

Skin surface and mental skin: the burn-accident as a symptom

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Abstract

Through the suggestions provided by a clinical case a brief panorama has been carried out regarding the position of some authors in the psycho-analytical traditions on the functions of the skin in psychic development. The particularity of the case under examination is that of highlighting how an accident in adolescence can be the sign of a fracture in a very primitive phase of development of the personality; in this case the incapacity of the external-mother object to contain the components of Self of the child and making it an inadequate structure for the function of the boundary of skin for the components of his personality and the consequent creation of a defensive “second skin” which blocked the access to a phase of psycho-affective development adequate for his age. It is this second skin, this “shell” that it was necessary to dent to bring to light the deep malaise that had accompanied the life of this boy. It must be stressed also that in dealing with cases of this type, the analyst should not refer greatly to his technical competence so much as his affective qualities and his containment.

Key words

skin surface, burn-accident, containment, shell, psycho-affective development, mental pain

With this contribution, I propose to highlight how in some cases an accident in adolescence can occur to signal a pathology which cannot find a more direct channel by which to manifest itself.

An alteration in the wholeness of the skin surface can have the function of revealing a much deeper wound at the mental level, which has for a long time remained sealed over because of the impossibility of coping with the mental pain that this would trigger.

Psychoanalysis has many times underlined the role played by the surface of the skin in the development of a personality.

In “the Ego and the Id” Freud affirms that “the ego is above all a body entity, not only a superficial entity, but also the projection of an appearance (1)”; and in a note to the English translation made in 1927 was added: “The ego is by definition derived from bodily sensations, above all from sensations felt by the surface of the body. It can therefore be considered a psychic projection of the body surface”.

According to A. Freud (1936, 1967) “At the beginning of life to be caressed, embraced, soothed makes various parts of a baby’s body sensitive, it helps to create a body image and a healthy Body Ego, it increases its narcissistic libido and at the same time promotes the development of a love object through the consolidation of the

link between baby and mother. There is no doubt that in this period, the surface of the skin performs a multiple function in its erogenous zone role in the growth of the child.”

Winnicott introduces the concept of handling through which the child begins, through the care of the body by the mother, to accept the body as part of himself and to feel that his Self is found in the body which is confined by the skin, defining what is “me” and what is “not me”. Winnicott defines this process as “personalisation”. “The resource that is placed at his disposition facilitates the innate tendency of the child to take over his body and enjoy bodily functions, accepting the limitation which is assured by the skin, a defining membrane which separates the ‘me’ from the ‘not me’” (D.W. Winnicott, 1958, 1975). Another concept by the same author is that of holding (1962), the way in which the mother holds the body of the child. “First is the physical containment during the intrauterine life which gradually enlarges its significance until it includes the overall maternal care.” (D.W. Winnicott, 1986, 1990.)

According to Anzieu, the skin “provides the psychic apparatus with the constitutive representations of the Ego and its principle functions”. The author defines Skin Ego “a representation which the Ego of a child makes use of during the early phases of development to represent himself as ‘I’ which contains psychic contents, starting with his own experience on the surface of the body”. Anzieu lists a series of functions of the Ego skin, amongst which: 1) that which contains the inside “the goodness and the fullness of feeding, the care, the shower of words which have been accumulated”; this function is carried out mainly by handling and corresponds in part to the maternal *réverie* (W.R. Bion, 1962), to the projective identification; 2) that of an interface which separates the outside from the inside; 3) that of being a place and means of primary communication; 4) that of protecting the psychic life through the internalisation of holding. A very suggestive image, which gives the idea that the psychic Self can survive as long as there is a body covering to guarantee individuality, is the myth of Marsyas used by the author: Marsyas was burned alive by Apollo as a punishment for having challenged him with his gifts as a musician: his skin was hung in a cave and remained sensitive and vibrated to the music of the faithful but was motionless to the airs dedicated to Apollo. Anzieu emphasises how this myth “illustrates the fact that the original communication between the child and the maternal and familiar atmosphere is a combined tactile and sound mirror. Communication is in the first instance entering into resonance, vibrating in harmony with another”.

