Between *hubris* and *humilitas*

The real is a remarkably fluid notion. An abstract term that suggests concreteness, it has an air not only of drama and definitiveness about it but also of mere triviality.¹ It could be everything or nothing. For Badiou’s account of the twentieth century it is, in a sense, everything—nothing less than the pivotal dimension when it comes to understanding the century’s aspirations and failures. Badiou, of course, mobilizes the concept of the real well aware of the connotations it has taken on in Lacanian psychoanalysis, but he extends and revises the term so as to adapt it to his political ontology. It thus moves from being a topological category in a tripartite model (Real/Imaginary/Symbolic), developed to account for the impasses and struggles within our libidinal economy, to a category of action, agency, and *kairos*. The real refers to the moment in which the given order suddenly gives way to something else, to a possibility unthinkable within the framework of the existing regime of things. It is both the blind spot and the point of intervention that allows us to overturn a situation that, viewed from within and on its own terms, appears unassailable.² In this sense the real is, above all, a cipher for the hidden emancipatory potential of a given symbolic field, and the “passion of the real” is the readiness to seize this potential and opportunity, if need be by violent means. In fact, very often it appears as though it is nothing other than the name for the resolve to resort to extreme measures. Hence the sense of urgency, decisionism, and violence the term evokes, signaling both the unexpected opening, or crack, in the order of reality and the alertness and determination required to make the leap into the unknown.

But the real is not only the dimension in which the Badiouian subject’s passionate effort to recast the space of the political “realizes” itself; it is also a force, or event, that transcends and transforms this subject. In other
words, the real is both a moment to be seized and the seizure of those involved in a process that exceeds them. It conflates the voluntarist commitment to radical change and the impersonal claim of an utterly unpredictable and inscrutable event. Badiou’s “passion of the real” solicits the subject’s embrace and its surrender, empowering the subject and enlisting it for its militant cause. The “passion of the real” is the unfailing commitment to this cause, as well as the ruthlessness employed in its name. But often it also appears as the name of this cause itself: it is the dimension that manifests itself in the split or impasse in the order of things summoning us to a new beginning. The passion it is supposed to arouse implies a form of subjection, of being overpowered by its appeal, and a form of empowerment, of being elevated with a new, if diffuse, sense of purpose.

In many respects the different encounters with forms of violent excess that stand at the center of this book exhibit some striking similarities to Badiou’s “passion of the real.” The most prominent one is undoubtedly the idea, present, in one way or the other, in all the texts considered here, that the advent of violence, more specifically its sight, somehow shatters reality itself, splitting it open and providing access to a different dimension of being. Moreover, there is a sense that this opening, for all the horror and fear it causes, has the potential to transform those willing to expose themselves to it. One might call this the mysticism of the real, that is to say the expectation of some revelation, the nature of which is unknown. Speaking in the broadest terms, the texts discussed here could also be regarded as being about the experience of a break with the present, the irresistible and yet disturbing appeal issuing from this event, and, finally, the prospect of some kind of transfiguration or conversion, a sort of realignment of the given order. But even though the works we looked at exhibit some elements of the script, if I may put it this way, in which Badiou casts his “passion of the real,” clearly their scenarios cannot be fitted neatly into the dramaturgy of The Century. Nor is it very obvious what actually motivates and sustains these engagements with the experience of excess, rupture, and violence. The purpose of the philosopher’s deliberately dramatic look back on the twentieth century was, as we saw, to recover the drive and enthusiasm, which, at least in his view, are so patently and regrettably absent from the political landscape of the present. In a sense, harking back to the real is a defense of twentieth-century radical emancipa-
tory politics against its denunciation as prototalitarian. Though he tries to take his distance from the allegedly corrupted forms of the “passion of the real” in Nazism and Stalinism, the revision he undertakes includes a defense of violence precisely as index or evidence of the very kind of change the prevailing liberal doxa is not prepared to contemplate. Though typically, when he invokes events like the October Revolution, for example, Badiou tends to emphasize their unforeseeable and radically innovative character rather than dwell on the terror that followed in their wake. He is simply much less interested, it seems, in the messy aftermath of such events or in the fallout of their violent eruption. What counts is their advent and the commitment it entails, even though Badiou concedes that there are various ways in which one can fail in this commitment, in the fidelity to the event, as he calls it, various ways of missing the real.

