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TOWARD A MARXIST POETICS

THE ISSUE THAT I WISH TO ADDRESS IS the gap between the advancing front of Marxist literary theory and the trailing body of specific critical studies guided by that theory. The issue is not new; many have commented on it. Jeffery L. Sammons recently observed:

The problem is no longer one of a peripheral methodological alternative, but rather one of the meagreness of firm results in proportion to an immense intellectual investment. When firm results can be delivered—most by empiricists—they not always but frequently appear as a codification of the self-evident and somewhat remote from the concerns of the critic; the answers that would truly be helpful are obtained with such severe difficulty that progress has been slow and even hard to identify.¹

This “problem” is in fact the “solution” to several previous problems—the failure in earlier formalist and structuralist theories to include in any integrated way the cultural context(s) of the work and the reader or the phenomenological experience of the reader. To include these is to ask a great deal, but it is just this synthesis of work, cultural context(s), and phenomenology that Marxism promises. Such a commitment places a very large responsibility on the interpreter in the range of scholarship and the breadth of observation required. If Marxism is to close the gap between theory and results, if it is to establish a firm foundation from which to launch further theoretical development, it must confront the need for a dynamic methodology, techniques for discovery, models that integrate form, context, and response into a coherent whole—in short, it must develop a poetics.

I appreciate the enormity of the task. I cannot offer a poetics *per se* in these pages; rather, I would urge that this task be considered a goal for the decade, a focus for long-term research by scholars who agree. Instead, I try to sketch in broad outline the specific questions or loci of questions that a Marxist poetics must address; I then attempt to trace their ramifications in search for the domains where answers may lie. My approach combines analytic and phenomenological thought—a rather strange combination but perhaps the one most congruent with our present intellectual environment. The essay is divided into two main parts. In the first section, I look at the context/work/reader construct, then introduce the issue of literary experience from a

phenomenological perspective, and finally step out of the framework to ask what the structure looks like as a whole and whether one can, indeed, step out of the framework. Projected is a static system that becomes dynamically animated by the phenomenology of the reader and the self-awareness of the interpreter. In the second section, I re-examine many of the same issues but from the standpoint of practical criticism and the resources necessary for specific studies. I point out, as the reader would suspect, that the traditional methods and resources of interpretive criticism will probably have to be expanded to realize a viable poetics. Finally I suggest where these resources may be found.

I wish to point out that the conclusion I draw as to the resources required for a viable Marxist poetics capable of supporting precise, yet comprehensive interpretations will be uncomfortable for some traditional scholars. The only practical way to consider the enormous range of materials required, I believe, will be with the assistance of large computer systems. The Marxist is likely to raise two objections: the dehumanization of the process and the ideological implications. I speak to the first point in some detail, drawing on my own experience with computing in humanistic studies. I hope to show that the computer can be used in a way that is not dehumanizing and, in fact, may prove the opposite to the extent it can extend the interpreter's awareness of self, text, and culture. I have not attempted to address the ideological issues, but have left them to the judgment and conscience of the individual reader. We all make accommodations in the society in which we live. I will argue that a precise Marxist poetics is likely to be realized only with the aid of a computer; the reader will have to determine whether the cost is justified. I hope, however, the reader will suspend judgment long enough to follow the argument.

I

While a Marxist poetics must be holistic, must include the constitutive material nature of the culture relative to the individual, it must be distinguished from general Marxist theory and any methodology that may be developed for that general theory. I begin with the self-evident distinction that Marxist literary theory is concerned with the material consciousness of the historically situated author and/or reader of a literary work. (The historical singer or listener of tales, viewer of plays, etc., can be accommodated under the concept of textualization which will be introduced below; for ease of discussion, the conventional images of author and reader will be used with the understanding that they can be extended to include these other roles.)

The phenomenological experience of the reader has received significant recent attention by Marxist or near-Marxist critics. Wolfgang Iser has addressed this issue in terms of the reading process.² In his view the text is an inanimate link between reader and author that is fully realized as literary work only through the imagination and recollection of the reader. The text is thus potentially an infinite number of different literary works brought into existence by the reader, shaped by his/her own experience.

At the same time, the text limits the range of generated responses to those consistent with its linguistic meanings. While the text is posed medially between reader and author, Iser's theoretical formulation does not deal adequately with the author nor does it account for the relation between reader and culture to the extent necessary for a true dialectical theory.

Both of these needs are addressed and partially resolved in a model proposed by Thomas Metscher:

Aesthetic cognition is my suggested basic concept for the core of the epistemological problematic in the theory of art. The concept of aesthetic cognition refers primarily to the relation between the work of art and the recipient, which is itself based on the relation of the work of art to reality. This implies in turn the producer of the work, the author, through whom the represented reality must have passed, after being psychologically and intellectually "worked up," interpreted, evaluated, and transformed by him into something new. Aesthetic cognition is thus a mode of artistic (or specifically, literary) communication. The concept describes a relationship of the following basic structure:

(A) Reality/Author <---> Work <---> (B) Recipient/Reality

The work is the core of the process of aesthetic communication and mediation of cognition.³

Metscher recognizes fully the problematic nature of the relation between Reality and Author and between Reality and Recipient: he asserts both that the cultural context—"the interpretative 'reconstruction' of its (the text's) sociocultural genesis"—can be ascertained scientifically and that the text, as an aesthetic form, can be adequately related to that construct (p. 24). This is possible because of the constitutive nature of language for all elements of the equation: Text, Author, Recipient, manifest Reality. While Metscher's extension does achieve a true first order Marxist dialectical stature, it leaves several important issues unresolved. First, neither Metscher nor Iser adequately resolves the matter of multiple readings. Iser recognizes that second readings are different from initial encounters between reader and text, but he leaves the issue at the level of reader experience; to include multiple readings, inclusion of extrinsic information, formal analysis, and other steps part of the critical *interpretive* process is to engage a different order of complexity. Second, neither Metscher nor Iser makes clear the distinction between the historical reader as subject and the historical reader as object. (The reader as subject may be the reader as reader or the reader as interpreter; the reader as object is the historical reader viewed as a cultural phenomenon part of a larger cultural context that "comes into being" when viewed by some other interpreter.) Both the nature of multiple readings and the roles of the reader must be resolved to posit a viable Marxist poetics; both points will be considered in section II, below.

