

A Skin for Thought: reflections on the tattoos of an adolescent patient

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An unusual session led me, starting from an aesthetic process using the body, to write, in order to discuss in echo or as a mirror reflection of the inscription on the skin, an attempt of symbolization at the border between the signs of a creative process and a perverse solution. Writing also allowed me to detach myself from a paradoxical counter-transferential situation.

I named my patient Aldous, like the author of *Brave New World*, in order to emphasize the neo-realistic dimension of the inscription on the skin. During the session where he evoked his tattoo for the first time, this young man with the adolescent air didn't present himself as usual: his style changed, and he spoke in his own name.

He is the subject of his enunciation and I use the first person when I transcribe this session, thus communicating something of the theatricality which took place. It would have been difficult and fastidious for me to write the preceding sessions other than in the third person, as if it had been an error of elaboration.

Overly excited, he described his tattoos for me: « Tropical frogs in a landscape! »

« In a scientific journal which belonged to my father, I had read an article about tropical frogs whose skin secreted, when they were touched, a strong toxin that caused burns. And this toxin, when extracted, healed serious illnesses. Both aspects of life, destruction and reparation were present.

I thought that these frogs represented me and I wanted them to be tattooed on my body.

I took the photo in the article to a master Japanese tattoo artist. I started with a frog, and then there was the aesthetic fascination – it was like a drug, I was hooked – and I was hypnotized by the irreversible appearance of the drawing on my body.

Now, there are twelve frogs.

In Japan, during my childhood, my father and mother, who both drew, were fascinated by tattoos. The most powerful men, the godfathers of the mafia, the leaders of industrial empires were tattooed all over their bodies by

artists. My parents hesitated when it came to themselves. They never took the step.

When I told them my intention, they were pleased, particularly my father, and he encouraged me. Now, after each tattoo session, he looks at the progression of the design, he admires it, it really interests him. For me, it has become a fascination and a unique experience, like a ceremony, during two to three hours every three or four weeks with the master, and we talk, drink tea, rest. I don't know if I could stop myself from getting tattooed, it is only during those moments that I feel alive. I inscribed these tattoos on my back in order not to see them unless I want to, in a mirror, so that I won't get tired of them, always obtaining pleasure from looking at them which is a choice, that is important. You also possess objects that we can't tire of [he is referring to Chinese archaeological statues]. »

He couldn't, he warned me, speak to someone who wouldn't understand, who would consider it strange, or someone who would reject this practice. It was a categorical warning on his behalf if I didn't understand him, at least that is how I perceived it at the time. It was also an obligatory assignment to a position of « positive narcissistic double ». He spoke as if he was establishing a « contract » between us, in this way ending his passive complaisance that he had maintained up until then in order to instill a domineering relationship. He placed me, in relation to my own ideals, my medical training and its ethics (he was attacking his corporeal integrity), within a fairly disturbing situation of complicity.

He continued:

« I saw from the very first day that there were Japanese engravings in your office and I thought that you would understand, I felt comfortable here, and that pleased me. But I didn't dare talk about it with you up until now because *it is more important in my life than all the rest and that could seem a lot to you.* »

In saying that, he had a triumphant expression.

This triumph faded, leading to a depressive movement certainly preceded by a counter-transferential movement of the same tone on my behalf, and the perception of this affect on him triggered a certain relief for me.

He is, like Narcissus, hypnotized when he looks at the frogs, but he does not experience pleasure when others look at them, except for his father: he thinks that they won't understand the meaning and won't know how to appreciate them. He hopes that I will understand because of my Japanese engravings and taste for aesthetics which he thinks that I, like his father, possess, and because of the décor of my office, but he is not completely sure.

At the end of this session and after the excitement which accompanied the revelation of the secret, sadness and feelings of nostalgia were much more visible.

He was extremely passive in his request where I was concerned. I suggested a weekly appointment face to face, which he accepted. He attended regularly, without missing any appointments, stubbornly investing the sessions, which he dedicated, during the first weeks, to explanations, – with a very pedagogical concern to make understood the elements of a history marked by traumatism and abandonment after a happy childhood in Japan.

