

MARXIAN EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE CRITICISM OF
AFRICAN LITERATURE*

by

Adebayo Bolarin-Williams

Truth resists being projected into
the realm of knowledge.

- Walter Benjamin

Were Walter Benjamin, the great collector of golden truths, not a forbiddingly serious man, his ghost would have had a perverse pleasure at the current ideological disjunctures of the left. No post-humous revenge can be sweeter than the one being currently exacted by the ghost of Benjamin. Walter Benjamin, scorned by the right, frequently rejected by the left, was finally done in by fascism. Yet in the current mad rush by both the left and the right to come to terms with him, to appropriate him and to enlist his forlorn authority, the concrete moral lesson of his example has been largely ignored. He preferred the lonely pursuit of truth to the triteness of the ideological herd. Here for once was a great Marxian critic who combines intellectual integrity and acuity of mind with a passionate disdain for orthodoxy. Since this is an essay that will refuse to be taken in by the hypocrisy of the right as well as the cant of the far left, let the dark, brooding ghost of Walter Benjamin be its presiding deity.¹

The urgent nature of the present work, located as it is within the context of the struggle for the body and soul of Africa, does not permit easy solutions and conclusions. In other words, we shall push our thoughts to the very frontiers of thoughts, problematising thought and mundane logic in the process. Against an intransigent reality, it is only an intransigent thought-system that has a chance. Hegel has in fact put it better when he observed that "If reality is inconceivable, then we must forge concepts that are inconceivable."²

Let us therefore begin with an "inconceivable" idea and

*As a response to Mativo's article: "Criteria for the Criticism of African Literature," (see the present issue), Adebayo's topic forms a part of an on-going debate, hitherto carried out through letters between the two writers. To preserve the author's pugnacity intact, no part of this article has been changed or tampered with in any way. (Ed. K.M.)

one that negates the very title of this essay. The idea then is that Marxism is indeed not an Epistemology, at least in the basic sense of that word.³ If this declaration is scandalous enough for orthodoxy, then let its Althusserian overtones serve as a renewed blackmail on Marxian common sense. The seminal French philosopher it was he who in the sixties maintained that Marxism is not a historicism, thus precipitating an epistemological trauma for contemporary Marxism.⁴ To be sure, Althusser would later admit in self-interrogation that he was deliberately overstating the case, that following the practice of Lenin and Machiavelli, he was thinking "in extremes" as a way of disarming the enemy.⁵ Whatever one's reservations about the stalinist fatuities that Althusser's antihistoricism would lead him into, vis-à-vis his denial of man and conception of history as "a process without a subject," one cannot deny the salutary effect of his rupturing of complacency and large-breasted optimism.⁶

Yet our thesis is not an Althusserian manoeuvre. As a matter of fact, the widespread consternation caused in Marxist circles by Althusser's rebellion paradoxically serves to underscore the vulnerability of Marxism as a living body of thought as it traverses new territories without the powerful searchlight of the founding father. Marx, it must be known, viewed the problems of epistemology *per se* with an indifference that often exploded into downright disdain. But this should not be so early construed as an indictment. Rather, the problematic stance should itself be seen as being inscribed in the historical conjuncture under which Marx's thought developed and matured. By a generous historical coincidence, the two great predecessors of Marx in the German philosophical tradition were redoubtable epistemologists. Kant and Hegel rigorously addressed themselves to the problems of epistemology, i.e., the theory of the relationship between two elements of knowledge. Hegel, in an epic of totalization hitherto unknown in human thinking, tried so hard to logically account for everything under the sun that man himself -- the subject -- eventually ends up as a function of logic. Colletti is invaluable on this perplexing drama. Of Hegel's system, he declares:

Epistemology is evaded and resolved into Logic. Real mediation, i.e., the relationship being-thought (the former the conditioning element, the latter the conditioned) lapses into and is absorbed within the relationship of thought itself.⁷

The result of all this, of course, is an anthropocentric convulsion in which Hegel grasps man's self-objectification in labour and yet did not scruple about installing the Absolute Spirit -- a cranky euphemism for God -- to govern his

affairs. When Marx observed that "Hegel thus provides his logic with a political body, he does not provide us with the logic of the body politic,"⁸ he was showing a brilliant insight into the double-bind Hegel has worked himself into.

Kant, on the other hand, proceeding from very different premises, arrives at roughly the same impasse. Because, he was far more cautious, indeed far more sceptical than Hegel, Kant poses such monumental antinomies on the path of man in his journey to knowledge that the breeches of his epistemological empire collapse even before leaving his study. Thus -- to put things rather simplistically -- he posits that while man has the natural ability to think, there are limiting conditions to what he can aspire to know. According to him, the delusion in which man sees himself as thoroughly mastering reality through thought arises from the "sophistical art of giving to ignorance, and indeed to intentional sophistries, the appearance of truth, by the device of imitating the methodical thoroughness which logic prescribes, and of using its 'topic' to conceal the emptiness of its pretensions."⁹

Yet if all this leads anywhere, it is to the paralytic enslavement of man by the deficiencies of his reasoning faculty. Kant apparently was reluctant to consider knowledge as a human praxis, an Enlightenment scepticism which is paradoxically reactionary in its consequences. As Lithchem observes:

