

3 The Notion of a Skin Ego

The four sets of data I have just examined—from ethology, group work, projective tests and dermatology—have led me to the hypothesis, published in the *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* as long ago as 1974, of a Skin Ego. Before returning to this hypothesis and expanding upon it, I feel it is necessary first to re-think the concept of the oral phase.

Breast-mouth and breast-skin

Freud did not confine the phase he termed oral to the experience of the buccopharyngeal zone and the pleasure of sucking. He always emphasized the importance of the subsequent pleasure of repletion. If the mouth provides the first experience, brief and vivid, of a differentiating contact, of a place of passage and an incorporation, repletion brings the infant the more diffuse and more durable experience of a central mass, a fullness, a centre of gravity. It is not surprising that contemporary psychopathology has been led to confer increasing importance on the sense of inner emptiness experienced by certain patients, nor that a method of relaxation such as Schulz's suggests that the subject should begin by feeling both the warmth (the passage of milk) and the weight (repletion) of its body.

When the baby is being fed and cared for, it has a third experience which is concomitant with the other two: it is held in the mother's arms and pressed against her body, whose warmth, smell and movements it feels; it is picked up, manipulated, rubbed, washed and caressed, all this usually amidst a flood of words and humming. One sees here the characteristics of the attachment drive described by Bowlby and Harlow, and those which, in the writings of Spitz and Balint, suggest the idea of a primal cavity. These activities lead the

child progressively to differentiate a surface which has both an inner and an outer face, in other words an interface, permitting a distinction between inside and outside, and an encompassing volume in which he feels himself bathed, the surface and the volume affording him the experience of a container.

'Breast' is the term commonly used by psychoanalysts to designate the complete reality experienced by the baby. It has four characteristics which the psychoanalyst, like the baby, is often tempted to confuse: it is on the one hand a source of nourishment and on the other an object that fills, its skin is both warm and soft to the touch, and it is an active and stimulating receiver. The generalized and syncretic maternal breast is the first mental object, and it is doubly to Melanie Klein's credit that she has shown both how it figures in the first metonymic substitutions—breast-mouth, breast-cavity, breast-faeces, breast-urine, breast-penis, breast-rival babies—and how it sets off the antagonistic cathexes of the two fundamental drives. The enjoyment [*jouissance*] it brings to the life instincts—the pleasure of participating in its creativity—gives rise to gratitude. By contrast, destructive envy is directed against the very creativity of this breast when it frustrates the baby by giving enjoyment to another. But by thus putting the emphasis exclusively upon phantasy, Melanie Klein neglects the qualities belonging to bodily experience (it is in reaction against this neglect that Winnicott [1962a] gives precedence to 'holding' and 'handling' by the real mother); and by insisting on the relationship between certain parts of the body and their products (milk, sperm, excrement) in a dynamic of creation/destruction, she leaves out of account what joins these parts together in a unifying whole, namely the skin. The body's surface is missing from Klein's theory, and this absence is all the more surprising in that one of the essential elements of that theory, the opposition of introjection (on the model of feeding) and projection (on the model of excretion) presupposes the setting up of a boundary differentiating outside from inside. This allows us, I think, better to understand certain reservations to which the Kleinian technique has given rise: the interpretative bombardment risks stripping the Ego not only of its defences, but also of its protective envelope. In speaking of an 'inner world' and of 'internal objects', Melanie Klein in fact presupposes the notion of an inner space (cf. D. Houzel, 1985a).

