hugo returns to the subject of what a poet can or cannot say, with interesting consequences. The speaker in the poem makes clear his rhetorical stance vis-à-vis the implied reader, beginning with "Sachez," continuing "je vous le déclare," and ending with "je vous le dis." Indeed, the title makes it clear that the poem's subject is not only what happened at Créteil, but also what the poet has chosen to write about it. What he in fact writes is clearly set against the conventions of verse. He affirms that he addressed the young woman he saw by the water as "O lavandière!/(Blanchisseuse étant familier)." In doing so he recognizes distinctions in diction while simultaneously flouting them: however improper
the latter word may be, he has seen fit to use it in this line of poetry. The poem's central metaphor is the comparison of nature to clothing, in particular, to the sort of clothing the girl is washing in the stream. As a consequence stylistic juxtapositions abound, like the comparison of "ces nippes" to "Les blancs cygnes de Cythérée," or the contrast between the last three words and the rest of the following lines:

L'aube et la brise étaient mêlées
A la grâce de son bonnet.

What is mixed in these lines are not only the referents of these expressions, but also the stylistic milieux in which we would expect the terms used here to be found. This combining of stylistic markers is parallel to the elimination of social distinctions the speaker claims when he tells the young woman that "'Les rois sont ceux qu'adorent celles/Qui sont charmantes comme vous;'" and "'Si vous vouliez, je serais prince.'" The poem's first stanza contains the most such juxtaposition of this sort and the one, if we are to believe Hugo's note, that caused the most uproar: "'j'ai vu.../Une fille qui dans la Marne/Lavait des torchons radieux.'" The epithet does not appear to have been able to raise the language level high enough to suit Hugo's critics: torchon evoked milieux that were just too common. In a note he wrote but did not publish, Hugo describes the reaction:

quelle audace! quelle folie! je pouvais faire remarquer que j'avais dit cela dans un sourire. que c'était prendre ce sourire bien au sérieux. mais point. est-ce qu'il y a des circonstances atténuantes à torchons radieux? Torchons radieux! Torchons radieux! Torchons radieux! Pendant deux mois, dans beaucoup de journaux, il n'y eut guère que ce mot. (Oeuvres poétiques, 3:786-87)

This critical reaction has a certain irony: this poem, whose subject is at least in part what a poet can or cannot write, ends with singular discretion: "L'idylle est douce./Mais ne veut pas, je vous le dis,/Qu'au delà du baiser on pousse/ La peinture du paradis." What is shocking about this text and others in the collection, then, is not their licentiousness but the informality of their language and their use of referents from milieux con-
sidered low. The program of raising the most common subjects to the level of poetry did not, it appears, meet with universal success.

It is important to recognize, however, that this program was neither confined to Les Chansons nor without other resonances in Hugo's work. The collapsing of the distinctions between high and low subjects and discourse follows naturally from the Hugolian vision of oneness in the universe. The line "rien n'est haut ni bas" is echoed in "Rien n'est haut et rien n'est infime" from "Egalité" or "Rien n'est ni tout à fait mort ni tout à fait vivant" from "A Albert Dürer" (Les Voix intérieures). The link between this conception of nature and the mixture of poetic styles can be seen in the poem from Les Contemplations, "Unité," where the sun, "cette fleur des splendeurs infinies," is contrasted to the humble daisy. The last two lines describe the daisy looking up at the sun,

Le grand astre épanchant sa lumière immortelle.
—Et moi, j'ai des rayons aussi!—lui disait-elle.

The nobility of the former is marked by noble diction, including a neoclassical periphrase, the lowness of the latter by spoken syntax. Diction equals place in the universe; and both kinds of distinctions are to be erased.

But there is a fault in the logic of this unification, this leveling: in order to articulate it, Hugo needs the very distinction he sets out to eliminate. The poetic effect of "Unité" depends on our recognition of the differences between the two stylistic levels used. Furthermore, except for instances like this poem and texts with particular targets for attack, it is not in his philosophical poems that Hugo uses such diction. Even in the Chansons, as Ward has pointed out, the public, philosophic poetic voice gradually takes over from the private one. Familiar language does not seem to be so appropriate to such subjects as neutral, if not markedly noble discourse, for in these poems the diction is more elevated. "Au cheval," the final, visionary poem in the collection, includes words typical of neoclassical verse like aquilon, astres, and azurs; and the horse is described in the periphrase "le dételé du char d'Elie." Thus, we find again in this collection the structure of "Réponse": strong, low diction in passages thematizing the reversal of high
/low divisions, followed by higher diction as the poet turns to his vision of the future. Hugo implicitly concedes this point in one of the Chansons, whose title, “Paulo minora canamus,” admits the distinction between genres. The poet puts aside “pour un instant” “Tous nos grands problèmes profonds” to treat of humble flowers, little birds, and Jeanneton, the washerwoman. The language here makes it clear that the high/low opposition has not been banished: when “Meudon remplace Denderah,” “J'en descends; je mets pied à terre;/Plus tard, demain, je pousserai/Plus loin encor dans le mystère/Les strophes au vol effaré.” In fact, he does return to such subjects and such images later in the collection. Nonetheless, for Hugo, the light genre of song does permit language he rarely uses in serious verse; and it is for this reason that these works so often thematize as well as practice a rich and varied scale of poetic diction.

