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TOWARDS AN AFRICAN CRITICAL PRACTICE:
THE CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE
CRITICISM OF AFRICAN LITERATURE

By

Adebayo Bolarin-Williams

There is no criticism without a criticism of criticism
(Thibaudet).

Today, let the words of the great French critic remind us of our historical task. Criticism must perform the same services for literature as well as for itself if it is not to ossify into dogma. Thus, it is binding on us to state that this essay will jolt conventional critical expectations; it will politely refuse to conform to "tradition." It will also display in certain places a polemical ardour which is not altogether incompatible with the nature of its contents.

African literary criticism now reminds one of a clever masquerade who converts a disastrous fall into a memorable acrobatic display. But it is only if the dance doesn't last long that the spectators will not discover the hoax. Yet it is clear that this daring diagnosis cannot be made without an exhaustive familiarity with the case-history--or case-histories as the case may be--of critical infirmity. Let us briefly place the disturbing symptoms in proper context.

It would appear that there is a concensus that criticism is the handmaiden of art and that theirs is a symbiotic relationship in which they nourish each other in turn. To put it more precisely, criticism should be the dialectical mirror which lies and tells the truth at the same time and which in its principled dishonesty shows art the way forward by denying it a hypostatized "objective" reality. But if it happens that in the first instance criticism so places itself where it can only procure entirely false images, or moves itself away to where it can only produce blank reflections, then a crucial dislocation has occurred in literature.

It would appear that it is this dislocation we are currently faced with in African literary criticism. Yet insofar as the wounds of our colonial history are scarcely healed, we may presently discover that our crisis is part of a larger critical crisis, indeed, of the current epistemological impasse of that complex known as Anglo-Saxon empiricism. To return to the genesis of that impasse is to place our own dilemma in proper historical perspective.

Unlike the more vigorous continental hermeneutics, Anglo-Saxon criticism this century has in the main been characterised by a timidity and aversion to literary theorising, indeed, by what Wellek has called "a distrust of the intellect and of any organised knowledge."¹ Several commentators, including Raymond Williams and Eagleton have traced this to the pervasive influence of British empiricism.² A turn of the century observer actually ascribed the "sterility and stagnation" in British thought to the fact that empiricism functioned "unopposed."³ Jameson, one of the more ruthless critics of this tradition, went a step further to place the blame squarely on the shoulders of Locke, the father of British empiricism. According to him:

The vice of Anglo-American empiricism lies indeed in its stubborn will to isolate the object in question from everything else, whether it be a material thing, an "event" in Wittgenstein's sense, a word, a sentence, or a "meaning." This mode of thought, going back as it does to Locke, is, I believe, ultimately political in inspiration; and it would not be difficult, following the lines pursued by Lukács in History and Class Consciousness for rationalizing and universalizing thought to show how such thinking is characterized by a turning away of the eyes, a preference for segments and isolated objects, as a means to avoid observation of those larger wholes and totalities which if they had to be seen would force the mind in the long run into uncomfortable social and political conclusions.⁴

Yet to stop here is to leave the depth of matters largely undisturbed. Empiricism, we must understand, was a widespread phenomenon in eighteenth century European thought and in fact there were several British major thinkers who could not be classified as empiricists but who have been swept away by the iron broom of history precisely because of the ascendancy of Locke. How come then the unchallenged supremacy of a thought-system that has proved so insidious? It is precisely here that we begin to encounter one of those paradoxes of history. Indeed, the very radicalism of German thought in the eighteenth century was consequent upon the relative backwardness of Germany. Thus, while Britain and France committed political regicide, Germany committed intellectual regicide. Heine, the great Germany poet, observed the phenomenon thus:

To be honest in comparison to us Germans you French are tame and moderate. The best you could do was to kill a king, and he had already lost his head before you beheaded him. And in the process you had to drum and scream

*and trample your feet so as to shake the entire globe. Much too much honour is bestowed upon Maximilien Robespierre in comparison to Immanuel Kant.*⁵

Thus, as Lukács aptly observed in his last interview, the contemporary backwardness of Anglo-Saxon thought is paradoxically due to the earlier political radicalism of Britain, to the triumph of the industrial revolution and the establishment of capitalist relations in the towns and countryside.⁶ The supremacy Locke's system has subsequently enjoyed lies precisely in the fact that it captures the vision and aspiration of the then rising bourgeois class. It is not hard to see why. By positing knowledge as a description of the relations between sense-images which are themselves copies of bits of reality, Locke was not only fragmenting reality, he was also deifying facts. German philosophers of the eighteenth century bitterly attacked this epistemological concept not only for fragmenting the real world but for making it impossible to be grasped clearly by reason. Locke's error, according to Leibniz, was that:

*He did not sufficiently distinguish the origin of necessary truths, whose source is in the understanding from those of fact, which are drawn from sense-experience and even from the confused perceptions that are in us.*⁷

Such a doctrine is necessarily a potent weapon in the hands of an ascendant class. To present the world as being fragmented is to debar reason from grappling with it and hence to justify the present; to conceive that same world as being synonymous with visible facts is to naturalise existing relations by making it impossible to grasp what lies behind the "facts." Indeed, as Althusser has noted:

*Empiricist abstraction, which abstracts from the given real object its essence, is a real abstraction, leaving the subject in possession of the real essence (emphasis in the original).*⁸