Kant represented a standing menace because his agnosticism concerning the existence of a "real world" independent of the mind seemingly opened a back door to fideism, i.e., religion.¹⁰

Thus given the immense toil of his illustrious predecessors, it was there and then historically enough for Marx to rest his case on a penetrating critique and correction of their systems. While retaining the form of Hegel's logic, Marx emptied it of its idealist content by infusing the Hegelian dialectic with the real dialectic, i.e., class struggle as the motor of history. For Kant, the philosopher's philosopher, Marx simply shifted the dialectical gear. The result is the sudden transposition of the problematic of his (Kant's) entire philosophy into a radically new terrain where its false problems are thrown into harsh relief. For if the world itself is now seen for the first time as nothing but the objectification of man's will and intelligence, then the Kantian "thing-in-itself" is itself vulnerable to labour.¹¹

In all these confrontations, Marx could barely hide his scorn and disdain for classroom epistemology especially in its tendency as evidenced by later-day Anglo-American charlatans

to degenerate into facile mental acrobatics and tedious hair-splitting. Indeed, Marx's celebrated eleventh thesis on Feuerbach that philosophers have frequently interpreted the world when the point is to change it summarises his unyielding contempt.

Yet the more subtle, indeed, the more frightening corollary of this is the tendency in some variants of contemporary Marxism to degenerate into a power pragmatism whereby real and pressing epistemological issues about botched "revolutions" and the soul of man in this era of global unease are either peremptorily liquidated or reabsorbed into the antiquated problematic of Marx's historical era. Adorno has posed it crucially when he declared that "philosophy, which seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed. The summary judgement that it had merely interpreted the world, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled it in itself becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried."¹²

Adorno's evident glee at the miscarriage of revolution is unfortunate to say the least. This pose of superior disdain, so classically Adornian has been scornfully characterized by Lukács as the logical culmination of Adorno's residency in the "Grand Hotel Abyss," where the soul of the universe can be contemplated after exquisite wine and five-star dinner.¹³ Yet for all that, no one watching the excess of seal and vulgar optimism that have been emblematic of recent currents in Marxism would deny the overall thrust of Adorno's indictment.

The long and short of this is that Marxism, has come to a critical cross-roads at which it will have to choose between becoming a new theology or an epistemology of praxis. But Marx's very spirit will violently resist the former. For while Marx, like Luther, shattered the faith in authority, he did not, like Luther, replace this with the authority of faith. Marx cannot remove the bonds of outer religiosity only to replace this with the bondage of inner religiosity. The choice then is very clear. Marxism cannot afford to become a new religion. Its classical momentum as the mediator of the subject-object dialectic must be regained. Needless then to add that this can never be synonymous with a return to epistemology as the tedious trivialities of hired scholars but an epistemology in the midst of hand to hand combat.

Criticism does have an important if not supreme role to play in the new venture. For part of the late capitalist strategy of containment is the remorseless anaesthetization of philosophy, whether as seen in McLuhanite trifles or Sir Karl Popper's ecstatic worship of science, whereby philosophy itself becomes an instrument of reification.¹⁴ It is then the

urgent task of criticism to forcibly occupy the position evacuated by philosophy. In Africa where the Hegelian owl of Minerva has even failed to arrive after the events, the role of criticism as the dialectical mediator between the necessarily partial and incomplete symbolization of the Real¹⁵ by artists and the grim and sordid realities of our existence becomes doubly crucial. It is to the working out of the terms of reference of such a scheme, especially as seen in the conflict between "Marxian" ideals and the recalcitrant reality of the African condition that we must now turn.

II

Lest we forget, the occasion for all these pyrotechnics is a response by Kyalo Mativo to an article by this writer in an earlier edition of Ufahamu.¹⁶ Since the said piece was provocative -- and deliberately so -- it would have been a sad commentary on the level of critical debate in Africa if nobody had picked up the gauntlet. Let me then express my rapture at the prospects of sharing the ring with a worthy gladiator -- Kyalo Mativo.

Like all genuine intellectual encounters, the present one is not without its salutary ironies. Thus it may sound ironical to assert that in this writer's development to date, Mativo's writings have served as a kind of dialectical inspiration. In several acerbic but nevertheless illuminating pieces, Mativo has heroically tried to grab the socio-political impasse of contemporary Africa by the horn.¹⁷ Indeed, it is symptomatic of this impasse that some of the more acute minds that Africa can boast of are operating not only from outside the continent but from outside the so-called university system itself. However grave the professional risks, the only honour those of us who are in and dissatisfied can do to people like Mativo is to keep on exposing the bulk of what constitutes contemporary literary criticism in Africa as the monumental farce it is.

Yet having paid our dues, we may preliminarily observe that a basic lack of delicacy or what we may propose as an ideological tone-deafness afflicts all of Mativo's critical endeavours. The symptoms are all there and it hardly matters whether the one that first catches attention is the apocalyptic self-righteousness or Mativo's constant rush for the apodictic or the downright lapses of taste. Yet one would hardly have been bothered if the price for this lacuna remains exactable on the level of theoretical proficiency but for the fact that one can only change a reality whose intricacies have been thoroughly mastered. Thus, by a cruel irony, the logical consequence of Mativo's theoretical clangers is precisely the postponement of the transformation of that reality into his ideological ideal. But since the transformation of that reali-

ty (the contemporary African condition) is not the exclusive preserve of one sect however strident, it follows that Mativo cannot expect to be let off the hook lightly.

