Fanon: The Revolutionary as Prophet by Peter Geismar

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Peter Geismar's biography of Frantz Fanon justifies its title in that it occasionally examines Fanon's forecasts and analyses of the Third World's revolutionary struggle. But a title more appropriate to the book's emphasis might be "The Revolutionary as Man and Superman." Geismar seems to have traveled wherever Fanon lived at length and to have interviewed many who associated with him in work or play. The interviews are supplemented primarily by the writings of Fanon himself and by published secondary sources which, unfortunately, the author considered of such "limited use" that they are not to be found in his bibliography.

The major virtue of Geismar's method is its vivid portrayal of a person larger than life in physical strength and endurance, intelligence and intellectual earnestness, devotion to duty and courage. Fanon was a perfectionist in his work, his writing and his thought. There are countless anecdotes to the point, none fully shorn of the interviewee's bristling adulation.

"Fanon's favorite method of relaxation remained blazing discussions that would last throughout the whole night by their own momentum. He had no concepcion of time, only of interests. He could contaminate others with this impulsive volubility. A friend of his in Tunisia described an evening when he, Fanon, and two others sat in a darkened room around a table with a small lamp in the center. Fanon had become extremely intense; so had the other three at the table. The doctor created sparks of nervous energy about himself. He could always listen but vastly preferred to talk. He had on a sport jacket and polo shirt open at the neck. Fanon was almost always beautifully dressed: His shirts were tailor-made in Europe; the hottest Tunisian summer day couldn't deter him from modeling a new, heavy tweed suit. That night the lighting in the room accentuated the depth of the many creases in his face and the jaggedness of the scar on his left cheek. Fanon's eyes, usually bloodshot from lack of sleep, burned out of dark wells. At times he would think with his forehead resting on clenched fists, elbows on the table. Then he would lift his head, squint his eyes, relax them, and speak while occasionally rubbing his nose vigorously."

Geismar's attention to the personal and concrete includes the environment, the market place in Port-de-France, Martinique, the sand colors of Gozo, Mali, the ratio of doctors to patients (6/2,000) at the Bilda Joint Hospital where Fanon was a chef de service. The incredible atrocities of colonialists at war are sketched in the same anecdotal way. The physical and social situation is ever present; we see the man and the superman's response to conditions around him.

To date, this biography is the general reader's only source for the early life, the private life and the medical life of Fanon. It is most lucid and useful in its accounts of the work routine, problems and policies Fanon had at each medical institution he served. Fifteen medical articles by Fanon (some co-authored) are cited in the bibliography. His contributions to psychiatric thought and practice are clearly explained and soberly appraised. Fanon was never an innovator of theory regarding the causes or even the treatment of psychiatric illness. But his saber-sharp insight and his boundless energy made him the successful innovator applying theory where others were uninformed, unmotivated or incapable. Thus on his first tour of inspection in a ward at Bilda, we are told, he found all sixty-nine patients strait-jacketed and he ordered all jackets removed. Despite a shortage of the new tranquilizing drugs, thereafter "the strait-jackets were used only on rare occasions in Fanon's wards."

Similarly, in the psychoanalysis of social behavior he often achieved a crucially important level of innovation by simply applying theory without prejudice. A sparkling example is the devastation of O. Mannoni's theory of a "dependency complex" among colonized (read colored) people. Fanon discusses the very dreams which Mannoni had analyzed; he then places the dreamers in the social and political context in which only Senegalese troops are used to terrorize the Malagasies, and concludes:

"... the discoveries of Freud are of no use to us here. What must be done is to restore this dream to its proper time, and this time is the period during which eighty thousand natives were killed—that is to say, one of every fifty persons in the population; and to its proper place, and this place is an island of four million people, at the center of which no real relationship can be established, where dissension breaks out in every direction, where the only masters are lies and demagogy..." (Black Skin White Masks).

Geismar's chronological arrangement allows us to follow clearly Fanon's increasing involvement with the Algerian revolution and subsequently with Pan-African independence movements. In the latter case we see events and trenchant analysis leading Fanon to his understanding of neo-colonialism. However, we are given only haphazard clues for understanding the conversion from the assimilationist doctrine of Black
Skin (I have in mind the eloquent and distressing final chapter's peroration, including: "as a man of color do not have the right to hope that in the white man there will be a crystallization of guilt toward the past of my race. . . . I do not have the right to be a Negro. . . . My life should not be devoted to drawing up the balance sheet of Negro values. . . . There is no white world, there is no white ethic. . . .") to the revolutionary doctrine of A Dying Colonialism, which in every chapter presupposes a differentiation of Algerian values and mores from the colonizers' and a (selective) defense of the former against the latter.

