

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Whoever hasn't yet arrived at the clear realization that there might be a greatness existing entirely outside his own sphere and for which he might have absolutely no feeling; whoever hasn't at least felt obscure intimations concerning the approximate location of this greatness in the geography of the human spirit: that person either has no genius in his own sphere, or else he hasn't been educated yet to the niveau of the classic.

—Friedrich Schlegel, *Critical Fragment* 36

Modernism and African Literature

This book argues for establishing the interpretive horizon of twentieth-century literature at capitalism's internal limit. In the classical Marxian conception this limit is the rift between capital and labor, but this rift knows many displacements, the most important of which is the division of the globe between wealthy nations and a much larger and poorer economic periphery. The literary texts primarily considered here come from each side of this divide: British modernism between the world wars, and African literature during the period of the national independence struggles. The following pages will insist that neither of these two literatures—each produced in a period of extraordinary political possibility—can be understood on its own; rather, the full meaning of each only emerges in relation to the other and to the rift, both internal and external, which they each try in different ways to represent.

But what does British modernism have to do with African literature? Provisional answers are not hard to come by. First, the prestige accorded modernist literary texts by colonial-style education at mid-century cannot be overestimated. The relationship to modernism of the African literature that emerged with the great national independence movements (a relationship not only to modernism proper but also to the entire new-critical canon, itself an enlarged and domesticated modernism then in full hegemonic bloom) is deeply ambivalent. The critical edge of the great modernisms presents a model, while their institutional weight as the vanguard of European culture presents both an obstacle and a formidable spur to new and sometimes aggressively oppositional literary production. One need only think here of the well-known kinship between *négritude* and European

surrealism, but other examples come readily to mind.¹ Indeed, each of the African writers considered in this book was explicitly engaged in the vital refunctioning of modernist tropes and strategies to suit sometimes contrary representational ends. Cheikh Hamidou Kane takes over the central problems of French and German existentialism only to resolve them in a completely novel way; Chinua Achebe invests the apocalyptic visions of Yeats and Eliot with new meaning; and Ngugi wa Thiong'o begins from a Brechtian theory of practice with which North American critical theory has never quite come to terms.

In what follows, however, these direct and sometimes genetic connections cannot be the primary or even initial point of analysis. In the context of African literature and modernism, we have been permanently warned away from influence study by Ayi Kwei Armah's funny but devastating response to Charles Larson's *The Emergence of African Fiction*, which claims to show Armah's formal debt to James Joyce. Armah's intervention made it clear that the "language of borrowing and influence is usually a none too subtle way Western commentators have of saying Africa lacks original creativity."² In the case of Larson's analysis of Armah's *Fragments*, the evidence of influence was demonstrably flimsy; but it is not clear even what one is to do with a genetic relationship that can be definitely established.³ The very language of "influence" is in any case misleading, since, as Borges once said, a writer creates his own precursors rather than the reverse. As Adorno put it in more agonistic terms, every act of imitation is at the same time a betrayal, and the mere fact of an "influence" is not enough to establish the movement of this dialectic in any particular case.⁴ The point, then, is not that this kind of literary history is totally irrelevant, but rather that its meaning is wholly contingent on literary interpretation: "To become good literary historians, we must remember that what we usually call literary history has little or nothing to do with literature and that what we call literary interpretation—provided only it is good interpretation—is in fact literary history."⁵ Our surest bet lies not with exploring empirical or genetic literary history but by asking what is historical about the works themselves. This book aims not simply to trace the common pathways that traverse modernism and African literature, though these are many, but to construct a framework within which these pathways make sense beyond mere similarity or influence, and within which the genuine difference they pass across will become apparent.

Considering the profound restructuring of African societies by the colonial economy—not least in the emergence of the class that will create the continent's new literature—we might, in a second approach, point to another, richer set of connections between both sets of texts and the societies from which they emerge. The mere fact that European imperialism names a key moment in the spread of capitalism as a global economic system already implies a certain baseline of universality. Amos Tutuola's radically deterritorialized English, Wole Soyinka's depiction of a social class deprived of its historical vocation, the emergent urban logic of Meja Mwangi's Nairobi—all these have ready equivalents in canonical European literature. From this perspective Achebe, for example, appears closest not to Yeats and Eliot (to whom the titles of his early novels refer), but to the

great nineteenth-century historical novelists, who also witnessed the long process of the “defeat of the gentile nations.” And yet, as far as our practice in this book is concerned, there can be no question of merely applying the methodological norms developed for one literature to the texts of the other. This is impossible for theoretical reasons—capitalism as a global economic system is also predicated on an uneven development that produces uncountable eddies and swirls in historical time, the literally unthinkable complexity of contemporary history that thwarts any overhasty universalizing gesture—but also on more empirical grounds. The vast graveyard of forgotten new-critical readings of postcolonial texts—not to mention the devastating blows dealt to such critical practice by critics as different as Chinweizu and Chidi Amuta in the 1980s—attests to the sterility of the transfer in one direction, and while the other has produced a number of fruitful recent studies of, for example, James Joyce as a postcolonial writer, the violence this approach inflicts on the Joycean text’s internal norms is palpable.

This book, then, reconstellates modernism and African literature in such a way as to make them both comprehensible within a single framework within which neither will look the same. This framework will hinge neither on “literary history” nor abstract “universal history” but on each text’s relation to history itself. In this context—though the demonstration will have to wait until later—Achebe can be considered most profitably in relationship with neither “The Second Coming” nor, say, *Waverly*, but rather with the work of Ford Madox Ford, a writer with whom he appears initially to have little in common. If African literature will appear in a new light when thus set beside canonical modernism, then modernism, in turn, will look rather different from the perspective of the period of African independence. Readers expecting a “theory of African literature” or a theory of canonical modernism are therefore bound to be disappointed. The wager of this book is that every discussion that isolates a “modernist tradition” or an “African tradition” (the very incommensurability of these terms should warn us of their insufficiency) carries with it an inherent falseness. Any attempt to discuss the latter without accounting for the process by which previously autonomous and hegemonic traditions assumed a position of subalternity (and therefore changed meaning absolutely) is to mythologize cultural continuity while ignoring the violence with which all cultural traditions have been violently opened up into world history. On the other hand, any “theory of modernism” that fails to take up this same history—the always encroaching movement of capital and the connection between this movement and colonialism, world war, and the containment of socialism, which will be thematized more explicitly as we approach our chapter on Wyndham Lewis—misses the very reason these texts are still so powerful today.

In any case, it is well known that attempts to produce a “theory of the tradition,” rather than reconstructing an autonomous heritage, tend to construct tradition according to the more or less commonly held norms of one critical movement or another.⁶ One could hardly do otherwise. The point is not to imagine that one could produce a purely innocent descriptive discourse, but to be explicit about the manner in which one is positing the contents of one’s own language.

In this book, literature as such names a certain mode of approaching problems and possibilities that are endemic to the development of capitalism. In the last instance, our reading of literary texts, in all their richness and complexity, will take the history of this development as its frame of reference. Renouncing the claim to be explicating some relatively autonomous tradition does not, then, prevent us from asking fundamental questions about modernism and African literature; it does mean that we will not be asking them about one or the other without reference to the history that brings them into relation with each other.

The framework constructed in this introductory chapter is grounded in what is meant to be an orthodox interpretation of the Marxist revision of the Hegelian dialectic. This is in some sense a “European” trajectory (if this label still applies to a tradition whose most important development in the latter half of the twentieth century was its appropriation and revision by anticolonial and anti-imperialist movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America), and it is customary at some point for the Western writer to “acknowledge his subject position”—a sign of good intentions that is meant to excuse any subsequent lapses. The subject position from which this book is written—a position that is intellectual, political, and classed as well as racial, geographical, and gendered—is obvious enough, but good intentions count for nothing if one genuinely wants not to be counted among Armah’s “Western scholars, critics of African Literature included,” who are “nothing if not Westerners working in the interests of the West . . . committed to the values and prejudices of his own society, just as much as any other Western expert hustling Africa, be he a businessman, an economic adviser or a mercenary wardog” (44). What is required, if only as a beginning, is rather the attempt genuinely to understand what it would mean to continue the colonial dynamic on cultural or theoretical territory.

We owe the most significant and rigorous analysis of what is commonly called cultural imperialism to Paulin Hountondji, who, in a remarkable series of interventions spanning nearly two decades, has demonstrated that theoretical production as such—even when it is apparently centered in the Third World—tends to be structurally oriented toward the interests of the First World.⁷ Hountondji’s materialist account of the circulation of knowledge between the periphery and the core economies—explicitly inspired by Samir Amin’s account of the structural dependency of peripheral economies—primarily concerns scientific knowledge, but the thesis can be easily generalized.⁸ In cultural as in directly economic production, the Third World tends to provide raw material (local knowledges, African novels, musical idioms) that are shipped to the research centers of the First World to be converted into finished products (anthropology and pharmaceuticals, literary criticism, Paul Simon albums) that are sometimes reimported to the periphery. Hountondji’s argument, however, refuses to remain at the level of culture, ultimately referring this movement to the total functioning of the “worldwide capitalist system”⁹ in which it is caught up and which determines the circulation of knowledge at every point. This step is absolutely indispensable. For it cannot, then, simply be a matter of altering the circulation of knowledge without first taking account of that other thing that determines this circulation. If, failing this,

we were to take the vulgar logic of cultural imperialism to its limit, we would arrive at something like a practice of “import substitution,” where weaknesses in First-World production are selectively exploited to develop a regional industry which, with a little luck, can eventually compete with the First-World product on the global market. While such a practice may have some positive effects, it mainly operates to the advantage of local owners of capital—cultural as well as economic. In other words, the struggle over who is entitled to appropriate local knowledge for his or her own theoretical discourse can easily become, as Chidi Amuta caustically puts it, “essentially an intra-class one, between bourgeois Western scholars and their African counterparts, over whose false consciousness should gain the upper hand.”¹⁰

The point is not to imagine that one is somehow outside this cycle or immune to its effects. Rather, if we adopt Hountondji’s goal as one of our own—“the collective appropriation of knowledge . . . by peoples who, until now, have constantly been dispossessed of the fruits of their labor in this area as in all others”¹¹—then we have no choice but to address that other thing—Capital—that determines the circulation of knowledge. Instead of merely acknowledging the author’s subject position or, on the contrary, perpetually worrying about the reaction of some imagined hysterical other, we will try to demonstrate that a Marxist framework is not only not Eurocentric, but the only conceptual framework that potentially avoids the pitfalls of both Eurocentrism and of the paradoxically Eurocentric refusal of Eurocentrism. This is not to say—far from it—that this potential has always been realized in Marxist criticism of postcolonial literature. But whatever objections there may be to the framework developed here, it seems unlikely that, at this late date, anyone will be particularly worried about the geographical origin of its basic conceptual tools.

How, then, to think capital and the relationship between modernism and African literature in a single thought? The most efficient way to broach this connection is through Marx’s well-known appropriation of the Goethean notion of world literature. Goethe writes:

For some time there has been talk of world literature, and properly so. For it is evident that all nations, thrown together at random by terrible wars, then reverting to their status as individual nations, could not help realizing that they had been subject to foreign influences, had absorbed them and occasionally become aware of intellectual needs previously unknown. The result was a sense of goodwill. Instead of isolating themselves as before, their state of mind has gradually developed a desire to be included in the free exchange of ideas.¹²

It is not difficult to discern the traces of this cosmopolitan multiculturalism in our own dominant discourse, where preexisting cultures develop a sense of goodwill in the “free exchange” of the mysteriously neutral ground of the university.¹³ Goethe himself was more discerning than this, as can be seen from the continuation of this fragment (whose explicitly mercantile overtones are excised from the contemporary edition), where the purpose of developing a world literature is to “acquire from it, as must always from any kind of foreign trade, both profit and

enjoyment.”¹⁴ For Marx, of course, the economic will be more than a metaphor when *Weltliteratur* puts in a surprise appearance in the *Communist Manifesto*:

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of the Reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. . . . And as in material, so in intellectual production. . . . [F]rom the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.¹⁵

Here the “peaceful coexistence” of nations, cultures, and texts is given definite historical content in the dynamic of imperial expansion. As plainly as we can see the legacy of the Goethean conception in contemporary multicultural discourse, it is just as clear that the Marxian narrative, where particular cultural forms colonize territory along with economic ones, represents the truth of Goethe’s metaphor.

If world literature does not spring spontaneously from a host of freely developing cultural equals but rather represents the exploitation of geographic and cultural diversity by a limited ensemble of economic and cultural forms, we might ask to what extent “non-Western literature” is a contradiction in terms. The question would not be whether the most vital writing of the second half of the twentieth century was produced by Third World writers: it was. The question is rather what we mean by “literature” and what we mean by “West,” what agendas reside in those words and whether they have any meaning at all. *Going Down River Road* by the Kenyan novelist Meja Mwangi presupposes the norms of European naturalism even where it works against them. Can we say of the *Inkishafi* (a verse meditation occasioned by the passing of the city-state of Pate in what is now Kenya, by the late classical Swahili poet Sayyid Abdallah bin Ali bin Nasir¹⁶) that we do not work a well-intended but nonetheless violent transformation by understanding it with reference to the concept of literature? What we usually call “non-Western” literature is rarely the expression (like the *Inkishafi*) of some other culture, if by that we understand some other set of norms and rules that has developed along its own internal logic; rather, it must be thought of in terms of the positions that economically, ethnically, sexually, and geographically differentiated subjects occupy within the single culture of global capitalism that has more or less ruthlessly subsumed what was once a genuinely multicultural globe.

All of this should be obvious, even if our entire mainstream multicultural discourse is built around its explicit denial. But the recognition of what multiculturalism denies should not be taken to signify a celebration of, or acquiescence to, the power of some henceforth inescapable “Western” tradition. Indeed, the capitalist monoculture dissimulated in multicultural discourse is not strictly speaking “Western” at all. It is true that the notion of a specifically “Western” hegemony has been useful as a heuristic for describing the Manichean superstructures of classical imperialism. But the concept of the “West” (except perhaps in its now outdated opposition to the communist “East”) has no purchase in causality, no

explanatory power. Now that these Manichean structures are generally understood to have dissolved in favor of more complex ones, the concept has outlived its usefulness. As Neil Lazarus reminds us in his *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*,¹⁷ the identification of capitalism with “the West”—the elevation of a heuristic into an explanatory concept—is a mystification that serves to moralize what is an essentially systemic phenomenon. The disequilibrium intrinsic to the function of capital can be kept under control only by the expansion of capital itself: as Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*, “the tendency to create the world market is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome.”¹⁸ As industrial capitalism expanded from southeastern England it subjugated, incorporated (unevenly), or obliterated noncapitalist modes of production and ways of life, and this process continues not only on the terrain of the former colonies but over remaining enclaves of as yet unrationalized labor—cattle ranching, higher education—in the dominant countries.¹⁹ Needless to say, some countries, classes, and economic sectors hold and attempt to maintain far more advantageous positions than others. But this is not something the notion of the “West” helps to explain.

What this means for cultural analysis is that the forms imposed by global capitalism frame the interpretive possibilities available for any concrete cultural contents, even contents of putatively ancient origin. One example of such a form would be the museum, which only becomes necessary in a society predicated on the tendential annihilation of all other cultural forms—and which is therefore not only an institution for the preservation of a multitude of different cultural forms but, like the antiquities market it superficially opposes, also a symptom of one thing, namely their eradication.²⁰ It has been said that the Taliban’s expressed reasons for destroying the statues of Buddha in the Bamiyan Valley paradoxically preserved them in their being as religious artifacts—which, like the Golden Calf, had to be destroyed.²¹ We should go a step further, however, and insist that Unesco would have annihilated them just as surely by turning them into yet another monument to humanity’s “cultural heritage.” In this book, however, we are not primarily concerned with institutions of this sort but with concepts; not so much the museum or Unesco as whole genera of discourses and mental structures that function in a similar way: “the novel,” “criticism,” and “culture”—in particular, “literature.”

It will be objected that the methodological decision to begin from the monoculture implicitly invokes the discredited category of totality. One of the objectives of this book is to restore the respectability of this Hegelian concept—indeed of the dialectic itself—to postcolonial studies.²² While the impact of Fredric Jameson’s work on this book will no doubt be felt by many readers, this book is devoted in part to undoing the damage done to the reputation of the dialectic for postcolonial criticism by Jameson’s “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”²³ and its infamous suggestion that “all third-world texts are necessarily . . . to be read as . . . *national allegories*” (69). Aijaz Ahmad’s canonical critique of this position is astute and unassailable on many counts. Jameson’s essay contains several bad, positivist reasons for reading literature produced on the periphery of capitalism as national allegory, and indeed substantial

parts of the essay—from a conflation of the process of the subsumption of older economic forms under Capital with the problems of the peripheral national economy all the way to rash assumptions about the “experience of colonized peoples” (76)—are indefensible.²⁴

None of these problems, however, annuls the essay’s one good, Hegelian argument, and in retrospect the failure of Jameson’s essay seems really more rhetorical than theoretical: what was intended as a rhetoric of struggle—of precisely Ahmad’s “ferocious struggle between capital and labour which is now strictly and fundamentally global in character”—is easily construed as a “rhetoric of otherness.” As with the capital-labor relation, Jameson’s First World-Third World distinction begins to evaporate as soon as one attempts to describe each side as a positive category. But this does not mean that the dash does not represent a real rift, the conflict between the two. The real ground of Jameson’s article comes not at the beginning, with all its easily refuted generalizing about subalternity, but at the end, when he finally invokes the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. In order to make this part of the essay conform to his general critique, Ahmad has to arrest this dialectic at an early stage (“one is merely the *object* of history, the Hegelian slave”). Whether or not this is a justifiable reading of Hegel, it is certainly not the Lukácsian one favored by Jameson, who understands the difference between master and slave as one of subjectivity, and in particular of the superior consciousness of the slave: unlike the master, who is “condemned to idealism,” “the slave can attain some true materialistic consciousness of his situation.”²⁵

In fact, the mode of reading recommended by Jameson for Third-World literature as “social allegory” (85) is not substantially different from the mode of interpretation as “socially symbolic act” that he recommends for European texts in *The Political Unconscious*.²⁶ Rather, the difference is one of consciousness, which Jameson’s invocation of the master-slave dialectic is meant to establish as largely the positional matter of where one stands in relation to Capital. In this context it might be productive to give Jameson’s “unconscious” its Hegelian rather than its more obvious Freudian referent, and recall the category of “unconscious symbolism” in the *Aesthetics*, whose forms are always inferior and inchoate next to those of “conscious symbolism,” which contains allegory proper. Terms like “political unconscious” (and “postmodernism,” which also makes an appearance in the “Third World Literature” essay) are cognate with unconscious symbolism and therefore privative next to the conscious symbolism of “national allegory”—not for sentimental reasons or because of an external political sympathy but because Jameson’s theoretical coordinates demand it. One might wish after the fact that the essay had been worked into the introduction to *The Political Unconscious* as a final dialectical twist, where it would have made clear that Jameson did not have in mind a radically different theory for Third-World literature but rather a kind of completion of the theory he had laid out earlier. As it is, however, without the kind of detailed theoretical and exegetical work that sustained that earlier book, the charge of reductionism was all too easy to make.²⁷

Further, there is no question that much criticism of Third-World literature at the time of Jameson’s essay was (and continues to be, though often in less obvious

ways) genuinely Eurocentric—what Chinua Achebe called “colonialist criticism”²⁸—so that both alertness to the problem and the theoretical tools to combat it were at the forefront of postcolonial discourse when Jameson’s essay emerged. In this context, and in light of the essay’s real shortcomings, the dominant reading of “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” as condescendingly reductionist was almost inevitable; the essay makes no attempt to preempt such criticism theoretically or to offer the kind of nuanced exegesis that would render it unthinkable. What is unfortunate is that an entirely salutary and productive reading within the micropolitics of the North American academy at the moment of the self-definition of postcolonial studies played directly into the macropolitics of the cold war: the description of Marxism (which, surely we do not need to be reminded, was appropriated by countless anticolonial struggles) as an intrinsically reductive and totalizing-totalitarian colonizer in its own right.

Micro- and macropolitics cannot, however, be kept rigorously separate. Although unfortunate and for the most part unintended—certainly so the case of Ahmad, whose work offers brilliant refutations of the anti-Marxism constitutive of mainstream North American postcolonial studies²⁹—this conjuncture was hardly fortuitous. Before we address in detail the necessity of the concept of totality—which has nothing to do with reducing difference to similarity—it is worth asking what alternatives offer themselves, in the charge of “reductionism,” to thinking the totality. The demand for a criticism that would do justice to the full complexity and contingency of contemporary social life functions in the main not as a methodology or even as an ideal but rather as an impossible demand whose stridency distracts us from other possible goals. And even if the charge of reductionism were justified at the level of any particular book, essay, or critic, it would still function as a hysterical repression at the level of its larger cultural context, in which the tendency is not to reduce cultural phenomena to the economic but, on the contrary, to take genuinely political phenomena (that is, conflicts that take place at capital’s internal limit) as though they were purely cultural. When, from Rwanda to Bosnia to the potentially endless series of conflicts fantastically referred to as the “war on terror,” we suppose that we are dealing purely with cultural phenomena like “ethnic conflict” or a “clash of civilizations” (though no doubt these diagnoses derive an element of truth from the very political manipulability of these categories), a dose of “economic reductionism” would be a welcome tonic.

