Dossier: Fanon-Tosquelles

Frantz Fanon at Saint-Alban

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Anyone who has met Frantz Fanon will have no trouble remembering him.[1] Forgetting him would certainly be more difficult. His presence will forever occupy the scene of memory the same way he once used to occupy any space he was in. His weight, his density, his bodily substance always seemed to serve some purpose, like a bed or table set down in the middle of the stage. It spoke [*Ça parlait*] and therein a subject would come to life.[2] His dance, from the opaque to the transparent, sometimes veiled, sometimes unveiled, would weave arabesque patterns which interpellated his partners, calling to the very depths and foundations of their selves – like a spring with infinite coils. Controversy was definitely one of his strengths. Some might accuse him of a certain perverse talent for drawing his willing victims into his net. Yet it seems to me that Fanon instead embodied a respect for others and for their freedom. His was a kind of active fraternity [*fraternité agissante*], one that would immediately make plain the difference between himself and others. His presence demanded your own commitment, it aroused your own critical engagement. That's all!

To be loved? To be noticed? Sure, why not? On your marks, get set, go! Take your positions! Deliver your lines! Life is not some empty desert. It's a stadium, a space that is certainly competitive, but one in which the golden rule for him was loyalty to one's partners.

It was in the mountains of the Margeride that Fanon sprung into my life, in that landscape where the water that comes out of the ground divides off and flows down to the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.[3] By the way, some think of the Massif Central as some backwater, but I'll have you know it's no land of retards or refuge for dropouts. Indeed, Fanon came to Saint-Alban along a route that a lot of people before and after him would also take: setting off in Lyon, across mountain paths, to that same Lozère redoubt where I myself had been welcomed just a few years earlier. He came, attracted by the possibilities which that particular kind of psychiatric practice that was at the time in the process of being built (or rather rebuilt) seemed to offer. I'm saying that Fanon felt that by going to Saint-Alban he was going *somewhere*. Quite correctly, he did not imagine Saint-Alban as some kind of fortress. He regarded Saint-Alban as a field of action that could give madness a chance to speak its name and develop itself in new ways, albeit in a controlled manner. The place he was going to was one where the active concern of psychiatrists coincided with an irrevocable commitment to construct, through collective effort, the very field in which they would undertake their work. One can understand nothing of Fanon's earlier project nor of the circumstances that would later lead him to sometimes take on the role of hero, even the tragic hero, if one thinks of Saint-Alban as nothing more than a space – that of a psychiatric hospital – like those new types of 'natural reserves', where one breathes clean mountain air, a country retreat or 'château' shielded from the supposed evils of industrial civilisation and consumer society. Saint-Alban was nothing of the sort.

Equally, neither Fanon nor the majority of those who worked there had the intention of boxing themselves in by defining themselves in explicit opposition to the notoriously oppressive carceral institutions where classical 'diagnostic' psychiatry [*psychiatrie 'notationelle'*] was then being practised. A merely 'reactive' opposition or oppos-

itional reaction against the psychiatric hospitals of the great confinement this was not. The differences which emerged did so out of the process itself, from its dynamism. These differences concerned the theory and practice of therapeutic eviction. A couple of digressions will make clear what I'm talking about. First, it's important to know that, like many others at Saint-Alban, Fanon had come from Lyon, namely, from the faculty of medicine there. A caricature, as it were, of analytic Cartesianism, this institution was renowned for its efficient handling of the anatomo-physio-pathological object upon which medicine in general is founded and which has become fragmented into endless specialisations. Lyon (and Paris too, for that matter) had produced 'Medical-Surgical Compendia', including two volumes dedicated to psychiatry and the professional training of psychiatrists. One chapter for every illness. Each organised in the familiar sequence: diagnosis, prognosis, treatment. The diagnosis bits, fine. Sure enough, tens, or rather hundreds of pages filled with perfectly respectable descriptions of many clinical conditions. But then come the culmination, and pragmatic justification, of this praiseworthy endeavour: the treatments. Precise, clear. These are usually condensed into a single line – actually, no, a single word normally suffices. No chances of error. No need for doubt or to worry about the unfortunate consequences of an incorrect dosage. This is what you'll see, stamped in capital letters: TREATMENT: INTERNMENT. Nothing less, nothing more.