It is not surprising that Locke's immediate successors, while thinking they were deepening and elaborating his system, were in reality sharpening its ideological edge: thus, Hume's subjectivist pessimism, Spencer's theory of the "unknowable." Mills in fact went as far as to declare:

*I think, by far the wisest thing we can do is to accept the inexplicable fact, without any theory of how it takes place.*⁹

If the world is indeed "unknowable," all the more reason why one should dine with the devil one knows. The real, therefore, becomes rational and the rational real, an Hegelian formulation which accurately captures the empiricist regression of Hegel's own capitulation to the Prussian State. The growth of big cities, of giant industries, and the unprecedented achievement of science could only have reinforced this faith in existing facts, never mind the cost in human misery and degradation. After all, the alimentary logic has it that "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." Althusser pithily observes:

*We are interested in the mechanism that ensures that it really is a pudding we are eating and not a poached baby elephant, though we think we are eating our daily pudding.*¹⁰

Thus the discoveries of science came in handy for Locke's system. Positivism reinforces empiricism: the coup is total. The new ideas, as Randall notes, were "bent to the erection of a science of society as a middle-class apologetic for business enterprise."¹¹ The implications of this development for Anglo-Saxon scholarship cannot but be momentous. Thus history for the historian becomes not only a biography of great men but according to one contemporary expert, "one damned thing after another."¹² (Note the influence of Darwin, of bourgeois individualist ethos, and the generous dose of Spencerian scepticism in this.) For the anthropologist, any racial group whose characteristics or mode of apprehending and making sense of reality do not conform to the given is barbarous or worse still, primitive. The classical economists knew all about rent and all about profit but they could not, understandably, totalize these fragmented phenomena into a theory of surplus value. In literary scholarship and criticism, a positivism which easily degenerated into that "petty antiquarianism," which thrives on the minutest details of the lives and quarrels of authors reigned in the university while impressionistic essay writing flourished outside. Two things united the scholar and the man of letters: a passion for "facts" and a contempt for systems.

Dickens' Mr. Gradgrind, that satirical bumpkin who howled for facts, was not misconceived. Thus Dr. Johnson, one of the more illustrious men of letters this tradition threw up, could not hide his disdain for systems and system-mongers: "Hurd, Sir, is one of a set of men who account for everything systematically."¹³

By the beginning of this century, Garrod could declare that "criticism is best which is written with the least worry of head, the least disposition to break the heart over ultimate questions."¹⁴ This is the critical problematic we inherited in Anglo-Saxon Africa and in contrast to the rigour of Germanistik,

it sounds frankly philistine. The implications for our humanities cannot but be serious. For example, it makes it certain that while the historian can chronicle the empirical facts of colonialism, the deeper manifestations, indeed, the reality behind the ideological smokescreen is denied his adopted conceptual instrument. It is an intellectual fix whose spinning catch 22 logic makes one come away profoundly paranoid. Thus the literary scholar, unable to apprehend the synchronic, the diachronic, indeed, the totality of African literature, assembles his facts on the vague belief, to appropriate Wellek again, "that all these bricks will sometimes be used in a great pyramid of learning." On closer scrutiny, such facts turn out to be empiricist hypostasis of reality. Literary criticism is mediated by more crucial but analogous factors. It is to this we must now turn.

II

New Criticism in Africa

Richards' critical revolution, which is better known as the triumph of practical criticism, arose out of an acute disenchantment with the impressionism of belles-lettres and the sickly positivism of the scholars. Yet like all idealist rebellion, it was to remain securely locked within the problematic of its adversary. Richards' turning to poetry and his advocacy of the close reading of individual texts was a romantic retreat from capitalism and a fulfillment of Arnold's equally romantic prophecy. Richards' method of intense analysis of the text was a crucial advancement of literary criticism, for it took the business out of the hands of amateurs and gave it to professionals. Yet precisely because such a method all too easily lends itself to impressionism, self-gratifying fantasies, and sheer critical fraudulence now reinforced by a positivistic bias of methodology!, Richards merely kicked the old ghosts upstairs without expelling them. The man of letters did not die after all, he merely went to the university. Yet, to compare the achievement of some of the nineteenth century men of letters with that of some of Richards' successors is to discover the difference between eclectic learning and irresponsible whimsicality. The ultimate net-effect of Richards' "autonomy of the text" methodology is that empiricist fragmentation of the totality of literary production into the textual moment, a tactic which in its sheer subjectivity and asociality paradoxically sanctions the very reality which has filled Richards with revulsion. This collapse into the solace of language and the artiness of the work of art received a charismatic boost from Eliot whose own romantic revulsion with reality has led to a paradoxical deification of art. The old-age agnosticism of an Eliot, who started out seeking order for "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history," should

not come as a surprise but as the logical culmination of that reified abstraction which holds that the artist has no personality and in which the man who suffers is different from the artist that creates. It is not hard to see why such a masochistic conception of art constitutes an ideological embracement of the same suspect reality. As Fekete acutely observes:

*But the fetish of immediacy and the acceptance of alienation reduce reality to the level of givens, and leave Eliot, and modern bourgeois theorists in general, incapable of grasping the full process of totalization involved in genuine artistic creation.*¹⁵

Thus criticism takes refuge from the "unjust" world by spinning out its own eccentricities from the work of art. In such a "bleak" world where nothing may be known, the gentleman, sarcastically observes Eagleton, takes shelter from "the vulgarity of rational argument" and "wears his art and opinion lightly."¹⁶ Or according to Steiner, since nothing is sure and opinions may be "reversed" tomorrow, what remains is "the strength or beauty" of the critic's language.¹⁷ Indeed, observes Kermode, the first requirement of the critic is a scepticism.¹⁸ Suffice it to say that these empiricist fallacies which are the legacy of Richards and Eliot turn the critic himself into a subtle accomplice of those conditions the modern artists decry.

