

TOTAL EQUALS WHAT: POETICS & PRAXIS*

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Upset within this context, public discourse, writing in & on the social body, possibility of meaning (horizon, system, dialogue, limits) how far extended, comprehended, challenged.

Today I want to talk about the social ground and the social dimensions, political dimensions as well, of recent writing within this extended community. And I want to draw an analogy, throughout, between language and society —both in terms of explanation (of how those things are understood) and also in terms of praxis and prescriptions deriving from that explanation.

First, in terms of explanation, the link is between conceptualizing the nature of the social order and how it's organized and trying to conceptualize the nature of the material of writing. That material I'm going to be talking about as systems of meaning in a way that's broader than signification, broader than the structure of the sign, but something more like "sense" or "value" in a more social dimension. Second, in terms of prescription, again I want to draw a link between writing and politics in the prescriptions that follow directly from those understandings. So these are prescriptions about how to intervene, or come to terms with, both the nature of writing and its materials and the nature of society and *its* materials —in a way that stresses the implicit prescriptions that are involved in writing. (For example: if it's a question of how to stop repressing the process by which it's made, then it matters how that process gets defined —whether you define it in terms of signification, more narrowly, or whether you define it more broadly, as I'd like to do, in terms of "making sense.")

Things don't change fast enough.

Talking about society and writing both, I want to introduce a picture of *levels* that I think parallels the way you can talk about language being organized, on the one hand, and society being organized on the other; so that you can see the way these levels exist, in a sense, in a series of concentric circles —one larger, one outside each— or almost like a series of interlocking Chinese boxes.

With society, on the one hand, you can talk about this surface level or this first level as a social order as a kind of decentered constellation of different practices, of differences, of heterogeneity, of pluralism, a micro-politics of fragments on this

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inner circle. Second, beyond that, you can talk about those multiple interests or points of activity being organized into a dominant hegemony and a variety of counter-hegemonies trying to challenge that hegemony, organized into specific functions, specific struggles, and specific blindnesses within society. And then third, as an even more extended perimeter, you can talk about the outer limits of something like a totality, an overall horizon of restriction and constitution, a limit, a set of organizing principles within the social order. A dominant paradigm. (In the American case, talking socially, you would then be talking about something like the relations of domination within a corporate-run, almost “one-dimensional” type society or capitalist patriarchy that exists also with a certain role and position within the world system or the world political economy.) Limits, throughout, are a qualification of action. Suffocating within these limits.

As a parallel, I think you can talk about language in a somewhat similar way. That language, being social, being socially constructed, suggest that what’s not possible is a condition of transparency or presence or the aura. Because meaning isn’t naturally reflected in language; language is producing it actively. There isn’t a natural or automatic possibility of presence. This ends up being a dream, an illusion of satisfaction. Instead you have absence, displacement, the erosion of the aura.

If you talk about language in terms of these same levels I was using to talk about society, first, on the surface, you would talk about it as a set of differences, the production of meaning (as signification). Outside that you can talk about the structure of discourses: the way in which those differences get organized into a polyphony —of different voices, different literary traditions— that goes beyond merely talking about language as a system of signs; and, in a sense, put this system of signification or these utterances in motion, through action, through the organization of desire, through the organization of discourse.

Finally, like society, there’s this final concentric circle for language in which polyphony is embedded. The polyphony inside, or the proliferation of signs and discourse are embedded in, limited in certain ways by, or collusive with, or inscribed in different ways by: this outer horizon, this set of limits, this set of ideologies, this overall body of sense that makes language into an archive of social effects.

1. Social Sense/Contextualizing literary choices (Explanation)

First, in terms of explanation, I’m interested in the way in which recent work in the literary world suggest how both language and society can be explained and understood in a way that can guide practice. Beginning with form, and politicizing that with the force of impatience, I think originally impelled this range of writing practices towards questioning tradition in styles and methodology. Because if all experience is constructed —is socially constructed— then writing which recognizes the fact ends up involving itself with a more active consideration of social

questions. As form itself begins to seem autonomous, the path of writing cuts beyond form and style, beyond the dynamics of any local situation or mode of address, beyond the particular partners in a dialogue, and moves toward a more critical (or contextual) focus on meaning itself and on this overall social comprehension. And this I think involves a great sensitivity to the matter of ideology —which is embodied in the discursive frames that we use and in the social arrangements which stage the possibilities for meaning to be produced (by authors) and also the possibilities for meaning to be realized (in a kind of reception/market). So that, beyond dealing with the sign —the formal underpinnings of *product*— recent work has tended to deal more with *method*, as a social *process*, as more than a question of form but as a question (or questioning) of society itself.

