

Blackness: N'est Pas?

David Marriott

Exergue

Fanon: “le Noir n’est pas un homme.” And this other text, by Pierre Macherey, from an essay on Althusser and Fanon: Is not the racially interpellated subject “the spokesperson or the echo of a remark of which *he is not*, himself, the author, and which does not come out of his mouth in a spontaneous fashion, but which has been dictated by another voice, a voice that remains silent?”²

We have yet to understand the being that is not, whereby it is the echo of a silence that cannot be communicated except through gaps—ruptures—in language; to recover the moment of its silence, before it can be established in the realm of being, before it is bleached white by ontology or representation. We must try to hear, within this silence, the yet to be understood experience of blackness, in order to pose the question of its being anew, before its reading can crystallize around the question of what it is, or, as Fanon conceives of it, is not, and the question of whether blackness should ever be considered a conventional form of humanism. To describe this experience of non-being, this echoing which turns ontology on its head, as a voice speaking without authorship, without origin, and as though a voice overheard, is to know that blackness cannot be uttered without at once being echoed by a voice that is not: n’est pas.

This is doubtless more than a question of reading. To explore it we must renounce the usual methods of psychoanalysis or philosophy, and we must never allow ourselves to be guided by what we may know of being (whether as an unasked question or as an unknowingness somehow unaccounted for or disavowed). None of the concepts of phenomenology, even and especially in the implicit sense of intentionality, consciousness, or affect, must be allowed to exert an organizing role. What is imperative is the gesture that attends to the undecidability of what blackness is, and not the ‘science’ that reads it as invariably a question of force, power, ideology and violence (and I would add to that: identity, desire, and faith). What is originary—in Fanon’s phrasing of this is not—is the caesura that establishes the distance between humanism and the difficulty of defining blackness as personhood in general; perhaps this is why Fanon prefers other terms such as persona or mask; as for the hold exerted by ontology upon the being of the black in order to wrest from it its truth as non-reason, criminality, pathology or excess, one might say that undecidability characterizes these debates insofar as the meaning of blackness derives from this caesura from the start. We must therefore speak of this initial n’est pas without assuming the possibility of a judgment, or a right to distinction; we

must speak of blackness as neither type nor emblem, neither law nor resemblance, and we must leave in abeyance everything that could figure it as a definitive conclusion, or as a literal truth; we must speak of this *n'est pas*, of this silence set, of this void instituted between humanism and the limits of the human, without ever relying on the fantasy of 'speaking' or 'representing' what blackness is or claims to be.

Then, and then only, will we be able to understand why blackness poses a question that has yet to be formulated, and for which similarly there is still no answer. In fact, I would suggest that the one thing that will keep us from understanding the status of blackness is inherent to blackness itself. To explain why let me briefly turn to the ambiguous ways in which blackness has been read by philosophy, or a certain philosophy; a reading that is, in a very originary and very violent way, unable to pose, let alone answer, what it is that makes blackness both black *and* undecidable. Here silence and speech, being and non-being are inextricably involved: inseparable since they are not yet distinguished, but are nevertheless mis-recognized each as the other, the one in relation to the other, in the undecidable exchange that separates them and that allows neither knowledge nor testimony to prevail.

I.

I began with the notion that the subject is the echo of that which it is not. There is nothing unique or obscure in this point of view, rather it has become something of a truism to say that the subject is always inscribed, implicated by what it assays; or, to be a subject is to be subjected by what is thereby engraved (by ideology or discourse). However, not everyone becomes a subject in the same way. This apparently common-sense point is what motivates Pierre Macherey's critique of Althusser and his notion of interpellation. Where, Macherey claims, in the classical scene of interpellation, the question posed by the enigmatic call [*appel*] of ideology is understood by all because, on the level of language, *each is spoken by his or her place in language*, and each is sequestered by what is sayable; in other words, in society, each is subject to the Other's language, and to speak is to be constituted by a subjection, which at best might justify Althusser's claim, as Macherey presents it, that in being hailed (by a hey you!) we all turn around [*retourné*] in exactly the same way. But what this scene perhaps overlooks is how we are so very differently *determined* by the situations we find ourselves in. In Macherey's account of the person of color, for example, he poses three challenges to the Althusserian formula:

- (i) for the subject who is *made to be* black there is "the feeling of not being a subject like the others, but a subject with something added, or perhaps we should say something missing"; accordingly this subject "is not [*n'est pas*], like the one of whom Althusser speaks, a turned subject [*un subject*]

retourné], but a doubled subject, who is divided between an *I* and this *more* (or less) which cannot be recognized or connoted as such (Macherey, 14, 18);

(ii) whereas the Althusserian formula of subjection “draws its efficacy from its purely verbal character: it is projected from behind, from a source systematically concealed from sight,” the subject of color “is constituted as such in the order of the visible, in plain sight, so to speak, and this changes everything”; it is an actual encounter “between two intersecting gazes” (Macherey, 14, 15);

(iii) as such, one does not become a subject of color “except by entering into a relation [*rapport*] with others”; a situation which, because it unfolds in plain sight, “brings consciousness into the foreground and presupposes no reference to an unconscious [in contrast to Althusser who famously compares ideology to the unconscious].” (Macherey, 15, 16)

In all three instances, Macherey thinks that Althusser is right to say that the positioning of the subject by ideology is not delusory or imposed, but he thinks that this does not justify Althusser’s move to a notion of interpellation that “isolates the one who receives it, suspending the relations that he or she might entertain with other people,” and merely because we are all considered to be subjected in exactly the same way (Macherey, 16).³ In other words, each is refracted differently in the other’s language according to the qualities of its otherness; and the *retourné* barely suffices as an account of social differences. In both cases 1 and 2, Macherey thinks that the iconic “Tiens un nègre!” [Look, a nigger!] episode from Frantz Fanon’s 1952 text, *Peau noire, masques blancs* offers a differing account of subjectivation, and that his extrapolation of it brings it much closer “to the data of lived experience”: more especially in case 2, Macherey’s notion of an actual encounter “in plain sight” is supposed to show that there is no turning-around scenario for the black subject but a traumatizing encounter with a “gaze that fixes him” (Macherey, 15); case 3, which Macherey thinks comes closest to Fanon’s supposed turn to a phenomenology of lived experience, is more troublesome and is described as follows:

What first strikes us in this exposition is how it underscores the cumulative nature of the process by which is installed—in the mind of someone who, here, says ‘I’—the feeling of not being a subject like the others, but a subject with something added, or perhaps we should say something missing, since the addition in question is color, a characteristic with negative connotations, the absence of colorlessness: we begin with an observation, tied to the intervention of an external stimulus, an onlooker’s gaze on his body and his skin, an observation that exhibits an objective status from the outset; there then develops, in the mind of the one undergoing this test, a growing psychic tension leading from amusement, which is a form of acceptance, to the feeling that something unacceptable is happening, something strictly unbearable, at least under normal conditions. (Macherey, 14)

Whatever the virtues of Macherey's general construal of Althusser's theory (we will return to that question in a moment), it seems fairly clear that he has not at all grasped Fanon's main argument in *Peau noire, masques blancs* concerning *le vécu du Noir*. This may be because, just as Althusser's account of ideology has to be understood, I am suggesting, on the basis of the universality of the "linguistic or symbolic order," so Fanon's own thinking of the subject who is made *nègre*, which we shall soon see is also indebted to a radical rereading of Sartre, also has to be understood on the basis of his earlier treatment of an apparently quite different account of *subjectivation* to which Macherey rather surprisingly never refers in these contexts, that of the moment when Fanon says ideology speaks through the black subject, namely the *feeling* of being on one's guard before any actual racist encounter, and one, moreover, that he takes as proof of how one has already been unconsciously determined by the ideology of negrophobia. "How can we explain, for example, that a black guy who has passed his baccalaureate and arrives at the Sorbonne to study for his degree in philosophy is already on his guard before there is the sign of any conflict?" (Fanon, 123). What Fanon puts forward here is in fact very similar to Althusser: the encounter with "Tiens, un nègre!" is unbearable, not because it is actually lived, but because it is already the result of a truly enigmatic interpellation in which the signifier (and not the sign nor the gaze) acts as the unconscious confirmation and reminder that one is already racially subjected. Thus, what is traumatizing is not the word that paints an image of the real and that serves to discipline the subject into racial difference, but the identification that makes the sign into an unconsciously internal referential effect that blackens (via a kind of hallucinated perception) language, being, world. The former acts as a confirmation, so to speak, that one was already subjected by the latter; meaning that its enigmatic meaning is already in me. And just as the "tiens" is all the more intensely received because its meaning is doubly impenetrable, its meaning (without being disclosed) is the discovery of an affect that is neither *in* language nor *outside* it.