Yet as Jameson and several other commentators have noted, the more terrifying price for this fragmenting critical practice is exacted not on the theoretical level, which is indicting enough, but on the very level of the analysis of individual texts which it claims to be its speciality. We cannot touch this without co-opting its African variant.

African literary criticism since its inception has travelled roughly the same road as its major trading partner and patron, Anglo-Saxon criticism, and it has arrived at roughly the same impasse. Analytical students of history would not be surprised at this development.

The origins of African literary criticism were anthropological. This is understandable because so was its literature. It should be expected that the children of the victims of slavery, traumatically transplanted from the natural environment and plunged into misery and desolation, would one day ask questions and pose issues often as radically and uncompromisingly as the poems of Cesaire. One does not need to be a vulgar historicist to discern that the whole upsurge of negritude in all its mutations--"pacifist," "militant," "jeremiad," "tigritudinous," etc.--was inevitable. Thus it can be seen why the

beginning of African literature should be riddled with turbulent emotions. As Onoge points out:

*. . . . Modern African literature was conditioned sociologically by the colonial milieu. The artists were fully aware of this fact. From the very beginning the literature could not but be reactive! It was a literature using the "weapons of words," for the legitimate defense of the African heritage. The consciousness which dominated this reaction was one of African affirmation.*¹⁹

As this literature was sociologically conditioned, so was its criticism; as the works of this period surged forth in passion and indignation, so did the critical back-up. According to Izevbaye:

*The earliest critical attitude towards contemporary African literature seems to have been strongly influenced by non-literary interests, the most important of which was nationalism or the desire to create an indigenous tradition that would be more or less independent of foreign models . . . literary theory and criticism was the means of achieving this independence.*²⁰

It must be conceded that under such circumstances, attention cannot be paid to the specific problematics of African literature. Indeed, many of these "critics" came from other disciplines and the only thing they all had in common was a burning nationalism. Thus one of them, while ostentatiously claiming not to have read Tutuola's works, nevertheless summarily dismissed them for not being of "a high literary standard."²¹ This is the African equivalent of impressionist "criticism."

It is in this sense that one must regard the movement which coalesced around the venerable figure of Eldred Jones in the early sixties as constituting a critical revolution in African literature. Independence and the disengagement of colonialism meant more liberal facilities for education and the establishment of more institutions of higher learning. This also meant the training of young men in the rigorous discipline of professional criticism, this meant a new ethos and new standards. Criticism has moved to the university. Eldred Jones wrote its classic manifesto:

It is the task of African universities to stimulate a discerning readership for African literature. . . . The specialist students of

*literature have the additional task of applying their minds in a special way to the critical examination of African literature in order to reveal the qualities of individual works and help to establish general critical standards.*²²

Nothing could have been more germane to the particular needs of African literature at this time than this declaration. Jones' editorial for the first issue of his journal, *African Literature Today*, which has since become the standard text-explication forum for African literature, even puts it better and more patriotically:

*The Editor wishes to encourage close analysis of individual works or the output of particular writers or groups of writers. Publishers publish what they decide to publish for a variety of reasons, not least among them the reason that they are in business to make money. Readers also read books with a variety of expectations, not the least being their wish to be entertained. It is the critic's business to read discerningly and demonstrate the qualities of a work*²³

In retrospect, if Jones, who originally trained as a Shakespearean scholar, left the ship in time before Weimann's spirited submarine assault, it is obvious that he took with him the strains of Richards' new methodology.²⁴ For a "young" literature which derived many of its tenets, especially its linguistic medium from its colonial masters, this would not have greatly mattered except that the methodology is bound to become frankly incompetent as the new literature begins organically defining its own momentum.

Jones represents perhaps the best moment of the new criticism in Africa. His urbane intelligence, sensitivity, humility, and affectionate reverence for the work of art and the artist enable the critic to become a creator in his own right. In order to plumb the "depth" of the work, the critic surrenders his being in an almost mystical quest. Jones' critical ascesis is remarkably similar to the method of the Geneva empiricist school where the critic must:

*Enter into a state of profound receptivity in which his being becomes extremely sensitivised. This preliminary state must yield bit by bit into a penetrating sympathy.*²⁵

But as we have seen, neither Richards nor Eliot themselves came out of this underground citadel of the work of art unscathed. Izevbaye accurately describes Jones' critical method as mainly a "complete reliance on the power of intuition and analysis to tease meaning from the words on the page without any reference to the author's intention."²⁶ Yet if this worked quite well with the early Soyinka, the increasing complexity of historical manifestations--which is reflected in the increasing complexity of Soyinka's work--has left Jones' intuitionist tools inadequate for the job. Jones' discomfiture began to show on Soyinka's post-1965 art. Thus, a remarkably inconclusive treatise on *Madmen and Specialists* closes this way:

