The poetics of the unconventional that we find articulated in Rimbaud's work is important for all of the poets I have treated, who were experimenting with new poetic materials. In his preface to Les Yeux d'Elisa, Aragon summarizes the poetic theory he inherited from them: "L'art des vers est l'alchimie qui transforme en beautés les faiblesses. Où la syntaxe est violée, où le mot déçoit le mouvement lyrique, où la phrase de travers se construit, là combien de fois le lecteur frémit" (7). These poets, then, participate in the aesthetic and cultural attitudes we associate with modernism. Each contributed in his own way to the development of these attitudes as he and other poets of the time attempted to create a new poetic discourse.

I. Different Voices

The preceding chapters have served to show how the use of familiar language functions in the work of each of the poets treated. They belong to three different generations; each has a very particular poetic vision and poetic project: although they share characteristics that lead us to situate them in the modern tradition, it is not to be expected that devices common to two or more of them should have similar poetic consequences in works that are often very dissimilar in other respects. Looking at the use of a single term from outside the traditional poetic lexicon can help to give us a measure of some of these differences. Tapage, though classified by Littré as a familiar term, is not particularly strong language and may not bring about the striking effects we have seen generated elsewhere. But it ap-
pears in poems that represent some of the important characteristics of each poet’s style, and it can help us to see how each makes use of familiar discourse.

Banville uses the word in the “Occidentales” section of the *Odes funambulesques*, in a poem entitled “Marchands de crayons” where a young woman is describing her lost love, her “prince,” Arthur. A sympathetic young man has accompanied her to the Opera ball to look for him among the crowd of famous artists, publishers, and literati, but to no avail. Yet Arthur is an artist too, she tells the young man, a musician: “Il fait souvent de la musique / Avec son cornet à piston!”:

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“Son bonnet brille comme un phare
Sur son costume officiel,
Lorsque, aux éclats de sa fanfare,
Le moineau franc tremble et s’effare
Et s’enfuit vers l’azur du ciel!

“Il aimait à faire tapage
Par les beaux jours pleins de rayons,
Assis en vêtement de page
Sur le sommet d’un équipage.
Derrière un marchand de crayons!
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In these lines we can see many of Banville’s comic devices and in particular his use of contrasts in diction. The trappings and the language of neoclassical poetry (*les beaux jours pleins de rayons, l’azur du ciel*, and so on) are in sharp contrast with the subject and with contemporary and prosaic elements like Arthur’s uniform and the pencil seller. The lines “Son bonnet brille comme un phare” and “Sur le sommet d’un équipage” are condensed versions of this contrast. *Tapage* is doubly comical, as a familiar term opposed to the traditional diction, and as characterizing the music dear Arthur produces. Underlying the poem are familiar themes in Banville, too, the poor taste of his age, the lack of comprehension accorded to true artists, the commercialization of bourgeois society.¹

Striking contrasts are also characteristic of Baudelaire’s style, though in a very different vein from Banville’s. A good example is a poem in which *tapage* appears, “Sisina.” Describ-
ing a woman who is a "douce guerrière / A l'âme charitable autant que meurtrière," it is based, like so many of Baudelaire's poems, on paradox and antithesis. Oxymorons like douce guerrière and "Son courage, affolé de poudre et de tambours" echo the stylistic conflicts in the first stanza:

Imaginez Diane en galant équipage,
Parcourant les forêts ou battant les halliers,
Cheveux et gorge au vent, s'enivrant de tapage,
Superbe et défiant les meilleurs cavaliers!

S'enivrant de tapage doubles an oxymoron with the stylistic incongruity of combining a noble verb with a familiar complement. Tapage is especially striking in its context, both because of the mythological allusions in the stanza and because it is followed by the word superbe. Such clashes translate the conflicting emotions the poem portrays. The simultaneous attraction and repulsion Baudelaire often expresses towards women is attributed in this text to the woman's own feelings toward love, itself presented as a kind of combat.

In "Voix de l'orgueil" (Sagesse), Verlaine also makes use of unlikely combinations of words, like "l'endroit fait semblant":

Voix de la Chair: un gros tapage fatigué.
Des gens ont bu. L'endroit fait semblant d'être gai.
Des yeux, des noms, et l'air plein de parfums atroces
Où vient mourir le gros tapage fatigué.