Nevertheless, Metscher's model, extended as indicated, can serve as a framing paradigm; for a poetics, however, the terms in it must be opened and the abstract structures they represent described. In the remainder of this section, I shall look first

at each term separately to identify some of the issues, questions, and problems that a poetics must address; then, I shall try to put them together to see what further questions their combination poses.

The most general term in the structure is *Reality*. (Other theorists have used the terms *socio-historical setting* or *culture* equivalently; I shall use *culture*.) A Marxist poetics must approach the concept of "reality" or "culture" in some systematic way on several different levels: it must establish the material basis through which to consider the culture and it must characterize any given cultural instance within larger diachronic and synchronic dimensions. Yuri Lotman's concept of textualization offers a reasonable starting point. In section II, I will discuss the more practical aspects of Lotman's argument; briefly, here, Lotman asserts that the abstract, functional culture *per se*, the true concern of Marxist theory, is materially manifest in the tangible, written texts that exist within the culture. The corpus of such texts provides the only access to the abstract culture and serves as a self-determining principle of valuation—important information for the culture will be preserved in written texts.⁴ Lotman's reduction is both elegant and practical; while any useful definition of culture will obviously suggest the enormity and complexity of the abstraction, Lotman's reduction provides a rationale for associating the concept with a tangible, finite body of materials that a poetics can address. However, it raises several fundamental questions about the intangible functions that lie behind material manifestation. Can there be important functions that do not result in manifest texts? or can we confidently assume, with Lotman, that all important functions will become materially manifest; otherwise they would be "unimportant"? I will return to these questions in section II, below; in the meantime, I shall presume that some concretization of culture is possible and that it will approximate Lotman's notion of textualization.

Posed medially between the individual text and the cultural corpus of all texts is the literary canon. Many Marxist theorists would argue that the concept should be dropped, thereby encouraging considerations of a wider range of reading experiences within critical inquiry. The egalitarian advantages of this position may be realized, however, without giving up the concept if a dynamic, rather than static, concept of canon is adopted. The usual notion of literary canon as a subset of all texts to which works are either assigned or not assigned may be replaced by the notion of canon as a function or set of functions that relate any text, literary or other, to axes of archetypal characteristics. Any "category" of texts, generic or other, will be those sharing similar kinds and/or degrees of characteristics. The axial characteristics may be derived from tradition, but they could be replaced by others more appropriate for a specific critical perspective. In this way, the boundaries of the canon may shift for particular inquiries while permitting convenient reference and necessary inclusion of reader expectation.

The question of the internal nature of the canon is, thus, absorbed into the question of the relation between canon and culture: assuming Lotman's textualization of culture, a functional view simply relates all texts to poles of archetypal extremes for the descriptive, defining characteristics adopted. Questions pertaining to the canon, *per se*, are recast in terms of the particular characteristics applied. The most obvious

question concerns a Marxist theory of genre; a true Marxist poetics that attempts to account, fully, for the literary experience will have to extend the concept beyond the conventional generic and rhetorical category types. These extended categories may be derived from intrinsic features or they may emerge from the characterization of the culture as a whole. Once adopted for the purpose of a particular inquiry, however, they serve either explicitly or implicitly to structure the field of all texts and to define canonical boundaries. Inherent, then, is a notion of dynamic synchronic form: the structure of the canon will reflect the characterizing principles adopted and the categories derived for a particular purpose. A different matter is the more complex problem of developing dynamic functions that reflect historical evolution as works appear and move within the structured field of the culture and the canon. Diachronic functions of this sort will have to include change as an integral factor. Either characterization of the canon, as a field within a specific culture at a specific time or as an evolving field within a larger evolving culture, will require prior characterization of the culture as a whole and must await the development of adequate tools and resources for that purpose.

As this discussion has moved from text to reader, to cultural context(s), and back to canon, several important problems were bypassed that could not be resolved within the level of the system then being discussed; we can now look back down through the system as a whole to resolve some of these and also to note some of the types of critical questions that can be formulated. Within this framework, one may begin to consider a variety of behavioral and phenomenological questions. Assuming Lotman's concretization of culture, behavior will be manifest textually and, hence, may be considered as a special group of texts in relation to other texts. Behavioral questions, then, refer to a subset of the material manifestations (texts) that are used to derive the social group or to place the individual within one or more groups within the culture; behavioral effects, however, may be displaced in time, sometimes with important implications.

The phenomenology of an historical individual or an historical group may also be examined at this level, but such inquiries are inherently more complex than considerations of observable/recorded behavior; detailed discussion of such inquiries will have to be deferred until the next section. Here we can note that within a Marxist poetics both behaviorist and phenomenological questions will be cast relative to some literary work, group of works, and/or cultural texts. These questions focus on selection of and response to a specific work or specific group of works by an individual or by a cultural group. Is such selection "typical" or "unusual"? With what implications? What variety of responses? We may even speculate what an individual's or a group's responses would have been *had* a particular work or group of works been read. This "cultural group" may be a conventional class or a group characterized by some specific convergence of overlapping categories; the group may be one individual, a proper subset, or the whole. A Marxist poetics must be able to support inquiries that focus on any of a variety of relations among individual, group, the whole and individual texts, groups of texts, and the canon.