In contrast to this largely unequivocal and emphatic reclamation of the passion of the real, the engagements with the real, with the spectacles of violence and suffering staged in the different works considered in this book, are much more ambivalent and conflicted, far less unified and certainly less programmatic than in Badiou. These engagements with the real are operative on three levels. First of all, and in a very literal sense, there is the encounter with the reality of irreducible physical pain, the facticity of destruction and mindless violence, exposing the subject to an excess that it can’t get a handle on. It is the real of creaturely corporeality but also the real of things assuming a menacing agency, of a hidden force, erupting and shattering the familiar face of the world. As we have seen, these encounters prompt mixed reactions: fear and terror, to be sure, but also an irresistible fascination and the peculiar urge to discern in this event the signs of some kind of higher purpose or to find the break in the intolerable spectacle that would either mitigate or sublate its horror. This is the real in its most concrete and perhaps most familiar guise: the repulsive and fascinating view of the agonizing and wounded body, causing the beholders a feeling of paralysis and turmoil at the same time. In a second sense, broader and more abstract, the real figures as the name for the incommensurable and ineffable horrors of the twentieth century. Not unlike Badiou’s *The Century*, coming to terms with, or at least finding ways of situating oneself vis-à-vis, the century’s record of violent excess—real not only because it took place and cannot be undone but also because its scale dwarfs all lesser events, defying and bewildering the imagination—
is the challenge the works take on, whether explicitly or in more oblique ways. Their solutions, if that is the right term, to this are contradictory and aporetic. The real is a recalcitrant remainder, stubbornly persisting and resisting sublation. In one way or another the attempts to convert, or salvage, this excess and to undo the paralysis it causes fails. And that failure is what in part constitutes the muted kind of pathos they so often exhibit. The third sense in which the texts can be said to be preoccupied with the real has to be located on a slightly different level. On the one hand, it concerns their ambition to bring about a kind of effet de réel (though not in the Barthesian sense), to break through the virtuality of representation by the force of their affective impact—hence the appeal to pathos and its quasi-contagious spread. But it is also related to their emphasis on the visual and on visualization. In a classically ekphrastic key, oftentimes the texts seek to produce a semblance of presence by inviting readers to imagine a picture, or a scene that looks like a picture. The appeal to pictorial representation aims at reproducing, in the reader’s imagination, the vividness of the image: the real as a kind of simulacrum, present but ontologically ambivalent. No less frequently the sense of illusion thus achieved is subsequently undone, often by means of a violent disruption: the real as inherently iconoclastic. As we have seen, the texts conjure up a great number of images or imagelike scenes, which, in many instances, serve as the occasion for staging a kind of heightened and troubled sense of seeing, strangely exalted and at the same time radically unsettling visions. What is at stake here is the way in which pictorial representation summons the viewer’s attention, how pictures captivate and astonish their beholders, striking and startling us. Indeed, the turn to artworks often appears to be motivated by the shock they deal the beholder, their power to disturb and to distress, to lock in the gaze in a spectacle from which it is all but impossible to wrest the eyes.

Against the somewhat lopsided exaltation of the real proposed in The Century, I have enlisted a notion that encompasses and goes beyond the passion of the real, which Badiou is so eager to recover. My contention has been that “pathos” allows for a more nuanced account of the claims on, and of, the real. On the most obvious level, pathos refers to the quasi-contagious, intolerable, and yet also inescapable appeal exerted by the spectacle of suffering. Furthermore, it implies a sense of grandeur and momentousness as well as of failure and futility. And last but not least, it
carries with it suspicions of inauthenticity, feigned emotions, and theatricality. The *pathos of the real* spans a set of contradictory tendencies: a sense of awe in the face of horror; the drama and exaltation—but also the delusion—brought on by a decisive encounter or emphatic engagement; and, finally, the sense of resignation in light of its failure. In a strange coincidence of opposites, the pathos of the real indicates both *hubris* and *humilitas*: the notion of taking on what is impossible to take on, to endure and resist in the face of overpowering opposition, thereby rising above it, and that of sorrow and compassion vis-à-vis a pain that cannot be mitigated.

The readings gathered under the title of the pathos of the real have taken very different trajectories. In keeping with the antagonistic tendencies implied in this title, they have all revolved around certain tensions: the similarity and difference between Bataille’s aesthetics of transgression and Kafka’s parodistic poetics of pathos and transfiguration; the opposition between the ekphrastic appeal to visual representation and the iconoclasm of Claude Simon’s efforts to come to terms with his traumatic war experiences; the programmatic injunction against pathos, on the one hand, and the persistent return to some of the most iconic representations of agony and death, on the other, in the works of Peter Weiss; and, finally, the surgical coolness of Heiner Müller’s dramatic parables about the unintended consequences or “fallout” of revolutionary terror, set against the grotesque excess staged in his postdramatic tableaux. At some level all these works militate against pathos as the codified representation of violence and pain, and thus against a certain notion of the image. They do so in the name of the real, that is, in the name of a violence and suffering that resists and disrupts representation. Their reservation vis-à-vis the idea of pathos is a reservation vis-à-vis the idea of aesthetic reconciliation or transfiguration. Their investment in the real is an investment in that which defies this desire. At the same time, as we have seen, there is a strong affinity between the concept of pathos, qua overwhelming hardship, pain, and sorrow, and the violence of the incommensurable real. And ironically, one way of bringing this real into view, of getting at it precisely in its incommensurability and recalcitrance, is by isolating the visions of pain and suffering in the image, stripping them of any context or meaning, fixating and intensifying the sight of agony in muted stillness. The texts marshal the image not because of any presumed verisimilitude but for its “evidentiary punch,”
as Susan Sontag has called it, or, in the words of Roland Barthes, its *punctum*. One could call this the pathos of the image, its capacity to strike and to injure, to break through the protective shields of the symbolic order. Hence as much as the real is pitted against pathos, there is, in fact, a profound complicity between the concepts. If the real is what always returns to its place, as Lacan says, what returns with it is pathos, both in the sense of the exaltation experienced before an imminent revelation and of the sorrow and disappointment before its nonmaterialization.