"Un gros tapage fatigué" is a contradiction in terms like those in Baudelaire, though tapage is in harmony rather than disharmony with its stylistic milieu. There is no mythological allusion or neoclassical diction here. The stanza uses a spoken rhythm and incomplete or very brief sentences to create the impressions of colloquial speech. In the very negative scene created by this stanza, the familiar status of tapage underlines its pejorative connotations. In tension with this tone, however, are the subject, "la Chair," with its theological resonances, and the phrase "Où vient mourir." The overall effect is that of simultaneous "imprecision" and strong impression, an effect that Verlaine achieves in so much of his verse.

Hugo uses tapage in "Quelques mots à un autre," from Les
Contemplations, addressed to an older man who has criticized Hugo's innovations in poetic language. The speaker is imagining that the man’s age should counsel him as follows:

“Ces gens-ci vont leur train; qu’est-ce que ça vous fait?
Ils ne trouvent que cendre au feu qui vous chauffait.
Pourquoi déclarez-vous la guerre à leur tapage?”

As in “Voix de l’orgueil,” tapage is used in a disparaging way in these lines. Ironically, what is denigrated is Hugo’s own work. The text also calls on the connotations of tapage as a term referring to the noisy sounds of children’s play, contrasting the old man’s maturity (at least the maturity the speaker says he should have) to the youthful efforts of poets like Hugo. Because of this connotation, the contrast between guerre and tapage underlines the disproportion of the old man’s actual reaction. The use of this level of language is highly relevant to the text as a whole, because, as in “Réponse à un acte d’accusation,” its major theme is Hugo’s stylistic innovations and the violent objections they have encountered. The older generation, according to the speaker, has rejected them out of hand:

“Vos yeux par la clarté du mot propre brûlés;
Vous exécurez nos vers francs et vrais; vous hurlez/
De fureur en voyant nos strophes toutes nues.”

As in “Réponse,” Hugo links together freeing up the alexandrine, introducing familiar language, and rejecting rhetoric in favor of the literal term. His lexicon incorporates on the one hand neoclassical diction, mythological terms, and didactic expressions, and on the other, popular and familiar expressions.² As I have noted in chapter 2, such usage is typical of Hugo’s polemical verse, especially in Les Contemplations and Les Châtiments. Despite his dismissal of traditional eloquence, however, these poems retain their oratorical tone, rather than creating the more properly colloquial tone we find in Verlaine, for instance.

Rimbaud uses tapage in the second stanza of “Le Bateau ivre”:

J’étais insoucieux de tous les équipages,
Porteur de blés flamands ou de cotons anglais.
Quand avec mes haleurs ont fini ces tapages,
Les Fleuves m’ont laissé descendre où je voulais.
Like Hugo and Verlaine, Rimbaud uses *tapage* in a deprecat­ing way. But here, such a use is paradoxical, because it refers to the massacre of the boatmen by the Indians in the first stanza: “Des Peaux-Rouges criards les avaient pris pour cibles,/Les ayant cloués nus aux poteaux de couleurs.” The violence of this image both indicates the rejection of civilization expressed in these stanzas and prepares the reader for further shocks on the drunken boat’s voyage. Incongruous in its reference, then, *tapage* is highly appropriate in its connotation: it underlines the childishness of the “redskins” story and prepares the way for the images of children to appear later in the text, especially at the very end, where “un enfant accroupi plein de tristesses, lâche/Un bateau frêle comme un papillon de mai.” As a familiar term, it is a comparatively mild element in this poem, whose vocabulary includes neologisms, latinisms, biblical allusions, scientific words, culinary terms, provincialisms, and more. With the other familiar expressions, however, it provides a counterpoint to the exotic words and places, forming a contrast that is central to one of the poem’s major themes, the conflicting desire for and fear of the unknown. It takes its place in the rich lexicon that Rimbaud uses to such striking effect throughout his verse.