The author may be considered in terms analogous to those for reader(s). As Met-

sch's diagram suggests, author and reader are mirror images of one another within the structure developed here. Both exist within cultural contexts—perhaps the same, perhaps different contexts—that exert a constitutive influence on the ideology of each. The author, in accord with his/her particular ideology, selects from phenomenal experience elements to be textualized in the work. Just as the reader's experience is animated by associations and relations evoked by the work in accord with his/her own ideology, the experience is enriched for the author as the selected elements or the evoked associations reverberate within the author's ideology. Such reverberations may be affirmative or negative. This does not necessarily suggest pleasure or displeasure, for such responses are holistic and may properly be more a function of order, sequence, and context than simple classification or summing. Important to note here, however, is that a whole area of inquiry is opened regarding the nature of the phenomenal, perhaps aesthetic, experience of the author analogous to that of the reader, as emphasized by reader-response and phenomenological criticisms.

We may now posit a closed first level Marxist hermeneutic. The text, extant in time and space, links reader to author. Each is embedded in a cultural context which includes but is not equivalent to the literary canon. Assuming a holistic, integrated culture, if both author and reader exist in the same cultural context, the linking is complete. If the author simply precedes the reader by a significant number of years within the "same" culture, the linking is closed by the dynamic transformational process that characterizes the evolution of that culture through time. If they are separated spatially, and possibly by time as well, the process is more complex. It requires finding a true homology between the two cultures. This may be possible directly but it may involve locating earlier stages of each culture that are historically the same or homologous and then linking later stages with the earlier stage through each culture's respective transformational processes. Important to realize, however, is the fact that the holistic, integrated structure makes possible hermeneutic inquiry from any position within the system. Readers may, conventionally, look through the work to author and his/her experience and culture; but the author may do the same for any specific individual, group, typical individual from a group, etc., within the culture.

Before going further, perhaps we should stop for a moment to take stock of the system that has been proposed. At this stage the system may be characterized as an expanded structuralist system. The links among text, author, and cultural context are properly structuralist, although in the next section the construct will be seen to extend beyond the usual structural models. The link between text and reader, similarly, may be viewed as the domain of formalism. We have noted where phenomenological experience would lie but no attempt has yet been made to say anything about the nature of that experience or how to get at it. The system approaches Marxist dimensions by calling for the characterization of canon and culture and by calling for consideration of relations across levels [group(s) within culture, individual within group(s)]. But it has not attained true Marxist vitality for two reasons: it has not included an adequate consideration of the historical subject and it has not become extant in a moment of true dialectical awareness. A consideration of the first leads directly to the

second.

There are two apparent roles for the historical subject. In the first, the historical subject may (temporarily) be posited to exist outside the system described and to observe the *complete* system. That is, the subject or interpreter would be looking at the responses of an historical individual to a particular work, or the responses of a group, or the principles of rhetoric that an author uses to achieve a specific response by some typical member of a group, etc. The second role for the historical subject is to take that of reader in the system itself. This is the more conventional role of interpreter of a work, group of works, or some other critical construct.

The first role raises a single primary question—what are the appropriate categories to be applied to the construct under consideration? The answer, however, must respond to the question on two different levels—the categories, themselves, but also the process of category formation. Take, for example, the inferred responses, both phenomenological and behavioral, of a particular group to a specific literary work. Inherent in the formulation of the problem is a set of categories that must be recognized: work within a typology or typologies of works, a group derived by some set of overlapping categories, the categories that characterize the culture as a whole. To define any thesis or question or to observe any response or actions, one must introduce still other categories. What categories? How are they selected? What do they reveal? What do they hide?

There are at least three seemingly different principles for selection. The interpreter may adopt the traditional categories of Marxist literary theory and apply them; in recent years this has become a rich set including categories from formalism, rhetoric, phenomenology, anthropology, to name some of the more important disciplines. Alternatively, the interpreter may focus on the specific culture under examination and use the more general categories contained within it to look at the embedded situation being considered. Finally, the interpreter may look at the embedded situation and attempt to infer through formal features of that subsystem of text/reader(s)/subgroup the categories that account for manifest action and inferred responses. In fact, all three of these prospects reduce to one. This is apparent when the question of categories is raised to the second level and viewed as a function of the ideologically formed point of view of the interpreter.

Fredric Jameson has commented most comprehensively as well as most starkly on this point:

Our contact with the past will always pass through the imaginary and through its ideologies, will always in one way or another be mediated by the codes and motifs of some deeper historical classification system or *pensee sauvage* of the historical imagination, some properly political unconscious.⁵

And earlier,

All conscious thought takes place within the limits of a given model and is in that sense determined by it.⁶

(I should point out that the second quotation refers to Jameson's view of Structuralism; the context makes clear, however, his acceptance of the description for Marxism when *model* is equated with *ideological construct*.) Once we recognize and accept the inherent influence of the interpreter's ideology on whatever is perceived, we see that all categorizations are ultimately imposed axiomatically by the interpreter. That imposition may be greatly removed from the interpretive act itself: inherent from the moment of acceptance of a Marxist perspective; or it may be as recent as the particular interpretive instance. But since context and construct are viewed through ideological categories, any secondary categories will be dependent on those inherent in the ideology, regardless of whether categories are overtly imposed or are thought to be inferred from context or construct. The same relativism exists even when applied to primitive concretizations where object and category seem most closely related, for any formulation of earlier perspectives is dependent on a series of ideologically defined perspectives that disappear into the epistemological nothingness of prehistory. We are, thus, left with an open link. The concrete identity of object and meaning exists within the formal structure of Marxist thought; within that structure the conjoining is true, tautologically. From a broader perspective categorization is relative; but, ironically, the Marxist dictum of culturally constituted individual ideology "hoists" Marxist theory up to include this relativistic perspective. The result is to make the question formally undecidable.

The second role, that of the interpreter occupying the position of reader, is problematic. At first glance, this role would seem to be simpler than the role of interpreter as observer, for the construct would appear to be the single Marxist hermeneutic circle described above. In that system the interpreter functions as reader/experiencer/actor in the contemporary cultural context linked through the text to author/canon/context of the same cultural instance or a different instance. But we must look closely at the nature of that phenomenological experience. The experience *per se* is primary and self-constituting. The act of reading, the flow of sentences through the mind of the reader, the induced visualizations, animations, associations, that enrich the text yet are bounded by it are both process and content of the diachronic literary experience. Iser's phenomenology includes second readings, in which expectation and ritualistic re-enactment replace surprise or the constantly receding flow of first reading anticipations; nevertheless, as Iser's treatment makes clear, the second reading remains primary experience—just a different primary experience.

