

Article

# Orwell's Tattoos: Skin, Guilt, and Magic in 'Shooting an Elephant' (1936)

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**Abstract:** This paper considers the significance of the talismanic tattoos on Orwell's hands, which he acquired in Burma during his time as a colonial policeman from 1922 to 1927. It examines historical evidence suggesting that such tattoos were understood differently by British and Burmese people, and concludes that, for Orwell, their meaning was multilayered: first, they were a means of understanding Burmese culture more intimately; second, they were a psychological attempt to cathect his feelings of guilt about his complicity in colonial injustice by remaking his 'skin-ego'; and third, they were a gesture towards the possibility that inscription—first in the form of tattoos, and later in the written word—might be a way to understand and process his self-alienation. The paper goes on to examine Orwell's 1936 essay 'Shooting an Elephant' in the light of Orwell's interest in inscription, and traces its themes of mark-making, magic, and authorship, arguing that these ideas enabled him, at a crucial moment in his development as a writer, to map his experiences of colonialism onto his wider commitment to anti-fascist and anti-authoritarian politics.

**Keywords:** Orwell; Burma; tattoos; colonialism; Anzieu; Fanon

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George Orwell was nineteen years old, and not long out of school, when he travelled to British-occupied Burma to train as a colonial policeman. He returned home five years later, a changed man: the naïve colonial functionary who had taken up his post in 1922 was, by 1927, an angry, sick, and bitter anti-imperialist, with a loathing for tyranny. This transformation was both ideological and physical; among other things, it took the symbolic form of a series of circles tattooed onto the backs of his hands. These were recorded in his 1927 passport, and were also recalled by Adrien Fierz, the son of Orwell's friends Mabel and Francis; Fierz remembered seeing 'blue spots the shape of small grapefruits—one on each knuckle' (Bowker 2007). The exact nature and significance of the tattoos are unknown, however. They are not visible in any extant photographs—they are likely to have faded over time—and Orwell never wrote about them, nor explained why he got them. Emma Larkin has suggested that they indicate 'the visceral hold that Burma had on the young Eric Blair' (Larkin 2011, p. 289), while Gordon Bowker has speculated that they were a badge of rebellion, 'probably a sign to members of the British establishment in Burma that he was not "one of them"' (Bowker 2007). Yet it is not clear how to read these marks; arguably, their message was directed not at Orwell's fellow Europeans—or not only at them—but at the Burmese people he interacted with every day. Such symbols carried a range of subtle and specific meanings within the South East Asian tradition of talismanic tattooing; they might have been understood as charm against British bullets, or as guarding against black magic and bad luck more generally. This paper will explore the validity of such interpretations in Orwell's case, as well as suggesting another, more personal, register on which the tattoos might have operated. Approaching one of Orwell's most famous essays about Burma, 'Shooting an Elephant' (1936), from the perspective of corporeal inscription, I will argue that it is marked, as Orwell's skin was, with the stigmata of an existential transmutation in which cultural

estrangement, haptic consensuality, and authorial responsibility intersected, and informed Orwell's particular brand of anti-fascist politics in the 1930s.

In a fascinating historiographical analysis of the Saya San Rebellion in colonial Burma in 1930–32, Mairii Aung-Thwin (2003) has examined the significance of talismanic tattooing in the region at this time, and has unpicked the tangle of misunderstanding and wilful distortion which informed official British attitudes to such practices. Saya San, the charismatic leader of a series of revolutionary uprisings, was indicted as a 'prophet-king' who encouraged a belief in amulets and magical tattoos in order to connect his political objectives with the tradition of Buddhist millenarianism. This narrative served the British agenda rather neatly, both by pandering to long-established racist stereotypes about restless, superstitious natives, and by allowing the authorities to consider certain kinds of tattoos as *prima facie* evidence of seditious intent, justifying the rounding-up of large numbers of potential rebels without any further evidence of law-breaking. Such convenient assumptions were underwritten by a pamphlet produced in 1914 by B.S. Carey, called *Hints for the Guidance of Civil Officers in the Event of Outbreak of Disturbances in Burma* (Aung-Thwin 2003, p. 369). It was considered an authoritative reference work for colonial officers throughout the decades that followed, and since Aung-Thwin has demonstrated that it was still in circulation as late as the 1930s, it is likely that Orwell, as a policeman charged with maintaining order in the 1920s, would have been issued with a copy or at least been aware of its contents. Carey's guidance referred to an alleged tendency among the Burmese to fall under the spell of revolutionary leaders known as *minlaung*, who practised invulnerability rituals and 'believed in such things as flying tigers, winged spears and magic' (Aung-Thwin 2003, p. 397). The pamphlet's account of this mythology was repeated almost verbatim in reports by British officers about the anti-colonial rebellion, and when Saya San himself was arrested and tried in court, the prosecution relied on the idea that he was a known 'provider of charms and tattooing which rendered the recipients immune to bullets' (Aung-Thwin 2003, p. 402). In reality, however, Burmese tattooing traditions were much more complex and elaborately codified than the British chose to assume, and Aung-Thwin's paper contains a detailed critique of the particular system of ersatz bird/snake symbolism which the British found it expedient to adopt in his case (Aung-Thwin 2003, p. 403).

