Verlaine’s work is particularly useful in showing how familiar diction, rather than lessening the importance of figure, allows for even greater (or at least different) possibilities for figurai language. If conventionally “poetic” words and their opposite are marked vocabulary in poetic texts, it is because their existence permits a kind of movement that can be called tropological: the use of familiar diction calls attention to the surface of the work, preventing its language from being “down-to-earth” in the sense of being stabilized or giving the reader a more direct link to the outside world. Rather, it plays on the estrangement implied by its identification as an element of a specific register. As metaphor has been considered the breaking of the semantic rules of a language, register-shifts constitute a breaching of its pragmatic rules. And this breach is one aspect of the figural dimension of language.

When familiar terms are used instead of their conventional counterparts, the reader must attempt to integrate them into some kind of structure. By examining the role of informal or colloquial diction in the figurai structure of Verlaine’s poems, we can see the different ways in which they exploit its possible stylistic motivations. Incorporating such language into coherent interpretations of the texts does not prove to be simple, however, and such an analysis reveals the complexity of a poet whose works have often been seen as direct, univocal, and even simplistic. Among the questions they raise are the role of diction in intertextual reference and the problem of “vulgarity.”
Given the entrenchment of neoclassical diction, it is not surprising that Verlaine's use of familiar language has had a varied critical response, ranging from hailing him as a revolutionary to condemning his later works (in which such language is more prevalent) as vulgar or "prosaic." Bruneau tries to excuse his use of low language by referring to his low life:

Avec Verlaine, nous avons affaire à un pauvre brave type, qui sort du bistrot ou de l'hôpital, traînant la patte, et qui nous raconte des choses très simples, ou très délicates, ou très élevées, dans la langue de tous les jours. Alors que les Parnassiens, en redingote et haut de forme, sont juchés tout en haut d'un trépied, Verlaine est sur l'asphalte du trottoir parisien. (Verlaine, 24)

But in his study of Verlaine's style, Cuénot is much less indulgent: "Une étude complète du vocabulaire argotique de Verlaine aurait une importance lexicographique, mais ne comporterait guère d'intérêt esthétique, puisque la poésie est absente" (137). "Unpoetic" words, then, cannot constitute a poem. Verlaine himself seems to support this view when he writes:

Tu n'es plus bon à rien de propre, ta parole
Est morte de l'argot et du ricanement,
Et d'avoir rabâché les bourdes du moment.
Ta mémoire, de tant d'obscénités bondée,
Ne saurait accueillir la plus petite idée . . .

Sagesse, 1, iv

Verlaine said that he wrote these lines about Rimbaud, but added, "Après coup je me suis aperçu que cela pourrait s'appliquer à 'poor myself' " (Garnier ed., 600). He had introduced language of varying degrees of familiarity during the whole of his poetic career, and especially so after Sagesse, where these lines appear. And indeed, he does so in this very passage: tu n'es plus bon à . . ., la plus petite idée, and rabâché are certainly casual, familiar expressions. His word, then, rather than being destroyed by slang, receives a new impulse forward.

In order to make sense of such discourse, in order to make poetry of it rather than rejecting it out of hand, the reader
must try to “naturalize” it, that is, to justify its use within the context of the poem. This naturalization can operate in various ways, on various levels. First, familiar language can be integrated by assigning the text to a “low” genre such as song or satire, where such diction would be the norm rather than an intrusion. Or it can be analyzed in relation to an intertext; Verlaine’s poems often exploit this dimension of literary language. On another level it can be naturalized as appropriate to the poem’s subject-matter: the signified might be “low” life (i.e., a popular subject) or “modern life,” calling forth signifiers that mirror the level of the signified. Many examples of such motivation can be found in Verlaine. In texts that escape such categorizations, familiar diction must be incorporated at another level. Critics often link it with general characteristics of Verlaine’s style, like “fadeur,” imprecision of vocabulary, “simplicity,” or the affectation of a decadent manner. “Art poétique” on the other hand provides an example of a text whose self-referentiality leads to taking its unconventional language as signifying a rejection of conventional poetry. Other texts seem unmotivated even at this metapoetic level and present a challenge to readability itself. In all these texts, we must examine to what extent Verlaine’s work justifies the naturalizations imposed on it by the urge to legibility and to what extent it defies any such analysis.

1. Genre
Perhaps the simplest way to analyze “low” language is to read it with reference to a genre characterized by the low style, such as song, satire, or parody. We have seen that it was in his poetry of invective and in his Chansons that Hugo usually incorporated such language. A good deal of Verlaine’s poetry can come under the heading of “light verse” or “songs.” “L’Ami de la nature,” for example, is a poem evidently designed to be humorous, and its humor consists in the play of its language, its use of slang discourse. Written in 1868, eight years before Richepin’s Chanson des gueux introduced the contemporary argot of the Paris streets into published verse, it supposedly created a sensation at the literary salon of Nina de Villard. Though it was
not published until 1890, it still preceded the works of Jehan Rictus and Aristide Bruant in what became a whole subgenre. The last two stanzas go as follows:

Nous arrivons, vrai, c’est très batt’!
Des écaill’s d’huîtr’s comm’ chez Baratt’
Et des cocott’s qui vont à patt’s,
Car on est tout comme chez soi
A la camp—quoi!

Mais j’vois qu’ma machin’ vous em . . . terre,
Fait’s-moi signe et j’vous obtempère,
D’autant qu’j’demand’ pas mieux qu’ de m’taire . . .
Faut pas se gêner plus qu’au bagne,
A la campagne.

In this poem the elimination of mute e’s, campègne, and its shortened form camp’ mimic lower-class Parisian pronunciation. None of the familiar or slang expressions have gone entirely out of use: rien, used as an affirmative in an earlier line, and batt’ (usually spelled bath) are not very common, perhaps, but words like chouette or boîte (used in previous lines) are very much alive today. The poem’s popular syntactic constructions are also still common, including the dropping of ne in the negative and the contraction “Faut pas se gêner.” The poem steers just clear of terms classified as vulgar, however, as the correction of em-merder to em-terrer shows. The use of this language is of course motivated by the presentation of an obviously lower-class speaker. The comedy of the situation, the city man’s amazement at the country (“des cocott’s qui vont à patt’s”), is heightened by this reproduction of popular speech, so incongruous for a poem at this time. Verlaine has been criticized for his self-conscious use of slang expressions, but their very excess contributes to the humor of this poem. Thus, one would not want to say that its diction is effaced by its correspondence with its context or that naturalizing it with reference to the speaker binds too closely the levels of signifier and signified. In order to have its comic effect, the popular speech must remain highly perceptible.