We are not therefore unduly surprised that Mativo conveniently ignores the fact that much of what goes on in our article is a basically historical-materialist examination of the critical situation in Africa. Not unexpectedly, we touched raw nerves when we expressed strong reservations about much of what goes on in the name of Marxist criticism in Africa today. As far as Mativo is concerned, our opening analysis is nothing more than a feint, or to put in his own words, "a camouflage for the real attack: Marxist criticism."¹⁸ We will not, à la Raymond Williams, ward off the blows of crass orthodoxy by observing that if one is not in a church one does not bother about what constitutes a heresy.¹⁹ We believe that this is a gentleman's shy distaste for combat. In a necessarily agonistic calling like contemporary criticism, this position is paradoxical and pathetic to say the least. We are for the demolition of all Marxist houses of worship and of the opinion that this cannot be carried out by taking pot-shots from outside but by carrying the battle to the citadels and the sanctuaries. Whether one is a member or a marauder then becomes an academic exercise. Let us therefore assure our friend that the debate has long passed the stage when any attempt to examine the credentials of professed Marxists can be answered with imprecations.

Be that as it may, one is willing to concede that Mativo's willful misreading of our essay may be part of his overall battle strategy. But since what is at stake here is the soul of a continent, it can hardly afford the chicanes of debating societies.

We shall therefore pass over in pained silence the Heideggerian fanfaronade which informs Mativo's opening concern with "establishing" criteria. However, what we cannot pass over is his assertion that "the main point" of our article is that "the epistemological approach to the criticism of African literature has so far failed owing to the inappropriate nature of its means of expression."²⁰

Let us again leave the malicious contradiction and confusion evident in this declaration. Yet only the most blatant of ideological closures could prevent anybody from seeing that the very preoccupation of the said piece is an attempt at unravelling the epistemological deficiencies of the current parameters of African literary criticism. Given the nature of the first part of this essay, our conviction that a rigorous attention to epistemology is crucial not only to modern criticism but to modern political praxis could not have been better demonstrated. Eagleton couldn't have put it better when he de-

clares: "The most fundamental issues in modern literary theory are on the whole epistemological ones ... It is to this root that many questions of meaning and value, intention and effect may be unravelled."²¹

But having said that, we find it necessary to restate our unqualified support for Mativo's thesis that "it is in the political and economic debris of our society that we are to find the criteria for the criticism of African literature."²² Indeed, to ignore the anguished cries of such works as Remember Ruben and Petals of Blood to concentrate on their formal properties is for criticism to become an accomplice of the realities the artists decry. Whatever the academic merits of such obsession with formal properties, it is certainly not of primal value in terms of the struggle for the delivery of Africa. Of course it might be objected that criticism is beyond and above all "isms", yet as Raymond Williams recently pointed out, there is just one "ism" that such self-righteous contentions chose to ignore: criticism!²³

But to reject the overall ideological thrust of rival epistemologies is not to recognize that certain aspects of them can be salvaged, purged and incorporated into the framework of a more totalizing epistemology. The refusal to recognize this crucial factor by certain Marxist purists while commendable for its wary distrust of the potential slide into the most wanton eclecticism is fraught with ideological perils precisely because it is predicated on a mystical faith in the infallibility of Marxism.

Thus contrary to Mativo's assertion, what we reject is not the empirical procedure but empiricism's ideological duplicity. Indeed, prior to its historical hijacking by the triumphant bourgeoisie, empiricism played a progressive role in human development. It encouraged a remorseless attention to details and a healthy respect for facts. As Thompson has noted, it is impossible to conceive how the Industrial Revolution and the revolution of Darwin could have taken place without such thorough attention to details.²⁴ Several authorities have noted that a rigorous attention to grand facts constituted part of Marx's own intellectual strength. Zeleny actually concludes that Marxism is "a higher empiricism";²⁵ while Lefebvre unkindly dismisses Marx's system as an empiricism without the dialectic.²⁶ It emerges here that what is criminal about empiricism is not the attention to facts or devotion to details but the fraudulent manoeuvre in which over the ages bourgeois ideologues turned this initial epistemological gesture into a fetishism of fact and the subjugation of reality to the level of the immediately given. So it is that it was enough for bourgeois theorists to point at the tall buildings, the Industrial Revolution, the pomp and pageantry of European thrones, the hypno-

tic glitter of state occasions to convince the world that everything was okay as such. What does it matter if the largest stone in the array of diamonds that bedazzle the Hanoverian throne came as a spoil of imperialist plunder in India?