Interpretation is another kind of experience. It involves a separation from the experience, a backing away to some perceptual point of view from which the experience can be viewed whole, as it relates to other experiences. In short, it involves a necessary and constituting self-awareness. As soon as this self-awareness takes place, however, the interpreter is no longer the reader in the system but the observer viewing a reader (some recollected self in an earlier experience) embedded in the Marxist hermeneutic system described. The interpreter-as-reader role, thus, is in fact a special case of the interpreter-as-observer role described above. Stated another way, the primary experience of reading is the experience itself; to realize one is reading or to as-

sume any other form of self-awareness is to be injected into a higher level role—interpreter—voluntarily or involuntarily. With that self-awareness comes the *choice* of the particular kind of interpretative role to assume. One can simply wait to “fall back” to the level of primary, “unself-aware” reading experience; or one may choose to enrich the experience by looking up a word or reference, injecting other information into the context of thought, working out a pattern or relation that is not clearly perceived. One can reread a portion of the text, reread the entire text, read critical commentaries, commit oneself to a lifetime of study of a single work (as Joyce not entirely facetiously recommended for *Finnegans Wake*). The resolution of the dialectic between reading and self-awareness will be understood not within a phenomenology of reading or even second reading but within a phenomenology of interpretation.

What are some of the available roles from which the interpreter may choose? The simplest true interpretive role is the impressionistic: the interpreter may attempt to recollect as fully as possible (or aesthetically desirable) the experience (or a simulated experience) he/she had of the text. Such an account may be vivid, rich in detail, carefully crafted; but is it accurate, valid, comprehensive? Which set of characteristics is appropriate? To raise the second set is to redefine the role of the interpreter as analytic, instead of impressionistic. Within this context, interpretation carries with it the concepts of intent and responsibility. The interpreter must decide the particular topics to pursue, the amount of time and effort to devote to them, the appropriate conceptual frameworks to use (and to “work up” if they are not familiar), and the degree of intellectual rigor to apply. A phenomenology of interpretation will reveal the nature of the interpretive experience: it will determine the appropriate mix of critical apparatus, texts, recollections of primary experience as well as the appropriate valuative categories to be applied to the material manifestations (texts) of the experience. It is in the *interpretive experience* that the Marxist dialectic synthesis takes place as these diverse elements fuse in a single experiential understanding.

The selection processes, however, take place on a level different from the primary interpretive experience. It is from some higher level of self-awareness that the interpreter selects the topic, the role, the appropriate critical apparatus, etc. From here, other critical perspectives are possible and inherent in the options not selected; from here one can project other interpretive roles. All complementary critical perspectives become potentially actual. As the interpreter evaluates and selects the most appropriate options from the culturally available alternatives, he/she is “injected” into a higher level of self-awareness; but at the same time, the system expands to include the self from that vantage point as well. By considering those alternatives, the self is once again injected into a more comprehensive level, only to have the system rise up once again and include that level. Each step upward in self-awareness carries with the abstractions brought into conjunction tremendous strands of lesser generalities, cultural phenomena, methodologies.

Does the process terminate? I don’t think so. For it to terminate, culture would have to be finite; while any historical, cumulative culture will be finite (under Lotman’s reduction), it must be considered potentially infinite in its characterization by the poten-

tially infinite nature of language itself. From a different perspective, we know that culture is not described by any formal system, but we do not know whether this is because such a description is impossible or impractical. Even if it is impractical, Gödel's theorem of undecidability indicates that from our internal, culturally constituted vantage point, we cannot know ahead whether termination will occur or whether any apparent termination is actual final termination.⁷ That leaves us in an unknowable (in any absolute sense), infinitely expansive conceptual universe. To what questions, what ends should we turn our attention? Jameson has traced what seems to be the culminant awareness: a timeless, placeless, selfless hermeneutic that suggests an ultimate transcendental Marxism.⁸ A projection out of the expanding paradigm I have outlined would be that; but there is nowhere to which to project oneself from which this perspective can be defined. Thus, the projection must remain an anticipated abstraction, not an achieved point of view.

Perhaps we have pushed metatheory close to its limits. Perhaps it is time to turn back to the world of the actual.

II

In the preceding section I tried to describe a theoretical framework in which a Marxist poetics can reside and to raise some of the questions and possibilities implied. In this section I want to reconsider the components of that system to see what will be required actually to realize a poetics for studies of specific, concrete situations. The reader is asked to keep in mind the system already developed, but the treatment in this section will not follow the same progression. The discussion will begin with simplest material elements, build toward larger aggregates and more abstract aspects of the system, and conclude with the phenomenological animation of the poetics.

The simplest and most tangible aspect of the system is the specific literary text. (Some inquiries will enter at a different level, not requiring characterization of, or access to, specific texts; however, the fact that some studies will require this access demands that the consideration include the nature of the text.) While Iser and other phenomenological critics are right in asserting that the literary work is not *just* the text, all such positions presume some actual physical text that becomes phenomenologically animated in the reading and thought processes: the historical individual must read some specific text or texts. A Marxist poetics should have access to "that text" if at all possible; if it does not exist, access will be sought through some material manifestation resulting from the presumed text having been read. The establishment of the historical text can employ the tools of conventional textual criticism but guided by slightly different principles. On the authorial side, the establishment of the "intended" text is a valid objective, but an objective that exists within a group of related objectives. To consider the author within a social and historical context, the interpreter may wish to consider the principles used in the selection process. While the question of textuality should include the text or texts as printed, it should also include if at all possible or-

dered representations of variants and revisions. On the reader side, the establishment of the text read is perhaps most important. While this will require conventional textual criticism methods, again they must be applied within a broader historical perspective. Where the analytic thesis focuses on the responses of a specific reader to a specific text, the question is one of establishing the text read or, possibly, the sequence of texts read, if more than one edition or revision was read, and the time when read, if that is within the boundaries of the analysis. Similar requirements exist for considerations of a group of readers. Where the thesis includes economic and social factors, consideration may include access to the text itself but will also require information from other levels of the system. Thus, the methodology that establishes the historical text, while including conventional techniques of textual scholarship, requires a holistic perspective that extends well up into the cultural system. The resulting "text" will vary in the nature for the specific work and the specific inquiry. Instead of being regarded as an object, it must be considered from the point of view of interpretive access: a shifting body of information, hierarchically structured, that ranges from some concrete manifestation to complex strands of abstractions extending into the higher levels of the system. Different interpretive intents will draw on different portions of this complex.