Clearly, Aung-Thwin's intervention makes it even harder to speculate with any degree of certainty about what exactly Orwell supposed his own tattoos to mean, let alone what they may have meant to the Burmese people who observed them. On the one hand, Orwell may have taken at face value the interpretation which most of his fellow officers would have accepted, and was therefore indeed likely to be making a simple declaration, as Bowker has suggested, of his own alignment with anti-colonial feeling. On the other hand, we know that Orwell was considered unusual among his British colleagues for the serious and sincere interest he took in Burmese culture, and may have been aware that the British interpretation of Burmese tattoos was flawed. He was a gifted linguist, and there is evidence that he was fluent in Burmese and Hindustani, as well as opting to study the minority Shaw-Karen language spoken in the eastern Kayah region. A fellow police trainee, Roger Beadon, recalled that 'he was able to go into the *hpongyi kyaung*, which is one of these Burmese temples, and converse in a very high-flown Burmese with the *hpongyis*, or priests, and you've got to be able to speak Burmese very well to be able to do that' (Crick 1980, p. 82; Brennan 2016, p. 17). This recollection becomes significant when we consider that it was common for talismanic tattooing to be performed by these Buddhist *hpongyi* or monks. The process was both intimate and painful: with the recipient lying on the ground, the skin was first pierced using a sharp brass tool, and rough pigment introduced into the open wound. On the most literal level, by opting to undergo this procedure, Orwell was allowing both the people and the culture of Burma to get under his skin.

Orwell's work on Burma is haunted by the image of racialised, broken or otherwise marked skin. In 'Shooting an Elephant', as we will see, he portrays his former self as a guilt-stricken oppressor trying to decode truths which can only surface indirectly, like the Freudian uncanny. The existence of his tattoos suggests that he may have experienced his own complicit silence about the injustice he witnessed there as a kind of toxic skin which occluded proper insight and perspective. According to

Didier Anzieu's conception of the skin-ego, trauma and repressed truth creates a 'psychic envelope' which is 'encysted' with anger and violence that has been forced to the periphery of consciousness (Anzieu 1989, p. 108). Anzieu's theory proposes that the sense of self is constructed out of an awareness of one's body as being contained within an outer wrapping, the inside/outside division becoming the first of many iterative distinctions out of which identity is built. When trauma exposes the mismatch between inside and outside, the inner self may begin to erupt through the skin, like the return of the repressed. Such forms of expression work on the level of the unconscious, which returns images and inscriptions of lost memories to the realm of perception. This is a process akin to writing: both memory and identity may be inscribed on the skin, or erased from it.