In *Peau noire, masques blancs*, this earlier treatment occurs in the discussion of Hegel's account of being in the famously obscure opening section of chapter 5, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man" (and which comes just after the iconic "tiens" episode).

There is in fact a "being for other," as described by Hegel, but any ontology is made impossible in a colonized and acculturated society. Apparently, those who have written on the subject have not taken this sufficiently into consideration. In the *weltanschauung* of a colonized people, there is an impurity or a flaw that prohibits any ontological explanation. (Fanon, 89-90)

Fanon has shown that Hegel's account of being for others [*fur sich, l'être pour l'autre*] depends on a view of self-consciousness centered on recognition, but that every

ontology is made unattainable in the colony, for “there is an impurity, a flaw, that prohibits any ontological explanation.” What is this impurity that places me *outside* of myself, but that is also a means of self-knowing? And how is one to account for this flaw that speaks from the side of the real (that is, the place where what is communicated is absent, prohibited)? This account of ontology as centered on prohibition is, according to Macherey, complicated by Fanon’s own treatment of “the limit that speculation on the subject of being qua being encounters,” that is to say, when it encounters a being that is also “being qua not-being [*être en tant qu’on n’est pas*], which is not the same thing at all” (Macherey, 16), but even that more complex account, in Macherey’s view, presupposes a being that “teems with the unthought and the unsaid” (and of which Sartre’s notion of a *néant de son propre être*, mentioned in *Peau noire, masques blancs* and of course in many other places by Fanon, and explicitly linked by him to a desire not to be), is a telling example. Macherey uses this account to underscore the point that racial difference has no universal equivalent. But Fanon’s critique of ontology—of which the “tiens” episode is a key illustration—suggests that there is a difference *within* the very category of difference which cannot be represented by or reproduced *as* difference even if we thenceforth read it as what results directly from the discovery of racial difference. Fanon’s extremely subtle point is that blackness does not have a language of its own, or: what it reproduces, what it utters, is a ventriloquy (in the proper sense of the term) that *speaks by itself*: in other words, contrary to the notion of interpellation, blackness has no articulation, for even its difference is borrowed; the result is a language whose idiom is that of a *n’est pas*. The *n’est pas*, certainly, is a very paradoxical object: without figure, without oppositional term, without remainder. In short, it is *what has always been said*, but also what interrupts *being-said*: it is essentially what remains in place, by being out of place: like a corpse that *corpses*.⁴ In *Peau noire, masque blancs*, the problem of this *n’est pas*—the problem of situating the non-being of the black—is ontological rather than ideological, then, not because it starts from the problem of how people are subjectivated by their interpellation, but how certain subjects have to assume a being that is not in order to be recognized as subjects.⁵ In brief, non-being is not the same for everyone and, in fact, the being that is made not to be (*n’est pas*) is not entirely a question of ontology (and so is different from Sartre’s *néant* or *rien*). The placement of this *n’est pas* within a theory of ideology is therefore designed to solve a theoretical problem. That problem is not simply that of an unsaid (in Macherey’s language), but refers to the effects of a prohibition that is maintained in being and is reproduced as a non-being that blackens. It is a problem that Fanon, in his early work, primarily engages via Sartre—not to say Freud and Hegel—and which has to be understood on the basis of his treatment of the moment at which the black understands that it is also *nègre*, or perhaps was always already *nègre*, a moment that Fanon puts foreword as belated, namely *nachträglich*. Or, the discovery of one’s racial difference is always a belated discovery.

In *peau noire, masques blancs*, Fanon suggests that the drift of Sartre's demonstration—in *L'Être et le néant*, *Orphée Noir*, and a host of other texts—in fact underscores why ontology, and therefore phenomenology, is unable to think this black deficiency of being, its impurity, and precisely at the point where its prohibition introduces a more menacing untimeliness (and of which it could be said that blackness is *nachträglich* to even Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit*) and in a way that complicates how Sartre understands the relation between consciousness and being:

For once this friend, this born Hegelian, had forgotten that consciousness needs to get lost in the night of the absolute, the only condition for attaining self-consciousness. To counter rationalism he recalled the negative side, but he forgot that this negativity draws its value from a virtually substantial absolutivity [*absoluité*]. Consciousness committed to experience knows nothing, has to know nothing, of the essence and determination of its being. (Fanon, 112-113)

What I want to argue here is that what makes blackness both absolute and virtual is also what makes it incomprehensible to both reason and ontology as traditionally understood (by which I mean: the white rhetoric of universality). Let us briefly consider why. In *L'Être et le néant*, first published in 1943, Sartre argues that: as soon as we admit that for being to appear there has to be a corresponding state of consciousness, or that being in-itself (*an-sich*) or rather within-itself (*in-sich*) does not appear on its own, we must also accept that the being that appears presupposes something that is non-present and non-evident and that is its actual ontic foundation.⁶ So if being is only as appearing (as in phenomenology) *for* somebody, which is to say for a subject, that appearance must therefore be ontically grounded in something that is outside itself before it can be determined for a subject. The priority of being over appearance is thus deduced not from the side of the object—which for Sartre is transcendent to our experiences of it—but from a subject (or self) consciousness which is characterized as being entirely apparent to itself, and which is nothing more than its intentionality. Whatever the phenomenological precision of this argument, or what it means to have a self-consciousness, for Sartre self-consciousness has no content in or through itself, all content must be given it from the outside. More, it is a “non-substantial absolute,” once again, and this should not come as a surprise, because “it exists only to the degree to which it appears,” and because “it is total emptiness (since the entire world is outside it)” (Sartre, 17). Since, then, self-consciousness is empty, insubstantial, a non-being, a *néant*, that is ontically, transitively dependent on being, it is always in an intentional relation to what carries it, namely, the *en-soi* that is identical to and completely filled by itself, and that has no emptiness or internal division. Rhetorically, there is no attempt here to go from the language of ontology to that of racial difference. And

yet, in those texts in which the question of racial difference is explicit, Sartre seems to present racial self-awareness as either an escape from self-consciousness (that he describes as unreal) or as the embrace of race as a quasi-objective essence (that he describes as a deluded self-objectification). In both instances, the subject intentionally denies (or inauthentically refuses) its own being. However, as the citation from Fanon suggests, what these two examples fail to grasp and what Sartre forgets (in his turn to phenomenology) is the extent to which the subject who refuses to be black is never able to escape the negrophobic effect of that refusal on his or her psyche, so that the response to interpellation is not the feigned escaping or embrace of difference, but the sudden disclosedness (what Heidegger calls *Erschlossenheit*) of an *en-soi* that is paradoxically full of its own non-being, and is overwhelmed by all the *négativités* that come with it: shame, despair, and guilt, that is to say, all those feelings that leave a residue and that cannot simply be negated at the level of consciousness. This is what Fanon means when he says that the black subject remains haunted by a virtually substantial absolutivity, for it is made to empty itself of everything absolute, or transcendental. In a word, blackness cannot know itself eidetically as spirit. In going on to say, after reaffirming that consciousness is dependent on being, that the black has no actuality of being but also no possibility as being, Fanon is making the appearance of this *n'est pas* into a fundamental challenge to ontology. Blackness becomes an absolutivity that can only affirm itself as a *n'est pas* (and consequently as a forbidden possibility), because its "*être été*" (being made-to-be) only appears insofar as it is not, and as something less than a *rien* but never quite a *néant*. But this non-being is not the subject's own. "[T]his reconsideration of myself, this thematization, was not my idea," Fanon writes (Fanon, 92). As a matter of fact, the black is the subject who allows non-being to appear—it assumes it as its essence, and its way of being is being-made-to-be-the-*en-soi-that-is-not* (*n'est pas*); it is the *être été* that sees itself as a *n'est pas*: where then is its contradiction, where is its impurity?

