"J'ai pétri de la boue et j'en ai fait de l'or," a line from one of his unfinished poems, is a succinct statement of Baudelaire's poetic method. A variation on it, "Tu m'as donné ta boue et j'en ai fait de l'or," was to have been the last line of the "Projet d'épilogue" for the second edition of the *Fleurs du mal*. The matter on which Baudelaire works his verbal alchemy is not only the subject matter of his verse, evil, say, or contemporary Paris (the epilogue is addressed to Paris), but also the verbal matter from which he fashioned his works. His vocabulary includes, along with the diction he inherited from neoclassical and baroque verse, the language of the streets he was among the first to depict. The ways such language is transformed into poetry or rather, the way such language transforms poetry will be the subject of this chapter. Among the issues raised by Baudelaire's poetry are the creation of a self-contradictory, oxymoronic style, the question of the "tragic seriousness" with which he treats the everyday, the charges of "prosaism" that have been leveled at his work, and the problem of "realism," especially in relation to the *Tableaux parisiens*.

The position of Baudelaire in the opening up of poetic language in the nineteenth century has elicited almost contradictory commentaries. Valéry praises his poetry's pure melodic tone "qui la distingue[e] de toute prose" (611), whereas, Thibaudet criticizes his "défaillances de langue" (*Intérieurs*, 58). His restricted vocabulary is often contrasted with Hugo's, yet Baudelaire himself admired the range of the latter's language: "J'ignore dans quel monde Victor Hugo a mangé préalable-
ment le dictionnaire de la langue qu’il était appelé à parler; mais je vois que le lexique français, en sortant de sa bouche, est devenu un monde, un univers coloré, mélodieux et mouvant” (“Réflexions sur quelques-uns de mes contemporains,” 2:133).

It was the extension of poetic vocabulary that Gautier praised in Baudelaire’s own style:

> reculant toujours les bornes de la langue, empruntant à tous les vocabulaires techniques, prenant des couleurs à toutes les palettes, des notes à tous les claviers. . . . On pense bien que les quatorze cents mots du dialecte racinien ne suffisent pas à l’auteur qui s’est donné la rude tâche de rendre les idées et les choses modernes dans leur infinie complexité et leur multiple coloration (17-18).

Underlying criticisms of Baudelaire’s “défaillances de style” is often an implied correspondence between vulgar language and incorrect grammar, both in turn related to Baudelaire’s immoral life. Degradation in morals is seen as leading to degradation in language, as when Trahard explains the weakness of Baudelaire’s style by his physical and moral state:

> miné dans son corps et hanté par la peur d’une fin lamentable, il mène de surcroît une vie désordonnée qui l’épuise . . . érotisme, luxure, drogue. stupéfiants, opium . . . comment ne serait-il pas détraqué? . . . Lui manque également l’esprit d’ordre indispensable au poète. (133-34)

Thus, the problem of the relation between the poem and reality is reduced to a simple cause/effect relation between the poet’s life and his work. We shall see that this same parallelism is drawn in the cases of both Verlaine and Rimbaud. But even if such a correlation could be proved, it does not explain how such diction functions in his work. We will have to look in more detail at the ways in which Baudelaire transforms the reality and the language of everyday life into the “gold” of his poetry.

1. Oxymoronic Style: From Mud to Gold

In “Fusées” Baudelaire writes: “le mélange du grotesque et du tragique est agréable à l’esprit comme les discordances aux oreilles blasées” (O.C., 1:661). One of the most obvious and
most often remarked-on aspects of his style is his alliance of disparate elements, his tendency to oxymoron. It can be seen most clearly in titles like “Horreur sympathique,” “Madrigal triste,” in joinings like “aimable pestilence,” and in the basic structuring of poems like “Réversibilité” and “L’Héautontimorouménos.” The oxymoron has as its nature the joining of two contradictory elements, but theorists often assert that they are only seemingly separate. The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics points out that this figure “reveals a compulsion to fuse all experience into a unity” and notes its frequency in religious poetry (596). Cellier links its use in Baudelaire to the passage from “un univers tragique à un paradis, de la dualité à l’unité,” and sees a mythical transcendence (related to the “correspondances”) in the oxymoron’s conciliation of opposites (5, 7-9). Fontanier discusses the figure under the heading of “paradoxisme,” and he, too, emphasizes its conciliating power. But whereas Preminger and Cellier point out its mystical aspects, Fontanier emphasizes its underlying rationality: though it could not be taken literally “sans absurdité,” “ce n’est pourtant pas sans un peu de réflexion que l’on peut bien saisir et fixer ce qu’il donne réellement à entendre” (137). He goes on to analyze a series of examples of the figure, showing how they can be understood despite their apparent logical inconsistency: “Faites bien attention aux circonstances, et déterminez bien le sens des deux mots, vous verrez que c’est très-possible” (138). His explanations all seek to bring within the realm of the logical, the reason-able, these seeming threats to rationality. He is very much aware of their danger, however: the use of these expressions requires “la justesse des idées qui les rapprochent”; otherwise we would be left with “pur galimatias . . . un bizarre et monstrueux accouplement de mots discordans et vides de sens” (140). The strength of his language reveals his fear that language will go awry, out of control, that the animal will emerge (accouplement), destroying reason by leading to the loss of meaning altogether. This figure is a monster, an assemblage of disparate parts engendered by an unnatural union.

This attraction to/fear of the irrational appears in Baudelaire’s repeated use of the figure. The urge towards rationality is always thwarted by the oxymoron, which must resist the
transcendence of its contradictions in order to exist as figure. "Paradoxisme" can be seen not only in the oxymorons in Baudelaire's verse, but in an "alliance de mots" from disparate registers as well. There is a kind of stylistic paradox in lines like "Ma pauvre muse, hélas! qu'as-tu donc ce matin?" ("La Muse malade") or "Amour . . . Gloire . . . Bonheur! Enfer! c'est un écueil!" ("Le Voyage"). Baudelaire makes full use of the stylistic potential of such juxtapositions.

In "Tu mettrais l'univers entier dans ta ruelle," for example, a series of contrasts on various levels culminates in the interlocking oxymorons of the famous last line:

"O fangeuse grandeur! sublime ignominie!"

The first line of the poem expresses a paradox: the entire universe is put in the woman's "ruelle": then the "machine . . . en cruautés féconde" is characterized as a "salutaire instrument"; whereas the concept underlying the whole poem is the paradox of the impure, cruel, blind animal who is used to "pétrir un génie." In such a poem it is not surprising to find that traditional rhetorical devices (apostrophe, hyperbole, personification of nature), the euphemism of ruelle, inverted syntax, and archaisms like appas should be countered by the expression "Comment n'as-tu pas honte?" and the stylistically disparate line:

Tes yeux, illuminés ainsi que des boutiques.

Thus, paradoxes in diction double the poem's underlying oxymoronic structure.

The far-reaching implications of such language can be found in "Au lecteur." As the first poem of Les Fleurs du mal, it gives the reader an idea of what to expect in Baudelaire's language as well as in his thematics. Not only does it show the range of his vocabulary, (including terms from such diverse registers as the archaisms "travaillent nos corps," the zoological term helminthes, the exotic word houka, and the popular or vulgar ribote), but also, it shows how elements from different registers are juxtaposed. Others have examined the poem in detail and pointed out some of the stylistic effects created by such juxtapositions; I would like to concentrate on the ways diction helps to create the dissonances in Baudelaire's style that I have
called oxymoronic. First, the rhetorical figure itself is the basic trope underlying the poem: not only the obvious “aimables remords” and “monstre délicat,” but also the “plaisants dessins” of rape, poison, etc., the descent “sans horreur à travers des ténèbres qui puient,” and the line “dans un bâillement avalerait le monde” are instances of “paradoxisme.” These are paralleled by stylistic discordances. The line that sums up the central idea of the attractiveness of evil,

Aux objects répugnants nous trouvons des appas;

combines the two: the paradox created by the joining of répugnants and appas is overlaid with the incongruity of the noble term appas in such a context.