Several of Klein's followers, aware of this shortcoming, have elaborated new concepts to remedy it (the concept of the Skin Ego finds its place among them): introjection by the infant of the mother-baby relation as a container-content relation and the subsequent constitution of an 'emotional space' and a 'space for thought' (the earliest thought, that of the absence of the breast, renders tolerable

the frustration caused by this absence, issuing in an apparatus for dealing with thoughts (Bion, 1962); the respective representations of a soft, flaccid amoeba Ego and a rigid crustacean Ego in the two forms of childhood autism, primary abnormal and secondary encapsulated (Frances Tustin, 1972); a second muscular skin as a defensive-offensive armour in schizophrenics (Esther Bick, 1968); the setting up of three psychical frontiers, with the internal space of external objects, the external space of internal objects and with the external world, but which leave in existence a 'black hole' (by analogy with astrophysics) which swallows up every psychical object that approaches (madness, autistic whirlwind) (Meltzer, 1975).

I should also mention at the outset four French psychoanalysts (the first two of Hungarian extraction, another Italian and the fourth Egyptian) whose clinical insights and theoretical elaborations, along lines similar to my own, have enlightened, stimulated and reassured me: every unconscious psychical conflict unfolds in relation not only to an Oedipal axis but also to a narcissistic axis (B. Grunberger, 1971). Every subsystem of the psychical apparatus and the psychical system as a whole reflect a dialectical interaction between shell and kernel (N. Abraham, 1978). An original mode of functioning of the psychical apparatus exists, pictogrammatic in nature, which is more archaic than its primary and secondary functioning (P. Castoriadis-Aulagnier, 1975). An imaginary space develops on the basis of the mutually inclusive relation of the bodies of mother and child, by a dual process of sensory and phantasy projection (M. Sami-Ali, 1974).

Every figure presupposes a background against which it appears as a figure: this elementary truth is easily forgotten, for our attention is normally attracted by the figure which emerges and not by the background from which it detaches itself. The baby's lived experience of the orifices which allow passage either in the sense of incorporation or of expulsion is admittedly important, but no orifice can be perceived without a sensation, however vague, of surface and volume. The infant comes to perceive its skin as a surface as it experiences the contact of its body with that of the mother, and within the framework of a secure relation of attachment to her. Thus it arrives not only at the notion of a boundary between the exterior and the interior but also at the confidence required for progressively mastering the orifices, for it cannot feel confident as to their functioning unless it also possesses a basic feeling which guarantees the integrity of its bodily envelope. Clinical practice here confirms the theoretical findings of Bion (1962) with his notion of a psychical 'container': the dangers of depersonalization are bound up with the image of a perforable envelope and with the anxiety-primary, according to Bion, of a flowing away of vital substance through holes, an anxiety not of

fragmentation but of emptying, well expressed metaphorically by certain patients who describe themselves as an egg with a broken shell being emptied of its white (actually of its yolk). Moreover, the skin is the seat of the proprioceptive sensations, whose importance for the development of character and thought has been stressed by Henri Wallon: it is one of the organs which regulate the tonus. To think in economic terms (accumulation, displacement and discharge of tension) presupposes a Skin Ego.

For the baby, the surface of its whole body and that of its mother are the object of experiences which are as important in their emotional quality and in their stimulation of confidence, pleasure and thinking as experiences connected with sucking and excretion (Freud) or with the phantasied presence of internal objects representing the products of the functioning of the orifices (Klein). The mother's care produces involuntary stimulation of the epidermis as she bathes, washes, strokes, picks up and hugs the baby. Moreover, mothers know well the existence of skin pleasures in the infant and in themselves and they produce these deliberately by their caresses and play. The infant experiences the maternal gestures first as a sensory stimulus, then as communication. The massage becomes a message. For language to be acquired, it is particularly necessary for such early pre-verbal communication to be established. The novel and the film *Johnny Got his Gun* show this well. A seriously wounded soldier has lost his sight, hearing and movement; a nurse manages to establish contact with him by drawing letters with her hand on the injured man's chest and abdomen - then, in response to his silent plea, by procuring for him the pleasure of sexual discharge through a kindly masturbation. As a result, the disabled soldier regains the will to survive, because he feels himself recognized and his need for communication and his virile desire satisfied. That the skin becomes erotically charged in the course of a child's development is an undeniable fact; pleasures of the skin play an integral part in the preliminaries to adult sexual activity: they remain pre-eminent in feminine homosexuality. It nevertheless remains true that genital, or even auto-erotic, sexuality is accessible only to those who have acquired a minimum sense of basic security within their own skins. Moreover, as Federn (1952) has suggested, when the body's boundaries and those of the Ego are erotized, the original psychical states of the Self are consigned to repression and amnesia.