Now, the method of writing articulates value, but the question is then: what sort of value are we talking about? The explorations that writing makes of, for instance, “communication,” are confined by an established discourse or a dominant paradigm of how meaning is constructed. But beyond that, there’s a desire to investigate the possibilities of meaning, rather than just the possibilities of form —to investigate, in a sense, the way our ability to create different kinds of content and different kinds of form get shaped, the arrangements that make knowledge possible.

This implies an understanding of the shape of experience and of “pre-sense”, prior to being organized socially —the background of messages— that can give us a glimmer of how meaning is socially constructed. Because meaning is constituting itself only in relationship to other meanings, and the text is not producing meanings from scratch. It’s only working —through readers— on other texts, on other kinds of constructions, other kinds of operating arrangements. And it is *transformative*. It has this social material that it’s working with. And that material regulates the play of differences; it regulates this giddy flux of signifiers. It provides an outside for the work. So you can think about meaning as more than this internal process of signification and look at the possibilities that are bestowed upon texts *from without* —by “sense”, or by the organization of social value, but certain practices and priorities that are organized by society in a certain way. Desire itself goes beyond signification and imprints itself on this body of sense. And this implies some kind of situation or community that’s socially constructed —and also conflictually constructed— that anchors meaning, that orients meaning, that physically or materially shapes meaning.

It’s a commonplace that language denies closure, and that language is a kind of openness. But I think we’ve come to recognize the need for a more social conception of what that openness is —and to frame what’s open against the dangers of closure, in this broader sense., On their way to being spread across the surface into infinity, words and the opportunities for meaning butt up against this horizon of sense, this delimited structure which pins meanings down and regulates them imperceptibly or constitutes them. Inside, there’s this possibility for a proliferation of signs, this polyphony, this anti-hierarchical play. Outside, on the other hand, there’s this boundary; there’s this social construction of consciousness,

of ideology, of the frames people use to organize their experience; there's this social stage.

And as long as we're acknowledging that language is rooted in communal experience, we're acknowledging also that it's socially saturated and that the communal experience which saturates it is organized. For that reason, a social dialogue must become possible —beyond the narrower interpersonal dialogue— that would be like the dialogue that internal polyphony has with its limits (with language; and also, as a constructive factor, with society). So if we start with a commitment to a writing praxis that's oriented toward the productivity of meaning, we become more aware that it's also involved with a kind of social sense, with this prior construction of opportunities and risks, this materializing of certain kinds of value rather than others.

Practice takes place within these systems of convention, and they're what make meaning possible —both linguistically (in terms of signification, or the structure of the sign) but also more broadly socially (as value, or sense). So that the dialogues and the layerings of voices and the ploys of communication, and rhetoric, utterances, are bound up by the coercive social limits of the possible. They're socially governed. That governing takes the shape of rules that are being followed or a context that's being adapted to —a context in light of which certain actions “make sense”.

So there's this process by which the sign —the material body of the sign— is transformed into meaning. It's allowed to make sense —or not— and this process is socially organized, or coded, at the level of discourse. This is a social government of meaning or value that's built up *on top of* the structure of the sign. And it enables units in a text to function both as signs and also as pieces of this social body, as materializations of social value.

That's another reason why some of these parallels come into view. I mean, we're used to seeing language in use, or speech, framed against some systematic language, some language system —in the way the structuralists would talk about it. Politically, also, influenced by equally structuralist kinds of thinking, people are more used to seeing immediate issues of politics framed against the limits and shape of the social totality. In a parallel way, either language in use *or* language as a system can be framed against a social totality. So that the overall meaning system, in this sense, would be analogous to the social order or the nature of the social formation, of society as a unit.