*This technique of free association makes the range of suggestion of which the play is capable boundless. It is certainly a significant work exploiting new techniques, but consistent in its themes with Soyinka's earlier work.*²⁷

We are not to search very far for the rationale--and alibi--of this capitulation. On page 152, in a section preternaturally titled "Requiem," Jones flatly declares:

*Poetry has not yet saved the world, and it is unlikely that even if Soyinka's poetry were to be widely read, it would save Africa.*²⁸

Despite the incoming qualification, one can see that this is indeed a supreme moment of agony for Jones' poetics, for if poetry happens to be inadequate, of what value then is the simulacrum--of a simulacrum--its criticism? We need only to remember the Dakar Conference Manifesto we have quoted earlier to see how even on the level of individual texts, Jones' promise has not been kept. Ironically enough, it is to a pre-Richards and pre-Eliot problematic which Jones finally succumbs. Indeed, we need to refresh our mind with Eliot's final fling to see the astonishing similarity of tone with Jones'. Says Eliot:

*And for what these causes were, we may dig and dig until we get to a depth at which words and concepts fail us.*²⁹

Thus, it is not only on the level of the analysis of individual texts and theoretical enquiry that the empiricist fetishization of the totality of art into textual manifestations wrecks havoc, it also plays a crucial part in that paradoxical moral abdication so characteristic of many a modern critic.

This lesson is not always borne in mind by most of Jones' successors, but to the degree that much of what is valuable in

African literature is now posed in an "antagonistic" spirit, we are witnessing very grave misreadings of individual texts which warrant urgent critical intervention.

Thus, Izevbye, who appears to be the most articulate, albeit reluctant successor to Jones' mantle, declares:

*The attempt at an objective evaluation belongs to the new university-based criticism. The older affective theory is at the heart of Negritude aesthetics which rejects "objectivity" and disinterestedness.*³⁰

And later:

*The supremacy of academic analysis however lies in its precision and the persuasive logic of its conclusions.*³¹

Izevbye is too refined a critic to be easily caught by an ideological lie detector. Indeed, not only does he concede that this method is not foolproof, he also casts side glances at what criticism must do "to find acceptance in an age of science." Yet his own critical practice has shown an overwhelming preference for the non-foolproof method. Perhaps the dictum "trust the tale and not the teller" is eminently applicable to the critic as well. Witness Izevbye's admonishment of Moore over the latter's bewilderment at Demoke's final speech in *A Dance of the Forest*. The speech, Izevbye insists, can be "deciphered."³² Now we know what empiricist criticism must do to find acceptance in an age of science: It must become positivistic! We are back to the problematic of Richards' methodology. But after Marx, after Freud's discovery of the manifest and latent structure of dreams, after Saussure's *Langue and Parole*, how can anyone ever think of extracting a primatal meaning from a text without first dissolving it into the literary and extra-literary totality of its background?

This art of "deciphering" can be seen in almost all of Izevbye's critical enterprises. According to him:

*One of the functions of criticism is thus to encourage the right reading of literature as a weapon against indoctrination and the habituating of people to a certain mode of behaviour through propaganda, as Soyinka has pointed out.*³³

Fair enough--at least for the light it throws on the doctrine against "indoctrination" in literature, except that

Izevbye immediately throws one of those typical catches:

But we must stop at this point. The next step may lead to the false position that our salvation lies in the right reading of literature.

One's patience is easily exasperated by this scholarly hedging or has Izevbye not (two pages earlier) categorised Jones' sensational disclosure as "a rejection of the usual faith in the practical value of the arts in Africa"? Indeed, if our salvation does not lie in the right reading of literature, may we humbly enquire as to what particular "reading" furnishes the evidence that *Why Are We So Blest* "seems to present autobiographical matter in a raw and untransformed state," or that in this novel "Armah bends his gifts to non-literary ends"³⁵--as Izevbye would declare on a different occasion. How, then, was Izevbye able to reach the conclusion that novels like *Petals of Blood* and *Two Thousand Seasons* which "seek a close identification of politics and the novel" are weakened because "the actual machinery and strategy of government and politics" belong "centrally to the realm of politics rather than of art"?³⁶ Since in the Eliotsian paradise, the artist thrives on "a continued self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality," it is not hard to see the intellectual pedigree of this abstract dichotomy; nor is its falsity obscured either.

Yet this is the very matrix of the critical tragedy we are now witnessing in Africa. While the most gifted, the most concerned artists on the continent are dismissed by Western ideologists as racists and naive ideologues, the same cries are paradoxically echoed by the critical establishment in Africa. Volumes 10 and 11 of *African Literature Today* bear eloquent testimony to this. Such concerns are normally subsumed under the rubric of that fraudulent abstraction known as "liberal humanism." That African critics all too easily fall into this ideological ploy serves to underscore the extent of that institutionalised amnesia from which a genuine African critical practice must wrench itself. The exchange of humanity for a glib humanism either consciously, or as a result of the Hegelian "cunning of reason" in which the individual is a blindfolded bearer, has become one of the profound ideological manoeuvres of the twentieth century, and since such strategies thrive on the total obliteration of the real man, it is not hard to see why they serve to perpetuate man's inhumanity to man.