There is a further incongruity in the way this philosophical poem contains not one but many references to food, a semantic field marked as distinctly unpoetic. Alimenter, nourrir, and une vieille orange are obvious examples, but grassement carries similar connotations, and helminthes are intestinal worms. Thus, the word riboter, conflicting stylistically with the rhetorical second half of the line:

Dans nos cerveaux ribote un peuple de Démons,

is doubly unacceptable and doubly appropriate here as both a popular word and one that refers to an excess of eating and drinking.

Given its “unnatural” unions of terms and stylistic levels, we should not be surprised to find monsters in this poem. The first to appear are the “peuple de Démons.” Though likened to intestinal worms, they are to be found in our brains, in a rhetorical figure that is monstrous in a different way from oxymoron, catachresis. Another catachresis, or forced (mixed) metaphor, occurs in the next lines:

Et, quand nous respirons, la Mort dans nos poumons
Descend, fleuve invisible, avec de sourdes plaintes.

Here Death is both a river and a creature emitting muffled (literally, “deaf”) cries: a hypallage within a catachresis. Monsters seem to beget monstrous language as well as vice versa. The list of beasts of prey in the eighth stanza is followed by a
list of their attributes ("glapissants, hurlants," etc.), here as-
signed to "monstres" in general.

This series of accumulations culminates in the image of En-
nui, who could swallow the world in a yawn—again an oxymor-
on and again an allusion to eating. The final phrase des-
cribing it, "monstre délicat," repeats this structure, ending the
text (before the famous last line) in both another oxymoron
and yet another reference to eating in délicat (in the sense of
"fastidious" or "finicky"). This gradated series ends in the ad-
dress to the final monster, the reader himself, a two-faced
creature whose contradictory spiritual attributes have been
the subject of the poem. In the final line, the like and the un-
like—the poet and, however unwittingly, the reader—are
linked in the words "—mon semblable—mon frère." Chanta-
voine, a turn-of-the century reader, found this line, "agressif et
peu engageant" (30). In one sense, however, it is as engaging as
it is possible to be: the poem's language has effectuated the
linkings that make it impossible to escape its conclusion. It
would be a mistake, however, to take this text's "oxymoronic"
style as a means to a higher transcendance or to try to show
how the two poles of poetic language cancel each other out.
Their poetic effect depends on the tension between them and
the stylistic "monsters" they create. The resultant discordance,
far from being a weakness, gives the poem its power.

It is in a different way that "Le Monstre," one of Baudelaire's
last poems, makes use of discordance in diction. Not surpris-
ingly, given its title, it contains his most concentrated use of
"low" expressions. He recognized both its shock value and its
disparities in style in a letter to Mendès regarding its possible
publication in the Parnasse contemporain: "Je vous préviens
que la pièce intitulée Le Monstre, si toutefois vous osez l'im-
primer, a maintenant quinze ou seize couplets, avec un certain
air archaïque qui en sauve un peu la crudité." As the critical
editions point out, in this poem Baudelaire is imitating the
"poèmes satyriques" of the baroque period, works that paro-
died and ridiculed the lyrical style of love poetry. He could be
describing their method and his when he writes in a review of
Cladel's Les Martyrs ridicules: "La disproportion du ton avec
le sujet, disproportion qui n'est sensible que pour le sage dés-
intéressé, est un moyen de comique dont la puissance saute à l’œil . . . surtout dans les matières concernant l’Amour, véritable magasin de comique peu exploité” (O.C., 2:185). Comic devices begin in this poem with its subtitle, “Le Paranymphe d’une nympe macabre,” with its juxtaposition of *nymphe* and *macabre* and the play on words: a *paranymphe* was a speech praising theological and doctoral candidates at the end of their examinations. Other puns include “Je suis diablement affligé” (line 66), and the lines:

> Je préfère tes clavicules  
> A celles du roi Salomon,

alluding to a book of magic attributed to Solomon. An editor’s note in *Les Epaves* calls attention to this last one: “Voilà un calembour salé! Nous ne cabalerons pas contre.”

The basic comic structure, typical of the genre, is the deflation of the traditional devices of love poetry. Parts of the woman’s body, usually praised extravagantly, are held up to ridicule here with a virulence that prepares the way for Rimbaud’s “Vénus anadyomène” and “Mes petites amoureuses.” Thus, her “front de guerrière . . . ne pense et rougit que peu”; her eyes, far from lighting up his life, “semblent de la boue”; her skin is “brûlante et sans douceur,/Comme celle des vieux gendarmes.” A related device is the juxtaposition of caressing tones and insults, as in: “Tu n’es plus fraîche, ma très chère” or “ce lustre abondant/Des choses qui sont très usées.”

The introduction of terminology related to food adds another incongruous element to the text: a kind of sign of the un- or, rather antipoetic, it serves to further disparage the usually elevated subject. “Bouilloner,” perfectly acceptable in its figurative sense, becomes literalized via the expression “bonne chère” and leads to the characterization of the woman as an old pot in the lines:

> Le jeu, l’amour, la bonne chère,  
> Bouillonnent en toi, vieux chaudron!

Both *piments* and *salières* have culinary senses; and the woman’s collarbones (not the part of the body love poetry usually celebrates) are contrasted with the melons and pumpkins other lovers might favor. Furthermore, in a letter to Malassis
Baudelaire: De quelle boue? 75

asking for information about the "giraumont" Baudelaire makes it clear that such allusions were to be taken as signifying the grotesque: he asks whether the term (referring to a kind of pumpkin) could be applicable to "toutes les tumeurs comme seins, fesses, et généralement à l'obésité" (23 janvier 1866, Correspondance, 2:577. So when he likens the woman to a thing (and worn-out things at that) the poet is merely making explicit the process of dehumanization the poem as a whole operates.

But if this text represented nothing more than a crude form of humor it would not be very interesting, and it would not explain its title. What is monstrous in this poem is the combination of attraction and repulsion it expresses. The line, "Des choses qui sont très usées," is followed by "Mais qui séduisent cependant." Expressions like certes, mais, cependant, pourtant, and malgré, are used throughout the poem to articulate this paradox. It is summed up in line 39, where the parallelism in structure makes the contrast all the more obvious: her lips are bitter (the opposite of the usual "sweet as wine"), yet they are an Eden "Qui nous attire et qui nous choque."

The poem's frequent disparities in diction serve to convey this ambivalence. Archaisms like narguer and the language of love poetry are opposed by familiar words like tendron and caravanes (in the sense of "une vie aventureuse et dissipée" [Littré]) and the popular expressions salières (for the hollows behind a thin person's collarbones) and déche ("poverty"). Baudelaire's diction falls to its lowest level in the vulgar term cas and the word cancan, which Littré classifies as "très-familier et même de mauvais ton." Such terms underline the oxymoronic structure of the poem. In lines like:

Ta carcasse a des agréments
Et des grâces particulières;

it is the language-level of the term carcasse used to refer to a woman's body that creates the paradox. "Ma vieille infante" inverts this procedure by deflating the elevated term, and this time it is an oxymoron besides.