This text, though interesting to the literary historian, represents neither a typical nor an important poem for Verlaine,
but much of his verse has been considered—and sometimes dismissed—as light verse. "En patinant" (*Les Fêtes galantes*), for example, is a poem whose familiar speech can be seen as motivated by the poem’s light tone and its intimate situation: a lover is speaking to his mistress. Familiar expression is uncommon in *Les Fêtes galantes*, however, and Cuénot points out that those used in "La Lettre," for instance, are themselves archaisms, "ce qui sauve l'unité de ton" (135). But what we find in "En patinant" is a series of contradictions in diction, a mixture of archaisms, latinisms, and colloquialisms. Phrases like "si ma mémoire est bonne" or "En somme," exclamations, and colloquial expressions like *filons* and *vertigo* are characteristic of spoken language (the entire poem is in direct quotation); *aphrodisiaque* was a technical term at the time; and, beginning with the title, the text is full of archaisms. These expressions are intermingled: no pattern is established in which they would serve to contrast some parts of the next with others the way the archaic/colloquial distinction did in Baudelaire's "A une mendiane rousse." The very first lines, "Nous fûmes dupes, vous et moi, / De manigances mutuelles, / Madame . . .", juxtapose the familiar term *manigances* with the literary past and the formal address and title. Such shifts in tone are parallel to the reversal the text operates between the serious and the frivolous, a reversal articulated in the lines:

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Ce fut le temps . . .
Des baisers superficiels
Et des sentiments à fleur d'âme.
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The play on the expression "sensibilité à fleur de peau" leads to a doubt about the level on which the text itself should be taken. In his edition Robichet points out the possible double entendre of the words "nous jouissions" (560); and Cuénot finds that the "vulgarité" of the epithet *poivrée* "détonne singulièremment" (135) because he takes "haleine poivrée" to refer to an aphrodisiac. What in the poem authorizes us to take it in this sense? Not only the earlier use of the word *aphrodisiaque*: because of its familiar discourse, it is more likely that the poem will be interpreted as "obscene." In a way, when the boundaries of polite language have been passed, anything be-
comes possible. This text has been read in a serious way as a commentary on the stages of love affairs, coming and going like the seasons. On the other hand, it has also been seen as a mere divertissement. But, in either case, its light tone does not suffice to incorporate its heterogeneous diction. Rather, it is the unconventionality of its diction that makes possible such divergent interpretations.

“Monsieur Prudhomme” is an example of a poem whose satirical quality helps to motivate the use of “low” language, satire being another genre characterized by the low style. It appears in the section of the Poèmes saturniens called “Caprices.” The title already makes its status clear: Joseph Prudhomme, the main character in Henri Monnier’s novels, was the archetypical bourgeois. The lampoon begins with the very first line, with the words “Il est grave” and the stock expression “père de famille” heightened by the homonym maire/mère. M. Prudhomme is deaf, his ears “engulfed” in his collar (the word faux is also relevant here), as well as blind to the beauties of nature—spring is reduced to the level of his slippers. The rest of the poem confirms this description of his antiaesthetic, antipoetic sentiments. Even the insults he addresses to poets are consummately bourgeois in the attitude they reveal (poets are unshaven, unkempt, and lazy), and in diction—maroufles or vauriens are perfectly acceptable terms. Indeed, Cuénot points out that maroufle is an archaism, from the language of seventeenth century comedy: “Il [M. Prudhomme] se ridiculise en laissant voir combien il est archaïque dans son langage” (129). It is curious to note, however, that in order to form a contrast with his insensitivity, a conventionally poetic diction is used: not only is the subject nature and flowers, but the periphrase “l’astre d’or” for the sun is eminently neoclassical. It seems that when Verlaine wants to signal “poetry,” he needs the easily recognizable “poetic” expression to do so.

Features of other registers conflict with this diction, like coryza and cossu. Machin is “très trivial” (Littré) and doubly comical here, recalling the word machine and indicating that the prospective fiancé is so conventionally bourgeois as to have lost all identity. The succession of adjectives in the tenth line
("Il est juste-milieu, botaniste et pansu") is funny, too, the physical epithet *pansu* following two nouns used as adjectives. *Botaniste* in this series indicates the only interest nature might have for him.

If the use of a conventionally poetic signifier is itself a sign, whose message is "I am poetry"; then slang expressions like those used here to ridicule the dehumanized characters should be a sign of opposition to this language. Often they do have this role. But in this text, where poets are referred to explicitly, and a traditionally "poetic" subject, the flowering spring, appears twice and ends the poem, where M. Prudhomme's *réve sans fin* turns out to be his thoughts of a profitable marriage for his daughter, the traditional diction is valorized and paradoxically opposed to the characters who would be likely to approve only such language, who would surely say of this text: that isn't poetry. As in Hugo, the use of familiar diction cannot be directly correlated with "low" genres. Not only did these genres traditionally maintain a higher level of language than that to be found here, but also the way Verlaine puts such diction to use makes it difficult to assign his poems to conventional genres at all.

II. Intertextuality

When "M. Prudhomme" is called satirical, however, it is not because it is a parody of another piece of literature, but rather because it represents a criticism of the character depicted. On the other hand, there are many instances in which familiar diction plays a role in the relation between a poem and an intertext, what Genette or Riffaterre could call its "hypotext." Verlaine's poems present examples of various kinds of intertextual references and various kinds of hypotexts. "Un Pouacré" (*Jadis et naguère*) is an example of the transformations operated by what Genette calls "travestissement," "la transformation stylistique à fonction dégradante" (*Palimpsestes*, 33). This kind of intertextuality gave rise to a common genre in the baroque period, the "travestissement burlesque," which involved treating traditionally noble subjects (like Virgil and the *Henriade*) in a trivial style. Genette outlines three main
characteristics of the travesty: a change in prosody from the alexandrine to the octosyllable; the use of a familiar style; and the introduction of vulgar or modern (anachronistic) details.

"Un Pouacre" incorporates most of these elements. It is based on the cliché of seeing the spectre of one's past, and Baudelaire is often mentioned as a possible source. In this poem familiar language is at odds with rather than justified by its context: whereas the figure of remorse is usually not a subject to be taken lightly, here the spectre of the past is gay enough, with its singing and dancing and casual language. The alternance of ten- and eight-syllable lines gives the poem a sing-song rhythm, likewise at odds with its subject. A comic devaluation operates at the thematic level as well. There are features in the poem typical of horror stories (an intertext common to poems of this sort): the death's head, eerie moonlight, the already-green corpse. But these details contrast with other, more comic features, like the exchanged insults (tur-lupin, and so on) and the annoyed guitar—presumably crying out in irritation. And finally, the text's familiar expressions also contribute to the disparity between the subject and its treatment. From le drôle, ricaner, fredonner, and tralala, which are more or less acceptable, to the more properly colloquial disons, pouacre (as a noun, an ugly, filthy old man), farce (as an adjective), and morveux, to the only somewhat euphemistic ending, "tu peux t'aller faire lanlaire," for a poem about remorse its language does not make it sound very remorseful. Indeed, the ending is not euphemistic enough to prevent the Classiques Larousse edition from censoring the last two stanzas.

What are we to make of this incongruity? Critics have often read the poem as an expression of Verlaine's emotional anguish. Reading only the stock situation and not its treatment, they have not taken into account its role as parodic commentary. In spite of the ominous beginning, the speaker, instead of being shocked into an awareness of his sins, insults the ghost of his past. When the spectre warns, "C'est moins farce que tu ne penses," we would expect a grim reminder calling the protagonist to order. But instead, the spectre is as flippant as he and as casual in his language:
"Et quant au soin frivole, ô doux morveux,
De te plaire ou de te déplaire,
Je m'en soucie au point que, si tu veux,
Tu peux t'aller faire lanlaire!"

