"Rimbaud bourre ses vers de mots triviaux, écrit dans une langue très voisine de la langue parlée," writes François Ruchon. These "mots roturiers . . . sont la traduction de l'état de révolte, d'ironie, de haine où il vit, dans la contrainte de Charleville et dans l'âpre ennui qui succède à ses escapades" (175). This quotation epitomizes the critical commentary on Rimbaud's linguistic innovations in verse: "revolutionary" poetic discourse equals revolt against society. This equation has been formulated in various ways and has been applied in different ways to various texts, but the underlying implication is the same. Several of the main features of this approach can be seen in the preceding quotation: first, that the use of familiar discourse reflects a kind of loss of self-restraint ("Rimbaud bourre ses vers"); second, that it is aspects of Rimbaud's life and character (Rimbaud the great rebel against convention, rejecting the "contrainte de Charleville") that provoke such usage; and third, and most important, that there is a one-to-one correspondence, here expressed as a "translation," between diction and thought, between the signifier and the signified. The word traduction is especially apt in its link to the root meaning of metaphor, for this concept represents in essence a metaphorical linking between the text and the world. Of course, such a concept is not particular to studies on Rimbaud, nor is it anything new. It is the basis both of theoretical positions like Bonald's 1806 statement supporting the distinction
between noble and "roturier" vocabularies, "distinction aussi fondamentale en littérature qu’en politique" (988) and of the poetic text that best epitomizes the romantics’ opposition to traditional poetic diction. Hugo’s “Réponse.” As we have seen, it was the line “je mis un bonnet rouge au vieux dictionnaire” that became the catchword for the metaphorical equivalence between revolt in poetics and in politics.

Rimbaud’s use of technical or scientific terminology, familiar discourse, slang, and childish expressions, and his attention to subject matter (and the corresponding vocabulary) of contemporary life and aspects of lower-class life are still easily perceptible today. He used such language from some of his earliest poems until the end of his work in verse, though it appears less frequently in the *Derniers Vers*. As throughout, I will be treating verse texts only. Effects of disruption and disjunction are typical of Rimbaud’s work as a whole, but the introduction of such language into verse brings about a conflict in codes that points up one of the problems I will discuss in particular, the question of the “prosaic.”

Rimbaud’s innovations exploit the possibilities raised by Hugo’s rejection of neoclassical periphrasis in favor of the *mot propre*. And it is these devices that lead to his characterization as a “revolutionizer” of poetic discourse as he was a rebel against society. This poetic/political parallelism becomes particularly clear when we turn to poetic texts whose subject matter is itself overtly political. I will study two such texts in detail, “À la musique” and “L’Orgie parisienne,” to see how this equivalence holds up. In other poems the use of familiar discourse contributes to establishing a kind of middle style in which the “prosaic” signified is neither romanticized nor devalued in its treatment. “Ma Bohème” is a good example of such a text. Still other poems, like “Ce qu’on dit au poète,” which presents itself as a kind of poetic manifesto, pose very different questions regarding resistance to poetic tradition and the relationship between the signifier and the signified. But before examining these poems, it is important to look at Rimbaud’s diction in general and the problems it raises in distinguishing between the levels of content and expression, for it is here that the question of the poem’s referentiality arises.
1. Innovation and Signification

Rimbaud is well-known for widening the scope of poetic vocabulary. Although the directions he developed had all been explored by Hugo, Baudelaire, Verlaine, or all three, there are in his work both a high incidence of unconventional vocabulary and striking use of clashes between conflicting registers. On the level of the signified, he introduced a large number of contemporary references as well as features of everyday or lower-class life, that is, semantic fields formerly considered beneath the notice of poets. Examples would be the hair ointment and caoutchoucs of “Mes petites amoureuses” or the photographers, telegraph poles, and references to public figures in “Ce qu’on dit au poète.” These would seem to belong in newspapers or advertisements rather than in poetry. A similar device is the presence of the banal and the commonplace: potatoes and fried eggs in “Ce qu’on dit au poète,” cheap wine in the “Bateau ivre,” shoe elastics in “Ma Bohème,” rustic or vulgar elements in “Les Reparties de Nina” (fumiers, une vache fientera, the description of the farmhouse and the peasant people). Such elements attract notice because they are features of everyday or lower-class life, linguistic fields formerly considered beneath the notice of poets.

Innovations in mode include the reproduction of speech associated with the lower classes, a stylistic marker of this field. “C’est une bonne farce” (“Soleil et chair”), “tra la la,” “tu sais bien” (“Le Forgeron”), “Ah va, c’est bon pour vous” (“Les Premiers Communions”), and “Veux-tu finir! . . . Oh! C’est encore mieux” (“Première Soirée”) are among many examples of directly or indirectly quoted speech that lend a realistic air as well as an everyday tone to the texts in which they appear. Hugo had made a similar use of reported speech, in “Les Pauvres Gens,” for example. Like Hugo, Rimbaud is especially noted for his use of familiar or popular expressions, a violation of the standards of “formality.”

Again on the level of the signifier, sequences of short, simple words (as in “Les Effarés”), terms from particular linguistic domains, like commercial or scientific vocabularies (the “défis assez mal ravaudés” in “Vénus anadyomène” for instance), and prosaic rhythms have similar effects. In “Au Cabaret-
Vert, "for example, there is a tension between the regularity of the sonnet-form (rhyme, alexandrines) and the rhythm of the poem, which tends to break free from the restrictions imposed by the division into verses. From the beginning of the poem,

Depuis huit jours, j'avais déchiré mes bottines
Aux cailloux des chemins. J'entrais à Charleroi.
—Au Cabaret-Vert: je demandai des tartines
De beurre et du jambon qui fût à moitié froid.

Bienheureux, j'allongeai les jambes sous la table
Verte: je contemplai les sujets très naïfs
De la tapisserie. . . .

the punctuation and the use of enjambements pull the lines into the rhythm of spoken language. In a poem like "Le Dormeur du val," also written in October 1870, the rejets D'argent, Luit, Dort, and Tranquille serve to accentuate important elements in the poem. But in "Au Cabaret-Vert" the words thus set off (De beurre, Verte, D'aiU and De la tapisserie) hardly merit such emphasis. They have no special interest; they neither form a combined effect nor a contrast with other elements in the poem. Rimbaud seems to contradict the reader's impulse to assign value to the rejets or to stop at the end of each line: tartines and gousse have to be carried over to the next line for completion; verte and de la tapisserie require the preceding line in order to make sense. Such prose rhythms combine with the simple past tense typical of narrative, the natural syntax, the colloquial expressions and provincial terms, and banal, lower-class elements (bread and butter, ham, garlic, la chope) to establish a tone that might be called "realistic" in the sense that it incorporates elements more likely to be found in realist novels of the time. But the expectations set up by these devices are themselves undercut by the more conventionally lyrical last lines of the text:

. . . la chope immense, avec sa mousse
Que dorait un rayon de soleil arriéré.

And the tone is again unsettled by the pejorative connotations of the last word of the text, arriéré.

As we have seen in studying other poets, familiar, vulgar,
and technical poetic discourse can be used to a variety of stylistic effect. It can be considered as motivated by evocation of, say, the milieux of peasants or the working classes. But Rimbaud also extends its use to more conventionally "aesthetic" contexts, where such terms are often in sharp relief against religious allusions (e.g., "Les Pauvres à l'église"), characters with heroic qualities (like the military heroes invoked in "Les Douaniers"), or conventionally lyrical subjects (as in "Mes petites amoureuses" or "Michel et Christine"). In such texts their shock value is especially great. "L'Eclatante Victoire de Sarrebruck" is an excellent example of this process: grandiloquent terms (éclatante, apothéose, Empereur) are played off against the slang terms and infantile expressions (dada, Pioupious, etc.), and the result is a picture of the Emperor as thoroughly ridiculous. Familiar and vulgar expressions used in conventionally lyrical contexts can be directed against the people described, as in "Vénus anadyomène," "Les Assis," and "Accroupissements," where they appear to be a form of attack, a series of insults. In such contexts they are in conflict with the text's own subject matter. "Les Premières Communions" is a particularly good example of such a use.