To answer, we must, despite the epistemological paradox of the object, say: blackness is the expression of its perpetual effacement. Silence, or *retournement*, is denied us, not because our speech has no status, or we don't speak clearly or well, but because *all speech is on the side of a racial law*. To speak black or white is still to have a role imposed: either that of a shimmer or blemish added on, or that of an obligatory delusion that is also a failure to speak at all. Or else the speaker is hampered by what is said without being said, what is absent: the idiom of a law that simply communicates the *ban* (the affective politics) of negrophobia: in this case what is unconsciously said can only be expressed, so to speak, by its effect: the effect of a being that is excruciated. This is why any lapsus in speech is irreversible: a white idiom can only show a black delivery as impure, bad, comedic; as a failure to speak "properly," and will either be corrected or perfected by a judgement that is likened to a condemnation. Anyone preparing to speak "Parisian" (among other blacks) will, then, be conscious that each word articulates a *n'est pas* that is always

on the side of a racial law. But not being is not being nothing, and deficiency is not a negation, but rather contains an affirmation of another sort in itself. A deficiency of being may be indistinguishable from the fault that empties it, but this deficiency does not exclude the power, the affect, of absolutivity that is the faultline of its very structure (a point that is as hard to express as it is grasp). In other words, what has been or can be produced as *nègre* also raises, in a very profound way, what counts as subjection.

It can now be seen that what Sartre has forgotten is what it means to *be a nègre* independently of any intent or desire we may have. This apparently negative virtually substantial absolutivity, then, would be in fact the positive condition of the impurity or flaw by which the black knows nothing (*n'est pas*) of the essences and determinations of its being. For our purposes here, the essential part of the analysis is that it implies that ontology has itself forgotten how being-for-others is structured by this *n'est pas*, and that its apparent simplicity and self-identity harbors a black alterity that means both that it has an absolutivity (it is not simply an escape as Sartre has it) *and* that that absolutivity is not simply that of an intersubjective un-said—that is, the anonymous voice of ideology speaking through the subject—but an enigmatic prohibition: on Fanon's reading, *the black is made to be non-being rather than an inauthentic failure to be*, the *être en tant qu'on n'est pas* is not just the presencing of a deficiency but involves something more like the flickering of a warning sign, an interdiction, an essential ban or exclusion, however evanescent or fleeting. And this being-made-to-be, which explicitly alludes to Sartre's "être éte" in *L'Être et le néant*, appears to have a characteristic that could be described as the ideological response, in culture, to the very possibility of black desire (Sartre, 22n14). (This could be linked to other figures in Fanon of a disallowed or forbidden path, such as the "prohibitions and barriers" in *Les Damnés de la Terre* and the more general figure of zones and blockades).⁷ The black is stuck, paralyzed before a prohibited path not because it is emptied of *être en-soi*, but because, contrary to Sartre, blackness cannot be made into a ground of being and so guarded, fenced off, as a new epistemic ground. Blackness, in other words, is not encountered on the way to being, like an obstacle, but rather in what lies beyond it: the deficiency by which it finds itself lacerated, severed, scattered (which is what passes for the black experience of the world). And this allows him further to play on the fact that in French, the word *être* is not just a transitive verb in the present tense but also can be used in the passive voice, which Macherey has not succeeded in grasping in his more simple account of ideology. This element of non-being in the analysis (and Fanon is certainly crediting Sartre with this insight, albeit one that also involves an element of blindness) would then bespeak an essential limit for how Fanon understands Sartre's phenomenology in its efforts to go to "intentionality" and would open onto what Fanon famously develops here and elsewhere as the evanescent structure of a *n'est pas*, which has to be thought of as more originary than either being or ideology. Although Fanon never to my knowledge makes the connection

explicit, this complication of the Hegelian notion of the *pour-soi* is of a piece with his own ambivalent fascination with Sartre's notion of nausea, as we shall see. And the sense that even if, for Sartre, it is through the subject that nothing (the *néant*) comes into the world, the black subject cannot "be its own nothing," for the thing that makes it into non-being does not belong to it, and is not its own doing, for it does not seek to determine itself as non-being (and thus as a *néant de son propre être*) but discovers that its non-being is outside of itself, and so beyond authenticity or intentionality. In other words, it is not enough to be ontically black to be consciously so, but nor is it enough to be interpellated *as* black to be unconsciously black in one's drives and desire.

Returning to *Peau noire, masques blancs* and leaving aside for now Fanon's initially enigmatic alignment in that text of blackness and ontology, of blackness and impossibility, let us try, the better to grasp what Macherey has wrong here, to understand the overall argumentative structure of Fanon's text (its reading of negrophobia as ideology). Fanon claims that negrophobia is endemic to the system and institutions of the colony and is itself grounded in a moment of inaugural violence that it cannot ever simply integrate or absorb. This claim is not simply an empirical or historical claim about actually existing systems or institutions (although the question of how the *de facto* violence of the colony becomes *de jure*, legitimated by a logic of racial sovereignty, is also at stake). This founding violence does indeed seem to have something of the character of the Althusserian version of interpellation, in that it is radically constitutive of the subject and thus marks a complete subjectivation in whose interruptive, decisive character we have been associating with the temporality of the "tiens" episode. But to capture this violent structure—the performative power of negrophobia—it is telling that Fanon's discourse comes up against its limit: it has to move away from both the language of phenomenology and that of psychoanalysis, to grasp the meaning of what he calls the *n'est pas*. To give just one example; it occurs after the introduction of the "*schema épidermique racial*": "I approached the other [*l'autre*]...and the other evanescent, hostile but not opaque, transparent, absent, disappeared. Nausea..." (Fanon, 90, 92, translation mine).

On the basis of this claim, Fanon will argue that this founding, evanescent or ungrounded violence does not simply disappear along with the (white) other who institutes it but that the trace of it remains as a kind of nausea. To the extent that what is thus instituted as *nègre* is not just a system of domination with its predictable outcomes (and Macherey concedes in all three of his types of case that negrophobia is not repressive in this sense), then the decision not to be *nègre*, in as much as this is ever a decision, always takes place in the nauseating recollection, as it were, of that ungrounded foundational moment. Insofar as we are dealing with a prohibition that is itself absent, evanescent, decisions made in the name of freedom are then always in principle, however unknown in fact, imprisoned within the formal instituted framework of a racial law (what Fanon calls "imposition") within

which anti-blackness is judged and pronounced. Fanon gives this imprisoning a very strong characterization in terms of aporia, in that on this view *any* decision to not be black to some extent attests to an interdiction at the level of being: the White Man [*le Blanc*], he writes, “had no scruples about imprisoning me,” which is the reason why the I here is not only outside of itself [*être-la*], but experiences itself as *the effect of a call that is nihilating*” (Fanon, 92). Every time that the subject hears the word *nègre*, every time that it tries to affect a correctly subsumed white example, according to a determinant judgement of what it *ought* (not) to be, it experiences this nausea by which the ego *hemorrhages* into an experience of aporia. This emptying out, this lessening: the terms converge on the concept of effacement in ways that remain to be understood, and that will force us to revise our understanding of Fanon’s relation to Sartre, Marx, and Lacan.

Freedom, then (as opposed to resistance or complicity), always entails, however minimally, this moment of nausea in which negrophobia uncovers the vicissitudes of this *être-la*. Macherey would not deny this: indeed this is just where he thinks that Fanon (as opposed to Althusser) is right, but he thinks that nothing in the structure as laid out so far justifies what he presents as Fanon’s refusal of the unconscious. After a further argument that attempts to show that negrophobia in general gives rise to a nausea that is certainly related to that described by Sartre in the context we are exploring, Fanon lists and discusses three aporias in the sense we have just given, and it is here that we will be able to understand the general logic of the *être-la* that Macherey is overlooking. Although all three of these aporias (which overlap to some extent, or perhaps can be thought of as redescribing one and the same impossibility from three slightly different angles, in terms of what Fanon calls the interdicted accomplishment of an infinite desaturation) are germane to the questions here, and the nearest Fanon comes actually to saying what the *être-la* is in the context of the third, it is actually in the first that the logic in question is most readily understood.

