



Creativity in Criticism: The Kryptonite of Academic Prose Writing or the Vibranium of (Meta)Criticism?

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Abstract

Despite being an art, (meta)criticism has been treated relatively coldly like its peers in the sciences, with its academic prose writing forced to carry an objective undertone and be predominantly devoid of conscious creativity in its analyses of texts and criticism of criticism. In this regard, a question surfaces: is creativity in criticism what Kryptonite is to Kryptonians or what Vibranium is to Wakandans? Using the critiques of Abiola Irele, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, Charles Nnolim, and Fredric Jameson, I highlight the conscious creative diction of the aforementioned critics and, more importantly, demonstrate how their choice of words is not rooted in showing off their mastery of the use of language but in concretising their arguments. Analysis reveals that since readers are not purely rational beings, emotions will always play a significant role in how information is perceived, understood, and acted upon, and to ignore this aspect of human cognition in critical writing is to miss an opportunity for intense engagement. Until metacriticism stretches beyond the traditional criticism of criticism to accommodate the literary criticism of literary criticism, the criticosphere will continue to deny creativity as a crucial element of language and willingly remain shackled to bland, uninteresting academic prose writing.

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Without notice, the problem had begun when critics struck a hard distinction between creative writing and critical writing, one marked not in their differing categorisations like prose, drama, poetry and essays, research articles, reviews but in the language of expression — creative writers are expected to use creative lan-

guage while critical writers should abide by the rules of critical language. Consequently, in the academic criticosphere, research supervisors are bent on chiselling the research of their students, whether undergraduates or postgraduates, to suit what they think are the demands of academic prose writing in a way that attenuates, at best, or suffocates, at worst, creativity in criticism. In such a ‘critical’ setting, writing on a topic that harbours ‘Kryptonite’ and ‘Vibranium’ in it is to risk being accused of academic treason. As researchers are groomed in the ethics of ‘academic patriotism’ since their rookie days, critical writing has been largely devoid of conscious creativity in terms of literary figuration.

Language is inherently creative, whether it is used in a critical or an imaginative context, and creativity is a feature that allows language users to generate novel expressions and structures that many times transcend mere utilitarian communication. In this regard, creativity possesses a showy quality which is heavily frowned upon and denied in academic prose writing. Given that the adjective ‘showy’ carries a negative connotation, academic prose writing tries to dissociate itself from academes and other seemingly theatrical languages like legalese, journalese, politichese, officialese/bureaucratese, computerese, businessese, and, I dare coin one for the language of medicine, medicinese. However, even the most academic of academic prose writings can be showy, but what distinguishes it from academes is the intention of the language user. That is, while language’s creativity allows it to be showy, it is not automatically so, as discussed further in this essay.

It is important to demonstrate how even the most academic writing can default, including the sentence by Henry Fowler and Francis Fowler that has been quoted for over a century in an attempt to create an inoculation effect against complex, showy writings. Fowler and Fowler warn that “Anyone who wishes to become a good writer should endeavour, before he allows himself to be tempted by the more showy qualities, to be direct, simple, brief, vigorous, and lucid” (1). Parsing the above sentence reveals the nested clauses and phrases that somewhat defy the message of simplicity and directness it preaches, and could have been more simply and directly written in any of these ways: i) to become a good writer, one should first focus on being direct, simple, brief, vigorous, and lucid, before pursuing more showy qualities; ii) anyone who wishes to be a good writer should try to be direct, simple, brief, vigorous, and lucid. They should do this before being tempted by showy qualities; iii) a good writer must be direct, simple, brief, vigorous, and lucid. This focus should come before seeking showy qualities.

Fowler and Fowler’s warning, while advocating simplicity and directness,

demonstrates a more sophisticated and arguably less simple approach in its construction, particularly with the parenthetical insertion. The core instruction — that a good writer should strive for certain attributes — is interrupted by a subordinate clause placed between the main verb (“endeavour”) and its infinitive complement (“to be direct...”). This inserted clause (“before he allows himself to be tempted by the more showy qualities”) acts as a parenthetical thought that, while grammatically correct and serving an important semantic purpose, creates a complex sentence structure with its placement. A simpler and more direct rendering of the advice would have placed this warning either at the beginning or end of the sentence, or even in a separate sentence altogether, as seen in the illustrations above. The complexity arising from the parenthetical insertion means the reader has to hold the initial part of the main clause in their mind, course through the interruption, and then reconnect with the latter part of the main clause to fully grasp the complete thought.