In applying the concept of register to poetic texts it is important to distinguish as carefully as possible among the levels of discourse and in particular between the signifier and the signified. It has been a useful step for critics dealing with Rimbaud's style to make distinctions between the subject represented and the language levels used in their representation. Thus, Riffaterre has noted that in "Vénus anadyomène" Rimbaud writes a kind of "contreblason," using pejorative and vulgar discourse to treat a conventionally "poetic" subject (Production, 93-97; see also Scarfe, 173-74). At the opposite extreme, a text like "Accroupissements" derives its humor from the elevated diction used to describe bodily functions, a semantic field avoided in the poetry of the time. "Rayons de lune," for instance, loses its lyrical quality in the next line, where we find that the moon's rays make "aux contours du cul des bavures de lumière." But often when critics turn to specific examples, the distinctions they establish break down. Thus, Scarfe does not distinguish between the signifier and the signified, grouping together as "pejorative" or "unaesthetic" such
disparate language levels as those exemplified by "mouches éclatantes," "pioupiesques," "c'est une bonne farce," and "coeurs de saleté." Similarly, he finds that the "Stupra" sonnets have a "scabrous vocabulary" (171), whereas they are lexically perfectly tame. The title of the third piece, "Sonnet du trou du cul" (beginning "Obscure et froncé..."), includes the only phrase that belongs to a level of vocabulary lower than that usually found in poetry, and this title was perhaps given by Verlaine, who wrote the quatrains. Whereas in earlier texts Rimbaud had used expressions like _Je pisse vers les cieux, ulcère à l'anus_, and so on, there are no other examples of such daring vocabulary in these supposedly obscene texts. And no one seems to have objected to the use of _leurs culs en rond_ in the more "esthetic" text, "Les Effarés." The "obscenity" of this sonnet arises from its subject and the reader's deciphering of the text with reference to parts of the body—_oeillet_ as the opening; _mousse_ as the pubic and anal hair; _larmes de lait_ as semen, etc. In fact, the very lack of more vulgar terms, the fact that the poems are couched in such genteel language, gives them a humorous note. The third sonnet appeared in _L'Album zutique_ as a parody of Mérat's "Idole," a series of sonnets celebrating various parts of the female anatomy. And, with respect to their language, incorporating such eminently lyrical words as _ardeurs, charmante, fleurit, anges_, and _glorieuse_, Rimbaud's sonnets would not be out-of-place in such a series. This aspect of the sonnets makes them into kinds of _éloges paradoxaux_ of the parts of the body (the penis, the buttocks, and the anus) not included in such verses as Mérat's. Though, as Kerbrat points out, the stylistic function of a term and its pejorative or meliorative function are often related in practice (101-2), these poems play on the divergence between their referents and the positive connotations of their language.

A certain imprecision in critical terminology arising from the failure to distinguish between the signifier and the signified can be seen even in Baudry's brilliant analysis of Rimbaud's discourse. He contrasts two kinds of "subversion" operating within the literary code in Rimbaud's verse, "l'interdit," or "ce qui ne doit pas être dit" and "le prosaïque," "qui devrait par définition être exclu de la poésie" (51-52). It is a measure of the difficulty of this task that once he turns to examples, his
distinction starts to break down: the examples he gives of each class of expression could be used to illustrate the other. Ulcère à l’anus (from “Vénus anadyomène”), an example of “l’interdit,” is a term that would be more appropriate to a medical context and so could be considered “prosaic”; whereas the language of “Mes petites amoureuses,” a text he classifies as “prosaic,” includes vulgarisms (dégueulé), scientific terms like hydrolat, neologisms, provincialisms, and more. These terms would certainly fall under the heading of “l’interdit,” that which should not be uttered in poetry. Furthermore, as Houston has pointed out (French Symbolism, 99), the term “prosaic” itself tends to be misused: familiar or slang diction is not necessarily characteristic of prose. The “prosaism” Baudry finds in “Et mon bureau?” from “Les Réparties de Nina” seems to refer to Nina’s unromantic attitude rather than to the qualities of her speech. It is interesting that critics of all schools call Nina “prosaic”: “the speaker in the poem is seen as the poet; what is opposed to him must be not-poetry, the “prosaic.” This meshing of expression and content is as capable of leading us astray as it is compelling; and it shows how easy it is to posit a union between the text and the world.

Because of the particularly restricted poetic vocabulary of neoclassical French poetry, the nineteenth-century texts that introduced elements from registers hitherto considered unacceptable tend to be described by critics in terms of “revolutionary” acts. But despite its usefulness in particular instances, the equivalence so posited is theoretically untenable: works from Lamartine to the socialist poets of the nineteenth century to Soviet socialist realists show that opposition to bourgeois society is not necessarily expressed through opposition to its linguistic standards or its literary conventions. And vice versa, stylistic innovation cannot always be associated with sociopolitical rebellion. Wordsworth, Eliot, and the Decadents (Rimbaud’s successors in the introduction of vulgarisms into poetry) would be among the many possible counterexamples.

Why is it so tempting to call Rimbaud’s verse “revolutionary” and to slide back and forth between referring to poetic devices and to political attitudes (with side-slippings to Rimbaud’s “anti-social” behavior at the time he was writing)? One reason is the attention that has always been given to his biog-
raphy. His alleged participation in the Commune, his rebellion against provincial life, his outrageous behavior in Paris and London even by the standards of bohemian poets and artists, his subsequent rejection of poetry, his gun-running, all these elements that Etiemble has examined in *Le Mythe de Rimbaud* contribute to his image as the great "révolté." Events in his life are deduced from reading the poems and the poems are interpreted with reference to his life. Another reason is that many of his texts do deal with social injustice, the constraints of bourgeois society, and so on. Other poems represent opposition to poetic tradition in their choice of subject matter: "unpoetic", "unaesthetic" objects and situations are described. Examples of such texts will be examined below.

But further, our conception of poetic language leads us to seek analogies among the various stylistic levels of a text: phonetic, semantic, syntactic, thematic, and so on. "Motivation," "overdetermination," "coupling," "projecting the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination," such catchwords represent what Genette has called a "poetic cratylism," i.e., the concept of poetic language as the "rémotivation de la langue courante" ("Formalisme," 237; "Valéry"). Whereas the principle of the arbitrary sign is generally accepted for ordinary speech, in poetry the critic finds a "mimelogical" relation between signifier and signified. This relation is most often posited between sound and sense but it is also used in the study of diction. In speaking about remotivating standard language in the context of nineteenth-century French poetry, however, it is important to remember that when it is incorporated within a poem, everyday language, far from being neutral, is marked diction set against the standard poetic lexicon. It is in fact in its supposed correlation with the thematics of revolt that it becomes motivated. Genette sees this phenomenon in our critical methods as a typically romantic-symbolist one (he examines Mallarmé and Valéry in particular). We can go farther and point out that it has affinities with the valorization, beginning with the romantics, of metaphor and more precisely, with the romantic tradition of metaphorizing the relation between the text and history: the specular relationship between the poet and nature is transferred to that between the poem and the exterior world. A representa-
tive quote from a contemporary theorist shows to what extent our critical discourse is still imbued with this conception of poetry: "Ce qui doit intéresser le poéticien, ce n'est pas d'isoler les éléments d'un vocabulaire dont la spécificité ne serait qu'évocatrice mais de montrer que l'effort poétique cherche à intégrer des structurations hétérogènes à celles de la langue dans une totalité dont il lui revient de souligner le fonctionnement globilisant" (Delas, 96).

The words intégrer, totalité, globalisant show clearly the metaphoric process at work. Of course, poets since the nineteenth century have themselves worked in this tradition, structuring such parallelisms into their works: the onomatopoëias of Poe or the concrete poetry of the twentieth century are especially clear examples, but the principle is the same with less obvious devices. Although the word "revolutionary" may be a homology rather than an analogy, Rimbaud does use unconventional language in texts expressing a reaction against his society. His work is part of the reason we are likely to draw such a parallel between poetics and politics when we read modern poetry.

II. The Poetics of Revolt

One reason it is easy to make the leap from poetics to politics is that our critical vocabulary tends to come already weighted with the poetics/politics analogy: we speak of poetic "convention" and "norms"; innovation is "opposition to poetic tradition," it is called "deviation," "violation of the rules." Finding neutral critical terms in order to avoid confusion is virtually impossible. When the subject matter of the text is opposition to bourgeois society or to the political regime, it is most tempting to analyze such discourse as itself "revolutionary," and to analyze it, the way Baudry does, as resistance to the code of the contemporary cultural text or as opposition to the political regime. There are many examples of such texts in Rimbaud's Poésies, referring to specific political events, like "Chant de guerre parisien" or "L'Eclatante victoire de Sarrebruck"; opposing religion ("Les Pauvres à l'église," "Les Premières Communions," "L'Homme juste"); or commenting on social injustice or insensitive bureaucrats ("Les Effarés," "Les Douan-
A study of two such poems, "A la musique" and "L’Orgie parisienne," serves to show the ways we can analyze the special parallelism between "revolutionary" thought and unconventional expression.

"A la musique" is an example of the use of familiar discourse in a piece of social criticism. An early poem, it is an interesting piece on several levels, especially in the attitude it manifests towards language in general. It seems to point to a rejection of language itself, as the contrast between the speaker and the people described in the text becomes that between speech and silence. The society presented in the poem is obviously antipathetic. The people are as chopped-off and mean as their surroundings: they have so deformed nature that even the trees and flowers are "correct"; and they have destroyed any semblance of life in themselves. Thus, instead of charms hanging from the watch chain, it is the notary himself who hangs. These charms are inscribed with the owner’s initials and have become symbols of possessiveness. Even the women are commercialized: they have "des airs de réclames." Imagery of sickness and death predominates; and the people seem to be strangled by their own weight and their restricting clothes: wheezy townsfolk, choked by the heat; bloated clerks; the fat burgher with his overflowing pipe. The uselessness and vacuity of their lives is suggested by retired men who stir the sand, as though one could get fire out of it. It seems to be their own appetites and acquisitions that destroy them. Their interest in things is translated by a predominance of concrete objects and therefore concrete nouns in the poem: almost all of the people are described as wearing or carrying something: schakos, charms, lorgnons, walking sticks, and so on. As the first stanza points out, the bourgeois "Portent . . . leurs bêtises." Similarly, bureaux is used in its third sense, referring to the workers in an office; they are reduced to the objects to which they sacrifice their humanity, like the women portrayed earlier who have become advertisements.

The young man who speaks in the last three stanzas is opposed to these people from his first words, as the line beginning Moi, je suis indicates. He is débraillé: literally "undressed," figuratively, "unrestrained" or "indecent." Likewise, as he undresses the young girls in his mind, he is removing all
the trappings of stifling, restricting bourgeois society. Unlike their elders, the girls are alert, not complacent; their embroidery, too, is really their hair, in mèches folles at that. And more important, both they and the young man are set against the bourgeois through their silence: he says, "Je ne dis pas un mot"; and they speak only "tout bas," and the indiscreet things they have to say are expressed with their eyes alone.

This is in marked contrast to the speech of the bourgeois, which is mimicked earlier in the poem in a good example of Rimbaud’s use of reported speech. Prisent en argent, for instance, is a contraction for taking snuff from silver snuffboxes. This ellipsis leaves what is essential to them, argent. The quotation, "En somme . . ." (another allusion to money, besides) is evidently ironic from the mouths of retired men, especially after the sarcastic fort sérieusement: the ridiculousness of their armchair politics is heightened by the pretentiousness of their language. The next instance of reported speech indicts itself in a similar way: "Vous savez, c’est de la contrebande." First, the speaker is a called a bourgeois: he need not fear judicial reprisals. Also, he is described as complacently satisfied with his situation: épatant . . . les rondeurs de ses reins, bedaine, savour, déborde; he seems to live for his appetites. The joy he takes in his little "contraband," the fact that the word is used for small amount of illicit snuff, all these are measures of the placidity and monotony of the lives of these people, to whom this seems exciting. The last line of the poem, "Et mes désirs brutaux s’accrochent à leurs lèvres," is in sharp contrast to such coyness. In the context of such a description, the word onnaing is of special interest. It is a provincialism referring to a type of pipe, a kind that "faisait plus riche" (Bruneau, "Patois," 5). It is itself overflowing as are the people, and the word indicates the social situation of the man described; but also it calls attention to itself as a word used by provincial people, in both the literal and figurative senses of the term. Even sounds other than words are denigrated in this text: the band music is filled with mistakes; the sound of the trombones is said to cause amorous feelings; and a "waltz for fifes"—which critics have actually tried to find—would be a very silly piece indeed.

The title, in its sense "To Music," can only be ironic when applied to such a concert.
Not only is the language of the bourgeois pompous and inappropriate; it is also commercialized: the inanimate objects that have become language, the dresses and the charms, carry messages similar to those of the people's speech, concerned with treaties and contraband. Indeed, all the objects they wear and carry signify their social standing and political beliefs. The soldier's caressing of babies in order to wheedle the maids' favors is only the most obvious instance of the exchanges that are going on. As Saussure showed, language itself can be seen as exchange, both in the sense of interpersonal communication and in the sense of the continual substitution of figure that constitutes it. In "La Mythologie blanche," Derrida points out that "l'inscription du numéraire est le plus souvent le lieu de croisement, la scène de l'échange entre le linguistique et l'économique" (257). I have indicated the ways in which Rimbaud's text explicitly presents language as a system of barter. The watch charms inscribed with their owners' initials are perhaps the best example of the link Derrida shows between writing, the propre (the literal), and property.

In consequence, language, as it both incarnates and constitutes society, seems to be opposed to nature in this text. It could be considered, as it often has been, as a kind of clothing, disguising both desire and thought. Like the bourgeois' clothing, like their fat, like their tobacco, it is in excess, it should be stripped away. In Marxist terms it would be analogous to the surplus-value generated by capitalism. Thus, the last line can be seen not only as a return to the natural (brutaux), but also as a way of silencing the young girls, of sealing their lips.

But it is of course impossible to counteract bourgeois society without words. "Je ne dis pas un mot" is necessarily untrue: it is the opposite of a self-referential statement. Not only does the existence of the poem contradict it, but the particular language to be found in it has important connotative value. It is important that the text should include expressions marked as popular or slang, words like couac, pioupiou, bedaine, voyou. Such words are in opposition to those of the bourgeois quoted and echoed in the text. The poem's familiar, commonplace language is unfamiliar, alien, in its context, playing against the poem's regular alexandrines and regular rhyme scheme. It is not silence that is set against bourgeois life and speech, but
language of another sort. When the speaker says “Je reconstruis les corps,” then, we should take it not merely as an opposition to clothing or restrictions: it is only through language that one can construct bodies or nature or any perception of the world. The meaning of corps ("corpus") is relevant here: through the language of this poem and in the conflicts between its different registers, the social body is constructed into a text.

It is useful to study familiar language in this poem in the context of opposition to bourgeois discourse, but we must be careful not to push too far the analogy between “subversive” vocabulary and subversive politics. A poem that reveals the problems raised by confusions between poetics and history, between text and world, is “L’Orgie parisienne ou Paris se repeuple.” It is generally taken to be an account of the return of the “Versaillais” bourgeois to Paris after the repression of the Commune. Its polemical tone is established from the outset. Its use of a slogan of the Versaillais: “Société, tout est rétabli” recalls the chapter headings of that other vituperative poetic work, Hugo’s Les Châtiments. The first stanza is largely representative of what is to follow:

O lâches, la voilà! Dégorgez dans les gares!  
Le soleil essuya de ses poumons ardents  
Les boulevards qu’un soir comblèrent les Barbares.  
Voilà la Cité sainte, assise à l’occident!

“O lâches” immediately sets the speaker in opposition to those he is addressing and prepares for the series of insults that will be hurled at them during the course of the poem. Dégorgez not only refers to the debarking of passengers but also, in its sense of vomiting, announces the network of both illness- and orgy-imagery that will predominate in the text. The Barbare (capitalized), an ironic reference to the Communards, and “la Cité sainte” (Paris described as Jerusalem) set a sarcastic, bitter tone that is likewise to be continued. That the city should be “assise à l’occident” rather than “à l’orient” and that it is decked out as a prostitute rather than “prepared as a bride for her husband” as was Jerusalem in the biblical source give a measure of the acerbity of the polemical attack. The political stance adopted by the poet could not be clearer.
The semantic fields utilized in the text, similarly, have clear thematic implications. The poem is saturated with imagery of sickness and death, words like *hagards, convulsions*, lines like "Trempez de poisons forts les cordes de vos cous," "Asphyxiant votre nichée infâme / Sur sa poitrine, en une horrible pression"), and death (*râle, flancs morts, cité quasi morte, tu gis*, and so on). This imagery points to the corruption and degradation of the bourgeois and of the society they are in the process of reestablishing. The orgy imagery makes this point even more explicit, especially since its effect is one of revulsion rather than titillation: "le troupeau roux des tordeuses de hanches" or "Tas de chiennes en rut mangeant des cataplasmes," for example, are hardly alluring. Such images seek to offend the reader's sensibilities, and they mark the ugliness and degeneracy of the bourgeois described. Indeed, these returning Parisians are reduced by the text to the level of machines without intelligence or sensibility, as shown by the accent on physical needs, the repetition of the word *pantins*, and the line "Fonctionnez plus fort, bouches de puanteurs."

On the level of the signifier, the language of the text reinforces such imagery, both syntactically and in its levels of discourse. Repeated and insistant imperatives, action verbs, and exclamation points create an impression of frenetic and undirected motion. Also, the levels of discourse employed represent a departure from the norms of poetic language of the time. The vulgarism *putain* is only the extreme point of a markedly familiar diction, including expressions like *tas de* and "Qu'est-ce que ça peut faire," and comprising as well a remarkable series of insults addressed to the bourgeois: *fous, syphilitiqnes, hargneux pourris* and so on. Rimbaud draws on another lexicon also usually excluded from contemporary verse: medical and scientific terms (*cataplasme, spasme, ulcère, asphyxiant*, etc.) Such terms are all the more striking in their juxtaposition with more conventionally "poetic" expressions: "Superbes/nausées," "azurs/blafards," "quoiqu'on n'ait fait jamais d'une cité/Ulcère plus puant à la Nature verte, /Le Poète te dit: 'Splendide est ta Beauté!'" Further, the neologism *râleux* goes beyond the bounds of the French language itself.

The use of such discourse seems to provide clear parallels with the poem's thematics. The repulsive imagery translates
the speaker's revulsion against the disgusting bourgeois; the rhythm of the text parallels his agitation; and most important, the poem's diction is itself revolting against the poetic norms of the day, just as the speaker revolts against bourgeois society. There is an analogy between the poem's style and its rejection of the conventions, attitudes, and actions of that society; in a word, poetic practice equals political stance. Moreover, poetic practice leads to a kind of praxis: the shock effects provided by the poem will create a corresponding feeling of revulsion in the reader as well; for who could sympathize with the bourgeois so described?

Yet such an assumption regarding the practical effects of the text is highly problematic: it is very doubtful that the "lâches" and "fous" to whom the poem is ostensibly addressed would read the text at all, let alone with any sympathy; and effects on more sympathetic, left-leaning readers either at that time or now would be difficult, not to say impossible, to measure. Besides, there are elements in the text itself that contradict the neat analogy I have drawn up between style and content. Clearly, the poem has many traditional aspects, too. First, there is a network of positive imagery in counterpoint to the distasteful imagery noted earlier, like the sun washing the boulevards, the luxurious light, the "bonté du fauve renouveau." Second, there are levels of discourse counteracting the use of familiar diction, slang, technical terms, and so on. These include classical allusions, religious vocabulary and allusions, and neoclassical diction, expressions like "pleurs d'or astral" or "le clairon" or "Le Poète" (capitalized, with a dieresis). Third, the form of the poem is perfectly conventional: regular alexandrines, grouped in quatrains, inverted syntax, the use of the simple past, and so on. As for rhetorical figures, the allegorizing capitalizations of words like "la Cité," "L'Avenir," and "Progrès" are used seriously toward the end of the poem, in counterpoint to the ironic use of the device earlier, for words like "Barbares" and "Vainqueurs." Other devices, like the frequent use of apostrophe ("O cité douloureuse, ô cité quasi morte"), enumerations, anaphora, and exclamations, place the text solidly within the tradition of romantic heroic verse. This "revolutionary" poem turns out to be quite conventional after all.
How can we fit such contradictions into an interpretive strategy for analyzing this text? It is not the case that when "Le Poète" speaks about the beauty of the city and his hope for its progress there is a shift in language levels from the low to the elevated (the way diction changed at the end of Hugo's "Réponse"); and even if there were, the supposed "revolutionary" nature of the text would be impaired: there would be a backsliding into a conventional mode of expression for a conventional subject. We could try to integrate the innovation/convention contrast on another level, positing that this juxtaposition itself parallels the situation of Paris—destroyed and brought to her knees, yet turned to the future, a symbol of defeat, a prostitute, yet a symbol of the possibility of concerted action and revolution. The poem, then, would itself represent the "supreme poetry" the poet finds in the city: it would be a hymn to the future and to Paris, but expressed in terms that would otherwise inspire disgust. Yet such ingenious interpretive strategies belie the ambiguous tone of the text in its mixture of rhetorical bombast and puncturing irony. The last lines illustrate the vacillations of tone that counteract efforts to arrive at a logically-satisfying, all-encompassing interpretation of the text:

—Société, tout est rétabli: (a bourgeois slogan)—les orgies
Pleurent leur ancien râle aux anciens lupanars:
(neo-classical personification, repetition, use of a literary euphemism, lupanars for a house of prostitution)
Et les gaz en délière, aux murailles rougies, (the gas lights, an element of modern life, are contrasted in semantic field with en délière)
Flambent sinistrement vers les azurs blafards! (a double juxtaposition: flambent is devalued by its epithet and azurs, an ultra-"poetic" term, by the pejorative and banal blafards).

Thus we can see that even such an overtly political text, referring to a particular historical moment, resists the one-to-one correspondences we attempt to ascribe to its relation to history. The signifier (in terms of language levels and stylistic devices) does not simply reproduce the signified (the subject matter of the text); nor can we say, in consequence, that the
text as a whole is a signifier that faithfully reproduces the historical moment it signifies. In “L’Orgie parisienne” the poet admires the beauty he finds in the very repulsiveness of Paris, saying, “L’orage t’a sacrée suprême poésie.” According to this text, then, poetry is not history; rather, history is poetry. As it is fashionable to say: history is itself a text. As in any concerted analysis of textual strategies, a close reading of “L’Orgie parisienne” shows that our critical tendency to metaphorize, to totalize, is resisted by the text: unmotivated, arbitrary elements give the poem a life of its own and thwart the categorizations we attempt to impose on it. Such a conclusion, in turn, puts into question the mimetic relationship of a literary work to history, not only as implied by what Hayden White calls the “reflection” theory of literature as the mirror of society, but also in the concept of the stylistic level of a text as reflecting its ideological content. 

III. The Unpoetic Poet

Looking at the question from another perspective, we see that the use of familiar and slang expressions in Rimbaud’s verse does not always have the effect of shocking the reader. In the Derniers Vers and in poems like “Soleil et chair,” we must find other ways of reading its presence. “Ma Bohème” is another such text. Like “Ce qu’on dit au poète,” it can be taken as an ars poetica, but the view of the poet and poetry it presents is a very different one. An analysis of this poem shows how the everyday character of the vocabulary contrasts with more conventionally aesthetic words in a way that creates a split in the discourse at many different levels. This in turn establishes the ironic mode of the text and, ultimately, puts into question the terms “poetic” and “prosaic” themselves. We have seen that Baudelaire, too, grappled with this issue, but Rimbaud’s solution leads to a very different kind of poem.

In his essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” Paul de Man examines Baudelairean irony, noting:

The ironic subject at once has to ironize its own predicament and observe in turn, with the detachment and disinterestedness that Baudelaire demands of this kind of
spectator, the temptation to which it is about to succumb. It does so precisely by avoiding the return to the world . . . by reasserting the purely fictional nature of its own universe and by carefully maintaining the radical difference that separates fiction from the world of empirical reality. (199)

Such an ironic mode is present in “Ma Bohème,” where a totalization of the self and the world is undermined by the speaker’s attitude towards his experience, an attitude articulated by his diction.

The poem sets up a metaphorical relationship between the young wanderer presented and the universe around him: metaphorical in the sense that it is effectuated through the use of tropes and also because a system of identities and analogies is established between the self and the world. In the line, “Mon auberge était à la Grande-Ourse,” for example, Grande-Ourse, sounding like a plausible name for an inn, is more than a metaphor describing his sleeping under the stars (“à la belle étoile”): the line makes of him a wanderer among the stars. He says “mon auberge,” and “mes étoiles.” He seems even to be one of the stars: “ma course” can be taken in its sense of the movement of the heavens. Not only is he capable of hearing the stars (the traditional image of the music of the spheres) but in the line “mes étoiles au ciel avaient un doux frou-frou,” it becomes the sound of women companions, the expression frou-frou referring to the sound of silk or taffeta gowns. The physical world and the speaker seem to exchange attributes, as in the metalepsis “mes souliers blessés” and the metaphor linking the sweat of his brow to the dew. The word égrenais, linking his verses with grain, presents another example of his union with the world about him.7

On the other hand, this idealized totalization of the universe and the poet is undercut in several ways, among them the poeticization of the banal. A certain oscillation is exemplified by the line:

Mon paletot aussi devenait idéal.

The ideal is of course contrasted with matter; as the coat disintegrates, it loses its material aspects and becomes ideal. It also
exists for the speaker as an idea, because he still feels he is wearing a coat, even when its outward appearance would be that of rags. But idéal also means that which is perfect: the coat suits him perfectly well. **Unique culotte** functions in the same way.

There is a certain indeterminacy in the sense in which the reader is to understand many of the expressions used in the poem, and because of it, the stylistic level is uncertain. “Fantaisie” can be a caprice or an imaginative work, an artistic creation; or on the other hand, according to Littré, an “irrégularité dans la conduite.” All these senses are appropriate: the wanderer’s life is certainly an unconventional existence, and his attitude towards his clothing reveals a rejection of the materialistic values of society. Yet another ambiguous term is Bohème, which has connotations of a sordid, tawdry, but also, an exciting and romantic existence. Rimbaud plays on both associations, and through the language of the poem evokes both conceptions, intertwining them by mingling the vocabularies proper to both, and giving us an example of a lyrical poem built on the reconciliation of two incompatible worlds.

Throughout the poem, as in “Oraison du soir” and “Mes petites amoureuses,” prose syntax and the everyday character of the vocabulary contrast with more conventionally aesthetic words. On the one hand, there are terms from the vocabulary of neoclassicism, like idéal, Muse, lyres, and amours in the feminine. But these are rendered familiar by their juxtaposition with familiar terms or by their association with the vagabond. Thus, idéal refers to paletot, and to a shabby one at that; the effect of amours splendides is immediately contradicted by the familiar interjection “Oh! là là!”; the strings of the lyres are nothing but shoe elastics. The details regarding his clothing belong to an ordinary, prosaic milieu; and words like crevées and frou-frou are familiar terms.

This almost simultaneous valorization and puncturing of the protagonist’s attributes establishes the ironic mode of the text. There is a split between the protagonist and the persona who narrates the poem: the slightly condescending character of the line, “Oh! là là! que d’amours splendides j’ai rêvées!” shows the narrator to be older, more mature, and amused by the thought of his earlier life. Rêver, used as a transitive verb,
has the connotation of "dreamed-up." another deprecatory expression. Calling the wanderer "Petit-Poucet" also reveals this attitude, since this fairy-tale character evokes both admiration and amusement. The parallels between him and the protagonist are many: like the young poet, "Il écoutait beau­coup"; as the poet is isolated from society. Petit-Poucet was "le souffre-douleurs de la maison et on lui donnait toujours le tort" (Perrault, 191). Whereas Petit-Poucet dropped pebbles and pieces of grain to show him the way home, the poet drops his verses. The use of this name puts us in the context of children's stories. We would not expect to take such a character seriously, and other elements in the protagonist's description bear out this impression. He is not really a poet: "rimant au milieu des ombres," he writes only "rimes," like verses for children.

But it is not simply the case that the narrator is denigrating his younger self: this might provoke laughter, but it would remove the essential contradiction necessary to an ironic stance. The narrator would simply be older and wiser; the present would be stable; and "Ma Bohème" would refer to a reckless, bohemian existence, now long gone. But this would negate the positive, attractive side of the life described: Petit-Poucet is qualified by the epithet, "rêveur." Such a view would also undermine the identification of poetry with walking that Jacques Plessen has pointed out in Rimbaud's work and that applies so well to this poem, especially to its last two lines (170-71). The passé composé in the line "Que d'amours splendides j'ai rêvées" has the ambiguity characteristic of this tense: on the one hand, it can be taken as assuring us that this stage is now passed (its "aspect accompli"); while on the other, it retains its link to the present.

Another aspect of this ambiguity is the narrator's stance with respect to himself as narrator. It must not be forgotten that it is poetry itself that is the subject here. The reader of this poem is presented with a "rhyme" written out of the protagonist's experience, like those alluded to along with muses and lyres. The oscillation between valorization and denigration and the conflicting registers, from the very familiar to the traditionally "poetic," are signs of a doubling of the self. Poulet sees a dialectic of dédoublement in Rimbaud's crea-
tion, "[qui] suppose un créateur qui soit la même personne que sa créature . . . le créateur réveille un autre que lui, qui est pourtant lui" (117; see also 110 and 118-22). But Poulet attributes an "activité magique" to the creator and passivity to the creature; whereas in "Ma Bohème" the creature is himself a creator. This split is not that between the narrator and the protagonist, for this would interfere with the texture of the poem, but within the narrator himself. That he can take himself no more seriously than he can the protagonist is made clear by the poem’s subtitle, "Fantaisie": his attitude cannot be simply one of superiority. This split, then, makes us unsure what to think not only of the character and his life but also of the poem’s own status. If this amused, seemingly detached treatment of the young poet is itself a fantasy, then where does fantasy end and reality begin? The union of the poet with nature or the universe, then, far from effectuating a metaphoric totalization, is itself as unsettled as the constant motion of the wanderer, Petit-Poucet, and the stars, as unsubstantial as the ombres fantastiques.