For all its interesting information, however, Fanon is ultimately a disappointing book. The concentration on the person, Frantz Fanon, the excursions into his environment and the discussions of his medical and political writings all excite too many legitimate and unanswered questions. Precisely that clarification of his thought which this sort of biography should provide is missing. The trivial and impertinent question of this revolutionary prophet of the Third World having a white wife requires discussion, both because it is thought important by so many black revolutionaries the world over and because Fanon himself found it a serious obstacle in his rapport with them. Geismar absolutely avoids the issue, mentions Josie Fanon rarely and her race, parenthetically, once. In contrast, David Caute's analytical, non-biographical, non-mecdotal, and better Frantz Fanon (published by Viking Press in 1970) does allude to the problem.

Geismar tells anecdotes revealing Fanon's profound respect for Jean Paul Sartre, but it is Caute who points to the discrepancy between Fanon's claimed audience, the oppressed, and the audience his books are styled to address, white European intellectuals. Geismar reveals Fanon's extreme devotion to European taste in clothing (as above), food and drink without seeming to recognize how this may relate to Fanon's conceptions of the peoples and cultures he spent his life to liberate.

"In Fanon's last years of life, the great enemy was the new bourgeoiise of the Third World"—to which he belonged in all the minutiiae of life-style and in all the significant privileges. As such, Fanon was prototypical of the new black revolutionary, and his resolution of the paradox requires treatment in a biography. For the same reasons, his life ought to be examined in relation to his utter dedication to socialism, which, in any case, is not adequately treated. At another point we are told, "Fanon's respect for traditional cultural patterns stopped short of their interfering with modern medical techniques." As though such a statement does not breach a hornet's nest.

Nowhere is this discrepancy between Fanon and Fanon's thought more relevant than in the chapter on "National Culture" in The Wretched of the Earth. Fanon was a writer of the third, "fighting phase" in intent, but working at the first, "assimilated phase," or at best using a "borrowed estheticism and . . . a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies." He wanted to be read by "his own people," but produced works capable of being read exclusively by the oppressor and others deeply assimilated to the oppressor's ethos. Fanon was too assimilated to appreciate the revolutionary potential and the basic conceptual rectitude of Negritude. But genius is the triumph over induced blindness. Note in Wretched of the Earth that Fanon is analytically faultless except in predicting that the delination of blackness will become mired in reactionary contra-whiteness. The prophecy has proved false, and it did not follow inevitably from the arguments which precede it. The reason for the prophecy was in Fanon's heart, and a biography could and should explain that reason.

Besides failing to relate the man to his thought, Geismar only hints at some things which must have become bitterly clear in interviews. Fanon was an outsider. Obviously, but not simply in France. In North Africa, despite all his thoughts and deeds, he was as much the foreigner to Arabs as to Europeans. The fact that Fanon was Martinican and black hampered his work in the FLN, just as his fervor, courage, talents, training and fame helped him.

But Geismar leaves readers to estimate how and how much. We can only guess at the influence this factor had on the thoughts in Fanon's last two full books. As a black man from the Western Hemisphere his appeal for Afro-Arab unity must have struck both the Arabs and the other Africans as naive idealism. Fortunately, both parties have managed to mute the profound mistrust and hostility between them. The subject is delicate, but unavoidable in a chapter on Fanon's "Unfinished Missions."

Readers informed about the history and doctrines of the Nation of Islam, the Black Panther Party, Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael may be led to suppose that Geismar's whole book is full of misrepresentations, errors and misleading assertions. The inference is unwarranted; Geismar knows more about Fanon than he is saying.

Precisely because Fanon has become the most valuable black theoretician of the revolution against neo-colonialism and white oppression, a personal biography is essential for those who wish to understand Fanon's ideas as exactly as possible and to distinguish as precisely as possible the personal bias from the universal truth in his works. But a more helpful biography would have to broach many exceedingly delicate areas of current politics, prejudices and ideologies, would have to offend many who helped in the book's creation, not to mention many potential purchasers. Geismar's biography does not dare. We must continue to rely more on the faulty but infinitely more valuable essay by Caute.