The first aporia, “an object among other objects,” reveals how blackness is possessed by a cultural voice that is not its own: we can thus say that the appearance of the *nègre* is consequent to the white disappearance of the subject (its evanescence), and for there to have been a subject, there must have been something other than the subject for its ‘being’ to just disappear from the world – what, in a different context, Fanon calls the *existentielle* situation of vertigo and nausea. This much we have seen Macherey concede. On the other hand (this is what Macherey seems not to have grasped when he claims that for Fanon “one is never a subject pure and simple, or a subject in an absolute sense, but only ever a subject in a situation” (Macherey, 18)), the action or decision to not be a subject (or to be a subject condemned and judged as deficient) must nonetheless still have a relation to absolutuity and thereby to a certain loss. Fanon describes the situation as follows:

Locked in this suffocating reification, I appealed to the Other so that his liberating gaze, gliding over my body suddenly smoothed of rough

edges, would give me back the lightness of being I thought I had lost, and taking me out of the world put me back in the world. But just as I get to the other slope I stumble, and the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye. I lose my temper, demand an explanation . . . Nothing doing. I explode. Here are the fragments put together by another me. (Fanon, 89)

The gaze that reifies or objectifies me must at one and the same time be the gaze that frees me from reification, and thus gives me back my world, yet without being one with or entirely consistent with the world, thus always to some extent contesting or suspending my access to the world. This means that the *I* that aspires to the world can never simply or confidently be *known* to be in it, on the one hand because of the desire that defines the decision as such (in its contentment and wretchedness) and on the other because the *I*'s belonging to the world will again be subject to the same aporia as that of the object. This means, says Fanon, that in a sense blackness has to invent, or more properly, reinvent the world as though for the first time in its discovery of it as lost (and each case is, *ex hypothesi*, a loss that is *already known*). This moment (however fraught) of reinvention then repeats, in however minimal a way, the founding violence of the exclusion itself, as already described. In short, for blackness to be in the world, it must, in its self-awareness, be both liberated and excluded: it must preserve itself as fixed or suspended in order to reinvent itself in each case, or reinvent itself as an affirmation in the free confirmation of its negrophobic principle. Each time it is fixed, each time it finds itself excluded by a white interpretation (narratives, values, reasoning), it also knows that only a white gaze can guarantee it absolutely. At least, if the gaze that guarantees it in no uncertain terms is also what censors, or nihilates it, then to be repeatedly seen by it, which always happens in part and according to the necessary iterability of negrophobia, is to be returned to being not as tragedy, but as a farce: but to that extent one will say of the black that he is purely free only if he doesn't confirm or refer to blackness or if, because he doesn't want to lose himself, if he suspends his decision, stops at the undecidable, but always violently resolved, that is to say, buried, dissimulated, repressed blackness of his being. Here the *être-la* is what establishes the call by which the being of the black is destined, or, more tellingly, learns to *become the being of its appearance* rather than the appearance of its being.

Macherey would perhaps say that this is just the kind of situation he is describing in his first case (i.e., the gaze as a logic of domination).⁸ If that were so, then at the very least his criticism of Althusser would be unjustified because to that extent they would in fact be agreeing. But it seems as though they are not exactly saying the same thing: Macherey's description of "a specified subject, a normed subject, a subject for and under norms," which is supposed to capture the "(apparent) legitimacy" and the "(real) efficacy" of racist interpellation and despite its claim to be essentially a correction of Althusser, in fact systematically minimizes the

elements of complicity (already in the desire to be put back into the world), of violence and undecidability that are showing up in Fanon's account (Macherey, 19).

Indeed, it seems that the question of decision, what it establishes or makes happen (in the sense of being the enigmatic point of a pathological inability to decide), is the object of Fanon's second aporia. The point here (Fanon also formulates this argument in the wake of his polemical exchange with Sartre) is that for the black "to make myself known" (in the sense of being recognized, that is, as a consciousness that is aware of its freedom), there must be a recognition by others that "all I want is to be anonymous" (Fanon, 95, 96). In this sense, "anonymity" means a little more than not being noticed; it refers rather to a desire to be recognized as not *nègre* even though what is recognized as *nègre* must be a misrecognition, a situation in which the desire to go unrecognized by a misrecognition is always an *impossible* recognition. On the one hand, this involves a tension between being a subject pure and simple in the sense of being in a relation to others and the singularity of the situation that we have already laid out and that Fanon here redescribes as an undecidable "evanescence" between two contradictory but equally imperative injunctions (so a kind of double bind); to become white insofar as one is condemned as black but always in the awareness that one's whiteness is impossible, heterogeneous, and irreducible, and, on the other hand, something that seems just as pernicious and that the least one can say it is not made immediately perspicuous: thus, to be black means: embrace one's deficiency, its impurity and necessary disappearance as one's most singular possession. Fanon says that blackness is the experience of that which, though heterogeneous to what it means to be human, and what ought, and yet cannot be human, has to give itself up to the impossible decision to be while refusing-embracing its non-being. Without this vicious circle, he says, apparently repeating an earlier point, the decision not to be black would not be a decision and would amount to a negrophobic imposition. Throughout all of this fraught characterization Fanon comes back to the assertion that "the proof was there, implacable. My blackness was there, dense and undeniable. And it tormented me, pursued me, made me uneasy, and exasperated me" (Fanon, 96). The point is that if blackness is undeniable, to have the density of being to which we shall be increasingly attentive in what follows, then it must exceed or suspend not merely the generality of what it means to be a subject to which it nonetheless retains the relationship laid out in the first aporia but also the idea that a decision to be is something that is never simply done or made by a subject, in the sense that there would first be a subject in its self-identity and relative self-sufficiency, and that it would subsequently come to make (or suffer) a loss of being on the basis of that subjecthood. In a way that is certainly still Sartrean in its inspiration if not its details, Fanon will argue that a thinking based on the subject will be unable to account for blackness: even if one wanted to say that the subject was made black or that blackness happened to it, on Fanon's view the word and concept "subject" would severely block and limit that thought (just as earlier we were able to criticize Sartre's

subjectivist account of self-certainty). As often around these matters, Fanon is quite vehement: "I was not mistaken. It was hatred; I was hated, detested, and despised, not by my next-door neighbor or a close cousin, but by an entire race. (Fanon, 97-98) And: "Victory was playing cat and mouse; it was thumbing its nose at me. As the saying goes: now you see me, now you don't. . . . And in one sense, if I had to define myself I would say I am the one who waits" (Fanon, 99, translation mine).

Undecidability, then, seems at the very least to involve an appearance that also involves one's disappearance ("now you see me, now you don't"), and a belated awareness that one is hated in one's very being. To that extent, and contrary to the Sartrean account we were reading earlier, if the white subject is entirely characterized by its transparent emptiness (since the entire world is outside it), and to some extent is the consequence of what happens or befalls it as a simple event or contingency, for the black subject, as Fanon puts it, the world is already *there* (*être-la*), aversive, hostile, even hateful, and what befalls it is expected. This aspect too, which Fanon is again suggesting must be present, however minimally, in any decision (not) to be black (the decision not to be *nègre*, to use an idiom from Fanon that we will soon be focusing on), suggests an opacity that, in a word, blackens ego, cogito, and bodily schema. Further (and this aspect of Fanon's discussion seems entirely absent from Macherey, though not from Sartre), this trial or ordeal of undecidability is not simply a transient moment (thought of as an impasse in a Hegelian sense). The undecidability that I am (or perhaps, given what we have just said, the "it" that is hated, or that is added, *the it that is me*) that is at once seen and unseen, and once it has happened produces nausea, this *it* remains marked by undecidability, and according to a pervasive logic of a necessary alterity in which what is *être-la* is never simply *there*, or, more precisely, it is *not* an *il y a*. And it remains marked by undecidability in the mode of spectrality, which will, as we shall shortly see, be a crucial aspect of Fanon's thinking and one that will make his theory of subjectivation slightly different again from Althusser (and a fortiori Macherey's). The spectrality of black undecidability will remain with the question of what an assured self-certainty would mean for the being of the black (or even whether it ever has a real ground for questioning its appearing as black, for questioning what something is not the same thing as saying that it is). Certainly, the real must lend itself to a figuration, to a concept, but for Sartre the actuality of the *en-soi* is not affected by this appearing. For Fanon, on the other hand, the figure and concept of blackness introduces a schism which alters being; it is not present in itself, but refers to something that has been cut open and amputated; and, moreover, this hemorrhaging challenges not only the subject's consistency but its ontic presupposition as an existence. It is not so much a dependency on how being appears, but a realization that blackness reveals the being of an appearing dependence. "I am a slave not to the "idea" others have of me, but to my appearance," Fanon tells us (Fanon, 95). This is why it cannot be surmounted or sublated, but remains caught, lodged like a

ghost in an undecidable decision which it either blindly follows or affirms as the law of its existence.