Francis Bacon

Each of the preceding chapters has begun with the description of an image: the horrific photographs of *ling’chi*, the panorama of Waterloo, David’s *Death of Marat*, and the anonymous drawing of an apocalyptic scene. I want to conclude with a set of images of a similar kind and turn to a work that exemplifies, if in a different medium, the conflicting aspirations and impulses we have tracked throughout this book. The art of Francis Bacon instantiates what I have called the pathos of the real like few other oeuvres in the twentieth century, both in terms of its aesthetic ambitions and its agonistic outlook.

As we have seen, the literary attempts to grasp and to “enlist” the real have very often taken the form of experiments on the boundaries between text and image, in which the image figures as the ideal, foil, and negative limit to the textual ambition to move beyond representation. Turning to Francis Bacon is to look at how this same ambition is fleshed out in the field of visual representation itself. For Bacon’s painting, too, is centrally concerned with a certain excess and with probing and transgressing the limits and protocols of pictorial representation, modernist as well as classical, in terms of form as well as in terms of content. Against the modernist predilections for abstraction, Bacon returns to art as incarnation: the human body, or rather flesh, forms his predominant subject. Against expectations raised by this return to the tradition and some of its well-known formulas and formats, such as the triptych, the artist places his subjects in laboratory-like spaces, subordinating notions of passion and compassion, associated with the suffering body and the flesh, to the abstract and material beauty of the paint.

The appeal to the real—or, in the artist’s language, to “the brutality of
fact”—is a recurrent motif in the numerous interviews in which Bacon has tried to articulate the premises and goals of his work, though the term is certainly not used in the sense it has assumed in the wake of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Time and again Bacon has claimed that his paintings seek to capture and convey the violence of reality, and the aesthetic program that is outlined in the conversations with David Sylvester continually invokes a dimension beyond or, to be exact, on this side of the symbolic. By contrast, he has never spoken about his work in terms of pathos, and it is certainly not a prominent term in the considerable amount of critical literature written about him. This absence is actually rather surprising, for there are a number of ways in which questions of pathos seem to bear on his art. First and foremost, there is the painter’s preferred subject matter of violence, pain, and suffering, even though he used to dispute that he had any particular interest in what his paintings are so ostensibly about on the level of content. The issue of pathos is present, second, by virtue of the iconographic and mythological themes and motifs Bacon’s paintings borrow from the tradition (another instance, surely not coincidental, in which the artist adamantly refused to accord any significance to his rather remarkable choices). Among the precursors of Bacon’s art are some of the most prominent iconic representations of pathos in the history of Western painting. On a more conceptual level the painter’s own account of what he hoped his paintings would achieve could also easily be translated into the language of pathos. As a matter of fact, Bacon’s ideal is very much that of a “pathic” or somatic art, as we will see momentarily. The artist’s account of the rationale behind his work, though presented with characteristic wryness, is itself often tinged with a certain pathos: the idea of disclosing a dimension this side of the symbolic, to confront viewers not just with any kind of violence—the extreme violence of the twentieth century, for example, as his interlocutors insist—but a more pervasive and yet strangely unfathomable and elusive force: the violence of reality.

In ways quite similar to the literary examples discussed in the previous chapters, the pathos of the real very much encapsulates the programmatic thrust of Bacon’s painting, but it is also that which exceeds and displaces the avowed project. It is the name of an ambition and its inherent ambiguities. After briefly reviewing some of the distinctive features of Bacon’s painting, I will touch on a number of crucial issues, reading them in light of Bacon’s own programmatic claims but also against the grain of the aes-
thetic positions the painter has defended so vocally. They include the interrelated questions of expressivity, violence, the flesh, compassion, and theatricality.

