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INTERROGATING IDENTITY
Frantz Fanon and the postcolonial prerogative

I

To read Fanon is to experience the sense of division that prefigures—and fissures—the emergence of a truly radical thought that never dawns without casting an uncertain dark. Fanon is the purveyor of the transgressive and transitional truth. He may yearn for the total transformation of Man and Society, but he speaks most effectively from the uncertain interstices of historical change: from the area of ambivalence between race and sexuality; out of an unresolved contradiction between culture and class; from deep within the struggle of psychic representation and social reality. His voice is most clearly heard in the subversive turn of a familiar term, in the silence of sudden rupture: 'The Negro is not, Any more than the white man.' The awkward division that breaks his line of thought keeps alive the dramatic and enigmatic sense of change. That familiar alignment of colonial subjects – Black/White, Self/Other – is disturbed with one brief pause and the traditional grounds of racial identity are dispersed, whenever they are found to rest in the narcissistic myths of negritude or white cultural supremacy. It is this palpable pressure of division and displacement that pushes Fanon’s writing to the edge of things – the cutting edge that reveals no ultimate radiance but, in his words, ‘exposed an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born’.

The psychiatric hospital at Blida-Jouville is one such place where, in the divided world of French Algeria, Fanon discovered the impossibility of his mission as a colonial psychiatrist.

If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization. ... The social struc-
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The extremity of this colonial alienation of the person – this end of the ‘idea’ of the individual – produces a restless urgency in Fanon’s search for a conceptual form appropriate to the social antagonism of the colonial relation. The body of his work splits between a Hegelian-Marxist dialectic, a phenomenological affirmation of Self and Other, and the psychoanalytic ambivalence of the Unconscious. In his desperate, doomed search for a dialectic of deliverance Fanon explores the edge of these modes of thought: his Hegelianism restores hope to history; his existentialist evocation of the ‘I’ restores the presence of the marginalized; his psychoanalytic framework illuminates the madness of racism, the pleasure of pain, the agonistic fantasy of political power.

As Fanon attempts such audacious, often impossible, transformations of truth and value, the jagged testimony of colonial dislocation, its displacement of time and person, its defilement of culture and territory, refuses the ambition of any total theory of colonial oppression. The Antillean écorché cut to the quick by the glancing look of a frightened, confused, white child; the stereotype of the native fixed at the shifting boundaries between barbarism and civility, the insatiable fear and desire for the Negro: ‘Our women are at the mercy of Negroes... God knows how they make love’; the deep cultural fear of the black figured in the psychic trembling of Western sexuality – it is these signs and symptoms of the colonial condition that drive Fanon from one conceptual scheme to another, while the colonial relation takes shape in the gaps between them, articulated to the intrepid engagements of his style. As Fanon’s texts unfold, the scientific fact comes to be aggressed by the experience of the street; sociological observations are intercut with literary artefacts, and the poetry of liberation is brought up short against the leaden, deadening prose of the colonized world.

What is the distinctive force of Fanon’s vision? It comes, I believe, from the tradition of the oppressed, the language of a revolutionary awareness that, as Walter Benjamin suggests, ‘the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a concept of history that is in keeping with this insight.’ And the state of emergency is also always a state of emergence. The struggle against colonial oppression not only changes the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist idea of time as a progressive, ordered whole. The analysis of colonial depersonalization not only alienates the Enlightenment idea of ‘Man’, but challenges the transparency of social reality, as a pre-given image of human knowledge. If the order of Western historicism is disturbed in the colonial state of emergency, even more deeply disturbed is the social and psychic representation of the
human subject. For the very nature of humanity becomes estranged in the colonial condition and from that ‘naked declivity’ it emerges, not as an assertion of will nor as an evocation of freedom, but as an enigmatic questioning. With a question that echoes Freud’s ‘What does woman want?’, Fanon turns to confront the colonized world. ‘What does a man want?’ he asks, in the introduction to Black Skin, White Masks: ‘What does the black man want?’

To this loaded question where cultural alienation bears down on the ambivalence of psychic identification, Fanon responds with an agonizing performance of self-images:

I had to meet the white man’s eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema... I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects... I took myself far off from my own presence... What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?

From within the metaphor of vision implicit with a Western metaphysic of Man emerges the displacement of the colonial relation. The black presence runs the representative narrative of Western personhood: its past tethered to treacherous stereotypes of primitivism and degeneracy will not produce a history of civil progress, a space for the Socrates; its present, dismembered and dislocated, will not contain the image of identity that is questioned in the dialectic of mind/body and resolved in the epistemology of appearance and reality. The white man’s eyes break up the black man’s body and in that act of epistemic violence its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed.

‘What does the black man want?’ Fanon insists, and 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 moments. 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 addressed not to such a unified notion of history nor to 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 in the heterogeneous assemblage of the 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 on 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, occlusions of historical progress, the ultimate misrecognition of Man.

For Fanon such a myth of Man and Society is fundamentally undermined in the colonial situation. 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 that 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 'Manichaean delirium'.

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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. The 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 this 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.

'What is often called the black soul is a white man's artefact,' Fanon writes.10 This transference speaks otherwise. It reveals the deep psychic uncertainty of the colonial relation itself: its split representations stage the division of body and soul that enacts the artifice of identity, a division that cuts across the fragile skin – black and white – of individual and social authority. Three conditions that underlie an understanding of the process of identification in the analytic of desire emerge.