The undeniable layer of syntactic density exceeds simplicity or directness in a purely structural sense. Nonetheless, the sentence remains lucid and vigorous in its message, demonstrating that complexity in structure is not necessarily antithetical to clarity or strength, especially when used deliberately to emphasise a crucial caveat. On the one hand, interrupting the flow may have been an attempt at highlighting the danger of “showy qualities” by making the reader pause before receiving the final list of virtues. Thus, although not simple in its form, it implies that even a sentence advising simplicity can employ sophisticated means to achieve its persuasive ends. On the other hand, one could argue that Fowler and Fowler, being exemplary writers themselves, wilfully allowed themselves to be tempted by ‘showy qualities’. Therefore, as seasoned literary craftsmen, the Fowlers imply that once one has mastered the fundamentals of directness, simplicity, brevity, vigour, and lucidity, one earns the right to occasionally employ more complex or ‘showy’ structures, precisely because they can do so without sacrificing clarity or impact.

The Fowlers understood that effective communication does not always follow blunt simplicity; this is why, even when they strongly proposed the preference of the “familiar word to the far-fetched. ... the concrete word to the abstract. ... the single word to the circumlocution. ... the short word to the long. ... the Saxon word to the Romance” (1), they used “compendium” on the same page and not a simpler and more common word like “collection.” Accordingly, for the sake of precision, conciseness, efficiency, flow, and disciplinary context, simple and

familiar words are not always used in academic prose even when authors like Fowler and Fowler advocate for them. The Fowlers' use of "compendium" is a deliberate choice to convey that the last rule (preferring the Saxon word) encapsulates or summarises the essence of the preceding rules rather than merely being a collection of them. This suggests a more integrated and representative nature of the final rule within their framework, further demonstrating that proponents of simplicity understand that the most accurate word, even if less common, can sometimes be the most effective.

Typically, metaphors in critical writings are not explained by the critical writers but left to be decoded by the readers, but to justify their use in the topic of this essay, the succinctness of 'Kryptonite' and 'Vibranium' needs to be explicitly projected. Following Fowler and Fowler's submission, it can be debated that those metaphors could have been substituted for simpler and more familiar words like 'weakness' and 'strength' respectively. Nevertheless, no two words can replace 'Kryptonite' and 'Vibranium' as used in this essay without losing their semantic value, and the reasons are clear.

In DC Comics, Kryptonite originates from Krypton, Superman's home planet, and it elevates its meaning beyond an external threat to an inherent vulnerability born from the very source of power itself. When applied to the idea of creativity in criticism as Kryptonite, this means that those who view creativity as a weakness in academic prose must understand that this vulnerability is not an alien intrusion but an intrinsic property of language itself. Language, which is the medium through which criticism is articulated, is creative, fluid, and capable of infinite permutations (just as Krypton teems with the raw material of Superman's undoing). This perspective acknowledges that while academic prose must rely on language, the inherent creative potential within that language, when unleashed without restraint, can paradoxically dent the clarity and systematic rigour that are hallmarks of traditional academic writing.

Therefore, this view contends that the tool used for critical analysis (language) carries within it the potential for its subversion, exactly like a Kryptonian lives in a world that has Kryptonite but must avoid it the best way it can. This way, it is not an external force attacking criticism but an internal, constitutive element of language (creativity) becoming a threat when applied in ways that deviate from academic norms. Aptly put, even as creativity (Kryptonite) is not an imported element in language (Krypton), there has to be a tendency on the part of the critical writer (Kryptonian) to constantly manage and suppress within the medium itself to maintain the desired characteristics of academic prose.

Conversely, in Marvel Comics, Vibranium represents far more than strength when applied to (meta)criticism. As a rare element whose key properties include the ability to absorb, store, and release kinetic energy, Vibranium's unique ability provides an analogy for how (meta)criticism operates within the context of creativity in criticism. Metacriticism, like criticism, is not static but constantly evolves (Brannigan; Usoro). To better illustrate this kinesis, an extensive excerpt from Burke's *The Philosophy of Literary Form* is needed. In detailing the source from which drama gets its materials, Burke writes:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress (110-111).

In this respect, creativity as Vibranium would help a (meta)critic absorb the ever-moving energy surrounding criticism, including diverse critical interpretations, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks generated from engagements that existed before them and would continue to exist after them. (Meta)criticism does not passively collect critical energies but actively processes and synthesises them. As much as Vibranium absorbs and releases refined energy, (meta)criticism releases new, higher-order insights that re-contextualise existing debates and generate novel theoretical frameworks, thereby advancing the critical discourse itself. In the words of Lalić-Krstin et al.,

For a long time, language creativity was thought of as belonging to the domain of artistic expression. However, all humans are now recognized to have the capacity for linguistic experimentation and innovation and it has been shown that creativity is very much part and parcel of our everyday language and social practices (95).