After some remarks about how this situation reached in the first two aporias (something in you more than you, undecidability of the decision (not) to be black as coming from somewhere other than the subject, whose arrival or refusal I do not master or control) might lead to an accusation of madness or neurosis (which will again bring us back to Freud) and other remarks about a reluctance (if not an outright refusal) to align the sense of being “too late” said to be at work in these descriptions with the idea of racial difference, Fanon moves to his third aporia, which will explicitly bring us back to Freud but also suggest a way in which the Sartrean and Freudian versions of ontology cannot be separated as rapidly and cleanly as Macherey seems to think and needs to think in order to sustain his reading of Fanon’s own interpellation.

The third aporia: “I wade in black irrationality, I am up to my neck in it, as a rational response to white irrationality,” at first seems little more than an inversion of the adage (from the *Acts of the Apostles*) that we must meet unreason with reason. The reason that is unreason is thus the reason why I have turned to irrationality. For Fanon, this inversion ruptures the kind of ecstatic irrationality at play in Senghor’s aesthetic theory of negritude and, most importantly, affects the relationship between *jouissance* and knowledge. Just as he comes up against something unreasoned in being-for others, Fanon realizes that the turn to black irrationality is also a symptom of the desire to make himself known: but the knowledge of what it means to be black in a certain sense comes before knowledge and blocks it. And even if it were possible to counter racist scientific knowledge with black poetic knowledge, that decision would still take the form of the irruptive *être-nègre* that he is trying better to understand. Hence Fanon’s irritated, frustrated response to Sartre’s “*Orphée Noir*,” and the argument that blackness is in a transitive-transitory relation to historical knowledge, *as such*, and that it must always remain a finite moment of urgency and discovery, and that it cannot be the consequence or effect of a theoretical or historical knowledge, given that the latter is the outcome of a dialectic that precedes the distinction between reason and unreason, that *must* precede it. Having written on this elsewhere, I won’t go into any detail here.⁹ But Fanon’s response: “So they were countering my irrationality with rationality, my rationality with the ‘true rationality’” (Fanon, 111); recalls Fanon’s discussion of *L’Être et le néant* that we described earlier: the call of ideology in Macherey’s discussion of Althusser puts an end to any doubt the moment one is summoned, here speculation ceases and one’s destiny is about to be decided. The difference here, however, has precisely to do with the quality of the urgency that Fanon ascribes to racial thinking: eschatological as it may be in a certain sense, as we shall see shortly, here the belief that race is a destiny does not seem to occur *at the end* of discussion or deliberation, nor even exactly *as an outcome* of such discussion and deliberation, but, through its intrinsic negrophobia, to cut short deliberation and discussion,

which are in principle irrelevant and which, however necessary they may be to the prospects of a reasoned response to blackness (and blackness is never simply a question of reason, says Fanon) are necessarily displaced by a phantasm whose existence is *sui generis*. And so it is not surprising that Fanon immediately invokes here not consciousness but indeed an “impulsiveness”: negritude is the acting out of an “impulsive position,” he writes, that is driven to see in blackness an *en-soi* that is complete or “immanent in itself,” and precisely because it refuses to see or know how it is itself unreasoned, driven by the desire not to be (Fanon, 114). But this desire to make blackness into a moment of decision (in the sense of discovery), to make it into an *is* rather than an *is not*, is always preceded (structurally and epistemologically, says Fanon) by the moment of negrophobic interpellation. This is why, as Fanon points out, the decision to present blackness as an *en-soi* is never a question of rationality (*verständlichkeit*) or negation, but is the result of a subjectivation that is always and everywhere the imperfect, incomplete imbrication of one’s being. Or, as Fanon puts it, “Où me situer? Ou, si vous préférez: où me fourrer?” (Fanon, 91) Where do I fit in? Or, if you prefer: where should I put myself? (Fanon, 93, translation mine).

II.

Irony as the negative is the way; it is not the truth but the way.
—Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*

This questioning is in fact a constant one in Fanon, first appearing in his published work as the famous final sentence of *Peau noire, masques blancs*: “O my body, always make me a man who questions!” (Fanon, 206). The emphatic, exclamatory distinctions of Fanon’s texts are often in tension with the precarious, even agonistic nature of what is being expressed, in as much as they concern the way that blackness is *denegated*, and that is more or less explicitly alluded to many times in Fanon’s work, functioning as a kind of watchword or slogan but never once given a precise definition or a detailed reading. In *Pour La Révolution Africaine* (published in 1964 but based on articles from 1952–1961), for example, the same kind of emphatic, but precarious assertion expresses a harsh irony: “It thus seems that the West Indian, after the great white error, is now living in the great black mirage.”¹⁰ In the essay “West Indians and Africans,” first published in *Esprit* in 1955, Fanon suggests a possible connection between irony and what he refers to as a “defense against neurosis,” provoking him to state that, in the West Indies, irony (and incidentally the reference to the great black mirage returns us to the context of the third aporia and the racial-cultural politics of negritude—irony is in fact used to question the somewhat impassioned invocation of a negritude), is paradigmatic. In the essay, Fanon’s reading of negritude, which does not mention explicitly his own earlier reading in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, though he does invoke irony as a kind

of dissimulation, helps us see how the three aporias presented separately in *Peau noire, masques blancs* are related in the general thought of an irony that is both psychoanalytic and historical (the resonance with Macherey's analysis of the *unsaid* in *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* (translated as *A Theory of Literary Production*) is something to which we shall return):

Jankélévitch has shown that irony is one of the forms that good conscience assumes. It is true that in the West Indies irony is a mechanism of a defense against neurosis. A West Indian, in particular an intellectual who is no longer on the level of irony, discovers his Negritude. Thus, while in Europe irony protects against the existential anguish, in Martinique it protects against negritude. (*Towards*, 19)