The establishment of the literary canon is, first, a multiplication of the establishment of individual texts. In the preceding section, I suggested that definition of the canon will not result in a fixed set of works to be included; rather the canon can more appropriately be viewed as an ordered field whose boundaries shift with the period and with the focus of the specific inquiry. In fact, the rigid notion of inclusion/exclusion is likely to be replaced by a concept of centrality (or centralities) with works distributed along axes as functions of designated constitutive or descriptive characteristics. So considered, the structure and dynamics of the canon can be approached only from a vantage point that includes the larger enveloping context of the culture. What is needed is a concerted, perhaps coordinated, effort to establish the historical text(s) using criteria appropriate for Marxist analyses. Once that body of texts is established, questions concerning its structure and use can be confronted.

The structure of the canon, however, can be considered only after one has established some characterization of the culture as a whole. There are many definitions of culture; most agree that it is intangible in its basic nature, abstract, as much function as substance. Because *culture* is such an integral concept for Marxist studies, any poetics will have to include some identifiable, tangible approximation that can serve as a basis for analytic studies. In section I, Lotman's concept of textualization was used as such a basis; here, we can consider that assumption and the rationale for its acceptance in more detail.

A number of scholars—non-Marxists as well as Marxists—have suggested that *culture* is integrally related to language. As early as 1930, V. N. Vol'ksinov observed:

The domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one another. Whenever a sign is present, ideology is present, too. *Everything ideological possesses semiotic value.*⁹

Its semiotic purity, its ideological neutrality, its involvement in behavioral communication, its ability to become an inner word and, finally, its obligatory presence, as an accompanying phenomenon, in any conscious act—all these properties make the word the fundamental object of the study of ideologies (p. 15).

It is the language system, its social and historical occurrence as well as its abstract structure, that links the individual with the culture as a whole; a Marxist methodology for the study of language was a matter of highest priority for Volôsinov and would, he believed, lead to an understanding of cultural context (p. 98).

Further specification has been provided by Yuri Lotman's recent studies in the semiotics of culture. Culture is defined by Lotman and Uspensky as a semiotic subset of a larger, otherwise inchoate, set:

Culture is never a universal set, but always a subset organized in a specific manner. Culture never encompasses *everything*, but forms instead a marked-off sphere. Culture is understood only as a section, a closed-off area against the background of nonculture.

The various ways of delimiting culture from nonculture essentially come down to one thing: against the background of nonculture, culture appears as a *system of signs*.¹⁰

Functionally, culture serves as "the nonhereditary memory of the community" (p. 213); but it is manifest in the form of written texts: "Culture can be presented as an aggregate of texts; however, from the point of view of the researcher, it is more exact to consider culture as a mechanism creating an aggregate of texts and texts as the realization of culture" (p. 218). The actual written aspect of manifest cultural texts is important for Lotman as a self-regulating principle of importance and valuation. Thus, in Lotman's view the culture *per se* may be viewed as an abstract system, but sole access to that abstraction for the interpreter is through the texts that survive from that culture.

Lotman's formal reduction of manifest culture to a body of texts is extremely important. It asserts, first of all, that there will be, by definition, a tangible, textual relic for every cultural element of importance: if the element does not exist in textual form it was, in Lotman's view, "unimportant." The result of this reduction is to establish a very large, but finite, body of materials that will comprise the material basis of a culture for the purpose of Marxist inquiries. This basis is not the culture, *per se*, nor is it an end in itself, but it is a tangible, closed set over which functional characterizations can be defined.

Lotman's reduction, however, does raise several problems. First, it does not include semiotic systems that are not manifest as texts: dress codes, body language, and the like. Second, and related to the first point, it does not include "oral culture." For Lotman, such questions do not exist, *by definition*, for if they were important enough they would be encoded into some written text. If that is an uncomfortable position, the issue may be resolved, at least for extant cultures, by recognizing that such sign behavior *could* be encoded. Propp's encoding of folk tales and choreographic schema for ballet and dance are examples. Thus, Lotman's reduction of semiotic systems to written texts could be extended to include any semiotic behavior so long as a category

system can be devised through which to observe and encode it. Such extensions raise practical, rather than theoretical, problems by expanding the number of texts that constitute the manifest culture. Throughout this discussion I have used Lotman's reduction. But I have done so with the understanding that it could be extended to include new texts that describe/encode any semiotic behavior that is observable and that is of sufficient interest that one would go to the effort to encode it. The set of texts, then, becomes potentially infinite but will remain finite in actuality.

A Marxist hermeneutic that includes a holistic perspective of culture must include some characterization of that culture. That characterization, in turn, must be derived from the set of extant texts in which the culture is manifest. First, then, a Marxist poetics must establish that body of texts and provide the interpreter with access to the collection. As with the case of individual literary works, the cultural text at its primary language or signifier level can be established through conventional techniques. An adequate realization of literary text, I have suggested, requires additional information drawn from its historical and social contexts; the same is true for the general cultural text. However, certain problems that were brushed past earlier become more apparent on the cultural level. No attempt was made to specify the particular social and historical categories needed to establish the literary text; such questions, it was tacitly assumed, could be "kicked upstairs" to the canon or culture: the categories on those levels deemed appropriate and relevant for the purposes of the inquiry.