Familiar language, then, has many different stylistic and rhetorical possibilities, exploited differently by each of these poets. When Hugo mixes levels and periods in lines like “Cours, saute, emmène Alphésibée/Souper au Café de Paris” (“Genio libri”), he is bringing them together in the overarching union of multiplicity that is his vision of the universe. We have seen how Baudelaire, on the other hand, leaves such contradictions unresolved. They take their place in a poetry informed by philosophic dualism and a sense of the disorientation and fragmentation of modern life. Banville is able to draw comic effects from his incongruous allusions and language levels: “Patron des fabricans d’ombrelles, qui protèges/Chryse, et qui ceins de feux la divine Gilla,/Regardez ce que font ces imbéciles-là!” (“Réalisme”). In “À la manière de Paul Ver­laine,” (Parallèlement) Verlaine pastiches his own style, show­ing the extent to which he relies on conflicting registers:

Je pardonne à ce mensonge-là
En faveur en somme du plaisir
Très banal drôlement qu’un loisir
Douloureux un peu m’inocula.

Many of his poems are based on such stylistic irresolution. Rimbaud uses contrasts like these throughout his verse, and particularly in his social and political satire. A rather surprising characteristic of such poetry is its use of familiar alongside with scientific or medical expressions. We find examples of this usage in Baudelaire, Verlaine (as in the lines quoted above), Rimbaud, Corbière, and even Banville (see “La Tristesse d’Oscar,” for instance). Contrasts in diction lend themselves easily to effects of irony, exploited most fully by Laforgue, but present in the others as well. Ultimately, the mixing of elements and levels can lead to a breakdown in logical development that brings us to the edge of unreadability, as we have seen in both Verlaine and Rimbaud.

The poets I have been studying were not, however, the only ones to experiment with expanding the poetic lexicon through the use of familiar language. Nor was this development the only (or even the most important) direction that poetic language was taking. Of those other poets working in an oral style, the most important and most adventurous is surely Corbière. Because of his rich poetic lexicon and the way he pushes these devices to extremes, Corbière is an important part of the movement I have been examining, and he made a strong impression on later poets, especially Pound and Eliot.3 Richepin’s work is of lesser importance and certainly lesser influence, though he had his successors in the genre of poésie argotique that flourished in the 1890s. We have seen that Hugo introduced argot into Les Châtiments; Verlaine has several poems in slang; and he, Rimbaud, and Corbière used popular language and slang both in direct quotation and in the poet’s own voice. But although Richepin’s La Chanson des gueux (1876) represents the first sustained attempt to write in true argot, we do not see the striking use of low diction in conjunction with more elevated language that we find in the other poets. In the end, despite the reputation he acquired, Richepin’s practice is a good deal tamer than that of Verlaine, Rimbaud, or Corbière.4
The little magazines that flourished in the 1870s and 80s were printing many examples of poetry that made use of colloquial language. Many of these poets were members of the circles that were called or who called themselves “Decadents.” The use of colloquialisms was an important feature of decadent style, coexisting with its search for rare and esoteric terms. Yet, despite their use of colloquialisms, the Decadents sought to create a language far removed from everyday speech. Their goal was the antithesis of Hugo’s democratization of poetic language; the decadent hero, after all, was an aristocrat. Their taste for artificiality and their desire for a new kind of poetry led to the creation of a new preciosity, a special language for the initiated. It is no wonder that such verse was easily and frequently parodied. Writing in 1897 about Symbolist poetry (including that of Verhaeren, Kahn, and Tailhade), Vigié-Lecocq enunciates a distinction between the “langue vulgaire” of common writers, “banale expression d’idées banales,” and a “langue de lettrés” characterized by “le souci de l’exactitude, le respect des origines latines, l’emploi judicieux et consciencieux des termes les plus divers, la recherche érudite et patiente d’une écriture personnelle, belle de ses propres beautés” (285). We have come full circle from Hugo’s time: this erudite language will include what had been called “vulgar” (popular) language; but there will again be a separate, properly “poetic” language.