First: to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus. It is a demand that reaches outward to an external object and as Jacqueline Rose writes, 'it is the relation of this demand to the place of the object it claims that becomes the basis for identification.'11 This process is visible in the exchange of looks between native and settler that structures their psychic relation in the paranoid fantasy of boundless possession and its familiar language of reversal: 'When their glances meet he [the settler] ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, "They want to take our place." It is true for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of settling himself up in the settler's place.'12 It is always in relation to the place of the Other that colonial desire is articulated: the phantasmatic space of possession that no one subject can singly or fixedly occupy, and therefore permits the dream of the inversion of roles.

Second: the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting. The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master's place while keeping his place in the slave's avenging anger. 'Black skin, white masks' is not a neat division; it is a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once that makes it impossible for the devalued, insatiable évolué (an abandonment neurotic, Fanon claims) to accept the colonizer's invitation to identity: 'You're a doctor, a writer, a student, you're different, you're one of us.' It is precisely in that ambivalent use of 'different' – to be different from those that are different makes you the same – that the
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Unconscious speaks of the form of otherness, the tethered shadow of deferral and displacement. It is not the colonialist Self or the colonized Other, but the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness – the white man's artifice inscribed on the black man's body. It is in relation to this impossible object that the liminal problem of colonial identity and its vicissitudes emerges.

Finally, the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification – that is, to be for an Other – entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness. Identification, as we inferred from the preceding illustrations, is always the return of an image of identity that bears the mark of splitting in the Other place from which it comes. For Fanon, like Lacan, the primary moments of such a repetition of the self lie in the desire of the look and the limits of language. The 'atmosphere of certain uncertainty' that surrounds the body certifies its existence and threatens its dismemberment.

II

Listen to my friend, the Bombay poet Adil Jussawalla, writing of the missing person that haunts the identity of the postcolonial bourgeoisie:

No Satan
warmed in the electric coils of his creatures
or Gunga Din
will make him come before you.
To see an invisible man or a missing person,
trust no Eng. Lit. That
puffs him up, narrows his eyes,
scratches his fangs. Caliban
is still not IT.
But faintly pencilled
behind a shirt...

... savage of no sensational paint,
fangs cancelled.

As that voice falters listen to its echo in the verse of a black woman, descendant of slaves, writing of the diaspora:

We arrived in the Northern Hemisphere
when summer was set in its way
running from the flames that lit the sky

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over the Plantation.
We were a straggle bunch of immigrants
in a lily white landscape.

... One day I learnt
a secret art,
Invisible-Ness, it was called.
I think it worked
as even now you look
but never see me ...
Only my eyes will remain to watch and to haunt,
and to turn your dreams
to chaos.14

As these images fade, and the empty eyes endlessly hold their menacing gaze, listen finally to Edward Said's attempt to historicize their chaos of identity:

One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed... If the world has become immediately accessible to a Western citizen living in the electronic age, the Orient too has drawn nearer to him, and is now less a myth perhaps than a place criss-crossed by Western, especially American interests.15

I use these postcolonial portraits because they seize on the vanishing point of two familiar traditions in the discourse of identity: the philosophical tradition of identity as the process of self-reflection in the mirror of (human) nature; and the anthropological view of the difference of human identity as located in the division of Nature/Culture. In the postcolonial text the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation, where the image - missing person, invisible eye, Oriental stereotype - is confronted with its difference, its Other. This is neither the glassy essence of Nature, to use Richard Rorty's image, nor the leaden voice of 'ideological interpellation', as Louis Althusser suggests.

What is so graphically enacted in the moment of colonial identification is the splitting of the subject in its historical place of utterance: 'No Satan.../or Gunga Din/will make him come before you/To see an invisible man or a missing person,/trust no Eng. Lit.' (my emphases). What these repeated negations of identity dramatize, in their elision of the seeing eye that must contemplate what is missing or invisible, is the impossibility of claiming an origin for the Self (or Other) within a tradition of representation that conceives of identity as the satisfaction of a totalizing, plenitudinous object of vision. By disrupting the stab-
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ility of the ego, expressed in the equivalence between image and identity, the secret art of invisibility of which the migrant poet speaks changes the very terms of our recognition of the person. This change is precipitated by the peculiar temporality whereby the subject cannot be apprehended without the absence or invisibility that constitutes it - 'as even now you look/but never see me' - so that the subject speaks, and is seen, from where it is not; and the migrant woman can subvert the perversity of the racist, masculinist gaze that disavowed her presence, by presenting it with an anxious absence, a counter-gaze that turns the discriminatory look, which denies her cultural and sexual difference, back on itself.

The familiar space of the Other (in the process of identification) develops a graphic historical and cultural specificity in the splitting of the postcolonial or migrant subject. In place of that 'I' - institutionalized in the visionary, authorial ideologies of Eng. Lit. or the notion of 'experience' in the empiricist accounts of slave history - there emerges the challenge to see what is invisible, the look that cannot 'see me', a certain problem of the object of the gaze that constitutes a problematic referent for the language of the Self. The elision of the eye, represented in a narrative of negation and repetition - no ... no ... never - insists that the phrase of identity cannot be spoken, except by putting the eye/1 in the impossible position of enunciation. To see a missing person, or to look at Invisibility, is to emphasize the subject's transitive demand for a direct object of self-reflection, a point of presence that would maintain its privileged enunciatory position qua subject. To see a missing person is to transgress that demand; the I in the position of mastery is, at that same time, the place of its absence, its re-presentation. We witness the alienation of the eye through the sound of the signifier as the scopic desire (to look/to be looked at) emerges and is erased in the feint of writing:

But faintly pencilled
behind a shirt.
a trendy jacket or tie
if he catches your eye,
he'll come screaming at you like a jet -
savage of no sensational paint,
fangs cancelled.

