

Fanon often—because he is eloquent, but also because he is quoted repeatedly these days by those who plead the need for violence. It is my conviction that he can be quoted as well to plead for nonviolence. It is true that he declares: “From birth it is clear . . . that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence.” But I ask all those who are readers of Fanon to make an experiment: Every time you find the word “violence” in his pages, substitute for it the phrase “radical and uncompromising action.” I contend that with the exception of a very few passages this substitution can be made, and that the action he calls for could just as well be nonviolent action.

He writes, for example: “Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them. Without that struggle, without that knowledge of the practices of action, there’s nothing but a fancy-dress parade . . . a few reforms at the top . . . and down there at the bottom an undivided mass . . . endlessly marking time.” “Knowledge of the practice of action”—that is what Fanon sees to be absolutely necessary, to develop in the masses of people an understanding of social truths, accomplish that “work of clarification,” “demystification,” “enlightening of consciousness” which is the recurring and the deepest theme of his book. This action could be nonviolent action; it could very much better be nonviolent action—if only that action is bold enough.

Here is Fanon as he argues the necessity for “mere rebellion”—which Oglesby has described—to become true revolution: “Racialism and hatred and resentment—‘a legitimate desire for revenge’—cannot sustain a war of liberation. Those lightning flashes of consciousness which fling the body into stormy paths or which throw it into an almost pathological trance where the face of the other beckons me on to giddiness, where

my blood calls for the blood of the other . . . that intense emotion of the first few hours falls to pieces if it is left to feed on its own substance. . . . You’ll never overthrow the terrible enemy machine, and you won’t change human beings if you forget to raise the standard of consciousness of the rank-and-file.”

The Spirit of Invention

The task involves the enlightening of consciousness. But violence “beckons me on to giddiness.” I repeat Fanon’s words: “It would be as well to decide at once to change our ways.” Another man with whom I was arguing the other day declared to me, “You can’t turn the clock back now to nonviolence!” Turn the clock back? The clock has been turned to violence all down through history. Resort to violence hardly marks a move forward. It is nonviolence which is in the process of invention, if only people would not stop short in that experiment. Fanon again: “If we want humanity to advance a step further, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries.” It is for that spirit of invention that I plead. And again I would like to ask something of all readers of Fanon. Turn to that last chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* and read it again. Is he not groping here visibly for a way that departs from violence?

He writes, “We today can do everything, so long as we do not imitate Europe.” And earlier in the book he has reported, “The argument the native chooses has been furnished by the settler. . . . The native now affirms that the colonialist understands nothing but force.” He writes, “We must leave our dreams. . . .” And earlier he has written, “The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the prosecutor. He writes, “Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners