Crossing the threshold

Frank González-Crussi

The Body's Edge: Our Cultural Obsession with Skin. By Marc Lappé. Holt: 1996. Pp. 242. \$22.50.

THE skin is much more than a simple boundary of the physical self, a simple frontier where the person ends and the outer environment begins. It is more than a mere enclosure that restrains our viscid interior from oozing out, thus guarding our integrity. It is also a custom-house for multifarious incident influences, a sensitive radar alert to the subtlest perturbations of the ambience, a clearing-house for impulses generated within the body or without, and a protective barrier, a living screen of unmatched efficiency, whose discernment fences in the good and fences out the untoward. Nor is this all: criss-crossed by a dense, intricate tuft of nerves and sensory receptors, the skin is the focal point of aesthesia, the conscious faculty that contributes to physical preservation, and, just as aptly say the ascetical foes of sensuality, to our spiritual perdition and moral ruin.

So complex and fundamental a part of the body could not fail to become the subject of intense scientific investigation; and it is rather surprising that its rich evocativeness has not made it more often the central topic of literary dissertation. In *The Body's Edge*, Marc Lappé approaches the skin from the plural viewpoint of the scientist, the sociologist and the cultural anthropologist — and at times, though (perhaps fortunately) not often, the surrogate poet. By his own avowal in the preface, he “wanted to go beyond the simple biology of the skin to explore how we define our ‘edge’ or boundary with the outer world”.

This professed aim is ambitious indeed. Its thorough development would require considerably more space than the relatively modest one comprised in a little over two hundred pages. It could be, God guard us, the work of a lifetime. Yet the author gallantly charges forward, armed with his record of past accomplishment (five previous books, including well-turned-out works of scientific popularization), his abiding interest in toxicology and its social implications and his undaunted optimism — a quality, this last one, without which no one could pos-

sibly feel impelled to write such a book.

Consider the scope of the work. Traditional dermatology is disposed of in one chapter; dermatological manifestations of systemic diseases in another. Cosmetology is dealt with in twenty pages. But the history of cosmetology, as acknowledged by the author in the final chapter,

At full stretch: James Morris, “elastic skin man” (c. 1890).

is “a long and broken trail of vanity, illusion and medical catastrophes”. Quite so, and therefore chroniclers of human folly were ever burdened with a Sisyphean, overwhelming task. An instance of just such human shortcoming is dealt with in a separate chapter, entitled “The Silicone Story”. It is a history of the US government-approved injection or surgical implantation of industrial silicone products as a means to reshape bodily parts perceived as unattractive and to smoothen wrinkled, aged skin. The author, who directs a centre for ethics and toxic substances, gives us a well-informed perspective of this episode, sadly brimful with human vanity and not

exempt from medical catastrophes.

Cosmetology, of course, leads us to ponder the broader question of the human preoccupation with bodily decoration, including tattooing, and from here it is an easy transition to evolutionary speculation. Other species have developed bright accoutrements, flamboyant plumage or polychrome *derrière* to attract potential mates. If human beings can flaunt no comparable endowment, the author tells us with somewhat facile discursive fluidity, it must be because their use of pigments, tattoos, lipstick, eyeshadow and assorted devices for enhancement or concealment has barred them from the natural process of beautification that sexual selection promotes in the wild. This claim may smack of the exaggerating brand of speciosity, but it was surely made in the same spirit as the assertion, in an earlier chapter, that ancient Chinese medicine anticipated modern knowledge of the immunological function of the skin by nearly two thousand years.

The Body's Edge is a thoughtful, up-to-date, highly readable work, likely to hold the interest of the nonmedical public. Dermatologists and allied experts will probably find many of the chapters uninformative or superficial, particularly those devoted to anatomy, function and diseases of the skin. But even these readers would benefit from tracing the “long trail of vanity, illusion and medical catastrophe” that is historically annexed to their field, and pondering the many social and other varied factors, of apparently no direct medical purport, that influence the health of the skin. Thus the reader is made to see how environmental depredation, by thinning the ozone layer, permits cancer-promoting rays to filter through and wreak their cutaneous havoc. Similarly, cultural attitudes, through their obsessive insistence in maintaining a youthful appearance, promote bizarre, misguided practices no less damaging to the skin. The idea of a subtle connectedness of all things in the Universe, so plain to the ancients and so deliberately ignored by modern specialists, acquires new relevancy in thoughtful, well-crafted works. *The Body's Edge* is one of these. □

Frank González-Crussi is in the Department of Pathology, Children's Memorial Hospital, 2300 Children's Plaza, Chicago, Illinois 60614, USA.