Anzieu finds a clue to this analogy with inscription in Freud's discussion of a novelty item known as the Mystic Writing-Pad, which consists of a base layer of dark wax, a middle layer of greaseproof paper, and a top skin of transparent cellophane. Any pointed object can make a mark on the pad by pressing down on it, causing the dark wax to adhere to the upper layer; the mark can just as easily be erased by pulling up and replacing the greaseproof paper in order to break the contact with the wax (Freud 1991). This object remains a familiar childhood toy to this day, but it was a new invention when Freud encountered it, and he was fascinated not just by the apparent erasability of the message written on the pad, but by the persistence in the wax below of what had ostensibly been deleted—an image of the work of memory, which can hide the traces of past events from the conscious mind, but nevertheless preserve them, ready for retrieval, on a deeper level. Anzieu came to think of the pad's top layer as a kind of epidermis, and its erasable markings as an image of the fleeting nature of tactile sensation; it became instrumental in his account of the development of the skin-ego. His study includes cases of dermatographia, in which patients undergoing a psychical crisis mark their own skin as part of their pathology, but he makes no mention of the deliberate dermatography of those who adopt tattoos and other voluntary skin-markings. Arguably, tattoos frustrate the essential erasability of memory: it is as if the trace on the celluloid layer of the Mystic Pad has been overwritten in permanent ink. Now, the Mystic Writing Pad will no longer work as it should: the subject has interfered with a necessary process of translation between conscious and unconscious, which requires an interstitial layer to keep them apart. The dream of a permanent mark, of perfect indexicality between image and experience, can only be short-lived and will ultimately be frustrated; if the pad continues to be used, the wax layer at the bottom will continue to be overwritten and complicated by future inscriptions, so that the top layer no longer refers to what is underneath.

Orwell's tattoos can thus be seen as a temporary and inadequate expression of his inner conflict, but one which offers important insights into his practice as a writer. The question of how to articulate in words his profound connection with Burma, and his guilt about his own failure to make any verbal protest against colonialism during his years there, would be an urgent aspect of his development as a writer. Woloch (2016), in his recent critical analysis of Orwell's 'plain style', asserts that he understood his experience in Burma above all as an *authorial* crisis, one 'that overwhelm[ed] any grounded, clearly discrete, observational or empirical subjective capacity' (Woloch 2016, p. 86). Woloch's interpretation depends on finding an insoluble paradox at the heart of Orwell's first-person narratives; this is writing that 'punctures itself, refusing to convey or contain the totality of the experience it is ostensibly discussing' (Woloch 2016, p. 88). His repeated references to his own failure to express how he felt ('I hated [my job] more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear', (Orwell 1986–1987; 1998, vol. 10, p. 501)) conflate 'a deeply psychological process—his paralysis in the face of what is "intolerable", "haunting", or "beyond bearing" for him—with a representational one, what's "indescribable" or impossible for the writing to "make clear" to the reader' (Woloch 2016, p. 88). This accounts, in Woloch's reading, for the 'restlessness' of Orwell's writerly procedures more generally, which foreground the 'imperfect, impatient, unsatisfactory' relationship between writing and 'primary experience' (Woloch 2016, p. 90). What should we make, then, of the act of decisive self-inscription—indeed self-puncture—which coincided with Orwell's ideological and authorial awakening? If we consider Orwell's tattoos as a kind of ur-text, a template for the kind of writing he wanted to produce, we can propose another resolution

to the tension between experience and utterance, inside and outside, which exists in his work. The real talismanic power of these marks may be precisely their capacity to refer to the unutterable, and make the haptic and the visible coincide. Orwell's ambition as a writer was not merely to articulate a sterile paradox of linguistic insufficiency, but to contain the energy of a dynamic uncertainty within the forcefield of his writerly agency. The act of puncture Woloch describes as being at the heart of Orwell's style takes on another character entirely when it is imagined as a tattoo, a writerly mark which intervenes at the threshold between self and world, creating a powerful third term which comes *between* the inside and the outside of the body, and between the subject and the phenomena it observes.

Orwell left his post in June 1927, and returned to England with a case of dengue fever and a burning desire to devote his life to words and justice. He probed and worried at his relationship with the colonial system in three key works of the 1930s: 'A Hanging' in 1931, the novel *Burmese Days* in 1934, and 'Shooting an Elephant' in 1936. The latter was written in response to a commission from John Lehmann for *New Writing*, a periodical with an explicitly anti-fascist agenda. Responding to Lehmann's request for a piece, Orwell explained that he was busy with a book—this was *The Road to Wigan Pier*—and 'the only other thing I have in mind is a sketch, (it would be about 2000–3000 words), describing the shooting of an elephant. It all came back to me very vividly the other day & I would like to write it, but it may be that it is quite out of your line. I mean it might be too lowbrow for your paper & I doubt whether there is anything anti-Fascist in the shooting of an elephant!' (Orwell 1986–1987; 1998, vol. 10, p. 483)<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, Lehmann clearly encouraged him to write and submit the essay, and within three weeks Orwell had done so, accompanying the manuscript with another tentative letter: 'As I say the incident had stuck in my mind & I wanted to write it, but whether it will be quite in your line I am not certain' (10.486).