Decades of consciously using language in literary criticism to only present information and enhance arguments have resulted in the agreement by many that academic writing is dry and boring. In fact, Jonathan Wolff concludes that "It is rather hard to escape the conclusion that academic writing is boring because academics wouldn't have it any other way." Therefore, the reluctance to embrace

creativity is not only a methodological choice but a form of intellectual dishonesty. Literary criticism is a social practice, and if humans have recognised creativity in everyday language and social practice, to still champion the cause of ‘critical’ writing leads to cognitive dissonance that urgently needs to be resolved. Perhaps, academics fear that a consciously creative criticism would dilute the analysis of a literary text or distract readers from the argument made. But creativity and criticism should not be forced into mutual exclusion, as a highly creative criticism can retain its analytical depth.

Because it is discouraged, creativity in literary criticism is either subconsciously or daringly used, and this paper spotlights some of the cases where creative tools are significantly used in (meta)criticism. In “A Defence of Negritude,” Abiola Irele imports rhetorical questions from creative writing into his critical prose in a highly effective way. In one such case, Irele uses a rhetorical question to underscore the inescapable logic of his preceding argument on Negritude, compelling the reader to a shared conclusion and reinforcing the historical necessity of Negritude’s emergence. Rather than a simple declarative statement, the question implicates the reader directly and nudges them to reflect on the overwhelming evidence presented and arrive at the same inevitable understanding.

The weight of the question is amplified by the historical context Irele lays out where he details the systematic “denial of ... [the Negro’s] humanity” (9), citing Professor Balandier’s need to even title an essay “The Negro is a Man,” and recounting the atrocities of colonialism and the daily lynchings in America. This catalogue of injustices paints a haunting picture of extreme oppression. In this light, the “loud public tone, the extreme self-consciousness of the poetry of negritude” (Irele 9) is not presented as a choice but as an unavoidable consequence. Irele rhetorically asks, “But how could it be otherwise?”, thus functioning as a summary of this historical determinism, suggesting that any other response from the Negritude poets would have been illogical and even morally impossible, given the brutal realities Blacks faced.

The rhetorical question injects a strong emotional and moral force into the academic discourse, shifting the tone from a detached historical explanation to a passionate assertion of the righteousness and necessity of the Negritude movement’s form and content. The presentation of the collective experience of the Black man as so utterly dehumanising allows Irele to make it seem inconceivable to regard the poetry born from this experience as a forceful, self-conscious declaration. A reader who believed that Negritude was needless, when met with Irele’s rhetorical question rather than a declarative statement, is forced to reflect and modify

their opinion on the movement. Irele's question projects the sheer absurdity in the belief that Negritude was an overreaction, solidifying his defence by appealing not just to intellect but to a shared sense of human dignity and historical understanding, thereby making the critical analysis more impactful and memorable, like a poignant turn in a creative narrative. This effect would have been difficult to create were the question replaced with a statement like, "It could not have been otherwise."

Metaphors are one of the most dominant and resourceful creative elements used in critical writing. In Ogundipe-Leslie's essay on Stiwanism, she believes that "The word 'feminism' itself seems to be a kind of red rag to the bull of African men," and so women should "Be a stiwanist" (549). The source domain ("red rag to the bull") of the metaphor captures the intense and instinctual negative reaction that the term "feminism" often elicits from a significant portion of African men. The "red rag" symbolises feminism as a confrontational object, while the "bull" represents African men who are instinctively aggressive in their response to it, at least in Ogundipe-Leslie's portrait. But how crucial was this metaphor to the discourse? The popular misconception that it is the redness of the cape that enrages the bull makes the metaphor effective, successfully conveying a sense of immediate, irrational provocation.

However, the underlying scientific fact that it is the movement of the cape that truly provokes the bull rather than its colour (because cattle are largely colour-blind) adds a layer of subtlety that deserves to be addressed. The use of "red rag" is not used as an appendage to the belief that bulls are enraged by the redness of the cape but functions purely as an appeal to familiarity. This scientific fact clarifies that Ogundipe-Leslie's intent is not to imply a colour-based dislike, which would mean that changing the cape to, say, white would resolve the bull's hostility. Instead, she leverages the common understanding of the metaphor to underscore the truth about the nature of the aversion to feminism among African men. Therefore, the issue is not hinged on changing the colour (rebranding feminism with a different word) to soothe a superficial dislike but about addressing the underlying sensitivities and perceptions of threat that make the movement of feminist ideas so agitating to a predisposed audience. If it were about the colour, substituting Stiwanism for feminism would be a failed attempt at mollifying the anger of the bull because switching colours does not take away the cape (feminist ideology [Stiwanism]) but would still provoke the Pavlovian-charged African men (the bull) against the matador's movements.

