

Exposing Shallowness

by Theodore Dalrymple



I was recently consulted in the prison in which I work by an inmate who was the proud father of two children. I asked him whether he still saw them: continued contact with their biological offspring being something of a rarity among the imprisoned paternal community. Instead of answering me directly, he rolled up his sleeves and pointed to two tattoos on his forearm, red hearts with scrolls across them bearing the names of his children—two tattoos among many others, needless to say. He hadn't seen either of his children for

years, and had never contributed anything to their upkeep. Indeed, the idea that he should have done so was so completely alien to him and to the mores of the world in which he moved that the thought had never crossed his mind, even fleetingly. By contrast, he obviously believed that his tattoos were a sign of genuine devotion to his children. Their names were engraved, if not on his heart exactly, at least on hearts painfully engraved on his skin, and one could easily imagine a touching deathbed scene in which he would be reunited at last with his children and would there show them the tattoos as proof that he had never really forgotten or abandoned them. They would probably accept this as having been true, and therefore forgive him his dereliction of duty.

In fact, more than 95 percent of imprisoned white British criminals are tattooed. The statistical association between tattooing and criminality is very much stronger (with the exception of that between criminality and smoking) than that with any of the more conventionally investigated factors, such as broken homes, drug addiction, low intelligence, and poor educational attainment. Show me a man's tattoos, and I will tell you his criminal record: British men, for example, who were incarcerated before the age of twenty-one usually bear a blue spot tattooed over one cheekbone, the criminal's equivalent of the old school tie, and a surprisingly large proportion of petty drug dealers have a tree-frog green cannabis leaf tattooed prominently on their person (sometimes on their face or neck), a clue whose meaning even a Dr. Watson might have little difficulty in deciphering.

The tattoo in modern society is thus a subject of greater interest and deeper significance than might at first be supposed, a subject worthy of reflection and a possible departure point for an assessment of the soul of modern man. Margo DeMello's *Bodies of Inscription* provides—often without really meaning to—some material for such an assessment. The author, an anthropologist, is herself a member of “the tattoo

community," that is to say, is heavily tattooed, an avid reader of tattoo magazines, and an occasional attender of tattooing conventions. Her book, therefore, may be said to be in the tradition of participant observation. Despite the ominously deconstructionist title, she writes clearly and without jargon. This alone is quite a lot to be grateful for, even if her insights are largely superficial and the reader cannot rely on her as a guide to the deeper meaning of the things she describes.

In fact, her book is largely concerned with a comparatively recent phenomenon: the spread of tattooing to the American middle classes. This is also a British, and no doubt a European and Australian, phenomenon. The tattoo was once a resolutely proletarian form of body adornment which the middle classes regarded as symbolic of lower-class savagery, bad taste, and irresponsibility (the decision to be tattooed was, indeed, often taken while drunk in the company of other drunks). A middle-class person who had himself tattooed was thereby at once *déclassé*: a slide down the social scale more precipitous and serious than that brought about by a *mésalliance*, insofar as tattoos last longer, and are more difficult to obliterate, than marriages contracted in haste.

The tattoo is now seeping through society like ink through blotting paper. I first became aware of this seepage when I noticed an increasing number of young women in my hospital ward who bore tattoos, the tattoo having been until then an almost exclusively male embellishment. At first, women's tattoos were small and on parts of the anatomy that were usually covered by clothes; gradually these tentative essays in the direction of male proletarian savagery have been replaced by larger, more prominent and brazen declarations of allegiance to it.

Having crossed the gulf between the sexes, the tattoo then began its creep up the social scale. Young celebrities sported their tattoos when they were photographed for the newspapers,

and before long I noticed that a number of university students among my patients also bore tattoos. This was unthinkable only a few years ago. Perhaps the *ne plus ultra* of this trend occurred when a young member of the British royal family exposed her pierced tongue (body piercing being a closely cognate phenomenon to tattooing) to the public.

According to Ms. DeMello, however, the middle-class tattoo differs from the proletarian variety. The latter is formulaic: when self-inflicted with a needle and India ink, it usually consists of simple symbols or acronyms, for example (in England) the letters ACAB, which stand either for "All Coppers Are Bastards" or "Always Carry A Bible," depending upon whether the person is asked about the meaning of the tattoo before or after an arrest. Proletarian tattoos done by professional tattooists are similarly formulaic: the customer simply choosing a well-established pattern from those on photographic display in the tattoo parlor.

If proletarian tattoos are ready-made, tattoos for the middle classes are individually tailored to their requirements by those whom the author insists upon calling "artists." It is perfectly true, of course, that tattooists sometimes display an astonishing skill in the production of images on, or in, their clients' skin, which are of photographic verisimilitude, and many even hold university degrees in fine arts, but skill alone, no matter how advanced or refined, does not make an artist. To think so is to confuse a necessary with a sufficient condition; indeed, there is very little more appalling than great skill in the service of bad taste and barbarism.

In any case, the individuality of the designs chosen for their tattoos by the middle classes is strictly relative. The iconography is limited and depressingly reminiscent of the "art" produced by prisoners, which is violent, crude, garish and pagan, however well-executed. It is a visual exhibition of modern superstition, the superstition of people who have

strong emotions but weak minds and a very limited cultural and historical frame of reference.