Genette outlines the role of familiar or “trivial” language in this kind of intertextuality:

le travestissement ne fonctionne pas seulement comme n’importe quel divertissement trans-stylistique fondé sur ce que Charles Perrault appelait la “disconvenance” entre style et sujet, mais aussi comme un exercice de traduction . . . il s’agit de transcrire un texte de sa lointaine langue d’origine dans une langue plus proche, plus familière, dans tous les sens de ce mot. (Palimpsestes, 69)

But at the same time, “Un Pouacre” plays on the unfamiliarity of colloquial and slang language in this context: it is this unfamiliarity that brings about the poem’s humor and satirical force. The apostrophe ô doux morveux is an encapsulated version of the poem’s conflicting registers and the way the slang expressions puncture the expectations set up by the more noble terms. But enough of the hypotext remains to come into play with the text’s language. The shocks in language serve as a parallel for the thematic content of the poem: the speaker’s ambivalent attitude towards the past. This attitude is figured in the chiasmus in the first stanza: “Tout mon passé, disons tout mon remord;/ Tout mon remords, disons tout mon passé”: rather than assimilating the two terms, this figure marks a divergence between them that would not have been noticed had only the first line been used. The ghost of this past, however, is a degraded figure (“Avec les yeux d’une tête de mort / que la lune encore décharne,” “un vieillard très cassé”). The ghost, then, is a travesty of the speaker’s past. Furthermore, through its irreverent language, the poem mocks both this travesty of the past and the speaker himself. So, although it meets the specifications of the “travestissement” as Genette defines it, its familiar language makes “Un Pouacre” the travesty of a travesty.

“Paysage,” another poem from the section of Jadis et naguère called “À la manière de plusieurs,” is an example of the
kind of intertextuality Genette would classify as a "charge" (see *Palimpsestes*, 96-105). "Charges" imitate the style of a work with a satiric intent, and Genette's paradigm case is the "À la manière de" genre. "Paysage" is one of the "Vieux Coppées" that Verlaine wrote—as did many others—in the *Album zutique* and elsewhere. Coppée had written a series of dixains called *Promenades et intérieurs*, in which he presented the little homely details of the life of "les humbles," as he called them. In their banality and sentimentality, they were easy marks for parodies, which usually involved either the introduction of still "humbler" elements, usually quite vulgar ones, or a pseudo-picturesque description of a simple object. Rimbaud has one to a broom. One of Verlaine's contains the passage:

... dixains chastes

*Comme les ronds égaux d'un même saucisson*

(Pléiade edition, 298)

which is a good description and illustration of the genre. "Paysage" pushes the "humble" elements to the extreme, with its unpleasant day and ugly countryside. The lines "un plat soleil d'été tartinait ses rayons ... ainsi qu'une rôtie" compare the sun to food (as we have seen, a banned topic in poetry) and to very ordinary food at that. *Plat* seems to allude to Coppée's work (and this text itself) as well as to the sun. Furthermore, the word *tartiner* is itself a familiar term. In the sense of spreading butter and jam on bread, it is not listed in the dictionaries of the time, and the *Petit Robert* dates it from 1884 ("Paysage" was written in 1874).5

But this poem does not in fact have the characteristics of the charge that Genette outlines. This is partly because of Verlaine's stylistic innovations and partly because of the interference of another intertext. Verlaine does not push to an extreme the language of Coppée's poetry: no matter how humble the subject, Coppée rarely makes use of low language as Verlaine does here in familiar expressions and constructions like *tartiner*, "c'est bête, la campagne" and "c'était pas trop après le siège." Genette detects behind the exaggerated diction used to parody a hypotext the idea of a stylistic norm "qui serait cette idée (simple) que le bon style est le style simple" (*Palimpsestes*, 96-105). ...
104). But though Coppée’s style is a simple one, Verlaine’s is not. There seem to be two kinds of intertextuality at play here, the “charge” based on Coppée and at the same time a “travestissement burlesque” of romantic verse. The familiar romantic topos of a day in the country spent with a loved one is turned around: with its ugly landscape and quarrels, the day is hardly a chance to commune with nature: it is a disaster like the siege. The words *maisons de campagne* are in quotes to show that what remains is only the wrecks of former villas; the only thing intact seems to be the artillery shells, “tout neufs.” But in this context, the familiar terms have an important function: it is through the lowering of the style of a subject that the satiric transformation takes place. In this way, paradoxically, such language is very much in harmony with the rest of the poem: “flat” language equals “flat” countryside; and the romantic metaphorical relationship between nature and man is preserved. Familiar diction, then, seems to serve several ends in this poem, escaping classifications that might explain its use in a univocal way.

Several texts in the collection *Parallèlement* are Verlaine’s own critiques of his earlier work: in “A la manière de Paul Verlaine” each stanza parodies an early volume; in “La Dernière Fête galante,” the Cythera of the earlier collection becomes Sodom and Gomorrah.6 “Poème saturnien,” by taking its title from Verlaine’s first published volume, invites a reading that takes it as a reading itself, a critique of those early poems. It is dated 1885 and was not published until 1889; it is typical of the late poems of *Parallèlement*, where coarse language is used to describe various kinds of debauchery. Verlaine called this volume “le deversoir, le dépotoir de tous les ‘mauvais’ sentiments que je suis susceptible d’exprimer” (Garnier ed., 422). In this poem the characteristics of his earlier collections are pushed to extremes: “saturnien” means sad or melancholy, and the section “Melancholia” of the *Poèmes saturniens* had developed this theme. Here, melancholy (“black bile”), has become *bile enflammée*, a medical term. The oil lamps call to mind the gas jets in “Croquis parisien”: and we move inside the cabarets mentioned in the earlier poems. Zimmermann has pointed out other echoes from ear-
lier collections and the way they parody and "destroy" these intertexts: "Ce piano dans trop de fumée" recalls "le piano que baisse une main frêle" ("Ariettes oubliées," 4); "refrains de cafés-concerts/Faussés par le plus plâtré des masques" deforms the "masques et bergamasques/Jouant du luth . . ." of "Clair de lune." The light, conversational tone of the earlier collections has been changed by the use of many slang and vulgar expressions: débagoulé, galopins, voyous, engueulai, troquets, and so on. These serve to effectuate the devaluation of the subjects of earlier poems through a lowering of language level. The subject of the poem—a drunken orgy—and the unpleasant experiences described (inflamed bile, false notes in the cabarets, an attack by voyous) point to a possible way of naturalizing this extremely low diction. But this subject itself is unlike that of the Poèmes saturniens or the other early collections. As in "Paysage," although the language of this text has the aggressivity associated with the "charge," it does not parody the style of the earlier verse: it opposes it. In doing so it has metatextual rather than intertextual implications: the older way of writing is devalued, and we can infer that Verlaine is proposing a new poetics in its stead.

There are several other instances in Verlaine's poetry of a kind of intertextuality that poses problems in interpretation because of the conflicts between multiple intertexts, conflicts that are echoed by discordances in the poem's diction. In "Images d'un sou" from Jadis et Naguère, the speaker is like a barker at a carnival, inviting the reader into his tent to see his collection of rare and picturesque marvels:

Accourez à mes magies!
C'est très beau. Venez, d'aucunes
Et d'aucuns. Entrez, bagasse!

In this poem Genevieve de Brabant brushes elbows with Pyramus, the forest of Arden with Spain; there are allusions to literature, comic opera, and folk songs. The language, too, is heteroclite: it ranges from the archaism d'aucunes et d'aucuns to Allons vite qu'on se presse, from spoken discourse. The word image designates both popular prints, in which one might find such subjects and such a mixture, and poetic im-
ages, where different elements are juxtaposed, like the metaphors and zeugmas characteristic of Verlaine's style. The language, then, parodies the incongruity that is the subject of the poem:

De toutes les douleurs douces
Je compose mes magies!