This is what Lyon meant to Fanon. We can see then why Saint-Alban must have represented something else entirely. I'm sorry to go on with the anecdotes but here's a telling one about Saint-Alban and Fanon's trajectory. We're at a *soirée* in the town of Mende, the capital of the Lozère, in the company of people with an interest in culture, and so, in one way or another, in madness. The conversation picks up. We start talking about spaces, different types of spaces. What kind of space does madness occupy? Next it's Fanon's turn to speak. The discussion turns to the subject of the space of tragedy, which he elaborates on with the aid of a few – if you please – cultural texts. His reflection proceeds through a series of texts and pretexts selected from the canon of classical theatre. Yet this is no exercise in literary analysis. At stake, rather, is the question of the limits of the professional field of action of psychiatrists: where does one stand today with regards to the activity of so-called mental hygiene, indeed with regards to therapeutic practice as such? The 'mentally ill' under our care were attending and participating in meetings outside of the hospital. Their families as well. That's sector psychiatry [*psychiatrie de secteur*] for you! Extended psychiatry [*psychiatrie d'extension*]? We were assessing its risks! Fanon gave up his life for that – and it killed him. Azoulay's work is quite instructive for understanding Fanon's journey up to Blida and beyond: nothing more, nothing else than his commitment to sector psychiatry.[4] The misgivings that a lot of people expressed out of precaution are quite understandable. Safety first, as the saying goes. But Fanon didn't always have the supposed virtue of patience at his disposal. He embraced his tragic destiny. For him, it was always, above all else, about psychiatry.

Saint-Alban was not conceived as a gamble or romantic venture but as a hypothesis. Sure, there were those adventurous spirits who looked to Saint-Alban longingly, beguiled by its air of novelty. But if they happened to get a taste, they would immediately be repulsed. With withdrawal symptoms guaranteed. Fanon stayed for two whole years. How can I put this – he's been

with us ever since. He's been hanging around, speaking and acting from that hiding place that is our memory of him. And not only mine. Memory is clearly a collective phenomenon, a social fact as they say. Well, I'll be damned – there he is now!

The hypothesis of Saint-Alban had nothing especially original or outlandish about it. It depended on what people wanted to do, what paths they wanted to take. It was a space that was 'open' to its interior as well as to its exterior. You might say that it consisted of several institutions, not just a single institution that one attempted to break up or negate. The plural and the diverse [*le divers*] have nothing to do with splitting something into pieces. More than the one, it's a question of that which can unite. And to unite you need the diverse, not to be confused with mere diversion [*divertissement*]. Institutions bring people together. Yet when such gathering turns into fusion or collapses into infinitely reflecting mirrors, it ceases to be true to its proper dynamism and function. The hypothesis posited at Saint-Alban was to bring a number of human beings together, both the insane and the sane, in the hope that they would harness the possibilities inherent in the very matter that constituted their being, a matter that was liable to be articulated and re-articulated yet which had also been moulded by history – as all of us, alas, inevitably have. The whole thing worked somewhat like the machinery of an artificial stage set, an apparatus of 'other scenes' [*scènes autres*] upon which the true [*le vrai*] – which elsewhere is merely capable of being presented [*présentifiable*] – here actually represented itself [*se représente*].

Some will call it a healing process. Others might emphasise 'alternative gatherings' [*re-trouvailles autres*], or situations in which the answer to a discreet, sometimes unspoken, appeal is offered: those alternative encounters where, if one so desires and knows where to look, one can quite paradoxically discover someone's identity – their singularity, their dis-alienated, de-depersonalised self. This hypothesis is not a daydream. Its elaboration is not just the reproduction of a dogmatically held assumption. Commitment is not blindness. Fanon had already grasped all of this before arriving at Saint-Alban. In his journey from the faculty of medicine (Lyon's in particular) to Saint-Alban (more than anywhere else), he travelled the same route, crossed the same distances, took the same detours that so many before and after him would take. Thus he came to settle among those valleys and forests, taking his place in that crevice which separates:

- On one side, the medical clinic. Here we find the specifically analytical, descriptive, institution, Cartesian in its approach to medicine, its doctrine and enactment [*mise en acte*] – not to speak of its ways of acting out [*passages à l'acte*]. Indeed, I wouldn't want anyone to think that I was questioning its effectiveness, not even in psychiatric terms.
- On the other side, the psychiatric clinic. What we find here is that the dissection of its object in the above style proves unworkable for the simple reason that this object is itself at stake, that is, as a subject of suffering. To use a bit of mechanical vocabulary, a 'breakdown' [*la panne*] corresponds to the very process of presentification [*présentification*], that is, the 'production' of the mentally ill subject as such. I want to make clear that this is not the case of an already determined social individual engaging in a process of 'social and negotiable production', but of the very production of the subject. It is the subject

itself that is produced here. And it is its production that breaks down.

From the medical doctrine of the Lyon faculty to the hypothesis disseminated and developed at Saint-Alban, there is nothing in Fanon's trajectory resembling a return to origins. One will find no attempt to recover the old opposition between nature and culture, civilisation and savagery, no nostalgic search for a lost paradise. Our modern ears are hardly immune to the sound of a shepherd's ballads, but deep down, underneath our superficial appreciation for some folkloric melody, it's hard not to feel a certain snide irony or basic contempt for our dear shepherd and his sheep. That's not to say that some rustic sheepherder, whatever their sex and condition, wouldn't also be capable of enjoying this sort of thing or, on the contrary, of feeling offended by it. Anyway, all this would have seemed like twaddle to him. What brought Fanon from Lyon to Saint-Alban was an entirely different sort of approach. He was clear-sighted and an even better listener. He wouldn't let anything bamboozle him. Some would even say he was 'pathologically' distrustful, perhaps even a little bit paranoid.

The effectiveness of the psychiatrist – or rather of the psychiatrist-in-training (the true psychiatrist is always in training) – his ability to thread together the byproducts of 'his' patients' suffering, depends entirely on a consciously assumed attitude of 'paranoia-critique', on his 'marginality' in relation to Cartesian and rationalist culture, his discernment and third ear. Fanon was not afflicted by that awful endemic illness which paralyses so many people's thinking when they fall under the spell of the 'voice of the master', pushing them into a state of 'normopathy'. That was a boon for him and the patients under his care. To my knowledge, he never attempted to rid himself of his own 'normopathy' through the usual psychoanalytic training analysis. Rightly or wrongly, to shield himself from the effects of 'normopathy', he dedicated himself to developing his own language [*verbe*]. How did he do this? What sorts of narcissistic reassurances might he have given himself along the way? I'm not sure, but it doesn't really matter. In truth, he worked and was worked through by his language [*verbe*]. This is a role he put his whole being into, and by 'being' here I mean something far larger, far deeper, than the auxiliary form of the verb 'to be' prescribed within various grammatical tenses.

In fact, he was always in full possession of the poetic and the rational dimensions of his discursive productions. His speech was carried by his entire body. But don't think that would have driven him to hysteria. He was vigilant to its dangers and pitfalls. For him, it was never a question of pretending. Even his lyricism was never an escape into some verbose imaginary. If he sometimes took flight, it was to gaze at things more clearly, to establish some distance before landing again to take on new actions more effectively. He stood as witness mostly through his actions. His life was neither some narrative nor a performance, nor was it just a series of actings-out [*passages à l'acte*]. I don't mean to idealise him. He sometimes made mistakes, as everyone does, and perhaps the consequences of his mistakes where all the more serious given his involvement in the therapeutic process. Even so, in spite of these hazards, I never saw patients bear him a resentment that was irreparable or so great as to crush them. His hand and his voice were always ready, always extended toward the other and their suffering. I believe that anyone – no matter how mentally retarded they might appear in the eyes of classical nosography – would be able to grasp the offer and the call issuing from the structural and structuring rigour of his 'poetic'