Why do members of the middle classes now adorn themselves in this savage fashion? The author draws not only on her own experience, but also upon that of tattooists and their customers. She believes that tattoos have philosophical meaning for those who bear them. The philosophy in question is a witches' brew of new age "spiritualism," ecological paganism, elevation of the primitive, and vegetarianism. It is the kind of philosophy that emerges when religious feeling is no longer disciplined by religious ritual that is established by tradition and upheld by social pressure.

It is perfectly possible, however, to be a vegetarian, or even to believe in witchcraft, without resort to the tattoo parlor. What makes individuals choose to undergo the painful, expensive, and virtually irrevocable process of tattooing? Having listened to an unspecified number of tattooed members of the middle classes, the author identifies several motives, all of which struck me as unflatteringly revealing of the soul of modern man.

First there is the assertion of individuality. One of the author's informants says,

[Being tattooed] separates me from anybody else. No one else has anything like what I have. I feel a little bit different from Joe Shmoe in the street, and I guess it makes me feel special.

This is infinitely sad. That a person's individuality should be made to depend upon so crude an outward sign as a tattoo is in fact an indication of the fragility of that person's identity. He must feel simultaneously overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of people around him who make it so very difficult for him to differentiate himself from them, and an urgent necessity to do so. This necessity is all the more imperative

in an age of celebrity, when fame and public notoriety are to so many people the only goals worth pursuing: indeed, when public adulation itself seems almost the sole guarantor of true personal existence. But their reach exceeds their grasp.

Of course, such outward signs of individuality as tattoos are inherently self-defeating. It cannot ever be long before someone has himself tattooed in a yet more startling, more “original” fashion (indeed, tattoo conventions regularly offer prizes for the “most unique” tattoo). But there is a deeper reason why such efforts at asserting one’s unique individuality are pathetically bound to fail: for true individuality does not arise from a decision to be an individual. A man who decides to be an eccentric, and therefore to behave eccentrically, is not an eccentric at all, but an actor, and usually a bad one at that. A true eccentric is a man who behaves eccentrically because it simply does not occur to him to behave otherwise.

“Personal growth” is cited as another important motive for having oneself tattooed. It is said to be “empowering.” A woman who had a bad marriage had herself tattooed with a wolf.

I ended up getting this wolf, which to me was power and strength over all the abuse and all the things that went on in my life. It was a sense of freedom... . I wanted it ... to become myself.

Another woman said that her tattoo was something she did, that she brought into being, as if the fact that it was hers were a sufficient guarantee of its worth.

What is striking about these “tattoo narratives” (as the author calls them) is their vacuous egoism. The interlocutors speak, and appear to think, in pure psychobabble, that debased and vague confessional language that allows people to imagine they are baring their souls when in fact they are exposing their shallowness. This is something the author does not

notice because she herself belongs to the psychobabble culture. One cannot but feel sorrow for people who think that by permanently disfiguring themselves they are somehow declaring their independence or expressing their individuality. The tattoo has a profound meaning: the superficiality of modern man's existence.

The author entirely misses the cultural significance of the spread of tattoos into the middle classes, even though one of her interlocutors, a teacher at a university, gives her a strong clue:

I was saying, "Fuck you, school, and I don't really care if you know I have a tattoo." I also at this time started getting pierced because basically I'm taking my anger out on this school... . I knew it would freak them out, which gave me no small amount of pleasure.

Here we see the bodily consequence of an intellectual climate that has long extolled opposition and hostility to what exists as the only honorable and ethical stand to take towards it. Of course, such an attitude is fundamentally ahistorical and lacking in respect for the achievements of the past, and only people who live in an eternal, egoistic present moment could adopt it. (The eternity of the present moment is, of course, the key to modern shallowness.) The tattoo is thus the art form of the cultural vandal, and it is no accident, as the Marxists used to say, that the cultural vandal's views should almost always be expressed with inarticulate sub-demotic vulgarity.

It is also no accident that some members of the middle classes should have adopted a typically proletarian form of bodily adornment as a badge not only of independence, but also of liberal virtue. A tattoo establishes them as tolerant, open-minded, and sympathetic towards those below them in the social scale: the highest virtues of which they can conceive. The

tattoo thus appeals to the kind of modern bourgeois who believes that foulness of language is a token of purity of heart, or at least of sincerity. The tattoo, like the constant resort to the swearword, is an attack on bourgeois propriety, and as such a demonstration of largeness of heart and generosity of spirit.

Of course, this antinomianism (itself so tiresomely bourgeois) has a tinny ring. I am reminded of the recent obituary of a British pop star in *The Daily Telegraph* (the fact that this newspaper, once the favorite reading matter of retired admirals pickled in port, should carry obituaries of pop stars at all is itself a cultural shift of some significance). The subject of the obituary was said to have been so irritated by what he considered the false gentility of the school he attended that he forever after used the demotic speech of South London. In other words, he adopted, in the name of authenticity, a form of language that was not his own and did not come naturally to him. The fate of all people who imitate others to achieve authenticity is to live a lie.

Besides, the bourgeois who has himself tattooed is, as this book indicates, at least as anxious to distinguish himself from the real proletarian as he is to identify with him. The tattoo is thus to the modern bourgeois what playing shepherdess was to Marie Antoinette. The woman whose tattoo was supposed to say "Fuck you" to her university did not really want to become the janitor of her faculty building, and probably would have very little to say to him. Egalitarians usually have a very strong sense of hierarchy.

Bodies of Inscription is a superficial examination of a social phenomenon of considerable cultural significance, but it will nonetheless be of great interest to people who know how to read between the lines.

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