Yet the view on the obverse of the coin is equally terrifying. From the fetish of facts we behold in terror what we propose as the fear of facts. This often leads many Marxist theorists to ignore as the starting point of their theoretical disquisitions not only the facticity of a problematic but the grand facts of the twentieth century condition. Paradoxically enough, the fetish of facts and the fear of facts are both epistemological kins of empiricism: the one because it encourages a philistine enthronement of facts on its way to the enslavement of knowledge; the other because it encourages a philistine dethronement of facts in its passage to the enslavement of knowledge. In his now celebrated confrontation with Althusser, E.P. Thompson poses the issue with admirable clarity when he observes that "this kind of idealism, since it prohibits any actual empirical engagement with social reality, is delivered, bound and gagged into the hands of the most vulgar empiricism. That is, since it cannot know the world, the world must be assumed in its premises."²⁷

It is precisely this variant of empiricism that a Marxist theorist of Mativo's calibre often succumbs to especially in his abysmally wrong-headed critique of Soyinka's works.²⁸ Thus it may be true enough that "when craftsmanship is not at the service of great content it is a fraud,"²⁹ yet further open research may expose the arrant superficiality of this "Marxist" dogma for what it is. We may then discover why the content of such great "contents" which by courtesy of Socialist Realism - we now know include the domestication of steel in Russia and some of comrade Zhdanov's more inane babblings often go beyond the phrasing and the specific dynamic whereby the phrasing of most of Soyinka's works appear to go beyond their content.

It may even be truer that the style of Madmen and Specialists is "an example of the most colourful juvenile ostentation in meaningless words,"³⁰ as Mativo contends, yet is it impossible that in a literary world in which the work of art itself is subject to increasing commodification, in which the paranoia of the class war has made the traditional virtues of clarity and simplicity the cornerstone of a renewed bourgeois offensive on sensibility and taste, Soyinka's stylistic density is itself a conduct of intransigence? Of course, questions may then legitimately be asked about readership and relevance but need we be reminded that it is precisely because of their elegance and clarity that Achebe's outstanding novels entered into a historic complicity with the mundane imbecilities of the African critical ruling class in the sixties? Indeed, the

continuing resistance of Soyinka's works to the cajoles and chicanery of bourgeois criticism discredits its modus operandi and serves as a check to its hegemonic designs in Africa. If Soyinka is a bourgeois artist then he is, like Baudelaire; a secret agent to his class.

It seems to us that part of the task imposed on a genuine Marxian aesthetics by so problematic a writer as Soyinka is the location of that terrain in which we have elsewhere proposed as the logic of defamiliarization in Soyinka's work can be unravelled.³¹ It is only after this that questions as to the precise status of Soyinka's oeuvre within the context of Africa's political and economic struggle may be broached. Our insistence is that the answer to that question cannot be a priority but can only be arrived at the end of an arduous critical labour. Such a theoretical regimen demands much more rigour, patience and humility than most of us are willing to part with.

Thus it is not only that for a Marxist theorist Mativo is not materialist enough given his insufficient attention to the materialities of literary production. Nor is it just that for a historical materialist he has given scant attention to the crucial dislocations attendant upon the historical context out of which a particular writer and a particular work of art emerge. More dangerous than all of these is the fact that Mativo's criticism to date begins and ends within the textual moment. Here then, in this paradoxical religious awe for the text, Mativo's criticism rushes headlong into the mainstream of the more disturbing manifestations of bourgeois criticism, whether as seen in Richard's "practical criticism," Emponian indeterminacies, the New Criticism, Derridean deconstruction, DeManian aporia and countless more alarming variants now fashionable in America.³²

It is here then that Althusser's seminal insight into the dynamics of uneven development within a structural totality becomes epistemologically suggestive for an African Marxian criticism.³³ Despite Althusser's childish horror for history, the diachronic import of his concept may enable us to perceive why there is a preponderance of dramatists among the Yoruba, or why praise poetry is a mandatory genre for a warlike ethnic group and why, rather than being due to poor craftsmanship, the talents of an Equiano and a Casely-Hayford may be more historically predisposed towards the autobiographical and biographical subgenres respectively. The synchronic dimension illuminates such contradictory moments within the same structure which might explain why the problematic of say Arrow of God could not have been fostered on another African ethnic group which as at that particular historical time had perfected a system for syncretizing invading religions. Equally, we may begin to understand why the byzantine network of gods and religions which was an ideological necessity given the complex

structure of the old Yoruba state often exerts a capricious terror on most of her contemporary artists. The lingering efficacy of these ideological apparati of the old Yoruba state and the necessity for any serious artist to come to terms with them may explain why Soyinka often becomes manipulated by his own mythical manipulations. Yet within this same totality we may perceive why the conceptual frameworks of Petals of Blood is inconceivable without a peasantry radicalized by several centuries of violent confrontation with diverse land-grabbing marauders. Across the equator, it may no longer be a mystery why Odili Achebe's petit-bourgeois hero chooses the parliamentary road, the road of compromise and "concensus", of independence on a platter of gold to carry out his "revolution". He had all the weight of tradition solidly behind him.