The clinical case of Giacomo, who had to hurt himself to express his suffering, seems to me particularly exact to show how accident-burning, an accident which is fairly frequent in adolescence, shows up the importance of the wholeness of the skin in the development psychic and the consequences of its breakage.

I refer to E. Bick’s thesis that “in its most primitive forms, the parts of the personality are felt to have no binding forms among themselves and must therefore be held together (...), by the skin functioning as a boundary. But this internal containment function of the components of Self depends initially on the introjections of an

external object which is able to carry out this function". Therefore the containing object is constructed on the basis of double experience of one's own skin contained within the skin of the mother which sustains the body. Bick adds that: "This contained object is concretely felt as skin". This "first skin" is a good skin, adequate and able to contain the psychic object.

I followed the clinical case of Giacomo through a series of three sessions a week in my training programme in psycho-analytic psychotherapy in infancy and adolescence.

Giacomo, 14 years of age, second child of two children (he has a sister who is 18 years old) came to the Isteba clinic because his parents had requested an interview to discuss their son's problems, which had been pointed out by his teachers who had noted some alarming behaviour at school and no benefit from his studies during the previous year.

On my first meeting with his parents I immediately had a vague sensation of unpleasantness, quite apart from their well kept appearance. The mother was perfectly made up, wearing elegant fashionable clothes; the father looked young and he also was wearing designer clothes. I do not know how to explain the reasons for my first impressions, perhaps it was the absence of naturalness, a certain artificialness of behaviour.

The two sat down at a certain distance one from the other and rarely exchanged looks. The father did not seem to participate much and it was in fact the mother who spoke, without ever trying to involve her husband. She said they were worried because the school (Giacomo was in the third year of the medium school) had advised them that the boy's studies, already scanty, had recently deteriorated. Even more worrying for the teachers was the manifestation of a series of stereotype behaviours like scratching his forehead until it bled and biting his hands, causing a thickening of the skin; also he tended to get up continuously from his place, to tell lies, which in some instances were even self-opposing, to isolate himself and not seem to be present when he was asked a question. The mother added that recently the boy had refused even to go to school and showed aggressiveness towards his sister, confirming that Giacomo isolated himself continually and did not reply to any questions asked him. Concerning her other child she said: "unlike Giacomo, she is doing very well at school. Giacomo does not show any interest, even in sport, while Giulia plays tennis and is an excellent skater. I have always dedicated myself to their education, even though I work. I have always concerned myself with their food, that they eat healthy things and I make sure they are well dressed and always clean. If anything, I occupied myself more with Giacomo and have always needed to be constantly with him when he does his homework as without my presence, he would not even try."

She also said that she had had problems of this type, that at school she did not study well and had few friends. For a period she had interrupted her attendance at school, never wanted to go out and passed nearly all her time in her bedroom, but "finally everything was resolved". She would have liked to become a teacher but had to interrupt her studies, adding: "*I was not cut out for it* but my two younger sisters had

excellent results at school and then at work". She told me she had to look after her sisters when she was only fifteen years old after her mother died, had had to help her father in managing the house and the family commercial concern, which was a dress shop where she still worked and so did her husband. She also said that her physical appearance had always helped.

Her account seemed devoid of emotional content which gave me the sensation of someone who had little contact with her internal world, and defended herself from emotions.

At this point, unexpectedly the father spoke and requested his wife to speak of their son's problems rather than herself and invited her to tell me about "the facts about bed". The mother told me that Giacomo still slept in his parents' bed although he has his own room, which he uses in the afternoon, adding that when Giacomo was younger it seemed convenient as if necessary it would be easier for her to give assistance to the child and then it became a habit for them all, also because there was a satellite television in their room.

I asked them which moments they shared with their son. The mother replied that they went shopping and watched television together. The father intervened to emphasise that Giacomo was not interested in football and he would like to take him with him to the stadium but had never managed to persuade him. The mother reminded him that he should propose something different, seeing that he knew very well that Giacomo did not like football.