Yet this is by no means to suggest that Armah's later works or *Petals of Blood* are without problems, but such problems cannot be worked out without taking into consideration the totality of their enabling circumstances, without inserting the individual case history of an author, with its unique neuroses and

existential vagaries into the synchrony of the societal case history. That this cannot be done while maintaining an abstract autonomy of the text is obvious. That this notion is a crippling dogma is all the more obvious. Autonomy of the text must be declared a dead theology in African critical practice. But not only must the weaknesses of this approach be exposed, some of the idealist generalisations that breed its critical canons must also be subjected to scrutiny. Thus Izevbaye declares:

*Since colonialism has imposed a similar pattern of linguistic relationships and a common political experience on African societies, the theme of colonialism has provided a compulsive point of view for many critics.*³⁷

All well and good, fixation on colonialism should be roundly condemned. But we happen to know that colonialism did not exactly impose a similar pattern of linguistic relationships and a common political experience on African societies. This observation is not even borne out in Nigeria where this writer and Izevbaye happen to come from. There, we discover that in the south the phenomenon of slavery and that complex of colonial/missionary conquest hastened the assimilation of Western culture and the creation of a new elite class; whereas in the north, the colonialists, once they had asserted their political supremacy, simply allowed the social, cultural, and religious hegemonies they met to remain and flourish. This was to engender serious social, political, educational, and religious dichotomies for modern Nigeria.³⁸ Thus in a French colony like say, Senegal--where the colonial masters, having imposed themselves, allowed the religious supremacy of Islam and then proceeded to extract a local frenchified elite--we see the conditions that fostered the specific problematic of *God's Bits of Wood*. In Kenya, where the emperor appeared half naked precisely because the ideology of "civilizing mission" had to cohabit with naked, land-grabbing rapacity, and where a people's heroic resistance only leads to a paradoxical consolidation of a local variant of this injustice, the stage is set for the emergence of an outraged conscience like Ngugi's and the hysterical passion of *Petals of Blood*. Without these rigorous differentiations, it is impossible to see how criticism even when it is exclusively formalist can proceed, for these local conditions affect not only the content but also the form of the works, making it impossible to separate them without the danger of an abstract polarity. Close reading of individual texts is thus vitiated beforehand by the static technique of the empiricist critic. Jameson observes:

For without that profound relativism and respect for the specifying of each concrete situation which characterises historical

*thinking, the categories of the New Criticism tend to solidify and are henceforth rigidly applied to every kind of text irrespective of its inner coherence.*³⁹

We have dwelt on the criticism of Jones and Izevbaye because for all their faults, they represent for us the most illustrious moment of this criticism in Africa. There have been more alarming moments.

Thus, Soyinka who has been a darling of academic empiricist criticism in the sixties suddenly became "a difficult obscurantist artist" in the seventies. There is indeed a grim but rather interesting irony in this. One would have felt that empiricist criticism, with its penchant for arcane convolutions, would have felt eminently at home in the esoteric conduit of Soyinka's later works, but the lonely integrity of these works, their paradoxically formalist refusal to "play up" to formalist chicanery suddenly confronted many critics with the spectre of bankruptcy. Thus for Derek Elders, Soyinka betrays "a desperate modishness." And Palmer declares:

*One expects of a good novelist therefore, that apart from his preoccupation with his message he should have some concern for the appropriate style and show signs of technical competence.*⁴⁰

So while Ekwensi misses a citation for lack of style, Soyinka is thrown out for his surfeit of style; and the reason for this wanton contradiction is not farfetched. For while Palmer can break through to the surface realities of *Jagua Nana* --as his indictment of Ekwensi's moral vision shows, the same assault cannot be carried out on Soyinka's dense fortress without telltale injuries. But no critic can fool history and when it finally caught up with Palmer in the form of a reassessment of Soyinka's merits as a novelist one cannot but be struck by the platitude-mongering and the singular banality of the procedure. It is not all the more surprising when sooner, Palmer observed:

*If, then the African novel is derived from Western sources, and it is not markedly different from the western novel, what argument could there be against applying to its evaluation the literary criteria that have grown up alongside the western novel?*⁴¹

If one is not terribly bothered by that lack of proper

historical perspective which denies this critic the insight that while borrowing its formal dynamic from the European novel, the African novel emerges with a distinct African sensibility which in turn dialectically seeks to mediate and further Africanise the very form of this dynamic, it is nevertheless obvious that on the level of individual text-analysis, his proposed "literary criteria" can only see an authentic African novel like say, *Two Thousand Seasons*, in terms of deficiency of plot, of characterization, of point of view, indeed, in terms of the guidelines laid down by Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*. How so utterly redundant to the real problematic of Armah's work must this kind of criticism be.

