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It Hurts, Therefore I Am

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The cause of criminality among the white population of England is perfectly obvious to any reasonably observant person, though criminologists have yet to notice it. This cause is the tattooing of the skin.

A slow-acting virus, like that of scrapie in sheep, is introduced into the human body via the tattooing needle and makes its way to the brain, where within a few years it causes the afflicted to steal cars, burgle houses, and assault people.

I first formulated my viral theory of criminality when I noticed that at least nine out of ten white English prisoners are tattooed, more than three or four times the proportion in the general population. The statistical association of crime with tattooing is stronger, I feel certain, than between crime and any other single factor, with the possible exception of smoking. Virtually all English criminals are smokers, a fact that sociologists have also unaccountably overlooked.

There are two main schools of tattooing: the do-it-yourself and the professional. They are by no means mutually exclusive; on the contrary, their relationship is rather like that between alternative (or fringe) and orthodox medicine. Devotees of the one often are simultaneously devotees of the other.

The differences between the two schools are very marked. Home tattooing is monochrome-india-ink colored, while professional tattooing is polychrome. The designs of the first are simple, though no less striking for that. The designs of the latter are elaborate and often executed with exquisite skill, though I am reminded of an old medical dictum that if a thing is not worth doing—a radical mastectomy, for instance—it is not worth doing well. Finally, home tattooing is low-tech; professional tattooing is high-tech.

All over England, lower-class youths aged between 14 and 18 indulge in a strange and savage *rite de passage*, in numbers that far exceed those who perform this rite elsewhere in the world. They take an ordinary sewing needle, wrap it in cotton gauze, and dip it into india ink. Then they stab it into their own skins, thus introducing a spot of ink into the dermis. They repeat this until the desired pattern or words form indelibly in their integument.

Like surgical operations before the discovery of anesthetics, this kind of tattooing is often done while the subject is drunk, in front of a crowd of onlookers who encourage him to withstand the pain of the process. In any case, this pain is inclined to diminish to mere numbness after a few stabs of the needle, or so I am told by my auto-tattooed patients. The redness of inflammation subsides within a few days.

What messages do these young men wish to communicate to the world? Generally, they are quite short and to the point: and they all too pithily express the violent nihilism of their lives. The most common consists of two words, with one letter on each of four knuckles: LOVE and HATE. Another fairly common tattoo consists of a dot on four knuckles of one hand, with or without the letters A C A B. These letters stand for ALL COPPERS ARE

BASTARDS.

The anti-police theme is one that I have seen represented in a more explicit way, in the form of a gallows from which was suspended a dangling policeman. In case the meaning of this was insufficiently clear to onlookers, the words HANG ALL COPPERS were appended beneath. Alas, this frank and manly expression of sentiment did not always stand the bearer in good stead, inasmuch as he was frequently in the custody of the constabulary, and the tattoo, being on his forearm, was not easily hidden from their eyes. I shall return later to the several disadvantages of being tattooed.

A surprisingly large number of auto-tattooists choose for the exercise of their dermatographical art the chief motto of British service industries, namely FUCK OFF. Why anyone should want these words indelibly imprinted in his skin is a mystery whose meaning I have not yet penetrated, though my researches continue, but I recall a patient who had the two words tattooed in mirror writing upon his forehead, no doubt that he might read them in the bathroom mirror every morning and be reminded of the vanity of earthly concerns.

It isn't only in the service industries that Britain limps behind, of course. The former workshop of the world has come to manufacture so little that nowadays one rarely sees the words MADE IN ENGLAND anywhere—except, that is, tattooed around the nipple or umbilicus of some of the less cerebral alumni of our least distinguished schools.

Naturally, this kind of tattoo can also serve romantic ends. Men, it is well known, are frequently prepared to endure agonies for love, and so it is not altogether surprising that the name of a girlfriend is recorded not on pen and paper but in ink and dermis. Unfortunately, romantic affections tend to be rather fluid in the age of auto-tattooing, and it is not unusual to see an entire romantic history inscribed, list-wise, upon an arm, sometimes with a name crossed through when the parting of the ways has been particularly bitter.

One youth I met had tattooed his romantic aspirations, rather than his romantic history, upon himself. The fingers of one hand bore the crude letters L T F C; those of the other, E S U K. When he folded his hands together—in an emblem of the message he wished to convey, that one alone is incomplete, but two together make a whole—the letters spelled Out: LETS FUCK. Did this ever work? I asked with some skepticism. "Well, yes," he replied with great complaisance. "Sometimes."

Often a tattoo acts as a membership badge. For example, a little blue spot on one cheekbone indicates that the bearer has been to Borstal, a correctional institution for wayward youth named after a village in Kent, the garden of England, site of the first such institution. The blue badge of rebellion is worn in the manner of the old school tie, that Old Borstalians may recognize one another—and be recognized. For in the circles in which they move, the meaning of the blue spot is well known and understood: *Noli me tangere*.