The explicit invocation of irony as a defense against anguish and neurosis is clear here, but the idea that irony also names a dialectic of black history (in the Antilles, in Africa) may not be so obvious: so in the essay we find: "Until 1939 the West Indian lived, thought, dreamed (we have shown this in *Black Skin, White Masks*) composed poems, wrote novels exactly as a white man would have done"; but "in 1945 he [the West Indian] discovered himself to be not only black but a Negro [*Nègre*]," a discovery that came from the reading of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Towards*, 26, 25). And again, in 1939 the West Indian "was continually recalling that he was not a Negro"; but "from 1945 on, the West Indian in France was continually to recall that he was a Negro" (*Towards*, 24-25). What happens between 1939 and 1945? Fanon cites two linked events: the publication, in 1939, of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*; and the forced deployment in 1943 of ten thousand racist Vichy sailors in Martinique after the fall of France. According to Fanon, the confrontation with white racism forced Martinicans to analyze their metaphysical fabrications apropos of French imperialism, but it was Césaire's poetics, defined specifically as a *negritude*, which permitted them to ask the question: am I a *nègre*? A question that acted rather like a parabasis in that it interrupted and intruded upon the illusion of West Indian society and rhetoric; forcing them to rethink the strictly ideological relation between "being neither white nor Negro" (a class definition), and the function of such rhetoric when faced with the event or decision of negro-phobia. We are then in the presence of two sign systems imbricated within each other; in the first, history is not so much a defense against irony as the most ironic of discourses; and in the second, negritude is the means by which an anti-black black racism can be expressed and denoted. Which is as much to say that the desire to be, or not to be *un nègre*, is always the denegation of what one actually is and a defense against what one appears to be but is not. The irony here has a very specific meaning, which the reference to Vladimir Jankélévitch's *L'Ironie* (1936) makes more complicated than it might at first appear. What is it that makes negritude an ironic poetics?: *negritude* is essentially the convergence of different signifieds in a single signifier according to which blackness is both excessive and subtractive, both

concept and unreason, both truth and pseudology. It is this specific element which, for my part, I shall call a *parabasis*: “parabasis is the interruption of a discourse by a shift in the rhetorical register,” writes Paul de Man, which is also linked to an interruptive “intrusion” (as such, the word not only gives us a different way of thinking about the “*tiens*” passages, but also about Fanon’s reading of them).¹¹ The oscillation between error and mirage would suggest that the parabasis is permanent in the sense given it by de Man in his reading of Schlegel: that the interruption—the interdiction—takes place successively, infinitely, so that we could say that *blackness is the permanent parabasis of an anti-black allegory*, and that irony refers to its necessary undoing and what, historically, links it to an economy of aberration: this is the logic of both the metaphysical fantasy (of blackness), as an excess that is infinitely subtractive, and a dialectic that is structured by enmity. “I mean, for example, that the enemy of the Negro is often not the white man but a man of his own color” (*Towards*, 17). What disrupts is, then, the disillusion that permanently blackens all irony. But there is no recuperation in terms of an historical dialectic, as we saw in Fanon’s response to Sartre, for the great black hole is a mirage, and even irony cannot expose what it really is, for what it reveals is an enmity launched against one’s own impossible reflection. And just as, when considered historically, blackness is a mirage, in the same way, when considered as irony, it reveals a negrophobia or—the same thing—a negritude that henceforth makes comprehensible an enmity of which irony, formed as a defense, is the most precarious, suspended, and interrupted of signs.

Simplifying greatly, it seems to me that where Macherey’s sense of Althusserian interpellation seems to come primarily from an unequivocal, supposedly unironic account of being spoken, Fanon’s reference to irony, or, if you prefer, black irony, which by its interruption and utter ambiguity gives one the impression that defense and enmity have changed names and even content, according to a metaphysics of intrusion, is where the said and the unsaid are, precisely, both allegories of the same (ghostly, traumatic) encounter with what is considered to be *nègre*. Let us consider these two oppositions.

Firstly, in the West Indies, the decision to *be* is always troubled by a desire that, we know, both idealizes and repels blackness, and so is unwilling and unable to decide between them, and so chooses neither. Irony offers an illusory escape from such indecision; whether this derives from a good conscience (Jankélévitch) or a bad conscience (Sartre), the refusal of apodictic certainty (the assertiveness of ideology), is not simply evasive, but nor is it resistant: Fanon accuses the black ironist of being *defensive*, that is to say, the failure to decide between content (truth) and form (appearance), or between white (message) and black (medium), gives rise, historically, to an aporia that cannot decide between illusion and error. I do not believe, as a matter of fact, that blackness can proceed without a certain undecidability as to its object (as we know, nothing is more resolutely elusive and paradoxical than the language of racial authenticity); nor do I believe that *le vécu noir*, heir

of a thousand anecdotes and fables, at once mythic, ideological, and stereotypic, can be divested of irony without the risk of further illusion. Hence Fanon's criticism of the metaphors by which West Indians express their superiority to Africans, for example, and the vision that subsists through them, that of a feeling of racial inferiority hidden behind the *nègre* as signifier. It is this argument, itself ironical, that explains why blackness is inevitably experienced as a permanent parabasis (I am referring here to the word *intrusion* rather than, say, imposition, or interpellation, and the trope by which it is communicated: the metaphor that makes blackness appear as a black hole, and the various invocations of a paradoxically repelling attraction, as an asymptote that famously touches on its own negation, but in a way that is always liminal, indecisive, because it refuses to know what it already knows, and will not verbalize the words, or the concepts, that would free it from such equivocation). Contrary to Jankélévitch, then, for whom irony reveals the truth behind illusion, perhaps it would be better to say that blackness is disclosed by a distance incapable of being traversed or negated. If, then (as Fanon consistently formulates it according to the logic of *aporia*), one were to try to answer the question (how is blackness possible?), then one would need to deconstruct this very opposition between irony and history, irony and truth.

The second, much more recent opposition, of a more Marxist aspect and largely tributary to the Althusserian paradigm of science/ideology, is that of the *unsaid* of literature. Or: literature makes us aware of what it cannot say, or is prevented from saying; an *unsaid* that both structures and fissures the semantic codes of the text (a limit that literature mouths silently): the *unsaid* is constructed as the limit of ideology, but it is through it that ideology speaks. At the very end of his introduction to *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*, first published in 1966, Macherey gives a brief summing up of this 'unsaid' structure, which establishes: "that absence around which a real complexity is knit."¹² This absence is determinate but not determined. The *unsaid* is then seen as the absent (though coded) residue of what the work *cannot say* or necessarily leaves *unsaid*; it is (the real, historical) elision that "founds the speech of the work" (if we define that speech as a kind of "vanishing" without which it could not be heard) that precedes its meaning *as history* (if we set meaning in opposition to its *denegation*—a word that Macherey borrows from Lacan but doesn't really define as such) (*ATLP*, 85, 86).¹³ Just as the opposition surface/depth implies a hermeneutic vision, so the *unsaid*/meaning opposition implies an ultimately dialectical vision (under cover of a logic of confrontation): there is a reduction of the *unsaid* to that of a symptom (the idea that each work is "haunted by the absence of repressed words which make their return"), and of the symptom to history, where the unspoken "receives the means" of its "realization"; literature, the trace of the *unsaid*, and because it is specifically this trace, then makes negatively explicit its historic function, which Macherey here describes as its production: it is the task of any Marxist reading to show how the work establishes, symptomatically performs, and ideologically assumes its history, in the same way

that the “*unconscious of the work*” establishes repression (the way an abscess reveals an underlying disease), in order to lance the process of its suppuration (*ATLP*, 53). Hence, we arrive at the paradox of an unsaid which governs any reading as such, the entire pertinence of an indetermination (in relation to form, ideology, discourse, or history) which has no signified, yet through which everything happens or is produced as the “real” of the work.

I should like to suggest that the unsaid is what haunts every literary production. How, then, can we read or interpret it, and how does it relate to the *situation* of blackness? To answer this question we will need to inquire more closely into the relation between language and ideology. To do so, I will use as my example, Macherey’s later reading of Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Accordingly (as I concluded at the beginning), we will see how blackness is produced—sutured—by a theory of reading that concedes that the essence of ideology is the production of a universal structure but in ways that make blackness itself invisible, which is absurd.

Let us take first the opposition of the unsaid and meaning, of subjection [*l’assujettissement*] and interpellation. No doubt how we read includes a certain relation to how we, in turn, are irreducibly read. The Marxist structural analysis of ideology is wholly based on the conviction (and the dialectical proof) that we subsist by how we reproduce ideology: in short, to occupy the grammar by which we are recognized as subjects we “*must answer*” the call of ideology, for there is “no possibility of dodging it” or its logic of reproducibility: the effects of ideology can be varied without altering this underlying structure (*ATLP*, 12). That Macherey should then say of the black that the “operation of selection” also takes “the form of a relegation,” as implacable and as it is overdetermined, has exactly the same narrative (or, more precisely, structural) function as *l’assujettissement* does in Althusser (e.g. the way in which the subject “is called upon” is irreducible, since it is functionally necessary to the sequence by which the subject becomes elocutionary, or expressive of ideology) (Macherey, 13) .

