

REMEMBERING FANON New Formations number 1 Spring 1987

Frantz Fanon was born in 1921 in Martinique. He studied medicine in France, specializing in psychiatry. His first book, Black Skin, White Masks, was published when he was 27. During the French-Algerian war, Fanon was sent to practise in Algeria; from this experience came A Dying Colonialism and The Wretched of the Earth. These books became manifestos for Third World liberation movements and, during the 1960s at least, for black struggles in the United States. Fanon died of leukaemia in Washington in 1961.

Now, twenty-five years after his death, it may be appropriate to consider the salience of his writings for an understanding of today's forms of oppression in the Third World and in conditions of metropolitan racism. His work still provides a salutary example in its total engagement with the most urgent and extreme political issues while refusing to subordinate the necessarily uncertain and unpredictable outcomes of intellectual enquiry to the exigencies of dogma or doctrine.

I

Homi Bhabha

'WHAT DOES THE BLACK
MAN WANT?'

'What does the black man *want?*' Fanon asks in his introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*.¹ In privileging the psychic dimension he not only changes what we understand by a *political* demand but transforms the very means by which we recognize and identify its *human agency*. Fanon is not principally posing the question of political oppression as the violation of a human 'essence', although he lapses into such a lament in his more existential moment. He is not raising the question of colonial man in the universalist terms of the liberal-humanist ('How does colonialism deny the Rights of Man?'); nor is he posing an ontological question about Man's being ('Who is the alienated colonial man?'). Fanon's question is not addressed to such a unified notion of history nor such a unitary concept of Man. It is one of the original and disturbing qualities of *Black Skin, White Masks* that it rarely historicizes the colonial experience. There is no master narrative or realist perspective that provides a background of social and historical facts against which emerge the problems of the individual or collective psyche. Such a traditional sociological alignment of self and society or history and psyche is rendered questionable in Fanon's identification of the colonial subject who is historicized as it comes to be heterogeneously inscribed in the

NEW FORMATIONS

texts of history, literature, science, myth. The colonial subject is always 'overdetermined from without', Fanon writes. It is through image and fantasy - those orders that figure transgressively on the borders of history and the unconscious - that Fanon most profoundly evokes the colonial condition.

In articulating the problem of colonial cultural alienation in the psychoanalytic language of demand and desire, Fanon radically questions the formation of both individual and social authority as they come to be developed in the discourse of social sovereignty. The social virtues of historical rationality, cultural cohesion, the autonomy of individual consciousness, assume an immediate, Utopian identity with the subjects upon whom they confer a civil status. The civil state is the ultimate expression of the innate ethical and rational bent of the human mind; the social instinct is the progressive destiny of human nature, the necessary transition from nature to culture. The direct access from individual interests to social authority is objectified in the representative structure of a General Will - law or culture - where psyche and society mirror each other, transparently translating their difference, without loss, into a historical totality. Forms of social and psychic alienation and aggression - madness, self-hate, treason, violence - can never be acknowledged as determinate and constitutive conditions of civil authority, or as the ambivalent effects of the social instinct itself. They are always explained away as alien presences, oclusions of historical progress, the ultimate misrecognition of Man.

For Fanon such a myth of Man and Society is fundamentally undermined in the colonial situation where everyday life exhibits a 'constellation of delirium' that mediates the normal social relations of its subjects: 'The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation.' Fanon's demand for a psychoanalytic explanation emerges from the perverse reflections of 'civil virtue' in the alienating acts of colonial governance: the visibility of cultural 'mummification' in the colonizer's avowed ambition to civilize or modernize the native which results in 'archaic inert institutions [that function] under the oppressor's supervision like a caricature of formerly fertile institutions'; or the validity of violence in the very definition of the colonial social space; or the viability of the febrile, phantasmic images of racial hatred that come to be absorbed and acted out in the wisdom of the west. These interpositions, indeed collaborations, of political and psychic violence *within* civic virtue, alienation within identity, drive Fanon to describe the splitting of the colonial space of consciousness and society as marked by a 'Manichean delirium'.

The representative figure of such a perversion, I want to suggest, is the image of post-Enlightenment man tethered to, *not* confronted by, his dark reflection, the shadow of colonized man, that splits his presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his action at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being. This ambivalent identification of the racist world - moving on two planes without being in the least embarrassed by it, as Sartre says of the anti-Semitic consciousness - turns on the idea of Man as his alienated image, not Self and Other but the 'Otherness' of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity. And it is that bizarre figure of desire, which splits along the axis on which it turns, that compels Fanon to put the

psychoanalytic question of the desire of the subject to the historic condition of colonial man.