At the cultural level, there is no "upstairs." Any abstraction, pattern of relation, scheme of categories once conceptualized becomes a text through the act of description or explication or it becomes a potential text. While assumptions, categories, beliefs may spring to consciousness with the felt recognition of absolute truth, once they are used for perception, inquiry, and explication they become, explicitly or implicitly, a text in the culture that is both constitutive of the individual and extant as object; and they merge with all other texts into the sea of relativism that is the cultural corpus. This is perhaps an uncomfortable realization. Are we still within a Marxist framework? We got here by beginning with the basic assumptions of Marxist literary theory and then rather doggedly tracing their implications. "Where" we are, of course, is at that same open link we reached earlier when deriving the point of view of the self-aware interpreter in a context of continuously expanding perspectives, only this time we came up the methodological staircase instead of the theoretical one. We can look around a bit, but there isn't much we can do up here.

We can really see only two things from here: a series of self-referential perspectives that recede into the nothingness of prehistory in one direction and disappear into the infinite potential of the future in the other; second, the role of faith or choice in all inquiry. In section I, I described the (apparently) transcendental nature of the future projection; here, I will trace several steps in the view toward the past. A Marxist perspective, to pick one perspective extant in our culture, is a received conceptual system that includes in itself a concept of the nature and origin of the self. As an individual, the Marxist interpreter uses that framework, consciously or unconsciously, in conjunction with other elements from the culture to view received Marxism. Through

the framework, the interpreter sees, among other things, Marx leading the somewhat privileged life of a scholar in mid-nineteenth century England during a particularly important stage of European industrial expansion. Working within that framework Marx identified certain acts, certain patterns of behavior that he regarded as fundamental and examined selected "texts" from earlier cultures to locate a time when those patterns or acts were first manifest. At that point of first occurrence, culture was seen to exist and was said to have come into existence. But Marx's view was, in fact, based on the perceptions of earlier observers and those on still earlier ones. From any vantage point, what is seen of the past is not reality but the perception of reality by some culturally constituted individual or group; of the truth of that perception, we can never be sure.

The way out is to work laterally instead of linearly. Instead of seeking a total and complete system, we should seek a metasystem that can accommodate a dynamic range of systems. The structural Marxism that I have been tracing is such a metasystem. Within it the selection of any specific system, Marxist literary theory, for example, or the components from which a system could be constructed, is based on choice and/or faith.¹¹ The choice can be speculative—adopted in the hope that it will assist in conceptualizing a large portion of experience or anticipated experience—and the system retained or rejected through assessment of its utility. In principle, scientific paradigms are selected in this way, although Kuhn raises a number of questions regarding actual practice.¹² It seems preferable, however, to base that choice on the experienced belief, feeling, hope that the system or the assumptions on which it is based are "true." But since all perception is framed by the system adopted or by some larger ideological construct, we can never be sure. Perhaps the most that we can derive at this level is a clarified sense of the functional role of valuation, leading to the replacement of terms such as *truth* and *absolute* by *consistency* and *comprehensiveness*. While this forced relativism denies us ultimate, complete knowledge, it encompasses an enormous field of inquiry over which interpretation can be cast and verified *within the context of the specific critical perspective*. We can now go back to the level of the cultural corpus of texts and the question of the categories needed to describe them.

Accepting the Lotman reduction, we see that these categories will be derived from and, in turn, will be used to characterize the cultural corpus. They will originate in the system initially chosen by the interpreter or in the assumptions that will be used to construct such a system. But the entire construct is highly dynamic: as the categories reveal structure within the cultural corpus, that perception will undoubtedly lead to refinement and modification of the category system. Thus, the problem of establishing the cultural corpus of texts is coincident with developing a characterization of that corpus. The full meaning of the text will come into perspective only as a part of the total process of interpretation, and it will change as the perspective changes, hermeneutically. An adequate Marxist theory, then, must emphasize access and characterization; it must be dynamic and support expanding, various interpretive structures guided by the domain of inquiry and the evolving ideology of the inquirer. It will require a very large set of actual physical texts as well as an extensive set of aids for analysis, character-

ization, and management of the inquiry.

Because detailed, comprehensive characterization of individual texts, groups of texts, and the cultural corpus will form the methodological center of any valid Marxist poetics, an essential question to ask is whether the conventional repertoire of analytic models is adequate. Practical criticism has tended to rely on the traditional concepts of structure provided by rhetoric and linguistics. Actual, meaningful Marxist inquiries are likely to require enrichment of that traditional collection of models. At this abstract level, there is no reason to exclude any principle of relation that is perceived by the interpreter as meaningful. Where mathematics, statistics, information theory, or other formal models prove helpful, they should be included in the repertoire of available aids, but access to them will require willingness to explore the unfamiliar.¹³

Categories assumed by the interpreter, categories derived from lower level primitives, models of relationship, all, may be applied in actual interpretations in a variety of ways. They may be applied within a single level of the system or across levels. For example, the traditional concept of socio/economic class or group is a partitioning of the population according to selected categories. The characterizing categories may be applied loosely, as has been the case with most traditional critical inquiries; however, the system described is approaching the stage where it could be used rigorously to formulate a variety of critical questions. To actually perform the subsequent analysis may place seemingly impossible demands on the interpreter. It is at this point that theorists must decide the basic nature of critical inquiry: is it a branch of speculative philosophy, a form of aesthetic self-gratification, a humanistic science? My own answer, probably not surprisingly, is the last; but the distinction between a *humanistic* science and other branches of science is an all important distinction. The word *science* suggests that the construct can be applied rigorously to actual questions embedded in actual cultures; the word *humanistic* implies that the process includes self-awareness and, ultimately, a phenomenology of the interpreter. Let me now attempt to address the practical dimensions of both assertions.