The several strands of African feminism, like Motherism, Womanism/African

Womanism, Nego-feminism, Stiwanism, Snail-sense feminism, Femalism, among others, led to a cannonade of metaphoric descriptions by Charles Nnolim about African feminism. In Nnolim's critique, African feminism "is a house divided against itself..." ("House" 250). A "house divided" metaphorises African feminism in its use of the concrete image of a building to represent the ideology. This metaphor conveys a sense of internal conflict, disunity, and potential instability that conjures an easily graspable image that communicates a complex state of affairs much more efficiently than a literal description of "internal disagreements and factionalism within feminism." It is noteworthy that the Biblical and historical background of "a house divided" makes the metaphor very apt in its execution — no fewer words could have been more clinical.

On June 16, 1958, Abraham Lincoln declared in his famous speech, "House Divided Speech," that a house divided against itself cannot stand, in reference to the United States on the brink of a civil war over slavery. The allusion in Lincoln's speech originates from the Bible (Matthew 12:25, Mark 3:25, Luke 11:17) where Jesus states that "Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand." Considering the gravity surrounding the situations in which "a house divided" has been used, Nnolim's allusion does not only present his argument about the discordance in African feminism but forces readers to treat the discourse with the same seriousness with which the Biblical and historical antecedents are treated. Thus, the allusion bears more solemnity than just saying that African feminism has internal conflicts because a house divided is not just a house with disagreements but one that faces collapse. This implied consequence is a rhetorical move that subtly warns about the future of the African feminist movement if its internal divisions are not addressed.

Traditionally, creative writers employ intertextuality in their literary works while critics analyse intertextual properties to understand and interpret those works. But Nnolim, a critic, borrowed this feature into criticism and laced it with personification. When Achebe recounts that "There was a saying in Umuofia that as a man danced so the drums were beaten for him" (185), Nnolim "paraphrase[d] him further, [stating that] some African feminists are dancing furious step, and the feminists drums have gone mad" ("African Feminism" 195). Here, there is a theatrical portrayal of what Nnolim perceives as chaotic and misguided developments within African feminism. His intertextual reference makes it easy to immediately conjure a scene of intense, unrestrained, and chaotic energy, suggesting a movement that is not measured or strategic but rather driven by an excess

of passion that borders on frenzy. The drums in Umuofia “beat the unmistakable wrestling dance — quick, light and gay, and it came floating on the wind” (Achebe 42), but feminist drums in Nnolim’s critique lack sanity, rhythm, and coherence and have therefore become a cacophony of uncontrolled crescendo and diminuendo.

Nnolim also argued, with simile, that African feminism “looks discomfiting like the leaning tower of Pisa” (“House” 250). The Leaning Tower of Pisa is recognised for its tilt and the engineering flaw in its foundation caused by Pisa’s alluvial soil. Likening the discomfiting appearance of the tower to African feminism implies that the ideology’s internal divisions have tangible, unsettling consequences for both observers and participants. Also, it points to a foundational issue within African feminism where the lack of a unified theoretical grounding has caused its persistent lean, like the Tower of Pisa.

In his study of Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, Nnolim also deploys simile to address the common assumption within the study of African literature that the material for novelists “comes naturally to them like leaves to a tree” (“Source” 1). The image of leaves effortlessly sprouting on a tree evokes an organic, not-laboured-for, and almost inevitable process. In the context of his essay, Nnolim illustrates the flawed belief that African writers, particularly novelists, draw their narratives from an ever-flowing spring of cultural knowledge that negates any conscious effort, research, or intellectual engagement. Just as literary writers use language to create visual, tactile, auditory, gustatory, and olfactory images in their narratives, Nnolim condenses a complex critical argument into a readily understandable and visually compelling image. The comparison of the creative process to the natural growth of leaves exposes the condescending idea that African literature simply emerges without the rigorous intellectual groundwork expected of Western authors. It highlights the implicit bias where the intellectual labour of African writers is often overlooked or downplayed, fostering the “vacuum existing in source study of African literature” (1). With this simile, Nnolim advocates a more serious scholarly approach to African literary origins, one that acknowledges the intentionality and effort behind their works rather than dismissing them solely as cultural regurgitations. Given the cogent arguments made in Nnolim’s critical works, amidst the conscious creativity in his diction, is it not safe to say that criticism does not need to sacrifice entertainment/emotion on the altar of analytical depth?