**BACON’S SINGULARITY**

Soon after first entering the scene in the early 1950s, the British painter quickly claimed his preeminent position in postwar European art. Indeed, few artists seem to have assumed, and maintained, such an iconic status in the second half of the century. (The two other names that come to mind are Andy Warhol and Gerhard Richter.) Bacon’s distinct manner seemed to represent a force and phenomenon unto itself, incommensurable with most contemporary trends, though there are some conspicuous family resemblances, say, to his colleagues and friends in Great Britain, Graham Sutherland, Frank Auerbach, and Lucian Freud, as well as some obvious affiliations with other, mostly older, contemporaries such as Picasso and Giacometti, for instance. At the beginning of his career Bacon was famously labeled insufficiently surrealist to participate in an exhibition devoted to British surrealist art, and his work has largely remained outside the usual categories and classifications of painting in the twentieth century. The iconicity this work has achieved has to do with a number of signature features: its favorite subject matter, of course, the tormented, agonizing body, violence, and sexuality, but also its apparent capacity to span the divide between figurative and abstract, even though Bacon himself has frequently dismissed abstract art as “decorative.” Furthermore, there is the remarkable coexistence of, or tension between, a virtuoso craftsmanship, if I may put it this way, and the artist’s readiness to undo his own achievement so as to allow something else, something altogether unplanned, to come to the fore. There is also the keen awareness of being part of a great tradition, ranging from Egyptian art to Michelangelo, Velázquez, Rembrandt, Soutine, and so forth. The appeal to this tradition is eclectic, to be sure, but even the untrained eye will not fail to register its influence. Besides many references, at times overt, at times more oblique, to traditional iconographic and mythological motifs (Oedipus and the Sphinx, the crucifixion, the Erinyes), Bacon’s sources include a number of other pictorial archives as well, most prominently the motion photography of Eadweard Muybridge but also popular image culture as evi-
denced by the random newspaper and magazine clippings that littered the floor of his studio. What I call Bacon’s iconicity, by which I mean not only his unmistakable style but also his unique and irrefutable place in the modernist or late modernist canon, is promoted, finally, by the fact that the artist continually repeated and enhanced his own pictorial formulas. To be sure, there are different periods in his oeuvre. But at the same time a distinct set of conventions, a kind of dispositif, is asserted and remains in place throughout his work of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (while a number of subjects present in the works of the 1950s disappear). A nonde- script, often monochromatic, background is divided and organized by a few lines that suggest a domestic interior that is furnished with very few objects. This space is further defined by the introduction of platform structures—a pedestal, cubicle, cage, rostrum, or glass box—staging devices that are supposed to isolate and bring into focus the human figures whose organic carnality, voluptuous and tormented at the same time, forms a sharp contrast to the nondescript setting. The emergence of this template does not mean that there is no space for variation and innovation. But the persistence of a number of motifs and of a more or less fixed set of elements organizing the picture space is an important factor when it comes to understanding the instant recognizability of a Bacon painting. Another aspect contributing to the distinctiveness of Bacon’s art is that he often worked in series, resuming and amplifying earlier work; think, for instance, of his popes after Velázquez, but also, more and more, after himself, as it were, for Bacon did not only quote iconic moments from the history of Western painting but also, increasingly, from his own pictures. Finally, the sense of familiarity is further consolidated by the fact that Bacon kept returning to the same models, his friends and lovers.

“THE BRUTALITY OF FACT”

Bacon’s art forms a body of work that, to many, has proved extremely compelling and suggestive—compelling in the formal and technical mastery it exhibits, suggestive in its ominous symbolism and allusiveness. The artist, however, has consistently discouraged critics from reading too much into his paintings, with a particular averseness, it seems, to interpretations along the lines of the works’ most salient thematic preoccupations: violence, pain, horror. In his interviews with David Sylvester, Bacon has pretty
much obstructed all the most obvious avenues toward his art, rejecting any intimation of symbolism or deeper meaning. He claims, for instance, that what interested him about the crucifixion was primarily the way the cross exposes the human body, serving as a kind of framing device.9 Mythological references to the Oresteia, a work Bacon admits to admiring very much, or to T. S. Eliot’s Sweeney Agonistes, for example, are said to be more or less fortuitous. Bacon regularly distances himself from any attempt to identify possible clues that would disclose a work’s purported “message.” He chastises art that would conform to such expectations as illustrational. In fact, illustration and narrative are the negative terms most frequently invoked in these interviews to mark the distinctive character of his project. In other words, he has been at pains to defend his art as not being “about” anything in the conventional sense. It is not about, say, the “modern condition,” le mal du siècle, or our “transcendental homelessness,” to use Georg Lukács’s apt phrase, nor is it about transgressive sexuality and death, or the tension between eros and thanatos.10 Bacon has been particularly resistant to readings that have attempted to view the violence so evident in his paintings as somehow reflecting the disastrous experiences that have marked the twentieth century, though he has also remarked that the war was, in many ways, the decisive event for his generation. (Interestingly enough, the first paintings that would “count” in the eyes of the painter date from the mid-1940s: Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion [1944] and Painting 1946 [1946], to which I will return below.) The refusal to accommodate expectations based on notions of illustration or narrative has been accompanied by the appeal to a different set of terms that shift the attention from questions of subject matter and motif to the creative process and its desired effects. In the interviews with Sylvester questions of intention and meaning are typically deflected by stressing the role of chance and instinct, and the unintended directions his works often take as a consequence. Considerations about a viewer’s efforts at interpreting the images give way to notions of “poignancy,” “immediacy,” “energy,” and “intensity.” Bacon claims that what he is interested in is sensation, something that is supposed to affect the “nervous system” directly, bypassing the conceptual, or symbolic, “screens” through which we perceive the world.11 He invariably describes the objective of his painting as that of impacting the beholder on a neuronal or visceral level, rather than speaking to her or his intelligence or

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imagination, and tearing away the “veils” obstructing reality. The violence so often attributed to his work is not that of war or any of the other disasters of the twentieth century but, more broadly, and more abstractly, the violence of reality or, in the terms of this book, of the real. Bacon does not say much to specify the character of this violence, but from what he says, one can infer that what he has in mind is a kind of primordial force, a predatory vitality that sustains and threatens life, the fact of “one thing living off another,” as he puts it in one of the interviews.

The painter professes a kind of materialism, seeking to “unlock,” as he likes to say in the interviews, the “brutality of fact.” The strategies for doing so are twofold. The first has to do with the materiality of the medium, with the incalculable characteristics of oil paint. “People don’t realize,” he says, “how mysterious and fluid a medium oil-painting is.” In keeping with this view, long stretches of the interviews he gave are about his working techniques, especially the creative use of chance in applying the paint to the canvas. According to Bacon handling the paint freely can produce unexpected effects overriding whatever the painter may have set out to do initially. The manipulation of chance foils intentionality and is supposed to be closer to the instinct, the artist’s as much as the beholder’s, for the real is that which can only be encountered by accident, not intentionally. The materialism of Bacon’s art thus concerns the base matter of human physicality as much as the conspicuous materiality of paint. At times giving the impression of oozing from the canvas, at times transforming it into a thick-textured, pasty surface, the paint makes for a drama all its own. About his portraits, in which the smudging, mixing, and layering of the paint is particularly striking, Bacon remarked that he hoped to achieve something that would look like the Sahara Desert. It is true that frequently the frontal views of his friends’ faces resemble rugged landscapes as much as human physiognomies. Typically, the portraits keep a precarious balance between achieving a certain likeness to the person portrayed and allowing the handling of the paint to exert its remarkable effects. Bacon himself described the departure from appearance as a form of detour leading back to appearance, one kind of likeness undone to make room for another. The second way of “unlocking,” and exposing the viewer to, the “brutality of fact” has to be situated on the level of the imagistic repertoire on which Bacon draws so consistently. It is directed against the pictures and clichés that populate the modern lifeworld and our imagi-
ination. Bacon’s art stages an assault on the images that are always already there, haunting the empty canvas, to bring out an image that would obliterate these specters, “hoping . . . to paint the one picture which will annihilate all the other ones” or, in a different formulation, “to make the image that sums up all the others”—an ideal that, as he admitted, he never achieved. It is the ambition to create an absolute image that will arrest the beholders because it is unlike anything seen, deliberately at odds with the received iconic models.

As I have said, Bacon’s painting is very much in dialogue with both the art-historical tradition and the contemporary archives furnished by the new media, especially film and photography. Indeed, it very manifestly derives part of its force from the fact that it draws on many familiar motifs and topoi from the history of Western painting. At the same time, however, the aesthetic sensibility at work in this endeavor continually challenges academic protocols of representation in pursuit of its own vision.

In the artist’s attempts to account for this vision, the matter of representation, as I have mentioned, is routinely superseded by reflections on the impact he would like his paintings to have and on the means employed to achieve this. Bacon’s insistence on “immediacy,” “intensity,” “inevitability,” and a number of similar terms appears to call for a quasi-physiological aesthetics, invoking, by turns, the visceral and the neural, and thereby effectively removing the work from critical analysis. From this perspective the paintings are indeed less about rendering a given subject than about transmitting certain feelings and sensations from the painter’s “nervous system” to that of the beholder. In spite of the appeal to chance and contingency, the assumptions underlying this operation seem oddly mechanistic, leaving little room for the notion that the impact aimed for is intricately interwoven with the persistence of figurative and narrative elements and that it might not be as unequivocal as suggested in the interviews. Given the artist’s tendency to describe the actual production of his works as a more or less unfathomable and incalculable process, in which the painter is basically waiting for something unforeseen to happen on the canvas, it would perhaps seem appropriate to try to account for their effectiveness in terms of the bodily or visceral reaction they elicit rather than on the level of the viewers’ efforts somehow to make sense of what they see. But it is of course not obvious at all how one would gauge the degree to which a painting may impact our “nervous system,” let alone
how one would talk about it. Premised on a kind of stimulus-and-
response pattern, this would seem a curiously reductive undertaking, de-
liberately disregarding the complex interplay of affect and the imaginary
that is actually at work in the paintings. The observations that follow are
therefore less concerned with the alleged visceral effects of the work than
with the pathos staged and revoked in it, its ostentatious engagement with
scenes of agony and anguish, at once fraught with suggestive meaning and
resolutely “impervious to interpretation.”17