The many allusions to other hypotexts are secondary to this poem's self-referentiality, a topic to which we will return in discussing "Art poétique."

The sixth "Ariette oubliée" from Romances sans paroles ("Jean de Nivelle") on the other hand, presents a more subtle form of self-reference. An ariette is a musical form especially popular in the eighteenth century, particularly in the comic operas whose freely rhythmmed forms interested Verlaine in the early 1870s. This text recalls that genre and is remarkable in general for its intertextuality. There are references to literary works: François-les-bas-bleus was a character in Nodier's story of that name; Médor and Angélique are characters from Ariosto. La Ramée is the hired killer in Molière's Dom Juan and the soldier in many a folk tale; and a line from Les Femmes savantes is echoed in the verse:

Tant d'or s'y relève en bosse

The most prominent hypotexts are folk songs; some critics have taken the poem as simply a pastiche of them. La boulangère recalls the song "La Boulangère a des écus que ne lui coûtent guère," and the poem's epigraph in the manuscript was "Au clair de la lune, mon ami Pierrot." La mère Michel and Lustucru are characters from the song "La Mère Michel." Jean de Nivelle was the son of the Duc de Montmorency who refused to come to his father's aid when called upon, giving rise to the proverb: "C'est le chien de Jean de Nivelle qui s'enfuit quand on l'appelle." He is also the subject of a folk song, one of whose stanzas goes:

Jean de Nivelle a trois beaux chiens
Il y en a deux vaut-riens,
L'autre fuit quand on l'appelle.
Thus, the poem keeps some of the characters' traits but mixes together elements from different sources.

There are plays on words, too: Loss mimics the French pronunciation of Law, the financier under Louis XV who defrauded the public treasury; and this spelling creates a bilingual pun. The lines "Petit poète jamais las/De la rime non attrapée" is very much applicable to this text, where feminine and masculine rhymes mix and where we find false rhymes like homme/cum and arrive/naïf.

In such a context it is not surprising that the diction, too, should seem a hodgepodge of different registers. Archaisms (Oui dam, [a contraction for oui dame] and palsembleu), church Latin, insults (robin crotté, petit courtaud), and colloquial expressions (sacrant, grigou, son vieil homme) are intermingled. The use of familiar expressions, then, can be explained partly as another characteristic of folk songs, almost another allusion. Critics have called the text a "fantaisie" and a "joyeux potpourri de chansons populaires"; we would not expect to find the strictures of more serious verse observed in such a context. Its diction is also motivated thematically: Jean-François "s'en égaie"; and in a poem where the scribe is naive and inattentive, we should not be surprised to find inscribed false rhymes, broken syntax, and a mixture of rhetorical figures like "lumière obscure," allusions to various genres and characters, and unaffected language. But not only is the diction unacceptable in terms of conventional poetry, so are the popular songs that are the poem's intertexts. In this respect Verlaine's effort distances him from Banville's use of folk songs whose diction is archaic rather than vulgar, like "Nous n'irons plus au bois" (Stalagmites). Besides, these are not the only intertexts in "Jean de Nivelle": the various sources are incompatible with each other, and it is not possible to integrate them in a coherent structure. In addition to the play between the hypertext and the hypotext that Genette points out, there is a play among different, conflicting hypotexts. Like Lafortgue, Verlaine uses just these conflicts in constructing his text. As in the other poems we have examined, "Jean de Nivelle"'s intertextuality does not provide a means to naturalize the use of its familiar diction. Rather, it presents an expansion of interpretive possibilities.
III. Expression and Content

As we have already seen but not yet examined, the link between the signified and the "low" register level of the signifier can be naturalized in ways that relate to the text's thematics. In such instances it can serve a variety of functions, marking relations between characters, milieux, emotional states, and so on, and playing an important role in structuring these texts. For example, in "Parisien, mon frère" (Sagesse), it establishes a contrast between Paris and the countryside, the former described in familiar, the latter in noble or neutral discourse. In "Nocturne parisien" (Poèmes saturniens), familiar diction sets modern Paris apart from the conventional subjects of romantic and Parnassian poetry, as well as from the diction characteristic of such verse. It is this opposition of subjects and styles that Jules de Goncourt noted in a letter to Verlaine: "Votre pièce sur la Seine est un beau poème sinistre, mêlant comme une Morgue à Notre-Dame. Vous sentez et vous souffrez Paris et votre temps (sic.)" (Pléiade, 1084). In this poem a description of the Seine follows a catalogue of ancient or exotic rivers, alluded to in varied but acceptable diction, as in:

Le gai Guadalquivir rit aux blonds orangers
Et reflète, les soirs, des boléros légers

The Seine, on the other hand, is characterized as unhealthy, as the depository of Paris's victims; and there is a marked shift in diction, beginning with the first line of this section:

Toi, Seine, tu n'as rien. Deux quais, et voilà tout.

The familiar tone of this line, with its short sentences, suppression of the verb, and the expression *voilà tout*, is typical of this part of the poem, containing words like *crasseux, bouquin, and tapoter*. Towards the end of the poem there is a mixture of classical allusions (to Venus, Orestes, and so on) and modern elements (*becs de gaz, vieux sou*) as in "Croquis parisien." So familiar diction is used to set modern Paris apart from the conventional subjects of romantic and Parnassian poetry, (represented by the Nile, the Mississippi, the Ganges, and so on), by means of its contrast with the romantic and Parnassian diction used to describe these rivers. In this way it ap-
approaches the kind of metapoetic statement that will be explored further in "Art poétique."

Another poem in which familiar diction is used to form a contrast is "Voix de l'orgueil," from *Sagesse*, where the speaker describes the different voices (of Pride, Hatred, Flesh, and so on) using varied and often low diction. He then tries to throw off such

> Sentences, mots en vain, métaphores mal faites,
> Toute la rhétorique en fuite des péchés,

in favor of the "voix terrible de l'Amour." Paradoxically, the difference in tone is marked by a shift to conventionally noble (though comparatively direct) language after the line:

> Nous ne sommes plus ceux que vous auriez cherchés.

Here the text explicitly calls attention to itself as poetic discourse, thereby investing its choice of words with thematic significance.

In the sixteenth poem of *La Bonne Chanson*, there is a sharp contrast between the description of the city scene (incorporating "prosaic" elements and colloquial diction), and the final words "avec le paradis au bout." Familiar language in "Qu'en dis-tu voyageur" (*Sagesse*) marks a difference between characters. The poem is written as a dialogue between a bad, cynical speaker and a Christian interlocutor, who responds in the last four stanzas. A conversational tone, pejorative details, and elements from contemporary life like cigars and train depots combine with familiar language to create the impression of a base, petty person. When the second speaker replies, beginning, "Sagesse humaine, ah, j'ai les yeux sur d'autres choses," the level he attempts to reach is signaled by the change in diction: there are no familiar expressions in the last four stanzas. It is in a different sense that the language of "Le Ciel est, par-dessus le toit" can be considered appropriate to its subject: the words "simple et tranquille" could be used to refer to the poem itself. The bits of spoken language ("Mon Dieu, mon Dieu" and the last stanza) fit in well with the text's thematized and stylized simplicity.