The enormity of the critical sophistication and subtlety required in pursuing these preliminary sketches to a satisfactory conclusion is daunting to say the least. The present essay can only content itself with these token twitches. But one thing that should be clear from all this is the dangerous consequence for that brand of criticism which conflates differing historical epochs of Africa in order to deliver magisterial judgement on their works of art. By the same token, it will be quite perilous for any critic to collapse the different socio-political levels within the African totality without first assigning to each level "a peculiar time, relatively autonomous, and hence relatively independent, even in its dependence, of the 'times' of the other levels."³⁴

We will leave Empiricism here but not Epistemology and certainly not our dear friend, Kyalo Mativo. It may certainly be the pressures of the revolutionary struggle which force him, after some dangerously brief sketches, to conclude that Empiricism, Positivism, Structuralism and Impressionism as "various categories of artistic expression are but subtle variants of one and the same thing, differing only in their variegated magnitude of exhibitionism."³⁵ Since Mativo has accused us of "complacency of ignorance" and "twentieth century illiteracy," among other things, the only charitable thing we can do is to leave the case-file open for interested readers. Yet we will permit ourselves the luxury of the observation that Mativo appears to have pride of place among intellectuals who believe that the tracing of the intellectual pedigree of a concept is synonymous with an explanation of its contemporary potency. Yet again, is it any wonder that Mativo's genealogical analysis of these epistemological criteria is grossly suspect?

Thus Mativo could claim that Lenin thoroughly "routed" "Empirio-Criticism" -- a variant of positivism, in his book Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. Let us say right away that our admiration for Lenin's brilliant insights into the problem-

atic of imperialism and above all his revolutionary genius notwithstanding, we are not deceived as to the real strength of his philosophic endeavours. Except for the backhanded means by which a successful Revolution can rout and put philosophy to flight, we are not sure of the persuasive forte of Lenin's book in a purely theoretical sense. Mativo could well have borrowed a leaf from Althusser, another Marxist who shares a mystical awe for Lenin. Addressing a conference of sceptical compeers in Paris, Althusser, apparently tongue in cheek, told his colleagues that it was because Lenin did not philosophize their kind of philosophy that they have held Materialism and Empirio-Criticism in sublime disdain over the ages.³⁶ Or he may choose to learn from Brecht, the great Marxist dramatist who after being advised by a friend not to read the book if he wants to retain his respect for Lenin, reportedly snapped: "If it is worth Lenin's while to write it, it must be worthy my time to read it."³⁷

However, the more interesting epistemological paradox is the complicity of Lenin himself together with the Second International in the naturalization of a stubborn strain of positivism within the Marxist tradition. It is therefore not surprising that the theoretical prognostications of an orthodox Marxist like Mativo suffer from "positivities" such as the impending death of capitalism and the imminent rise of a world commune of socialism. Thus when we point at the resilience of capitalism and the inability of Marx himself to foresee certain crucial developments, it is not because we are "capitalist roader" or a poor man's Raymond Aron but because we recognise the limitations that death -- one of the more elusive phenomena for Marxism -- places on a historical individual's intellectual labours. Of course, no one in his right mind can pray for the good health of capitalism. The implication of the bewildering resilience of this horrendous monster which daily snaps up thousands of innocent souls in its iron belly is that it is not only the living who are not safe but the dead as well. Yet the noble service that theoretical praxis can perform for the dead of Asia, the forgotten of America and the millions who have gone down in unmarked graves in Africa is not to unconsciously legitimize their destruction by becoming mystics of teleology but to examine more critically the subtle dynamics of bourgeois encirclement in the enactment of these unparalleled tragedies. Teleology may then be seen for what is: the false consciousness of capitalist ideology.

The corollary of all these is that we reject in toto the crudely organicist metaphor Mativo employs when he describes Africa as a baby learning to walk within the world-historical process. This nakedly teleological assertion while being superficially true also makes a falsehood and a terrible insult on the African dead and living. History for us, is, in the

last instance, a blank text which suffers continuous retextualization from a dialectical interplay of the strong and those with the will to power on one hand and societies that have been placed in advantageous positions often by sheer accidents of history on the other. What this means, in plain language is that there is no primate chart which has premapped the journey of man through history to the contemporary impasse and beyond. We will nuance this position only by conceding that the logic of certain earlier formations might have triggered off a chain of reaction which blocked off certain possibilities for human development, but this is not synonymous with that expressive causality which sees a preordained necessity in the evolution from tribal groups to feudalism and onwards to capitalism. Let us put things concretely. Assuming that there is indeed something in the logic of feudalism which virtually guaranteed its maturation into some form of capitalism, then there is absolutely nothing to show a divine necessity in the particular capitalist vision the West has imposed on the rest of us.

Yet in rejecting teleology, we will not go as far as Levi-Strauss who glumly insists that "the world began without the human race and will end without it."³⁸ Neither will we succumb to the elegant pessimism of the New Philosophers of France who maintain that the problems of the contemporary world must be traced to paradigm patriarchs and tyrants of totalization such as Hegel, Nietzsche and Marx. Be that as it may, it seems to us that some of these frenzied assaults can only be deflected if the eschatological temperament which led Marx to some of his more unfortunate geneticist formulations are placed in proper theoretical perspective. Despite valiant efforts to free himself of the evolutionist framework, Marx continually backslid into the bourgeois quagmire. This itself is an indication of the corrosive influence of bourgeois-capitalist worldview on the master himself.