Not only in “Réponse” and its “Suite” but also in others of the Contemplations Hugo’s target is the restrictions in poetic diction, and his weapons include the very words of his text. “A André Chénier,” “Quelques mots à un autre,” and, especially “A propos d’Horace” make use of language from a wide variety of registers, and the lowness of their diction seems to vary directly with the violence of the attack. These poems can be read, however, in the context of the other genre that traditionally had a looser code of conventions, the satire.

Satire is a genre at which Hugo excels, and it is in such verse that we find some of his most striking innovations in poetic language. A look at satires such as Boileau’s shows that the genre could admit references to particular amounts of money, allusions to food as specific as “une langue en ragoust de persil couronnée,” and insults like “Filoux effrontéz” (21, 36). Boileau approvingly puts in the mouth of a rejected poet the same claim to using the literal expression that Hugo makes in “Réponse,” (where Boileau was one of the main targets): “Je ne puis rien nommer, si ce n’est par son nom./J’appelle un chat un chat, et Rolet un fripon” (14). On the other hand, he has been careful, he tells us in his preface, not to “laisser échaper un seul mot qui pust le moins du monde blesser la pudeur” (63). Bruneau defines the language traditionally appropriate to the satire as that of “la conversation soignée” (72-73). Now,
"soignée" is certainly not the term we would want to apply to the following lines from "Eblouissements" (Les Châtiments):

A ce ramas se joint un tas d'affreux poussahs,
Un tas de Triboulets et de Sancho Panças.
Sous vingt gouvernements ils ont palpé des sommes.
Aucune indignité ne manque à ces bonshommes;
Rufins poussifs, Verrès goutteux, Séjans fourbus,
Selles à tout tyran, sénateurs omnibus.
On est l'ancien soudard, on est l'ancien bourgmestre;
On tua Louis Seize, on vote avec de Maistre;
Ils ont eu leur fauteuil dans tous les Luxembourg;
Ayant vu les Maurys, ils sont faits aux Sibours;
Ils sont gais, et, contant leurs antiques bamboches,
Branlent leurs vieux gazons sur leurs vieilles caboches.
Ayant été, du temps qu'ils avaient un cheveu,
Lâches sous l'oncle, ils sont abjects sous le neveu.
Gros mandarins chinois adorant le tartare,
Ils apportent leur cœur, leur vertu, leur catarrhe,
Et prosternent, cagneux, devant sa majesté
Leur bassesse avachie en imbécillité.

It is impossible to do justice here to the range of language levels, the variety of objects of derision, the intensity of invective that Hugo attained in his polemical pieces. But a look at this passage from the poem can indicate something of Hugo's technique and the role language levels play in it.12

First, Hugo portrays his targets, those who support and benefit from the Empire, as physical and moral wrecks. He compares them to fools, Sancho Panza, and Triboulet (François I's fool); he shows them as old, feeble men with nothing to do but talk about the good times they used to have. To do so, he uses the vocabulary of illness (cagneux, poussifs, and so on). Such terms are used to denigrate the historical characters alluded to, like Rufin, who have already been presented as despicable characters. This language culminates in the line "Ils apportent leur cœur, leur vertu, leur catarrhe," where the shock of the last word comes not only from its contrast with the meanings of the words that precede it (and whose form in the line is identical), but also because of its status as a medical term. Its incongruity is underlined by the oddity of its spelling. These
are the kinds of effects that Rimbaud will achieve in his invective verse, in "Les Assis" in particular.

The names of the people mentioned in these lines, as so often in Hugo, lose some of their status as proper names: they lose their ability to refer uniquely both when they are used in the plural ("les Maurys," "un tas de Triboulets") and when they are modified by adjectives, as in "Ruffins poussifs." Another kind of confusion of reference occurs in the line "Gros mandarins chinois adorant le tartare": here the unlikely combination of characters compresses the technique used throughout this passage, where contemporary figures are used along with literary and classical allusions, where poussahs rub shoulders with bourgmestres, the foreign origin of the words underlying their incongruity. Hugo seems to attack his opponents with a barrage of unrelated names.