Why does the faintly pencilled person fail to catch your eye? What is the secret of Invisibility that enables the woman migrant to look without being seen?

What is interrogated is not simply the image of the person, but the discursive and disciplinary place from which questions of identity are strategically and institutionally posed. Through the progress of this
poem 'you' are continually positioned in the space between a range of contradictory places that coexist. So that you find yourself at the point at which the Orientalist stereotype is evoked and erased at the same time, in the place where Eng. Lit. is entstellt in the ironic mimicry of its Indo-Anglican repetition. And this space of reinscription must be thought outside of those metaphysical philosophies of self-doubt, where the otherness of identity is the anguished presence within the Self of an existentialist agony that emerges when you look perilously through a glass darkly.

What is profoundly unresolved, even erased, in the discourses of poststructuralism is that perspective of depth through which the authenticity of identity comes to be reflected in the glassy metaphories of the mirror and its mimetic or realist narratives. Shifting the frame of identity from the field of vision to the space of writing interrogates the third dimension that gives profundity to the representation of Self and Other – that depth of perspective that cineastes call the forth wall; literary theorists describe it as the transparency of realist metanarratives. Barthes brilliantly diagnoses this as l'effet du réel, the 'profound, geological dimension' in of signification, achieved by arresting the linguistic sign in its symbolic function. The bilateral space of the symbolic consciousness, Barthes writes, massively privileges resemblance, constructs an analogical relation between signifier and signified that ignores the question of form, and creates a vertical dimension within the sign. In this scheme the signifier is always predetermined by the signified – that conceptual or real space that is placed prior to, and outside of, the act of signification.

From our point of view, this verticality is significant for the light it sheds on that dimension of depth that provides the language of Identity with its sense of reality – a measure of the 'me', which emerges from an acknowledgement of my inwardsness, the depth of my character, the profundity of my person, to mention only a few of those qualities through which we commonly articulate our self-consciousness. My argument about the importance of depth in the representation of a unified image of the self is borne out by the most decisive and influential formulation on personal identity in the English empiricist tradition.

John Locke's famous criteria for the continuity of consciousness could quite legitimately be read in the symbolic register of resemblance and analogy. For the sameness of a rational being requires a consciousness of the past which is crucial to the argument - 'as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person' - and is precisely the unifying third dimension. The agency of depth brings together in an analogical relation (dismissive of the differences that construct temporality and signification) 'that same consciousness uniting those distant actions into
the same person, whatever substances contributed to their production' (my emphasis).17

Barthes’s description of the sign-as-symbol is conveniently analogous to the language we use to designate identity. At the same time, it sheds light on the concrete linguistic concepts with which we can grasp how the language of personhood comes to be invested with a visuality or visibility of depth. This makes the moment of self-consciousness at once refracted and transparent; the question of identity always poised uncertainly, tenebrously, between shadow and substance. The symbolic consciousness gives the sign (of the Self) a sense of autonomy or solitariness ‘as if it stands by itself in the world’ privileging an individuality and a unitariness whose integrity is expressed in a certain richness of agony and anomie. Barthes calls it a mythic prestige, almost totemic in its form [which is] constantly exceeded by the power and movement of its content; ... much less a codified form of communication than an (affective) instrument of participation.”18

This image of human identity and, indeed, human identity as image — both familiar frames or mirrors of selfhood that speak from deep within Western culture — are inscribed in the sign of resemblance. The analogical relation unifies the experience of self-consciousness by finding, within the mirror of nature, the symbolic certitude of the sign of culture based ‘on an analogy with the compulsion to believe when staring at an object’.19 This, as Rorty writes, is part of the West’s obsession that our primary relation to objects and ourselves is analogous to visual perception. Pre-eminent among these representations has been the reflection of the self that develops in the symbolic consciousness of the sign. It marks out the discursive space from which The real Me emerges (initially as an assertion of the authenticity of the person) and then lingers on to reverberate – The real Me? – as a questioning of identity.

My purpose here is to define the space of the inscription or writing of identity — beyond the visual depths of Barthes’s symbolic sign. The experience of the disseminating self-image goes beyond representation as the analogical consciousness of resemblance. This is not a form of dialectical contradiction, the antagonistic consciousness of master and slave, that can be sublated and transcended. The impasse or aporia of consciousness that seems to be the representative postmodernist experience is a peculiar strategy of doubling.

Each time the encounter with identity occurs at the point at which something exceeds the frame of the image, it eludes the eye, evacuates the self as site of identity and autonomy and — most important — leaves a resistant trace, a stain of the subject, a sign of resistance. We are no longer confronted with an ontological problem of being but with the discursive strategy of the moment of interrogation, a moment in which
the demand for identification becomes, primarily, a response to other questions of signification and desire, culture and politics.