As in "Au lecteur," linguistic paradoxes in "Le Monstre" point up thematic ones; and again the poem ends in an oxymoron and one that refers to a monster: the woman he loves is
a “monstre parfait.” It is followed by yet another paradoxisme, one englobing the rest of the poem:

Vraiment oui! vieux monstre, je t’aime!

In this last stanza, the poet underlines one paradox with another while denying it is a paradox: he says he is seeking “la crème” of evil (another alimentary reference as well as another oxymoron) and therefore that he is “très logique” in loving the monster. And indeed, in “Le Monstre” there is a kind of logic, though it is not clear whether for Baudelaire as a man repulsion led to attraction or vice versa. As a poet he was able to raise the attraction for the ugly to a new kind of beauty. The woman’s eyes “semblent de la boue”: from this mud he is able to fashion his poem, breaking down the distinction between the vulgar and the noble and accomplishing the program he sets forth in “Le Peintre de la vie moderne.” In this essay the prostitutes he proposes as models for the artist are “exemples d’une fatuité innocente et monstrueuse” (monstrous because of the mixture we have been studying). “Parfois elles trouvent, sans les chercher, des poses d’une audace et d’une noblesse qui enchanteraient le statuaire le plus délicat, si le statuaire moderne avait le courage et l’esprit de ramasser la noblesse partout, même dans la fange” (O.C., 2:721). What Baudelaire says we will find in Guys’ drawings of prostitutes is what can be found in his own poetry: “rien que l’art pur, c’est-à-dire la beauté particulière du mal, le beau dans l’horrible” (722).

II. “Aesthetic Dignity”: From Gold to Mud

In an important and influential article, “The Aesthetic Dignity of Les Fleurs du mal,” Auerbach studies this mixture of styles, demonstrating how Baudelaire created a new poetic style, “a mixture of the base and contemptible with the sublime, a symbolic use of realistic horror.” Though his object is to show how Baudelaire treated traditional subjects in new ways, what his essay reveals is how difficult it is to separate treatment from subject matter. His point of departure is a discussion of the fourth “Spleen” poem (“Quand le ciel bas et lourd”). He begins by showing how, through the alexandrine line, allegorical figures, and “grave rhythm,” Baudelaire estab-
lishes the dignified style appropriate to his subject, “deep despair,” and then how he introduces “things that seem hardly compatible with the dignity of the sublime”: the sky compared to a pot lid, the trappings of horror stories, the medical term *cerveaux*, and the images in the last stanza. But as Auerbach proceeds in his analysis of the poem, his subject subtly changes. It turns out that rather than treating a lofty subject in trivial terms, Baudelaire has done the reverse: “He was the first to treat matters as sublime which seemed by nature unsuited to such treatment” (154). The subject of the poem, which had been “deep despair” (worthy of the poem’s “lofty tone”), is now an untraditional subject, “gray misery.” The stylistic contradiction has shifted to that between this “lofty tone” and the lowness of both the subject matter and “many details” (153).

When we look at the elements that, according to Auerbach, constitute both this tone and its other pole, we find that they combine without distinguishing them many different aspects of discourse, from rhythm to rhetoric to diction. Furthermore, when he goes on to treat Baudelaire’s love poetry, the “harsh and painful disharmony” he finds is at the subject level only: he is referring to the contradiction between the simultaneous hatred and attraction the poet expresses. Questions arise, too, with respect to his comments on the poem’s diction: he makes too much perhaps of the use of *cerveaux* and *hurler*, both of which had a long tradition of figurative use. On the other hand, though he finds the image of the bells compared to “des esprits . . . qui se mettent à geindre opiniâtrement” as contributing to an “absurd hubbub” (152), he does not note the fact that *geindre* was a familiar term, the only word in the poem that would be unacceptable because of its informality in tenor alone.

What Auerbach’s essay reveals is how these levels, which I have been trying to distinguish, tend to influence each other, how they begin to shade into each other. Their interrelationship can be seen in the second “Spleen” poem (“J’ai plus de souvenirs”), which I will look at more closely and also in another aspect of Baudelaire’s poetry that Auerbach calls to our attention, the accent on the physical. Auerbach points out this aspect of Baudelaire’s work when he studies the carnal
nature of his love poetry, but the physical—and even the medical—are important elements in Baudelaire's verse as a whole. "Une charogne" will provide a starting point for the examination of such discourse.

The second "Spleen" is a poem that exhibits a kind of heterogeneity at many levels, and an examination of these levels shows how they are interrelated. First, on the level that particularly concerns us here, the lexicon of the poem draws on many different vocabularies, including the commercial terms *bilans* and *quittances*, the familiar word *fouillis*, the mythological sphinx, the allusion to Boucher, and the exotic *Saharah* (spelled with an extra "h"). On a syntactic level, there is a remarkable shifting of pronouns from *je* to *tu* via an *il* implied by the copula joining the *je* with the cemetery and the boudoir. On a syntactic level, there is a remarkable shifting of pronouns from *je* to *tu* via an *il* implied by the copula joining the *je* with the cemetery and the boudoir.7 On the level of the signified, there is a series of collections of *hétéroclite* objects: the secretary with its bills, verses, etc.; the pyramid, itself likened to a *fosse commune*, where corpses are thrown in pell-mell; the bedroom with its hodgepodge of objects.8

None of these things seems to have more importance than any of the others. Indeed, a kind of equivalence is established: love letters and bills are interchangeable. The fourth line makes the connection explicit:

Avec de lourds cheveux roulés dans des quittances.

Not only does this verse imply a mercenary relation between the lovers, but it also makes it seem impossible to distinguish between the hair and the receipts. That all these objects should be in the plural is another way of making them lose their particularity. Everything in this world seems to be equivalent to everything else. The phrase *à tiroirs* contains a similar implication in the sense of *tiroir* as an intercalated tale in a novel: such digressions (and often digressions within digressions—containers within containers) are joined by only the thinnest of links to the main story. Each of the objects in the poem could tell a story, but their stories—the stories of the poet’s life—are unrelated; there is no logical thread linking them.

The text as a whole is structured as a series of similes and metaphors, likewise lacking logical connections between them. The poet’s brain is first a secretary, then a pyramid, then
a cemetery, then a bedroom, and so on. Indeed, it must be so, because spleen, as presented in this poem, is just this loss of proportion, a loss of the capacity to distinguish that leads to "morne incuriosité." Hence the play on plus and moins and the echo between the first, isolated line:

J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans
and lines 17-18:

L'ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité,
Prend les proportions de l'immortalité.

Not only are the poem's images seemingly perfectly contingent, but the similes themselves show another kind of interchangeability, as in the line:

Où comme des remords se traînent de longs vers

Adam among others has pointed out the oddity of the use of "comme des remords" rather than "comme des vers"; both the meaning of comme and the normal functioning of similes are put into question.

In this context, then, fouillis is important at several levels: because it means a jumble of unrelated things and because its status as a familiar term doubles this meaning. But this pluri-valence indicates another dimension to the poem: an interrelatedness both on each of these levels and between them that counteracts the arbitrariness so important to its theme and its structure. There are links between the apparently unrelated images, including the container/contained structure of the images, the associations with death and dissolution, and the play on the word souvenir in the first line that generates the first section of the poem. The image of the pyramid is a good example of the ways each element can be tied to others:

C'est une pyramide, un immense caveau,
Qui contient plus de morts que la fosse commune.