Thus when he declared that "the human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape,"³⁹ Marx had merely restructured the evolutionist problematic without having escaped its epistemological double-bind. Eagleton shrewdly observes:

In his effort to theorize historical continuities, Marx finds the evolutionist problematic closest to hand, but it is clear that it will not do. For you do not escape a naively unilinear historicism merely by reversing its direction. . . .⁴⁰

Any wonder then that like Marx's ape, Mativo's African baby is "live" enough. But let us not add insult to injury. History is not a human organism. A historical "baby" will surely grow, not to become a known adult but a unique biologi-

cal entity. To think otherwise is to be complicit with the bourgeois logic of historical development. More dangerous still is that this type of thinking, whatever its revolutionary pageantry, encourages indolence and paralysis of the will insofar as "growth" is preordained. When the Portuguese adventurers arrived in the Kongo Kingdom around present day Angola at the end of the fifteenth century, they did not meet a "baby" but a political organization vastly superior to the one they left behind at home. Between then and the beginning of this century, the Europeans have acquired enough discipline, knowledge and power to impose their vision and version of history on the rest of the world.⁴¹ Yet paradoxically enough, this ascendancy was first made possible because Europe, being underdeveloped within the context of feudalism was able to transcend the contradictions of feudalism more rapidly than the more established and hence more impregnable centres of feudalism. It is any wonder then that in our present age, it is the marginal fringes such as Tsarist Russia, China and the Third World where the forces of capitalist production were/are least developed that are offering rescue operation to us, the marooned captives of capitalist shipwreck.⁴² With the weight of history behind us, is it too much of an idealist regression to speculate that this rescue operation will ultimately result not only in the outflanking of Europe and America but in their antiquation?

The lessons for Africa should be clear enough. That such lessons also coincide with the fundamental tenets of Marxism can no longer be denied. The eternal scandal of Marx's discovery that it is being that determines consciousness is that for the first time we are privileged to know that the slave is the master minus opportunity. This profound secularization of human relationship makes nonsense of such claims as "natural" superiority and "divine" lineage.

It can now be seen why the notion of linear growth, so powerful and handy in the thematization of the collective destiny of mankind can at the same time be enlisted in a backhanded revalidation of the status quo. This is because its partisans all too often disregard the radical discontinuities which may attend the transition from one historical epoch to another. Against the vulgar historicism evident in this line of approach, structuralism comes in as an implacable foe. Whatever its current degeneration, here then is the revolutionary impetus of structuralism which a Marxist criticism ignores at its own risk. Since this is an essay which derives its primary inspiration from literary theory, it is only befitting that its theoretical skirmishes should conclude on the terrain of structuralism. Thus whether seen in Saussure's polemical repudiation of the diachronic, in Althusser's strident antihistoricism, in Derrida's cry against the logocentric

tyranny of Western discourse, in Barthes' wilful disobedience of the historicity of a text and in Levi-Strauss dechronologizing of history as seen via Western parameters we find in all structuralist discourses a concerted effort to subvert and rupture history and authority.

Marx himself might have anticipated the coming threat to his authority in the guise of Levi-Strauss and structuralist anthropology when he emphatically declared that "all mythology overcomes and dominates and shapes the forces of nature in and through the imagination, hence it disappears as soon as man gains mastery over the forces of nature."⁴³

The linear historicity and evolutionist problematic are again glamorously evident in this passage. Marx's thesis is that man progresses via the dark recesses of mythology to science and civilization. Levi-Strauss appears to have struck a deliberately discordant note. In his monumental study of Amerindians, Levi-Strauss claims to have discovered within our global totality some tribal groups which despite Newton and Einstein apprehend and make sense of reality through a complex network of mythology and are none the worse for it. To be sure, Levi-Strauss has been rebuked for his unsystematic sniggles at Marx, and even the most casual observer would detect a romantic worship of alternative "life-styles" in his work.⁴⁴ Yet against Marx's overly scientific notion of human development, nothing could have served as a more salutary check. Indeed, in his stubborn notion of science as the deliverer of man, Marx was again backsliding into a paradoxical bourgeois world view, the world view of Industrial Revolution, of the brave new world of Machine. For whatever its other achievements, nothing has served more to inculcate those virtues of conformism and complacency so crucial to bourgeois hegemony than the "certainties" of modern science. Thus the role of science in the reification, regimentation and instrumentalization of modern life can no longer be ignored. Here then the Kantian thing-in-itself which we thought Marx liquidated once and for all begins to loom large again and the old man of Kroneberg seems poised for a sweet revenge. Marx's misplaced confidence in the ability of man to use science for his own benefit has suddenly thrown up excruciating antinomies for the mind. Yet Kant does not have the last laugh precisely because his own reservations about human knowledge stems from an enlightenment awe and respect for the certainties of science which rejoins the crassest of empiricist visions.⁴⁵

If all these teach literary theory and criticism anything, it is that they can no longer in the name of science and civilization dismiss out of hand monuments which surface from the past and which may yet revitalize the present. Therefore authors who make a reconstruction of those ancient evenings

their preoccupation can no longer be peremptorily dismissed as irrelevant and reactionary. Thanks to the radically ineffectual attempt by the colonialists to culturally totalize Africa, we find on the continent today several modes of cultural production overlapping and interlapping. It is here then that the fundamental agnosticism of structuralist discourses should help in the interrogation of the gaps, crevices, silences and absences of our collective psyche as refracted in those texts.