But like those peculiar moths and butterflies about which naturalists delight to tell us, which imitate the colorful plumage of poisonous species without being poisonous themselves, that potential predators on *lepidoptera* might leave them alone, so do certain young people tattoo themselves with the blue spot without ever having been to Borstal. They wear the spot both as protection and as a means of gaining the admiration of their peers; but, to change the metaphor slightly, the coinage is soon debased, and what was once a sign of considerable value is now almost emptied of it.

And thus the study of a seemingly minor social phenomenon such as tattooing affords us a little glimpse into the Hobbesian moral world inhabited by a section of the population with whom we normally have little contact: they actually *want* to be considered psychopathic. Not their eyes but their tattoos are the windows of their souls.

Another popular pattern—though it makes one shudder to think of the process by which it is inscribed upon the skin, or the consequences if a mistake is made—is the spider's web on the side of the neck. Occasionally, this is spread over the whole of the face, even over the scalp. At first I assumed this design must have a symbolic meaning, but having inquired of many bearers of it, and having been assured by them that there is no such meaning, I am now satisfied that it is its intrinsic beauty, and a certain vaguely sinister connotation attached to spiders' webs, that attracts people to the design and induces them to adorn themselves with it. Moreover, I vividly recall the scene at a murder trial in which I testified. The judge and counsel were embroiled in a learned discussion of the finer points of *mens rea*, watched by the prisoner in the dock and his family in the public gallery—all of whom, down to the *n*th generation, had spiders' webs prominently tattooed on their necks. Never was the class basis (as the Marxists used to call it) of British justice more clearly visible: two classes separated by, among other things, a propensity on the part of one of them to self-disfigurement.

A considerable number of the auto-tattooed inject themselves with swastikas. At first I thought this was profoundly nasty, a reflection of their political beliefs, but in my alarm I had not taken into consideration the fathomless historical ignorance of those who do such things to themselves. People who believe (as one of my recent patients did) that the Second World War started in 1918 and ended in 1960—a better approximation to the true dates than some I have heard—are unlikely to know what exactly the Nazis and their emblem stood for, beyond the everyday brutality with which they are familiar, and which they admire and aspire to.

About 1 in 20 of English auto-tattooists adorn themselves with dotted lines around their neck or their wrists, with the instruction to onlookers to CUT HERE, as if they were coupons in a newspaper or magazine—an instruction that many of their acquaintances are perfectly equipped to obey, inasmuch as they routinely carry sharp knives with them.

Such tattoos can have serious consequences. Not long ago, a prisoner with the words NO FEAR tattooed prominently on the side of his neck came before me with a medical complaint, and I inquired into his medical history. He wore his hair shaved, and his scalp reminded me of that of the old, one-eyed, half-eared tomcat in the garden next door to me at home, whose scalp is a mass of scars.

"Have you ever had any serious injuries?" I asked.

"No," he replied.

"And have you ever been in the hospital for anything?" I continued.

"Yes, *four times*."

"What for?"

"*Broken skull*."

I should explain in parenthesis that the tattooed classes of England do not consider fractures of the skull to be serious injuries, even when they result in operations, steel plates inserted into the remainder of the skull, and prolonged sojourns in the hospital. It is difficult for them to conceive of

everyday occurrences as being serious: for example, one patient had his skull staved in with a baseball bat but said of the incident that "it was just a usual neighborly row," and therefore nothing for the police or doctors to get too worried about.

"And how did you come by these fractures of your skull?" I asked my patient.

It was his tattoo that was responsible. Everyone assumed that NO FEAR meant precisely that, so that whenever he walked into a pub he would be challenged to a fight by those who felt entitled to be feared, and who regarded a lack of fear as a personal insult. Moreover, he had often been glassed (the verb *to glass* meaning to smash a glass into someone's face or over his head, usually in a pub) because of his tattoo.

When asked why they inflict these marks of Cain upon themselves, the tattooed cite pressure from their peers and boredom. Perhaps the pain of it reassures them they are alive: it hurts, therefore I am.

"I was bored," said one man whose hands were covered in scores of such tattoos, and who claimed that they had kept him unemployed for many years. "It was either tattooing myself, or going out robbing."

No other possibility presented itself to his ill-furnished mind; but in any case, the distraction caused by the tattooing soon wore off, and he went out robbing just the same.

Just as many who start with marijuana go on to crack, so do most who tattoo themselves go on to be tattooed by professionals. It is illegal in Britain to tattoo anyone under the age of 18 (though of course if the government were really serious about restricting the numbers of the tattooed, it would make tattooing compulsory). The parlors of those whom I suppose I must call the *ethical* tattooists—who refuse to tattoo their clients' penises, for example—are inspected regularly by the Health Department for cleanliness and sterile technique. The tattooists display their licenses upon the wall, as well as their membership in various organizations of tattoo artists, as doctors in America do.