Now, this established structure of value and sense is arbitrary —like the shape of the sign— but, on the other hand, it's also *imposed*; it's made to seem natural. And what's dislocated (sense and language) are brought together by a set of power relations. They're organized. They're organized by an apparatus or a machine of discourse, this policing system of something like power/knowledge. These might not be fixed structures —there's always struggle going on underneath— but it is a configuration of forces out there, an empowered configuration with some historical weight to it. And it does seem to embody, at the same time, the possibility of a collective reference —however disfigured that may be. This may be more like a

crossroads than a closed and fixed corpus, ready for the dissection table. But still: there's this clamp-down by society on what's possible. So that this established structure of meaning isn't just being created and constituted at its core, day by day. It's also something that has stability; it has a certain force; it's institutionalized; it makes up a solid mode.

So if you think of discourse or ideology as something like a mode of production, then literature becomes something that's inscribed onto material within that mode. Not in a reductionist way, like a superstructure related to a base, but it's something that's mediated by meaning (which in this case would be operating like the means of productions) and in which literature then is positioned more actively as the way the relations of production are organized. So: discourse, as mode of production; meaning, means of production; and the organization of writing, the relations of production.

Now the hegemonic political organization of writing (literature) would end up seeming like a strategic project or paradigm of sense, of appropriating sense, of making use of it. And discourse itself (this larger figure) is also then articulated with society in a similar way. Even discourse begins to look like a paradigm of society, a strategic politics, a constitutive politics —with society as its field, its referent, its context, its target, and also as the condition of its slimy embeddedness.

From the point of view of trying to explain things, and thus orient praxis, *scale* looks like the issue here. The problem is total. Meaning totality. Or at least it's performed on the stage of totality. And by totality here, I'm talking about the internal organization of a society, a historically constituted social formation and its organizing principles, the way it defines itself in discourse and in social sense, as well as the apparatus of domination (or of power/knowledge) that holds it together. Totality, in that sense, would suggest the roots of discourse and the system of meaning within a national social order —some overall organization of ideology or ways of making sense that underpin the variety of signifying practices or cognitive forms.

Because writing's "material" is discursively articulated, it's also culturally and politically articulated in light of these limits. The materials —or the building blocks of sense— are related internally in society as distinctions within a whole; and they're also organized to be mutually interdependent. They require each other as the ground of their *possibility*.

By calling attention to possibility, we're acknowledging that the totality isn't just a negative restrictive thing, or some deterministic program. It's also something that's reproduced by action within the system and, at the same time, it becomes a resource or a medium that can be drawn upon. So it's a source, for instance, of something like what Foucault calls "positive power." The social rules that are involved in it are positive, enabling, constructive, and constitutive. But it does have this horizon as well.

To imagine the limits of language (as an active process, as method) is also to imagine the limits of a whole form of social life —in this case, of a predatory social order (or an interlocking network of orderings) that desperately needs to be

changed. Now, often the horizon goes unrecognized —and unchallenged— so that those limits, and the social world as a whole, are seen as natural, or they're not seen at all. As an example, I want to read a quote from Perry Anderson about Britain in the last century, where he talks about the inability of the British bourgeoisie to achieve a totalizing view of the society that they in fact were governing —and the problems, he suggests later in this piece that he wrote in the late 1960s, that then arise for the Left in Britain as a result of the fact that even the people governing the society never had this view:

It refused ever to put society as a whole in question. A deep, instinctive aversion to the very category of the totality marks its entire trajectory. It never had to recast society as a whole, in a concrete historical practice, It consequently never had to rethink society, as a whole, in theoretical reflection... Society was treated as if it were an immutable second nature.

I'm suggesting that the alternative for many of us has been to come up with a more explanatory vision of writing that could come closer to *comprehending* —by moving out and extending out into— this larger social whole.

2. Social Praxis/What to do (Prescription)

Given this contextual notion of explanation, certain notions about prescription I think follow implicitly. Because it's out of this explanatory ground that we can talk about what this writing is doing, prescriptively, in a way that fits this social understanding.