At any rate, the charge of reductionism, supported by the leap (via a convenient but illegitimate paralogism) from the concept of totality to the assertion of a totalitarian will to power, is absolutely rejected here. There is a vulgar notion of totality that does indeed imply terror: the positive notion that every element in a set must conform to a single rule. The kind of “totalitarianism” that would submit certain ethnic traits or sexual practices to the rule of “revolutionary or counter-revolutionary” falls into this category. In this book, however, we will have a rather different totality in mind, one which, far from reducing contingency and complexity to a monotonous necessity, is in fact the precondition for understanding difference. Meanwhile, the hegemonic doctrine of difference, particularly in its

vulgar form, falls prey to the most elementary Hegelian deconstruction. That the naïve notion of presence must everywhere give way before the operation of difference is unobjectionable as far as it goes, but at the same time the poverty of the concept of Difference is readily apparent. Any concept as universal as Difference (which, as the very medium of human cognition, is virtually synonymous with Being) necessarily lacks all specificity; it is empty as to content. But without content there can be no difference, and the concept of Difference turns into its opposite, the monotony of the Same.³⁰ This is not to say that Same and Different are really identical, which would be absurd, but that they share a certain ground; every mere difference exists by virtue of a field that stamps it with the character of the Same. This is easiest to see if one descends from the concept to its political application, where it is difference, not totality, that reduces the complexity of the world to the monotonous same, since the truly different (that is, what refuses to be seen as merely different) is excluded from the field of difference. As Alain Badiou puts it with characteristic vigor:

Our suspicions are first aroused when we see that the self-declared apostles of the “right to difference” are clearly horrified by any vigorously sustained differences. . . . As a matter of fact, this celebrated “other” is only acceptable if he is a *good* other—which is to say what, exactly, if not *the same as us*?³¹

The primacy of difference in fact outlines an identity—the unacknowledged frame of the monoculture, global capitalism.

The respect for differences applies only to differences that are reasonably consistent with this identity (which, after all, is nothing other than the identity of a wealthy—albeit visibly declining—“West”).³²

Meanwhile it must be understood that the social totality (the monoculture) is not One in the ordinary sense of positive identity; it is founded on a fundamental rift, an internal limit. Totality, that is, should be confused neither with unity nor with simple identity, but rather with the famous Hegelian “identity of identity and difference.” The paradoxical formulation alone should make it clear that we are not talking about a reduction of difference to identity (difference remains part of the formulation), but rather the explicit placing of difference into a frame where it is made comprehensible.³³ The point is not that the master and the slave, to take up our previous example, are monotonously the same but that neither of them is anything at all outside of his relation to the other: the totality they comprise is constituted by the rift that opens up between them. What the concept of totality gives us is, paradoxically, access to the radical incompleteness of what appears spontaneously as solid and whole. Complete, self-evident things (say, a commodity, a democracy, a novel) are in fact incomplete and always derive their being from something else (the production cycle, the world economy, the concept and institution of literature). As Ato Quayson puts it in his defense of dialectical criticism, “any phenomenon, literary or otherwise and no matter how apparently innocent or irrelevant, can be made to speak to a wide ensemble of processes, relations, and contradictions.”³⁴ In this book we will be taking this assertion a

step further: the refusal to take account of these larger processes gives the phenomenon its innocence and in so doing utterly deforms it.

Not to acknowledge this fundamental incompleteness (whether by asserting some transcendent plenitude or by insisting on the absolutely untranscendent plurality of differences, and we have already suggested that these are the same thing) is a good working definition of ideology. While we will insist, therefore, that totalization is necessary (and anyhow inevitable), what we must never lose sight of is not that conceptualizing the totality is in a rigorous sense impossible, always in some sense “wrong” and incomplete (though this is true enough), but that it is never innocent. The frame one constructs does not simply rearrange preexisting objects but intervenes directly in their being, even as one’s own relation to them and therefore one’s own being is constituted at the same moment. The manner in which one totalizes is therefore at base a decision, even if this decision is obscured when the act of totalization is disavowed. As such it is a matter of responsibility and, potentially, guilt. For this reason one should be as explicit about it as possible.

At a more concrete level, it is often said that the concept of totality allows no room for contingency: totalizing narratives neglect the openness of the struggles that constitute real history. Here one might repeat a gesture that seems facile yet unanswerable, namely that the narrative of the end of totalizing narratives is itself a totalizing narrative, which is why people can get excited about it and derive some satisfaction out of their participation in the great project of tearing down the old grand narratives. Further, this new narrative of the end of totality can only be made comprehensible in the light of the avowedly totalizing narrative of a continual segmentation and specialization of intellectual labor that makes conceptual totalization increasingly difficult. The imagined lack of a frame turns out to be a disavowed totalization whose truth only emerges when it is made explicit. What the critique of the Hegelian conception of history makes room for, then, is not some genuinely new way of thinking about time, so that events and struggles could finally appear in their radical contingency and particularity. Instead, we leap from the Hegelian fat only to find ourselves in the fire of a Kantian formalism: the contingency and particularity of “radical” historicism take place against an ahistorical set of silent *a priori* assumptions. What the rejection of the frame as such produces, paradoxically, is the reliance on one particular unacknowledged frame, namely capitalism as the ahistorical horizon of all history. As Omafume Onoge has observed, only from the perspective of totality can “social systems [be] accorded only temporary legitimacy”;³⁵ only when capitalism is explicitly named as a totality can it itself be historicized.

More concretely still, a vivid example offers itself in the history of African independence. In every case, the independence most African nations achieved in the 1960s was won through countless individual heroic acts performed and lives sacrificed, every one of which deserves to be memorialized. Further, even if, as Immanuel Wallerstein has suggested, capitalism as a world economic system was well served by the ultimate conversion of settler economies into external markets for the core economies,³⁶ in no case was the anticolonial struggle guaranteed in advance

to succeed. The protracted struggles in Lusophone Africa and the belatedness of black rule in Zimbabwe and South Africa attest to that. Nonetheless, the true dimensions of this struggle only emerge against a totalizing backdrop. The narrative of national independence, appearing spontaneously as complete in itself, in fact takes its historical meaning from what is excluded from it, namely the limitations placed on the liberation movements by their location in the world economy. Each of these countries, once independence was on the horizon, faced the same question: whether to dare genuinely to challenge the logic of capital and violently disturb property relations or, remaining within the context of a purely national liberation, to strike a bargain with the former colonizer (in the contemporary example of South Africa, with investment capital).³⁷ The question of the propertyless masses, as Zimbabwe and South Africa remind us today, is the irreducible limit of national liberation. Fanon—to whom this book owes the greatest intellectual debt—was able to see the pitfalls of national liberation precisely because he conceived of capitalism as a totality and because he therefore knew that the national narrative, however necessary, was limited by the foundational exclusion of that totality.³⁸

All this is not to say that social life is not in fact unthinkably complex. Resistance—which is given in the concept of capital as one of its constitutive limits, always “to be overcome”—takes on an infinite variety of forms, some of which are refunctionalized out of bits and pieces of older cultural pathways. But these can be as easily refunctionalized in the service of capital as its resistance, and to take resistance to capital as a basis for discussion is very far from multiculturalism as it is generally practiced, which functions in the main to discourage any attempt to theorize the monoculture. To begin, then, with an analysis of this striated capitalist monoculture is not (unlike discourses from either Left or Right that fetishize “the West,” for ill or for good, as the fundamental source of “modernity” or “development”) Eurocentric. To the contrary, such a beginning provides the only ground for discussing cultural differences without turning them into fetishized substances.

The global expansion of capitalism, with all of its social, psychological, and cultural effects, is obscured when we speak of modernism as a product of “Western culture” and of African literature as “non-Western.” Indeed, when the boundary between the two is bracketed, the differential movement of capital emerges not as one kind of content among many, but as the fundamental content of both modernism and African literature. One might say it emerges as the content of literature itself. What do modernism and African literature have to do with each other? The obvious answer—both are literature—tells us nothing until we reconsider what we mean by “literature” in the first place.

The Eidaesthetic Itinerary

It is often said that “literature” in its current sense, with all the privilege and ontological weight it now enjoys or is burdened with, is not much older than the nineteenth century. Dr. Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*, completed in 1755, mentions only its older and more general meaning, defining literature

as simply “Learning, skill in letters.”³⁹ Alain Badiou, who maintains that literature in the modern sense is constituted by the emergence in the poem of problems that philosophy was unable to solve, traces its emergence to Nietzsche.⁴⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, referring to literature’s new philosophical calling as its “eidaesthetic” vocation, place the emergence of the modern concept of literature somewhat earlier, almost exactly at the turn of the nineteenth century.⁴¹ That literature as we know it is invented in the nineteenth century does not mean that the literary tradition begins then; rather, it is precisely the retroactive invention of a literary tradition that makes the romantic conception so powerful. Like the terms labor, life, and language that define the epistemological mutation Foucault pursued almost obsessively to precisely this historical moment, the instant literature comes to exist, it is discovered always to have existed.⁴² It should come as no surprise that in Foucault, too, literature, “constituted and so designated on the threshold of the modern age,” appears with the dawn of the nineteenth century.⁴³ Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe’s *The Literary Absolute*, however, is considerably more specific than Foucault about the origins of literature (even if this specificity does not alone do anything to explain it), tracing literature’s origins primarily to the philosophical fragments produced by Friedrich Schlegel between 1797 to 1804. What is at stake here is not simply German romanticism or even romanticism in the sense of a literary period or a closed set of texts. Rather, romanticism is “our *naïveté*,” the very ground of postromantic thought, even as its later mutations—modernism and postmodernism—continue to define themselves against it. “A veritable romantic *unconscious* is discernable today, in most of the central motifs of our ‘modernity.’”⁴⁴

Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe point out that this henceforth “romantico-modern” conception of literature as it develops in Schlegel’s writings is not simply a mutation in a preexisting field, but a complex and dramatic reshuffling of discourses:

It is precisely what determines the age we live in as the *critical age par excellence* or, in other words, as the “age” (almost two hundred years old, after all) in which literature . . . devotes itself exclusively to the search for its own identity, taking with it all or part of philosophy and several sciences (curiously referred to as the *humanities*) and charting the space of what we now refer to, using a word of which the romantics were particularly fond, as “theory.”⁴⁵

Literature here emerges as the middle term in a temporal and logical series, sandwiched between two apparently extra-literary discourses as it *takes up* philosophy on one hand and *opens up* the space for theory on the other. Schlegel expresses the first moment quite clearly in his *Ideas*: “Where philosophy stops, poetry has to begin.”⁴⁶ The second moment emerges from Schlegel’s *Athenaeum* fragments: “poetry should describe itself, and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry.”⁴⁷ In other words, poetry (understood in the broadest sense) must also always be a theory of poetry. Conversely, however, critique must always be “poetical through and through and at the same time a living, vibrant work of art.”⁴⁸ Thus theory and anti-theory are generated at a single stroke: poetry is to produce the most adequate theory of poetry, but a subtle reflexive bifurcation is now required

of poetry, so that poetry itself cannot exist without the critical moment, either immanent to the text itself or exiled to an initially intimate symbiosis.