In all these works (and many others could be cited), stylistic uses of register-levels imply a correspondence between diction
and content: the signifier is taken to mirror the signified in ways that have significance for the poem's thematic structure. Verlaine also has texts where one might consider "low" diction to be motivated by the "low" subject of the poem as a whole. An example of such a poem is "L'Auberge" (Jadis et Naguère), which bears closer examination to see to what extent this expression/content parallel can be maintained. Cuénot compares this poem to a genre painting, and explains Verlaine's interest in this kind of work by the contemporary rise of the realist novel (136). The popular milieu calls forth many elements usually excluded from poetry: vin bleu (cheap wine), cabbage soup, and so on. The pictures of the wise men and Malec Adel (the hero of a popular novel) would be typical in such an inn. In its homely and banal elements, the text resembles the poetry of Coppée or the Parnassian poets who treated rural subjects or even the descriptive poetry of Delille; and in this respect it does have analogies with the realist/naturalist novel and its portrayal of lower-class life.

But what differs in Verlaine's treatment of the subject is, in fact, the intrusion of familiar diction. He goes much further than Hugo does in his poetry of domestic life. The language of the poem contains discourse one might expect to hear in a country inn, and not just in reported speech: shortened forms like the elliptical first and fourth lines, including "pas besoin de passe-port" and familiar expressions—n'a pas tort, entendez-vous, marmots ("kids"), and teigne ("scabby"). They are not used in a denigrating way as in La Bonne Chanson XVI or "Qu'en dis-tu voyageur." Everything about this milieu is presented in a positive light and opposed to the dusty, painful road. Unlike those in Baudelaire's portrayal of contemporary Parisian life, the familiar words are neither pejorative nor startling: the casual tone they create is in harmony with the place described, where one can obviously be at ease.

These expressions play a role in the figurai structure of the text as well, which is built on a correspondence between inside and outside. It is a poem concerned with signs, or language. "Ici l'on fume" and so forth, of course, imitate the messages on signs in shop windows; i.e., they are linked with the life inside the inn. Thus they recall the sign in the first stanza: "Happiness" is, or should be, the inn's name, since that is what is to be
found within. And of what does this happiness consist? Of *talking* about happiness and comfort and love: “l’hôtesse . . . / Parle d’amour, de joie et d’aise, et n’a pas tort!” So it is removed to yet another level, as the designatum of the inhabitants’ conversation. The images or prints on the other hand are metaphors for the life outside; and they are called violent to underline the contrast. Thus, in the last line,

Et la fenêtre s’ouvre au loin sur la campagne

the opening window is yet another “image” of the exterior world, framed by the window sill. The language of the poem functions as an imitation (another metaphor) or as another sign of the language of the environment.

In such a context, the speaker is placed in an ambivalent position: he is allowed, even invited within, but an inn is only a temporary lodging, a contingency of his travels. His link with it is an arbitrary one, as the phrase “pas besoin de passe-port” shows; he is just an observer. The poem is indeed like a genre painting, like a print hung on the wall of city person’s apartment with a title like “The Pleasures of the Simple Life.” But the “simple life” has turned out to be another signifier, or another metaphor; and the language of the text, rather than grounding it in a correspondence between subject and register-level, serves to destabilize the depiction of a world that seemed attractive in its stability.

Another thematic significance that can be assigned to familiar diction, one related to the problem of realism, is its association with the contemporary. In a letter to Delahaye, Verlaine himself writes of “ma poétique de plus en plus moderniste” (12 Octobre 1872). There is an element of “modernism” in much of his poetry, from the *Poèmes saturniens* onward, in the sense of portraying nineteenth-century life as Baudelaire did. Much of Verlaine’s verse, and particularly “Croquis parisien,” which echoes Baudelaire’s title, recalls the *Tableaux parisiens* section of *Les Fleurs du mal*. Dedicated to Coppée, whose sentimental verse usually has Parisian settings, it thematizes the opposition between the contemporary and the past. It is usually printed without the third stanza, omitted in *Les Poèmes saturniens*:
La lune plaquait ses teintes de zinc  
Par angles obtus. 
Des bouts de fumée en forme de cinq  
Sortaient drus et noirs des hauts toits pointus. 
Le ciel était gris. La bise pleurait  
Ainsi qu’un basson. 
Au loin, un matou frileux et discret  
Miaulait d’étrange et grêle façon. 
Le long des maisons, escarpe et putain  
Se coulaient sans bruit,  
Guettant le joueur au pas argentin  
Et l’adolescent qui mord à tout fruit. 
Moi, j’allais, rêvant du divin Platon  
Et de Phidias,  
Et de Salamine et de Marathon,  
Sous l’œil clignotant des bleus becs de gaz.

Even without its third stanza this poem was the target of several critical attacks. It was said to be “impressionistic,” cacophonous, its images supposedly impossible to understand. Borneque quotes Jules Lemaître in this regard, “Il y a dans tout cela bien des mots mis au hasard. —Justement. Ils ont le sens qu’a voulu le poète, et ils ne l’ont que pour lui” (166). Lemaître criticized especially the first stanza, which contains elements like zinc and par angles obtus. Indeed, the use of artistic terminology, unusual images, elements from modern life, and familiar expressions, in their novelty, constitute a metaphor for modern life itself. In other words, as in Nocturne parisien (though more strikingly), new forms of expression are to traditional poetry as the new age is to the old.

Like the artist’s vocabulary, angles obtus is an unexpected lexical item, an intrusion from mathematical terminology. Elements normally considered low are included in the poem—gas jets, the meowing tomcat. Colloquial expressions like bouts de fumée and moi, j’allais also stand out in this manner while giving the impression of a casual, conversational style. In the eliminated stanza, escarpe, a slang word for thief, and putain, which Littré calls a “terme grossier et malhonnête,” are even stronger and are surely at least part of the reason for the
stanza's suppression. The poem's rhythm contributes to its conversational tone: the five-syllable second line of each stanza throws off its regularity. And the short, declarative sentences, without the inverted syntax characteristic of traditional poetry, tend to negate their division into verses. The rhymes are all masculine, another unusual procedure; and the false rhymes—zinc/cinq and Phidias/gaz—reinforce their unconformity. These devices heighten the contrast set up between nineteenth-century Paris and ancient Greece. The sculptor Phidias is opposed to the aquafortists and sketchers of modern times; the battles of Salamis and Marathon to those between the prostitute and her clients, the thief and his victims, and by implication. Plato's city state to the modern city of Paris. The winking gas jets are the guiding lights of a new age, and their mention in the last line of the poem brings us back to the everyday world.

The familiar expressions in such a poem, then, can be naturalized as appropriate to their subject, Parisian street-life, a subject or field that is itself unusual. But also, the thematization of the modern, explicitly in opposition to the classical world, is paralleled in its language: the "divine" Plato is no more as the word divin is no longer in everyday use. And the poem's protagonist does not ponder Plato's philosophy; he is dreaming as he travels through the city. A conversational language and tone, then, is doubly appropriate to the text.