He neither provoked boredom, nor excitement. I was disturbed and moved by the contrast between the disaster which he expressed and the absence of feeling which accompanied his story or its subtle nature. If the psychic representations seem little invested, the décor of my office, the fabrics, the archaeological statues, the Japanese engravings, all these objects which remind him of the Asia and Japan of his first years were the source of a significant and immediate perceptive and sensorial « hook », conscious on his behalf. He seemed to consider these inanimate objects to have a soul and to grant them a reassuring quality, as if they also protected him from being intruded upon by the other.

He spoke of himself as of someone else who was of little concern, with the precision of an entomologist describing the behaviour of insects, leaving me disconcerted and somewhat troubled for four weeks. I had the impression of assuming an emotion which he did not seem to feel and, occasionally, I had a great deal of difficulty in identifying with him.

The session which I described marked a change in the relationship which had been established. At the end of the session, I felt I was in the grip of a paradoxical situation : I had to, if I wanted to meet this patient, become interested in this creation which was « vital » for him, analogous to a fetish, and recognize it, through its relationship with his past, as an attempt to restore a wounded narcissism and as a condensed representation in an image and fairy tale of himself, which would have appealed to me if it had not been inscribed directly on his skin.

I could not get rid of a certain counter-transferential dread at the idea of his continuing the tattooing parallel to the psycho-therapeutical sessions, in a scenario which included his father who was introduced into the acting between Aldous and myself. I had the impression of “extemporaneously” participating with the risk of a perverse solution and becoming powerless. I was afraid of being unable to play the role of analyst and being marginalized by the paternal figure.

This session troubled me at the time, and continued to haunt me long after Aldous had left; the momentary traumatic stupefaction that I experienced led me

to write this observation in order to rid myself of the fascination that it held over me.

Because he did not show me his tattoos, as he did with his father, but described them to me, I tried to overcome the identity wavering that I experienced by drawing on the verbalization of all that the tattoo signified for him, which was the beginning of a development that the framework and verbal methods of analytic work should prioritize. The erotic significance attributed to his back, the equivalent of an offering to his father made me think about the possibility of a future session with Aldous in a horizontal position.

A literary light

An example taken from literature, *In the Penitentiary Colony*, by Kafka, seems pertinent. In this short story, inspired by the *Garden of Tortures*, by Octave Mirbeau, which was forbidden as pornography and sadism when it was published in 1901, there is question of a « peculiar apparatus », an execution machine by torture that was invented by the former commandant of the colony and run by an officer: « The law which the prisoner broke will be inscribed on his body by the harrow... It would be useless to tell him [the verdict]. Because he will learn it from his body. »

The new commandant wants to obtain support from a passing traveller, a renowned stranger, in order to bring an end to this practice. The officer passionately presents – and in the presence of a prisoner condemned to death that he is getting ready to execute – the details of how his machine works and his despair to see it neglected («I am the only one to defend the heritage of the former commandant. »). Not receiving the approval of the traveller, he frees the prisoner and kills himself by offering his body to the machine which he minutely regulates under the eyes of his visitor.

Kafka wrote nine epilogues to this short story to describe the disarray and confusion of the traveller prey to unspeakable feelings of guilt. After having submitted to the sadistic and jubilatory account of the torture about to occur, he witnesses the spectacle of the sacrifice of the officer under the fascinated gaze of the pardoned prisoner. Struck by the sentence of the machine, which incarnated for him the phallic power of the Master that had conceived it, the officer committed suicide by delivering himself to the machine. By refusing to support its use, the traveller, witness and actor by being present and exercising his judgement, had saved the prisoner, but had driven the officer to despair, leading to his death.

This horrible illustration seemed to reflect the paradox in which I found myself and which I tried to resolve by searching for meaning and formulating the account into words.

An attempt to take possession of the paternal object which he is exiled from

Via the tattoos on his body, he retrieves, shares and appropriates paternal investments, and the aesthetic pursuit of his father, attempting – as in many perverse defence mechanisms – to hold over the paternal object which he can not introject, and maintained by a positive narcissistic double. Because of this symptom, he is acknowledged by his father, seen, respected, and admired as worthy of him because he meets his aesthetic ideals with the investment of his body as an object for exhibition.

It seems to me that herein lies the danger of « addiction » to this practice which, contrary to those of the father, is irreversible and permanently inscribed on his body. The fact that the experience is shared in this way, and by his father, and visually invested reinforces the « rehabilitating » aspect from the perspective of the narcissistic reconstitution which is essentially inherent to the visual image. This dual narcissism and, here, this « skin for two » evokes the twin couple described by D. Anzieu, which resides in the same skin and would be vitally threatened in the event of the separation of one of the elements.