This series—philosophy, literature, theory—can be given a more concrete history. To begin with, it is specifically Kant who opens up the possibility of the first moment, the emergence of poetry from philosophy, the peculiar philosophico-artistic or eidaesthetic hybrid of literature in the modern sense. The critique of aesthetic judgment—this is typically said of the analytic of the beautiful, but it can be shown equally of the analytic of the sublime—is originally meant to mediate between the “otherwise irreconcilable opposites” that characterize the Kantian impasse: the well-known antitheses of subject and object, phenomenon and noumenon, and the ever-widening circle of antinomies this fissure produces.⁴⁹ But as Georg Lukács argued decisively, these antithetical moments do not originate purely in philosophy, reflecting rather “antinomies of bourgeois thought” whose ultimate determinants are the segmentation of the labor process and the dominance of the commodity form, which sever subjectivity from matter at all points, from the assembly line to legal procedure all the way to the philosophy of science. Therefore, it is not surprising that an *aesthetic principle*, originating from within thought—the integrative notion of aesthetic pleasure developed in the third *Critique*—should be elevated beyond the sphere of aesthetics as such. The aesthetic, philosophically resolving antinomies whose origin lies outside philosophy, emerges to bear the responsibility for overcoming contradictions produced by capitalism itself: for “salvag[ing the contents of life] from the deadening effects of reification.”⁵⁰ After Kant, the aesthetic sphere becomes necessarily philosophical and, within the limited sphere of thought, utopian. And indeed, this dual exigency, to “realize the kingdom of God on earth”⁵¹ precisely through the philosophical operation of literature, is present everywhere in Schlegel’s fragments: “The French Revolution, Fichte’s philosophy, and Goethe’s *Meister* are the greatest tendencies of the age.”⁵²

As for the second moment, the emergence of theory, it is easy enough to see that the subtle, reflective bifurcation of literature itself—the demand that each work develop along a purely internal dynamic of which it must in some sense also be aware—has a built-in tendency to become an absolute rupture and to engender theory as a separate discourse. The concept of literature demands, at one and the same time, both what is commonly called romantic “organicity” quite apart from external determinants, and a distinct discourse that would be able to recover that organicity from the necessarily fragmentary nature of any particular literary work—which then becomes merely an occasion, incidental to the project of recovery itself. But this logical exigency for theory, as we know, unfolds in history, and Fredric Jameson has described the “emergence of Theory, as that which seemed to supplant traditional literature from the 1960s onwards,”⁵³ as completing an earlier Hegelian premonition of the “end of art” that had appeared hopelessly wide of the mark. (This subsumption, of course, cannot be attributed solely to the autonomous unfolding of the idea of criticism; we will have to return later to its precipitating determinants.) This late “end of literature,” postponed for two centuries by the romantic epicyle, would not refer to the

actual disappearance of literature, which would maintain itself in a kind of decorative afterlife, perhaps with occasional isolated re-efflorescences of its original power. Rather, the “end” of literature would refer to the migration of its philosophical excess, the absolute to which each work refers without ever managing to contain, over into theory once and for all.

For reasons we have already touched on, this philosophical excess emerges after Kant, and indeed the account of the absolute that was most decisive for literature was the Kantian sublime, which subjectively mediates the fundamental Kantian antinomy of noumenon and phenomenon. In what follows we will be developing a theory of a certain modernist sublime.⁵⁴ It might well be asked why we need another sublime on top of the pile of sublimes that have accumulated in recent decades. The point here is not to produce yet another variation on the theme, but to identify modernism as such with a certain mode of the sublime. Luckily, Jean-François Lyotard has already made this equation for us, and probably the best way to go about establishing the peculiar qualities of the modernist sublime is to turn to Lyotard’s essay as a point of departure—even if ultimately Lyotard’s revision of the sublime will have to be abandoned in favor of a more orthodox reading of the Kantian sublime and of its Hegelian deconstruction.⁵⁵

For Lyotard, the basic problem of modernism follows the familiar Frankfurt School analysis: “Capitalism inherently possesses the power to derealize familiar objects, social roles, and institutions to such a degree that the so-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery. . . . Classicism seems to be ruled out in a world in which reality is so derealized that it offers no occasion for experience but one for probing and experimentation.”⁵⁶ Kant’s sublime is a similarly structured failure of representation, the inability of the understanding to compass a reality that nonetheless demands to be conceptualized. But the sublime names something else as well: the experience of such failure strangely brings with it a kind of elation. Therefore the Kantian sublime involves two moments: the first being the (painful) experience of failure, while the second (pleasurable) moment comes with the recognition that the very awareness of failure implies some further, heretofore unrecognized capacity.

Simplifying Lyotard’s argument, we may say that he assigns the name “modernism” to the first moment of failure and “postmodernism” to the second, ecstatic moment where the failure itself is registered on another level. But at this point, something happens that initially seems rather strange: “Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is recurrent.”⁵⁷ Two things have happened here. First, a double inversion: not only the modernism-post-modernism sequence but the temporality of the sublime itself has been turned around, as the ecstatic moment precedes the experience of the loss of the signified. Lyotard arrives at the first reversal by the simple expedient of taking the word “postmodern” absolutely literally: every genuinely modern work must follow some older modernity. Cézanne had to break with impressionism, Picasso had to reject Cézanne, Duchamp had to leave behind what was left of painting after Picasso. Thus the experimental impulse itself is always “post-modern,” while the complacent repetition of an older modernity is simply a mat-

ter of style, modern in the sense of fashion, *mode*. The second inversion, however, presents a difficulty Lyotard resolves by flattening out the temporality of the Kantian sublime and repositing it spatially: the difference between modernism and postmodernism is a difference in emphasis between the two poles of the sublime—from which it follows that a work can be both modern and postmodern at the same time. But this flattening leads to the second, and more important transformation: Lyotard—while keeping faith with the temporal etymology of all the words deriving from “modern” (from *modo*, just now)—effectively abandons their periodizing function. Surprisingly, the postmodern “slackening” (*relâchement*) Lyotard criticizes in the “just now” of the opening pages of the essay turns out not to be postmodern at all but rather modern in the new sense, while the modernism to which he fantastically wishes to return was in fact the postmodern. It is obvious that at this point “modern” and “postmodern” name more or less eternal possibilities. It might come as no surprise that Proust is modern and Joyce is postmodern—but then it might be less obvious that Montaigne is also postmodern while Schlegel is modern.⁵⁸ The implication is that this play of the modern and the postmodern could be pushed back indefinitely: one might think of Rome as a merely modern repetition of postmodern Greece.

Lyotard’s distinction, in fact, is so fundamental that the game begins to impose itself everywhere one looks. (In the context of the works currently under consideration, one would have to argue that they are all “postmodern” in Lyotard’s sense, while our current middlebrow explosion and the institutionalization of the market in postcolonial literature would be “modern,” a term that now becomes almost derogatory.) But we cannot go along with Lyotard so easily. For if the distinction is now conceptual and therefore more or less outside history (or everywhere the same in history, which is the same thing), we cannot forget that the very impetus away from a naïve or cynical realism (that is, toward the postmodern in Lyotard’s sense) was, in Lyotard’s account, historical: namely, capitalism, and a particular early twentieth-century moment at that, one which was able to grasp aesthetically the “derealization” imposed by the commodity form. The concept of modernism, it turns out, cannot shake off its empirical referent so easily, and this leads us back to the same old question we never started with, which is that of modernism in the literary-historical sense, although we can no longer ask it in the same way.

Meanwhile, we are confronted with another fundamental issue. In the final paragraph of the essay Lyotard suddenly brings in a whole new set of questions having to do with totality in the Hegelian sense: “Let us wage war on totality; let us be witness to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences (*différends*) and save the honor of the name.”⁵⁹ Lyotard is here attacking both official or genteel realism and *transavanguardia*, or facile pastiche, both of which fundamentally fail to ask any difficult questions of reality itself. So much is unobjectionable. But the passionate last-minute assault on “totality,” while hardly unexpected in itself, is puzzling in this context. It is clear enough that Lyotard’s equation of the failures (or evasions) of current art with Hegelian totality involves a very different interpretation of Hegel than our own, and there is no point in repeating our earlier

comments on the subject. The problem for us, however, is not Lyotard's reading of Hegel but his reading of Kant.

Lyotard's distinction may well be the same one identified in Thomas Weiskel's classic *The Romantic Sublime* as that between the sublime proper and the "secondary or problematic sublime" which, like Lyotard's bad "modernism," is essentially nostalgic.⁶⁰ Weiskel, however, understands something that Lyotard explicitly rejects: the sublime proper requires the notion of totality; without it we are left with what Lyotard condemned as the merely modern. At the very outset of Kant's discussion of the sublime, when he begins to draw the distinction between the sublime and the beautiful, he emphasizes the importance of totality: "But the sublime can also be found in a formless object, either [as] in the object or because the object prompts us to present it, while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of its totality."⁶¹ The last phrase here is essential. Unrepresentability alone doesn't constitute the sublime. The sublime, rather, requires the capacity to recognize that the sublime object is conceptually totalizable—in fact, it positively requires that we do so totalize it—at the same time as we fail to totalize it aesthetically as we do with ordinary objects. The sublime could be summarized as the simultaneous experience of aesthetic unboundedness and conceptual totalization. Now is not the time to explore the relevant passages in Kant in detail, but it would not be difficult to show that at every stage, totality ("the infinite as a whole," "the idea of the absolute whole")⁶² is absolutely central to the sublime as such. "Unboundedness" and "totality" are the fundamental conflict at the heart of the sublime. Without this conflict there is no sublime, only conceptual failure.