His diffidence is understandable: at first glance, 'Shooting an Elephant' appears to have little relevance to the struggle against fascism in Europe in the 1930s; as I will argue, however, the questions it asks about performance and agency would feel perfectly relevant to readers of *New Writing*. Famously beguiling in its superficial simplicity and apparent honesty, the essay describes an incident in Moulmein in which the young Orwell was called upon to deal with a working elephant 'in musth' (that is, in a temporary state of heightened aggression) which had broken its restraints and killed an Indian labourer. Despite the fact that the animal was calm and placid by the time he arrived, Orwell relates how he felt compelled to shoot it because he dreaded the mockery of a large crowd of Burmese onlookers who were, he felt, expecting blood to be spilled. Not only was this act of violence unnecessary, it was also botched: rather than killing the elephant cleanly, Orwell aimed badly and left it to die a slow and painful death. The primary indictment is clear: the intervention of western imperialism in Asia was not only malign but incompetent; moreover, it harmed the white interlopers along with everyone else. In this performance of white power, both the European actor and his Burmese audience collaborate in the production of Orwell's uneasy 'sahib' identity, transforming him against his will into the spectacular avatar of a demented and capricious British authority.

Yet Orwell's letter to Lehmann, with its implication of an urgent need to put into words something which was troubling his mind, suggests that the act of writing the essay helped him to mark the stigma of his complicity—and perhaps begin to come to terms with it. At the time, Burma was on Orwell's mind; he was in dialogue with a writer who wished to adapt *Burmese Days* for the stage, and was therefore revisiting his earlier treatment of colonialism. Guns and tattooing feature in a key chapter of the novel, where the protagonist, Flory, attempts to impress a young woman, Elizabeth, by taking her on a shoot. A local hunter leads the way, and Orwell notes that 'his meagre thighs were tattooed with dark blue patterns, so intricate that he might have been wearing drawers of blue lace' (2.168). This curiously intimate reference to lace underwear sets up the theme of misplaced eroticism which makes

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<sup>1</sup> Orwell, George. 1986–1987; 1998. *Complete Works*. Edited by Peter Davison. 20 vols. London: Secker & Warburg. Henceforth quotations from the *Complete Works* will be cited by volume and page number.

the subsequent hunting scenes so uncomfortable: Elizabeth's romantic interest in Flory waxes and wanes with his ability to perform his role as the manly embodiment of colonial power—a demanding piece of theatre which the timid Flory cannot sustain for long. Orwell was keen to emphasise that Flory's obsession with his precarious status was a symptom of his political disengagement. In a letter he wrote to his agent, Leonard Moore, on 25 April 1936, he proposed that a hard-hitting new title—*Black Man's Burden*—should replace the anodyne 'Burmese Days' in any stage version of the novel (Orwell 1986–1987; 1998, vol. 10, p. 476). Through this ironic reversal of the title of Kipling's poem, 'The White Man's Burden', Orwell was reversing the notion that colonial rule was a 'heavy harness' for the Europeans who undertook it. 'Shooting an Elephant' applies a similar, if more subtle, torsion to such platitudes. Its flawed narrator is apparently preoccupied with the burden of his own colonial position, yet is unable to avoid the imprint of his complicity. A similar guilt also left its mark on *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which Orwell was completing in 1936. Here, in a lengthy section on Burma, Orwell attempts to map his experience of colonialism onto the politics of the left. 'There was no obvious class-friction [in Burma],' he wrote, 'because the all-important thing was not whether you had been to one of the right schools but whether your skin was technically white' (5.132). The racist assumptions of colonialism were harder to shake off than the class hierarchies of British culture, however, and dissent was more difficult to express. Colonial officials such as himself, though 'haunted by a sense of guilt', chose to conceal their true feelings because 'there [was] no freedom of speech' (5.135). To illustrate this point, he conjures up a startling image of sexual shame, recalling a beer-fueled night-time conversation on a train with a fellow apostate, in which they 'damned the British Empire—damned it from the inside, intelligently and intimately. It did us both good. But we had been speaking forbidden things, and in the haggard morning light when the train crawled into Mandalay, we parted as guiltily as any adulterous couple' (5.135).

In 'Shooting an Elephant' Orwell attempts to break this mortified silence by acknowledging another troublingly somatic experience of unsanctioned feeling: it is a confession of Orwell's dirty colonial secrets, just as *Wigan Pier* contains confessions about the physical sensations of class-based disgust he once harboured as a starch-collared Eton schoolboy when he caught a whiff of the grubby poor (5.122). Nevertheless a tension arises within the essay—as it often does in Orwell's most personal writing—from a sense of its conflicted purposes: on a naïve level, the narrator wants to express his sense of being entrapped by a colonial discourse which victimised the Europeans along with the Burmese. At the same time, the author knows he cannot evade his own culpability so glibly; indeed, like 'A Hanging', this essay insists on the impossibility of exculpation in the face of the incontrovertible, irreversible, and inescapably *physical* fact of death.

There has been some perplexity among Orwell scholars over the lack of evidence that the elephant incident really took place. Extant records are sparse; a single eye-witness, George Stuart (Larkin 2011, p. 223), recollected being with Orwell one Sunday morning when he received a message about a dangerous elephant, and remembers him setting off to deal with the matter; on the other hand, a 1926 report in the *Rangoon Gazette* of an elephant being shot by another colonial official, Major E.C. Kenny, sounds suspiciously similar to Orwell's account and opens up the possibility that he may have appropriated the story and turned it into a first-person narrative for his own purposes (Taylor 2004, p. 80). His widow and literary executor, Sonia Brownell Orwell, had little time for such doubts, reportedly telling the biographer Bernard Crick, 'Of course he shot a fucking elephant. He said he did. Why do you always doubt his word?' (Larkin 2011, p. 224). Brownell's rhetorical question approaches the very heart of Orwell's essay, and of his documentary writing more broadly. On what basis *do* we dispute the author's version of events in these texts? Where *is* the threshold between fiction and non-fiction? On what level should the 'truth' be judged? In 'Shooting an Elephant', the first-person narrator converges with his self-described identity as an 'actor', a fake who has been forced against his will and his ideological inclinations to play the role assigned to him (10.504). Behind both the actor and the narrator stands a third figure, that of the writer, compulsively drawing attention to his own toxic layers of deception. The torturously slow death of the elephant provides Orwell with an

image of an endlessly deferred narrative closure, an impossible target towards which he can only take approximate aim. And indeed, the essay itself ends, not on a flight of righteous rage against injustice, nor on a cleansing howl of self-loathing, but on a dying fall of limp disputation, as the British bicker idly about the legal ramifications of the elephant's demise. The final sentence collapses bathetically into terminal bad faith: 'I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool' (10.506).

It is worth noting the buried metaphor in this final reference to grasping, which leaves the reader to contemplate the mind as a kind of defective, non-gripping hand: the idea that the body may grasp what the mind cannot understand provides a clue to the imbrication of the haptic with the cognitive which the essay examines. The same image appears in the 'actor' passage already referred to—perhaps the key passage in the essay:

And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd—seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalised figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the 'natives', and so in every crisis he has got to do what the 'natives' expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. (10.504)

There is a curious resonance between this passage and the remarks made by Walter Benjamin in his near-contemporaneous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', the first version of which was published in 1935 (Benjamin 2006). In brief, Benjamin's argument is that our way of looking at the world has been permanently altered by the invention of optical technologies such as photography and film; this revolution in perception can be understood as a useful metaphor for a collapse in the hierarchical certainties of capitalism, but more dangerously, it may also enable the mesmeric spectacularity of fascism to find an audience. This is because modernity, according to Benjamin, encourages a profound sense of self-alienation, and unless this is properly acknowledged and theorised, humankind may even begin to 'experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure' (Benjamin 2006, vol. 4, p. 270). Like Orwell, Benjamin turns to the metaphor of performance to elucidate the fascist potential of self-alienation. 'The actor's feeling of estrangement in the face of the apparatus [ . . . ] is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one's appearance in a mirror. But now the mirror image has become detachable from the person mirrored, and is transportable. And where is it transported? To a site in front of the public. The screen actor never for a moment ceases to be aware of this' (Benjamin 2006, vol. 4, p. 261).

