

When the spirit drowns in the flesh

On Bacon and Bataille

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(This text was published in Dutch in 1988 in *La Chair*)

Can we look calmly at this painting? Does it give us enough opportunity to explore it before it yields its deeper significance? Although the orange universe suggests a vast expanse, no space is opened up, despite the creation of a sense of perspective through the minimal application of a border. The framed empty space seems to isolate and accentuate the figures rather than to relate them to one another. All the same, our gaze is guided arbitrarily by a compulsive dynamic between the figures. After all, wherever we look, we end up moving from the extended neck of the right-hand figure or from the inner, partly veiled, partly averted gaze of the left-hand figure to the central representation.

A representation? Of what? Our quest for meaning, which we probably unconsciously demand as the reward for our efforts, remains unanswered. The 'representation' does not submit to our importunate gaze. Rather, it avoids and disturbs it. It imposes its own dynamic on our gaze: we are swung in an oscillating movement from the right-hand foot of the pedestal through the amorphous body to the hanging neck, where we are forced to confront the head: or rather, the open jaws. The dynamic between and the intensity of the images confront us unexpectedly with a new space: an inner space, in which every quest for meaning in an identifiable experience is dissolved. The expression of the drawn mouth appeals directly to our deeper instincts. The blindfold and the gaze refer us back to the two other representations. Our gaze thus wanders over the canvas until we suddenly realise that we are looking. It is precisely because the canvas evades our control and comprehension that we experience the **compulsive violence of the gaze**.

Bacon's paintings affect us. Do we not feel a sense of unease when we look at the triptychs or the portraits? What kind of creatures are they? Mythological animals with human heads? The bodies are twisted, the faces dispersed, erased. Yet they are still recognisable in their indeterminacy. The screaming figures bound by iron frames are certainly not depicted realistically, but their scream still has an impact on us. The oppressiveness of what is usually an immeasurable space evokes an indeterminate, bodily experience.

There is no eye contact, but all the same the drawn-back mouth communicates something between a sneering, satanic laugh and a moan of pain. We are dragged into the diffuse no-man's land between pain and pleasure. The 'inner' space which opens up between us and the canvas as experience is the limbo which extends

outside the circumvallated fastness of our identity. A murky no-man's land, where every representation starts by getting lost and ends up by dissolving. The disturbing screams of Bacon's figures no longer represent anything. Even the title leaves us in the dark: *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*. A crucifixion? Whose crucifixion? Studies? Is the canvas not finished?

1. The mouth: from identity to intensities

Bacon's paintings do not mediate. They do not offer a neutral area where the painter and spectator can meet one another with a smile: they no longer represent any common objectivity. His figures are intensified to the boundaries of representation, though without going so far as to resort to abstraction. His images are situated between figuration and non-figuration. They are figural.¹ They move *on* the boundary of representation rather than *beyond* it, so that this boundary retains its unconscious character as a configuration of forces. The image is only a momentary solidification of them. Unlike the surrealist Dalí or the magic realist Delvaux, Bacon dissolves everyday reality by evoking one of its barely visible aspects - violence - as an ambivalent experience. It is the mouth, not the eyes, which 'communicates' this experience. Bacon has always wanted to paint a mouth as "Monet painted a sunset".² The mouth expresses the specific quality of our inner world better than the eyes do: "It is no longer a specific organ, but the hole through which the body fully escapes and through which the flesh (chair) descends".³ The gaping mouth displays the interior both literally and metaphorically as flesh, as the rent coherence of the body, while the scream is a concentrated expression of this tearing apart: "If you scream", says Bacon, "you are always the prey of invisible and incomprehensible forces which obstruct every spectacle and which even exceed the pain and the suffering".⁴

Around 1930 the French philosopher, novelist, pornographer and archivist Georges Bataille wrote a short text with the innocuous title The mouth in the cultural periodical Documents, which he helped to set up:

The mouth (...) is the most vital part, that is, the one which is the most terrifying to animals of the same kind. Human beings, however, are not constructed as simply as animals. It is even impossible to say where a human being starts. It starts inevitably on top of the skull, but the upper part of the skull is insignificant and unable to draw attention to itself: it is the eyes or the forehead which play the signifying role of the animal's jaws.