It is interesting to note that the artistic vocabulary employed here refers primarily to etching, as the title of the section in which it appears ("Eaux-fortes") would lead one to expect. Plaquer, teintes, angles, and en forme de refer to art work in general, whereas zinc and even argentín recall the metal engraving plate, and mordre is the expression used for the corrosive action of the acid's inscription in the metal. The line "Des bouts de fumée en forme de cinq" makes explicit the link between such inscription and writing: written figures are analogous to engraved figures (or shapes); and this analogy is itself a figure, in yet another sense of the word. It is not the city that the poem describes (or that is inscribed in the poem), but rather, a sketch, an etching of the city. The text, then, is the representation of a representation. The scene is similarly presented as a series of unrelated impressions; and the line
beginning “Moi, j’allais . . . ” underlines the speakers detachment from what he sees. In his preoccupation with ancient Greece, he makes no attempt to comprehend what he sees and hears around him. But the final line makes clear the specular relation between him and his surroundings: he is himself observed by the gas jets: he is part of the picture. This integration by means of the eye incorporates the world of Greece as well, as the analogies between it and modern Paris show. And yet, the final line does not accomplish altogether a metaphoric totalization of the disparate images in the text. Plato and the famous Greek battles are known to the speaker and to us only through books, or, as here, through his dreams. The scene is that of a sketch; and even the rain is likened to music, rather than being a natural sound. So this written text cannot be said to describe the real world, but only another text; it is the metaphor of a metaphor, opening on to the possibility of the limitless play of relations characteristic of figurative language.

IV. Metapoetics

As poems like “Monsieur Prudhomme,” “L’Auberge,” and “Croquis parisien” show, even texts whose familiar diction would seem to be motivated by genre or subject matter can be seen to resist the totalization imposed upon them by the process of naturalization. Such resistance can be seen even more clearly in “Art poétique,” which calls for analysis at another level: as a metalinguistic text, it has often been taken as a description of Verlaine’s poetics. It exhibits a characteristic trait of the *ars poetica* genre: the tending toward the limit of performativity, toward what Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* called the coincidence of action and utterance. Of course, there is no explicit performative “I hereby poeticize correctly,” but the poem itself comes to represent such an utterance, and its theory/illustration model can bring into play a certain amount of self-referential discourse.

De la musique avant toute chose,
Et pour cela préfère l’Impair
Plus vague et plus soluble dans l’air,
Sans rien en lui qui pèse ou qui pose.
Il faut aussi que tu n'ailles point
Choisir tes mots sans quelque méprise:
Rien de plus cher que la chanson grise
Où l'Indécis au Précis se joint.

C'est des beaux yeux derrière des voiles,
C'est le grand jour tremblant de midi,
C'est, par un ciel d'automne attiédi,
Le bleu fouillis des claires étoiles!

Car nous voulons la Nuance encor.
Pas la Couleur, rien que la nuance !
Oh ! la nuance seule fiance
Le rêve au rêve et la flûte au cor !

Fuis du plus loin la Pointe assassine,
L'Esprit cruel et le Rire impur,
Qui font pleurer les yeux de l'Azur,
Et tout cet ail de basse cuisine !

Prends l'éloquence et tords-lui son cou !
Tu feras bien, en train d'énergie.
De rendre un peu la Rime assagie.
Si l'on n'y veille, elle ira jusqu'où ?

O qui dira les torts de la Rime ?
Quel enfant sourd ou quel nègre fou
Nous a forgé ce bijou d'un sou
Qui sonne creux et faux sous la lime?

De la musique encore et toujours !
Que ton vers soit la chose envolée
Qu'on sent qui fuit d'une âme en allée
Vers d'autres cieux à d'autres amours.

Que ton vers soit la bonne aventure
Eparse au vent crispé du matin
Qui va fleurant la menthe et le thym . . .
Et tout le reste est littérature.

In this text there are moments of theoretical statement
simply followed by illustration. The second stanza, for in­
stance, can be taken as a reading of the third, where the juxta­
position of the “indécis” and the precise is demonstrated. The
reference to beautiful eyes, presumably clear and bright (on the level of the signified), is followed by “derrière des voiles” which blurs the effect of the first part of the line as veils might do eyes. The word tremblant annuls the effect of “grand jour” (broad daylight) in the same way as does attiédi for “ciels d’automne.” Similarly, the last line incorporates the contrast between fouillis and clair, whereas bleu gives the impression of their fusion, since it contradicts the whiteness of claires étoiles.

There are several examples of what could be called “méprises” in the text as well. Soluble en l’air contradicts the meaning of soluble, which refers to a liquid; assassine is used as an adjective; and not only is the jewel said to be forged, but it conflicts with “d’un sou.” Vent crispé is another example: crispé means “dont la surface est un peu crispée par le souffle de quelque vent” (Littré); and there is an added resonance of the English “crisp air.” But there are always instances of “mê­prises” in the choice of words; for the confusion of words, the taking of one for the other, is just another way of designating tropes. Bijou d’un sou, for example, can be called an oxy­moron, vent crispé a kind of hypallage.

The last two stanzas present themselves as a summa of the precepts set forth in the poem. It incorporates vague expres­sions like la chose, d’autres, and plural nouns. There is a “mé­prise” in la bonne aventure, which here has the sense of “ad­venture” as well as its usual meaning of “fortune” (telling); it can also be taken as a metonymy for “fortune teller” or gypsy. That its epithet is éparse is another instance of a turning away from normal usage. Only aventure/littérature is a rich rhyme. But there are moments where precept and illustration coincide more directly. First, with reference to the rhythm: “pré­fère l’Impair” is part of a nine-syllable line. Second, there is an instance of onomotopoeia in which the coincidence of sound and sense parallels the precept enunciated: “sans rien en lui qui pèse ou qui pose.” The stanza on rhyme, a critique of Parnassian verse and its extremely rich and rare rhymes and the funny, tricky rhyme of Banville, incorporates a mixture of in­ternal rhyme and alliteration in f and s to a degree that has been called cacophonous. The two interior lines—where ou is repeated six times and echos the rhyme in the preceding
stanza—are difficult to read aloud, and their exaggerated rhyme has a comic effect. And the phrase “sans quelque méprise” itself illustrates imprecision.

But perhaps the clearest example of self-referentiality is the line “Prends l’éloquence et tords-lui son cou!”: the expression is itself the antithesis of eloquence, both as signified and as signifier, since the use of tords-lui and son rather than le are markers of a more casual style. This “neck-wringing” takes place throughout the poem in its conversational rhythm and use of familiar expressions. Fouillis is a colloquial expression, and its tenor underlines its contrast with claires étoiles. Grise, though obviously representing the indécis/précis distinction, carries with it a resonance of its familiar meaning, “tipsy.” Other elements from conversational speech include the tutoiement, “C’est des beaux yeux,” tu feras bien, and elle ira jusqu’où, where the omission of the interrogative inversion is reinforced by its position as a rhyming word. Elements from situational registers usually avoided in poetry can be found here, too: assagie carries a connotation of childishness; and ail de basse cuisine is highly unusual in poetry. The use of familiar speech and elements from everyday life serve to create a contrast with the title, which would have led one to expect an elevated style like that of Boileau (and like that Boileau recommended). And in this contrast itself resides the “message” of the art poétique. There is a reversal of the hierarchy: “la pointe,” or eloquence, which should have been “elevated,” is “basse” here. Its epithet, assassine, is an archaism: it too is obsolete. And it is music, not poetic language, that is “before everything else,” that lets verse fly away and the soul go off to “other skies.”