To use the conceptual system described presupposes a number of preceding steps. Presumed is a body of literary texts established using appropriate Marxist principles, as well as the larger body of cultural texts for the context(s) involved. Presumed is access to those texts and characterizations of the major structuring principles of the corpus relevant to the particular inquiry. Assumed is the Marxist criterion that such characterizations not be fixed but that they be dynamic, responsive to the particular ideology and intent of the interpreter. How can these necessary preconditions be met to permit adequate Marxist inquiry? In my opinion, a Marxist poetics will require the utilization of large-scale computer systems, textual archives in machine-accessible form, and collections of powerful generalized analytic procedures all merged in a general management system to assist the interpreter in assembling the components to be focused in the interpretive act.

I realize many traditional scholars, particularly Marxists, will be uncomfortable to find the suggestion that a computer system may reside at the center of a Marxist

poetics. I would offer two responses. First, if we take the matter of a poetics seriously, I don't believe any other alternative is possible. To appreciate fully the constitutive nature of culture and to uncover the relations between the culture and the individual, the group, the literary work, etc., will require access to, and characterization of, a mass of information that can be dealt with in no other way. To reject the computer is to reject any hope of a viable poetics. Second, I have been building toward what I term a phenomenology of interpretation. In no way will I suggest a diminution of the role of the human interpreter. To the contrary, I will propose a mode of inquiry that seeks to expand the range, diversity, and freedom of the interpretive experience—in short, to expand the humanistic dimension of the interpretive experience. To make this possibility concrete, let me describe one possible interpretive situation.

The working environment could be the interpreter's office or study. The typewriter is replaced or supplemented by a video computer terminal of approximately the same size. The scholar reads and writes as usual, but turns to the terminal to gain access to certain kinds of information more readily available through it and to assist in the process of characterizing certain bodies of information. The terminal links the scholar via a common telephone line with a computer center in the area; the computer center, in turn, links the interpreter with other centers throughout the country (and, potentially, the world) via computer network facilities. Sitting at home at his/her desk, the interpreter can obtain information from any of these sources. Working environments such as this currently exist and, in fact, are being used by increasing numbers of scholars, humanists, as well as others.

A true Marxist poetics, however, will require more than just access to a computer; the scholar must be able to review and characterize large collections of texts. While an individual may prepare small numbers of texts for computer access, collections large enough to permit valid and confident characterization of cultural or literary patterns will require established textual archives. These collections do not currently exist, although several such projects have been proposed.¹⁴ The investment will require national, perhaps international, support, but the resulting archives would represent a research tool of unprecedented potential, not just for Marxist studies but for a variety of analytic approaches in a wide range of disciplines. Within Marxist studies, however, the possibility of large textual archives poses interesting theoretical as well as practical questions. Lotman's assertion that importance is self-selective through the economics of publication might be updated for contemporary culture to assert that importance is self-selective through the economics of transcription into computer accessible form. The proposition would work well enough for previously published materials; for current material, the proposition carries several levels of implication. The vast majority of published works go through a computer accessible form in the photocomposition stage of offset printing; that material could be gleaned for an archive. However, as computers and networks develop, we are likely to see an increasing proportion of written material that is originally constituted within a computer, distributed by computer networks, and read on terminals. That development should prove interesting to a Marxist perspective as a cultural phenomenon; it could also provide the scholar with a large

body of textual material through which to study the culture and in the form most useful for that consideration.

Computers, networks, archives are all necessary resources to realize a Marxist poetics, but they are still not sufficient. Also needed will be flexible, easy to use, but powerful analytic and management systems. The range of analytic models that can be applied to segments, texts, collections of texts will have to be expanded. Above, several discipline sources were mentioned; they provide a rich store of models that are already available on current computer systems and have been used to characterize textual data. If work in this field proves fruitful, that collection will undoubtedly grow. A separate need is help in managing a large scale inquiry. As the interpreter progresses from more apparent patterns to more subtle and comprehensive structures, assistance will be required to recall the information, re-present it, retain it, or discard it. The system will have to be dynamic, easy to use, self-explanatory.¹⁵

The terminal, the computer, the network, the archive, the analytic and management systems, all conjoin in the directed inquiry of the interpreter. From the interpreter's study or office, he/she will select the work or works to be considered, apply conceptual categories and analytic models suggested by the interpretive intent, modify the approach or retain the derived abstractions/categories experienced as meaning. Moving the focus of attention from text to recollection to conventional apparatus to terminal-provided information and back, the interpreter guided by intent slowly builds an understanding that is coherent, rigorous, and even dynamic, as steps are retraced and changed according to the evolving conceptualization. The results will, thus, be rigorous but they will not be rigid—rigorous in the sense that identifiable categories will be applied to identifiable semiotic segments resulting in abstract characterizing patterns derived by identifiable principles of relation; flexible in the sense that the whole approach will be guided and shaped by the ideology and intent of the interpreter and can grow and change dynamically as the perception grows and changes. Thus, the computer, rather than diminishing the basic humanistic nature of the interpretive experience, may actually augment it by expanding and clarifying the components brought together in a single moment of interpretive awareness.

We may now turn to a final set of questions that pertain to the phenomenology of the individual as interpreter and as historical reader. A traditional phenomenology, such as that of George Poulet and his Geneva colleagues, assumes as a basic methodology the interpreter's thorough immersion in the works of an author and complete recall of the texts. With this material, he/she participates in the ritualization of selected phrases, sentences, passages—chosen through the hermeneutically derived gestalt of the whole—"played" linguistically through the mind. The situation is more complex for the phenomenology of the Marxist interpreter. As emphasized above, true dialectical awareness comes in the interpretive act. Marxism insists on the inclusion of information and the awareness of structural relations extrinsic to the text; the poetics described here does not change that basic requirement. It only locates the focus of that experience more precisely and provides practical means for the self-aware, controlled expansion of the components of the experience. The poetics

outlined assists the interpreter in forming a more comprehensive awareness of self/work/author/canon/culture, an awareness that would be impossible through conventional scholarship and reflection. The experience of synthesis, of dialectical awareness, however, is clearly within the phenomenology of the interpreter, but sustained and extended by the system. It is in this act of awareness that the entire system, the entire poetics comes alive.