thought. He didn't hide his work as a polisher of concepts – those 'weapon-tools' of the artisan – an activity in which his leading role remained uncontested. The artisan, incidentally, does not destroy the matter he works. On the contrary, he respects it, grasps its lines of force, and brings them out with the aid of his tools. This is what can sometimes give the impression of violence – an important point as far as the artisan Fanon is concerned. This is what can sometimes arouse a bit of fear here and there. Let us note, however, that such fears tend to form and spread as a result of rumours that are often malicious in intent. I dare say these fears have emerged all too easily when certain individuals have themselves shrunk from such work [*l'ouvrage*]. When someone experiences fear and violence in the other, this can justify their escape, laziness, or apathy. No carpenter, cabinetmaker, or sculptor would accuse a fellow artisan of violence on the grounds that he uses his tools, hammers, saws, and so on, to work and strike the stone or wood. It is actually quite rare for an artisan to use his work tools as weapons to commit murder or suicide. Still, we must admit that seen from afar, the handling of tools can seem frightening. Accidents, as they say, can happen suddenly. The safest, wisest, most prudent course, then, is to do nothing.

True, life is peppered with 'accidents'. Life is always social, I would say, because it is spent in the company of others, those we know and those we don't, those who are close to us and those who are not – this is a life spent in the company of others and their representatives. There's always in the relations between individuals something unexpected, enigmatic, some misunderstanding, misstep, misrepresentation, misappropriation, some theft or act of seizure. Navigating life with others is not just about acting out one's wish-fulfilment dream [*rêverie désidérative*]. The obsessive pursuit of a fixed goal or project does not seem like a good way for navigators to find their way. Unlike certain reckless young adventurers, Fanon was working with a cartography that had been mapped out by other navigators before him, a fact he never forgot about. Quite the opposite. He remained alert and attuned to the sea's constant changes and the whims of the winds. Sure, he also sought out the unknown and beyond, but, most importantly, he steered clear of danger when it was visible on the horizon. I've already said it: sometimes he was wrong. Yet, he never went looking for the storm just to prove the extent, or excess, of his power. He did not fear the storm should it come. That's all. His task was then to confront it. Fanon certainly loved boats, especially his own boat. But let's not forget his aim was always to get somewhere in one. Therein lay the scope and limits of his narcissism.

I'm sure that if he could read this, he'd chuckle at my seafaring metaphors and call me an idiot. Actually, that's all the more reason for me to persevere with them. So, if you'll indulge me, let me say that the course he charted across psychiatric waters presupposed the existence of a transitional field, as is the case in all our navigations. This is a field of illusion, which, according to Winnicott, serves a crucial functional role in the process of humanisation of every individual. One must not confuse this illusion with the delusional demands of a desire made all-powerful by the very omnipotence of desire. Fanon had fed on illusions. In the Christian religion, this is called the virtue of hope. But that has nothing to do with the arts of the manipulators of illusions – of what might be called a certain illusionist clergy.

Now then, to conclude, I realise I've said nothing – or almost nothing – about Fanon, not even about Fanon at Saint-Alban. But that's fine with me, to be honest. The nothing said here itself speaks of all the resonances that life, friendship, and the work I shared with Fanon have stirred in me. And that means a lot. I'm hoping some young psychiatrists will see themselves in this. Also, I'm absolutely certain that somewhere the harvest will be reaped.

Translated by Giovanni Menegalle

Notes

1. This article was originally published in a special issue of *Information psychiatrique* devoted to Frantz Fanon, n.10 vol. 51 (December 1975).
2. The 'ça' here seems to be a riff on Lacan's impersonal 'ça parle', but the subject of the sentence also appears to refer to Fanon's 'presence', namely as some kind of pre-subjective force or substance which then animates 'the subject'.
3. The Lozère department is also known as the 'land of sources' (*le pays des sources*) because several important rivers (the Lot, the Tarn, the Truyère, the Allier, …) have their source there.
4. On 'sector psychiatry', see Lucie K. Mercier's article in this issue of *Radical Philosophy*.