The pyramid is one in a series of containers in the poem, and of course what a pyramid contains is both a corpse and a collection of objects that had surrounded the person in life. Furthermore, the pyramid as a shape evokes the idea of things piled up, accumulated, and thus it is related to both the accumula-
tions of objects and the image of the snow piling up. Moreover, the term prepares us for the images of the Sahara and the sphinx that will appear later in the poem. One could go on to every one of the other words in the lines just quoted and make similar connections, but the point should already be clear: not only do elements in the text reinforce and complement each other, but it seems possible to recuperate them in the poem's overall structure. This is the point of Jauss's "second reading" (161-70) in his masterly commentary on this poem, the phase he calls "interpretation." His goal is always to bring its disparate elements together to form a coherent whole, "the harmony of a coherence of meaning" (Toward an Aesthetic, 161). Although I would agree that the reader of poetry does follow a trajectory like the one he outlines in her deciphering of a text, I think it is important that this poem contains elements that work against such incorporation.

Auerbach had tried to show in the fourth "Spleen" "the contradiction between the lofty tone and the indignity both of its subject as a whole and of many details" (153). But our analysis of the second "Spleen" shows that it is not always easy to tell what is the whole and what is a detail. There are certainly incongruities in the poem, incongruities of diction among them. But incongruity itself is the subject matter here. At the same time, the sense of an incapacity to discriminate that pervades the poem acts as a counter to the reader's unifying tendencies: the series of images, however closely linked, could in principle continue spinning off indefinitely. Indeed, in a sense they do continue—in the three other poems also entitled "Spleen," in the section "Spleen et idéal," in the elastic collection Les Fleurs du mal. This metonymic confusion between the container and the contained repeats at a macrotextual level the structures of this poem and defeats our attempts to effectuate a metaphoric linking of all its parts. Its intricate orderings—as in the lines on the pyramid quoted above—get out of hand through the very multiplicity of their linkings and their resonances, miming the lack of order that (at one level) is the poem's structure as well as its theme.

Another text that points up the difficulty of distinguishing part from whole is "Une charogne." Its stylistic incongruities are perhaps the most obvious of all those in Baudelaire's work.
and they have elicited a good deal of commentary. The poem was considered shocking by his contemporaries, and time has not dulled the effect of its startling juxtapositions. Here is the tenth stanza:

—Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette ordure,
A cette horrible infection,
Etoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature,
Vous, mon ange et ma passion!

But when we speak of juxtapositions, are we speaking of the poem’s language or the relation between the signifier and the signified? There seem to be at least three kinds of clashes in style. One is on the level of diction alone. In the stanza quoted above, infection is incongruous as a medical term, in contrast to the conventionally lyrical—exaggeratedly so—language of the poet’s address to his beloved. But it is also incongruous because of its semantic field: an infection is not what one expects in the context of passion. Ordure functions in the same way without being a technical term. There is yet another kind of discordance, of which a good example occurs in the sixth stanza:

Tout cela descendait, montait comme une vague,
Ou s’élançait en pétillant;
On eût dit que le corps, enflé d’un souffle vague,
Vivait en se multipliant.

If one did not know that “tout cela” referred to the putrescences flowing from a carcase, there would be no evident conflict in register: the discordance here arises from the lack of proportion between the signified and the signifier.

The whole poem is built on these oxymoronic clashes in style, including clashes between terms (“la carasse superbe”); ironic touches, like the dog looking for another morceau (a delicious morsel) of the carcase; and incongruous expressions like cuire à point, another culinary term. The last lines show how the poem’s richness of association serves to defeat our efforts to classify its language:

Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine
Qui vous mangera de baisers,
Que j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine
De mes amours décomposés!

The word *décomposés* clashes with the rest of the stanza (except for the word *vermine*) in many ways. On a thematic level, it forms a contrast with the divine, unchanging world of forms. Its concreteness contradicts the abstract noun it modifies, *amours*, (thereby making us aware again of the physical—and perishable—reality of the woman the poem addresses). Finally, as a technical term, it is out of place not just in the company of “essence divine” and so on, but in poetry *tout court*. On the other hand, it takes its place in the series of clashes in diction that have constituted the poem; and it completes the series of allusions to art: his loves are “décomposés”; the poet will reconstitute them, he will make them into compositions.

And on yet another level, these incongruities of style can be recuperated, like those in “Spleen,” in a larger structure; they take their part in the development of the theme of transformation—one of the major themes of Baudelaire’s poetry—that underlies this text. What is dead is shown to be bursting with life: what is commonly considered repugnant is shown to be beautiful. The language of the poem mimes these transformations in the series of images in stanzas six through eight, where the carcase is compared to a wave, a “souffle vague,” music, running water, wind, and grain being winnowed. This text, then, accomplishes the transformations, the recomposition it describes. Because of this overarching theme it is able to accommodate its discrepancies. But only partially, as both the contemporary reaction and its continuing power for the reader attest: the poem is gripping to the extent that we cannot erase its contradictions. That the last word should be not one of reconstitution but of destruction and that is should be an “unpoetic” term are emblematic of its refusal to be assimilated in a redemptive vision of art.

Rimbaud is usually considered the innovator in the introduction of technical terms in French poetry, but it was Baudelaire who prepared the way. Mitchell has mentioned the extensive use of medical terms in Baudelaire and its place in Baudelaire’s poetics of the transformation of the ugly into the
beautiful ("Heart," 155). Such terminology is a part of Baudelaire’s accent on human physical reality, a semantic field usually eliminated from poetry. In a sense the body is what is most propre; and in Baudelaire it calls forth the most precise terms, from the “pieuses entrailles” of “Le Mauvais Moine,” to gerçures, cancrès, chloroses, phtisique, miasmes, hydropique, calenture, and many more. But the example of “Une charogne” shows how the very preciseness of this language, its very removal from the realm of euphemism and periphrasis usually to be found in poetry leads it to play an important role in the figural structure of the texts in which it appears. In “Une charogne” this preoccupation with the physical manifests itself on many levels: the lingering examination of the carcase in all its sensuous actuality, the linking of the abstract idea of love to its physical aspect, and the use of the scientific terms infection and décomposés. Its angle of vision is revealed in the last stanza, in the literalizing of the expression manger de baisers: the language of love has become the language of destruction, as the poetic ideal of love has been reduced to the physical, and as the language of love poetry has itself been radically transformed.

In this section I have been examining the ways in which Baudelaire renews the traditionally “high” subjects of poetry by introducing elements from the low style. I will go on in the next section to look at the other side of this verbal alchemy: his poetizing of the banal. But it should be clear how these categories tend to shade into each other, even trade places with each other, as in the contrast between the purely contingent and the metaphorically linked elements in “Spleen.” In “Une charogne” references to putrefaction reinforce the traditional carpe diem theme, but the language typical of poetry treating that theme is deflated by these same images and by discourse inappropriate to the subject. But this language itself is reappropriated in the creation of a new kind of beauty. This is what Jauss sees as Baudelaire’s “move away from the Platonic concept of the beautiful, a turn which was so decisive for the development of a modern poetics” (Aesthetic Experience, 243; see also 43). Baudelaire’s poetry puts into question the very concepts of “lofty” and “low” subjects and styles.
III. The Poetic and the Prosaic

The confusion of terminology about terminology pointed up by Auerbach's essay is related to that revealed by the conflicting senses of the word "prosaic" as it has been used by literary critics. Baudelaire's work has often been accused of "prosaism," but that charge has several different targets. The word prosaic can mean both "pertaining to prose . . . having the character, style or diction of prose," or, on the other hand and very differently, being "commonplace, dull, tame" (O.E.D.). Realistic elements—that is, elements like those to be found in the realistic novel of the time, are also often felt to be "prosaic" in the first sense, partly because of their association with that genre. But it must be remembered that such devices are anything but commonplace or dull when they intrude into the well-defined realm of poetry. Paradoxically, critics who have referred to Baudelaire's "prosaic" qualities in the second sense (or who wish to defend him from such a charge, like Valéry) are discussing what might also be considered his ultrapoetic aspects: that is, the conventional neoclassical rhetorical devices and diction often found in his poetry. These judgments reveal the fluidity of the concept of the "prosaic": what in one age was quintessentially poetic has become just the opposite by the time of Valéry and Thibaudet.