We hear occasionally about “the death of meaning” within society, not just within certain schools of poetry. Meaning clearly didn't die. But it's possible that instead of remaining as a *content* that's relatively freely and easily appropriated, it's become the limits of method within a social order, that it's relocated itself within certain fixed modes, and that these need to be confronted with a more social or totalizing perspective within writing: one that recognizes the point of those fixed modes, those fixed blocks, as something that is *public*. A praxis which fits this more inclusive vision of what's at stake would be one that orients the privacies of the text toward a more public context to be addressed, intervened into, contested —or at least, to be *implicated*, for the reader as well as for the writer. So that by highlighting the public (or social-political) implications of these relationships at least gives the possibility of a more public conception of the subject, of interpersonal relations and interpersonal experience, of intertextual relations (and also of politics, more broadly) at this public/social level.

The related collective project looks like one of articulating this content of contested social themes, of a social horizon —in order to better guide our choices and frame the experiences that we're operating with. For that reason, in discussions of poetry and politics, sometimes, I find it troublesome to hear “politics” being

instrumentalized— as for instance it is in neo-populist discussions; to think that the whole notion of politics involved with writing is being narrowed down to specific struggles toward change, while the contexts that are actually directly implicated in the use of writing are being ignored. Because this can corrupt our conception of what the public realm looks like by bringing with it, or even valorizing, manipulation or a kind of “means justify the ends” point of view about what to do, how to proceed, and what’s at stake. I’m suggesting instead that politics can also bring to mind the older sense of community good or public good rather than specific struggles. The idea of politics as, for instance, a matter of arranging community matters needs to be reinstated. Because here, in writing, I think it’s also paralleled by a concern *for* language and for its limits and its point —the point of its organization.

Recently I think the work in this community has been involved with the conditions of meaning, with metalanguage —both in terms of explanation and in terms of prescription. At the level of explanation, I think this has to do with writing that is contextualizing (within language games which are also then social games), that’s demythologizing and that’s involved with a critique of ideology —those would be different ways to talk about it.

At the level of prescription, or how do you conceive of the task, I think this has to do with a desire for totalization, for getting a more and more total grasp (I mean here not a complete mapping, but an attempt to go toward the outer boundaries, toward a perimetrizing of the field —a field which is itself more and more this total arrangement at the national and even global level, this integrated capitalist world system, for instance, which then brings to mind Adorno’s claim that “the whole is the false”, or at least that the whole is open to question is a total way).

So, both in language and politics, there is registered this desire to have a totalizing perspective. And within language as well as within politics, it also may need to be equivalent in strength to the strength of the homogenizing impact of the totality on whatever is inside. Recent work that’s challenging those things then becomes the rough equivalent, in praxis, of a totalizing stance for writing.

The task, beyond coding and decoding particular messages, is also one that raises the question: “What is this code?” How is it that these codes are constructed? I think this suggests a way to explore these larger frames, the “limits of the normative” —by foregrounding not only the shape of different stylistic traditions but also the shape of linguistic structure, of utterance structure, of discourse structure, and of the social codes which are also providing the limits for all of that.

It helps give an understanding of the limits as well as the building blocks of those social codes. Its contextualizing and reshaping and contesting are what I’m calling *totalizing*. Beyond form’s maximizing of *act*, this would be a parallel maximizing of *context*, or of paradigm. More than just a pluralizing of voices and traditions within some taken-for-granted whole, and more than adding to the multiplicity of voices all situated within a system of social sense which is ungraspable, these would be ways of revealing the socially coded nature of larger

units of language and of language as an overall system, and politicizing them by showing or implicating their place within one or another ideological bloc —which is a social bloc, some constellation of different social forces and social values outside.

So, this politicizing, or this totalizing, which is a form of radical *reading* embodied in writing, involves a comprehension of social limits that are built up on top of the limits of signification, the limits of the sign. This raises the possibility that our experience could be reoriented and made intelligible in a different way. It orients us to keep in mind, to keep facing, this larger other —this contextual horizon which shows the most broadly social possibilities of meaning being constructed. And social, here, means unnatural, or constructed. The grasp of these social limits can help to define the project future of the work. Or if you don't want to talk about the future, or time, it would define the scale of the work —as a political act— which then recalls these questions about both explanation and prescription.

In an explanatory sense, you're framing the privacies of language against some larger organization of signifieds —or the conditions by which those signifieds get organized (which is what I'm calling "sense" —something that's fairly close to the notion of ideology). By challenging this relationship between writing, on the one hand, and sense, on the other, we're engaging in a way of working which is both explanatory and which carries with it specific prescriptions about meaning (and society).