Yet it need be said that if a fundamental agnosticism accounts for the major strength of structuralism, it is also the source of its glaring deficiency to date. Therefore, a brief critique of this and the implications for criticism in Africa seems a mandatory finale for this essay. Here, as usual, Mativo scrambles his genealogy. While it is true that structuralism originated in France, no profitable enquiry into its contemporary sway can be held without first linking it with distant precursors and cousins such as Saussure's concept of *langue* and *parole*, Russian Formalism, the Prague school and Williams Empson. Thus Saussure's repudiation of the diachronic despotism in language theory is not dissimilar to the Russian Formalists' rejection of history as a pre-condition for the interrogation of the text, or to Empson's indeterminacies of reading and Derrida's subversive "differance". At this point, a dose of the dialectic of concrete history may help shore up our perspective. For if the Russian Formalists were otherwise gifted scholars, their crass naivete' as shown in their inability to read the political barometer and their reluctance to come to terms with the concrete history staring them in the face immensely contributed to their ultimate liquidation. Yet who would have thought that shortly before this time, in the vast recesses of the Swiss Alps, Saussure, an obscure Professor of linguistics, was developing thoughts strikingly similar to those of the Russian Formalists? And who would have thought that these concepts when later remodelled into various disciplines would not only harass but demand important concessions from Marxism, the same ideology that had stifled their ontological kins in Russia? If all this points to the rich and complex drama of human thought, let it also serve to remind us that no amount of "revolutionary" violence can crush an idea whose time has come.

Yet the ideological bankruptcy of Structuralism is that having evacuated history from its privileged position, it can offer nothing but an aimless virtuosity to fill the terrifying vacuum. Sartre, in his splendid confrontation with the Structuralists has argued that while structure is important, to stop at structure is "a logical scandal."⁴⁶ Is it any wonder then that whatever the initial rigour of their premises and the stylistic panache which informs their discourses, all structuralist ventures end up giving the impression of unease,

of discomfort, indeed of frenetic airiness? Is it any wonder then that Barthes ends up a critical voluptuary, a prisoner of the pleasures of the text, that Derrida continues his macabre jingles while wisely "deferring" what can only be an annihilating encounter with Marxism, that Levi-Strauss subverts history only to collapse into a self-consuming despair, and that Foucault, the guru of power-praxis whose studies of the instrumentalization of tyranny in Western societies remain unsurpassed continues to doubt the validity of Marxism and the class struggle?

The unique dangers which the classical pessimism of these theorists represent for the embryonic theoretical praxis and the revolutionary struggle of Africa cannot be overemphasized. Yet to the extent that their unyielding skepticism is itself inscribed in the misfortunes, the reversals and defeats which have been the lot of revolutionary movements in the advanced capitalist societies the lesson cannot be ignored either.

Therefore, this essay will conclude reaffirming the primacy of history but not of a primordial historical chart; of developments -- with all the nuances -- but not of evolutionist growth; of empirical procedure but not of empiricism; and, finally, of class and race struggle but not of a mystical faith in the preordained outcome of this. If Marxism happens to be the one ideology that comes closest to appropriating these ideals, then let it be realized that like all appropriations, it is necessarily incomplete and hence its own gaps and lapses must be filled and corrected via remorseless critique. The intellectual revolution ushered in by Hegel and Marx means that nothing can be taken for granted any longer. This, alas, includes their own works. As Hegel himself has succinctly put it: "In general what is well-known, precisely because it is well-known is not known."⁴⁷

In a world in which philosophy suffers increasing cretinization, the urgent task before an African revolutionary criticism is to situate itself within that privileged terrain where reality and ideology wage a multiple-front war with the literary text. Since such a criticism sees the improvement of reality as its urgent task, it has nothing to do with writing endless tons and tones on the dislocation of syntax in Tutuola or with the endless conferences and symposia in which bouts of hair-raising inanition compete with orgies of tea - drinking and self - congratulation. Such a criticism can only seek temporary accord but not permanent accommodation with its rivals since its goal is not the bourgeois platitude of allowing a thousand flowers to bloom. Needless to say then that since such a criticism must constantly confront institutionalized deceptions and falsehood, it is openly contentious and insistently polemical. Indeed, the very readiness with which

bourgeois scholarship derogatorily labels as "polemical" any attempt at a stringent scrutiny of its credentials must be seen as a nervous attempt to contain threats to its hegemony. For us, polemics is the sole of business. Let us therefore end with the words of Karl Marx, the greatest polemicist of all time: "To leave an error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality."