The location of the tattoos invests them with a fetish function, as a « mirror of himself on the back » always available through the intermediary of their reflection but which he is not obligated to see, therefore without the risk of becoming bored and, in this way guaranteeing the durability of the investment.

The increased number of frogs, and the plan to totally tattoo himself, creates a representative screen between inside and outside.

Aesthetic contemplation does not destroy its object, despite the intimacy that is attached, but attributes an internal fetish function to it, located outside the hold and anthropomorphic projections, which is the beginning of metaphoric creation.

Aldous seemed to achieve and permanently inscribe on his body the trace of his idealized childhood in Japan, with both of his parents, and the realization of their shared desire, a neo-reality where all are contained within the same skin, hiding a denial and erasing the catastrophe of traumatism. The horizon is located beyond pleasure and, there more than elsewhere, it is with his body and in a non-metaphorical way that he pays tribute to the impossible separation. It is a question

of rediscovering the perceptibility of the object by over-investing that which could provoke sensations, the investment – which he does not mention – of the pain of tattooing, which produces existence, extricating him from depersonalization and creating an initiatory suffering modifying the constrained relationship with the father and parental imagos.

The cultural inscription of the tattooing practice

The practice that Aldous chose does not have the same significance in France as in Japan, where it is socially recognized, and commonly practiced within a certain elite and considered in a positive light. The tattooers are renowned and honoured artists, and the drawings are symbolic, individually chosen in a spiritual manner after much thought. The tattoo is an attempt to translate in a poetic pictorial way the representation that the person being tattooed has of himself and hopes to give to others, imposing respect.

The frog is one of the most common tattoo motifs in all of Asia, where it is likely that thousands of people have frogs tattooed on their back. In fact, in all of southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, the « man-frog » motif is featured on traditional textiles, having accompanied ancient migrations from China. By dating and following this motif, researchers have tried to reconstitute a history which has not yet been written. Through the use that Aldous makes, it confides in him the role, with the help of an other, to write on his skin a story which he has not yet appropriated. The tattoo master is also a spiritual guide who facilitates access to representation of oneself and the world.

In Japan, the « replacement frog » is an amulet, generally in carved stone, destined to receive the spirit and the soul of its owner if recently deceased, and is worn at all times. This is perhaps the role that he confides to the master tattoo artist and now, to me. The frog would contain the soul of a child who died while very young (himself?), troubled souls; the symbol of resurrection through metamorphoses.

Frogs, emblems of water, are supposed to attract rain, fecundity and prosperity. As such, their image is found, going back to the most ancient cultures, on objects of popular or folk art dedicated to animist rites (prehistoric bronze drums in Vietnam). They represent a symbol of construction of a life, a history.

In Asian cultures, an investment exists, a source of « magic » beliefs, of seminal liquid, a miracle remedy which can be compared to the toxin of the frog.

The « frog position » is the usual sexual position in Asia, inspired by the « swimming frog » in the Kama-sutra. The frog is often considered a sexual invitation, which encourages the hypothesis of homosexuality or a feminine position.

The meaning attributed by Aldous translates his nostalgic ties to the culture that was the cradle of his childhood and ideals which were shared by both of his parents at the time. Aldous' tattooer is part of this tradition and therefore allows him to rediscover and rebuild his roots; he is a paternal substitute with whom the young man has a good relationship.

This situation does not seem to emerge from a perverse masochism. It is the representation, not the provoked pain, which is invested. And, if Aldous speaks of addiction and aesthetic fascination, there does not seem to be a real escalation.

The narrative represented in images

The tropical frog that would like to be larger than the bull and transform herself into a Japanese empress reflects Aldous' infantile megalomania, as a link with the nostalgic pathological narcissism of the child king that he was in Japan.

The skin secreting a toxin translates the fragility of his self-skin, intolerant to contact with an other and provoking in this case the destruction of the other skin (with the aim either of repulsion, or the abolition of limits between both skins). The desire, always megalomaniac, for reparation and a restorative result is part of the project for healing, with this toxin, the serious illnesses of the whole of humanity.