It emerged from their account that there were no particular moments of sharing or playing with the son. At my questioning the mother added that when Giacomo was very small she had occasionally held him in her arms or played with him, but she usually left the child with the baby-sitter and she didn't speak to him as she thought he was unable to understand: "he couldn't speak so what would I say to him ...?"

I ascertained that Giacomo had spoken his first words rather late, after two years of age, although his parents seemed confused as to his time of talking.

To my question as to when they began to be worried by Giacomo's behaviour, the mother replied that it was about a year ago. Her husband intervened, asking the mother to tell me about a particular episode: "Tell the doctor that Giacomo burned himself!" So the mother said that about a year ago, the son had burned his face while taking the coffee pot off the gas (I noted that the mother reported this incident without apparently making the connection between this and Giacomo's present behaviour, in spite of the father's prodding which seemed to suggest a connection).

I did not have the impression that the mother saw the incident as particularly serious, in fact almost immediately she returned to speak of the scholastic difficulties of her son, repeating that Giacomo "*was not cut out to study*", but previously such worries had not stirred her to think of the necessity of therapy as much as during the last year, mainly due to pressure from the teachers.

I was struck by the parallels of the original situation experienced by the mother and the present condition of Giacomo: she used the same words for herself and her son "not cut out to", but the sister had good results like the mother's sisters. It was as if

she was unable to distinguish between herself and her son (and, I would later have the chance to see, vice-versa).

The mother seemed absolutely uncritical of her behaviour and thought it completely natural and adequate, as if there were no other way to act, but instead criticised the inadequacy of the father, his absence, his indifference also to Giacomo's scholastic problems.

The father, in spite of his evident passivity and his wife's judgements, seemed at times to attempt to connect his own unconscious with that of his son. During the interview I noted little contact between the married couple, as if they were not on the same wavelength. The internal project of this couple of parents towards their son seemed inconsistent, indefinite, not integrated. In their connection as a couple, it seemed as if a mind-container able to leave space for their son was absent.

I began to feel at this point a sense of pain for them, almost of tenderness, as if they themselves had been unjustly deprived of something essential. To me it seemed evident that my task was to try and mend the existing fracture between parents and son. I seemed to grasp their incapacity to put together their son's experience of life, to give it a consistency and make the connections, to recognise and give a sense to his problems, to understand his personality.

It could be said that neither of the two parents were able to see problematic knots in their relationship, or at least highlight little conflicts, wishes still not realised and to face personal elements which go beyond daily issues, as if everything between them was "normal" and unchangeable, lived as if it extended to the description of Giacomo.

Giacomo: during my first meeting with Giacomo, I immediately noted with dismay the burn scars from the previous year still on his infantile face. His skin was still visibly scarred. I was amazed that his mother had given little importance to the disfigured face of her son, to such obvious evidence left on the skin of this boy, yet affirmed with a great superfluity of words his scholastic problems. At that moment I had the sensation that what I "saw" was the most serious thing, I had a sense of impotence and I asked myself what could I do to ease the consequences of this damage so indelibly graved on Giacomo's young skin. My emotion, I realised much later, was not linked so much to what I "saw" as to what I "felt".

Giacomo immediately made me feel a great tenderness. He seemed younger than his age, just as his mother tended to show him, and also his physical development seemed to reflect the psycho-affective; he was shorter than average, and very slightly built. Like his parents he was dressed well and fashionably; he didn't know the reason why he was visiting me and seemed not at all interested to know and in general was lacking in curiosity. My wish to help him was strong, but fear was equally strong.

Giacomo seemed to carry on his face evidence of his being, which was "deeply scarred" by a great wound. I tried to ease this sense of dismay by thinking that in fact there are situations which are apparently much more serious, and I told myself that after all this boy has a personal and social situation much less complex than many other cases of great gravity and marginalisation which I was following in the same

period in the hospital, which took children and adolescents diagnosed with psychosis and autism, coming from needy families: it was as if I rationally wished to deny something serious which I had emotionally perceived.

He pulled out a portable consol play-station telling me that his mother had just bought him a new game. For a while he played at the consol, completely ignoring me, then he collapsed onto the desk as if he had undergone a great effort. I thought that with this object he wanted to keep under control what he could not express of his internal world, using the game in place of thought.

I tried to involve him in a verbal exchange; noted that he did not have a good command of language for his age, he had only a simple vocabulary. I didn't know how to introduce myself to him, to treat him like a boy or a child. It seemed extremely difficult to make contact with his emotions and his thoughts. The concepts that he expressed remained the images of a child more than those of an adolescent. He said he was not "cut out for school" and when he was an adult he wanted to work in the family shop. He had no particular friend, nor thought about girls because he was "too young to marry". When I asked him something about his parents, he replied that his mother bought him "everything I want"; described his relationships with his parents or schoolmates as "always the same". He made no reference to the accident and I asked him no questions about it.

I asked myself how to face this complex adolescent situation, this great fragility and lack of resources of Ego, how to give strength and vigour again to Giacomo; it seemed as if everything depended on me because he did not have any energy to play. I felt the weight of the request that I become an alternate parent always able to "find him".

Appearances seemed to affirm that Giacomo had received care and material attention, but showed a lack of that aspect of containment in a relationship that revealed itself in his look, his verbal exchange, the shared game. It is a situation of merging which was lacking in what Winnicott had defined as "potential space" between mother and child, the space that allows one to go beyond the illusion of omnipotence which characterises the initial phases of infantile development when it is impossible to distinguish between "me" and "not me".

For some time the sessions continued without any particularly perceptive events, even if they were not without a suggestion of incipient trust; we were, it seemed to me, getting used to one another.

Slowly Giacomo seemed to begin to see me and to feel he could communicate some of his thoughts, even of disagreement, with me, referring to his parents with phrases like: "my mother is stupid, she always tells me to do my homework" or "my father always tells me off for the same things".

When the therapy began again after the summer break, Giacomo seemed to be transformed and I noted with satisfaction that even his physical aspect seemed to be right for his age. I told him about the positive change I had noted, but Giacomo became aggressive (a behaviour that had never appeared in a session before) he constantly fidgeted, said he had "wanted to break everything, also your rotten face, so that we can see what's underneath".

I understood that Giacomo referred to me what he would like to do to himself. He expressed everything with suffering, almost desperation, perhaps he was angry because I had paid attention to his physical aspect instead of understanding he wanted to communicate to me; I tried to repair the damage telling him that, if he wanted, we can try to understand together what he needs to break. He becomes very agitated; then exhausted, as if he had made an enormous effort, he begins to cry and, between hiccups, refers to his having “broken” the skin of his face, saying: “that day *I was angry with my mother*. I had asked her to make me a tiramisu, and when I came home from school she showed me the Nike she’d bought me, but she hadn’t prepared me the dessert. I didn’t have the courage to tell her that I wanted what I had asked for and not the shoes! I wanted to hit her but I went close to hug her and thank her for the present; the coffee pot jumped from her hands and hit me in the face; she had a strange face, *I thought that Mamma was angry with me*. I nearly went mad with the pain.”

This communication showed me an anguished face. I thought with pain of Giacomo’s inability to blame his mother for what had happened, his inability to differentiate himself: if he is angry his mother must be too, and vice-versa.

He tells me all this with an intensity that involved me so much even to feel it in my body (in fact I felt a pain at the level of my kidneys that continued long after the end of the session). I had the impression that there were no appropriate words to contain so much pain; I feel as if I am facing a body full of unhealed wounds and I do not know which part to begin healing first.

I remembered the image I had during our first meeting, when his scarred face seemed to be the greatest damage to Giacomo. What had occurred in this sitting seemed to confirm this, that what I “saw” on the outside, without then having the knowledge that it was not more than the representation of the split of the much more internal skin, deep; a “primitive skin” that, because of its damage, is not able to keep together parts of self.

The emotion has moved in the direction of the true nature of the suffering, it was as if now it came to the surface of conscience what I had unconsciously perceived.

My words should make a sort of “healthy skin”, a “protective shield” able to keep his emotions together, and take the place of the damaged skin. All that I heard myself say is “I am here”.

With this phrase, Giacomo seemed to have become aware of control, the words are few but the unconscious communication is rich. I feel in tune and it seems to me that he is on the same wavelength as I am. I like to think of myself placed in the mental attitude of which Ferro spoke regarding the activity of *réverie* as the basis of an analyst: “The *réverie* activity is a constant base which is the way in which the analyst’s mind continually collects, metabolises and transforms “how much” is coming from the patient as verbal stimulation, half-verbal, non verbal. The same *réverie* activity works in the patient in reply to each interpretative stimulation or not coming from the analyst. This same basic *réverie* activity is the cornerstone of our mental life and on its functioning/non-functioning depends the psychic health, sickness or suffering” (A.Ferro, 2006).

I could now see how Giacomo's burning trauma finally broke the "shell" to reveal a much earlier trauma and disclose an inadequate integration of the "first skin", of which E. Bick speaks.

According to the writer: "disturbances in the primary function of the skin can proceed to the formation of a "second skin" through which the dependence of the object is substituted by a pseudo independence and inappropriate use of certain mental functions or of innate attitudes with the purpose of creating a substitute to the function of the skin container". These disturbances are due to a lack of an external object or a destructive attack and make the introjections of its function difficult, with the consequences described by Bick, which show in patients with an inadequate formation of the first skin "the phenomenon of the second skin, which substitutes the primary integration of the skin and manifests itself as a partial or total form of muscular shell" (E. Bick, 1964, 1989). The writer shows how this second defensive skin, a characteristic in children who have developed a non-integrated first skin, gives place to problems of communication, aggressiveness and hyper-activity.

Anzieu also shows similar problems in reference to the role of auxiliary para-excitement carried out by the mother since the growing Ego in the child finds in its own skin a sufficient support to take on this function and of the consequences of excesses or lacks in this role.

In a successive session, Giacomo says that at his new school, he is teased about his appearance, not making any precise reference even though it is evident that he is referring to the consequences of the burn. He also says that he hates the school and its rules, that he would like a life without rules, to do what he would like when he likes, take what he wants and break everything; he seems to reflect a moment and adds with a note of worry: "of course, if you break everything, there is nothing left, not even me".

The intensity of the moment makes it difficult to say something, it is as if my words could touch Giacomo's internal skin, injured by the burn that, contrary to what is still visible on his face, is still open and not healed.

I point out there is a possibility of putting together what has a value, what is really important (the part of Self) and throw out what disturbs, which is a sort of dead weight (I am thinking of the shell that stops him from feeling emotions). I tell him that in some cases you can break something to find something else, like in an Easter egg, and even if by doing this, a little is broken of what is inside, we can repair it together.

I reflect on the fact that Giacomo, having to control his mother's anguish, has been involved in a relationship that makes him carry out that function which Masud Kahn calls "protective shield".

This author shows the function of a mother as a "protective shield" for the needs of the child and "the accumulative trauma" which is caused when a crack appears in this protective barrier. According to Kahn: "The accumulative trauma has its origins in that period of development in which the child needs and uses the mother as a protective shield (...). When this need for the protective role become too frequent and produce knocks on the psychic-soma of the child that there are no means of

eliminating, they create a nucleus of pathogenic reactions. These in turn begin a process of reciprocal actions with the mother which is very different from the mother's adaptation to the child's needs". One of the consequences indicated by Kahn can be that of: "organising in the child a particular sensitiveness to the mother's state of mind and provoking a lack of balance in the integration of aggressive impulses. Another consequence is that delusion is avoided which accompanies the inevitable separation from the mother, but a false union is manipulated of an identification type. In this way, in place of delusion and regrets, an attitude is established of the 'I' full of worry for the mother and an excessive desire that the mother worries on her side".

