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There is a breathlessness to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon leaves us in no doubt that he is an author with a great deal to say about matters, among which racism, colonialism and the effect of both on the black body and psyche are his preeminent concern, that are politically urgent. As they are. Such is Fanon's urgency that he uses every resource at his disposal – works of literature that turn on the colonial condition, psychoanalysis (from Freud to Lacan with the likes of Mannoni in between), as well as the occasional philosophical invocation (Hegel is a presence if by no means a fleshed-out one; although, it must be said, it is Jean-Paul Sartre who is called to do duty most often).

Although Fanon suggests that he considered presenting *Black Skin, White Masks* as a doctoral thesis, one finds it difficult to imagine such a prospect, in no small measure because the project is so stylistically incoherent. *Black Skin, White Masks* is an admixture of the anecdotal (Fanon has no trouble extracting political or psychoanalytic conclusions from his personal encounters; a tendency which applies as much to his Martinican past as to his experience of living in France; a tendency that extends to making deductions based on his observations in colonized Algeria), the psychoanalytic, the implicitly philosophical and the rhetorical. That is, the rhetorical in the sense that this is how Fanon structures his argument: through the declarative, through declamation. A scientific work *Black Skin, White Masks* is not.

And therein may reside its strength and its resilience. In our historical conjuncture, in a world still – more than 70 years after the 1952 publication of *Black Skin, White Masks* – riven by racism, ethnonationalism, increasing inequality, to say nothing of the environmental catastrophe that stares us so unremittingly in the face, Fanon's analyses resonate. The depth of *Black Skin, White Masks'* commitment, Fanon's capacity to address us (or, at least, so it seems), to provide a language and a discursive paradigm (a framework out of which we can apprehend the condition of our world), lends the intensity of his voice a special attractiveness. We are drawn to it. After all, Fanon's urgency is ours, except, perhaps, multiplied many times over for us, so close

do we know ourselves to be to ecological disaster, a disaster that has a great deal to do with the machinations of capital and the technological innovations that capitalism hath wrought.

However, finding ourselves so open to the allure of *Black Skin, White Masks* produces, of course, its own effects. Or, to phrase the matter bluntly, Fanon's breathlessness, his lack of philosophical specificity and stamina and his tendency toward the grand declamation, is not without philosophical cost. One could say, and this is an undeniably legitimate defense, that because of the conditions under which Fanon wrote – he was a practicing psychiatrist serving patients traumatized by the Algerian war as well as an FLN cadre (revolution is an exacting business, often leaving the revolutionary with only so much time to write, to think) – not only mitigate how it is that *Black Skin, White Masks* is presented to us, but make it an all the more remarkable text. Indeed.

Yet, such an acknowledgment serves only to explain Fanon's work. It does nothing to alleviate us of the work of *thinking* Fanon. And to think Fanon is to subject his work to scrutiny, to think what it is Fanon either does or fails to. It demands that we follow the threads of Fanon's argument at precisely those moments where it is weakest, at those moments when the threads fray, and, as importantly, those moments of aporia – when there are spaces between the threads, when gaps open up, where connections, as it were, are in need of being made.

This essay is preoccupied with one such moment, a moment which is not aporetic in the strictest sense. It is, rather, a moment filled with philosophical prospect. It is a prospect born out of Fanon's haste, his moving too quickly from one line of argument to another. Fanon abandons a condition worth tarrying with, a moment deserving of thinking.

Tarrying With

The final line of *Black Skin, White Masks* is, as we well know, a famous one. A poetic line, rich with philosophical appeal, patinaed with Socratic inflection, it would be fair to say. "O my body make of me always a man who questions!" It is not, however, this line that is the object our scrutiny. It is a line that enjoys none of the status of *Black Skin, White Masks'* concluding sentence. It is a line that lies, for all intents and purposes, buried in the chapter entitled "The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonized Peoples." However, it may be, for all its obscurity, the germ out of which that final line is born. Lost within the clamor of declamation, Mannoni is Fanon's target in this chapter, about the "Malagasy" (the focus of Mannoni's work) with more than an occasional turn to South African apartheid, Fanon writes: "To understand something new requires that we make ourselves ready for it, that we prepare ourselves for it; it entails the shaping of a new form."¹ In its archaic form, to "tarry" means to

“wait for.” Already we are free, etymologically, at any rate, to proffer that “O make me . . .” is the outcome of a waiting that began earlier, much earlier. It is only by insisting upon “waiting,” by lingering over Fanon’s call to “shape a new form.”²

In order to “make ourselves ready” for this “new form,” however, it will be necessary to we tarry with it. To tarry, as proposed here, is composed of both a temporal and a phenomenological dimension. That is, to tarry is both to commit to spending time with the philosophical object (proposition, the idea, the theory, the concept, whatever the case might be) in question and to be open to that object. In tarrying, we apprehend the object as it is so that to be open to is, as it were, to “look” or “gaze upon” simultaneously in its familiarity and in such a way as to know that there is much about the object that is unknown, as well as unknowable, to us. The object under scrutiny is, in a word, entirely capable of surprising us and in so doing it yields a series of insights; insights not only into the object itself but also to that which is proximate to it (that with which it has a relation); and, moreover, that which would, at first, or even third, glance, appear to be – to exist – in no obvious relation to the object as we first understood ourselves to know it. In order to be open to the object we must stay-with it.