The frog is a strange animal; if it possesses a cloaca, it was previously a tadpole that lost its tail, as children enjoy observing the phenomenon. Castration preceded sexual indetermination. It therefore no longer remains to be accomplished. The cloaca reflects sexual difference, apparently not acquired by Aldous, and an archaic maternal-paternal imago under the anal sign. In fact, the frog lives in the mud.

The tattooed skin evokes an attempt to reconstruct internal and external fetishes that are protectors against disorganization, fetishes that are animated by the projection of the narcissistic integrity of the patient and dis-animated by the devolution to an inscription on the skin, which ensures its permanence. The inscription thus becomes a product of the subject, with the attached fecalization.

The tattoo possesses the qualities of permanence, immutability and the magic power (megalomania) included in the unconscious fantasies of the subject in relation with its internal objects. It results from the movement of idealization inherent to the psyche.

The created work possesses an excitation-barrier effect for Aldous. It makes him feel whole and soothes him. Like an internal fetish, it attracts all of Aldous' investment – « it is more important than anything else » – and, in an investment with a hold over the lost object, its traces, that which remains serves as narcissistic reinforcement.

Moreover, this situation « behind », where others can see by coming near, while he does not have access, could suggest homosexuality. The back for Aldous would be the place of identification with his father.

Frogs secrete a substance that destroys whomever touches it but which, once it is extracted, becomes a remedy. The dangerous approach would be homosexual; this contact would kill the aggressor but would probably lead to the destruction of the patient. The extracted substance (seminal liqueur?) would be a source of life, capable of fathering. It is therefore an attempt to formulate a fantasy which the tattoo achieves.

The delicate transition is that of the symbolization, where the homosexual threat risks the fragmentation of the self.

The signs of a creative solution

The transformation into writing would require living – and being inhabited by – the universe of words and metaphors produced by the visual representation ; however, the infantile nature of the patient – in the sense where as Pascal Quignard emphasizes, *infance*, *infantia*, is the stage of « aparlance » – exposes him to the constant threat of a deficiency in his acquired language.

If we must account for the fact that the language of the culture which cradled his infancy is inscribed, including linguistic signs, in a manner full of imagery, similar to pictograms, it is not Aldous who draws, it is the tattooer who translates his thought into images. Aldous lends his skin to the representation in order to contemplate it.

We can however consider this as the premise of a creative process: it is the representation, and not the act or the pain which is produced, which is invested (he will say that occasionally, he can not, during certain periods, have himself tattooed because of the fear of suffering). There is an absolute narcissistic priority at this level, « it is more important for me than anything ».

The animal metaphor displaces the frontier beyond the human, avoiding the anthropomorphic projections, freeing it from the hold and, in this way, provides access to the polysemy (« we are all flies for the Gods », said Shakespeare).

Representation and story relate, like a dream, that which can not be thought without a shift or a change of perspective.

The nature of the domineering constraint, the relationship to suffering and infantile megalomania also often belong to the creative process.

Like writing, the inscription on the skin hides what is agonizing in a revelatory movement, restating the lesion, celebrating the wound, which was born in and from a violence. It was decided after a period of reflection, germination, and conception, and there is a delay between the sessions of drawing. It is the fruit of a co-creation with an artist. It is still limited by the animist and infantile universe of the patient but testifies to his effort for a shift in perspective. It provides in the analysis, in a condensed manner, a space for representation and formulating into words that the analyst can use, providing the future possibility of a restitution in the form of representations.

It fails however in that writing on something alive, skin, it takes the place of an identity marker. It is a fetish. It therefore joins the intimate which, contrary to sublimation, can not be transmitted to someone else, is not a source of social value and exchanges and does not resolve the solitude which is expressed. In addition, like the toxin of the frog, this representation attacks the skin and the self-skin. Aside from the fact that it damages the integrity of the body in an irreversible manner, the possibilities for realization that it could offer will be limited by technical constraints as well as by the tegument itself. There is little manouvre possible.

The openings

Expression through an image, because of its condensation and visual representation, is rehabilitating, in the narcissistic meaning of the term, for Aldous. It lends itself to an over-investment on my behalf, as an analyst to whom he delegated a work of representation and deciphering that he could not assume.