In place of the symbolic consciousness that gives the sign of identity its integrity and unity, its depth, we are faced with a dimension of doubling; a spatialization of the subject, that is occluded in the illusory perspective of what I have called the 'third dimension' of the mimetic frame or visual image of identity. The figure of the double - to which I now turn - cannot be contained within the analogical sign of resemblance; as Barthes said, this developed its totemic, vertical dimension only because 'what interests it in the sign is the signified: the significer is always a determined element.' For poststructuralist discourse, the priority (and play) of the significer reveals the space of doubling (not depth) that is the very articulatory principle of discourse. It is through that space of enunciation that problems of meaning and being enter the discourses of poststructuralism, as the problematic of subjection and identification.

What emerges in the preceding poems, as the line drawing of trendy jacket and tie, or the eerie, avengeful disembodied eye, must not be read as a revelation of some suppressed truth of the postcolonial psyche/subject. In the world of double inscriptions that we have now entered, in this space of writing, there can be no such immediacy of a visualist perspective, no such face-to-face epiphanies in the mirror of nature. On one level, what confronts you, the reader, is the incomplete portrait of the postcolonial bourgeois - who looks uncannily like the metropolitan intellectual - is the ambivalence of your desire for the Other: 'You! hypocrite lecteur! - mon semblable, - mon frere!'

That disturbance of your voyeuristic look enacts the complexity and contradictions of your desire to see, to fix cultural difference in a containable, visible object. The desire for the Other is doubled by the desire in language, which splits the difference between Self and Other so that both positions are partial; neither is sufficient unto itself. As I have just shown in the portrait of the missing person, the very question of identification only emerges in-between disavowal and designation. It is performed in the agonistic struggle between the epistemological, visual demand for a knowledge of the Other, and its representation in the act of articulation and enunciation.

Look, a Negro ... Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened ... I could no longer laugh, because I already knew where there were legends, stories, history, and above all historicity.... Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema.... It was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person.... I was responsible for my body, for my race, for my ancestors.
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Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* reveals the doubling of identity: the difference between personal identity as an intimation of reality, or an intuition of being, and the psychoanalytic problem of identification that always begs the question of the subject: 'What does a man want?' The emergence of the human subject as socially and psychically authenticated depends on the negation of an originary narrative of fulfilment, or on 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, 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; the process of displacement and differentiation (absence/presence, representation/repetition) renders it a liminal reality. The image is at once a metaphorical 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.23

From that overwhelming emptiness 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 conscious-
ness. The Other must be seen as the necessary negation of a primordial
identity – cultural or psychic – that introduces the system of differen-
tiation 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 front of
identity, truth or misrecognition.

As a principle of identification, the Other bestows a degree of objec-
tivity, 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 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, 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?

III

Lacan’s excellent, if cryptic, suggestion that ‘the Other is a dual entry
matrix’ should be understood as the partial erasure of the depth perspec-
tive of the symbolic sign; through the circulation of the signifier in its
doubling and displacing, the signifier permits the sign no reciprocal,
binary division of form/content, superstructure/infrastructure, self/other.
It is only by understanding the ambivalence and the antagonism
of the desire of the Other that we can avoid the increasingly facile
adoption of the notion of a homogenized Other, for a celebratory, opposi-
tional politics of the margins or minorities.

The performance of the doubleness or splitting of the subject is
enacted in the writing of the poems I have quoted; it is evident in the
play on the metonymic figures of ‘missing’ and ‘invisibility’ around
which their questioning of identity turns. It is articulated in those iterative
instances that simultaneously mark the possibility and impossibility
of identity, presence through absence. ‘Only my eyes will remain to
watch and to haunt,’ warns Meiling Jin as that threatening part object,
the disembodied eye – the evil eye – becomes the subject of a violent
discourse of resentment. Here, phantasmic and (pre)figurative rage erases the naturalistic identities of I and We that narrate a more conventional, even realist history of colonial exploitation and metropolitan racism, within the poem.

The moment of seeing that is arrested in the evil eye inscribes a namelessness, or a freezing of time - 'remain/to watch and to haunt' - that can only be represented in the destruction of the depth associated with the sign of symbolic consciousness. It is a depth that comes from what Barthes describes as the *analogical* relation between superficial form and massive *Abgrund*: the 'relation of form and content [as] ceaselessly renewed by time (history); the superstructure overwhelmed by the infrastructure, without our ever being able to grasp the structure itself.\(^{24}\)

The eyes that remain - the eyes as a kind of *remainder*, producing an iterative process - cannot be part of this plentitudinous and progressive renewal of time or history. They are the signs of a structure of *writing* history, a *history* of the poetics of postcolonial diaspora, that the symbolic consciousness could never grasp. Most significantly, these partial eyes bear witness to a woman's writing of the postcolonial condition. Their circulation and repetition frustrate both the voyeuristic desire for the fixity of sexual difference and the fetishistic desire for racist stereotypes. The gaze of the evil eye alienates both the narratorial I of the slave and the surveillant eye of the master. It unsettles any simplistic polarities or binarisms in identifying the exercise of power - Self/Other - and erases the analogical dimension in the articulation of sexual difference. It is empty of that depth of verticality that creates a totemic resemblance of form and content (*Abgrund*) ceaselessly renewed and replenished by the groundspring of history. The evil eye - like the missing person - is nothing in itself, and it is this *structure of difference* that produces the hybridity of race and sexuality in the postcolonial discourse.