NOTES

1. For some more recent commentaries on this ill-fated Marxist theoretician, see (1) Terry Eagleton, Walter Benjamin: Or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism (London: NLB, 1981) (2) Susan Sontag, "Under the sign of Saturn" in Under the sign of Staurn (New York: Vintage Books, 1981) pp. 109-136. Finally, see excerpts from his friend's biography, Gershom, Scholem, "My Friend Walter Benjamin" in Commentary December 1981.
2. As quoted in Alain Manville, "Hegel and Metaphysics" in Telos no. 42 Winter 1979-80 pp. 109-110.
3. For a more philosophically rigorous formulation of this thesis, see Lucio Colletti's essay "The Concept of the Social Relations of Production" in his Marxism and Hegel trans-Lawrence Garner (London: NLB, 1973 pp. 199-248). It is interesting however, to note that Perry Anderson professes that it is a preoccupation with "methodologism" which has been the particular bane of Western Marxism; yet Anderson concludes with a shopping list of Marxian issues that are in need of deeper probes. See Perry Anderson, Considerations on Western Marxism (London: NLB, 1976).
4. Louis Althusser, "Marxism is not a Historicism" in Reading Capital (London: NLB, 1970).
5. Louis Althusser, Essays in Self-Criticism trans G. Lock (London: NLB, 1976) p. 119.
6. We cannot agree with Fredric Jameson who recently argued that Althusser's antihistoricism is "a coded battle waged within the framework of the French Communist Party against Stalinism." Events tend to suggest otherwise. Indeed, part of the FPC's original cooling towards Althusser stemmed from the paradoxical need to distance itself from the legacy of Stalin. See Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) p. 37.
7. Colletti op. cit. pp. 206-207.

8. Karl Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the state" in Early Writings (London: Penguin, 1975) p. 159.
9. Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason trans Kemp Smith (London: Penguin, 1953) p. 99.
10. George Lithchem, Lukacs (London: Fontana, 1970) p. 30.
11. This thesis has been elaborately developed by Lukacs in his History and Class Consciousness (London: Merlin Press, 1971)
12. Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics trans T.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973) p. 3.
13. See preface to the 1971 edition of his The Theory of the Novel trans Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1971)
14. For the summit of this worship of science, see Criticism and the Growth of Science ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970).
15. For a sustained Marxist analysis of the Lacanian Concept of the Real, see Fredric Jameson's important essay, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism and the Problem of the subject," in Yale French Studies No. 55/56 1978.
16. "Towards an African Critical Practice" in Ufahamu Vol no. 2 Fall 1981-Winter 1982.
17. For a sample see Kyalo Mativo, "The Novel by any other Name" in Ufahamu Vol. III, No. 3, 1977. Also see "Ideology in African Philosophy and Literature" in Ufahamu vol. VII, No. 2, 1978.
18. Kyalo Mativo, "Criteria for the Criticism of African Literature" in Ufahamu, present issue.
19. Raymond Williams in introduction to L. Goldman, Racine (Cambridge: Rivers Press, 1972) p. xiv.
20. Kyalo Mativo, "Criteria for the Criticism" in Ufahamu, present issue.
21. Terry Eagleton, "The Idealism of American Criticism" in New Left Review 127 June 1981 p. 56.
22. Kyalo Mativo, "Criteria . . ." in Ufahamu, present issue.

23. Raymond Williams, "Crisis in English Studies" in New Left Review No. 129 Sept-Oct., 1981 p. 53.
24. See E.P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," The Socialist Register No. 2 1965.
25. J. Zeleny, The Logic of Marx trans Terrell Carver (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980) p. 253.
26. Quoted in *ibid* appendix iii.
27. E.P. Thompson, The Poverty of Theory (London: Merlin Press, 1978) p. 265.
28. Kyalo Mativo, "Ideology in African Philosophy and Literature," *ibid*.
29. Quoted in *ibid* p. 135.
30. *Ibid* p. 178.
31. See my forthcoming, "The Interpreters and the Logic of defamiliarization."
32. For a scrutiny of this disparate school, see Frank Lentricchia, After the New Criticism, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
33. See Althusser's seminal essay, "Contradiction and Overdetermination" in For Marx, trans Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1977).
34. Althusser, Reading Capital p. 99.
35. Mativo, "Criteria for the Criticism . . ." in Ufahamu, present issue.
36. Louis Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays (London: NLB, 1971).
37. H. Pachter, "Brecht's Politics" in Telos No. 44 Summer 1980 p. 47.
38. Claude Levi-Strauss, Tristes Tropiques (New York: Atheneum, 1967) p. 397.
39. Karl Marx, Gundrisse (London: Harmondsworth, 1973) p. 105.
40. Terry Eagleton, "Ideology, Fiction and Narrative" in Social Text Summer 1979 p. 73.

41. For an elaboration of this thesis, see Edward W. Said, "The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions," in Critical Inquiry Summer 1978.
42. For an amplification of the theory of the periphery and centre of capitalism, see the works of Samir Amin the distinguished African economist especially his Class and Nation, Historically and in the Current Crisis trans. Susan Kaplow (London: Monthly Review Press, 1980).
43. Karl Marx, Grundrisse, p. 110.
44. For this critique of Levi-Strauss, see Fredric Jameson, The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972 p. 102.
45. For further discussion on the complicity of science with Anglo-American empiricism, see my "Towards an African critical practice."
46. See Jean-Paul Sartre, "Reply to Structuralism" in Telos No. 9 Fall 1971 pp. 110-115.
47. See preface to the Phenomenology of Mind trans. Sir Nokes Baillie (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966).