In the passage from 'Shooting an Elephant' quoted above, Orwell casts himself in the role of an actor who is uncomfortably aware that his constructed persona has been scripted by the imperatives of spectacle. If the essay can be said to take fascism as its tangential subject—in accordance with the *New Writing* commission and its intended readership—then it is in this passage that Orwell attempts to address the performative aspect of tyrannical dehumanisation which Benjamin also described. Both writers refer to this defamiliarised perspective as a kind of magic, but while Benjamin's essay develops a typically elaborate network of analogies comparing painters to magicians and cinematographers to surgeons, for Orwell, the role of magic is more simple: his ritualised role is directly instantiated by his 'magical rifle', the emblem of the colonial identity which has been pressed upon him; 'They were watching me as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick,' he writes (10.504). He is not interested in the intervention of a camera-lens placed between the tyrant and the crowd, but the sights of a rifle. And he knows that it is not really by magic that this gun confers power on him, but British law, which forbids the Burmese population to acquire or possess firearms. The tyrant on the stage is at the mercy of a crowd he has himself brought into being by pulling the levers of oppression; as in Benjamin, fascism is produced by the mechanics of the performance, with audience and actor both

magicked into existence by their structural inter-relationship, yet unable to see that the whole process is an empty fiction.

For Orwell, it was essential to record his sudden, nauseated insight. Can his disquiet about the sleight-of-hand nature of power be read directly into his decision to tattoo supposedly 'magical', 'bullet-deflecting' symbols onto the guilty hands which have pulled the colonial trigger? Arguably, such marks amounted to a silent admission of his unredeemed complicity in the violent ontologies of colonial agency; and indeed, this would be consistent with another Burmese tattooing tradition which had nothing to do with talismanic protection: criminals, at least until the late nineteenth-century, were habitually marked with tattoos denoting their crimes (Anderson 2000, p. 106). Such stigmata are defined explicitly by their potential for legibility: inscribed in this way, Orwell's hands are not talismanic objects, but texts to be interpreted. In what sense, then, are they still *his* hands? His moment of grim clarity in Moulmein was triggered by an experience of self-estrangement which called into question not only his autonomous personhood but his very humanity; he experienced himself as hollow—a puppet or dummy—or, worse, as a monstrous hybrid, an uncanny assemblage of flesh and mask. This hideous transformation might be abated by returning flesh-and-blood reality to its proper place in the natural order of things—but now, after his blinding flash of self-awareness, he finds a simple return impossible: redemption must be approached reflectively, via his pen.

In his essay 'Skinscapes', David Howes has examined the link between skin and earth: 'In the realm of myth,' he writes, 'we have a skin-to-skin relationship with the earth: when we lie on it our skins meet and mingle with the skin of the world' (Howes 2005, p. 31). Orwell had a name for his own tendency to rely, aesthetically and politically, on the ideal of a skinscape of sensory empiricism; in a letter to Henry Miller in August 1936, he called it his 'belly to earth attitude' (10.496). This is perhaps why, when he remembered himself flat on his belly in Burma, pumping impotent bullets into the inscrutable, ageless flesh of the elephant, he understood fully the profundity of his failure. He was haunted by his inability to leave an adequate mark on that scene of colonialism, either by playing his allotted role and 'impressing' the 'natives' with appropriately heavy-handed displays of power, or, conversely, by piercing the bloated assumptions of Empire in open critique. Instead, he begins the essay with a reverse-image of his own failure, evoking inscription as a form of wordless recalcitrance wielded by the Burmese: 'No one had the guts to raise a riot, but if a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress' (10.501). One by one, he presents in these opening paragraphs his main themes in ironic negative: he describes himself 'an obvious target' to be 'baited' like an animal, and his only contact with the earth comes 'when a nimble Burman trip[s] [him] up on the football field' (10.501). Later, when he encounters the elephant itself, he notes that it has already achieved what he cannot, and has done so with deadly force:

The people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon [the dead labourer] round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back and ground him into the earth. This was the rainy season and the ground was soft, and his face had scored a trench a foot deep and a couple of yards long. [ . . . ] The friction of the great beast's foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit. (10.503)

Orwell is describing a process of bodily inscription which is as direct as it is brutal. The elephant makes two marks simultaneously, imprinting the mud with the impression of the worker's body, and scarifying the man's back with an autographic gesture imbued with a quality of autonomous intent which reminds Orwell of domestic butchery. The decisive impression made by the elephant's foot can only be poorly echoed by Orwell's marksmanship; even his bullets 'seemed to make no impression' (10.506). Unlike the Burmese crowd, which he feels 'pressing [him] forward, irresistibly', the narrator can only feebly attempt to make his own impression at a distance, being too cowardly to come into direct contact with the elephant (10.504). He fears that he will leave his mark on the earth as the labourer did, pressed into the mud like a crude stamp on a clay tablet:

I was a poor shot with a rifle and the ground was soft mud into which one would sink at every step. If the elephant charged and I missed him, I should have about as much chance as a toad under a steam-roller. But even then I was not thinking particularly of my own skin, only of the watchful yellow faces behind. (10.504)

The return of the idea of skin in this final sentence reminds us of its complexly layered meaning within this essay: the skin he claims *not* to think about (though he clearly does think of it) is the necessary container of his corporeal existence and a metonym for his physical survival; the 'yellow' skin of the audience—the skin he *admits* to thinking about—is, on the other hand, an emblem of invisibility within this colonial setting, which seeks to erase the subjectivity and agency of the Burmese individual. Burmese skin becomes troublingly visible to the narrator only when it has been marked by colonialism. Orwell claims both to be against the 'oppressors, the British' and himself to be 'oppressed' by the oppression he witnesses, yet it is not the diminished interiority and personhood of those caught under the weight of colonial injustice which seems to affect him, but the way their outer skin has been transformed, codified, and de-individualised by the experience:

The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos—all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt. But I could get nothing into perspective. I was young and ill-educated and I had had to think out my problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East. (10.501)

This is the same anguished silence Orwell alluded to in the *Wigan Pier* anecdote about his whispered transgressions on the train, and it informs his essentially aesthetic response to colonial culpability here: his dissent is condemned to dwell in the prison of his secret thoughts, while the literal prisoners become a mere image of themselves, denied any autonomous interiority even by the guilty onlooker who tries to comprehend their plight. Colonial enforcers such as Orwell have scarred the skin of the Burmese prisoners, but such visible signifiers of power have failed to articulate anything meaningful to the narrator who now looks back on them—let alone to the baffled policeman who observed them at the time. Orwell's appeal to the body, both in his Burmese writings and his Burmese tattoos, is part of his effort to index this dialectic of silence and meaning.

In his seminal analysis of the psychological implications of racism, *Black Skin White Masks* (1952), Franz Fanon refers to the 'epidermal' schema which overwhelmed his 'corporeal schema' when he first became conscious of the white gaze (Fanon 2008). At this pivotal moment of spectacularity—curiously, a near-inverse of Orwell's epiphany in Moulmein—his previously instinctive sense of selfhood, based on the physical space he occupied and the personal history of his body, was suddenly reified as an aspect of his skin colour alone. Crucially, this goes beyond any simple binary of identity. From this point onwards, he writes, 'it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person [ . . . ] I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other . . . and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea' (Fanon 2008, p. 84). Called upon to be 'responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, and for my ancestors', Fanon describes discovering his 'blackness' interlaced with a historicity and corporeality that was not his own; he was forced to inhabit an identity 'battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all: "Sho' good eatin" [orig: 'Y a bon Banania', a reference to an advertisement for a French chocolate drink depicting a racist caricature of an African man].' (Fanon 2008, pp. 84–85).