As time went on, Giacomo's emotional life seemed to be enriched and gain vigour. During one session Giacomo told me about this dream: "I was on a merry-go-round and at a certain point the merry-go-round began to spin very quickly and I was afraid. I tried to see if Mamma was there but I saw instead a man who was not my father but seemed someone in the family. He came to the merry-go-round and it stopped. He helped me get off and said "Let's go!". I was happy to go with him but he walked very quickly and I was afraid I wouldn't be able to keep up and I called out to him, I said, "Mamma!" He turned to me and said, "I'll wait for you". I reached him and finally I felt safe and then we went on together somewhere, I don't know where". He immediately commented, "How silly, calling out Mamma to a man".

It seemed that Giacomo was trying to be more communicative, that he began to count on me, he was asking me to guide him and make him alive, to give him the guarantee that if he broke the shell and risked falling to pieces, I would be able to put him together again. I think that I was helping Giacomo to express the violence of his sentiments regarding frustration, offering him a context that helped him to control them and serve him in a constructive manner.

Finally Giacomo seemed able to refer to a more developed function of a mother, external, therefore not unconnected with the possibility of overcoming catastrophic events that he was unable to control and which had for a long time terrorised and inhibited him. We can begin to hope that he can cope with this catastrophe, thinking of the possibility of separation and growing up.

To be in the transitional space of psychotherapy it is necessary to assume that everything is possible, not only what the patient says but also the opposite. It is necessary to accompany him into our interior life, be able to make him emotional, feel what the patient feels, go crazy a little together and at the same time not let the pathology overwhelm him; keep the suffering in his mind but at the same time be able to look also at the vital intact parts of the person who is asking for help. In the contrary case, the diagnostic classification exposes the therapist to the danger of colliding with the false self of the patient.

P. Lussana underlines how to face such complex adolescent situations. It is fundamental to know how to recognise and differentiate the various phases of emotional experience. In fact, you find yourself faced with the impossibility of making contact with emotions and thought. These patients have not experienced a

real and proper birth, the family has failed to provide a base for relationships and they have lived a life of isolation and privations.

To tackle this case in which one meets in an accentuated form some conflicts and emotional tensions which agitate and upset the mind of the adolescent, I understood some peculiar needs related to working with the subject who are going through this type of experience.

Giacomo does not need that you offer him a mind so much as a belly, something more visceral which feels sensations, like at the beginning of existence in the baby, where the mental function is still guaranteed only by body sensations. In fact, Giacomo had been unable to live that evolutionary moment in his relationship with his mother.

Lussana reminds us that in these cases, it is necessary “to equip” ourselves with instruments which go beyond the traditional ones available to psycho-analysts, to offer a new departure point for a life of relationships. In order to do this the analyst must call on not only his theoretical knowledge or technical ability, but his emotional quality, his capacity to nurse and contain a real and intense involvement, to naturalness, with interventions marked by clarity and reciprocity.

It is also fundamental to accompany the patient in his retrogressive journey, picking up terrifying emotions and fantasies, and progressively directing him to the achievement of a self-sufficiency through a knowledge of self that will carry him to the gaining of an identity.

Giacomo had to pass through all the painful experience that he had tried to hide; thoughts and sentiments seemed to be blocked, he had to break that skin-shell which has allowed him to survive, to go forward, but which had stopped him from growing, to feel emotion.

Finally he had managed to ask his mother to help him by way of a secret agreement that, through the burn, brought a crack in the skin-shell. In this way Giacomo made his parents give him, through therapy, an alternative mother who helped him create again that first skin able to hold and contain and let him deal with a balanced psycho-affective development, to rehabilitate the parental figures, recognising both their limits and powers.

I will conclude with Lussana’s words which suggest not to provide a “breast” which gives “value and significance” so much as an “amniotic sack” and “a reliable, patient, spongy and earthy placenta”, to replace “envy and competition” with his own “wonderful attributes” (P. Lussana, 1992).

Notes

1) All quotations in the text are translated from Italian language

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