

FRANTZ FANON "ON NATIONAL CULTURE" (1961)

Fanon, Frantz. The Wretched of the Earth. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove, 1963.

Here, Fanon argues that there are three phases noticeable in the development of a national culture (he would seem to have in mind both intellectual history in general and the various cultural practices in which novelists, poets, etc. participate). In the first phase,

the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. . . . His inspiration is European and we can easily link up these works with definite trends in the literature of the mother country. This is the period of unqualified assimilation. (178-179)

In the second phase,

we find the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is. . . . Past happenings of the bygone days of his childhood will be brought up out of the depths of his memory; old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed aestheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies. . . . We spew ourselves up. (179)

In the third phase, the "fighting phase" (179),

the native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with people, will on the contrary shake the people. Instead of according the people's lethargy an honoured place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature. During this phase a great many men and women who up till then would never have thought of producing a literary work, now . . . feel the need to speak to their nation, to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people and to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action. (179)

However, Fanon stresses, at the

very moment when the native intellectual is anxiously trying to create a cultural work he fails to recognise that he is utilising techniques and language which are borrowed from the stranger in his country. He contents himself with stamping these instruments with a hall-mark which he wishes to be national, but which is strangely reminiscent of exoticism. (180)

Sometimes, accordingly, the 'native intellectual'

has no hesitation in using a dialect in order to show his will to be as near as possible to the people; but the ideas that he expresses and the preoccupations he is taken up with have no common yardstick to measure the real situation which the men and women of his country know. The culture that the intellectual leans towards is often no more than a stock of particularisms. He wishes to attach himself to the people; but instead he only catches hold of their outer garments. And these outer garments are merely the reflection of a hidden life, teeming and perpetually in motion, . . . of a much more fundamental substance which itself is continually being renewed. The man of culture, instead of setting out to find this substance, will let himself be hypnotised by these mummified fragments which because they are static are in fact symbols of negation and outworn contrivances. Culture has never the translucidity of custom. . . . (180)

Fanon argues that the "desire to attach oneself to tradition or bring abandoned traditions

to life" (180) means not only "going against the current history but also opposing one's own people" (180). During the "period of struggle traditions are fundamentally unstable and are shot through by centrifugal tendencies" (180). This is why, in Fanon's view, the native intellectual "runs the risk of being out of date" (180-181).

Time and again Fanon is intent upon stressing that the inclination to turn towards the past for artistic inspiration extolled by proponents of the Negritude movement in effect ignores the cultural present. This is why native artists often seek to turn their back on foreign culture, deny it and set out to look for a true national culture, setting great store on what they consider to be the constant principles of national art. But these people forget that the forms of thought and what it feeds on, together with modern techniques of information, language and dress have dialectically reorganised the people's intelligences and that the constant principles which acted as safeguards during the colonial period are now undergoing radical changes. (181)

The result is that the

artist who has decided to illustrate the truths of the nation turns paradoxically towards the past and away from actual events. What he ultimately intends to embrace are in fact the cast-offs of thought, its shells and corpses, a knowledge which has been stabilised once and for all. But the native intellectual who wishes to create an authentic work of art must realise that the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities. He must go until he has found the seething pot out of which the learning of the future will be found. (181).

The native artist may, in his "anxiety to rejoin his people" (181), engage in the "most detailed representation of reality" (181). "Enlightened circles are in ecstasies when confronted with this 'inner truth' which is so well expressed" (181). This 'truth' is, however, "already outworn and denied, called into question by the epoch through which the people are treading out their path towards history" (181).

The same is true of native poets and writers in general, Fanon argues: after the "period of assimilation characterised by rhyming poetry, the poetic tom-tom's rhythm breaks through" (182). However, again, it is

not enough to try to get back to the people in that past out of which they have already emerged; rather we must join them in that fluctuating movement which they are just giving a shape to, and which, as soon as it has started, will be the signal for everything to be called into question. (182)

Let there be no mistake, Fanon stresses: "it is to this zone of occult instability where the people dwell that we must come; and it is there that our souls are crystallised and that our perceptions and our lives are transfused with light" (183).

Fanon contends that the colonised man "who writes for his people ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope" (187). Evidently gesturing towards the arguments of the Negritude thinkers, Fanon contends that we must not be content "with delving into the past of a people in order to find coherent elements which will counteract colonialism's attempts to falsify and harm" (188). Instead, Fanon argues, we must work to

construct the future and to prepare the ground where vigorous shoots are already springing up. A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions . . . which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people. A national culture is the

whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. (188)