In reading *Black Skin, White Masks* it is crucial to respect the difference between 'personal identity' as an intimation of reality, or an intuition of being, and the psychoanalytic problem of identification that, in a sense, always begs the question of the subject - 'What does a man want?' The emergence of the human subject as socially and psychically authenticated depends upon the *negation* of an originary narrative of fulfilment or an imaginary coincidence between individual interest or instinct and the General Will. Such binary, two-part identities function in a kind of narcissistic reflection of the One in the Other which is confronted in the language of desire by the psychoanalytic process of identification. For identification, identity is never an *a priori*, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an 'image' of totality. The discursive conditions of this psychic image of identification will be clarified if we think of the perilous perspective of the concept of the image itself. For the image - as point of identification - marks the site of an ambivalence. Its representation is always spatially split - it makes *present* something that is *absent* - and temporally deferred - it is the representation of a time that is always elsewhere, a repetition. The image is only ever an *appurtenance* to authority and identity; it must never be read mimetically as the 'appearance' of a 'reality'. The access to the image of identity is only ever possible in the *negation* of any sense of originality or plenitude, through the principle of displacement and differentiation (absence/presence; representation/repetition) that always renders it a liminal reality. The image is at once a metaphoric substitution, an illusion of presence and by that same token a metonym, a sign of its absence and loss. It is precisely from this edge of meaning and being, from this shifting boundary of otherness within identity, that Fanon asks: 'What does a *black* man want?'

When it encounters resistance from the other, self-consciousness undergoes the experience of desire As soon as I desire I ask to be considered. I am not merely here and now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity in so far as I pursue something other than life

I occupied space. I moved towards the other . . . and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea.

From that overwhelming disorientation of nausea Fanon makes his answer: the black man wants the objectifying confrontation with otherness; in the colonial psyche there is an unconscious disavowal of the negating, splitting moment of desire. The place of the Other must not be imaged as Fanon sometimes suggests as a fixed phenomenological point, opposed to the Self, that represents a culturally alien consciousness. The Other must be seen as the necessary negation of a primordial identity - cultural or psychic - that introduces the system of differentiation which enables the 'cultural' to be signified as a linguistic, symbolic, historic reality. If, as I have suggested, the subject of desire is never simply a Myself, then the Other is never simply an *It-self*, a font of identity, truth, or misrecognition.

As a principle of identification, the Other bestows a degree of objectivity but

its representation - be it the social process of the Law or the psychic process of the Oedipus - is always ambivalent, disclosing a lack. For instance, the common, conversational distinction between 'the letter and spirit' of the Law displays the otherness of Law itself; the ambiguous grey area between 'Justice' and judicial procedure is, quite literally, a conflict of judgement. In the language of psychoanalysis, the Law of the Father or the paternal metaphor, again, cannot be taken at its word. It is a process of substitution and exchange that inscribes a normative, normalizing place for the subject; but that metaphoric access to identity is exactly the place of prohibition and repression, precisely a conflict of authority. Identification, as it is spoken in the *desire of the Other*, is always a question of interpretation for it is the elusive assignation of myself with a one-self, the elision of person and place.

If the differentiating force of the Other is the process of the subject's signification in language and society's objectification in Law, then how can the Other disappear? Can desire, the moving spirit of the subject, ever evanesce?

In his more analytic mode Fanon can impede the exploration of these ambivalent, uncertain questions of colonial desire. The state of emergency from which he writes demands more insurgent answers, more immediate identifications. At times Fanon attempts too close a correspondence between the *mise-en-scene* of unconscious fantasy and the phantoms of racist fear and hate that stalk the colonial scene; he turns too hastily from the ambivalences of identification to the antagonistic identities of political alienation and cultural discrimination; he is too quick to name the Other, to personalize its presence in the language of colonial racism - 'the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely.' These attempts, in Fanon's words, to restore the dream to its proper political time and cultural space can, at times, blunt the edge of Fanon's brilliant illustrations of the complexity of psychic projections in the pathological colonial relation. Jean Veneuse, the Antillean *evolve*, not merely desires to be in the place of the white man but compulsively seeks to look back and down on himself from that position. The white man does not merely deny what he fears and desires by projecting it on 'them'; Fanon sometimes forgets that paranoia never preserves its position of power for the compulsive identification with a persecutory 'They' is always an evacuation and emptying of the T.

Fanon's socio-diagnostic psychiatry tends to explain away the ambivalent turns and returns of the subject of colonial desire, its masquerade of western man and the 'long' historical perspective. It is as if Fanon is fearful of his most radical insights: that the space of the body and its identification is a representational reality; that the politics of race will not be entirely contained within the humanist myth of man or economic necessity or historical progress, for its psychic affects question such forms of determinism; that social sovereignty and human subjectivity are only realizable in the order of Otherness. It is as if the question of desire that emerged from the traumatic tradition of the oppressed has to be denied, at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, to make way for an existentialist humanism that is as banal as it is beatific:

Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? . . . At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness.

However, Fanon's Hegelian dream for a human reality *in-itself-for-itself* is ironized, even mocked, by his view of the Manichean structure of colonial consciousness and its non-dialectical division. What he says in *The Wretched of the Earth* of the demography of the colonial city reflects his view of the psychic structure of the colonial relation. The native and settler zones, like the juxtaposition of black and white bodies, are opposed, but not in the service of 'a higher unity'. No conciliation is possible, he concludes, for of the two terms one is superfluous.