The elision of identity in these tropes of the 'secret art of Invisibleness' from which these writers speak is not an ontology of lack that, on its other side, becomes a nostalgic demand for a liberatory, non-repressed identity. It is the uncanny space and time *between* those two moments of being, their incommensurable differences - if such a place can be imagined - signified in the process of repetition, that give the evil eye or the missing person their meaning. Meaningless in/as themselves, these figures initiate the rhetorical excess of social reality and the psychic reality of social fantasy. Their poetic and political force develops through a certain strategy of duplicity or doubling (not resemblance, in Barthes's sense), which Lacan has elaborated as 'the process of gap' within which the relation of subject to Other is produced.\(^{25}\) The primary duplicity of the missing person pencilled in before your eyes, or the woman's eyes that watch and haunt, is this: although these images emerge with a certain fixity and finality in the *present*, as if they are the last word on
the subject, they cannot identify or interpellate identity as presence. This is because they are created in the ambivalence of a double time of iteration that, in Derrida's felicitous phrase, 'baffles the process of appearing by dislocating any orderly time at the center of the present'.26 The effect of such baffling, in both poems, is to initiate a principle of undecidability in the signification of part and whole, past and present, self and Other, such that there can be no negation or transcendence of difference.

The naming of the missing person as 'Savage of no sensational pain' is a case in point. The phrase, spoken at the end of Adil Jussawalla's poem, neither simply returns us to the Orientalist discourse of stereotypes and exotica – Gunga Din – enshrined in the history of Eng. Lit., nor allows us to rest with the line drawing of the missing person. The reader is positioned – together with the enunciation of the question of identity – in an undecidable space between 'desire and fulfillment, between perpetration and its recollection... Neither future nor present, but between the two.'27 The repetition of the Orientalia and their imperialist past are re-presented, made present semantically, within the same time and utterance as that in which their representations are negated syntactically – 'no sensational pain/Fangs cancelled.' From that erasure, in the repetition of that 'no', without being articulated at all in the phrase itself, emerges the faintly penciled presence of the missing person who, in absentia, is both present in, and constitutive of, the savagery. Can you tell the postcolonial bourgeois and the Western intellectual elite apart? How does the repetition of a part of speech – no! – turn the image of civility into the double of savagery? What part does the faint of writing play in evoking these faint figures of identity? And, finally, where do we stand in that uncanny echo between what may be described as the attenuation of identity and its simulacra?

These questions demand a double answer. In each of them I have posed a theoretical problem in terms of its political and social effects. It is the boundary between them that I have tried to explore in my vacillations between the texture of poetry and a certain textuality of identity. One answer to my questions would be to say that we now stand at the point in the poststructuralist argument where we can see the doubleness of its own grounds: the uncanny sameness-in-difference, or the alterity of Identity of which these theories speak, and from which, in forked tongues, they communicate with each other to constitute those discourses that we name postmodernism. The rhetoric of repetition or doubling that I have traced displays the art of becoming through a certain metonymic logic disclosed in the 'evil eye' or the 'missing person'. Metonymy, a figure of contiguity that substitutes a part for a whole (an eye for an I), must not be read as a form of simple substitution or equivalence. Its circulation of part and whole, identity and difference,
must be understood as a double movement that follows what Derrida calls the logic or play of the ‘supplement’:

If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory and vicarious, the supplement [evil eye] is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which takes - the - place. As substitute ... [missing person] ... it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness. Somewhere something can be filled up of itself... only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy.28

Having illustrated, through my reading of the poems above, the supplementary nature of the subject, I want to focus on the subaltern instance of metonymy, which is the proxy of both presence and the present: time (takes place on) and space (takes place of ...) at once. To conceptualize this complex doubling of time and space, as the site of spunciation, and the temporal conditionality of social discourse, is both the thrill and the threat of the poststructuralist and postmodernist discourses. How different is this representation of the sign from the symbolic consciousness where, as Barthes said, the relation of form and content is ceaselessly renewed by Time (as the Abgrund of the historical)? The evil eye, which seeks to outstare linear, continuist history and turn its progressive dream into nightmarish chaos, is exemplary once more. What Meiling Jin calls ‘the secret art of Invisible-Ness’ creates a crisis in the representation of personhood and, at the critical moment, initiates the possibility of political subversion. Invisibility erases the self-presence of that T in terms of which traditional concepts of political agency and narrative mastery function. What takes (the) place, in Derrida’s supplementary sense, is the disembodied evil eye, the subaltern instance, that wreaks its revenge by circulating, without being seen. It cuts across the boundaries of master and slave; it opens up a space in-between the poem’s two locations, the Southern Hemisphere of slavery and the Northern Hemisphere of diaspora and migration, which then become uncannily doubled in the phantasmic scenario of the political unconscious. This doubling resists the traditional causal link that explains contemporary metropolitan racism as a result of the historical prejudices of imperialist nations. What it does suggest is the possibility of a new understanding of both forms of racism, based on their shared symbolic and spatial structures – Fanon’s Manichaean structure – articulated within different temporal, cultural and power relations.