But curiously enough, there are parts in the poem that are self-contradictory rather than self-referential. Cou/jusqu’où is an example of the exaggerated rhyme censured. Though impure laughter is to be avoided, “cet ail de basse cuisine” is used to refer to it. And the most curious instance of this procedure occurs in the fourth stanza, where nuance is repeated three times, contrasted with color to render it even clearer and creating an internal rhyme like that described in the seventh stanza.

The harping tone created by all this repetition is reinforced
by the demanding "nous voulons"; and pas, rien que and seul are also pleonastic. All this thwarts the nuance so expressly called-for. This circumventing of the theory/illustration model can be seen again in the relation of the lyrical last two stanzas to the rest of the poem. The didactic tone—though at times a comic one—of the first section is absent here; the imperatives have become much more gentle subjunctives; there are no traces of familiar vocabulary (in fact, vont fleurant is an obsolete, literary construction); the garlic has been transmuted into much more delicate seasonings. This poem then, might seem to repeat the pattern of a text like Hugo's Réponse: polemical passages using familiar discourse followed by a return to elevated style. In that case the last two stanzas would represent ideal poetry, whereas the preceding explanations could be dismissed as didactic theorizing. But this poem cannot be called a simple statement of Verlaine's poetics—nor a "simple" statement at all. Verlaine himself said of it: "Puis—car n'allez pas prendre au pied de la lettre L'Art poétique de Jadis et Naguère, qui n'est qu'une chanson, après tout, JE N'AURAI PAS FAIT DE THEORIE" ("Préface" aux Poèmes saturniens).

The last line, "Et tout le reste est littérature," by relapsing into the casual mode forestalls an interpretation that would divide the poem into a theoretical first part followed by a contradictory application. The Petit Robert gives as one meaning of the word littérature: "ce qui est artificiel, peu sincère," and uses this line as the example. But there was no such meaning of the word at the time: it is this poem itself that turns littérature into a pejorative word. The use of familiar discourse in this poem then, because it is a "song" and in its deviation from conventional diction constitutes a sign denoting a rejection of traditional "literature." Verlaine has taken Boileau's title for a poem that, in its shiftings of style and tone, is distinctly anticlassical. The text's awareness of itself as language, as indicated by the title, leads to its disruption as simple assertion. Each time it seems to refer to something outside itself, beautiful eyes, for instance, it refers instead to its own language: here, the words "beaux yeux" and what follows. The signs become the referents; and the poem itself refers to this referring, or
deferring. This oscillation between the surface of the text and its referent puts into action the figural movement of the text, a circular motion indicated by the imagery of joining and the figure of the sun. It seems to be a text about poetry in general; but it can only be "about," and turning about, itself.

Other texts likewise play on the reader’s recognition of the stylistic incongruity of familiar language and invite interpretations that can take it into account. The title of "Kaleidoscope" as well as its use of the future tense, allusions to dreaming and metempsychosis, and its evocation of a "ville magique" suggests obvious ways of naturalizing its incompatibilities in diction. Poems like "Charleroi" and "Pantoum négligé" combine elements from different milieux and several registers to produce a humorous tone or the disorienting effects prized so greatly later on by the decadents. The title of "Sonnet boiteux" (Jadis et Naguère) is self-referential, calling attention to the thirteen-syllable lines, which convey the sensation that everything is in excess. The English words (Sohos, indeeds, all rights, haôs) are all in the plural (the last three are italicized), and their intrusion in the poem without any reference makes them into nonsense syllables. Familiar constructions and words take their place in a structure that seems to deny meaning and emphasize unfamiliarity.

V. Toward Unreadability

Sometimes it seems that such contradictions in tone and level are impossible to incorporate at any level whatever. An example of such an instance is "Nouvelles Variations sur le Point du Jour" (Parallèlement) where a description of Paris calls up familiar language with no contrasting elevated moments.

Le Point du Jour, le point blanc de Paris,  
Le seul point blanc, grâce à tant de bâtisse  
Et nueve et laide et que je t'en ratisse,  
Le Point du Jour, aurore des paris!

Le bonneteau fleurit "dessur" la berge,  
La bonne tôt s'y déprave, tans pis
Pour elle et tant mieux pour le birbe gris
Qui lui du moins la croit encore vierge.

Il a raison, le vieux, car voyez donc
Comme est joli toujours le paysage:
Paris au loin, triste et gai, fol et sage,
Et le Trocadéro, ce cas, au fond,

Puis la verdure et le ciel et les types
Et la rivière obscène et molle, avec
Des gens trop beaux, leur cigare à leur bec:
Epatants ces metteurs-au-vent de tripes!

The diction ranges from casual ("Il a raison le vieux" voyez donc) to slang (birbe, ["old man"], type, bec, épatants, je t'en ratisse) to vulgar expressions like metteurs-au vent de tripes (murderers, who disembowel their victims), and especially ce cas. This last word has two slang senses: "excrement" and "penis"; and whichever applies in this case is highly improper in poetry. This poem appears in the section of Parallèlement called "Lunes," with its "obscene" connotation. Robichez finds such usage an "aveulissement du langage" (697). Since there is no opposition of such language to a different milieu, it cannot be naturalized in the same way as in "Parisien, mon frère" or La Bonne Chanson, XVI. It seems that the language of the poem is taking over, responding to the impulses of sound and figure rather than logic. Word play is evident, as in the phrase "Sur le point de" in the title. "Point blanc de Paris" calls forth "aurore des paris"; and it is related to the gambling imagery in the text: paris, bonneteau, and je t'en ratisse, meaning to "take" someone in a card game. As in a card game, the relations between the words are purely arbitrary or metonymic; they have only their sound in common. Thus le bonneteau becomes "la bonne tôt . . . "; Paris calls up paris; tant. t'en. The name of the neighborhood, "Point du Jour," has no relation to its referent either, since it is situated at the west of Paris. Verlaine had noted this fact earlier in the poem "Aube à l'envers," evidently referred-to indirectly in the title "Nouvelles Variations." The manuscript of the later poem shows an alternative title, "Couchants," which makes this link explicit and which contains another twist because of the sexual meaning of
coucher. Grâce à rather than par la faute de is another shift from what would be expected; and épatants seems an unlikely epithet for "metteurs-au-vent de tripes." Car has lost its function of drawing a conclusion from evidence: the countryside has no obvious connection with the maid's virginity. Besides, we have already been told she is corrupted and that the old man is in fact wrong despite the assertion "Il a raison, le vieux." The poem seems carried along by its words as by the river it describes: the accumulation of disparate nouns and contradictory adjectives joined by et's, puis, and avec, the repetitions of the first stanza, all seem purely gratuitous. There is no consciousness ordering experience, no totalizing power. Attempts to link the white color of the dawn to the virginity of the maid or to her apron in a metaphorical process are futile: only métonymic relations of sound and contiguity seem to apply. The use of vulgar diction contributes to this contravention of the traditional mode of poetry, indeed of language in general. The only element joining this fragmented assemblage together is the poem's rhythmic structure, its rhyme, and its disposition into stanzas on a printed page. "Variations" could lead one to expect a theme in which the variations would be grounded. But the point of "Le Point du Jour" is its pointlessness: that where there should be a theme there is a hole or rather, a river, carrying the unordered detritus of the life in the city.