In examining this poem from the standpoint of linguistic register, we can see that the field is at first sight perfectly acceptable: it is about a wandering poet, certainly a traditional subject for poetry. But other signifieds in the poem come from a field usually excluded: everyday clothing (including culotte, poches crevées, and shoe-elastics). Furthermore, on the level of the signifier, there are intrusions from the spoken mode, "Oh! là là!", and an informal tenor (frou-frou). The contrast between these linguistic intrusions and the terms conventionally associated with this subject, like lyres and Muse, cannot be analyzed in terms of rebellion (political or social), as in "L’Or­g­ie parisienne" or "A la musique." Nor can it be seen as deni­gration of the characters described, as in "Les Assis" or "Mes petites amoureuses." Rather, its very undecidability makes possible the distancing necessary for the ironic stance the narrator takes with respect to himself, and it creates a new, intermediate style, neither "lyrical" nor "prosaic."

IV. "Trouver une langue"

Expanding the correspondence between the signifier and signified the poetics/politics connection presupposes, Rim
baud's work shows how poetic effects can be elicited by discordances both between the signified and the signifier and on the level of the signifier itself. These interrelations can be seen in a pair of texts that exemplify the poeticizing of the trivial ("Oraison du soir") and the trivializing of the poetic ("Mes petites amoureuses") and in the metapoetic text, "Ce qu’on dit au poète."

The juxtapositions of lyrical language with unacceptable signifieds in "Oraison du soir" have frequently been noted. The best example is perhaps the contrast between lines 12 and 13:

Doux comme le Seigneur du cèdre et des hysopes,
Je pisse vers les cieux bruns, très haut et très loin,

but similar juxtapositions take place at the level of both the signified and the signifier. The first line of the poem opposes two figures from distinctly different real and textual milieux: "tel qu’un ange aux mains d’un barbier." Contradictory elements are brought together, creating striking images: the burns are "douces": Acre is conjoined with doux; gold is both young and somber, and it can ensanglante: (is it red or gold, then?) Guisto points out the contradictions on the level of expression, seeing the poem as exemplifying Rimbaud’s poetic enterprise in 1871, “subvertir la poésie traditionnelle” (118). Of course, Rimbaud needs the reader’s familiarity with traditional poetry to make this poem work, because it contrasts conventional poetic vocabulary and religious terms with medical terms (hypogastre), botanical vocabulary (including senses of cannélures and ravaler), and familiar expressions. The romantic mon coeur triste is immediately degraded by its paradoxical association with sapwood and with the coulures. The heavens are depreciated by the adjective bruns. The heliotropes “approve” because they too turn to the sky. Indeed, these contrasts lead to a rereading of the poem in which the elements referred to in elevated diction are reinterpreted in terms of physical functions. Thus, voilures become clouds of smoke from the speaker’s pipe, the “rêves” his feeling of nausea or vomit (ravalé taken in the sense of “regurgitated”); coulures the spilled or driveled beer, me recueille not meditation, as the religious vocabulary and title would lead us to expect, but the speaker’s retiring to relieve himself. This rereading, in
which this language itself is “ravalé,” is triggered by the cues the lexical contrasts have alerted us to find. The confrontations between and on these various levels creates the humor of this poem. And the contrast between these contrasts and the conventional sonnet form creates another level of contradiction. The poem’s effect depends on all these oppositions.

“Mes petites amoureuses” has the same contrasts, though its structure is just the reverse of that in “Oraison du soir”: the conventionally poetic subject is treated in language that is violent and vulgar in the extreme. The language is also extremely difficult to understand. But interpretations of this poem differ from those of “Oraison du soir”: The violence of the language used has elicited commentaries on the violence of Rimbaud’s feelings towards women (or towards himself), provoking speculations regarding young women by whom he may have been rejected, thoughts on his homosexuality, and so on. The language is itself often called “aggressive.” The subject matter, then, seems to determine the seriousness with which the poem is regarded. But as Schaeffer has shown, Rimbaud is writing not against particular young girls or against women in general, but rather, against a certain kind of poetry, the kind the title of the poem would lead us to expect (125; see also Giustio, 133). Whereas in “Oraison du soir” “poetic” expressions were devalued by their conjunction with a “low” subject,” here, as in “Vénus anadyomène,” the standard subject matter of lyrical poetry is brought down through the use of unconventional vocabulary.

But what kind of unconventional vocabulary is used tells us a great deal about Rimbaud’s poetic methods as well as about his reception by critics. Schaeffer tells us that the lexicon of the poem “est emprunté au dégoût, au visqueux, au technique, au prosaïque” (116), thus making no distinction between, respectively, reader reaction (or, if he means words referring to disgust, semantic field), semantic field, a particular register (scientific language), and literary genre conventions. In conflating these categories, he is presupposing that remotivation of the relationship between signifier and referent Genette points out as “poetic cratylism.” A look at the first stanza of the poem shows both how these connections are made and how they unmake themselves:
Un hydrolat lacrymal lave
   Les cieux vert-chou:
Sous l'arbre tendronnier qui bave,
   Vos caoutchoucs
   —
Blancs de lunes particulières
   Aux pialats ronds.
Entrechoquez vos genouillères.
   Mes laiderons!

We can make sense of *Un hydrolat lacrymal* in several ways, on different levels. Schaeffer points out the kind of “bégaiement” produced by the concatenation of *la al* sounds. The phrase also takes its place in an interlocking network of imagery relating to liquids, tears, and pain. And finally, the nouns are part of the sequence of scientific/medical terms in the poem. But when we try to see correspondences among the phonetic structure, the imagery, and the register levels of the language used, we find rupture rather than correlation. We do not associate scientific language with tears or with stammering. The various levels confront rather than reinforce each other, stymying our urge to organize the elements of the text into a comprehensible whole.

The text presents many obstacles to interpreters, and critics have been puzzling for the past hundred years about such collocations as cabbage-green skies, a blue-haired laideron, or the arbre tendronnier. Some terms present problems beyond those posed by unusual images, however. It is worth taking the time to look in detail at some of these difficulties and the ways critics have tried to deal with them. *Laideron* is masculine in the poem, though it was a feminine noun at the time; *étoile* is masculine in the ninth stanza, feminine in the eleventh. What can we make of these “errors”: inadvertence? obscure allusion? further denigration of the conventionally “poetic”? *Fouffes* is defined as a provincialism meaning (depending on the commentator) either “un gifle” or “un chiffon.” Adam finds that “gifles” would not make sense in this context and proposes the latter definition, though *fouffes* is modified by “douleureuses,” and references to pain and cruelty occur throughout the text. *Eclanches* has been given as a provincial-
ism, too, though it exists in Littré and in present-day dictionaries. But Chambon seems surprised that “les commentateurs pensent qu’il s’agit du terme français éclanches” (97-98), since the word applies to sheep’s shoulders and in particular to a butchered cut of meat. He finds such a meaning unacceptable, though the text incorporates terms like mouron, bâtées, and oeufs à la coque. He proposes instead a provincial term, éclinches, meaning “shoulder.” Never mind the other culinary terms and the prevalence of pejorative terms relating to the girls: for Chambon, “shoulders” is more pertinent than the word Rimbaud in fact uses, the “terme français” éclanches. The spelling difference and the fact that the term comes from Picardy rather than the Ardennes region are not evidence enough to counteract the urge to readability and regularity. Pialat is even more difficult to work into a coherent reading because so far its sense has eluded Rimbaud scholars. Antoine Adam avers that it derives from se pialer, “peler de froid” (though he does not list a source); but other commentators, unable to make sense of such a meaning in the stanza, have rejected this definition. Ruff proposes an origin in a slang verb “pialer,” meaning “chialer.” Ruff can then propose a reading, “les traces . . . des larmes de la pluie” (113). But it doesn’t get around the fact that Rimbaud twice wrote “pialat” not chialat (and the latter does not exist either) in a clearly copied text included in the “Lettre du voyant” to Paul Demeny. Schaeffer, too, refutes Adam’s suggestion, proposing instead a reading that can be inserted into the network of sexual allusions and images in the text, that of a breast, un “pis-à-lait.” Here again, one would have to discount the spelling Rimbaud used. I have found the word pialat in the Dictionnaire du Béarnais et du Gascon modernes, meaning “gros tas, rassemblement, groupe nombreux, foule, masse, amas de choses en tas.” But it is difficult to imagine how Rimbaud could have encountered the term, and it does not work well with the word caoutchoucs in its first appearance, though it makes more sense in conjunction with the “amas d’étoiles” at the end of the poem. What is clear is that, by means of what is literally agrammatical, Rimbaud is working here not only at the limits of conventional poetic language, but of language itself. The kind of opacity presented by such terms makes it impossible to treat this text
as a simple instance of referential discourse. It refuses refer­ence, it makes denotation impossible: pialat denotes the null set. It should be clear to what extent readings attempting to correlate the text with events in Rimbaud’s life are wide of the mark.