The idea of a Skin Ego

The development of a Skin Ego is a response to the need for a narcissistic envelope and guarantees the psychical apparatus a sure

and continuous sense of basic well-being. Correlatively, the psychical apparatus may test itself in sadistic and libidinal object-cathexes; the psychical Ego derives strength from identification with these objects and the bodily Ego may enjoy pre-genital and, later, genital pleasures.

By Skin Ego, I mean a mental image of which the Ego of the child makes use during the early phases of its development to represent itself as an Ego containing psychical contents, on the basis of its experience of the surface of the body. This corresponds to the moment at which the psychical Ego differentiates itself from the bodily Ego at the operative level while remaining confused with it at the figurative level. Tausk (1919) showed particularly well that the syndrome of the 'influencing machine' could only be understood by distinguishing between these two Egos: the psychical Ego continues to be recognized by the subject as its own (this Ego also sets in motion defence mechanisms against the dangerous sexual drives and interprets logically the data of perception which reach it), whilst the bodily Ego is not recognized by the subject as belonging to itself and the cutaneous and sexual sensations which emanate from it are attributed to the workings of an influencing machine in the service of a devious seducer/persecutor.

Every psychical activity is analytically dependent upon a biological function. The Skin Ego finds its support in the various functions of the skin. I shall proceed later to a more systematic study of these. For the moment, however, I shall briefly indicate three of the functions (the ones to which I restricted myself in my original article of 1974). The primary function of the skin is as the sac which contains and retains inside it the goodness and fullness accumulating there through feeding, care, the bathing in words. Its second function is as the interface which marks the boundary with the outside and keeps that outside out; it is the barrier which protects against penetration by the aggression and greed emanating from others, whether people or objects. Finally, the third function - which the skin shares with the mouth and which it performs at least as often - is as a site and a primary means of communicating with others, of establishing signifying relations; it is, moreover, an 'inscribing surface' for the marks left by those others.

From this epidermal and proprioceptive origin, the Ego inherits the dual possibility of establishing barriers (which become mechanisms of psychical defence) and filtering exchanges (with the Id, the Super-Ego and the outside world). It is, in my opinion, the attachment drive, if it is satisfied sufficiently and at an early enough stage, which gives the baby the basis on which what Luquet (1962) has called the integrative élan of the Self may be manifested. As a further

consequence, then, the Skin Ego underlies the very possibility of thought.

The phantasy of a common skin and its narcissistic and masochistic variants

There are arguments here that provide support for the disputed notion of primary masochism and give it clearer contours. Masochistic suffering, before being secondarily erotized and leading to sexual or moral masochism, is initially accounted for by sudden, repeated and quasi-traumatic alternations, occurring before walking, the mirror phase, or the acquisition of language, between overstimulation by the mother or her substitutes and deprivation of physical contact with her, and thus between satisfaction and frustration of the need for attachment.

The constitution of the Skin Ego is one of the conditions for the dual transition from primary to secondary narcissism and from primary to secondary masochism.

In the psychoanalytic treatment of patients either engaging in masochistic sexual behaviour or exhibiting a partial fixation on a perverse masochistic position, I have in fact often encountered the following: patients have spoken of an episode of actual physical injury to their skin in early childhood, an episode which provided material decisive for the organization of their phantasies. This may have been a superficial surgical operation, i.e. one principally affecting the surface of the body; it may have been dermatosis or alopecia; or an accidental knock or fall in which a substantial area of the skin was damaged. Or these may have been early symptoms of hysterical conversion.