Now, meaning isn't something that precedes explanation but it's constructed through a social method —an explanatory method— that places and positions texts within the horizon of some outer social world, and in that way reveals some connection between orders of the text and orders outside the text —not on a point-by-point basis (a naturalistic or referential basis) but at this meta-level, or this systemic level, in terms of the overall organization. So you'd be enabled to recognize the fit between experience (textual experience, individual experience, collective experience) and this larger envelope of meaning. And to see that fit as fidelity or as a kind of adequacy in an explanatory way, as the way things "make sense", seems appropriate in the light of some specific context and acquires value in the process of framing, and as they're felt to become intelligible. So that the links involved in this explanatory thrust aren't a kind of mechanical cause/effect link. Instead, you're starting with a purposive act, motivated by desire, and you're relating it to this larger context; you're addressing this larger context. You're relocating those units within the largest totalizing of this context that's possible.

The praxis involves a contextualizing of the text, a pointing of the text beyond itself, and a re-mapping of the subject (the position of the author, the position of the reader) in terms of that larger interaction between writing and this social body (of meaning). (Just parenthetically, this is somewhat related, when you talk about the notion of the subject in writing, to the notion of "shifters" —here, not in the sense of pronouns and not in the sense of a semantic shift in the narrower conditions or the possibilities of signification, but in a broader, more social and

substantive way: almost like a notion of discursive shifters or social shifters in this broader sense.) You're expanding to the limit this contextual horizon within which sense gets produced and realized. So that the relationship keeps extending outward—in a series of concentric circles— each one framing and bounding and making sense out of what's inside, so that the contextualizing is an expanding one.

Now, I'm not talking about context here in the way some linguists might—as linguistic context, the word located in the context of a sentence for instance—but as a social system; so that when utterances are contextualized, they would point these larger codes, this social organization of act and of performance. You're talking about underlying sign systems generating the possibilities of sense. And these are also normative systems that surround language; these are codes that are more like context in *rigor mortis*. So by articulating the complexities and the horizon of social sense, writing can function as an internal explanation, a "pointing outward" that goes beyond the naming or the appropriating of referents to some more critical characterizing of them.

In the end, the grasp of the system of society, the meaning system, the explanations from which prescriptions can directly follow, involves pointing to this complicated fabric of power relations and domination, of control systems and normalization (the prison-house of language, the prison-house of society). The grasp involves making that contextualization as total as possible, so that we're facing the totality (or what we think of as that) with our explanations, or with the explanations that are implicit in the work. Beyond trying directly to give body to our dreams and our visions of what we want or imagine, there's also this implicit recognition, within that embodiment, of what the limits are, and of what's *pushing against* that and of what we therefore need to challenge and try to get beyond.

If we're going to think about writing as an active intervention into this overall configuration of meaning, then we're talking about seeing through that in some way, talking about V-Effect, about recognizing the hidden social processes by which value or meaning gets produced. We're trying therefore to get beyond established meaning from *within* the structure of meaning—not just bypassing it with "experimentalism" of different kinds, but to risk it and to reveal its constructedness. So that you are articulating some of the process by which sense gets produced in a different way. The act of enunciating becomes part of the content—in a way that makes the *social method* become visible (and not just to illuminate the products that can be carried through that method).

Here the work raises some old questions—although not within the older debate, for instance, between the Realists and the Modernists—but more within a newer debate between Modernists and a more social perspective (or I might even like to think, socialist perspective). This would help us reconsider this tension between openness and closure in language in a different way. Because the question remains: whether form, as an activity, will help reinforce the generative qualities of language's raw materials rather than close it off. Talking about pure openness or about the autonomy of discourse or the autonomy of language seems attractive. On the other hand, it seems to threaten to look like self-absorption because it's not

a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the other hand, to just talk about explanation and to deny the force of this openness ends up looking excessively closed off. We're talking about work that carries with it a desire to have both.

This use of form has been, at the same time, an articulation of the rawer materials that would give body to its generative possibilities, to "new meaning," but also it's something that can embody a recognition of the limits that are placed on those possibilities by these outer systems (linguistic systems or social systems), or by some outer ensembles or constellations of practices (whether literary or artistic or social).