It is possible—and useful—to give a reading of this text analogous to Riffaterre’s of “Vénus anadyomène” as a simple reversal of the structure of a typical love poem. Thus, as Guisto has pointed out, the traditional love nest gives us “œufs à la coque”; stolen kisses have become “salives desséchées”; the graceful ballerina is now an “éclanche” (134). But such a reading can account only in part for the language of the text. The obscure terms prevent a reading that can assign positive or negative values to terms in any simple way, and the collisions on the level of vocabulary between culinary terms, medical expressions, colloquialisms, lyrical expressions, and so on, function in a similar fashion. Hydrolat lacrymal combines a pharmaceutical term (meaning a liquid obtained by distilling water over aromatic plants) with a medical expression, and it throws off simple reference in two ways: it makes us ask both what it denotes and how we can conciliate the two referential systems. For Adam “c’est tout bonnement la pluie” (883). But just as we seek to understand what the use of a rhetorical figure adds to a text instead of a simpler equivalent, we expect to be able to determine the stylistic consequences of the use of such a phrase. Here, they are not so easy to establish. Lunes particulières is an analogous case: lunes can put us into the traditional setting of love poetry, or it can mean “ass” in slang parlance. But what can “lunes particulières” refer to in either case? “Special,” “peculiar,” “private”? Perhaps we should not take as ironic the line “Tu me sacras poète” and Rimbaud’s characterization of the poem as “un psaume d’actualité”: this poem takes its place in his theory that his age must create a new poetry, for which it must “trouver une langue.” He enunciates his poetic program both in the “Lettre du Voyant” (in which “Mes petites amoureuses” appears) and in his other poetic manifesto, “Ce qu’on dit au poète à propos de fleurs.”

This latter text incorporates the kinds of language we have found in “Mes petites amoureuses” and adds more besides. Its
language shows the full range of Rimbaud's innovations in the poetic lexicon. He illustrates the possibilities open to poetic discourse, both for himself and for others. But because it is a kind of *ars poetica*, its self-referential character permits a certain recuperation of this new diction. At the same time, it is not altogether clear what his prescriptions are.

In this text Rimbaud introduces references to fields uncommon in poetry, to contemporary life and to banal, everyday elements in particular. There are allusions to well-known figures of the time—Banville, Renan, Hachette, Grandville (who had published a collection of drawings called *Les Fleurs animées*), Figuier, author of scientific works, M. de Kerdrel, a famous royalist. Many of the objects mentioned are recent discoveries: rubber, telegraph poles, spoons made by the Alfé­nide process. Not only do they reveal his interest in the technological advances of the time, but they represent the introduction of unusual subjects into poetry. Rimbaud seems to be calling for a modern poetry for modern times. The same effect is elicited by the scientific terminology so frequently used in this poem (*rayon de sodium, dioptriques, glucose*), the many references to plants and animals, and the medical lexicon: one would expect them to be used in a scientific treatise rather than in a poem. Using this register also allows plays on the sounds of its typically hard-to-pronounce terms, as in the line “L'Ode Açoka cadre avec la”; as Rimbaud says, they permit “A l'Eucalyptus étonnant / Des contrictors d'un hexamètre.” This kind of effect is common in Rimbaud’s satirical verse (the almost unpronounceable *grappes d'amygdales* of “Les Assis” is one of many possible examples). Industrial and commercial terminology have similar effects. There are references to textile manufacturing (*cotonnier, filer, noeuds*), mining (*filons, gemmeuses*), pharmacology, and leather manufacturing. The “Poète” seems to be proving his acquaintance with such subjects, a knowledge superior to those poets ridiculed in the poem because of their futile and ignorant search for local color (“Tu ferais succéder, je crains / Aux Grillons roux les Can­tharides”).

A similarly unusual semantic field represented in the text is that of the everyday and the commonplace, including basset hounds, potatoes, ragoûts (in the literal sense), fried eggs, and
so on. The impression of what commentators have called the "unaesthetic" is reinforced by the intrusions of the mode of spoken language and the informality of expression, including terms like *pochant l’œil* and *torcher*. The lyrical status of typically poetic terms is often devalued by their association with vulgar or pejorative terms, creating the kind of oxymoronic diction we have seen in Baudelaire: "O blanc Chasseur, qui cours sans bas," "calices pleins d’œufs," "ô Farceur," "magnifiques omoplates," etc. These clashes in tone provoke laughter, but at the same time, they represent an implicit refusal to accept conventional poetic language.

The use of neologisms also shows the poem’s antitraditionalist stance. True coined words like *gemmeuses* (from *gemme*) and *pectoraires* (a variant on *pectoral*) combine with terms like *pubescences* (a latinism) and *incageur* (an italianism) and irregular usages like *végétaux* as an epithet for *français, panique* applied to *Pâtis*, and "*un pleur."* Rimbaud is proposing a new language for a new poetry. Neologisms serve a variety of purposes in Rimbaud’s work, creating a dream-like atmosphere, evoking a new world, expressing a rejection of the poetic norm; but in all these cases the effect depends on the way in which neologisms attract the attention of the reader to the coined word itself. The automatic link between signifier and signified is broken, and the reader must supply her own signified according to the context in which the word is found. Thus, refusing the transparency of referential language, the neologism is a particularly effective instrument in focusing on the surface of a text. But in a sense, all the scientific, technical, slang, and vulgar expressions in the poem function like neologisms or foreign words: they belong to levels of language inappropriate to "serious" literature. Rimbaud emphasizes the "revolutionary" nature of his enterprise in dating the poem, "14 juillet 1871," echoing the politics/poetics parallelism studied above. As Houston (Design, 56) and Baudry (52) have pointed out, the lilies whose overuse in poetry is criticized in this text are emblematic of both literature and royalism (the latter also alluded to in the reference to M. de Kerdrel).