The unconscious phantasy which these various observations have failed to bring to light is not one of a 'fragmented' body, as certain psychoanalysts have hypothesized: that phantasy seems to me to be typical of psychotic organizations. In my view, it is a phantasy of a 'flayed' body which underlies the behaviour of the perverse masochist.

Apropos the 'Rat Man', Freud mentions his 'horror at pleasure of his own of which he himself was unaware'. The masochist's jouissance reaches the maximum degree of horror when corporal punishment applied to the surface of the skin (spanking, flagellation, pricking) is pushed to a point where pieces of skin are ripped, pierced or torn away. To attain masochistic pleasure, the subject needs, as we know, to be able to represent the blows as having left a mark on the surface of his body. Among the pre-genital pleasures which normally accompany genital sexual gratification, one quite often finds that of leaving marks on the partner's skin by biting or scratching: this is an

index of an incidental phantasy element which, for the masochist, moves into the foreground. As we shall see in the following chapter, devoted to the Greek myth of Marsyas, the original masochistic phantasy consists in the representation, firstly, that the mother and child share a single skin, a skin figurative of their symbiotic union, and secondly, that the process of detachment and the child's attainment of autonomy involves a rending of that common skin. This phantasy of being flayed is borne out by observation of domestic animals being slaughtered and pre-pared for the table, or of oneself being spanked or having one's cuts or scabs treated.

Most of the patients in whom I found an appreciable masochistic fixation had phantasies, more or less conscious, of cutaneous fusion with the mother. It seems to me significant that the unconscious phantasy of the flayed body occurs in such close proximity to the pre-conscious phantasy of fusion. In the language of archaic thought, the symbiotic union with the mother is represented by a tactile (and probably olfactory) image in which the two bodies of child and mother have a common surface. Separation from the mother is represented by the tearing away of that common skin. Certain elements in reality correspond to this phantasy image. When, if an illness, operation or accident has produced a wound and the dressing sticks to the flesh, the mother or her substitute tears away or is imagined to be able to tear away pieces of skin with the dressing, the one who provides the care is also the one who flays. But the one who has torn apart the shared envelope is also the one who can repair it.

In masochistic phantasy, fur (cf. Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*) represents figuratively the return to a contact of skin with skin-velvety, voluptuous and odorous (nothing smells as strongly as a new fur)-and to that physical embrace which is one of the attendant pleasures of genital jouissance. That Sacher-Masoch's flagellating Venus, in life as in the novel, is naked beneath a fur confirms the primary value of the fur-skin as an object of attachment before it acquires a value as denotative of the sexual object. Need we remind ourselves that a fur is, in reality, the skin of an animal, and that its presence refers back to a flayed, skinned beast? The child Severin, fascinated by Venus or Wanda dressed in furs, in his imagination sees his mother covered by a skin which signifies both fusion and a tearing away. This fur represents the physical softness and sensual tenderness experienced when a mother lavishes affectionate care on her child. But the Venus in furs also represents the mother whom the child has tried to see naked or whom he has attempted to seduce by showing her, in reality or imagination, his penis, the mother who has punished him in reality by beating him and in the imaginary by flaying him

alive until he is completely skinned and who now drapes herself triumphantly in the skin of her victim, as the hunter heroes of ancient mythology or of so-called primitive societies dress themselves in the skin of the wild animals or the enemies they have killed.