The error, however—and it is here that we must modify Macherey’s reading of blackness—would be to forget the irony by which the black realizes its untruth; what this (forgetting, as we have just said) forgets is not what brings about the content or the signified of selection, the racist forms of understanding that are assumed to be already *there* (*être-la*), but the form, the signifier, or if we prefer, the permanent parabasis by which the subject is desutured and *as such is never symbolizable* (for blackness is always articulated around a position which has no here-there (*juste là*); its signified is a never-having-been-there (or is more akin to a kind of hallucination), as we have shown in Fanon and even more clearly in his reading of psychoanalysis. Further, Fanon attempts to bring to light—without reference to verisimilitude or allegory—an interplay between voice and signifier in which the black (or more exactly the black who is ideologically whitened) *does not need the “tiens” to be heard for it to have an effect*, for the place it is communicated *from* is already echoed by a drive *towards* it, a *n’est pas* that is located at the *other* end, as it were,

of desire and reality, of subject and ideology; moreover this drive is *absent*, it necessarily slips away from any image or history of meaning; and even though it is full of malice and a certain defensiveness, this is an irony that has no symbolic code, genre, or disposition, whatever the material uses of ideology.

Hence, we can no longer *see* blackness as the overdetermined effect of a structural situation; blackness is not relegated, but effaced; in the black, there is only whiteness, or, more precisely, the black in its blackness is only a denegation of form—consequently, *there is no subject of blackness*. We can say metaphorically that the black is subjected not by what he is, but by what he is *not*: neither host nor parasite, the *nègre* resolutely intrudes as an obscene intrusion; it confuses distance and limit, not because of nausea, and not even because of autoimmunity, but because it is an abolition that is freely chosen (that is, a self-effacement that is always a forced choice). Doubtless, this is why its voicing is not primarily phenomenological (Macherey) nor *automatic* (Althusser), *but that which recedes*, as it were, from discourse, truth, and ideology. What is more ironic, more undecidable, more interruptive, than this structure by which blackness experiences itself as fixed in its effacement, and that declares itself free in its chosen unfreedom?

III.

Now let us turn to the second opposition, that of irony and history, which is in effect the opposition of Fanonism and Marxist phenomenology. There is a kind of intermediate step here that will lead us to the parabasis that we are trying to understand in the irony Fanon is invoking. Here too, we must refine our vision of what blackness is (or is not).

What enables Macherey to question Althusser is, as we have seen, the belief that the theory of ideology is blind to the functioning of difference. It is a blindness that is symptomatic, unsaid. And therefore, says Macherey, has to be decrypted. The features of the unsaid are, of course, undeniably drawn from Althusser, or at least from his idea of a symptomatic reading (the belief that what is unsaid is both absent and what grounds the text in a *real historical rationality*, i.e., a hermeneutics): like any discourse that claims to expose what is absent, how does one finally know that one has grasped the truth of ideology? What is its reference? How does it surreptitiously persist, constantly repeated by the work, without its meaning or signified being anything but what is *meant* by ideology? These propositions seem to be both excessive and insufficient: excessive because meaning is always returned to its referent, and the text thereby becomes the incarnation of an absolute reference; insufficient because the operation of *conversion* or *decryption* is never explained in all its depth. A word on this last point.

We know that the unsaid of the work, what determines at once its task and its limits, is the ideology that takes place by never taking place *as such*: there is no text without repression, or literature begins as the sign or allegory of a displacement; but, in order to think this, critique must be able to make repression

representable, for why otherwise would we read it; a Marxist theory of reading must thus expressly become the structure, the code, by which the unsaid emerges as the resolution of its ideologically repressed reference. Now, the irony of blackness (the black irony of thought) has essentially nothing to do with reference or repression; of course, it can include symptoms, but it does not need to be repressed for it to be unconscious: Fanon constantly talks about how blackness is the depository of a cultural hatred that directly opens a black hole *within* the psyche, and in ways that are necessarily unknown or ambiguous, but no less real or traumatic for all that. Blackness is the signifier of a text that intrudes, but what intrudes has no determinable meaning beyond the intrusion itself to the point where blackness is the experience of a paradox: *an unconscious affect that is itself not unconscious*; it is better to speak, more neutrally, of a form that lacks repression, or for whom repression is lacking. Let us even add, perhaps: without arrival—or at least without the appearance of arrival, intrusion does not function as a meaning (a signified that is unsaid), but is the effect of an entire culture. But even here we are not really going far enough, for what remains to be described is a vanishing that is neither an event nor an occasion, and so cannot be dialectically overdetermined as something unsaid, or simply interpellated.

Whence Fanon's view of a black *n'est pas*: a figure that does not lend itself to figuration—or even that of production—a figure that subsequently is not a *verneinung*; a figure that is not tropological, but that reveals a dramatic antithetical turning point that Fanon characterizes as a *contre coup* or ricochet, that is, an adversative signifier that throws one off balance, out of kilter, off guard. In the “tiens, un nègre!” example: such a moment is foregrounded not by the various metaphors, but by the exclamation mark that suggests that the gaze cannot be grasped as readily or straightforwardly as Macherey suggests, i.e., as an intruding sense or intention, but as a punctuation without content. By carrying this distinction to its conclusions, we shall be working toward why blackness requires a different language than ontology; it is, Fanon says, the paradoxical figure of what cannot be figured, and that is indeed without phrase or sentence, even though it can be uttered, or said, and in respect to which the word *black* is little more than an antilogy, whose signified opens onto a perpetual parabasis in which Fanon suggests we experience the impossible: “I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but that had become impossible” (Fanon, cited in Macherey, 14).

Such sentences make it obvious why the *n'est pas* is not the work of a repression. But they also make it quite clear why the *n'est pas* cannot, consequently, be conceived as an existential situation. To explain why consider the following passage from *Black Skin, White Masks*, which I cite at some length:

One of the traits of the Antillean is his desire to dominate the other. He steers his course through the other. It is always a question of subject, and the object is totally ignored. I try to read admiration in the eyes of the other, and if, as luck would have it, the other sends back

an unpleasant reflection, I run the mirror down: the other is a real idiot [un imbécile]. (Fanon, 186)

And:

Each of them wants *to be*, wants to *flaunt himself*. Every act of an Antillean is dependent on the Other—not because the Other remains his final goal for the purpose of communing with him as described by Adler, but simply because it is the Other who asserts him in his need to enhance his status. (Fanon, 187, translation mine)

So what is the Antillean's relation to the other? It is marked by one generic feature (which attaches it to an idiocy that is indeed foolish and that, not surprisingly perhaps, does not distinguish it from a complex rhetorical irony: the obligatory desire to be "full of myself," and to declare to the other this "wish for fullness" is already, in itself, the sign of an insufficiency that is both litotic and rhetorical: if these sentences of Fanon's are deeply ironic, it is because they show how the black desire to *be* is already foolish because it cannot fulfill itself (and presumably because it is mediated, dependent), and for whom the other is of the same order as a reflection that renders not plenitude but its opposite, a self-image that is inclined to be suspicious (of itself) because the other is inattentive to my (fictitious) exemplary status) (Fanon, 187). These sentences, in their complex rhetorical inversions, seem to me, then, to present black identity as a kind of pseudonymous delusion, and one marked by a rivalrous relation to another that, on this view, is in fact an ironical self-relation. What we must grasp here is not that such irony might *seem* foolish, but what it bespeaks is a claim to being that is radically displaced from being and that Fanon habitually describes as an antagonism.