ANGUISH, AGONY, PATHOS

The affective charge of Bacon’s work is as palpable as it is difficult to de-
fine. One of the places where it seems to manifest itself in a fairly straight-
forward manner is in the series of screaming popes, though here as else-
where the paintings’ striking efficacy cannot be reduced to a simple
formula. As is well known, capturing the scream was one of Bacon’s ob-
sessions for the longest time, inspired not so much by Edvard Munch as
by Poussin’s Massacre of the Innocents and by the famous close-up of the
bloodied face of a nurse, shrieking with terror, in Eisenstein’s Battleship
Potemkin. The series of popes (not all of which are actually shown scream-
ing) is accompanied and complemented by pictures of screaming men in
dark business suits and of primates, in particular a baboon and a chim-
panzee, baring their canine teeth, all of them placed in similar cagelike and
claustrophobic settings. Characteristically evasive when it comes to pro-
viding a possible account for the anguish that is so much in evidence in
these paintings, Bacon remarked that he did not so much intend to paint
the horror as the gaping mouth emitting a cry. In fact, it is to no small ex-
tent that this very absence of any hint at the source or meaning of the panic
that appears to have seized the figures makes for the troubling effect of
these paintings. Their screams, though of course inaudible, seem to drown
out everything; howling before an invisible terror, they appear to be con-
sumed by their own interminable wails. There is another crucial feature,
however, that adds to the peculiar poignancy of the series of figures, or
rather creatures, wailing and screaming. For their creatureliness or ani-
mality, reinforced by their crouching position and their “primal” scream
(if that is what it is), is counterbalanced by a peculiar sense of spectrality.
It is the indistinct and vague quality of the subjects that appears to be dis-
solving as they emit their never-ending howls. It is actually often impossible to tell whether they scream because they are losing their contours and their consistence or whether their apparent dispersion is a consequence of their silent screaming. Yet, in spite of the blur that so often veils their features and gives them a ghostly appearance, their faces are the site of utmost expressivity. The popes and men in business suits are characters of an indeterminate order of being, conjured into existence from nowhere and on the brink of receding into the dark background, real and unreal at the same time. What is more is that in many cases it is not only the screaming men who appear threatened by dissolution but actually the space around them itself. It is precisely this array of different and partly incongruous possibilities that gives these pictures their startling, indeed their hallucinatory, power.

The affective charge of the later works is more difficult to describe. At first glance the anguish of the figures appears to have given way to agony, though the nature of the depicted affliction is far from obvious, vacillating between extreme pain and extreme pleasure, torment and ecstasy. The peculiarly transparent quality of the subjects of the early paintings, their indistinct presence and apparent immateriality, has been supplanted by an unmistakable emphasis on the corporeal. The figures at the center of these paintings are often featured as a pulsating, dense mass of flesh, contorted and twitching, with the suggestion of density and volume being as much a result of the handling of the paint as a characteristic of the bodies, which appear sculpted, in the flesh, as it were. The scream has disappeared, and the faces, as generally in Bacon’s later portraiture, are sites of a veritable devastation. There remains only a faint trace of the former expressiveness, the eyes gazing out from under or behind the devastation visited on the figures. It is a gaze that is strangely oblivious with respect to the destruction unleashed against the subject. Amid this near absence of any signs of expressiveness, the muteness of the gaze forms a sharp contrast to the agitation that has seized the bodies. As in the series of screaming men from the 1950s, it is unclear where to locate the origin of the commotion that seems to be stirring the canvas.

In many instances it appears as though the depicted struggle was, above all, one in which the bodies were engaged with themselves. As Deleuze, Bacon’s most inspired reader, has observed, oftentimes one gets the impression that these bodies are trying to escape from themselves, to leave
their own frame and assume a form that is less fixed. Think of the puddles into which some of the figures seem to empty themselves or the mysterious processes of liquefaction depicted on a number of other paintings. The bodily forms frequently appear not to coincide with themselves, strangely displaced vis-à-vis their own center. Clearly, Bacon is at pains to undo the symmetry and integrity of the classical body, not in a cubist fashion by breaking down the object into views from different angles but rather by telescoping, magnifying, and condensing a series of movements into each other, “hoping to deform people into appearance,” as he put it to Sylvester. It is as though Muybridge’s photographs of the human body in motion had been superimposed on one another. As a result we become witness to a peculiar biomorphic mutation, midway between birth and contraction, an uncertain metamorphosis in which the human form is stretched to the limits of its recognizability.

As Deleuze also noted in connection with these monstrous metamorphoses, the becoming-animal, as he calls it, of Bacon’s figures, there is something strangely impersonal about the agony the figures are undergoing. The extreme affects overpowering them do not seem to be properly theirs. In fact, there is a disconnect between the forces ravaging the bodies and the attitude of the figures, their apparent absent-mindedness, their introverted gazes, coming at us from a great distance, as though from a different realm entirely, and a violence that is erupting out of nowhere, striking indiscriminately at whatever comes in its way. It is no surprise that the apparent mindlessness of the suffering and violence depicted on Bacon’s canvases has led critics to accuse the artist of pessimism. Although he typically rejects suggestions of any moral intent, whether positive or negative, the painter has countered this criticism by declaring the spirit of his work as one of “exhilarated despair.” And Deleuze has defended the reputed fatalism of the paintings as the sign of an “extraordinary vitality” rather than of the tragic vision so often associated with Bacon’s work.

The earlier works, especially the popes, are patterned after the state portrait. They evoke a sense of pathos in the grand manner, featuring dignitaries with all the official trappings of their power. But the serenity so characteristic of the genre has given way to outright panic and anguish. The equanimity and composure of the representative of power is discomposed and disrupted by an uncontrollable agitation. Bacon’s paintings “infect” the sublime pathos of supreme authority with the primal fear of the cor-
nered animal. If the mark of sovereignty is the power over life and death, here it has become subject to the very violence it used to command: Giorgio Agamben’s bare life and sovereign power in one. Merging the image of such sovereignty with the vision of creaturely anguish is at the heart of the powerful dissonance of many of the early portraits.