The anti-dialectical movement of the subaltern instance subverts any binary or sublatory ordering of power and sign; it defers the object of the look – ‘as even now you look / but never see me’ – and endows it with a strategic motion, which we may here, analogously, name the movement of the death drive. The evil eye, which is nothing in itself,
exists in its lethal traces or effects as a form of iteration that arrests time – death/chaos – and initiates a space of intercutting that articulates politics/psyche, sexuality/race. It does this in a relation that is differential and strategic rather than originary, ambivalent rather than accumulative, doubling rather than dialectical. The play of the evil eye is camouflaged, invisible in the common, on-going activity of looking – making present, while it is implicated in the petrifying, unblinking gaze that falls Medusa-like on its victims – dealing death, extinguishing both presence and the present. There is a specifically feminist representation of political subversion in this strategy of the evil eye. The disavowal of the position of the migrant woman – her social and political invisibility – is used by her in her secret art of revenge, mimicry. In that overlap of signification – in that fold of identification as cultural and sexual difference – the 'I' is the initial, initiatory signature of the subject; and the 'eye' (in its metonymic repetition) is the sign that initiates the terminal, arrest, death:

as even now you look
but never see me ...
Only my eyes will remain to haunt,
and to turn your dreams
to chaos.

It is in this overlapping space between the fading of identity and its faint inscription that I take my stand on the subject, amidst a celebrated gathering of poststructuralist thinkers. Although there are significant differences between them, I want to focus here on their attention to the place from which the subject speaks or is spoken.

For Lacan – who has used the arrest of the evil eye in his analysis of the gaze – this is the moment of 'temporal pulsation': '[The signifier in the field of the Other] petrifies] the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to speak as subject.\(^{29}\)

Foucault repeats something of the same uncanny movement of doubling when he elaborates on the 'quasi-invisibility of the statement':

Perhaps it is like the over-familiar that constantly eludes one; those familiar transparencies, which although they conceal nothing in their density, are nevertheless not entirely clear. The enunciative level emerges in its very proximity: ... It has this quasi-invisibility of the 'there is,' which is effaced in the very thing of which one can say: 'there is this or that thing,...' Language always seems to be inhabited by the other, the elsewhere, the distant; it is hollowed out by distance.\(^{30}\)

Lyotard holds on to the pulsating beat of the time of utterance when he discusses the narrative of Tradition:
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Tradition is that which concerns time, not content. Whereas what the West wants from autonomy, invention, novelty, self-determination, is the opposite — to forget time and to preserve, and accumulate contents. To turn them into what we call history and to think that it progresses because it accumulates. On the contrary, in the case of popular traditions ... nothing gets accumulated, that is the narratives must be repeated all the time because they are forgotten all the time. But what does not get forgotten is the temporal beat that does not stop sending the narratives to oblivion.

This is a situation of continuous embedding, which makes it impossible to find a first utterer.31

IV

I may be accused of a form of linguistic or theoretical formalism, of establishing a rule of metonymy or the supplement and laying down the oppressive, even universalist, law of difference or doubling. How does the poststructuralist attention to écriture and textuality influence my experience of myself? Not directly, I would answer, but then, have our fables of identity ever been unmediated by another; have they ever been more (or less) than a detour through the word of God, or the writ of Law, or the Name of the Father, the totem, the fetish, the telephone, the superego, the voice of the analyst, the closed ritual of the weekly confessional or the ever open ear of the monthly coiffeuse?

I am reminded of the problem of self-portraiture in Holbein’s The Ambassadors, of which Lacan produces a startling reading. The two still figures stand at the centre of their world, surrounded by the accoutrements of vanitas — a globe, a lute, books and compasses, unfolding wealth. They also stand in the moment of temporal instantaneity where the Cartesian subject emerges as the subjectifying relation of geometrical perspective, described above as the depth of the image of identity. But off-centre, in the foreground (violating the meaningful depths of the Abgrund), there is a flat spherical object, obliquely angled. As you walk away from the portrait and turn to leave, you see that the disc is a skull, the reminder (and remainder) of death, that makes visible nothing more than the alienation of the subject, the anamorphic ghost.32

Doesn’t the logic of the supplement — in its repetition and doubling — produce a historylessness, a ‘culture’ of theory that makes it impossible to give meaning to historical specificity? This is a large question that I can only answer here by proxy, by citing a text remarkable for its postcolonial specificity and for its questioning of what we might mean by cultural specificity:
THE LOCATION OF CULTURE

A's a giggle now
but on it Osiris, Ra.
An अ ह अ ए ... a cough,
once spoking your valleys with light.
But the a's here to stay.
On it St. Pancras station,
the Indian and African railways.
That's why you learn it today.

'Get back to your language,' they say.

These lines come from an early section of Adil Jussawalla’s poem 'Missing Person'. They provide an insight into the fold between the cultural and linguistic conditions articulated in the textual economy that I have described as the metonymic or the supplementary. The discourse of poststructuralism has largely been spelled out in an intriguing repetition of a, whether it is Lacan’s petit objet a or Derrida’s différence. Observe, then, the agency of this postcolonial a.

There is something supplementary about a that makes it the initial letter of the Roman alphabet and, at the same time, the indefinite article. What is dramatized in this circulation of the a is a double scene on a double stage, to borrow a phrase from Derrida. The A – with which the verse begins – is the sign of a linguistic objectivity, inscribed in the Indo-European language tree, institutionalized in the cultural disciplines of empire; and yet as the Hindi vowel ए, which is the first letter of the Hindi alphabet and is pronounced as ‘er’, testifies, the object of linguistic science is always already in an enunciatory process of cultural translation, showing up the hybridity of any genealogical or systematic filiation.