As a white colonial officer, the narrator of 'Shooting an Elephant' is just as guilty of epidermal schematisation: even in the 'actor' passage discussed above, which purports to describe his insight into the fictive nature of colonial role-playing, he reduces the Burmese onlookers to an undifferentiated mass of 'yellow faces', while reserving the complexity of an assemblaged face/mask identity for himself alone. Yet from the point of view of an author detached from the figure of the narrator, the binary begins to break down: the reference to 'those yellow faces behind', for instance, suggests



that the blankly anonymous Burmese onlookers may also be masked role-players, even if they do not appear so to the narrator. Just as the rifle-bearing policeman is only ‘seemingly’ the lead actor in the drama, so the ‘epidermal’ schema of Burmese selfhood turns out to be a hollow semblance too. In his preface to a 1986 edition of Fanon’s book, Homi Bhabha described the mask of self as both binary and more than binary, ‘a doubling, dissembling image of being in *at least* two places at once’ (Bhabha 2008, p. xxviii, italics added), and this description applies equally in ‘Shooting an Elephant’ to the masked narrator, to the Burmese ‘faces’, and to the invisible, self-alienated author who arranges them in relation to each other. As Bhabha adds: ‘It is not the Colonialist Self or the Colonised Other, but the disturbing distance in between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness—the White man’s artifice inscribed on the Black man’s body’ (Bhabha 2008, pp. xxviii–xxix).

When Orwell chose to break his colonial silence, first by breaking his own skin, and then by constructing a new skin in the form of his autobiographical writing, he was creating a link between dermatographical and authorial inscriptions. Anzieu’s critique of Lacan was based in large part on the latter’s reliance on language and silence as the tools of psychoanalysis; for Anzieu, this ignored the importance of somatic experience. Yet at the end of *The Skin Ego*, Anzieu himself states, ‘the spoken word, and even more, the written word, has the power to function as a skin [ . . . ] If I have written this book, it is to defend my own Skin Ego also by writing’ (Anzieu 1989, pp. 231–32). As Jay Prosser has noted, for Anzieu, ‘autobiography works like a skin; it is the skin the author sends out that at once conceals and reveals the self [ . . . ] a fantasmatic surface, a canvas for what we wish were true—or for what we cannot acknowledge to be true. Skin’s memory is burdened with the unconscious’ (Prosser 2001, p. 65). Orwell’s tattoos configure writing as a form of magic: a phantasmatic mechanism by which he might contain the conflict between his external complicity and his secret horror. In this sense, the meaning of Orwell’s tattoos is reflexive: they stand in for the idea of magical meaning itself; he is not so much appropriating the cultural traditions of Burmese skin-talismans, as asserting his own self-conscious awareness of the kinds of cultural (as well as political and ecological) appropriations and misdirections upon which colonialism depends. Orwell’s tattoos were his first attempt to reverse the polarity of bodily inscription by which colonialism—and by implication, all forms of oppression—operated. They did not invoke superstitious forces as such, but rather attempted to elide the distinction between Orwell and those who were decried, and sometimes prosecuted, for their visible alterity. By placing his avatar, a hollow dummy pretending to be a ‘sahib’, into the lead role in ‘Shooting an Elephant’, Orwell revealed not only the hidden colonial machinery which was at work behind the scenes, but the utter emptiness of the trick it performed.

For Orwell, haptic consensuality was—like everything else he cared about—political. Naomi Segal’s study of Anzieu’s theory, *Consensuality* (Segal 2009) argues that the ‘body is not just a lived object in space’ but ‘communicates something of the self to something of other selves’ through ‘its ability to touch’ (Segal 2009, p. 4). This sense of skin as an expression of a collective impulse would have appealed to Orwell. Whereas, for James Joyce, the idea that ‘modern man has an epidermis rather than a soul’ expressed the intransigent superficiality of the flesh, for Orwell, skin was the battle-scarred threshold where aesthetic interiority is stained by the urgent contaminations of political intervention. Orwell was not much of a modernist, but he understood how imaginative consensuality might induct the monadic self into a sense of collective experience, and show how subjectivity is not in binarial opposition to exteriority, but is infinitely entangled with the world. As Orwell shed his identity as the enforcer of an arbitrary and exploitative disciplinary structure, he came to realise that the raw, unskinned experience of a critical observer, preternaturally open and permeable to sensation and influence, could never be encompassed by a written account which ignored political collectivity. By inscribing the hands that wrote about—and fired guns at—a fractured world, he was marking them with a stark reminder of the simultaneous necessity, and impossibility, of skin-deep connection.

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