"Nouvelles Variations" is only an extreme example of a process seen in the poems discussed earlier: familiar discourse can play an important role in the texts where it appears, but it is an intrusion into conventional poetry, and it does not let itself be dismissed with easy generalizations. It reminds us of its otherness, and as such, improper language becomes im-propre, figurative, standing for a message not carried by its surface signification. As it participates in the figural structure of the text, it escapes our attempts to account for it fully. The texts in which Verlaine uses familiar discourse, then, are far from lacking "poetry"; they are not to be excused by referring to his low life: from Les Poèmes saturniens on, they exploit important stylistic resources. It is clear that, rather than representing a rejection of rhetoric, Verlaine's use of such diction exploits to the full their rhetorical possibilities. Because of the resistance these texts oppose to the reader's efforts to incorporate them
into seamless, totalizing interpretations, they show Verlaine to be a much more complex, innovative, and interesting poet than the naive versifier he is often taken to be.

Verlaine has been credited with a central role in the nineteenth-century renewal of poetic language. Poems like "Nouvelles Variations" show the disorienting effects he achieves through mixing expressions from diverse sources. In contrast to the Rimbaud, however, he uses few technical or scientific terms. Rather, he follows Baudelaire's lead in introducing references to contemporary life and informality in tenor, though pushing much beyond Baudelaire in the use of popular speech. Critics have often pointed out that Verlaine's use of familiar diction increases in the works written towards the end of his life. To some extent this increase can be associated with the practice of other poets during this period, and especially with the decadents. Nonetheless it should be clear from examples like "Monsieur Prudhomme," "Croquis parisiens," and "L'Auberge," all written in the 1860s, that the use of familiar diction was a feature of Verlaine's style from the beginning of his poetic career. To some extent its increasing use by other poets was an effect of the growing reputation of his earlier work, reprinted by Vanier in the 1880s.

Yet despite his affinities with others, Verlaine's poems have called forth critical reactions that differ somewhat from those accorded his predecessors and contemporaries. I quoted some of these at the beginning of this chapter. There seem to be two questions raised about the propriety of the use of low language in his poetry: one relating to its efficacy and the other to its supposed correlation with his "vulgarity" of thought.

A brief look at a poem that pushes Verlaine's tendencies towards vulgarity the farthest in instructive in this regard. The dixain "La sale bête . . .", dated 1875-76, is among the poems using slang diction to the greatest extent. It describes Rimbaud studying languages in preparation for embarking on business ventures abroad:

La sale bête! (En général). Et je m'emmerde!
Malheur! Fait-il qu'un temps si précieux se perde?
Le russe est sans l'arabe appliqué, j'ai cent mots
D'Aztec, mais quand viendront ces cent balles! Chameaux.
Va donc! Et me voici truffard pour un semesse
Et c'est Pipo qu'il faut quoiqu'au fond je m'en fesse
Eclater la sous-ventrière! Merde à chien!
Ingénieur à l'étranger ça fait très bien,
Mais la braise! Faut-il que tout ce temps se perde?
Mon pauvre coeur bave à la quoi! bave à la merde!

This is obviously another of the "Vieux Coppées." Another intertext is Rimbaud's poem "Le Coeur volé," whose first verse, "Mon triste coeur bave à la poupe," is echoed and distorted in the last line of the dixain. This allusion parallels Rimbaud's rejection of his poetic vocation; his present mercenary inclinations are the butt of the poem.

It is often asserted that slang and popular language change rapidly, and Verlaine's poetry shows to what extent this can be true. Words like pouacre, for example, have gone out of use. When Cuénot says that "rien ne change plus que la langue populaire," he implies that Verlaine should have avoided it on these grounds (133). But this text reveals how much slang has remained the same and neither passed into standard usage nor disappeared since the last century. Most of the expressions are still current or at least understandable: cent balles, chamœaux, la braise (for money), and merde à chien (chien still has the negative connotations expressed in "quel temps de chien!" and other locutions). S'emmerder, which was absent even from many slang dictionaries in the nineteenth century, is anything but obsolete today. Pipo, a slang term for a student at the Ecole Polytechnique, is dated at 1875 by Robert, so this is a very early use. Other expressions might be considered as familiar rather than as popular or slang, including la sale bête, va donc!, and ça fait très bien. These, with the exclamations and syntactical constructions bave à la quoi and so on, are also typical of the conversational mode still common today. The imitations of contemporary lower-class pronunciation are still comprehensible: un semesse is obviously the popular pronunciation of semestre; and je m'en fesse (used for je m'en fasse in a variant of the popular expression "manger à s'en faire pétèr la sous-ventrière") has the added resonance of fesser, to spank. The only expression not to be found in a current layperson's dictionary would be truffard, which Delvau's slang dictionary defines as "soldier."

This poem also shows how much of Verlaine's colloquial
language and slang is still striking over a hundred years later. It is significant that not only was this poem not published during Verlaine’s lifetime, it was not included in the posthumous editions of his work until 1948, not even in the Correspondance with the letter in which it had been inserted. This is perhaps neither an important nor very interesting poem in other respects, but it is a reminder that the use of such diction in poetry still has a good deal of shock-value.

“Vulgar” expressions are by no means fully accepted in print today. In fact, I myself am obliged to use the words vulgar and low in order to speak of these levels of language. Even populaire in French has a decidedly pejorative cast. In a 1954 article, Marouzeau takes pains to distinguish “langue vulgaire” from vulgarity of attitudes or objects, which could be expressed at any level of language. But he goes on to speak of such language in a negative manner: it arises from a “défaut de culture,” he tells us, caused by “d’une part l’ignorance de la discipline grammaticale et des formes littéraires, d’autre part par l’absence de la coercion qu’exerce ce qu’on appelle l’éducation” (245). Here again, it is clear that low language is opposed to literature. Furthermore, the words défaut, ignorance, and absence reveal his belief that the people are missing something: they lack discipline; they are out of control. The same attitude can be seen as he goes on: “D’autres caractéristiques de la langue populaire sont fonction de la mentalité propre aux couches inférieures de la population: en premier lieu, défaut de ce qu’on est convenu d’appeler éducation, c’est-à-dire absence de cette contrainte sociale qui refoule les instincts élémentaires et en tous cas leur refuse la libre expression” (248).

This kind of criticism has been addressed to Verlaine as well, largely, I think, because of what is known about the debauchery of his last years. As it was for Baudelaire, a correspondence is posited between Verlaine’s life and his works in comments like the following by Cuénot on “Amoureuse du diable” (Jadis et Naguère):

“Ah! si je bois, c’est pour me soûler, non pour boire”, est déparé par un grossier vulgarisme. “C’est une espèce d’autre vie en raccourci./Un espoir actuel, un regret qui rap­plique”. Toute la poésie est abolie par ce mot où se révèle
la grossièreté de celui qui parle. Il semble que le vin, comme la débauche, transforme Verlaine en une sorte de voyou. Le vice, sauf quelques trouvailles littéraires, le dégrade aussi bien dans sa poésie que dans sa moralité. (134)

Part of what makes some Verlaine texts unreadable or what has led to their rejection is the loss of control that is perceived when popular language comes into play. It is not easy to get a grasp on what it stands for, what its referent can be. One solution (Cuénot's and Bruneau's for instance) is to find a motivation between signifier and signified in the relation between Verlaine's poems and his life. Such an association means that the entire practice of the use of familiar diction is naturalized in its correspondence to the world. Language is reduced to reference. The problems such an equation raises will be the subject of the next chapter, on Rimbaud.