In both senses, when Baudelaire's style is described as "prosaic," the term is clearly pejorative. Defining the "prosaic" is at the same time but negatively to determine what is truly—or what should be—poetic. Though what they exclude may differ, critics seem to demarcate the boundaries of the "poetic" by defining what it is not. Yet it is curiously difficult to see just what is meant by "prosaïsme" as it is used by Baudelaire's critics. To the extent that it implies a lack of "nobility," it is related to the distinctions between levels of language that concern us here. Cuenot, in his study of Verlaine's style, puts in the same category the "mots familiers" and "termes prosaïques" that he feels Verlaine got from Baudelaire (76). This is the sense in which Trahard uses the term when he writes, "Baudelaire entremêle parfois des vers de haute volée à des vers prosaïques," giving as one of his examples "pour faire épau­nourir la rate du vulgaire" from "La Muse vénale" (122). But he
also uses the term to mean “platitudinous” or “banal.” Sometimes he seems to relate it to homely elements (as in the first *O.E.D.* meaning), sometimes to lines that have the rhythm of spoken language (“Mon berceau s’adossait à la bibliothèque,” for example). Sometimes, as in the line “Dans tous les hôpitaux et dans tous les palais” from “Le Soleil,” it is not clear just what reproach he is making. Likewise, in the list of examples of “gaucherie prosaïque” that Henri Peyre gives in his article “Sur le peu d’influence de Baudelaire,” it is far from obvious what qualities are shared by the line “Car le tombeau toujours comprendra le poète” (“Remords posthume”), the same line Trahard criticizes from “Soleil,” and the entire poems “Les Bijoux” and “J’aime le souvenir.” The *Petit Robert* classifies as obsolete the uses of *prosaïse* and *prosaïque* referring to poetry that is like prose (and thus, “qui manque d’élèvation”). In Baudelaire criticism the expression “vers prosaïque” is anything but obsolete, but it has lost precision as a theoretical concept. Even supposing agreement about its meaning, as Thibaudet notes, what one critic criticizes as “prosaic” will be admired by another (*Histoire*, 324). His example is the last line of “Le Cygne,” and he proposes a possible justification for the “platitude” of the last line in a coincidence between its style and the situation of the swan lost in the dust of Paris. On the other hand, his own language reveals where he stands on the issue: he says the language of the poem has come down from poetry “pour s’abattre dans la prose”; and he concludes his discussion by claiming that Baudelaire “ne connaissait pas sa langue et la grammaire de sa langue comme Gautier” (324-25).

Thibaudet was among the first to point out that what was new in Baudelaire’s verse was the way its art depended on dissonance, on the incorporation of “une prose nue et . . . une poésie pure” (*Histoire*, 324). Baudelaire’s poems are remarkable in the way they play these two kinds of prosaism—the traditionally rhetorical and the everyday—against each other. A good example of the tension between the two appears in “La Muse vénale,” whose central preoccupation, according to Antoine Adam in his edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*, is “effets d’antithèse et de dissonance” (284). These effects are brought about by a contrast between both the subject and the diction of neoclassical verse and commonplace elements and vocabulary.
The first stanza sets up this opposition (though it was signaled already in the title):

O muse de mon coeur, amante des palais,  
Auras-tu, quand Janvier lâchera ses Borées,  
Durant les noirs ennuis des neigeuses soirées,  
Un tison pour chauffer tes deux pieds violets?

The personification of January, the two inversions in the second line, the mythological figures (the muse and Boreas), the archaism amante, the traditional situation of the poet addressing his muse, all these devices put us securely in the realm of conventional poetry. Indeed, Borées in the plural, denoting north winds, shows how the frequent use of this mythological character in such verse had turned it into a common noun. The last line, with its simple words and “prosaic” (in the sense of humble) “tison,” clearly brings us down to earth from such realms. This pattern reappears in inverted form in the following lines from the next stanza:

Sentant ta bourse à sec autant que ton palais,  
Récolveras-tu l’or des voûtes azurées?

The neoclassical paraphrase and ultrapoetic terms in the second line contradict the familiar expression à sec, making the answer to the questions posed in this stanza an obvious “no.” The words “épaules marbrées” carry in themselves the text’s contrast between the high and the low styles. Marbrées can be taken as comparing her shoulders to marble in the traditional device of comparing parts of a woman’s body to precious materials. In this way it turns her into a statue, reminding us of statues of muses. The term also takes its place in the network of imagery relating to riches (palaces, gold, and so on) in opposition to the homely elements of the coal, the shutters, and the expression “gagner ton pain.” But in another sense, and in a very different register, marbrées can be taken as meaning her shoulders are mottled with cold. “Étaler tes appas” is another stylistic oxymoron: it confronts the term étaler, carrying its connotations of merchandising, with the noble word appas.

The poem culminates in the line:

Pour faire épanouir la rate du vulgaire.
Faire épanouir la rate is itself a familiar expression, carrying a connotation of vulgarity that effectuates a coincidence of sense and register. This verse epitomizes the way the familiar expressions serve to bring down the level of the subject matter (the poet’s muse) parallel to the lowering of the noble that is thematized in the poem. Rather than allowing the poem to end on the pathetic note of “ton rire trempé de pleurs qu’on ne voit pas,” familiar language gives the poem its bite, in a kind of stylistic shock.

This harsh note can be explained in part by the fact that what we have here is not a descriptive poem about a woman or a comment on poetic inspiration, but a text about poetry and language itself. Vénal has two interrelated senses, both appropriate here: “for sale” (the muse as prostitute), and “interested in money” (“amante des palais”). Of course the hypotext here (in the Riffaterrean sense), is the romantic situation of the artist forced to prostitute himself in order to survive in a venal, capitalistic society. The cliché that expresses this idea is “une plume vénale,” which generates the vocabulary of money appearing throughout the text. It also leads to the images of the falseness the muse is required to take on, like the author who must repeat the opinions of others. Indeed, “chanter des Te Deum auxquels tu ne crois guère” applies more clearly to the poet than to the muse as a woman. In this line language is presented explicitly as a medium of exchange, reflecting the exchange of money for poetry that is the basis of the poem and that gives it its structure. The extent to which the text is dominated by substitutions can be seen in the tercets, where the muse (already a substitution for the poet), who has been transformed into a prostitute, is metamorphosed into first, an altar boy (quite a change here) and then, a clown. Both these last transformations are necessary for her to “gagner [s]on pain”: that is, they take their place in what is already a system of exchange. But the exchange-rate is clearly not a favorable one, as the degeneration in both image and language reveals: we move from palaces to a shuttered room, from “l’or des voûtes azurées” into night; and the poetic style descends from the first words “O muse de mon coeur” to the last, “vulgaire.” Rather than making gold out of mud, this poem transcribes a transformation of gold into mud.
“Prosaism” in all the senses described above can be found in this poem: on the one hand, instances of familiar language and elements from everyday life, on the other, conventional poetic vocabulary and rhetorical figures. The way these devices interact is central to its meaning; a contrast between “high” and “low” underlies the text. Yet the poem puts into question the concept of the prosaic as “qui manque d’élégance, de distinction, de noblesse” (Robert, Dictionnaire): in its language the prosaic and the noble are juxtaposed; in the word marbrées they are combined; and in the series of comparisons used to describe the muse they are shown to be interchangeable. Baudelaire seems to be making this very point in one of the Fusées, “Il n’est même pas de plaisir noble qui ne puisse être ramené à la Prostitution,” a remark followed closely by another: “Qu’est-ce que l’art? Prostitution” (O.C., 1:649). The poet as prostitute becomes a kind of pure signifier in a system of exchanges, leading to a multiplication of similies that fail to accomplish a union of the poem’s disparate elements.