Our long digression on Lyotard thus leads us back to two things: first, to some less naïve conception of modernism as a moment in literary history and, second, to the original Kantian presentation of the sublime as the conflict between totality and unrepresentability. But while we will want to retain Lyotard's observation that modernism (now in the vulgar literary-historical sense) is intimately bound up with a certain mode of the sublime, we cannot fail to note that we have gotten far ahead of ourselves. We began this section with Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's account of the first emergence of the "literary absolute" in the post-Kantian moment of early German romanticism, a full century prior to the emergence of a distinctively modernist literature. Indeed, the genre of the fragment, as practiced by Schlegel's circle at Jena, mobilizes precisely the same logic that we will see in the modernist sublime. Nonetheless, there is plainly a difference between literary romanticism and modernism, one which surely has something to do with the "derealization" of the object world cited by Lyotard. The terms by means of which this transition can be understood are to be found within the Kantian sublime itself. The difference between romanticism and modernism—within the single, romantico-modern conception of literature—might be identified, perhaps too schematically, with the difference between the mathematically and the dynamically sublime, the shift from the thought of the infinite itself to the confrontation with its embodiment in the sublime object.⁶³

Criticism, unsurprisingly, registers this shift. T. E. Hulme's 1914 "Romanticism and Classicism," for example, repudiates the "spilt religion" of romanticism in

favor of a literature of “small, dry things.”⁶⁴ It almost goes without saying that the terms of Hulme’s repudiation are thoroughly romantic. The philosophical excess carried by art in Hulme’s antiromanticism is precisely that put into play by the Kantian impasse: if reality “could come into contact with sense and consciousness, art would be useless and unnecessary. . . . [T]he function of the artist is to pierce through here and there . . . the veil placed between us and reality.”⁶⁵ (It may serve as a measure of the ubiquity of this movement to modernism that Victor Shklovsky’s rejection of symbolism—almost exactly contemporary with the Hulme essay—in favor of a practice that would, famously, “make the stone *stony*,” unfolds along lines that are congruent with Hulme’s.⁶⁶) The metaphor of the veil is, also, of course, unmistakably romantic.⁶⁷ What occurs here is not a radical break with romanticism but a more subtle shift in emphasis onto matter as such as the means of access to the absolute experience beyond the veil: Hulme’s poetry of “finite things,” John Crowe Ransom’s “physical poetry,” or Shklovsky’s poetry of the “artfulness of an object.”⁶⁸

This critical tendency, whose philosophical counterpart would be phenomenology’s Husserlian slogan “To the things themselves!”⁶⁹ resonates profoundly with a tendency that was already deeply inscribed in modernist practice. In James Joyce’s *Stephen Hero*, written just after the turn of the twentieth century, Stephen’s aesthetic theory hinges precisely on the apprehension of the thing-in-itself: first as something discrete, then as something with a form, and finally as something that is, mutely, stubbornly, and infungibly, “*that* thing which it is.”⁷⁰ Ezra Pound wrote that the first “principle” of modern poetry was “the direct treatment of the ‘thing.’”⁷¹ William Carlos Williams’s famous line from *Paterson* can be taken as a manifesto-in-miniature: “no ideas but in things”⁷² reaffirms the value of “seeing the thing itself without forethought or afterthought but with great intensity.”⁷³ And so on.

What is clear, then, is that while the absolute as such becomes in the modernist period an object of ridicule—Hulme’s “circumambient gas”—the problematic of the absolute, of the fragmentary representation of the unrepresentable, remains as central as ever, only now condensed into matter. This historical shift, the movement from the mathematically to the dynamically sublime, runs from the ability to postulate the infinite without being able adequately to present it to a kind of shock at the confrontation with brute materiality, from the radical inaccessibility of the supersensible Idea to the radical inaccessibility of the *Ding an sich*, from symbolism to defamiliarization, from romanticism to Hulme’s “classicism” or modernism. Doubtless the dynamically sublime undergoes a certain domestication, however, as it makes its way into modernism: from “shapeless mountain masses piled on one another in wild disarray, with their pyramids of ice, or the gloomy raging sea”⁷⁴ to, say, a red wheelbarrow.

Or perhaps not. In Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus condenses in a phrase what is presumably something like Joyce’s early theory of the epiphany: “God is a shout in the street.”⁷⁵ This is, on one hand, a reformulation of the romantic theory of the fragment.⁷⁶ But it might also remind us, in its equation of altogether incommensurate registers of being, of a well-known similar paradox in Hegel: “the being

of Spirit is a bone.”⁷⁷ Here (in the discussion of phrenology in *Phenomenology of Spirit*) the representational problematic of the sublime is understood differently than it had been in Kant’s *Critique*. It is not that the skull somehow actually embodies the truth of the subject (that the “sublime object” somehow allows us to be aware of an essence that cannot be represented); rather, the skull represents the fact that there is no subject in the positive sense that phrenology dreams of—the inertness and absurdity of the skull only reminds us that it might as well be the skull as anything else. If we read the modernist sublime in this way—as Žižek puts it, converting “the lack of the signifier into the signifier of the lack”⁷⁸—then the privileged signifier of the modernist *thing*, rather than presenting in the humbleness of objects an unrepresentable Being, signifies a lack, the absolute absence of a certain kind of content.

But what is this lack, and why the *thing*? With the Hegelian example, the movement between the lack of the signifier and the signifier of the lack is metonymic: the skull assumes the dimensions of Spirit just because it happens to be convenient and suitably empty. If we remember that in the modernist era, the “age of mechanical reproduction,” the *thing* has acquired a whole new and mystified mode of being on the assembly line, it may not be too much to say that the unassuming *thing* comes to represent metonymically the entire system of productive forces, the social totality. Or rather, as we saw in the phrenology example, it precisely does not represent this system—which does not in any case exist as a positive substance, as a One—but stands in for the lack of any concept of it. The real object of (representational) desire is—as in the Lacanian explication of the “‘perverse’ fixation”—metonymically displaced.⁷⁹ As with the skull, there could not be a less promising signifier than the mass-produced thing, which, as is well known, is systematically deprived of all traces of its production. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that self-conscious attempts to theorize the *thing*—in Heidegger, for example—are led into a marked nostalgia for an older form of production, and for the set of cultural pathways that went along with this older mode and whose modern analogs are steadfastly refused. (In fact, compared to the subjectivities born with the mass-produced object world, the old feudal master of the Hegelian narrative, whose distinguishing trait was utter alienation from the reality of his material existence, appears positively earthy by comparison—as will be seen in our readings of Ford Madox Ford’s novels in chapter 4.) The *thing* does not represent or provide some kind of mystical quasi-representational access to this new productive totality; instead, merely convenient metonymically to the great mutation in productive power, it signifies the impossibility of representing the field of productive forces from within the field of commodities.

Needless to say, this representational dilemma is not faced uniformly by everybody; in its modernist form it is proper to a certain mode of subjectivity and a certain position within the economic order. And with this realization we find ourselves suddenly free of the claustrophobic atmosphere of the logic of modernism and able to consider a different set of approaches to the same problem, namely—to get ahead of ourselves—the literature of decolonization, where, in a rather different sense than Fanon had in mind, “the Third World . . . faces Europe

like a colossal mass whose aim should be to try to resolve the problems to which Europe has not been able to find the answers.”⁸⁰ No doubt it would be possible to think of other, European late avatars of the romantico-modern conception of literature, not least in the postmodern condensation of the newly global and instantaneous forces of production into the relatively puny figure of the individual body, its pains and pleasures, and its decay. But this would be a relatively static and essentially external mutation, in every way less dramatic than the seizure of the literary itself at the very moment that the colonized world breaks free of the colonial yoke.

But first, we must remember that the modernist sublime was, within the terms set out by Lukács, utopian. It fulfilled the function of uniting, at the level of thought, the intellectual antinomies opened up by the rift that runs through capitalism—subject and object, noumenon and phenomenon—by means of the sublime object that was supposed to represent the unrepresentable totality: the shout that signifies God, the wheelbarrow that signifies “so much.” But the trick lurking in the aesthetic is that it is utopian “only *in so far* as these [contradictions] become aesthetic.”⁸¹ This is not a quibble but an absolute reversal, a cancellation that repeats, in quite other terms, the Hegelian reduction of the sublime outlined above. The secret truth is that the Kantian noumenon is fictional through and through; that the very condition of access to the Idea is that it originate in ideology; that aesthetic utopia comes into being only at the expense of aestheticizing the problems it resolves; that the Being or totality to which modernism promises access is a mystification. At this point it might occur to us that, historically, modernism’s aesthetic utopia has a counterpart in the quite different (specifically, socialist) political utopia imagined by the great wave of European political struggles following the Soviet revolution. Precisely to the extent that canonical modernism puts into practice the Lukácsian structure outlined above, it becomes, regardless of any particular politics, antagonistic to politics as such. Modernism is utopian only in so far as it refuses utopia.

As Lukács makes clear, this antagonism is a kind of complementarity in that both aesthetic and political utopia represent solutions, incommensurate with each other and originating from different positions within the economic order, to the same set of problems. (That this structure is explicitly inscribed in the idea of literature from the very beginning can be clearly seen in Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*.)⁸² If the deep bifurcation between aesthetic and political utopia in modernism marks the radicalization of a more ambiguous dual impulse in the romanticism of Schlegel’s circle⁸³ (which develops, quite consciously, in the shadow of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic reorganization of feudal space), then we should not be surprised to discover this ambiguity once more in the literature of decolonization, which unfolds in a third revolutionary moment.

Four overlapping series: within the larger series (philosophy-literature-theory, to which we will return shortly), a narrower literary sequence (romantic-modernist-postcolonial), which corresponds to a representational shift (mathematically sublime to dynamically sublime to, as we shall see shortly, the evacuation of the

sublime), and ultimately to a series of historical crises (the French, Russian, and anticolonial revolutions). It needs to be remembered of this third and final moment that postcolonial literature is literature in precisely the romantico-modern sense: postcolonial literature bears a specific ontological burden that differentiates it both from other art forms in formerly colonized countries (it is no accident that there is no such field as “postcolonial music,” for example, even though much of the world’s most interesting and culturally important music is produced on postcolonial territory), and from the status that quite “literary” texts like *Al Inkishafi* would have had in precolonial times. That postcolonial literature is literature should go without saying. But, as Gayatri Spivak has pointed out in a quite different context, the “theoretical sophistication” that is taken for granted in European texts, which demands that a specific hermeneutic be devised for each work (this exigency is precisely what is implied by the romantic invention of theory), is all too often denied to postcolonial cultural production, which is reduced—not only for a relatively naïve audience but also in academic multicultural discourse—to mere raw material, “the repository of an ethnic ‘cultural difference’”: or, one might add, of the specifically local or subjective effects of a “clash of cultures.”⁸⁴ Works from the independence period, no matter how complex, are perpetually submitted to a hermeneutic that mines them for primarily ethnographic and sometimes historical evidence. Such a literal-minded mode of reading is, of course, possible as one approach among others; one could easily read, say, Joyce’s *Dubliners*, Ford’s *Parade’s End*, or Lewis’s *Tarr* in precisely this way. As the dominant approach to postcolonial literature, however, the assumption that one already knows how to read it inflicts a flattening violence. More important, this violence, as benevolent as it may believe itself to be, cannot be innocent: it is not merely a blindness but a refusal of the properly eidaesthetic project of postcolonial literature, a refusal to recognize its appropriation of the problem of the absolute, understood explicitly now as the social totality.

But with this we are prepared to understand the real difference imposed by the anticolonial *prise de parole*. It is perfectly reasonable to anchor this difference initially in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic and the epistemologically mutilating position of the master vis-à-vis his laboring bondsman (which mutilation would also explain the metropolitan containment of postcolonial writing within a hermeneutic of cultural expression), as long as we understand that this dialectical unity is the totality that each seeks to represent, though in quite different ways and with quite different possibilities of success. The “mimetic purchase” or apparent representational immediacy of much postcolonial literature may also be situated in this dialectic, but this does not then allow us either to mistake representational urgency for naïveté, or to abdicate the responsibility, having felt Schlegel’s intimation that one “might have absolutely no feeling” for the resonance of the text before one, to search patiently for further allegorical registers. It was suggested earlier that as postcolonial literature takes over the project of the literary, it also takes over and refunctions many of the tropes and topoi of European modernism. It does not seem very useful, therefore, to describe the difference between modernism and the literature of decolonization in terms of some

relative lack of interest in form or in some real representational immediacy, if this is understood as a kind of naïveté or obstinacy—however bracing or salutary. Instead, we might think of this difference as marking the emergence of a new kind of consciousness, a shift similar in form to Hegel’s “end of art” but within the literary itself: a shift from the “poetry of the imagination to the prose of thought.”⁸⁵ What is new in the anticolonial *prise de parole* is its refusal or evacuation of the whole problem, central to modernism, of the thing-in-itself: the evacuation, that is, of the whole structure of the sublime.