Listen: 'An अ ह अ ए ... a cough': in the same time, we hear the a repeated in translation, not as an object of linguistics, but in the act of the colonial enunciation of cultural contestation. This double scene articulates the ellipsis ... which marks the différence between the Hindi sign ए and the demotic English signifier – 'er, a cough'. It is through the emptiness of ellipsis that the difference of colonial culture is articulated as a hybridity acknowledging that all cultural specificity is belated, different unto itself – ए ... er ... ugh! Cultures come to be represented by virtue of the processes of iteration and translation through which their meanings are very vicariously addressed to – through – an Other. This erases any essentialist claims for the inherent authenticity or purity of cultures which, when inscribed in the naturalistic sign of symbolic consciousness frequently become political arguments for the hierarchy and ascendancy of powerful cultures. It is this hybrid gap, which produces no relief, that the colonial subject takes place, its subaltern
position inscribed in that space of iteration where \( \mathfrak{H} \) takes (the) place of

if this sounds like a schematic, poststructuralist joke – 'it's all words, words, words...' – then I must remind you of the linguistic insistence in Clifford Geertz's influential statement that the experience of understanding other cultures is 'more like grasping a proverb, catching an illusion, seeing a joke [or as I have suggested reading a poem] than it is like achieving communion.' My insistence on locating the postcolonial subject *within* the play of the subaltern instance of writing is an attempt to develop Derrida's passing remark that the history of the centred subject and its dislocation of European metaphysics is concurrent with the emergence of the problematic of cultural difference within ethnology. He acknowledges the political nature of this moment but leaves it to us to specify it in the postcolonial text:

'Wiped out,' they say.
Turn left or right,
there's millions like you up here,
picking their way through refuse,
looking for words they lost.
You're your country's lost property
with no office to claim you back.
You're polluting our sounds. You're so rude.
'Get back to your language,' they say.

Embedded in these statements is a cultural politics of diaspora and paranoia, of migration and discrimination, of anxiety and appropriation, which is unthinkable without attention to those metonymic or subaltern moments that structure the subject of writing and meaning. Without the doubleness that I described in the postcolonial play of the 'a \( \mathfrak{H} \)', it would be difficult to understand the anxiety provoked by the hybridizing of language, activated in the anguish associated with vacillating boundaries – psychic, cultural, territorial – of which these verses speak. Where do you draw the line between languages? between cultures? between disciplines? between peoples?

I have suggested here that a subversive political line is drawn in a certain poetics of 'invisibility', 'ellipsis', the evil eye and the missing person – all instances of the 'subaltern' in the Derridean sense, and near enough to the sense that Gramsci gives the concept: 'not simply an oppressed group but lacking autonomy, subjected to the influence or hegemony of another social group, not possessing one's own hegemonic position.' It is with this difference between the two usages that notions of autonomy and domination within the hegemonic would have to be carefully rethought, in the light of what I have said about the proximate nature of any claim to presence or autonomy. However, what is
implicit in both concepts of the subaltern, as I read it, is a strategy of ambivalence in the structure of identification that occurs precisely in the elliptical in-between, where the shadow of the other falls upon the self.

From that shadow (in which the postcolonial a plays) emerges cultural difference as an enunciative category; opposed to relativistic notions of cultural diversity, or the exoticism of the ‘diversity’ of cultures. It is the ‘between’ that is articulated in the camouflaged subversion of the ‘evil eye’ and the transgressive mimicry of the ‘missing person’. The force of cultural difference is, as Barthes once said of the practice of metonymy, ‘the violation of a signifying limit of space, it permits on the very level of discourse, a counterdivision of objects, usages, meanings, spaces and properties’ (my emphasis).³⁸

It is by placing the violence of the poetic sign within the threat of political violation that we can understand the powers of language. Then, we can grasp the importance of the imposition of the imperial a as the cultural condition for the very movement of empire, its logomotion – the colonial creation of the Indian and African railways as the poet wrote. Now, we can begin to see why the threat of the (mis)translation of जै and ‘er’, among the displaced and diasporic peoples who pick through the refuse, is a constant reminder to the postimperial West, of the hybridity of its mother tongue, and the heterogeneity of its national space.

V

In his analytic mode Fanon explores such questions of the ambivalence of colonial inscription and identification. The state of emergency from which he writes demands insurgent answers, more immediate identifications. Fanon frequently attempts a close correspondence between the mise-en-scène of unconscious fantasy and the phantoms of racist fear and hate that stalk the colonial scene; he turns from the ambivalences of identification to the antagonistic identities of political alienation and cultural discrimination. There are times when 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.’³⁹ Restoring 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 the psychic projections in the pathological colonial relation. Jean Veneuse, the Antillean évolué, desires not merely to be in the place of the white man but compulsively seeks to look back and down on himself from that position. Equally, the white racist cannot merely deny what he fears and desires by projecting it on ‘them’. Fanon sometimes forgets that social paranoia does not indefi-
fully authorize its projections. The compulsive, fantasmatic identification with a persecutory 'they' is accompanied, even undermined, by an emptying, an evacuation of the racist 'I' who projects.