The interchangeability of the poetic and the prosaic provides the motivation for both the thematics and the stylistics of “Le Vin des chiffonniers.” Especially at the beginning of the poem, we find a mixture of “prosaic” elements and neoclassical figures and language. The former include gas lamps, the setting in the faubourgs (worker’s neighborhoods that were appearing at the outskirts of Paris); the characters of the ragpicker, his old soldier friends, and the police spies; and, on the level of the signifier, the familiar expressions grouiller and un tas de. On the other hand, in the line:

Vomissement confus de l’énorme Paris,

the noble epithets, the inversion of subject and adjective, the personification of Paris, all serve to eliminate the possibility of our taking vomissement in its literal sense, despite the fact that drunkenness is the poem’s subject. Similarly, in the first stanza the worker’s quarter is likened to a “labyrinthe fangeux,” the mythological allusion heightened by the noble epithet. This phrase is typical of the movement of the poem, whose subject is the transformation of the prosaic into the poetic, the “solennelle magie” that wine effectuates in the lives of the poor. The poet foretells a literal changing of the city’s mud
Baudelaire: De quelle boue?

into gold: “Le vin roule de l’or, éblouissant Pactole” through “frivolous Humanity.” The second stanza shows how this transformation is accomplished at a stylistic level:

On voit un chiffonnier qui vient, hochant la tête,  
Butant, et se cognant aux murs comme un poète,  
Et sans prendre souci des mouchards, ses sujets,  
Epanche tout son coeur en glorieux projets.

In the third line, *ses sujets* turns what was a ragpicker into a king, and at the same time it elevates the diction from the level of *mouchards*, a “terme de dénigrement” according to Littré. To a certain extent, the simile “comme un poète” has the same function. But here, as so often in Baudelaire, the simile does not refer the reader to a commonly-held set of assumptions about a second entity. Rather, it puts in doubt our standard preconceptions about both ragpickers and poets. We can turn the simile around: the poet is like the ragpicker because, by his own “solennelle magie,” he is able to make poetry from the stuff of ordinary life. The power of transformation this poem thematizes and exhibits thus undermines the separation of these two worlds. This is the poetic process Baudelaire describes in his essay on Banville: “Mais si vraiment! le poète sait descendre dans la vie; mais croyez que s’il y consent, ce n’est pas sans but, et qu’il saura tirer profit de son voyage. De la laideur et de la sottise il fera naître un nouveau genre d’enchante­ments” (*O.C.*, 2:167).

**IV. Modernity, Realism, and the Tableaux parisiens**

The passage I have just quoted from the essay on Banville on the poet and life is echoed in “Le Soleil,” where the sun is described in the following manner:

Quand, ainsi qu’un poète, il descend dans les villes,  
Il ennoblit le sort des choses les plus viles.

“La vie” has become “les villes”: in other words, life (at least contemporary life), means urban life. In *Les Fleurs du mal*, it is especially the *Tableaux parisiens* that deal with “chose modernes,” as Gautier puts it. Part of their “modernity” is just their subject: life in the city was a subject still very uncommon
in verse. "Le Soleil" also raises the question of how this new subject should or can be treated when the speaker describes himself as "trébuchant sur les mots comme sur les pavés." Because they introduce fields like prostitution and crime as well as many aspects of more ordinary Parisian life, in the *Tableaux parisiens* we find a high incidence of everyday words and expressions, the vocabulary to be heard in such milieux. There are also many terms that call up unpleasant or repugnant images, terms such as *s'empêtrer, puer,* or *ordure,* which are often classified by critics as vulgarisms or *trivialités.* The "descente" into life/the city, then, is paralleled by a lowering in language level.

Brooks has discussed the ways in which artists of the modern (in particular Baudelaire and Balzac) are concerned with the "accessory": in the context of nineteenth-century urbanization and industrialization, "life has come in some measure . . . to be determined by the life of the commodities, of the made things which man surrounds himself with" (11). The stylistic consequence of this orientation is an emphasis on the particular: and in poetry we can expect a turn to the precise term, the *propre,* which since Hugo was contrasted with classical periphrasis and with rhetoric in general. Indeed, Baudelaire's texts do incorporate references to elements of contemporary life, like buses, tugboats, and coal. Such elements have led to their characterization as "realistic" poems, because of the importance of detail and physical reality usually ascribed to realist prose.

But, in discussing the novels of Balzac, Baudelaire emphasizes rather the way the novelist was able to transcend the particular:

Son goût prodigieux du détail, qui tient à une ambition immodérée de tout voir, de tout faire voir, de tout deviner, de tout faire deviner, l'obligeait d'ailleurs à marquer avec plus de force les lignes principales, pour sauver la perspective de l'ensemble. . . . De cette étonnante disposition naturelle sont résultées des merveilles. . . . qui peut se vanter d'ètre aussi heureusement doué, et de pouvoir appliquer une méthode qui lui permette de revêtir, à coup sûr, de lumière et de pourpre la pure trivial-
lité? Qui peut faire cela? Or, qui ne fait pas cela, pour dire la vérité, ne fait pas grand’chose. (2:120)

The metaphor of the purple of nobility transfiguring triviality reveals that Baudelaire saw in Balzac a fellow practitioner of verbal alchemy. The “wonders” Balzac worked were not the way he represented the details of everyday life but the ways in which he transformed them. This process of transformation, which I have been studying in others of the Fleurs du mal, can be seen especially clearly in the Tableaux parisiens.

In the first place, as Stierle has shown, these poems do not present an overview of Parisian life as their prose predecessors in the tableau de Paris genre had done. They concentrate on eccentric elements of city life rather than on “the present moment of modernity” (359). Furthermore, they are not descriptive poems: as has frequently been pointed out, details and people in the city function as starting-points for the poet’s reverie that is the real matter of the poem. The first poem of this section, “Paysage,” presents a speaker able to transcend the outside world and to create his own: “faire/De mes pensers brûlants une tiède atmosphère”; and in all these poems (“Les Petites Vieilles” as much as “Rêve parisien”) it is transcending concrete reality that is important: “Tout pour moi devient allégorique.” The program that Baudelaire sets out for artists at the end of the “Salon de 1845” reveals this position: “Celui-là sera le peintre, le vrai peintre, qui saura arracher à la vie actuelle son côté épique, et nous faire voir et comprendre, avec de la couleur ou du dessin, combien nous sommes grands et poétiques dans nos cravates et nos bottes vernies” (2:407). This passage shows not only the importance of contemporary life as a subject for painting, but also the way it should be transformed: through such works of art, the people of the time will appear “grands et poétiques.”