We may now introduce a fundamental distinction between the two types of contact the mother, or others involved in mothering, have with the baby's body and skin. Certain forms of contact communicate excitation (for example, a highly libidinated excitation on the part of the mother who is giving physical attention to the baby may transmit to the baby an erogenous stimulation that is so premature and so excessive in relation to the child's psychical development that it experiences it as a traumatic seduction). Other forms of contact communicate information (concerning, for example, the infant's vital needs, the emotions experienced by the two partners, dangers originating in the outside world, the manipulation of objects and different ways of dealing with these depending on whether they are animate or inanimate). The two types of contact are at first undifferentiated for the baby and they tend to remain so for longer when the mother and her helpers mix, confuse or invert them. In the hysteric, the confusion of these two types of communication tends to remain permanent: he (or she) directs towards a partner what seems to be excitation, but is in fact information in a form so veiled that the partner is highly likely to try and reply to the excitation and not to the information, thus producing disappointment in and resentment and reproaches from the hysteric. In certain forms of depression, we find the obverse dynamic: the baby has received the necessary and adequate bodily care, accompanied by the usual instinctual excitation, but the mother, distracted by the death of a close relative, by distress at the break-up of her marriage or by post-natal depression, has not given enough attention to the signals sent out by the baby, nor to returning signals of her own. When the baby becomes an adult, it will become depressed each time it receives some material or spiritual nourishment that is not accompanied by meaningful exchanges, and the absorption of that nourishment will intensify its own awareness of inner emptiness.

The fate of these two types of contact, the excitatory and the signifying, has implications for masochism and narcissism respectively.

The paradox of excitatory contacts lies in the fact that the mother, who functions as the baby's original protective shield against aggression from the outside world, produces in the infant through the libidinal quality and intensity of the bodily care and attention she provides an instinctual over-excitation of internal origin, an excess of which is sooner or later registered as unpleasant. The construction of

the Skin Ego is then handicapped by the installation of a durable psychical envelope which is at once an envelope of excitation and an envelope of suffering (in place of a Skin Ego which would be at the same time a protective shield and an envelope of well-being). This is the economic and topographical basis of masochism, with its com-pulsion to repeat the experiences which reactivate both the envelope of excitation and the envelope of suffering.

The paradox of signifying contacts lies in the fact that the mother who is attentive not only to the baby's bodily requirements but also to its psychical needs, does not merely satisfy those needs but shows, by the sensory choices she sets off as well as by the concrete acts she carries out, that she has correctly interpreted them. The baby has its needs satisfied and, above all, is reassured that those needs are being properly understood. Hence the construction of an envelope of well-being, narcissistically cathected, which supports the illusion, necessary for the formation of a Skin Ego, that a being attached to the other side of this envelope will react immediately and in a complementary, symmetrical fashion to its signals. This is the reassuring illusion of having an omniscient narcissistic double at one's permanent disposal.

What underlies both these cases, of secondary masochism and secondary narcissism, is the phantasy of a skin surface common to both mother and child: a surface where the dominant activity is, in the case of the former, the direct exchange of sensory stimuli, in the latter the direct exchange of meanings.

In cases where the Skin Ego develops particularly in the narcissistic direction, the original phantasy of a common skin is transformed into a secondary phantasy of a skin reinforced and invulnerable (characterized by its double wall structure; cf. p. 129). When the Skin Ego develops more in the masochistic direction, the phantasied common skin is seen as damaged, torn-off. Along these two lines of development lie the various phantasies of the skin found in mythology (cf. D. Anzicu, 1984): the skin as shield (the aegis of Zeus), and the splendid skin (the celestial robes and animal covering of Peau d'âne) for the first; the bruised, flayed, deadly skin for the second.

S. Consoli has recounted the case of a (masochistic) patient who derives pleasure from imagining himself being humiliated by a woman in the following conditions: she is standing, dressed in the skin of a sheep or a cow, while he, on all fours at her feet, identifies with the animal. 'Here, then, is a representation of a skin common to the man (transformed into an animal) and the woman who dominates

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him clad in the skin of the same animal; their complementary roles accentuate the illusion of a narcissistic continuity. In their bodily interrelation, each is not (as S. Consoli argues) the 'extension' of the other; rather, each is a single face of that common cutaneous interface which I have just adduced. (I should add that fur plays a role as a fetish in a great number of perverse scenarios and in ordinary erotic phantasies, on account of its resemblance to the body hair which masks the genital organs and therefore impedes the recognition of sexual difference.)