What kind of poetry is Rimbaud asking for and simultaneously illustrating in this poem? The answer to this question is not so easy to determine as we might expect in a text that
presents a poetic program. Though it seems clear that the new poetry will be set against the facile exoticism of Parnassian verse, commentators are divided as to whether the poem represents an attack on Banville or whether addressing the poem to him in respectful terms, echoing passages from the *Odes funambulesques*, and the mere fact of sending the poem to him do not indicate a more positive attitude to the poet Rimbaud included among the “très voyants” second romantics in his “Lettre du Voyant” to Paul Demeny. Is the “Poète” addressed in the text Banville? Parnassian poets? The poet of the future? Rimbaud himself? Even more important, is the speaker Rimbaud himself or a “vil bourgeois” who does not understand poetry, as Adam claimed (906 ff.)? And what kind of statement is Rimbaud making about the society of his time? Is he touting the values of an industrial, technological age, as some critics have thought, citing the “Lettre du Voyant”: “Cet avenir sera matérialiste, vous le voyez”? Or does he rather criticize the “Siècle d’enfer,” “voué” as Adam says “au culte de l’Utile et de l’argent”? (906). Or is it that he marks his opposition to the economic system of bourgeois society by parodying its cultural text, as Baudry claims (52-53)? The differences in interpretation following from the answers to these questions are by no means trivial ones. When giving their own answers, critics seem to need to bolster their arguments with rhetorical force, using “il est clair que” or “il est évident que” with a frequency that would make one think there was critical unanimity on these points. The point here is not to claim that because critics have disagreed about the meaning of the poem this meaning is therefore impossible to determine, that the text is “undecidable.” On the other hand, the shifts in register I have pointed out lead to ruptures in tone that make agreement difficult to come by. Irony is an invisible trope, actualized by the reader, and the “cocasse” language and polemical stance indicated by the insulting characterizations of earlier poets make it hard to say whether Rimbaud is recommending utility as the object of the true poet’s efforts or whether it is the object of the poem’s ridicule.

I think a reading that looks at the text as a self-referential work can shed some light on the question. The text is proposing a properly poetic notion of utility rather than poetry that
would be useful. The emphasis on work seen in the repeated use of the verbs *fonctionner*, *servir*, and *travailler* and in the use of the imperative mood can be understood as indicating what poetry should accomplish. To “trouve[r] au coeur des noirs filons / Des fleurs presque pierres” is to find a new poetic vision. The usefulness of this search is reflected in the poem’s industrial and commercial vocabulary; but it is important that such language has itself proved useful in poetry. “Ta Rime sourdra, rose ou blanche, / Comme un rayon de sodium, / Comme un caoutchouc qui s’épanche!”: poetry is not to associate these colors with flowers (white as a lily, pink as a rose) but to find its references in the technological and scientific world. What is proposed, then, is not a work ethic but an aesthetic of language. The text underlines the importance not of plants, but of plant names.

The mixed-up geography of these poets in their search for local color is mocked by throwing together names of unrelated places—*Rios, Rhin, Norwèges, Florides, Habana, Guyanes*, and in contrast, *Oises*. The plural form of many of these names has the effect of denying the reference of each to a specific place, denying its very function as a proper noun. Whereas one would expect that the *ars poetica* genre would call forth a correspondence of expression and content, this kind of usage calls reference itself into question. Proper nouns, the epitome of denotation, are no longer allowed to denote: they have become common nouns again. Poets are to read the works of M. Figuier not only because of the “usefulness” of his works, but also because his name is itself that of a useful tree. In the same way, they are told to go to M. Hachette, whose name is that of a tool, one that might be useful in cutting short traditional poets’ lyrical effusions. And so, proper nouns have become useful, useful *words*, words that can be “common,” that can refer in a polyvalent way. On the other hand, there is an overabundance of capitalization in the poem—not only for all the flower names and words traditionally allegorized (*la Flore, l’Art*), but also *Plantes, Chasseur, Grillons, des Buffles, Oeufs de feu*, and *Salons*. It represents not only a mocking of the process of personification so common in neoclassical verse but also a reversal of the signification of capitalization. Proper nouns have lost their specificity, whereas common nouns have become
proper. In the same way as aesthetic terms are devalued by their epithets ("Les Lys, ces clystères d'extases!") and vice versa, the improper and proper have changed properties, putting into question the notion of property/propriety.

In this poem about how to write poetry, Rimbaud has accomplished what he recommends: he has opened poetic vocabulary to new possibilities and thereby to new poetic effects. That readers are still puzzling over how to deal with his accomplishment is a measure of its effectiveness. On the other hand, it is less clear to what extent the poem can be taken as a statement opposing a political and social structure. The use of such diction can be better analyzed as a sign of resistance to the conventionally "poetic." Genette (in *Figures*, 219-20) has analyzed conventional poetic tropes in a way that can be schematized as follows:

\[
\begin{array}{c|c}
\text{signifier: voile} & \text{signifier} \\
\text{signified: ship} & \text{signified: poetry}
\end{array}
\]

Similarly, familiar and scientific discourse signifies a rejection of neoclassical diction. Because it must call attention to itself as language, it implicitly comments on poetic language in general. The signified of such collocations as *précieuses glucoses*, then, is a reaction against traditional poetic diction. In modern literature, of course, thanks to the work of poets like Rimbaud, what it signifies is again "poetry."

These discordances are analogous to the rhetorical figures that predominate in Rimbaud's work as a whole: oxymoron, zeugma, hypallage, as well as metaphor. The hypallage in "panthères à peaux d'hommes" (instead of men in panther skins) ("Le Bateau ivre") is typical of the startling effects elicited by Rimbaud's use of rhetoric. Perhaps the most striking example of such language is another line from the "Bateau ivre": "dévorant les azurs verts." The color-noun *azur* means blue: *azurs verts* is not merely impossible in fact, it is logically impossible, a contradiction in terms. We can try to understand the expression in the context of the poem, imagining the water as now green, now blue or as indistinguishably blue and green. Or we can assimilate them into blue-green, a distinct color
composed of both, mentally inserting a hyphen and an "s" to make *azurs-verts*. But since Rimbaud did not make this insertion, as they stand, the words *azurs verts* bring us to a point of virtual incomprehensibility: Rimbaud has violated a semantic rule. He has violated the standards of propriety in his diction, too, not just in introducing vulgar terms into his texts, but in conjoining terms from disparate registers, forming stylistic oxymorons like *morves d’azur*.

Todorov links the impossibility of representation in the *Illuminations* with those texts’ oxymorons and contradictory sentences. He sees Rimbaud’s language as essentially “présentatif” rather than representational (129-30). It is possible to read much of Rimbaud’s verse not as representations of the world, but as statements about contemporary poetry or about his own poetry. Their use of unconventional diction serves to foreground these intertextual and self-referential dimensions.

The preceding examination of the language of Rimbaud’s poetry has repeatedly encountered the question of reference. This is a question raised often with respect to the *Illuminations*, but it is central also to interpretations of Rimbaud’s verse works dating almost from the beginning of his writing career. As we have seen, the kinds of terms he introduced into verse—scientific terms, neologisms, and familiar discourse in particular—create discordances in tone, agrammaticalities that call for critical interpretation. When pushed to the extreme, as at certain moments in “Mes petites amoureuses,” these anomalies in diction can push a text to the point of unreadability, the way they did in Verlaine’s “Nouvelles Variations.” When familiar language refuses assimilation by its context in this way, its shock value—even today—is especially great; and it can thereby gain great destructive or constructive force. In doing so it can serve to disrupt referentiality at the same time as it adds another level of reference, reference that functions by means of the figurative dimension of diction.

In his sonnet on Rimbaud, Auden wrote: “But in that child the rhetorician’s lie / Burst like a pipe.” The phrase “burst like a pipe” echoes Rimbaud’s own use of unconventional discourse in poetry. But Auden is presenting the traditional view of rhetoric as artificial, as what is opposed to the real, the genuine,
the down-to-earth. Rimbaud’s accomplishment is to have used such discourse to its greatest rhetorical advantage, not just in the way it can engage the reader, startling her, perhaps even shocking her, but also in the way it functions like rhetorical figure. And at its strongest, in texts like “Ce qu’on dit au poète” or “Le Bateau ivre,” where “le Poème de la mer” transfers the aesthetics of liberation to the poetic lexicon and imagery, it figures the poetic enterprise itself.