The poetic diction that arises from such a conception of the modern and the poetic is, as may be expected, a mixed one. Colloquial and technical language contrast with more traditional discourse. The function of this diction is multiple: more than just serving as a sign of the “real” or the “contemporary,” familiar discourse plays various roles in the thematic structure of these poems. For example, “Le Soleil” makes use of scien-
tific or medical terminology in its dichotomies of city and poorhouse/palace, demonstrating how the poet can "enno\-blir[le sort des choses les plus viles." In "Le Cygne" familiar expressions like *bric-à-brac* and *baraques* and references to the construction of the *nouveau Carrousel* and to the street cleaning services help establish the contrast between modern Paris and classical antiquity or the Paris of former times that is central to the poem. Verlaine will set up a similar juxtaposition in his "Croquis parisien." The famous first lines of "Les Sept Vieillards":

Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves,  
Où le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant!

incorporate a striking use of vulgar diction, the verb *raccrocher*, from the language of prostitution. The appearance of such a term serves to create a rupture in the text parallel to the shock attributed to the speaker at the sight of the specter.

The techniques used to destabilize the tone of poems like "Une Charogne" and "La Muse vénale" appear frequently in the *Tableaux parisiens*. Contrasts in diction in "Les Petites Vieilles" contribute to the image of the "monstres disloqués" as well as to the ambiguity of the speaker’s attitude towards them, the kind of attraction and repulsion we saw in "Le Monstre."

"Danse macabre" uses a mixture of neoclassical rhetoric, medical terminology, and familiar terms like *attifer* to create the tone Baudelaire was seeking: "l’ironie criarde des anciennes *Danses macabres* et des images allégoriques du moyen âge" (Letter to Calonne, 1 janvier 1859). It is about this poem that Baudelaire wrote what is perhaps his most detailed analysis of a particular word. He was writing to Calonne about the proofs (the poem was to be published in *La Revue contemporaine*), and he expressed his dismay that the editor had chosen a variant that eliminated the word *gouge* in the line "Bayadère sans nez, irrésistible gouge":

*Gouge* est un excellent mot, mot unique, mot de vieille langue, applicable à une *danse macabre*, mot contemporain des *danses macabres*. **UNITE DE STYLE**, primitivement, *une belle gouge* n’est qu’une belle femme; postérieurement, la gouge, c’est la courtisane qui suit l’armée
Or, la Mort n'est-elle pas la Gouge qui suit en tous lieux la Grande Armée universelle, et n'est-elle pas une courtisane dont les embrassements sont positivement irrésistibles? Couleur, antithèse, métaphore, tout est exact (11 February 1859, 1:546-47, italics Baudelaire's).

This letter reveals how precise Baudelaire was in his choice of words. He expected them to have resonances at many levels of signification: in this case "color," because it was an obsolete term; metaphor (death as the courtesan whose charms are irresistible); and antithesis. His insistence on "unité de style" was presumably intended to forestall Calonne's objection to the word as out-of-place: Littré and other lexicographers classify it as not only "vieilli" but also "très-familier" or "trivial." But Baudelaire seems to protest too much: "unité de style" is a curious defense for a text whose basic structuring device is the contrast between its traditional theme and modern references and language (which alone justify its inclusion among the Tableaux parisiens). The unity of style to which the word gouge contributes is one of disharmony. The antithesis this term creates, then, is one of diction as well as rhetorical figure.

"A une mendiatante rousse" is another poem that makes use of obsolete terms; they function in its contrast between the present and earlier times. In this poem Baudelaire also plays on the tension between the two kinds of "prosaisms" I have described above (the conventionally poetic and the commonplace) in the same way as in "La Muse vénale." Here again, upon closer examination simple oppositions break down in the context of the text's thematic and figural structures. Familiar discourse stands out conspicuously, and it seems simple at first glance, taking its place as one aspect of the contrast, central to the poem, between the coexistent beauty and poverty of the character described. This paradox is indicated in several related ways: semantic, syntactic, rhythmical, and prosodic. In the first line, for instance ("Blanche fille aux cheveux roux"), the placing of the adjective before the noun is an indicator of poetic syntax and therefore has the effect of underlining the contrast set up between a valued characteristic—white skin—and the devalued, supposedly lower-class trait of red hair. 12 This inverted syntax is in counterpoint to the natural
syntax that predominates in the poem. Such a play of contrasts could be traced throughout the text, put into relief by parallelisms in alliteration and internal rhyme. *Haillon trop court/habit de cour* is a prime example. Other devices include the use of sharply contrasting rhyming words: the central *beauté/pauvreté*, plus *velours/lourds, rousseur/douceur*, and the like. The central contrast is pointed out further in the discrepancy between the lowly subject, as announced by the title, and the verse form that recalls the prosody of Ronsard's songs to his mistress.

On a thematic level, the opposition of the beggar to ladies and heroines of past times is related to that between what is and what might have been (marked by the subjunctive and conditional moods), extended to that between the past and the present. Thus, the time of the Valois court and the poets of the *Pléiade* is set against modern Paris and the "poète chétif." *Vieux débris* used to designate the beggar's mark, then, not only forms a contrast with the young pages and valets who would formerly have sought the woman's favors, but also indicates the leavings of an earlier age.

The role of familiar diction in such a text is obvious: in the last three stanzas, it performs an immediately perceptible shift from the poem's archaic or archpoetic diction that is parallel to the opposition between the beggar girl and beauties of former times. The earlier variants of this poem contained even more obsolete expressions (*blanchette, une pipeuse d'amants, and tétins*), but in this version we still find *lois* in the sense of a woman's power over her lover, *gueusant, gisant, and maints*. Words with only literary uses contribute as well: *déduit*, which Littré places in the "langage des poètes érotiques," and *cothurne*, whose associations with the theater, on the level of the signified, are underlined by its status as a term used exclusively in literature. In the context of such conventional language as well as the traditional verse form, familiar language stands out sharply, as the beggar girl does in her poverty. The expression *vieux débris* is in sharp contrast with its counterparts, the young lovers, not only in its reference to age and decrepitude, but also because it is a popular expression. Similar fallings-off from the norms of poetic diction include the
familiar guettant (in the sense of trying to catch someone on his/her way); the colloquial “Oh, pardon,” its spelling changed form “ô” in the earlier version; and the notation vingt-neuf sous. This last expression is unconventional both because of the exact number and because it is an intrusion of everyday life; and it is especially remarkable in its oxymoronic juxtaposition with bijoux. “Quelque Véfour/De carrefour” presents another such juxtaposition; Adam points out the irony in the mention of this very expensive restaurant (380).

It might be considered that such diction could be naturalized as realistic, in two senses: as appropriate to the milieu described and in its opposition to the imaginary worlds of literature and legendary history to which the text alludes. But it is important to note that the contrast here is not so much between women of former times and those of the present, but rather between women subjects of former poetry and those of modern verse. The poem makes frequent references to earlier texts, on several levels, including direct allusions to Ronsard and Belleau and the words roman and cothurnes. Somewhat less direct are the mentions of clothing typically worn by heroines of earlier works (trains, noeuds mal attachés, jewels); and typical novelistic or poetic situations and elements: a golden dagger, young men writing love poetry, the coy mistress. Other, indirect allusions include the Ronsardian prosodic form and the use of vocabulary like déduits and so on whose serious use is found only in verse. Adam has pointed out that “la belle mendiant” was a favorite subject for Baroque poets (380): the text seems to be calling for a comparison between itself and earlier verse.