Mallarmé and the Symbolists who followed him also sought to create a very special poetic language. Though it was different from the neoclassical one, it, too, had words that were properly “poetic” in that they recurred frequently in verse and acquired special, enriched meanings. Such terms could originate in the traditional poetic lexicon, like azur and ébat, or they could come from other sources, like aboli or stérilité. The injunction to “donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu” (“Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe”) applied in either case. Elements from everyday life (cigars, fans) and a few familiar constructions do appear in Mallarmé’s poetry, but they are elevated and transformed by their lexical and syntactic context, excluding “le réel parce que vil” (“Toute l’âme résumée”). So even within the Decadent and Symbolist movements, the turn towards the common language was not a universal phenomenon.
It should be clear that the relation of poetic to what Aristotle called “foreign” and “commonplace” discourse was by no means established once and for all by the poets I have studied. Laforgue and Verhaeren as well as many other minor fin-de-siècle writers used familiar diction in their own ways; the poets of the twentieth century have so frequently incorporated such language that its use has lost some of its stylistic force; and theorists from the Russian Formalists to more recent critics trying to separate poetic from standard or scientific or neutral language, cognitive from expressive discourse, are still engaged in trying to determine the nature of this relation.8

II. Modernism and the Unconventional

The above examples reveal some of the ways the poets I have treated differ in their use of language levels. On the other hand, the foregoing study of their language has met with a number of elements they have in common, among them the very project of reforming the French poetic language. Their attitude to their poetic materials is part of what makes us think of them as “modern.” Aragon formulates this position as follows: “il n’y a poésie qu’autant qu’il y a méditation sur le langage, et à chaque pas réinvention de ce langage. Ce qui implique de briser les cadres fixes du langage, les règles de la grammaire, les lois du discours” (Elsa, 10). The attitude Aragon expresses here is not only a Surrealist one; rather, it encapsulates the modernist view of poetry. It shows to what extent the values implied by the poetic practice of nineteenth-century poets have taken hold, making effects of dissonance, surprise, and confrontation acceptable, even desirable. The anticonventional has become the convention. This does not imply, however, the elimination of a hierarchy of poetic genres and styles. As Molino et Tamine point out, in the modern period, “les grands genres sont les genres d’avant-garde” (100). An aesthetic based in some measure on a capacity to startle has certain limitations, however. As juxtapositions of language levels have become more common, they become less perceptible, and their effects are dulled. The more “poetic” prosaic language becomes, the fewer poetic effects are generated. It is perhaps in recognition of this fact that French poetry has
taken many different directions during the course of the twentieth century, only some making use of the familiar vocabulary now a part of the poetic lexicon.

The poets I have been studying, however, were able to put unconventional language to good use in their work. They did so in several related ways, though their applications of these ways vary with their own poetic worlds. Several aspects in the work of some or all of them bear closer examination: a rejection of eloquence, a search for originality, an attempt to depict contemporary life, an implied linking between poetic language and politics, and an aesthetics of rupture and surprise.

One of the themes we have seen repeatedly in the reaction of these poets against the stifling constraints of neoclassical form is a rejection of eloquence (usually taken as synonymous with rhetoric) and a corresponding valorization of the literal term. This is the attitude that Hugo enunciates in “Quelques mots à un autre” and that Pound expresses in discussing Laforgue: “Bad verbalism is rhetoric, or the use of cliche unconsciously, or a mere playing with phrases” (283). When Laforgue writes “Faire de l'éloquence me semble si mauvais goût, si jobard,” (Correspondance, O.C. 4:163), he is echoing Verlaine's “Prends l'éloquence et tords-lui son cou” and Hugo’s “Plante là toute rhétorique.” Lines like these, incorporating familiar constructions, show how practice correlates with precept, for one of the major elements in the style informed by such a view is, as we have seen, the use of colloquial expressions and syntax. In “Voix de l'orgueil,” Verlaine foresees a time when all the “Sentences, mots en vain, métaphores mal faites, / Toute la rhétorique en fuite des péchés” will die before “la voix terrible de l'Amour!” The dismissal of rhetoric becomes in effect, a rejection of language altogether. But the impossibility of doing without either is obvious. Furthermore, we have also seen to what extent using lower language levels creates new rhetorical possibilities rather eliminating them: there is no zero degree of rhetoric.