Even if, as is shown to be the case of the “terror” that is shown to be at core of six of the seven Malagasian dreams – “we find a dominant theme of terror” – such a being open-to reveals the existential threat of being open-to (Fanon, 101). To look on the open, to search for what it is that has taken up residence in the aporia, is always to run the risk of encountering, without respite or a path along which to escape, the prospect of “terror.” We can never be sure as to what will make itself visible to us, as Nietzsche and Heidegger remind us, each in his own way, when we (dare to) look into the abyss. (Here Slavoj Žižek’s reading – a reading which is nothing less than a signal provocation – of Heidegger’s turn to the poetry of Hölderlin in the aftermath of World War II is instructive. Commenting on that Hölderlin line, “the wasteland grows,” that Heidegger attends to repeatedly in *Was Heißt Denken?*, Žižek offers the following insight, an insight that is, for all intents and purposes, counter-intuitively, “in order to overcome the danger, one has to push it to the extreme.”³ It is his capacity to uncover – reveal – the counter-intuitive, of course, that the strength of Žižek’s work resides.) Or, Joseph Conrad, for that matter, who warns us against the “terrors” of colonialism with a brevity that does nothing to reduce our fear: “The horror, the horror.”

Fanon Does Not Tarry

This Fanon does not do. Having urged us to “make ourselves ready for it,” he does not pause. This he does not do even as he, dialectician that he by inclination is, cognizant of the fecundity that resides in the encounter between objects, or, between subject and object or object and object. In his critique of

Adler (“The Negro and Adler”), Fanon once again recognizes the possibilities for thinking that reside in that moment when antagonists are brought face-to-face with each other: “Contact with the object means conflict” (Fanon, 212). In this instance, when Fanon posits the “Negro” as that object that enjoys no sovereignty (the Negro cannot stand alone and figures only as that which must be apprehended through “comparison”), Fanon, after presenting us with the figure of “Narcissus,” quickly disperses his analysis rather than subjecting what the effects of such a “conflict” might be (Fanon, 212; 211). The pattern, then, is established.

Tarrying is not what Fanon does. Instead, he moves immediately from the phenomenological to the structural. Following hard on the heels of “it entails the shaping of a new form,” Fanon dismisses the possibility of the phenomenological, declaring it an impossibility: “It is utopian to expect the Negro or the Arab to exert the effort of embedding abstract values into his outlook on the world when he has barely enough food to keep alive” (Fanon, 95). Given to the Manichean as Fanon so often is, the phenomenological is set against the alimentary. By Fanon’s reckoning, and there is a great deal to be said in his defense but that is not by itself sufficient, we would do well to remind ourselves, it is only under “utopian” conditions that the “Negro or the Arab” can undertake the phenomenological – “to exert the effort of embedding abstract values into his outlook on the world” – because of the impoverished structural conditions under which the colonized make their lives.

(Here, we would do well to pause to remind ourselves, if only for a parenthetical moment, of that troublesome strain in Fanon’s work: his utter neglect, abjection, even, of vernacular life and culture. I have in mind here Fanon’s derogation of the role of the blues and jazz – and probably early rock ‘n’ roll, soul and the entire oeuvre that is black music in the US – in African-American culture. Fanon dismisses blues and jazz as little but a “slave lament.” Fanon cannot, and why he cannot has to be proclaimed a mystery, such is its axiomatism, understand how the cultural work that goes into making the blues and jazz functions as a phenomenology. It is, moreover, a phenomenology that not only derives from, pays tribute to and in those rare moments, actually overcomes, the conditions of black suffering, in no small measure by articulating itself in its own, and, in truth, very distinct, existential register. The blues and jazz, as Angela Davis shows in *Blues Legacies*, is also a phenomenology of liberation. The blues and jazz, as well as soul music – as well as rap and hip-hop, its advocates would insist – constitutes a movement that works toward its own kind of emancipation. And freedom, we should add. A freedom crafted out of pain and as such all too conscious of the suffering that is borne in and by the music, but a freedom that is reached for, sometimes more hesitantly than others, but the claim on freedom is almost never relinquished.)