The frames are insecure and they can be challenged. Laying bare the device remains as a task but it becomes a more social act, of social unbalancing, of a social reflexivity of content, rather than some kind of (what I have in the past called) preppie formalism. Because the modernism that's at stake now is more public and is more involved with the conditions of meaning, it also becomes more social. So that if people are arguing (as some of the post-structuralists seem to) that social meaning has disappeared, then just trying to disrupt the sign system with some radical formalism isn't going to be enough. Instead, if something's going to be disruptive, or disrupted, it's going to have to be *method*, seen in a more social sense —as the social organization of signs, as ideology, as discourse; those are the more broadly social things that need to be shaken up: historicized, politicized, contextualized, totalized —by laying bare the social devices, or the social rules which are at work. So the work isn't only gesturing toward how things work (which often ends up being a capitulation to what exists), but it also tries to show the limits of that and take a more critical stance —to as *why?* as well as *what for?*

This acknowledges that if you want to talk about things like tradition, community or experience being built on more *legitimate* ground, that there's really this massive job of comprehension that's on the agenda first. Getting this demystifying and distancing perspective on the prior condition is going to be crucial. And so will writing that recognizes its social ground and contests it —that contests the establishment or the institutionalization of that social ground and its "point" as well as its claims to authority and the claims to the "natural" which that ground often (usually, in fact) carries with it. I think with a greater effort to reshape and restructure that context of meaning, it becomes easier to sustain a continuing momentum behind the growing awareness *of* context and what its limits are. The social "point" gets located as it gets challenged.

This writing which seems to be "about" meaning also takes as its goal the challenging of existing frames and the widening of this social realm of possibility. It involves testing the horizon, setting up a probe, by violating codes so that each unit keeps getting reframed —or keeps reframing what's going before it and what might come next as you challenge these wider and wider concentric circles of normalization, or of a functional fit, almost a machine-like fit that exists *within* the social dimension of language. So, this larger operation of the entire body of language —the internal relations of this totality— can begin to be recast. You then get something like what Ron Silliman, in his interview in the recent issue of *The*

Difficulties, called inciting a riot within the prison-house of language—or, in this case, language seen in a social way as well as just in a systematic structure of differences.

This foregrounding of the limits of the possible begins to seem like a form of address, increasingly global, so that when you're articulating a specific language (or experience or possibility) you're framing it, always, by addressing this implicit and more distant Other, this general system of language and the social principles and organization of meaning. The method by which meaning arrives in a prefabricated way are challenged and, at the same time, the limits of the social order are questioned. There is this implicit recognition that meaning isn't just arbitrary (in the way the structure of the sign would suggest) but it's also systemic; it's based on these conventions which need to be restaged, reconsidered and reconvened, in a prefigurative way. Writing can acknowledge how constructed those norms are and, at the same time, try to create a kind of impossibility —so that you'd be able to restage the preconditions of being able to say... everything.

Once you recognize the sovereignty of these systems, you can ask what the lessons for praxis are, what the implications are for social change in a prescriptive sense. Here, the limits or the point of this outside, this outer order, seem to subordinate the present to the past. And, for that reason, thinking about totalizing becomes a way to question or to negate the given and to do so in a way that points toward some other anticipated future. It creates a dialogue with the future in a way that expands expectations and imaginative possibilities; and it does so by locating limits by challenging them, by pushing them, by attempting to set up something outside of them, that disrupts that. So that language could be rematerialized in a more social way, that exposes the codes operating within the whole —a whole that needs to be questioned before it can be altered.

The praxis is one that implicitly recognizes the possibilities of constructing and reconstructing a society. It looks at the regulation of meaning as something inseparable from the way the social whole is composed, so that the way sense is regulated is analogous to the way that the social body is written. Language and writing wouldn't be regarded as something determined, externally, by a socio-economic system, for instance; but they're actually part of that system, they're part of the reproduction needs of that system. As a result, writing and language both are active and they're constitutive of this social body.

Politics itself ends up as something that you can look at as a type of writing that takes as its material a society as a whole, as a collection of practices governed by discourse and certain rules of behavior. There's already this existing material and politics is involved with its constant rewriting. In the same way, to change what exists, with writing you're pointing towards this newer collective body of referents; you're generating new contexts; you're constantly motivating and remotivating what's already there. And in doing so, you're encouraging the idea of a constant (not permanent revolution but a constant) renegotiating of this political and social contract —with all of its typical projections, institutional embodiments, and coercions.