When these poets disparage rhetoric, it is in reaction against the abuses they perceive in their predecessors, and it is an aspect of another characteristic associated with modernism, the pursuit of originality. Laforgue put it most bluntly: “J'écris de petits poèmes de fantaisie, n'ayant qu'un but: faire de l'origi-
nal à tout prix” (Correspondance, 5: 20). In his letter to Deme­ny, Rimbaud announces, “les inventions d’inconnu réclament des formes nouvelles” (Bernard ed., 349). Ironically, though these poets are often seen as breaking with romanticism (and Rimbaud’s “Lettre du Voyant” is a major text in this regard), the desire to break with tradition is itself a romantic trait. It is clear that, from Hugo on, one of the most important innovations we can discern is the renewal of poetic language I have been studying: Hugo’s “bonnet rouge au vieux dictionnaire,” Banville’s claim to have found a new comic language, and Rimbaud’s call to “trouver une langue” make explicit what is implied in the work of all these poets. It is interesting to note how often a critic writing about one of them will claim the merit of this “revolution” in poetic diction for his or her poet. Often, a device or an expression signaled for its novelty will have appeared earlier in another poet’s work; sometimes examples can be found in Boileau or Malherbe. I do not mean to assert that Corbière does not use more slang than Baudelaire, for instance, or that Verlaine’s role in this development is less significant than has been claimed, but rather, to point out the extent to which novelty and originality have become valued characteristics in poetry. We have come a long way from when Carpentier’s dictionary was praised for helping poets to “fixer leur goût dans l’emploi des expressions, dans le choix des tournures.”

Part of being modern is depicting what is modern; and the portrayal of the contemporary scene, theorized by Baudelaire, is another important aspect of the work of all these poets. Hugo was among the first to introduce bourgeois domestic life as a subject for poetry. His portrayal of the lives of the lower classes led to a great deal of verse following his example, by many minor poets like Coppée and Manuel as well as the works we have seen by Verlaine and Rimbaud. Banville naturally drew on contemporary people, scenes, and events in his satirical verse, which carries an indictment of the society it presents. In this respect it is related to Baudelaire’s depiction of modern urban life, where the monstrous and the demonic are ever present.

The depiction of contemporary life involves, for all these poets, a reliance on concrete detail and on familiar and slang
discourse. The extent to which originality and the modern are associated with unconventional diction can be seen in the poems in which familiar language is used to signal the modern world whereas neoclassical or archaic diction and mythological allusions indicate the contrasting world of the past. Yet, as my examination of Hugo’s poetry of domestic life has shown, its point is not the direct representation of the contemporary world. Verlaine’s “Croquis parisien” links Paris to a mythological past; the humble settings and characters in Hugo’s poems (and those of Rimbaud as well) are the bearers of political or philosophical messages; and, as Baudelaire puts it in his “realistic” poem, “Le Cygne,” “tout pour moi devient allégorie.”

An important part of what such language and such portrayals signify is their political message, especially the criticism of bourgeois society shared by all of them except Hugo (whose object of attack is, rather, the political regime). We have seen that this is a major theme in Banville’s verse. His “Monsieur Coquardeau” is a close relative of Verlaine’s “Monsieur Prudhomme” and Corbière’s RUMINANT (“Litanie du sommeil”). A similar critique is central to many of Rimbaud’s poems. Such texts often seem to fly in the face of the decorum associated with bourgeois life. Thus, these poets concentrate on semantic fields that had usually been passed over in silence, especially those having to do with the body, like food and clothing. Particular items of clothing are often mentioned, both because of this emphasis on the body and because of their link with the fashionable, the contemporary. The range covered by these poems shows again how similar elements can be used to radically different effect. Baudelaire emphasizes the body itself, especially its more repugnant aspects. Verlaine presents the most revolting results of drunkenness and debauch. Rimbaud carries this emphasis even further in his “Stupra” sonnets and in the scatological “Accroupissements” and “Oraison du soir.”