The colonized cannot both think for bringing the “new” paradigm into being and attend to his basic needs – food, shelter, clothing, safety. Indeed, we could say that it is precisely because of the structural inequalities imposed by colonialism that the need for a different, more equitable, just, non-racist tomorrow is made all the more imperative. What is more, Fanon – in his casual invocation of the “utopian,” a tradition of thinking with a very long and intensely political history, fails to recognize that it is precisely under conditions of extreme historical uncertainty, with the threat of violence and the destruction of the existing political order visible on the horizon, that utopian thinking tends to flourish. The premise and promise of the utopian is that it is impatient with business-as-usual, that it will no longer, in its leftist instantiatino, abide capital accumulation for the sake of capital accumulation, that the endless cycle of production and consumption must be broken; the utopian takes as its ground the emptiness of liberal democracy platitudes – “freedom,” “representation,” “parliamentary elctions.” The utopianist knows the vacuity of those concepts and, because it knows it, seeks an emancipation that is beyond the ken of, that is so instinctively stifled and relentlessly suppressed by, what-is. That is, the urgency of undoing what-is and installing in its place something radically different is the very motor of many a utopian movement. In this regard, when the US seems to be on the cusp of political and cultural implosion (so much so that one can now speak of a US society that will tolerate the possibility of “alternative truths”), one need only cast one’s mind back to the number of millenarian movements that flourished in the US in the years – decades, in truth – preceding the American Civil War. All across New York State, for example, from Albany in the east stretching all the way across the state (a city such as Oneida, NY, to name but one, was a hotbed of utopian agitation and organization, a movement that stretched) to as far west as Pennsylvania and Ohio; albeit in significantly distinct forms and incompatible iterations. Material want, economic scarcity, as much as the desire for a new social order, can provide a powerful impetus for the utopian imaginary.

Add the yearning for love and loss of love, and you have the blues.

Is the germ of the utopian always already present in the blues? Why ever not? We might want to take a closer phenomenological look at what Billie Holiday or Lena Horne is trying to tell us.

This is not to suggest that the immanence of Fanon’s argument is without standing. On the contrary, many a revolution has been born out of the determination to secure material security for an oppressed or exploited community (October 1917, for one); of course, we know that frequently the oppressed community is the exploited community. It is, however, to refuse the political neatness (a neatness that often claims for itself the standing of the politically axiomatic – political commonsense, so to speak) at the heart of Fanon’s presentation: the impoverished, the malnourished, the lumpenproletariat, shall we say for the sake of argument, cannot think for

protest, for producing social unrest and through it radical transformation of their society, cannot begin to envisage the revolution, to say nothing of executing the revolution, on, metaphorically rendered, an empty stomach. The alienated or the exploited do not have it within their capacity to both attempt to tend to their rudimentary needs and think against the world as it is. Or think for their rudimentary needs because of the world as it is.

The philosophical cost of not tarrying with, it becomes possible to suggest, is the persistence of the Manichean. And because the Manichean persists, in no small measure because it has an undoubted appeal for how it is we apprehend the world, it becomes all the more difficult to think-with – to think for the germ of the utopian within the condition of scarcity or because of depravity (again, the blues or the hauntings that pervade the music of Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman) rather than, as is Fanon’s habit, to set opposing forces against each other in the most stark light. What Fanon is advocating, whether it is acknowledged or not, is that the revolution (although the labor strike might present a peculiar difference, in both tenor and motivation for our thinking here) is seldom, if ever, made under ideal conditions. Marx says as much, and as explicitly as he can, in the “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.”

In his insistence that thinking can only take under place under, if not “utopian” then certainly those conditions where alimentary needs have been satisfied, Fanon shows himself to be a proponent of, shall we say, the “Event” – that is, the revolution follows a chronological order, a set sequence – rather than the event – radical transformation taking place in society either by surprising everyone (as in the case of, say, Mohammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation which set in motion the Arab Spring) or as the accumulation of situations or circumstances that culminate, again, in the most unpunctual way (that is, the event is only punctual to itself), in an explosion. An explosion that shows itself to be, in retrospect, “inevitable” but in its unfolding – historical accidents that produce historical opportunity; the slow seething of resentments at injustice; the enacting or implementation of a series of unjust laws. The event as the effect of concatenation as opposed to the “Event,” where radical – and almost certainly violent – rupture with what-was is the order of the day.

The End is in the Beginning

How does the man who “questions” come into being? What prepares such a man, Fanon’s iteration of the new human condition, one that can only come into being after colonialism has been overthrown (and the postcolonial elite of *The Wretched of the Earth* have been laid to rest historically), to be in the world?

Fanon's answer, of course, is that "we make ourselves ready for it." The problem, of course, is that Fanon offers no path through which we might come to prepare ourselves. (Almost making us long for, one is tempted to say, but not only for the sake of provocation, a figure who walks the path, which of course involves a doubling back, an unwanted return, of Nietzsche's Zarathustra.)

