

Treatise on the Skin

Brett Foster

Galen understood it as permeable
membrane, being less anxious
about bodily integrity. Instead the fluids
had to pass in and out, suavely
achieving humoral balance— skin
as enabling desirable openness.

Then Paracelsus thickened the skin:
world became riddled with external agents,
“where all diseases lurk and dwell,”
assailing one’s personal stronghold.
Glorious Renaissance expansions
bequeathed unease of new poisons.

But if a closed container, how is it
that the tumor grew there? Whence
a body’s security? Any thought of skin
as vigilant cover feels over. Maybe
harassing causer instead: beastly suit
whose hardness fostered self-pollution.

Thus the emperor Severus, constructing
hospitals in Rome, declared his laboring
subjects sufferers of “putrefaction.”
Thick, clammy matter stopped their pores,
trapping within unhealthy exhalations
like a rapist not alone in an elevator.

Man's being born so accessible (ceasable?)
was for Erasmus a promising point
of contrast with all animal ferocities—
bull's horns, lion's claws, the boar's
gnashing tusks. Man alone came forth
"all naked, without any armure,

with most softest fleshe and skynne,
this creature alone borne al to love
and amitie, faste knytte together
by good turns done of one to an other."
It's enough to make one willingly vulnerable,
this mild evidence of our perishing

natures at least ensuring an affection,
riskiest porousness, interdependence.
Aristotle's calling us "ticklish animals"
belongs here somewhere, described
as such because of skin's sensitivity,
because our fineness recognizes warmth.

Yet Helkiah Crooke, anatomist and court
physician to King James I, would give up
any giggles for additional bulwarks
for our quaint framing. The skin, for him,
was a casement of nourishment, "so soft
and exquisite of sense," by which it warns

inward parts of approaching dangers:

“The world is a Sea, accidents and diverse occurrences are waves, wherein our life’s small boat is tossed, beaten up and down.” That sounds about right, the skin as frightened warder off of hazards for soul’s appointed (anointed?) encampment.

Speaking of, where does the soul reside?

In the Cartesian brain, or liver as others nearly as intelligent once believed? Maybe the soul disperses organ-oriented geniuses: pancreatic soul or little soul in the colon.

Or its accessory? (Adversary?) Is flesh fortress, vessel, or penitentiary that encloses whatever sovereign, substance, or inmate remains within? Its leased (leashed?) nature makes touchingly clumsy that unnamed, inhabitant, intangible and invisible.

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