Bourgeois decorum is violated in the descent in style to levels of informal tenor as well. The introduction of new diction was part of the attempt to “épater le bourgeois” we associate with avant-garde art. Vigié-Lecocq saw it in this light: “Ce riche lexique déroute le bourgeois, se servant au besoin de quelques centaines de mots ternis par le long usage; effaré, il déclare ne plus comprendre” (270). Such an attitude is part of the attack
on its own readership that Sartre views as characterizing French literature between 1848 and 1914 in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature* (148-56). As the chapters on Hugo and Rimbaud have made clear, the link between revolutionary politics and the introduction of colloquial speech has a long history. It is very common to find the latter expressed in terms of the former, by poets and critics alike. In Boileau’s “Art poétique,” we can see how the opposition between high and low diction takes on political implications:

> Quoyque vous écriviez, évitez la bassesse.
> Le stile le moins noble a pourtant sa noblesse.
> Au mépris du Bon sens, le Burlesque effronté
> Trompa les yeux d’abord, plût par sa nouveauté.
> On ne vit plus en vers que pointes triviales;
> Le Parnasse parla le langage des Halles.

(lines 78-84)

In this passage nobility of language equals nobility of birth; “low” language is that of les Halles, of the lower classes. Neoclassical theorists like La Harpe, Bonald, and Delille also link restrained or free diction to political institutions. At the end of the nineteenth century, Brunetière uses imagery of height and depth similar to Boileau’s and Hugo’s (in “Réponse”) when he takes the romantics to task for having abandoned their national tradition: “En ce qui touche à la langue d’abord, et sous le prétexte assez spécieux de lui restituer son ancienne liberté, le romantisme n’a rien négligé de ce qu’il fallait pour la faire tomber du point de perfection où les classiques l’avaient portée” (*Etudes critiques*, 321).

My examination of Hugo’s “Réponse” dealt with the importance to this poem of the politics/poetics parallelism. Just as Hugo does for his own verse, Hazlitt compares Wordsworth’s innovations to the French Revolution:

> It partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age: the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments. His Muse . . . is a levelling one. It proceeds on a principle of equality. . . . His popular, inartificial style gets rid (at a blow) of all the trappings of verse, of all
the high places of poetry. . . . Kings, queens, priests, robes, the altar and the throne . . . are not to be found here (quoted in Abrams, 39-40).

(In late nineteenth-century France, of course, it was the bourgeois rather than kings and nobles who were seen as opposing the leveling of class represented by the new poetic language.)

When Eliot discusses the way poetic language changes, he too compares the return to common speech to a revolution: "Every revolution in poetry is apt to be, and sometimes to announce itself to be, a return to common speech. That is the revolution which Wordsworth announced in his prefaces, and he was right: but the same revolution had been carried out a century before . . . and the same revolution was due again something over a century later" (23). Butor expresses the same idea when he writes that the object of poetry is "le salut du langage courant. Lorsqu'elle s'en est complètement isolée, on est à la veille d'une révolution littéraire (Malherbe, Wordsworth, 'J'ai mis le [sic] bonnet rouge au vieux dictionnaire' de Hugo)" (43). Butor's point of view reflects again the quest for originality that is such an important legacy of romanticism. Unlike Eliot, who sees the poetic task as varying from one period to another (28-29), Butor clearly valorizes the revolutionary. The poetics/politics analogy seems to be a part of the way we have come to talk about poetry.

But, as we have seen, the shock of conflicting registers has different implications for each poet, implications often related to politics only indirectly, if at all. That these poets put the same devices to varied uses should alert us not to assign them a univocal meaning. Even more, it should make us wary of deducing from them facts about the poets' lives or vice versa. We have seen how the use of vulgar language has been attributed to aspects as different as Hugo's democratic politics, Baudelaire's vices, Verlaine's drunkenness, and Rimbaud's social rebellion.

This language is unsettling not only because of its opposition to the previous standard and the political stance such an opposition may imply, but also in the way it is used in the poems themselves. All the poets studied seek effects of juxtaposition and rupture, the "negative techniques" of modern
poetry that Friedrich classifies as fragmentation, incoherence, and dissonance. The clashes in diction I have been studying are an important aspect of this development. Such juxtapositions are often used to counter and deflate what has been elevated by means of neoclassical diction, as in Hugo’s “Leur coeur, leur vertu, leur catarrhe” (“Eblouissements”). This is, naturally, a common device in Banville’s humorous verse. When Baudelaire uses it, it is with poignancy or a kind of mordant humor, as in “Le Monstre,” “Au lecteur,” and “Une Charogne.” Rimbaud uses the deflating power of the informal tenor for violent attacks on his targets, in “L’Orgie parisienne” and “Mes petites amoureuses,” for example. Hugo’s reducing of proper names to the status of common nouns finds an echo in Rimbaud, who irreverently turns common nouns into proper ones as well, putting into question their capacity to refer at all.