We remember that this problem, the mainspring of modernist defamiliarization and so-called difficulty, is ultimately the symptom of a certain position in the economic order and represents a mutilated but real striving after the utopian representation of the absent totality.⁸⁶ The literature of decolonization takes over this striving, the eidaesthetic project itself, but from a quite different position within the global division of labor; in so doing, it hollows out the equivocal structure of the sublime (which, meanwhile, begins to be supplanted in the First World by the category of the beautiful, embodied in advertising and the “serious” book market).⁸⁷ The totality is no longer to be thought of as a mystical substance, accessible in quasi-religious form through the fetishized “host” of the fragment or the thing-in-itself, but rather as no more than a necessary fiction in a globalized world; a world, that is to say, where the truth of any event (or any “culture”) resides more or less outside itself. To fail to attempt a strategic map of the totality, to pretend that one could possibly narrate the particular without providing some account of the universal, would be more profoundly ideological than any (necessarily) flawed attempt. Could we imagine, for example, Achebe’s brilliant *Arrow of God*, the story of what might be called the “nervous breakdown” of a village priest, without a simultaneous narration of the intimate rhetorical interference offered by the Christian narrative?⁸⁸ This narrative, in turn, could not be introduced without depicting the conflicted ideology of the British imperial project; which could not be depicted without representing capitalism in the form of extraction of raw materials and the introduction of a cash economy; which itself entails a sketch of the crisis in capitalism occurring in Europe concurrent with the narrative; which itself leads back to the (secret) delicacy and impermanence of cultural forms in general and to a genuinely utopian possibility.

But it should be clear that utopia no longer takes its positive, potentially totalitarian form—the mystical City of God, the ideal of the Harmonious Man, the impossible, totalitarian solution to a world of conflicts, which would only be, at best, an idealization of our own world anyhow. Instead, utopia is understood here, in keeping with Hegel’s critique of Plato’s *Republic*,⁸⁹ precisely as something negative, nothing other than a lack or contradiction in the actually existing social totality whose presence hints at an as yet unimaginable future. The future, insofar as this word is used in a nontrivial way, cannot be represented except as a lack: as the Mozambiquan writer Mia Couto puts it in his story “The Flags of Beyondward,” “the destiny of a sun is never to be beheld.”⁹⁰ Positive utopias—like Plato’s *Republic*, the cyber-utopias of our own recent past, or the popular futurisms of the 1950s—cannot think the future; they can only rearticulate the actual

in futuristic form. The negative version of utopia, only available in genuinely political moments, is utopia stripped down to its naked essence. It is the bare thought, emerging from the nearness of the rift or set of contradictions that characterize social life under capitalism, that things might really be otherwise.⁹¹

As we all know, the utopian trajectory suggested by the writings of the period of decolonization was hijacked, as Fanon feared it might be, by national bourgeoisies only too happy to profit through the old economic relationships and to celebrate their private wealth as a collective triumph. The great period of utopian anticolonial literature in Africa is followed in the postcolonial moment by a literature of corruption, of stagnation—to a surprising degree, a literature of feces.⁹² It is tempting to say that with the disillusionment of the post-independence period, the utopian energies contained in modernism by its own conditions of possibility are, in the case of the literature of decolonization, contained by history itself. But history is not external. The literature of decolonization, as literature, does not come with an epistemological or ideological guarantee merely because it is written from the relative position of the bondsman—which is in any case only an allegorical figure whose geographic representational value was already receding with the postcolonial reorganization of accumulation. The colonizer/colonized dialectic, indispensable for understanding the historical dynamics of post-World War II global politics, cannot be given foundational authority or be understood to describe even that period without excess: the domain of the colonized, like that of the colonizer, has its own “lords” and its own “bondsmen,” with greater or lesser degrees of collusion among homologous groups in each space. (If “hybridity” can be thought without contradiction it must refer to something like this structure.) The literature of decolonization, in turn, mystifies its own conditions of possibility and dissembles its interest in the ascendancy of a national bourgeoisie. In his extraordinarily insightful work on postcolonial disillusion, Neil Lazarus has said of the generation of African anticolonial intellectuals that their optimism was “so naïve . . . as to seem culpable in retrospect.”⁹³ More often than not the utopian element in the African literature of independence, while anything but a mere aesthetic compensation, is nonetheless purely abstract. As long as utopia is only the abstract negation of the colonial system, everyone can agree on it because it lacks the concrete content—the radical reorganization of property relations—that would necessarily impose division and dissent. Neither is this lack of specificity innocent: in the political realm it allows the national bourgeoisie, without apparent contradiction, to pursue its own goals under the cover of revolution. Merely by being literature, moreover, the literature of decolonization presupposes a certain division of labor which it does nothing concrete to oppose, even as it is genuinely critical of many of its effects. If modernism can be considered, in a sense, “genuinely” utopian after all because it does finally yield up the secret of its own failure, the genuinely utopian literature of decolonization already contains within itself the seeds of its own defeat.

This seemingly brings us to a kind of dead end. But we should keep in mind that the First World 1960s, and postmodernism more generally, are the direct inheritors of the decolonization movement. The apparently independent and

quintessentially U.S. phenomena of the civil rights movement and the protest against the war in Vietnam, for example, are coordinated through and take their meaning from the worldwide expansion of the struggle against colonialism. The pan-African aspect of the civil rights movement is misunderstood if it is considered to be based solely on the valorization of common cultural roots; fundamental to such identification is the possibility of political solidarity with the decolonizing world. And we are so used to thinking of Vietnam in cold war terms that we have all but forgotten that the Viet Minh was first an independence movement and only later a communist party; the refusal to serve in Vietnam, played out in other contexts and other territories in Europe, is a refusal to recognize the legitimacy of colonial domination.⁹⁴ In more general terms, we might think of the relationship between the Third World 1960s and our own postmodern, globalized moment as exemplifying a Marxian insight that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have radicalized in *Empire* and *Multitude*, namely that “resistance precedes power.”⁹⁵ Rather than seeing capital’s positive side as its dynamism, Hardt and Negri place that dynamism in the hands of living labor, which has at every step forced capital to reorganize. In this model, the current reorganization of capital called globalization is an essentially reactive regrouping after the disintegration of classical imperialism at the hands of the anticolonial movements.

Which returns us to our original, larger series: philosophy-literature-theory. For the utopian impulse that recedes in postcolonial writing reappears with the emergence of theory: Foucault’s disappearing face in the sand or the “as yet unnameable” that marks Derrida’s writings testify, if not to any particular future, then at least to the decisive end of the present. On the surface, however, nothing could seem as parochially European as theory, and indeed Edward Said and others have criticized theory for not engaging sufficiently with the postcolonial world.⁹⁶ But all theory is postcolonial theory: it owes its very existence to the struggle against colonial domination and its echo in the political urgency of the First World 1960s. The initial designation “poststructuralism” refers to Saussure’s legacy to be sure, but also and more importantly to Lévi-Strauss and a crisis in French anthropology that V. Y. Mudimbe has identified as part of a more general moment of European cultural doubt when confronted with the illegitimacy of the colonial venture.⁹⁷ Derrida’s classic “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”⁹⁸ is an exegesis of this crisis—the inability to posit any longer the difference between engineer and bricoleur, an inability that is itself the symptom of the impossibility of legitimizing the colonial project in the face of anticolonial resistance. The very possibility of imagining “Western Culture” as no more than “myth today”—and it is no accident that Barthes’s primary example of contemporary myth is the image of an African soldier saluting the French flag—emerges from the fissure opened up by this crisis.⁹⁹ We should not forget either that the secret determinant of everything in Foucault’s *The Order of Things* turns out to be anthropology. To be sure, a specifically philosophical meaning is given to this word, but we must remember that the climax of Foucault’s text, the emergence of theory and the end of humanism, arises precisely out of a crisis in ethnology, which is understood not as a purely epistemic phenomenon but in its relationship to French

imperialism, the “relation that can bring [European thought] face to face with all other cultures as well as with itself.”¹⁰⁰ Foucault’s introduction to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* draws the connection between the Vietnamese anticolonial struggle and European political developments on the first page; the decisiveness of this connection for theory is pointed to everywhere in *Anti-Oedipus* itself, where colonialism becomes a key to understanding the imposition of both the Oedipal figure and capitalism everywhere.¹⁰¹ No doubt there are other examples—indeed, even Pierre Bourdieu, whose work perennially arouses the suspicion of a parochial Frenchness, begins from a critique of ethnography motivated directly by the Algerian war, which is also the occasion for Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*—but these will suffice to sketch the point. Our own present—from the reorganization of Capital all the way up to the reorganization of knowledge, not to mention the boomeranging effects of decades of disastrous U.S. foreign policy—is the product of a history of anticolonial struggle.¹⁰²

Totality, Allegory, and History

This does not bring us to the end of the eidaesthetic itinerary, and we will return in our final chapter to the contemporary history of the eidaesthetic. In the intervening chapters, our aim will be to capture this dual project—the grasping toward the representation of the rift or set of contradictions that produces the social totality, a representation that at the same time discloses a utopian desire—as it plays out between modernism and African literature. Insofar as our work in these chapters will be interpretive, it will be methodologically useful to translate the structure we have been discussing into more explicitly hermeneutic terms. Here we might note, no doubt too quickly, that the position maintained in different forms of the absolute throughout the eidaesthetic itinerary is congruent with that occupied by the *anagogic* in the allegorical tradition.

This identification may initially seem more problematic than useful. The canonical illustration of the fourfold method of allegorical reading—the successive derivations of the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogic meanings of the biblical text, referring respectively to the historical meaning of the Hebrew Bible, its prefiguration of the New Testament, its ethical import, and finally to its disclosure of “eternal glory”—is Dante’s reading of Psalm 114:

Now if we look at the letter alone, what is signified to us is the departure of the sons of Israel from Egypt during the time of Moses; if at the allegory, what is signified to us is our redemption through Christ; if at the moral sense, what is signified to us is the conversion of the soul from . . . sin to the state of grace; if at the anagogical, what is signified to us is the departure of the sanctified soul from bondage to the corruption of this world into the freedom of eternal glory. And although these mystical senses are called by various names, they all may be called allegorical.¹⁰³

The key element of this interpretive machine, as we will shortly see more clearly, is that not only this verse but ultimately any biblical passage, no matter what path

it takes through the infinite possibilities generated by the literal, allegorical, and moral levels, is ultimately to be understood in the light of eternal glory. Both the biblical anagogic meaning and the postromantic absolute, the totality to which fragmentary representation refers, are the ultimate resting points of all signification within their respective systems, the absent signifieds that guarantee the meaning of a signifier that in itself would be merely fragmentary and infinitely interpretable. Like the anagogic, totality is a “nodal point” that binds the signifier to the signified for the subject caught up in the signifying machine.