Low language has a particular role to play in such a passage. Hugo plays such expressions off against words like "leur vertu" and "sa majesté" as he did the medical term catarrhe. He chooses terms from the whole spectrum of French usage. Forty lines earlier, he had used the word grinche, from Parisian argot, perhaps the first appearance of argot in modern French poetry (Pléiade, 2:1107). Here, the low language varies from a familiarity in tone in lines like "On tua Louis seize, on vote avec de Maistre" or "du temps qu'ils avaient un cheveu" to the more properly familiar soudard, un tas de, and "ils ont palpé des sommes" to the next lowest level, the popular expressions caboches, bamboches for amusements, and gazons. This last term refers either to a wig or to the few hairs left on a bald head, and is listed in both Delvau and Larchey's dictionaries of slang. Bamboches is especially striking in its stylistic contrast with its epithet, the anteposed antiques. The perceptibility of such terms as antithetical to the pretentions of Hugo's targets, who claim to be other than the former soldiers and bourgeois that they are, plays a considerable role in the effectiveness of his satire.

Gaudon points out the novelty of the use of these slang and popular expressions in his very effective analysis of the combined effects of syntax, rhythm, and image in Eblouissements (Temps, 175-77). But he sees the introduction of such language in Les Châtiments as "une nouvelle application de la théorie
"du mot propre" (167; see also 168). This is the same opinion Sainte-Beuve expresses, with a pejorative impulse, when he writes that Hugo came to “attacher une vertu excessive au mot propre et . . . pousser quelquefois les représailles jusqu'à prodiguer le mot cru” (quoted in Gély, Intimité, 206). Yet when we look at the popular expressions introduced in this section, we find that they are figurative, not literal. *Un tas de* and *palper* are standard French in their literal senses. A *bamboche* is literally—and perfectly acceptably—a marionette; *faire des bamboches* meaning “se livrer à toutes sortes d’amusements et de plaisirs” (Littré) is figurative and popular. Likewise, the etymology of *caboches* combines *bosse* and the derivations of *caput*, whereas the metaphor embedded in *gazons* is obvious. Hugo himself claimed that figurative language depended upon popular language: “Le langage figuré est essentiellement le langage populaire. Les métaphores sont des filles de carrefours; il y a émeute d’images” (Notes de travail pour William Shakespeare, O.C., 12:351). Here the revolutionary class is not rioting to assert the rights of the *mot propre* as in “Réponse.” We do not need to assert the priority of popular language as Hugo does in this note to recognize its figurative dimension and to see it at work in his texts.

In his songs and in his satire, Hugo has certainly gone beyond the bounds of these genres as they existed at the beginning of the nineteenth century, where, according to Brueneau, the limits of familiarity did not exceed the terms that “l’honnête homme emploie dans la conversation” (Histoire, 12:72). On the other hand, in these genres no more than in “Réponse,” Hugo’s use of such language did not bring about a reduction in figurative language. Indeed, as the above quote shows, he himself was aware of the links between the two; and he was able to exploit them to the fullest in texts such as the ones we have studied.

We will see again in Baudelaire’s work the importance of details of everyday life; and Rimbaud will carry on the use of medical terminology and slang in his poetry of invective. We should not consider Hugo as a “source” for these poets, or even as a precursor: as mentioned earlier “Réponse” was first published in 1856, the same year as the *Odes funambulesques,* a
year before the first edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* and after many of them had already been published; *Les Chansons des rues et des bois*, published in 1865, followed the 1861 edition of the *Fleurs du mal* and preceded by only a year *Les Poèmes saturniens*, which include texts like "Croquis parisien" and "Monsieur Prudhomme." Nonetheless, as the critical reaction to "Réponse" shows, Hugo set the agenda for the way poetic diction was discussed in the nineteenth century and since; and the questions about figurative language he raised in that text and the others I have studied are those informing the work of the other major poets of the time.

As we have seen, Hugo's emphasis on the literal follows from one of the basic tenets of his thought, his belief in the power of language to mime the order in the universe: "Comprenez que les mots sont des choses" ("Suite"). This logocentrism both presupposes that there is such an order and valorizes denotation as the foundation of language. One of its consequences is the often-noted importance of nouns and naming in Hugolian rhetoric, an importance manifested in the predominance in his poetry of nominative syntax, condensed metaphors formed by the apposition of two nouns, accumulations of proper names, and extensive use of enumeration, as well as in the rejection of periphrasis studied above.

But just as there is a tension between stylistic "democracy" and the poetic means necessary to express it, there is an incompatibility between the vision of oneness in the universe (articulated, as we have seen, through diction as well as direct statement and other figures) and the priority of naming, whose function is to distinguish. It is for this reason that we find in Hugo both an affirmation of the power of language to name the world and the breakdown of the proper noun's capacity to refer. Furthermore, as Gaudon has noted ("Mesure," 230) and as the passage from "Eblouissements" shows, the very devices of accumulation and enumeration Hugo uses to fill up his poetic universe lead to a kind of excess that puts meaning itself into question.