The answer to the question of how bring into being such a human being dedicated to the question (always questioning) demands, first, the delineation of that which is-not. One must, as it were, know what it is that this interrogative being wants while also acknowledging that such a knowing is impossible. To know that it is impossible to know. Such a mode of being toward, one that is at once confident in its delineation and entirely unsure of itself, may be the only way in which it is at all possible to "make ourselves ready for it." To think for that which is-not but must-be, to imagine a "new form," that is, a distinct way of being that emerges out of the rupture that is which-is, is nothing less than a call for the absolutely assiduous ("discipline," as it might have been called in an earlier political moment, that moment when the Party in its orthodoxy proclaimed itself omniscient), but such an absolute assiduousness that knows itself as limited, a priori, by what it does not, and cannot, know. Much as we would like to assert differently, we know in advance that the "new form" will not conform to that form which motivates us to achieve it. The "new form" will, thus, only conform in part to our design; its form will not coincide with our prescribed form. The "new form" will be, despite – and perhaps because of – our very best efforts, sovereign only to itself. As for its content, well, that is an entirely different matter. Indeed, we would not be wrong to propose *Wretched of the Earth* as the content to the form of *Black Skin, White Masks*.

We will find ourselves adapting to this "new form" that is at once of and not of our own making. Our imaginary will be astounded. It might indeed even be disappointed, as Fanon was disappointed, to understate the matter greatly, by the actions of the new postcolonial elite, a political class that showed itself to be the scourge of the previously colonized masses and about which Fanon is scathing in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Our imaginary is in no way prepared for the content which so violently comes to mis-shape the "new form" that Fanon enjoined us to conjure into being.

Aphoristically rendered, the disappointment of the form in encountering stubborn integrity of the content (the content will not accommodate itself to the form), reminds us of the difficulty of undoing both what-was and what is to-come. The form-content dialectic familiarizes us, if familiarizing is necessary, with the immensity of the task that is preparing-for that being-toward the world that accedes to preparing-for as a task that is not only impossible, but is, in fact, a work without end.

The only way in which we can even begin to be prepared is, however, a mode of being-toward that already exists within Fanon's interrogative arsenal. There is no historically opportune moment to begin to be a "man who questions." The "man who questions" must begin, if he is showing fidelity to the interrogative, by drawing everything, all his pronouncements, his every declaration, regardless of the intensity of his invective, into "question."

That is, the "man who questions" must confront the question: what does it mean to understand? How can such a man know that full comprehension is beyond his capacity and yet must be that for which he strives? What does it mean to prepare for? What will such a preparation entail? And, perhaps most saliently, how is it possible to undertake this work, all the labor that is required to understand, the relentlessness of the preparation, the kind of thinking that is capable of procuring for itself a "new form," under conditions that are far from optimal.

Marx's "Eighteenth Brumaire" presents itself as an obvious touchstone, at the very least it would be a good place to start. But only if the phenomenological and the alimentary – the material, Marx would insist – are held together. Held together in a such a tension that they threaten, at every turn, to undo each other, but must, for the sake of Fanon's interrogative, be made constantly to engage despite their determination to rupture. Form must be held in proximity to content.

To question, then, as a first recognition of the violence that resides at the core of every thinking. Of thinking-for that which is-not but must-be. The man dedicated to the question fails himself if he cannot subject himself to tarry, in every act, with the violence that is holding together that which would sooner tear itself asunder.

To tarry with is to expose the self to the violence that constitutes every question.

The question as the first act of violence, a violence that can only come into its own if it is tarried with. The self must risk itself in posing that question which it knows will refuse to yield. And to know that answer, in whatever form it takes, as inherently provisional, as nothing but the prelude to the future that is the violence contained already in the question to come. The question already present in the question that has not yet been addressed. It is out of this demand that the singular force that is tarrying with emerges. It is because of this demand that we must, despite our every inclination to resist, persist in tarrying with.

* For David Johnson and the phenomenological difficulty he presented me with almost 25 years ago. I remain in his debt. Happily so.

¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1982), 95.

² There are moments, it should be said, when Fanon's critique assumes a frankness that inclines in the direction of an of the need for extended, if not the sustained attention itself. In delineating the encounter between the colonizer and the Malagasy, Fanon writes: "something new had come into being on the island and that it had to be reckoned with - otherwise the analysis is condemned to falsehood, to absurdity, to nullity" (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 97). It is only by accounting for the rupture with what-was, the disruption wrought by colonialism, that the truth of colonialism can be revealed. For Fanon, however, it would appear that it is analytical rigor rather than the temporal, tarrying with, that drives his argument in this moment.

³ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008), 119.