We have learned to be wary of such ultimate significations, and we will return to this problem shortly. Meanwhile, the logic of allegory contains peculiarities that will clarify aspects of the current project. The Greek *allēgoria*, “speaking otherwise,” implies not only a complex symbolic act but also a social one: *agoreuō* is not only to speak but to speak publicly or politically: *agorēphi*, in assembly. Allegorical language is charged with social effectivity. If the relevance of this etymological moment to the seemingly hermetic fourfold scheme that comes down to us through Aquinas and Dante seems obscure, we might recall that in its original formulation in Saint Augustine’s *On Christian Doctrine*, Christian allegory has a specifically missionary purpose: it is a means by which “the Church of Christ is able to destroy all sorts of superstitions in those who come to it and to incorporate them into itself.”¹⁰⁴ Allegory serves the socially integrative function of subsuming whole signifying systems into its own regime of meaning, turning them into mere fragments of a signifying machine oriented toward eternal glory. As can be seen in Dante’s reading of Psalm 114, for example, allegory manages to preserve the truth of the Hebrew Bible while bringing it within the narrative of Christian redemption. The exodus is not any less factual for being the sign of something else, but the nature of its truth has fundamentally changed. The utility of this hermeneutic machine for evangelization is tremendous: nothing has to be made false for it to mean something else, too. Allegory, then, is not a machine that interprets merely for the sake of interpretation or even for the revelation of theological truth. Rather, it interprets in the service of a social agenda—in this case, the expansion and maintenance of the community of believers. Missionary discourse can expand this community not simply by destroying other beliefs—though of course it does this, and sometimes crudely—but by bringing other narratives into itself, by subsuming their truth into the anagogic truth of Christian allegory.¹⁰⁵ This social activity is the *effective truth* of Christian allegory, as distinct from the *interpretive truth* it wishes to reveal.

We might pause here to take note of a logical structure essential to the allegorical machine. If the original function of allegory is to animate the words of the Hebrew Bible with the spirit of the New Testament so that the former comes to signify the coming of Christ in advance, then in missionary discourse, traditions seemingly in competition with Christianity can turn out to have been obscurely about Christian salvation all along. This temporal quirk gives us a clue to a deeper constitutive structure that would seem to rule out allegory as a viable mode of reading for a secular text: the allegorical meaning that seems to emerge from the reading of a text must instead have been posited in advance. What emerges from

the allegorical reading, in other words, is precisely the interpretive a priori (prior with regard to any particular reading, but belated in relation to the text itself), which has miraculously circled around to become the endpoint of interpretation. Augustine is actually quite frank about this:

Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all. Whoever finds a lesson there useful to the building of charity, *even though he has not said what the author may be shown to have intended in that place*, has not been deceived, nor is he lying in any way.¹⁰⁶

The biblical text must always “turn out” to mean something that was programmed in advance. Only faith prevents allegory from collapsing into tautology.

The scandal here is not for Christian allegory, for which the centrality of faith was hardly a secret. Instead, what is unmasked by Augustine’s exposition is fundamental to interpretation itself. And in fact it is hardly a revelation today that interpretation is no more than the strategic—one might substitute “political” or “pedagogical”—arrest of the movement of signification, the attempt to center the infinite play of the chain of signifiers, to stem the flow of meaning in a way that is never justified by the text “in itself.” But to leave things at this, to return to this fact anxiously, repeatedly, to pile precautions on top of hesitations, to try at all costs to avoid the accusation of naïveté (ultimately, to seek escape from this breathless interior through an unjustifiable leap that then must assume monstrous proportions), betrays a certain fear. Not a fear of error, of accidentally making a claim that cannot be rigorously justified, but a fear of truth. Here again we might turn to Hegel’s critique of Kant in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The rigorous exclusion of the thing-in-itself from cognition, the limiting of experience to the phenomenal realm in the interest of avoiding the naïve trap of mistaking the phenomenon for the thing-in-itself, all bespeak a fear of error. But what is in fact excluded here, since the procedure “presupposes that cognition which, since it is excluded from the [noumenal realm], is surely outside of the truth as well” is even the possibility of an encounter with truth.¹⁰⁷ The absence of the guarantee of truth is made over into the guarantee of the absence of truth. For the same reason, it is not enough to point to the strategic function of the transcendental signified while limiting oneself rigorously to the interior of a signifying system whose subordination to that signified demands constant vigilance. In this way the error of confusing the signifier with the signified can be avoided. But what is ruled out in advance is not only naïveté but what truth naïveté might encounter.

This critique of interpretive skepticism does nothing, however, to resolve the dilemma of interpretive tautology—a problem for all interpretation, brought to a level of self-consciousness by the allegorical tradition. For a solution we must return to the notion of effective truth derived above from Augustine’s discussion of allegory. As we have seen, the anagogic truth put into question by interpretive skepticism is not the only truth of the allegorical machine. Faith seems to be a mere prop supporting the production of interpretive truth, preventing the allegorical circle from collapsing into tautology. But the production of faith is in fact the very truth

of that circle. A signifying system that seems to be supported by an external belief is in fact oriented toward producing that belief as its effective truth. The paradox lies in the fact that the truth is in the process (the production of faith) only to the extent that truth is believed to be in the product (the produced interpretation). The effective truth toward which the system is oriented can only be generated if quite a different (interpretive) truth is aimed at by the subject caught up in it. The lesson here is that the anagogic truth, which appeared in relation to the effective truth to be merely a secondary and mystified truth, cannot be simply abandoned once its essentially unjustifiable nature is recognized. Without it, the effective truth becomes a mere demand and ultimately an appeal to force. Allegory is in the end nothing more than a rhetoric, but a rhetoric whose logic is founded on a commitment to Truth.

In spite of everything, we imagine ourselves to live in one of those eras when, in Hegelian terms, “antithesis is in abeyance.”¹⁰⁸ History, in the form of the contradictions and tensions that threaten to rupture a social totality from the inside and emerge from its ruins as a new form of ethical life, is successfully kept at bay, and subjectivity exists at a remove from the possibility of history as anything other than the static passage of time punctuated by disaster, the aimless flipping of blank pages interleaved with unrelated and inexplicable atrocities. There is no way of knowing, from within the present, if our current experience of history reflects a real stasis or whether, on the contrary, the famously ahistorical or anti-historical character of the postmodern age is no more than a fantasy, a defense against a history that lurks on the edge of consciousness, against a nightmare that has taken refuge just beyond the streetlamps of neoliberal discourse.¹⁰⁹ Readers will recognize in what follows an approach, generally in line with a tradition in which Theodor Adorno and Fredric Jameson mark pivotal moments, that challenges this apparent separation of the subject (to make explicit what is often assumed, the First-World subject) from history. As Adorno bluntly puts it, “History is the content of artworks.”¹¹⁰ This dictum should not be confused with historicism in the ordinary sense, which often pretends as if it were enough simply to situate literary works in their own moment in empirical history, as though in themselves literary works were merely existent and absolved from becoming.¹¹¹ But the meaning of any literary work that is still vital remains fundamentally open to history. This is the meaning (quite aside from any preference for a certain incompleteness of form, what Schlegel called *Härte* or roughness) of Schlegel’s pronouncement that the “real essence” of “the romantic kind of poetry”—that is, literature in the modern sense—is that it “should forever be becoming.” The Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz points out, for example, that the great nineteenth-century novelist Machado de Assis had not been a particularly important writer before 1964. But nothing new was discovered in 1964 about Machado’s “context” that had not been known before; rather, the military coup of 1964 intervened directly in the meaning of Machado’s great late novels.¹¹² The method for drawing out this continuous historical sedimentation of meaning in Jameson’s introduction to *The Political Unconscious*—possibly the last word in the allegorical

tradition—cannot simply be applied as a guarantee of truth, nor can it establish, for those who are inclined against it, an “ultimately determining instance” that could justify interpretation once and for all.¹¹³ But the anagogic truth of the Hegelian tradition—narrative as the symptom of history—will here be aimed at with all sincerity. The effective truth will have to be sought elsewhere.

It might still be objected that this framework for the readings that follow—no matter how aware of its own functioning—is merely a secularization of a Christian hermeneutic. Indeed, it would not be the first time that a Marxist perspective has been derided as secretly religious. Without wanting to enmesh ourselves too deeply in Slavoj Žižek’s attempt to rescue the Christian legacy from “fundamentalist freaks,”¹¹⁴ we might concede an element of truth in the accusation while pointing out that its basic falseness resides in the word “merely.” To say that this framework “merely” secularizes Christian allegory implies that what constitutes Christianity is not a particular faith but rather a rhetorical structure whose content might as well be temporal politics as eternal glory—a gesture that empties out the content of Christianity to the point that one might as well accept the accusation as refute it. Further, the whole structure becomes something other than it had been once the relationship between effective and anagogic truth is made explicit and fully assumed—though one may always, in retrospect, see that the new structure was fully present in the old, just as one now reads Hegel through Marx. In the readings that follow, the paradox of the framework laid out above is fully operative; we have tried to show that it is also inevitable. It is legitimate, finally, to insist on calling this structure “secularized Christianity,” but only if one is willing to admit that all interpretation is, in this sense, fundamentally religious: aiming at Truth, but producing a community of agreement.

One senses, however, that the objection “Marxism = secularized religion” goes beyond simple questions of method. One might treat this equation as a misperception to be dispelled or, with Žižek, to be endorsed in a particular way, but for the moment we can restrict ourselves to pointing out that with regard to the particular problems such an equation means to imply (a rigid teleology, a myth of salvation, a corruptible priesthood, a cult of infallibility, recourse to a “greater good” that justifies atrocities carried out in its name), market liberalism (with its teleology of development, the “sin” and “redemption” of Third-World corruption and structural adjustment programs, a technocracy acting entirely in the interests of the core economies, a discourse that automatically represents its own failures as pathological rather than structural, and an utter indifference to human suffering inflicted in the name of “open markets” and “economic efficiency”) has much more to worry about than Marxism. Recent work by Third-World-oriented theologians has begun to notice that in terms of its formal procedures, “the discourse of the World Bank’s analysis and policy prescriptions for Africa closely resembles the discourse of fundamentalist theology.”¹¹⁵ If Marxism retains anything at all from the Christian tradition, it is precisely what is lacking in market fundamentalism: the Pauline doctrine of universal love.¹¹⁶

Utopian Generations

The last moment of the analysis begun here has to be completed anew in each chapter: so little can there be a gapless theory of literature that at this point even the relatively few works addressed in this book refuse to be theorized in precisely the same terms. This apparently innocuous warning might be radicalized into a thoroughgoing questioning of the categories that organize this book. Certainly it would not be hard to find examples of what is commonly called modernism and of literature written during the heyday of the African independence movements that would fit into our schema uncomfortably at best. Just as surely, the dynamic elaborated above can be discerned in other contexts altogether. It seems we are presented with two incompatible options. The first, nominalist option would be to identify the problem with categorization as such: there is no such thing as modernist literature or African literature; there are only works. The other, stereotypically idealist one, would be to say that any work is modernist or African only if and insofar as it conforms to the ideas sketched out above. Caught between these two unsatisfactory options, we might then find ourselves in the predicament of Paul de Man, whose title “Literary History and Literary Modernity” contained “no less than two . . . absurdities—a most inauspicious beginning.”¹¹⁷ One of the lessons of that essay and its sequel, “Lyric and Modernity,” was that once a particular tendency is established as constitutive of a literary-historical entity (say, modernism, or postcolonial literature), not only will exceptions immediately spring to mind, but the tendency in question will suddenly be found at work in one form or another throughout literary history. Isn’t the dynamic laid out above as constitutive of modernism a feature of literary language more generally (Herrick’s “careless shoestring,” for example, reproducing the logic of the fragment, of the humble thing as the little piece of the Real)? And isn’t the “postcolonial” refusal or evacuation of this logic an equally perpetual impulse, indeed virtually implied by the first? Our own theorization, after all, was authorized by a reference to Hegel, for whom postcolonial literature did not exist and who had rather discreditable things to say about Africa.