As can be seen from the foregoing description, the system of oppositions in this text could easily be charted in semiotic fashion as a system of positive and negative values on scales like old/new, rich/poor, and so on. In such a chart, the element opposing earlier poetry—that of Ronsard and Belleau as well as the young “rhymers,” would be this text itself. But here, the system of simple oppositions breaks down, referentially and stylistically, since the term includes its opposing term: it turns upon itself, taking on the structure of a mise en abyme typical of figural language in general. Rather than being
“about” a beggar girl, the text is about poetry and about itself. Taking this idea further, it can be said that the stripping away of ornament alluded to in the last stanza describes the process of undercutting traditional poetics that the poem itself accomplishes, largely through its use of familiar discourse. When Baudelaire eliminated many of the obsolete expressions from the first version of the poem he lessened its parodic force, but the many ultraconventional devices and allusions that remain serve to destabilize its tone. As in all parody, devices are simultaneously used and undercut; and the metali­terary nature of such discourse leads to questions about the nature of poetic language itself. It is not just that the detritus of the modern world is a fitting subject for the contemporary poet, although the “poète chétif” is linked explicitly to the beggar girl in the rhyming symmetry of poète chétif/ton corps maladif. The description of her body incorporated in the text becomes also an example of self-referential discourse: her stripped-down body (divested of both clothing and flesh) is like the poem, which has been stripped of its neoclassical trappings. There seems to be an implicit play on the traditional notion of rhetoric as the clothing of thought. But when “rhetoric” is stripped away in order to get to the “real” world, what is revealed is itself highly rhetorical.

“Le Jeu,” describing a seedy gambling parlor, might seem like a more “realistic” poem than “A une mendiante rousse.” The familiar discourse it incorporates contributes to its depiction of physical and moral decay. Like “A une mendiante rousse,” it is constructed around an interrelated series of antitheses: between illusion and reality, light and darkness, full­ness and emptiness. The language of the text traces a continual degeneration, both as signifier and as signified. Imagery of sickness and death predominates; and in the second stanza, the metonymies isolate parts of the gambler’s bodies, reducing them to their parts and at the same time taking away even these characteristics: “des visages sans lèvre, / Des lèvres sans couleur, des mâchoires sans dent.” No verb comes to set in motion the living dead players in this “noir tableau”; and though it is said to move (“se dérouler”), it gives the impression of a static image. In a decentering play of mirrors, the speaker sees
himself seeing, and then comments on his point of view: "je me vis . . . enviant" and later, "Et mon coeur s'effraya d'envier." This structure is of course highly relevant to a text built on a structure of absences: the chairs have lost their color, the courtisans their youth, the faces their features; fingers grope in empty pockets. The speaker is himself in a recess; and his reaction, one of envy (a sensation of lack), is fitting in a text treating gambling, itself a seeking to fill a gap, to remedy a loss. All these images have the structure of desire, as the line "fouillant la poche vide ou le sein palpitant" makes clear. Moreover, what the speaker wants is desire; and still further, that desire is for yet another lack: the speaker envies the poor man (something missing here again), "courant avec ferveur à l'abîme béant." The piling up of figures here has a vertiginous effect: we seem to be approaching a figurai abyss. The choice offered the gambler or the speaker/poet is that between pain and death, between hell and nothingness; and whereas the gambler is presented as preferring the former elements of these pairs, he has paradoxically been presented as seeking the abyss; and the imagery of death used to describe the gamblers in life makes it seem as though they have already chosen death.

We are witnessing here the process of degradation that Derrida, in "La Mythologie blanche," sees as constituting the primary characteristic of metaphor; and the economic ramifications he notes as well are present here, too. The play of figures is linked to le jeu in the sense of gambling. Out of the usure of metaphor, its continual using-up, come further lacks, leading to more metaphor that ends in the words "le néant" and then, necessarily, silence. It is as though the poem has run out of steam, or rather, out of money to play with. From the very first, the speaker had portrayed himself as cold and muet. The figurai structure of the text, then, parallels the structure of gambling: a continual paying out and loss and redoubled efforts to win more linguistic capital, ending merely in increased emptiness. The exchange is explicitly noted in the lines "trafiquant . . . l'un de son vieil honneur, l'autre de sa beauté": in the game of life, abstract qualities have turned into merchandisable quantities.

The description of the gamblers and their settings, though
emphasizing their ugliness and decrepitude, is on a perfectly acceptable linguistic plane until the speaker's outburst beginning at the end of the fourth stanza:

Je me vis accoudé, froid, muet, enviant,
Enviánt de ces gens la passion tenace,
De ces vieilles putains la funèbre gaieté,
Et tous gaillardement trafiquant à ma face,
L'un de son vieil honneur, l'autre de sa beauté!

Here, the violence and bitterness of his reaction, as seen in the repetition of *enviant*, the indignant *à ma face*, and the exclamation point, call forth a parallel linguistic violence. He uses the words *vieilles putains* to insult the old women, a term Littré does not even classify as vulgar, calling it a "mot grossier et malhonnête." This degraded/degrading language serves to separate the speaker from them and simultaneously to reduce him to their level in a *va-et-vient* of absence and presence like the pattern of envy and lack. In the last stanza, the expression *en somme* (with its resonances of both plenitude and money) and the familiar expression "*soûl de son sang*" continue this level of language. This latter term can mean not only "drunk with the rushing of his blood" but also "drunk on his blood" (as the earlier line "qui viennent gaspiller leur sanglante sueur" makes clear): the gamblers are bleeding themselves dry, a link with the imagery of sickness and death as well as the structure of continual loss. Familiar discourse in this text, then, serves to convey or translate the disgust expressed in these lines. As a translation, like a metaphor, it is itself figurative; it figures the mingled repugnance and longing envied by the speaker. Both of the vulgar terms, *putain* and *soûl*, on the level of the signifier represent objects of desire normally forbidden. Both call forth images of hollows and abysses. That they are examples of "low" language as signifiers as well contributes to the downward thematic thrust of the text.

It is hard to see in what sense we should call a poem like "Le Jeu" realistic, even if the term itself were an unproblematic one. On one level we might be able to tie its imagery of exchange and loss to the materialism of capitalist society. Benjamin sees the image of the gambler as "the characteristically
modern complement to the archaic image of the fencer” (178). But what has become of the impartial observer that is one of the staples of realist fiction? As in “Les Petites Vieilles,” dispassionate observation has become obsession; here, the passionate desire for passion. The foregoing analysis of certain of the Tableaux parisiens has shown that Baudelaire’s use of references to contemporary life (a use that is, in the last analysis, a very restrained one—see Joxe, 157-58) and his introduction of familiar language do not effectuate a turn to the propre, the literal. Such discourse represents more than the mimetic reproduction of the language of Paris or contemporary life or decadence; in its intrusion into the unfamiliar world of verse, it also becomes a figure representing those worlds and their opposition to the standard subjects and language of poetry.

As we have seen, Baudelaire’s language has been characterized in several, interrelated ways. It has been called “prosaic” and “realistic,” it has been criticized for its “trivialités” and “défaillances de style.” These critical terms have all proved to be both difficult to define and difficult to apply to Baudelaire’s texts, which undercut such definitions by playing on the tensions established by shifts in style. Indeed, a reading of Les Fleurs du mal shows that familiar language itself can become a kind of figure, in Genette’s sense—a figurative sense—of the gap between the expression used and that which would be felt to be “normal” in its context. In the next chapter, on Verlaine, I will examine more systematically the ways in which the reader accommodates such language and the names we give the different levels on which it is integrated.