In a number of cases the configuration of terror and authority is a somewhat different one though. The animality that appears to eclipse the gravitas of representation and the presumed dignity of the human is less that of primal fear than of predatory instincts and ferocity. Think, for example, of Head I and II, in which an indefinable beast seems to emerge from within the silhouetted human form, baring a menacing set of canine teeth, or Painting 1946, another one of Bacon’s signature pieces. This latter painting is a picture of a dark, brooding figure, with blood on its upper lip, framed by a black umbrella and the sumptuous carcass of a partitioned bull looming behind it, a construction midway between canopy and cross, announcing the equally famous, later crucifixions (Three Studies for a Crucifixion [1962] and Crucifixion [1965]). The features of the man at the center of the image are partly hidden. Receding into the dark shade of the umbrella, he conjures up the figure of the executioner, masked so as to keep his anonymity but also to enhance the aura of violence that the painting exudes. The title of the work dates the image and inevitably offers it as an oblique commentary on the times, however much the painter has resisted such a possibility. Rather than signaling a departure into a new era, after the end of the war, the picture confronts the beholder with a strangely archaic and faceless vision, conflating the spheres of sacral authority and the butcher shop. We can easily discern the traces of the state portrait in the grand manner, but it is infused with an atmosphere midway between slaughterhouse and torture chamber.

If the meat had functioned as a kind of accessory in Painting 1946, the insignia of brute force, it starts to take center stage in the two later crucifixion paintings, which seem less about their ostensible religious subject matter than about the grained, marmoreal beauty of red meat, as Bacon himself has repeatedly emphasized. The creatures crawling down the crosslike structure are strange hybrids—half human, half animal. Rather than resembling any recognizable species, what slides down the cross calls to mind “the river of flesh” Bacon invoked in one of the interviews with Sylvester and from which many of the figures in his later paintings seem
to emerge. In view of its ubiquitous presence, Bacon has often been called the painter of flesh, dedicated to painting the flesh for its own sake, so to speak, as the organic, elementary substance of life, featured in its fluid plasticity and “convulsive beauty.” On some level the pathos of the later work appears above all the pathos of this flesh. It seems to be the true object of Bacon’s compassion and is figured in a variety of forms: flayed, wounded, worn by exhaustion, contracting in a spasm, whether from pain or in erotic entanglement, sculpted like the body of an athlete (or one of Michelangelo’s marvelous slaves) but also strangely diaphanous at times, as in an X-ray image. This array of different appearances of the flesh is matched by the variation in its formal treatment. The flesh is often subject to the violence of the paint, paint thrown on the canvas, smudged and spread in broad strokes, but there are also a few instances where it is treated more gently, with a softening touch, as it were, shrouding the agitation on display in a sort of haziness. The affective charge of the paintings is reflected not only in the strangely indeterminate attitude of the figures but also in their creator’s touch, alternately violent and tender.

Though Bacon insists that he is attracted above all by its material beauty and sheer immanence, clearly, the painterly fascination with flesh cannot be dissociated from its relation to sexuality and death, our desires, fears, and bodily needs, in short, with a certain kind of creatureliness that can inspire both extreme discomfort and compassion. In other words, as much as the flesh seems to figure as the paragon of mindless matter, it is also a motif that will invariably conjure up a set of familiar associations, evoking notions of lust and desire as much as vulnerability, mortality, and compassion. Needless to say, the varying degrees to which the tormented creatureliness depicted on Bacon’s later paintings gives rise to any of these affects and emotions are very hard to determine. It is far from certain, for instance, whether the tormented creatureliness depicted on many of the later paintings actually gives rise to any compassion. If the mark of pathos is the sufferer’s ability to maintain a reflective distance to his or her own suffering, to assert a minimal degree of freedom in the midst of turmoil, then Bacon’s visions of agony seem in a strange way to conform to this definition. But as we have seen, many of the figures appear strangely numbed, as if oblivious to the violence visited on them, and this near total lack of a sense of depth or reflexivity on the part of the figures seems to foreclose the very possibility of compassion. In a paradoxical fashion there
is the pathos of the flesh, soliciting our compassion for creaturely suffering, and then there is the pathos, if one can put it this way, of the impos-
sibility of compassion, the distinct sense of being confronted with a spec-
tacle that denies us the comfort of an unequivocal affective response.

I would like to conclude by turning to another dimension of Bacon’s art
that contributes to what one might call the affective indeterminacy of the
paintings or the peculiar dialectics of pathos and deflation they seem to
stage. It is a dimension very much at odds with the insistence on the non-
figurative, nonsemantic, and so forth, and one that the criticism that has
adopted Bacon’s own critical terms has largely missed. I am speaking
of the paintings’ rather obvious concern with mise en scène. For all the
insistence, both by the artist himself and the critics writing in his wake,
on instinct, intensity, energy, and the like, what I have called the affective
charge and efficacy of his paintings is sustained in many of them, above
all in the triptychs, by a strong intimation of drama.

This impression is based not just on the stagelike structures that ele-
vate and focus what is going on but also, more generally, by the “scenic”
look of many of the situations depicted in Bacon’s paintings. A great num-
ber of the pictures call to mind crime scenes or evoke sites that bear the
traces of some horrific, inscrutable spectacle. Mirrors, windows, shutters,
doorways, and other openings underline this scenic aspect, too, catering
to a voyeuristic and searching gaze. At times a spectator or witness figure
is included within the picture itself, thus reinforcing the beholder’s sense
of becoming privy to some mysterious or illicit goings-on. Circling and
magnifying certain sections of a body or face, as in radiation photogra-
phy, or using little arrows, the paintings also frequently draw attention to
certain details as though they want to present us with some kind of evi-
dence, clues for a possible story, but this story itself remains elusive. We
are looking at its abbreviated or condensed form, without being afforded
any kind of resolution or relief. The arrangements on these paintings, of
nondescript, sterile interiors, furnished with props from everyday life,
human and animal figures, suggest a complicated web of relations: cou-
ples in an agonistic embrace, either wrestling or making love, sometimes
framed by curious onlookers, or doubled and mirrored by figures wrench-
ing their bodies and engaged in the most bizarre exertions. Clearly, there
is a sense of tension and conflict, but the significance of these relations re-
 mains enigmatic. This is also true for the paintings that feature single fig-
ures. Placed in a void that seems alternately ominous and mundane, even banal, they appear to bear testimony to something, figurations of a silent memento, but, again, any possible revelation as to the nature of their apparent affliction, ennui or exasperation, is withheld from the beholder. Obviously, the bareness of the setting forms a contrast to (and thus reinforces) the agitation experienced by the figures. In some sense it gives rise to imaginary scenarios that would allow us to make sense of the situation, but it also thwarts our innate urge to discern the narrative presumably underlying the scene. To be sure, these tendencies are very much in conformity with the painter’s opposition to storytelling and, more generally, to the banality, as he puts it, of narrative and illustration. At the same time, however, the strong sense of mise en scène inevitably enforces the notion that the display, erratic and mystifying as it is, is given with some purpose in mind; indeed, it seems to urge the beholder to make sense of the symbolic charge of the painting. The striking appeal of Bacon’s pictures derives from the very tension between a sense of suspense, generating a desire for relief and resolution, and the unapologetic display of muted suffering and mindless violence.

If we take pathos to imply the attempt to endow suffering and pain with dignity and with a quasi-redemptive streak, if it designates a form of rising above or transcending the hardships suffered precisely as one is submitted to them, then Bacon’s appeal to the real is very much pitted against the possibility of pathos. He effectively denies the beholders of his pictures the relief or resolution of a narrative that would allow them to discern a rationale for what is being depicted. The suffering featured on his paintings is never subject to any form of sublation or transfiguration. Nor is there any intimation of reconciliation. It is true that he “quotes” a number of what one could call “pathos formulae,” both in terms of the formats and of the motifs he has chosen, the triptych, the crucifixion, the Sphinx, or the Erinyes, all of them subjects that, in one way or the other, are related to some kind of mythic doom. But the pathos associated with these subjects is strangely unsettled.

As in the other works examined in this book, Bacon’s pathos of the real is double-edged. It designates the inadequacy of our reactions in the face of the spectacle of violence and excess, the inadequacy, also, of the critical readings Bacon likes to dismiss in favor of the appeal to a fundamentally “unreadable” and unrecognizable real. But it also refers to
the opposite notion, namely, that the engagement with that which resists assimilation holds a momentous lesson, all the more so for being utterly undecipherable—hence the peculiar combination of heightened drama and its deflation, the simultaneity of a sense of exaltation and of perplexity, of pathos and apathy, that marks the encounter with the real staged in Bacon’s art.

Throughout these pages the “pathos of the real” has designated an ambition rather than a unified program. It has also named, if perhaps less explicitly, a certain skepticism vis-à-vis this ambition. As I have said, the phrase mixes hubris and humiliation, the highest aspirations with a sense of futility, the promise of breakthrough and the disconcerting experience of lasting opacity, alterity, nonsense. On the face of it pathos is the pathos of such ambition, but it is an ambition that fails. As a consequence the pathos in question, the pathos of the real, is in equal measure the pathos of this failure. The pattern is by now familiar. The preceding readings have all been preoccupied with similar puzzles, based on a certain coincidence of opposites: the refusal of pathos as a site of transfiguration and as a means of reconciliation, and the pathos of this refusal; the encounter with the real as a transformative experience, portending a different economy of suffering and pain, and the confrontation with the facticity of violence, erratic and unsublatable. In some sense the pathos of the real appears to be both itself and its own negation, an ambition and its disappointment, a refusal and the return of that which is refused on a different level. Though marked by a certain tension, this structure, dialectical but without synthesis as one might say, hinges as much on the opposition between the two terms of the formula as on their nexus, the contradictory and complementary character of pathos and the real. As excess the latter is pitted against the former as codified affect; at the same time pathos is a certain kind of excess itself, a response to, and an instance of, violation and transgression. As the counterpart to the symbolic and the imaginary, the real is, of course, antithetical to the notion of representation tout court, but as we have seen throughout, it very often has an air of drama about itself, indeed, of pathos. For all its irreducible opacity, it is nonetheless presented as pregnant with meaning. This troubled dialectic is what makes for the sense of indecision and ambiguity between ambition and failure at the core of engagement with the real.
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