An especially effective way to create effects of disjuncture is to play language off against a poem’s subject. These poets often use informal language for a traditionally poetic subject, creating a kind of “travesty” (in Genette’s terms, defined in Palimpsestes). Thus, addresses to the muses are no longer in a sustained high style in Hugo’s Chansons, Banville’s “Evohé” poems, or even Baudelaire’s “La Muse vénale.” The muse as prostitute is in fact a theme common to these poets and to Corbière as well. Love poetry has a mischievous air in Verlaine’s “En patinant” and a distinctly unromantic tone in Rimbaud’s “Vénus anadyomène” and Corbière’s “A une demoiselle.” The other side of this procedure is the use of neoclassical diction for a contemporary, “prosaic,” or even repugnant subject. Such a practice is related to the “charge” as Genette defines it. Rimbaud’s “Oraison du soir,” Baudelaire’s “Une Charogne,” and Banville’s “Monsieur Coquardeau” include examples of this latter technique. Both charge and travesty depend on poetic conventions because such discourse functions only when it runs counter to the reader’s expectations of harmony between style and subject. But it is not with satiric purpose alone that these poets break down the boundaries between prose and poetry. In doing so they put into question this very distinction, and they open serious verse to new elements and new techniques. Baudelaire’s vision of a new
poetics is expressed in his essay on Banville: “De le laideur et de la sottise il fera naître un nouveau genre d'enchantements” (2:167). Such an aesthetic underlies the lexical experimentation of all these poets.

Since the lexical innovations I have been studying and the dissonant effects they can create are intrusions in the texture of traditional poetry, they take part in the flouting of artistic conventions we have come to associate with the modernist work. Thus, Breton writes: “Au sens le plus général du mot, nous passons pour des poètes parce qu'avant tout nous nous attaquons au langage qui est la pire convention” (66). In this passage he is speaking of the Dadaists, but the resistance to convention and the emphasis on the material of construction (language in this instance) he expresses characterize the art of the avant-garde in general.

In breaking the rules, unconventional diction attracts the reader’s notice to the surface of the works where it appears. Because of this foregrounding, these texts exhibit another of the major traits of modernism: the artwork’s gesturing toward the process of its own construction. Each of these poets has written major poems about the writing of poetry and the poet’s place in the world: Banville creates his poet-clown; Hugo’s “Réponse” is only one of many poems about poetry; Baudelaire begins *Les Fleurs du mal* with his cycle on art; Verlaine gives us his “Art poétique,” Corbière, “I Sonnet,” and Rimbaud “Ce qu'on dit au poète” and “Ma Bohême.” In all these works, there is a coincidence of theory and practice, and the language levels used play an important part in the functioning of the text.

As the surfaces and the process of constructing these poems gain in importance, the referential dimension of their language is diminished. Rather, they become self-referential. Foucault sees this characteristic of modern literature as leading to what he calls counter-discourse. It is opposed to the classical conception of representation by means of naming and by the deferral of the name through rhetoric: “À l’âge moderne, la littérature, c’est ce qui compense (et non ce qui confirme) le fonctionnement significatif du langage” (59). Hugo’s vision of a language adequate to represent the world gives way to a prolif-
eration of language beyond control. He was to "nommer le co-
chon par son nom"; but the pig turns out to have many differ-
ent names, with different significances and stylistic potential.

Despite their place in the creation of modern literature as Foucault defines it, it would be a mistake to view these writers
as heroes in a success story of poetic evolution. Theirs was a
swing of the pendulum away from a specialized literary vocab-
ulary, not altogether unlike previous ones, and not a stopping
of the pendulum's movement. But that does not diminish
their significance in the development of that strain of modern
poetry that looks to the resources of the common language in
its attempt to create a new poetic voice. In taking what had
been considered base, unformed lexical material and making
poetry out of it, in unleashing its rhetorical power, these poets
are all practitioners of verbal alchemy.