Fanon's sociodiagnostic psychiatry tends to explain away the ambivalent turns and returns of the subject of colonial desire, its masquerade as Western Man and the 'long' historical perspective. It is as if Fanon is fearful of his most radical insights: 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 modified, at the end of Black Skin, White Masks, to make way for an existentialism: 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.40

Despite Fanon's insight into the dark side of man, such a deep hunger for humanism must be an overcompensation for the closed consciousness or 'dual narcissism' to which he attributes the depersonalization of colonial man: 'There one lies body to body, with one's blackness or one's whiteness in full narcissistic cry, each sealed into his own particularity - with, it is true, now and then a flash or so.'41 It is this flash of recognition - in its Hegelian sense with its transcendental, sublative spirit - that fails to ignite in the colonial relation where there is only narcissistic indifference: 'And yet the Negro knows there is a difference. He wants it. . . . The former slave needs a challenge to his humanity.42

In the absence of such a challenge, Fanon argues, the colonized can only imitate, a distinction nicely made by the psychoanalyst Annie Reich: 'It is imitation . . . when the child holds the newspaper like his father. It is identification when the child learns to read.'43 In disavowing the culturally differentiated condition of the colonial world - in demanding 'Turn white or disappear' - the colonizer is himself caught in the ambivalence of paranoid identification, alternating between fantasies of megalomania and persecution.

However, Fanon's Hegelian dream for a human reality in-itself-for-itself is ironized, even mocked, by his view of the Manichaean 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 Manichaeanism suggests an answer. By following the trajectory of colonial desire - in the company of the bizarre colonial figure, the tethered shadow - it becomes possible to cross, even to shift the Manichaean 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 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 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 which the black man slips to reveal the white skin. At the 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 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 such tensions - both psychic and political - that a strategy of subversion emerges. It is a mode of negation that seeks not to unveil the fullness 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
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veiled Algerian woman in the course of the revolution as she crossed the Manichaean 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, linking the Arab city and French quarter, transgressing the familial and colonial boundary. As the veil is liberated in the public sphere, circulation 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-membering, 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 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’.

This leads to a meditation on the experience of dispossession and dislocation – psychic and social – which speaks to the condition of the marginalized, the alienated, those who have to live under the surveillance of a sign of identity and fantasy that denies their difference. In shifting the focus of cultural racism from the politics of nationalism to the politics of narcissism, Fanon opens up a margin of interrogation that causes a subversive slippage of identity and authority. Nowhere is this subaltern activity more visible than in his work itself, where a range of texts and traditions – from the classical repertoire to the quotidian, conversational culture of racism – vie to utter that last word that remains unspoken.

As a range of culturally and racially marginalized groups readily assume the mask of the black, or the position of the minority, not to deny their diversity, but audaciously to announce the important artifice
of cultural identity and its difference, the need for Fanon becomes urgent. As political groups from different directions, refuse to homogenize their oppression, but 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 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.47

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 Other-wise?

VI

I have chosen to give poststructuralism a specifically postcolonial provenance in order to engage with an influential objection repeated by Terry Eagleton in his essay, 'The politics of subjectivity':

We have as yet no political theory, or theory of the subject, which is capable in this dialectical way of grasping social transformation as at once diffusion and affirmation, the death and birth of the subject—or at least we have no such theories that are not vacuously apocalyptic.48

Taking my lead from the 'doubly inscribed' subaltern instance, I would argue that it is the dialectical hinge between the birth and death of the subject that needs to be interrogated. Perhaps the charge that a politics of the subject results in a vacuous apocalypse is itself a response to the poststructuralist probing of the notion of progressive negation—or sublation—in dialectical thinking. The subaltern or metonymic are neither empty nor full, neither part nor whole. Their compensatory and vicarious processes of signification are a spur to social translation, the production of something else besides which is not only the cut or gap of the subject but also the intercut across social sites and disciplines. This hybridity initiates the project of political thinking by continually facing it with the strategic and the contingent, with the countervailing thought of its own 'unthought'. It has to negotiate its goals through an acknowledgement of differential objects and discursive levels articulated not simply as contents but in their address as forms of textual or narrative
Subjections — be they governmental, judicial or artistic. Despite its firm commitments, the political must always pose as a problem, or a question, the priority of the place from which it begins, if its authority is not to become autocratic.

What must be left an open question is how we are to rethink ourselves since we have undermined the immediacy and autonomy of self-consciousness. It is not difficult to question the civil argument that the people are a conjugation of individuals, harmonious under the Law. We can dispute the political argument that the radical, vanguardist party and its masses represent a certain objectification in a historical process, a stage, of social transformation. What remains to be thought is the contentious desire to recognize ourselves doubly, as, at once, decentered in the solidary processes of the political group, and yet, ourself as a consciously committed, even individuated, agent of change — the bearer of belief. What is this ethical pressure to ‘account for ourselves’ — but only partially — within a political theatre of agonism, bureaucratic obfuscation, violence and violation? Is this political desire for partial identification a beautifully human, even pathetic attempt to disavow the realization that, between and besides the lofty dreams of political thinking, there exists an acknowledgement, somewhere between fact and fantasy, that the techniques and technologies of politics need not be humanizing at all, in no way endorsing of what we understand to be the human — humanist? — predicament. We may have to force the limits of the social as we know it to rediscover a sense of political and personal agency through the unthought within the civic and the psychic realms. This may be no place to end but it may be a place to begin.