No, there can be no reconciliation, no Hegelian 'recognition', no simple, sentimental promise of a humanistic 'world of the You'. Can there be life without transcendence? Politics without the dream of perfectibility? Unlike Fanon, I think the *non-dialectical* moment of Manicheanism suggests an answer. By following the trajectory of colonial desire - in the company of that bizarre colonial figure, the tethered shadow - it becomes possible to cross, even to shift, the Manichean boundaries. Where there is no human *nature* hope can hardly spring eternal; but it emerges surely and surreptitiously in the strategic return of that difference that informs and deforms the image of identity, in the margin of Otherness that displays identification. There may be no Hegelian negation but Fanon must sometimes be reminded that the disavowal of the Other

always exacerbates the 'edge' of identification, reveals that dangerous place where identity and aggressivity are twinned. For denial is always a retroactive process; a *half* acknowledgement of that Otherness which has left its traumatic mark. In that uncertainty lurks the white-masked black man; and from such ambivalent identification - black skin, white masks - it is possible, I believe, to redeem the pathos of cultural confusion into a strategy of political subversion. We cannot simply agree with Fanon that 'since the racial drama is played out in the open the black man has no time to make it unconscious', but that

is a provocative thought. In occupying two places at once - or three in Fanon's case - the depersonalized, dislocated colonial subject can become an incalculable object, quite literally, difficult to place. The demand of authority cannot unify its message nor simply identify its subjects. For the strategy of colonial desire is to stage the drama of identity at the point at which the black mask *slips* to reveal the white skin. At that edge, in between the black body and the

white body, there is a tension of meaning and being, or some would say demand and desire, which is the psychic counterpart to that 'muscular tension' that inhabits the native body:

The symbols of social order - the police, the bugle calls in the barracks, military parades and the waving flags - are at one and the same time inhibitory and stimulating: for they do not convey the message 'Don't dare to budge'; rather, they cry out 'Get ready to attack'.

It is from that tension - both psychic and political - that a strategy of subversion emerges. It is a mode of negation that seeks not to unveil the fullness

NEW FORMATIONS

of Man but to manipulate his representation. It is a form of power that is exercised at the very limits of identity and authority, in the mocking spirit of mask and image; it is the lesson taught by the veiled Algerian woman in the course of the revolution as she crossed the Manichean lines to claim her liberty. In Fanon's essay 'Algeria unveiled' the colonizer's attempt to unveil the Algerian woman does not simply turn the veil into a symbol of resistance; it becomes a technique of camouflage, a means of struggle - the veil conceals bombs. The veil that once secured the boundary of the home - the limits of woman - now masks the woman in her revolutionary activity, Unking the Arab city and the French quarter, transgressing the familial and colonial boundary. As the 'veil' is liberated in the public sphere, circulating between and beyond cultural and social norms and spaces, it becomes the object of paranoid surveillance and interrogation. Every veiled woman, writes Fanon, became suspect. And when the veil is shed in order to penetrate deeper into the European quarter, the colonial police see everything and nothing. An Algerian woman is only, after all, a woman. But the Algerian *fidai* is an arsenal and in her handbag she carries her hand-grenades.

Remembering Fanon is a process of intense discovery and disorientation. Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present. It is such a memory of the history of race and racism, colonialism and the question of cultural identity, that Fanon reveals with greater profundity and poetry than any other writer. What he achieves, I believe, is something far greater: for in seeing the phobic image of the Negro, the native, the colonized, deeply woven into the psychic pattern of the west, he offers the master and the slave a deeper reflection of their interpositions, as well as the hope of a difficult, even dangerous, freedom: 'It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world.' Nobody writes with more honesty and insight of this lasting tension of freedom in which the self - the peremptory self of the present - disavows an image of itself as an originary past or an ideal future and confronts the paradox of its own making.

In Britain, today, as a range of culturally and racially marginalized groups readily assume the mask of the Black not to deny their diversity but to audaciously announce the important artifice of cultural identity and its difference, the need for Fanon becomes urgent. As political groups from different directions gather under the banner of the Black, not to homogenize their oppression but to make of it a common cause, a public image of the identity of otherness, the need for Fanon becomes urgent. Urgent in order to remind us of that crucial engagement between mask and identity, image and identification, from which comes the lasting tension of our freedom and the lasting impression of ourselves as others.

In the case of display . . . the play of combat in the form of intimidation, the being gives of himself, or receives from the other, something that is like a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown-off skin, thrown off in order to cover

the frame of a shield. It is through this separated form of himself that the being comes into play in his effects of life and death.

(Jacques Lacan)

The time has come to return to Fanon; as always, I believe, with a question: how can the human world live its difference? how can a human being live Otherwise?

NOTES

- 1 This contribution is based on my introduction to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto, 1986).