You're raising the possibility of something entirely new taking shape: constructing a set of common meanings, some common network into which people can move, a way of exchanging different kinds of awarenesses. This would allow desire to register as a kind of community-building and put writing at the forefront of envisioning what a positive social freedom and participation might look like. By imaging a different *sense*, you're beginning to imagine a change also in what's possible in the practical transactions between social individuals—even to the point of implicating a different kind of subject: a new subject that could begin to coalesce, or that begins to coalesce around this desire to signify more widely—and fittingly—in light of “what is, indeed, happening.” The meaningfulness that's embodied in ideology can get restaged. So that you're starting to construct a subject built up in light of a representation or a mapping of the largest possible social whole in which action can occur. And writing becomes part of the hegemonic—or almost educational—struggle over the totality of social relations *in its own realm*.

Now, in terms of politics and political praxis, I think that this conception of writing is related to the idea that an overall perspective, nationally, in politics, on the needs of existing institutions or the official model of social development at the national level is necessary to account for, and also to securely change, specific patterns of domination within that system. That you can't expect a mild reformism that's oriented toward specific problems to be capable of challenging (and altering) the broadest contexts in light of which those problems might keep making “perfect sense”. The political dimension of writing isn't just based on the idea of challenging specific problems or mobilizing specific groups to challenge specific problems, but it's based on the notion of a systemic grasp—not of language described as a fixed system but of language as a kind of agenda or as a system of capabilities and uses.

This is also related to the political question—about praxis—of asking: on what basis are conflicting groups and claims in society going to be able to come together? How can you link up the actions of all these different groups by means of some larger vision or some larger social worry, some sense of the totality that they're all enclosed by? Because if there *is* a common agenda and there is some ideological mobilizing around it, it's very likely to require a recognition of the overall system that it's operating in—as a precondition. And that means opening up the possibility of some conceptual (or experiential) totalizing that would be visible and understandable to these different groups—helping to keep them from being isolated and atomized and competitive with each other.

Without that idea of a totality in politics, I think it's hard to get a common grasp of what's needed for these groups and individuals to mobilize themselves together. There's a quote I have here from Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), where he makes a similar point about totality:

In practice, then, the attack on the concept of “totality” in the American framework means the undermining and the repudiation of the only realistic

perspective in which a genuine Left could come into being in this country.
(54n)

And it's something like this that I'm talking about in terms of recent writing.

The parallel here might be a notion of the *public*, or of a public sphere, as a totalizing notion that is underneath the more surface phenomena of “alliance building” and the construction and reconstruction of these different hegemonies in society. This idea that a public might need to come into being—a sense of the public within politics—as existing subjects reorient themselves toward a more social form of self-determination and thereby being to cut against the grain of these more subjective preoccupations (for instance, in writing, I think that would suggest those of Romanticism or much of the New American Poetry) that have led to a weakening of the sense of any kind of common public life, or any sense of the public at all.

So, another linked notion involved with totalizing would be *participation* as a criterion for evaluating the present and mapping an alternative. If you combine this sense of the “public” and of participation, you end up with a theme like *literacy*, characterized more socially than technically. The capacity for totalizing as literacy. This is close to the way Stanley Aronowitz defined this recently in a book review. He said:

If we understand literacy as the ability of individuals and groups to locate themselves in history, to see themselves as social actors able to debate their collective future, then the key obstacle to literacy is the sweeping privatization and pessimism that has come to pervade public life.

Or I think we could even say: has come to eliminate public life and erode the whole notion of a public sphere.

Literacy, here, suggests building a public in the old-fashioned sense—one where individuals are able to orient themselves to social life more broadly, rather than just rubberstamping the existing agendas of the rich and the powerful. In a parallel way, this kind of writing might then seem like a part of public life—in the sense of the public sphere—an access point to totality, through this vehicle of the public sphere, the underlying conditions for the construction of which are tied up with the social system of meaning. So that a totalizing poetic practice involves a kind of social denormalizing—at work on the structure of the sign but also on these larger shapes of meaning—that would allow for revitalizing of the idea of a *public sphere*, as more than a cheering section for the effects of capitalism.

The whole is unfinished.