This is not all. The black is a *comparaison* that itself has no status, in the sense given it through the pages of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, with its image of a distrust that is *itself* negrophobic when viewed from a black perspective, and that bespeaks an envy of the white *néant* that it lacks, such that it masks what is missing and cannot ironize away. This insight has considerable consequence for Fanon's understanding of interpellation since it corresponds to a confusion – not so much of appearing with phenomena—but of the *néant* with cogito, as if the other that besets me (and who plunges me into a black hole) could be simply annulled, or again, dispensed with, along the lines of a chiasmic reversal. So when Fanon writes: "The question is always whether he [the other] is less intelligent than I, blacker than I, or less good than I" (Fanon, 186), what is being thematized ironically is also an example of foolish undecidability (and, indeed, of mirage and error). Amidst such uncertainty and gnomic inversion it is hard to tell apart desire from a kind of pathological narcissism which, in a further paradoxical twist, also communicates a form of mastery and satisfaction, but one that can only perform itself as a kind of ontological stupidity, as is further evidenced by the fact that it is so obviously haunted

by what it is not, a *n'est pas* that Fanon draws attention to as an obligation that makes the decision to *be* both constrained and aporetic. Put another way, it is clear that, if blackness is *n'est pas*, a *non-étant* otherwise repressed by phenomenology, clinically it signifies not so much “a being by which nothingness comes to things” (the words are Sartre’s), but a nothingness whose being is a thing, and that reproduces itself as the imprint or turning point of a destitution that is also its most luxurious possession (Sartre, 57).¹⁴ It follows that, for Fanon, blackness is not a dialectical struggle between an *en-soi* and *cogito*, but an aporetic struggle over the status of what is lacking, and one that is linked not to how one is seen, or how one imagines oneself being seen, but to a *disgrace of being* stupefied by irony.

Condemned, unconscious, prohibited—and yet performed: let us say that blackness cannot affirm, or choose, itself, for it is already chosen—by which I mean that it cannot pass from indecision to a transformation of what subordinates it; the paradoxical gravity, and fate, by which it is at once undecidably mad, foolish, and deluded; and, as is so often the case, bespeaks an almost religious love for what would destroy it, and that luxuriates in both the choice and the experience; an inheritance based on culture and not on pathology (and consequently is never *just* a question of unconscious desire). The *n'est pas* certainly has some affinity with a symptomatic morphology, but it differs from it on one fundamental point (the predicates associated with these aporias imply a self-blinding irony that, once again, is never simply ideological): the *n'est pas* (whose form is derived from a logic of corpsing) cannot be resolved (*aufheben*) nor negated; for as Macherey shows perhaps in spite of himself, it speaks to the ways in which blackness is the depository of culture, how it is excluded, not just selected; out of kilter, not just turned around; nihilated, not just subjected.

To return, in conclusion, to the concept of interpellation that I discussed at the beginning: in my opinion, it must consist today not in trying to see history within the unsaid of the text: in *Peau noire, masques blancs* the unsaid is not the form of the text but that which can never be said and which I would prefer to call, at least in this essay, the permanent parabasis of a black allegory. The problem of what it means to be a subject can only be treated in relation to what I call an undecidable question; and which, to continue the metaphor, can be summed up by saying that, if hitherto we have read black texts as stupidly referential (as identical to their situation), it would be better to read them as the place where blackness is suspended or interrupted (as a question of authenticity), whose irony, as Fanon describes it reading Césaire, is nothing but an abyssal infinity—which envelops and absorbs nothing other than the black hole of its relation to ontology and destruction.

Endnotes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the seminar: “Unthinking Affect: Blackness, Incapacity, Negativity,” at ACLA 2019. My thanks to Tyrone S. Palmer and the other participants.

1. Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Éditions du Seuil: Paris, 1995: 6. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2008. Hereafter cited parenthetically in-text.
2. Pierre Macherey, "Figures of Interpellation in Althusser and Fanon." *Radical Philosophy* 173 (May/June 20, 9-20): 17, my emphasis. Hereafter cited parenthetically in-text. When Macherey, describing the effect of Althusser's iconic 1970 essay, "Ideology and ISA," tells us that it was "particularly disconcerting" to him, whose "enigma" he was "left to decrypt"—the decision to interrogate that enigma and its formulae (an odd phrase that conveys something systematic in relation to meaning), is what leads him to turn to Fanon, specifically *Peau noire, masques blancs* and the sentence, "Tiens, un nègre!": "it is interesting to compare them," he writes, and to contrast their "taking up [of] the problem of subjectivation [*subjectivation*]" (ibid.: 9). But what also remains enigmatic, or at least rhetorically unexplained, is how this return to the notion of *retournement*, whose limits are scrupulously reproduced, does not include Macherey's own use of the concept in *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*, to capture the *difference* between art and ideology; or how art makes ideology *visible*, decipherable, by exposing its imaginary contours as in a broken mirror. This displaced genealogy would seem to suggest (contrary to Macherey) a *retourné* that is itself ambiguous, displaced, absent; there is even, in this subtle and odd reversal, a suspicion that blackness is the *inverted* image of this earlier attachment, and so the means by which *retourné* makes visible the belief, posterior to Althusser, that ideology is a specular relation, and/or how art presents a real that is the (black?) reversal of ideology. The pattern is itself paradoxical, ironical, and too precise (which does not mean innocent) not to be deliberate. We shall be broaching its repercussions throughout.
3. Significantly, Macherey says that Althusser's notion of subjection allows Marxist literary theory to go beyond the 'classical' reading of ideology: in which "*ideology is defined by what it is not*, by what it fails to be, or, to put it another way, by the distance it keeps from the real and its materiality" (Macherey, 9, my italics). This old traditional understanding of ideology, in brief, is disappointing for it can only see ideology as a *reflection* of, rather than effective agent of, social reproduction: in fact, Macherey insists that ideology is neither a representational nor reactive response to the real. This *is not*—its rhetoric or what it calls into question—will be of much concern to us in what follows given its ubiquity in both *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* and this later essay on Althusser and Fanon.
4. For a detailed analysis of these terms and figures see my *Whither Fanon?: Studies in the Blackness of Being*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018.
5. Moreover, what exists here as *n'est pas*, or its interruption, is essentially a vanishing point *within* meaning. This is why we perhaps should not name it as an ontology, or seek a meaning in it that amounts to a political ontology or—the same thing—a para-ontology. It is quite significant that these terms rely on ontological language to describe what blackness *is* (as a trope whose meaning is thenceforth beyond analogy or hermeneutics); see recent texts by Frank Wilderson, Sylvia Wynter, and Nahum Chandler.
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*. Paris : Gallimard : 1943. All references are to the English translation by Hazel E. Barnes. New York : Philosophical Library, 1966.
7. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2004: 65.
8. After references to Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946), Macherey argues that Fanon's analysis remains existential, phenomenological; that it is constituted by a *situation*, "which is to say on the plane that is at once that of being for itself and that of being for the other, in a certain historical context" (Macherey, 17). It follows that a subject is only "ever a subject in a situation," and that is because the subject is always *overdetermined* (a word that we shall come back to): "which is to say a subject specified according to the norms of the situation" (Macherey, 18). And it is because Althusser fails to ask or question "the criteria imposed by the situation," that he also fails to see how interpellation is both a process of *selection* and *relegation* (Macherey, 19). This is what we might call the true thrust of Macherey's *anti-Althusserian decryption*: subjection is not only a recruitment by which the subject learns to subject itself, it is also a prescription by which some are told that they are less than human, resisted as the very negation of agency and will.
9. See chapter ten, "The Abyssal" in *Whither Fanon?*
10. Frantz Fanon, "West Indians and Africans," in *Towards the African Revolution*. Trans. Haakon Chevalier. New York: Grove Press, 1967: 27. Hereafter *Towards* plus page no.
11. Paul de Man, "The Concept of Irony," in *The Aesthetic Ideology*. (178)

12. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1978: 101. Hereafter cited parenthetically in-text.
13. See Jacques Lacan, "Response to Jean Hyppolite's Commentary on Freud's 'Verneinung' (1954)" Trans. B. Fink, H. Fink, and R. Grigg. *Écrits, The First Complete Edition in English*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.: J. 2006: 308-333. For an elaboration of Fanon's relation to Lacan, see my *Lacan Noir*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming.
14. Reading across from *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* to *Peau noire, masques blancs*, it is precisely absence which can be described as a situation of being overdetermined by, and an indeterminate relation to, a desire that reproduces itself as impossibility. As *ruinare*, the *n'est pas* is not, or not only, a negation: we could also say that it subsists as an ontological impurity that is the trace of the other within us, consequently, there is no defense against it, for it is how blackness absents itself—whitens itself—that overdetermines its own negrophobic appearance as a passion that is violently envious, morally unjust.