Yet insofar as such critical inanities collect as accretions around the works of art they do not illuminate, thereby impairing genuine efforts, they must be seen as part of the larger calamity. The dialectic of African literature is frozen by African criticism. This is the crisis facing us today. It is now on record that Ngugi has accused African critics of uninventively mimicking Western critical ethos.⁴² Soyinka's Inaugural address expresses analogous anxiety. Armah functions in painful silence. Indeed, when a normally sunny-tempered artist like Achebe could declare that there was a "certain fellow who was claiming that *Arrow of God* was written by his uncle,"⁴³ the exaggeration notwithstanding, all the portents of a literary catastrophe are visible in the horizon. The return to a crudely positivist source-hunting, the obsession with juvenalia, which have characterised some recent critical currents, must be seen as an inglorious regression into the problematic of nineteenth century criticism. It is an admission of paralysis in face of novel critical problems. It is the urgent task of a new African critical practice to formulate a way out of the impasse.

III

Towards an African Critical Practice

We have gone into history not only to place our crisis in proper perspective but to show that there are no eternal critical canons. All the critical turning points we have seen are responses to particular socio-historical situations. We have shown how, so far, our critical history is marked by a complete appropriation of all the virtues and flaws of Anglo-Saxon Criticism. Yet it must be conceded that while we wallow in complacency, the old critical order in the Anglo-Saxon world is under considerable assault. This can be seen in the work of Williams, Eagleton, and, above all, in the recent MacCabe affair in Cambridge. The story of why we tend to atrophy in our critical attitude is the story of that manipulated phobia for a particular ideology which was passed over to us by our colonial masters, and which we naturally took as a religion.

Yet the point must be raised that not all of Africa was under Anglo-Saxon rule. For example, it can be pointed out that there were French colonies too. This is where we begin to encounter one of those great historical paradoxes again. Despite the potential vivacity of French thought, the dogmatic empiricism of Cartesian idealism performed analogous functions for the French bourgeois class as empiricism performed in Britain. This made it certain that France's official literary criticism would be encapsulated for a long time in those dreary pedantries which serve to justify institutionalised privileges. This is the starchy tradition that literary structuralism revolted against and we need to freshen our minds with the fact that in the now famous Picard-Barthes confrontation, it was such institutionalised critical canons that Picard unsuccessfully attempted to invoke against the new "impostures."

Thus structuralism is that delayed critical revolution which Richards had carried out in England, the Formalists in Russia, and Saussure in Switzerland. That it achieved such élan and panache in France is due to a series of fortunate conjunctures: first is the anti-novel phenomenon which in its own way is a fictional obituary of the author which Barthes would later proclaim, then the natural inventiveness of the French, the intellectual charisma of Barthes, and finally the social unease generated by the May 1968 events.

Yet precisely because it was a revolt against academic tedium, structuralism inherited Richards' empiricist-formalist problematic without either the authority or the passion of Richards. Barthes' writing even at its most brilliant is characterised by a wilful hedonism, a flippancy, and a lack of higher seriousness which has made detractors to classify it as "a discourse of the child."⁴⁴ Indeed, the considerable critical achievement of structuralism is made possible because a reification of language from its material and psychological base gives it the false aura of a systematic discourse. "Where does Barthes mention the specific problems that Racine had to solve?"⁴⁵ asked an exasperated Macherey.

It is precisely this attempt to give academic respectability to a criticism which is so patently unacademic in origin, to systematize the irreverent musings and versatile constructions of a twentieth century reincarnation of the Renaissance man of letters that must be disturbing to the historically-minded. In America, where pragmatism, which has been described as the businessman's variant of empiricism, encourages anything "as long as it works," the upsurge of structuralism is understandable. In Africa, it cannot work because it has not taken the present dialectic of the African world into consideration. Indeed, to attempt to turn a critical practice which is unacademic in inspiration into the cornerstone of "Academic Criticism" in Africa

as Anozie advances, is to betray a crucial absence of historical perspective.⁴⁶ This is not the place for a comprehensive analysis of Anozie's structuralism but we may need to state that structuralism "is likely to be treated with continued suspicion in Africa" not only because of "the apathetic attitude of most African academics,"⁴⁷ as he claims, but because its momentum has not been worked out from within the socio-historical dialectic of Africa and therefore constitutes an idealist imposition.

Yet when all is said, it is still possible to sympathize with Anozie's pioneering efforts. At least his is an honest admission that something has gone wrong. At least he has managed to scuttle free of that aversion to new ideas, that ideological mass-chloroforming which has characterized Africa's intellectual system. All the great ideas of the world, all the great advancement in human thought, have been made possible by cross-fertilization and it is not hard to see why the imposition of such artificial quarantine serve to confirm us in perpetual mental servitude. Indeed, that some of these "heretic" ideas are being smuggled in to revitalize the thought-system of our erstwhile colonial masters only serve as a chilling reminder of the immensity of our predicament. Yet precisely because of such fostered hostility to novel ideas, any new critical practice in Africa will need all the sophistication and subtlety it can muster. To deny this is to escape into a gross idealism.

The emerging Marxist criticism in the main has shown neither this subtlety nor the sophistication either. Indeed, one has the suspicion that it remains securely locked within the empiricist problematic of the very criticism it seeks to supplant. Old habits die hard, and it is difficult to ascertain whether its own impressionism, fantasies, text-fetish, and positivism have not surpassed those of the parent criticism. This is not the place for an assessment of individual practitioners, but such a stringent scrutiny could hardly be postponed much further. What we are witnessing is the use of Marx's system as a privileged code: Marxism as a priesthood with devotees who cannot remember a line from the original text of the founding patriarch. Yet the more acute danger of this is the branding as "heathens" and "infidels," those who either refuse to "play ball" or those who have seen the danger of blind faith in all religious systems. That such tactics are far removed from the *real* struggle of Africa cannot be emphasised; that, in the long run, it is a strategic blunder which not only alienates potential sympathisers but also drives a divisive wedge into the progressive forces in Africa is now being demonstrated.