Among developed human beings the mouth has even lost the relatively protruding character which it still had among primitives. However, the violent significance of the mouth has been retained in a latent state. (...) And at major moments human life is concentrated once again in the mouth as in an animal: teeth gnash in rage, and fear and dreadful pain turn the mouth into an instrument

of agonizing screams. Then it is easy to see that an individual in distress raises its head, strains its neck like a madman, so that the mouth is aligned as closely as possible with the spinal column, i.e. in a position which it normally assumes in the animal state. As if explosive instincts in the form of a wild scream have to erupt directly from the body through the mouth. (...) One can see at the same time that there are at least two ways of liberating one's instincts: in the brain or in the mouth."⁵

For pain and desire, rage and euphoria, for all those situations in which individuals lose themselves in an unbounded surrender to their bodily forces, there is only one way out for the inner conflict: the mouth. As both sun and anus - 'l'anus-solaire', says Bataille⁶ - as both source of excessive heat and as excretory orifice, it pours out the indigestible violence. The communication of this inconceivable experience of "a subject at boiling point"⁷ calls not for unambiguous concepts but for series of phantasms with the parodic ('para-odos', 'parodos') function of access and passage. Bataille's early work actually does offer a range of mythological parodies, of which coitus is the exemplary case: it apparently shows the experience of a communication in which the partners are entirely absorbed in one another.⁸ Furthermore, he outlines the transition from animal to human being in a variety of different, often strikingly inventive ways. If there is not yet a gaya scienza on this theme, Bataille's 'mythological anthropology' is certainly a candidate. However, it remains at the fragmentary level of preliminary studies, approaches to perspectives which might reveal this 'reality'. The boundaries between philosophy and literature, anthropology and mythology sometimes disappear. Starting from the established fastness of science, Bataille roams through the wilderness which encompasses it on every side: the unspeakable no-man's land between impulse and thought, where thought still loses out to its own violence. They are - or rather, can only be - little more than excursions. No wall can be erected around this wilderness without annexing it as a new part of the city.

For Bataille, life is characterised by the need to limit this chaos: prohibitions concerning sexuality and death are its social expressions. But at the same time the need to drink from this animal source at regular intervals remains. Again and again people set themselves in the scorching light of an ultimate truth. They come into ritual contact with it through their totem animals, ancestors or deities. The mediation through sacrifices, however, is necessary because direct perception or communication would lead inevitably to blindness or insanity - a tragic experience attested to by many existing myths. For modern human beings, however, this 'positive' experience has been lost. Now that modern science claims to use its technologies to dominate the world and humanity as objects, incomprehension and uncontrollability can only be seen as lack or failure. The rituals seems to have disappeared, and with them the violence that is their hallmark.

Bacon's figures and Bataille's parodies circulate around a border. Note, they are concerned not so much with the specific distinction between human and animal, as with the feverish state in which human becomes animal, with the process in which their limited identity is momentarily dissolved in the intensities of the body. Gilles Deleuze remarks on this process of becoming animal: "The person who suffers is an animal, an animal that suffers is a person. It is the reality of becoming an animal. Bacon's work is constituted by an indecidable zone between human and animal."¹⁰ Bacon and Bataille are concerned with this indecidable zone, framed and open. The indecidability of their common 'object' affects their work. Bacon intensifies the representation as figurality, thereby dissolving it to some extent, while Bataille attempts to disrupt the modern truths about human beings - the theories put forward by the various sciences - by means of parodies. Canvas and text can be conceived as strategies to reactivate a suppressed dimension of humanity as experience.

Bacon's paintings do not reflect any new objective world. Nor do Bataille's texts present a new coherent theory of humanity. Their work does not offer any reassuring truths. It presents itself as a disruptive, violent experience. The consumption of their work is thus not without its dangers. It is a radical consumption, like alcohol, drugs, sex or rock 'n roll: excessive consumption soon leads from a state of euphoria to uneasy irritation or even a fearful sense of panic evoked by the temporary loss of control over the reality in which we live - or precisely by a comprehension of it. In philosophical terms, consumption leads to the temporary suspension of the identity that we hold so dear, to "the disappearance of the subject"¹¹. These experiences are as painful as they are seductive, a seduction in which plain truths become obscure or cloudy and lose their obviousness. We cannot gain possession of this experience: we are possessed by it.