The tattoo and body-piercing parlors—and I have now visited several—are all very much the same in both layout and atmosphere. In the reception area are posters illustrating the patterns from which most of the clients choose, bespoke tattooing being considerably more expensive. The patterns seem inspired mainly by sub-Wagnerian Norse mythology, the female figures deriving in equal measure from Brünnhilde and Ursula Andress, the male from Siegfried and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Snakes winding their way round skulls, saber-toothed tigers, and bulldogs baring their fangs are also popular.

The owners are themselves heavily tattooed, though some of them, in the privacy of our conversation, admitted that they would not tattoo themselves, at any rate so extensively, if they had their time again. But business is business, and the demand is more than sufficient to keep them in work. I estimate that in our city of 1 million inhabitants, about 3,000 are tattooed by professionals each year: a high proportion of what epidemiologists call "the population at risk," that is to say, young men between the ages of 18 and 30.

Indeed, the popularity of tattooing in some quarters seems to be growing

rather than declining. It is a curious characteristic of our age that cultural influences now seem to flow from the lower social classes upward, rather than from the upper classes downward, so that middle class people are having themselves tattooed in greater numbers than ever before. And what used to be an all-male preserve is no longer so: along with banking and gentlemen's clubs, another bastion of patriarchy has fallen.

And just as Britain is the most culturally degraded country in Europe, so does its cultural influence grow. Tattooing used to be uncommon in France, for example, and discreet at that; but (or so several tattoo artists have told me) it is becoming ever more popular there. And one of the parlors has opened a branch in Spain, mainly—but, alas, not entirely—for the drunken British oaf market.

It doesn't take long or cost much to have a small tattoo done, though an hour or two of the process is the most people can stand at any one session. You can stigmatize yourself thoroughly in an hour for a mere \$50. But those who want to cover their entire integuments (85 percent coverage of the body surface being by no means rare) may spend years of their life in the tattooing parlor. Watching as yet untattooed young men browsing through the patterns in the parlor reception areas, I felt like a Victorian evangelist or campaigner against prostitution, an impulse rising within me to exhort them to abjure evil; but their adoption of the characteristic expression of the urban underclass (a combination of bovine vacancy and lupine malignity) soon put paid to my humanitarian impulse.

But few are the tattooed who do not eventually come to regret their youthful folly, for both aesthetic and practical reasons. A patient of mine described how his tattoos had always prevented him from getting a job: at interviews, he was able to cover up the dotted lines around his neck with a high collar, as the ruff in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries covered up the scrofula, but those around his wrist always let him down.

Well, perhaps he wasn't all that keen on work anyway; but the last straw—the precipitant of his despair—came when he was refused entry to a nightclub because of his tattoos. On seeing them, the bouncer at the door stepped in front of him and kept him out: even in a world where distinctions are few and crude, his tattoos put him beyond the pale.

The follies of the foolish are the opportunities of the wise, of course. I learned from the yellow pages that for every five professional tattoo parlors, there are three clinics for the removal of tattoos by laser treatment (thus is our gross domestic product increased). The most sophisticated of these clinics has several lasers to deal with different colors, which are susceptible to different wavelengths. The lasers shatter the particles of pigment, and the body's own macrophages can then remove the tiny fragments. Many tattoo parlors offer a removal service as well, but the method they most commonly use, the injection of a dissolving acid into the tattoo, has scarring effects on the skin tissue, so the results are not good.

The principal drawbacks of laser treatment are its cost and duration. A single session lasting ten minutes costs \$160. The skin will not tolerate more prolonged treatment, and between each session a period of six or eight weeks should elapse. An average tattoo on the biceps muscle, three inches by three, requires between five and eight such sessions for full removal. Since many people have a much larger area than this adorned with tattoos, they must invest many thousands in their removal. And in general such people are drawn from the poorer segments of society.

Nevertheless, demand for treatment outstrips supply, and one company that already operates four clinics throughout the country is opening two more. The treatment is not generally available under the National Health Service (Britain's system of socialized medicine), except for those patients in whom their tattoos cause serious psychological or psychiatric disturbance. Despair over tattoos can lead to suicide attempts, even to efforts to carve them out of the skin with kitchen knives. A patient who had tried to cut hers out with a razor blade told me that for years she could think of nothing else. Her obsession with her tattoos (incidentally, they had been done under duress by other inmates in an all-female orphanage) sapped her will to live, and only after they had been removed was she able to start a normal life.

That the Health Service makes exception in these cases (subcontracting the actual work to private clinics) is not generally known, and is certainly not advertised, for fear of provoking a wave of money-saving psychological disturbance among the tattooed. It is a regrettable fact that psychological distress expands to meet the supply of publicly funded services available to reduce it.

It occurred to me, however, albeit in a moment of uncharacteristic weakness, that the prison in which I work should offer a tattoo-removal service for its involuntary guests. After all, even recidivists would be better placed to find honest employment without their marks of Cain.

But then I remembered that every policy has its unintentional consequences. If tattoos were removed free of charge in prison, then people with tattoos might commit crimes specifically to avail themselves of this opportunity. And then the association of tattooing with criminality would be even stronger than it already is.