I find it crucial to include a major intellectual event in the 1980s which was inadvertently organised by Fredric Jameson’s most controversial essay, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.” Jameson insisted,

among other things, that while the importance of “non-canonical forms of literature such as that of the third world” can be argued for, “one is peculiarly self-defeating because it borrows the weapons of the adversary: the strategy of trying to prove that these texts are as ‘great’ as those of the canon itself” (65). He could have just regarded the move as “a self-defeating strategy,” but that would not capture the atmosphere of conflict and warfare that has engulfed arguments regarding the literature of the Third World. In fact, the rut left by the contentions about the literariness of African oral narratives is yet to be eroded, contentions that existed even before Adrian Roscoe asserted that the novel “as it is known in the West precisely because it is a written form has no history whatever in Africa” (75).

The use of such words as ‘weapons’, ‘adversary’, and ‘strategy’ contributes to an extended metaphor of a battle or contest, which at once invokes images of struggle, power dynamics, and the tactical considerations of a fight. Jameson’s point was that an attempt to prove that Third World texts are as great as canonical ones is to accept the canon’s criteria, framework, and standards of greatness. The core of this position is that using the adversary’s weapons against them in this specific context is self-defeating because weapons (criteria of greatness, aesthetic values) of the Western canon are designed to privilege certain types of literature and marginalise others. Therefore, trying to fit Third World literature into these pre-existing moulds validates the system that marginalised it in the first place, rather than challenging the system. Although this essay is primarily framed to x-ray the importance of creativity in criticism, I must ink the faint part of Jameson’s sketch.

The inference that true recognition for non-canonical literature will not come from proving its similarity to the dominant forms but from asserting its distinct value and potentially challenging the notion of a universal greatness defined by the existing canon oversimplifies the debate. Before Jameson’s publication, Roscoe’s assertion that African literature written in English “must be considered as belonging to English literature as a whole and must be judged by the same critical standards as any other work written in English” (x) shows that Third World writers did not wilfully adopt this strategy in a conscious, strategic sense but was largely a consequence of imposition stemming from global literary institutions stationed by the former colonial powers. Even when Ngugi stopped writing in English to decolonise the African mind, his postcolonial works were still structured in the framework of Western literary conventions. Western literary traditions were already presented as the universal benchmarks of quality and sophistication by the West, and for writers in former colonies, writing in English (or French,

Portuguese...) was more of a necessity than a pure choice; publishers, critics, and academic institutions primarily located in the West naturally applied the critical frameworks they knew best.

Therefore, Third World writers and critics were disarmed, and the “weapons of the adversary” were imposed upon them. Besides, how else would the Third World have written back to the Centre if the message was encoded in a language that could not be decrypted by the Empire? It should be seen as a manoeuvre for survival and visibility within a hegemonic system and not an inherent belief that Third World literature was an extension of the European canon. However, this pragmatic compromise reinforced the hierarchy it sought to transcend, making it “self-defeating” in the long run, even though it was not borrowed with deliberate intent to undermine its distinct literary identity.

Despite the gravitas and authority which literary figuration lends to critical assessments, the use of conscious creative language proves that critical writers draw from widely recognised wisdom to frame their analysis in a scintillating way. This is not done exclusively because it can be done (that would be show off), but because weaving it in very plain language will be less precise. The result may be showy, but that is not the intention. It is like riding a horse that tölts instead of one that canters or gallops. The smooth and comfortable gait that a tölting horse affords the rider is assured because there is no moment of suspension (the horse always has at least one foot on the ground). While it is not the intention of the rider to show off, showiness appears as an accidental by-product of effectiveness and not a deliberate act of vanity.

Academic writing has been accused of being “unnecessarily complicated, pompous, long-winded, technical, impersonal, authoritative, humourless, elitist, and excludes outsiders” (Hartley 4), it would not be catastrophic for (meta)critics to consciously write in a way that would add “entertaining” to the list. The plea in this essay is not that literary criticism should abandon reason simply because its “touchstone is emotion, not reason” (Rawlinson 2), for that would result in academic demagoguery, but that critical writing should aim to persuade with reason by consciously and effectively integrating emotions into analysis. If criticism is, aims, or pretends to be art, then the way it is presented (its style) must become a legitimate object of critical inquiry, just as the style of a literary text is analysed. Until metacriticism stretches beyond the traditional criticism of criticism to accommodate the literary criticism of literary criticism, the criticosphere will continue to embarrassingly deny creativity as a crucial element of language and willingly remain shackled to bland, uninteresting academic prose writing. Would

passing a vote for creativity in criticism not align with the manifesto of subjectivity usually associated with not only literature but literary criticism, and help to unseat the incumbent insentience that has usurped authority for decades?

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