The phenomenology of the historical reader is more troublesome. In this situation, an interpreter posits an inquiry or thesis involving the experience of a culturally situated other reader. How can the interpreter infer *that* reader's phenomenological experience? The absence of direct comment from that reader regarding the experience may be presumed; otherwise, the situation is equivalent to that outlined above with the "text" becoming the recorded responses of the reader and the literary work read by that reader functioning as part of the selected cultural background. The material available for considering the unrecorded responses may be of three kinds: other writing by that individual, factual information about the individual's actions, and information about the constitutive cultural subgroups of which the individual is a member. If the characterizing categories are known as well as the holistic characteristics of the culture, a predictive model might be developed and the individual's probable responses generated, manifest either as actions or as statements. There are a wealth of unsolved problems with this approach, but even if it were developed and "determined to be accurate" it would function as a black box and would not reveal to the interpreter the actual nature of the presumed experience.

To open that black box is to confront a number of fundamental questions; some of those questions are shared by a very interesting and important field known as artificial intelligence. Briefly, the intent of artificial intelligence research is to develop computer systems that function at a conceptual level indistinguishable from human beings. Some will object that it is impossible for a computer system to appear, conceptually, human; others may accept the eventual possibility but observe the current impracticality of actually developing such a system. The point that I am leading to is the relation between the phenomenology of the historical reader and a viable artificial intelligence. In the meantime, for the sake of discussion, let us assume that an artificial intelligence is currently impractical; if it is impossible, I shall argue in a moment that we are precluded from any direct awareness of the phenomenology of the historical reader as well.

The classic test to determine artificial intelligence is to set up a situation involving a computer and two human beings sitting at separate, isolated terminals. One human being is the examiner and he/she asks questions through the terminal of the other human being and the computer. If the interpreter can not identify the responses of one as human and the other as computer, the computer is said to have achieved artificial intelligence. There has been no such achievement to date, but there have been some interesting developments. We are currently in a period of rapid progress in both the syntactic analysis of a received sentence and in the generation of syntactically correct sentences. Much more difficult is the development of viable *gestalts* that permit

the "understanding" of received sentences in some conceptual context so that meaningful, appropriate sentences may be generated in reply. This does not suggest, however, that no progress can be seen. Terry Winograd has developed a system that deals quite well with the "gestalt" of a collection of basic geometric solids.¹⁶ His system can move, stack, construct assemblages of these objects through natural language dialogue with a human being. The system recognizes when stacks must be "unstacked" to get at, say, the small red cube between two blocks to form some other construction. Roger Schank and his colleagues at Yale have developed a dialogue and inquiry system that "understands" narratives within the "open gestalt" of the culture.¹⁷ The system can answer questions about brief narratives—three or four sentences—and can draw inferences based on relations between narrative components and the system's general informational gestalt. The current achievement is far from a "literary understanding" but the intent is there and development is proceeding in that direction.

These systems as well as other general contextually accurate response systems use a concept called a semantic network. The semantic network configures individual information components into relational and associational structures. Over this network are certain inferential functions that permit semantic parsing as well as syntactic parsing and, in turn, can support semantically consistent as well as syntactically correct sentence generation. A true artificial intelligence will require large, general semantic networks that structure a significant portion of the cultural context. I suggest that the development of a realistic artificial intelligence system is equivalent to the problem of a phenomenological understanding of the unreported historical reader. The interpreter would merely substitute known characteristics of the historical reader for the arbitrary specifications of the artificial intelligence. Both are constituted, conceptually, by the mix of elements drawn from the culture as a whole; both would "respond" coherently within ranges of variability but not completely predictably; both would relate new information/experience to a continuum of previous information/experience. If such a system could be realized, we could simulate an historical reader; if it can't be done, we have no other means that differ in basic approach for reconstituting that experience with any reliability. To continue the assumption of eventual possibility, such a system could literally read the work and discuss its responses, in dialogue, with the interpreter. The responses would not necessarily be the actual responses of the historical reader but they would be consistent with what is known about that individual—that is, consistent with the constitutive semantic network and the defined context of the situation. The responses would then become the reported text on which the phenomenological inference is based. Perhaps at some later date, when the interpreter is more accustomed to abstract conceptual structures, he/she might "read" the semantic network and related functions—or whatever precise model is employed—and infer the phenomenology of that structure as the contemporary interpreter reads the manifest passages of a work and infers the phenomenology of the author. Either prospect, however, is dependent on a viable model of intelligence; that model is not likely to be realized in this decade but there are substantial reasons to believe that it might be realized before the end of the century.

CONCLUSION

This discussion has not tried to present a complete Marxist poetics; rather it has attempted to identify the principles and assumptions on which a poetics would rest and to sketch the domain where a poetics could be built. I have taken those principles seriously and tried to follow their directions wherever they led without immediate concern for practical implications. They point to only one solution that I can see: a fully integrated structural system utilizing computer archives, analysis, and access systems. I can imagine a sensitive, informed interpreter using these resources to gather and characterize a range of information not possible any other way. I can imagine this information being synthesized with the text and with recollections in a dialectical experience of unprecedented scope and vitality. I cannot imagine a valid and meaningful Marxist poetics otherwise.

NOTES

¹Jeffery L. Sammons, *Literary Sociology and Practical Criticism: An Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp. 13-14.

²Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. 274-94.

³Thomas Metscher, "Literature and Art as Ideological Form," *NLH*, 11, No. 1 (Autumn, 1979), 23.

⁴Yuri Lotman and B. A. Uspensky, "On the Semiotic Mechanisms of Culture," *NLH*, 9, No. 2 (Winter, 1978), 214-19.

⁵Fredric Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," *NLH*, 11, No. 1 (Autumn, 1979), 45.

⁶Fredric Jameson, *The Prison House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 101.

⁷For a very readable account of Godel's Theorem and its implications for a variety of fields, see Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

⁸Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," 66-72.

⁹V. N. Volósinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), p. 10.

¹⁰Lotman and Uspensky, p. 211.

¹¹Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967).