There are several ways to answer this. The easiest would be to take refuge in the dialectic of quantity and quality: at the point where an occasional feature becomes an organizing principle we must establish some sort of break. A more interesting solution is suggested by Fredric Jameson’s recent suggestion that “the canon, or Literature as such . . . is simply modernism.”¹¹⁸ This is to say that the canonization of high modernism in the United States after World War II effectively decided the terms by which all literature was to be evaluated, so that “literary history” in effect becomes the prehistory of modernism. The new critics, in other words, effectively repeat the founding gesture of the romantics with regard to literature itself: the moment modernism comes to exist, it is discovered always to have existed. But this second option—which has the advantage of both preserving and trumping de Man’s insights, since the features he finds throughout literary history are precisely those associated with “literary modernity”—in fact relies

on the first. As we saw in our discussion of Lyotard and modernism, it is only in the light of the break that the break can be deconstructed. Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, which traces that dialectic back to Homer, could not have been written without the prior isolation of the Enlightenment as a discrete object of analysis and critique. That the deconstruction of literary history relies on literary history is trivial and quasi-tautological; more consequent is the fact that the conclusions drawn from the deconstructive moment continue to presuppose what has been deconstructed. The point here is that while literary-historical categories cannot be rigorously sustained, neither is there any perspective that is rigorously free of dependence on them. We must, in other words, be vigilant in our use of literary categories even as we have little choice but to use them. The tendencies we have theorized under the names of modernism and African literature from the moment of independence may in fact be only two strands in a much more complex history and may, as the title of this book implies, be discernible at other times and other traditions entirely. When we try to be rigorous about defining them as positive entities, modernism and African literature tend (like capital and labor or the First and Third Worlds) to evaporate before our very eyes. But what the preceding pages have attempted is not a description of two positive entities but the exploration of a negative one, the rift that separates them. What we have outlined, in other words, is a relationship, one that exists not only between modernism and African literature but within modernism (between, say, Proust and Dos Passos), within African literature (say, Mia Couto and Sembène Ousmane), and within individual national literatures (Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan, or Dos Passos and Mike Gold). Further, when viewed from the perspective of the postmodern recedence of the utopian horizon, as we shall have the opportunity to do in the conclusion, both strands currently under consideration appear thoroughly modernist. This is not, however, a hopeless situation. Instead, the caution it recommends is the best justification for the practice of literary interpretation.

But to which texts does one turn? The works that appear here do so not because of their canonicity or potential canonicity, but according to a logic that will unfold from chapter to chapter. While it would be foolish to claim, given the above, that there will be no arbitrariness in our selection of texts, it should be equally clear that we are not interested in "typical" works, good positive examples of this or that literary tendency: any "good example" is necessarily inadequate, only imperfectly embodying an ideal whose existence is only notional. Rather than looking for good examples, we will turn first to works that constitute an "event" in the sense proposed by Alain Badiou—the exception that breaks out of and reorganizes an existing order and is therefore at one and the same time both absolutely particular and (with regard to the field it pertains to) absolutely universal.¹¹⁹ The procedure is therefore not one of scanning the literary order for representative works but of seeking out those texts which, in reconstituting the field of possibilities at a single blow, constitute an event. Under this criterion the choices of Joyce and Achebe are nearly unavoidable—so much so that, as will have not escaped notice, our

“theory of modernism and African literature” is, thus far, at least partly a theory of Joyce and Achebe.¹²⁰

So fundamental, in fact, was the impact of each of these authors that the difficulty now becomes finding texts that manage to escape the dominion their most revolutionary works exerted once they became institutionalized—and it should be kept in mind that this dominion extends as much into a work’s past (under the sign of its “precursors”) as it does into the future of its “influence.” The first thing to look for would be texts that self-consciously attempt such a break, and we find ready examples in the most adventurous work of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, whose theater experiments explicitly reject every element of Achebean decorum up to and including the use of European languages, and in the work of Wyndham Lewis, possibly the only of Joyce’s contemporaries to have been unimpressed with him in an interesting way. It is not surprising that the most successful of their works—Lewis’s *The Childermass* and Ngugi’s Kamiriithu theater projects—are decidedly marginal texts in our contemporary canon. They are not only directly partisan works, which itself accounts for part of their marginality, but they reject the very coordinates on which critical common sense is founded. Further, we should note that while there is no direct antagonism between the works of Joyce and Achebe (indeed, they seem to share the same project, even the same “post-colonial” canon; their opposition only emerges at the formal level outlined in the foregoing pages), something different happens at the level of their opposites: Ngugi’s Marxism and Lewis’s proto-fascism, each the force behind their respective literary projects, are radically opposed.

If there is no obvious antagonism between Joyce and Achebe, however, the reason now becomes easier to discern: while Ngugi and Lewis occupy the same terrain of the political, the Joycean and Achebean projects are marginal with regard to each other. Subjectivity, whose centrality to Joycean language is obvious on even the most superficial reading, is precisely the problem that Achebe deliberately and rigorously excludes—in fact, as we shall see, the rigorous bracketing of subjectivity is one of Achebe’s most essential stylistic decisions. On the other hand, historical movement (as Abiola Irele has emphasized, the heart of Achebe’s works)¹²¹ is marginalized in Joyce’s work—in *Ulysses* by the formal limitations imposed by the single day. We will return to this phenomenon in the next chapter, but for now it may suffice to imagine that Lukács, as suspicious as he was of *Ulysses*, would have been able to work *Arrow of God* into the genealogy of the historical novel with little difficulty. The antagonism between Joyce and Achebe lies not at the level of the texts themselves but in what terrains they ground themselves in.

We find, then, that we have generated three categories: politics, subjectivity, and history. These three possible axes, whose centrality to a particular text determines the possibilities open to it, are in some degree incommensurate with each other; the relationships among them cannot be entirely symmetrical. The first thing one would say from a Hegelian perspective is that history is transcendent in relation to the other two categories: subjectivity and politics exist only within history. In that case it would seem that subjectivity and politics are history in

mediated form. However, this same move could be made from the perspective of the other two categories as well. From a psychoanalytic perspective, history and politics are only possible on the basis of the structure of subjectivity, however minimal this structure may be; and politics as such, the structure of social antagonism, occupies much the same position in the theory of hegemony. Which of the three categories is transcendent with regard to the others is therefore a choice, and one of some moment. Having cast our methodological bet with history, it remains to be seen how these categories are to be ordered. Simply saying that history is transcendent with regard to the other two categories is insufficient, since subjectivity and politics can evidently not be reduced to the same genus. While subjectivity only exists in history, politics in a sense *is* history. History only acquires content through human practice; politics is history concretely mediated. It is not, then, that politics and subjectivity are history in mediated form, but that politics is the mediation between the subject and history, and thus “higher” (that is, more concrete) and more likely to display antagonisms that are latent in more abstract moments. The antagonism we have been charting in this introduction will therefore deepen as we move across our three categories: from subjectivity to history to politics.

Our grid, however, is incomplete. We are lacking both a text that performs the Achebean evacuation of the sublime on the terrain of subjectivity—in other words, one that, paired with Joyce, would reproduce the dialectic between subjectivity and history within the realm of subjectivity—and one that, conversely, embodies the structure of the modernist sublime on the terrain of history. Whatever we find will be anomalous: since part of the very problem of the sublime as a utopian moment is that it confines itself to the realm of a subjective compensation, what kind of text will break with the sublime while remaining on the ground of subjectivity? And, conversely, what on earth could we call an “historical sublime” when the sublime itself is predicated on the suppression of history? Here must we turn neither to canonical nor to marginal works but to two “minor masterpieces” which, while tangential with regard to the dominant concerns of modernism or the literature of African independence, nonetheless bring out possibilities that went unnoticed in the dominant works: the novels of Ford Madox Ford, “historical” in a way that Lukács surely would not have recognized, and Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *L’aventure ambiguë*, which replaces the sublime with the notion, itself highly ambivalent, of authenticity.¹²² It must be emphasized once more that the procedure here has not been to juxtapose or compare works that are in some obvious way similar or that have evident genetic relationships with each other. What would that show? Rather, the pairings—Joyce and Kane, Ford and Achebe, Lewis and Ngugi—will construe each of their texts as part of a larger totality. More precisely, each pairing will play out, with increasing intensity, the dialectic sketched out above, which ultimately hinges on the status of utopia. Along all three axes, utopia is a space opened up only in the end to be foreclosed. But what is impossible for modernism (what can be understood only by entering into each work’s particular mode of the sublime, its mystified or inarticulate expression of an inchoate representational and political desire) appears more or

less clearly as a possibility in African literature of the independence period—but a possibility that contains its own negation, the seeds of its own failure.

The historical situation of neither of these periods is our own: that the utopian longing embodied in each of these texts seems naïve from a perspective that takes in the actual futures of both of these literary moments—World War II and neocolonial Africa—is an index of this fact. The unique danger of our present moment, with the disintegration of the Second World and the apparently secure victory of capitalism over all points on the globe, is that the globalization of the “free market” threatens to dress a unique historical moment in the raiment of an anthropological universal, canceling in advance any discussion of social, economic, or political alternatives. As Hardt and Negri suggest in *Empire*—a text which, despite limitations we will turn to in our final chapter, suggests the possibility of a new utopian generation—we may be witnessing the construction of a new form of global sovereignty whose domain would extend infinitely, not only geographically over the entire globe, but also temporally, ideologically projecting itself backward and forward into eternity. But the question of the future is still an urgent one, or ought to be; in our final chapter we will return to the question of our own future. In the meantime, it is good to remember that the future has sometimes seemed quite near. On the longest view—say, on the scale of Benjamin’s “Messianic time,” where each moment brings the possibility of revealing “a secret agreement between past generations and the present one”¹²³—perhaps the longing of the texts examined here will turn out to have been prophetic after all.