This hypercondensation contains a risk of fascination on the traumatic level and requires the analyst to undertake an intense job of decondensation for a measured future restitution. This will perhaps be postponed for a fairly long time in order to avoid assigning it, as in the relationship with the father as well as with the tattoo artist, to an immobilized, passive masochistic feminine position (he allows himself to be looked at, to be pricked and injected with ink) which would be the equivalent of a psychic rape.

The creative effort present in this attempt requires being heard, and one can imagine that the work in the sessions could propose a metamorphic shift that can be symbolized.

Without being overly optimistic but, because in the transfer I am attributed the masochistic position – which was his – of a powerless spectator with the proposition of taking the role of the tattooer, perhaps a space will exist where, without completely refusing the domineering relationship, which would be a non-encounter, providing meaning to these inscriptions could introduce a gap, a space in the tightly wound mechanism which would eventually lead to a work of elaboration, even sublimation.

The depressive movement had reassured me, as if a return to the painful experience could lead to a release of the corporeal investment and a reflexive movement concerning the origins of his suffering, as an alternative to the pleasurable hold of the symptom.

The nostalgic emotions appeared during the following session, following a dream where his friend (a girl), walking beside him like his shadow, disappeared. He evoked at length his mother, who had been up until then absent from his discourse, a depressed mother, often incomprehensible for him in her reactions and having herself undergone a long analysis.

He had not gotten any more tattoos since the beginning of our meetings. An appointment had been made in the days following the session where he had initially spoken of it, but he had cancelled it, fearing to no longer be able to support the dreadful pain. He thought that he would continue this practice in the future but that he did not feel capable for the moment because of the fear, rare for him, of physically suffering. Perhaps a symbolic shift operation had taken place between the tattoo artist and the analyst that I represented ...

He then explained to me his « emotional insensibility » with surprising words concerning the suicidal attempt of his childhood friend :

« She was in a coma, I was watching the tube, I took my pulse and it was beating faster, I watched the tubes, the screen then my breathing, my diaphragm hardly rose, it was hard to breathe, but I didn't feel any emotions, I was insensitive, I didn't feel anything. »

He was in a state of confusion, probably afraid of the return of a painful emotional experience, and I accepted, upon his request, to increase the frequency of the sessions.

The factor which made this identifying creation waver and led him to consult remains unclear. Was it the mourning for the friend that had recently left him, for the mother that was absent, for these two women who had turned their backs on him and that he believed to have seen from the back in the street? These images would seem banal if the back did not possess such an erotic connotation for Aldous.

From the back, in addition to the fact that the face is not visible, can we determine someone's sex? Here lies perhaps the confusion of this patient. Or rather his paradoxical perception of the difference between the sexes which makes him feel to be on the path of paternal identification, via his back.

Conclusion

The counter-transferential dread that had seized me at the idea of following a practice of tattooing in parallel with the sessions of psychotherapy, the fear of being marginalized by a perverse father figure thus introduced in the acting between Aldous and myself, the traumatic stupefaction caused by the session where, for the first time, he switched from the third person to the first person and the excitement expressed when he evoked this practice had made me doubt being able to maintain the role of the analyst.

Writing the observation was essential for me, an effort of forced symbolization against, as a reflection, and in echo to the inscription on the skin.

A change which seemed fairly quick to me – perhaps prepared by the ordeal of the tattoo as an initiatory pain, which could have virtually modified the relationship which was so constrained by parental imagos – took place ; it allowed the establishment of an analytic process. The switch from the somatic inscription to the mental representation which followed this session translated a change in the metapsychological mode of organization of the patient and his economical equilibrium.

There are clinical situations where the *Geworfenheit* of the analyst (with the meaning of Heidegger's concept, literally « being thrown there ») is a preliminary condition which is perhaps necessary for the patient's perception of his *Hilflösigkeit*.

The encounter with creative patients confronts, in an unexceptional way, aesthetic processes involving the body, where the analyst must both respect this identifying creation and attempt to find meaning and words that can be heard.

The inscription on the skin by the master tattooer led me to write this out and should lead to an analytic process where the patient will be led to formulate his story through words and attempt its appropriation.

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Summary

An unusual session concerning the tattoos of a patient led me to write as a mirror reflection and echo to this inscription on the skin, and to discuss the value, for him and in the transference, of this neo-reality at the border between an artistic solution and a perverse solution, a preliminary to writing his story in words. Writing contained the implication of detaching myself from a paradoxical transference hold.

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