The paradox is that the greatest Marxian critics have been those who are not afraid of Marx. This has to be so because Marx, for all his epic innovations to the human thought, remained

very much a nineteenth century thinker, bound within the problematic of his time. He could not, for example, foresee the stabilization of capitalism, the oil factor in world economy, the transformation of some parts of the third world from passive objects of capitalism to its active subjects, etc. In effect, Marx's vision was ultimately constrained by the fact that "no individual can overleap his own age"--a decree ironically passed by Hegel, Marx's Oedipal father.

Yet because of this, human thought cannot truly progress without coming to terms with *all* the implications of Marx's system. This is the immense historical advantage of Marxist criticism in Africa, the advantage which is being frittered away by sheer crudity and incompetence.

Thus *A Man of the People* may have been written by "a functionary of the superstructure," but is it not because of this that Achebe's portrait of Odili offers unique insight into the psychology of a typical but highly individualised petit bourgeois intellectual? *The Interpreters* may have been written by an "alienated bourgeois sensibility," but just for that it becomes the most penetrating understudy of romantic intellectuals in African literature. To prematurely dismiss such works with such vulgar materialist shibboleths as "reactionary," "unprogressive," etc., is to refuse to come to terms with their internal dynamic, the totality of the conditions of their production, and hence to paradoxically checkmate art and the artists. Stalinist vulgarities are so easy to write but they are also so easy to refute.

We may need to freshen our minds with the unedifying history of such reductive criticism. In the thirties when it was beginning to flourish in Britain, it was easily routed by Leavis, whose criticism combined a close attention to the text with an equally moral and cultural, if ultimately provincial, vision. Leavis, we need to remind ourselves, was actually writing as an outsider, hounded out of Cambridge as he was by the combination of virulent mediocrities and Georgian poets he would later describe as "a solidarity of professional philistines."⁴⁸ In America, Ransom and the New Critics did not have to wait for MacCarthy to batter it into submission. It is not only political history that those who ignore are condemned to repeat.

In conclusion, it is all but inevitable that a call for an African critical practice is primarily a call for its decolonization from outmoded critical orthodoxies, whether "radical" or conservative. Those who mooted this idea in the early seventies collapsed into a formalist problematic more cavalier and dangerous than the one they sought to supplant precisely because they neither posed the correct epistemological issues nor accurately perceived the ideological substratum behind the

obvious manifestations.⁴⁹ While borrowing and developing foreign concepts to illuminate our paths, it is the express needs of Africa that must be uppermost in our mind.

This essay has sought to demonstrate not only the epistemological inadequacy of our adopted critical parameters in their totality but also the fact that literary criticism is socially and historically mediated. Because the work of art is itself mediated by a constellation of socio-historical phenomena, because the man that suffers cannot be abstracted from the mind that creates, literary criticism must itself be mediated by history and society in order to achieve profound illumination into the particular work of art and the totality of literary production.

Yet for all practical purposes we cannot proceed with this urgent task without consciously placing in proper context the merits and achievements of those rugged pioneers. To do otherwise is to encourage that return of the repressed which has proved fatal to many an intellectual revolt. For all the epistemological deficiency of their adopted critical formula, the sensitivity and sympathy which Jones displayed in his study of Soyinka and which Izevbaye exhibits in most of his work, including even his study of the early Armah, are the first requirements of the genuine critic. Whatever else they may be, these critics were the very reverse of vulgarians. In an atmosphere where most of us, their prospective successors, are prone to mindless critical brutalities on the work of art and the artist, such qualities become even more resplendent and it is paradoxically here that we may discover that their strategy of close attention to the text per se may constitute the most valid starting point for nurturing critical sensibility. Indeed, this is the one irreversible achievement of Richards. Yet insofar as such a critical mode when not harnessed to the social and historical dialectic, tends to turn the critic into a poet manqué, or worse still, tends to subjectivise his vision and thus impair those very virtues of sensitivity and sympathy, its acute limitations cannot be emphasized. Indeed, it is only when the totality of the text is reinserted into the totality of its social and historical matrix that the possibility of genuine critical practice appears. For it is then that the very sensitivity of the critic paradoxically enables him to take a brutal look at the social and historical reality and to take a firm stand. Such a combination of passion and vigour, of the poet and the logician, the artist and the scientist all co-existing in one soul, is what distinguishes the systems of the intellectual and moral giants of our epoch. It is not hard to see why such a combination in its wilful abolishment of the harrowing division of labour of the present forces us not only to think about the bliss of the past but the heroic demands of the present. It is such a sense of urgency and devotion, such

sensitivity and rigour that must characterize an African critical practice. In effect, our literary criticism must be mediated by a new negritude, a scientific but no less emotional negritude. It must become not just a passion of the mind but the mind of passion itself.

¹Rene Wellek, "The Revolt against Positivism" in *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 264.

²See, for example, Terry Eagleton, "Liberalism and Order: The Criticism of John Bayley," *New Left Review* 110 (August 1978). Also see Raymond Williams, "Crisis in English Studies," *New Left Review* 129 (October 1981).

³Guido de Ruggiero, *Modern Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1921), p. 227.

⁴Frederic Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 23-24.

⁵As quoted in Hans Mayer, "Heinrich Heine, German Ideology and Ideologists," *New German Critique*, 1, 1 (1974):89.

⁶See Georg Lukács, "An Unofficial Interview," *New Left Review* 68 (August 1971). Notes Lukács on p. 52: "The dominance of empiricism as an ideology of the bourgeoisie dates only from after 1688, but it achieved tremendous power from then on, and completely distorted the whole previous history of English philosophy and art."

⁷As quoted in John Randall, *The Career of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 43.

⁸Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1970), p. 36.

⁹As quoted in Randall, *The Career of Philosophy*.

¹⁰Althusser, *Reading Capital*, p. 57.

¹¹Randall, *The Career of Philosophy*, p. 52.

¹²As quoted in Frederic Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," *New Literary History* 11, 1 (1979):51.

¹³As quoted by Geoffrey Hartman, "Structuralism: The Anglo-American Adventure" in *Beyond Formalism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 5.

- ¹⁴As quoted in Wellek, "The Revolt against Positivism," p. 265.
- ¹⁵John Fekete, *The Critical Twilight* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 22.
- ¹⁶Eagleton, "Liberality and Order," pp. 29-40.
- ¹⁷George Steiner, "Georg Lukács and His Devil's Pact," *The Kenyon Review* 22 (Winter, 1960):4.
- ¹⁸See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 112.
- ¹⁹O. F. Onoge, "The Crisis of Consciousness in Modern African Literature: A Survey," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 8, 2 (1974):388.
- ²⁰Dan Izevbaye, "Criticism and Literature in Africa," in *Perspectives on African Literature*, ed. C. Heywood (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1971), p. 27.
- ²¹Adeagbo Akinjogbin, *West Africa*, 5 June 1954.
- ²²Eldred Jones, "Academic Problems and Critical Techniques," in *African Literature and the Universities*, ed. C. Moore (Ibadan: University Press), p. 90.
- ²³Eldred Jones, editorial preface to *African Literature Today*, 1, 1 (1968).
- ²⁴See Robert Weimann's assault on the canons of Shakespearean criticism, in his book *New Criticism* (Munich: Verlag, 1974).
- ²⁵J. Miller, "The Geneva School," in *Modern French Criticism*, ed. J. K. Simon (Chicago: University Press, 1972), p. 281.
- ²⁶Dan Izevbaye, "The State of Criticism in African Literature," *African Literature Today* 7:13.
- ²⁷Eldred Jones, *The Writing of Wole Soyinka* (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 95.
- ²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 152.
- ²⁹As quoted in Fekete, *The Critical Twilight*, p. 25.
- ³⁰Izevbaye, "The State of Criticism," pp. 8-9.

- ³¹Izevbaye, "Criticism and Literature in Africa," p. 16.
- ³²Izevbaye, "The State of Criticism," p. 15.
- ³³Ibid., p. 17.
- ³⁴Ibid.
- ³⁵Dan Izevbaye, "Issues in the Reassessment of the African Novel," *African Literature Today* 10:23.
- ³⁶Ibid., p. 24.
- ³⁷Ibid., p. 8.
- ³⁸Precisely for these reasons, we cannot apply the same static critical criteria to say, Nwana's *Omenuko* and Balewa's *Shaihu Umar*, Nigerian prose works written around the same time in the thirties. While the one could have a measure of suspense, excitement, and complexity because it was capturing the dynamic of an inherently republican community which was then even in a state of further revolutionary flux, the other would appear static and predetermined because Balewa's vision is itself severely conditioned by a powerful feudal socio-cultural structure.
- ³⁹Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 333.
- ⁴⁰Eustace Palmer, *An Introduction to the African Novel* (London: Heinemann, 1972).
- ⁴¹Eustace Palmer, "The Criticism of African Fiction: Its Nature and Function," *International Fiction Review*, 1, 2 (1974): 117.
- ⁴²See Ngugi's interview in Phaniel Egejuru, *Towards African Literary Independence: A Dialogue with Contemporary African Writers* (London: Greenwood Press, 1980), pp. 112-132.
- ⁴³Kalu Ogbaa, "An Interview with Chinua Achebe," *Research in African Literature*, 12, 1 (1981), pp. 2-3. Also see Wole Soyinka's professorial inaugural address: "The Critic and the Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies," University of Ife, October 1980.
- ⁴⁴See Todorov's obituary tribute to Barthes in *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1981). It is important to distinguish between the literary structuralism of Barthes, Derrida, the structuralist Marxism of Althusser, Macherey, the structuralist anthropologist

of Lévi-Strauss, and the structuralist psychoanalysis of Lacan. While they all tend to have an anti-historicism and anti-humanism in common, each came about under different conjunctures and has been propelled by totally different dynamics.

⁴⁵ Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 146.

⁴⁶ Sunday Anozie, *Structural Models and African Poetics: Towards a Pragmatic Theory of Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁸ F. R. Leavis, *Towards Standards of Criticism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), introductory preface.

⁴⁹ See Chinweizu et al., "Towards the Decolonization of African Literature," *Transition* 48 (1975).