Bacon and Bataille. A philosopher and an artist, working with the brush or with the pen. What is the connection between them? Does Bacon paint Bataille's ideas? Certainly not. That would make Bacon's paintings an illustration of a text, elevating philosophy to the status of ultimate touch-stone. The irreducible autonomy of the visual idiom and of the philosophical discourse would be destroyed. I would prefer to put it like this: given the nature of their medium, each of them embarked on the same enterprise: laying bare the violence that is inherent in human activity. To anticipate, we can claim that while Bataille both thinks violence and demonstrates the violence of thinking, Bacon represents violence and reveals the violence of the gaze. While Bataille breaks open the limits of thought and language, Bacon shift the limits of our imagination.

Language and representation trace boundaries in the chaos of events in which we are submerged and the plurality of things with which we are confronted. Text and image can reveal this violent act of tracing boundaries by problematising their own existence. Before discussing this disruptive effect, I think it is worth saying

something about the common experiences of Bacon and Bataille. Perhaps this tells us something about the violence in their work. After an exploration of possible connections, I shall discuss the nature of the violence in their work, before concluding with a provisional assessment of their importance for the relationship between art and philosophy. Three perspectives are outlined: a biographical one, a social psychological one, and a philosophical, or even religious one. In other words, do they share a common background or do they know one another, did they grow up in the same cultural and political climate, and can their work be seen as the expression of typically modern dilemmas? Somewhere where these perspectives intersect it will be possible to talk about the couple: Bacon and Bataille.

2. A common biography?

We could take the Catholicism to which they were both exposed as children. Philosophers rightly connect Bataille's obsessive preoccupation with death and eroticism with a disturbed father-son relation and a failure to come to terms with a flirtation with Catholicism. Bacon left home at a very early age and had an equally unsatisfactory relation with his father, while his Irish background guaranteed an overdose of aggressive Catholicism. Does this explain anything? I do not think so. However interesting detective work of this kind may be, psychological reductionism is inadequate. Can we speak of an influence by Bataille on Bacon's work? There is a slender connection, in that after a short stay in Berlin, Francis Bacon's travels brought him to surrealist Paris in the thirties, where the tyrannical André Breton, monarch of surrealism, held sway with his highly realistic sceptre. As a good dogmatic Marxist, he knew how to use the weapon of alienation better than anybody else. Former supporters - renegades - were associated with Documents. Bataille and Michel Leiris, his bosom friend, were among the founders. Leiris was not yet on friendly terms with Bacon, but later on he joined Bacon's small circle of intimates. Bataille published many articles in Documents, sometimes accompanied by illustrations. One of the photographers, Eli Lotar, accompanied the painter André Masson - a friend of Bataille and illustrator of his obscene texts - on a working visit to the Villette abattoir. His photograph of lumps of meat stacked up against the wall was published together with an article by Bataille, in which the latter claimed that "the abattoir originates from religion in the sense that the temple had a dual function in former times; it was a place for prayer and killing at the same time. This is undoubtedly the origin (...) of a disturbing coherence between the mythological mysteries and the lugubrious majesty which is inherent in places where blood flows."¹² In short, the abattoir as parody of the temple.

The Mouth also included a photograph of a scene from Eisenstein's film Battleship Potemkin. We can recall the historic scenes. The populace protests, the palace guard kills. The soldiers clean up the steps leading to the palace, mowing down everything that stands in their way. A nursemaid is hit right in the face, and the pram bumps

down the steps to its end below. Then a close-up of her face: her spectacles are broken, her right eye bulges out of its socket. She screams. Her wide-open mouth conveys her fear of death. That is the moment recorded in the photograph. That scream.

We can be sure of one thing: Bacon had copies of Documents which included these articles and photographs. He read them, and the article and photograph of the abattoir made an impression on him. So they might have inspired him during the production of his first canvases. There are sporadic references to Bataille in the Bacon literature. A recent study of his work by Dawn Ades goes into this relationship in somewhat more detail, but the language is still vague. Thus "the photographs and texts in Documents might have been a source"¹³, or "it is possible that various elements can be detected in Bacon's early paintings (...) which run parallel to Bataille's text".¹⁴ In short, "It might be possible to refer Bacon's human/animal to Bataille's discussion of this theme".¹⁵

At any rate, Bacon is fascinated by the carcasses and by the screaming nursemaid. (The latter can also be seen from the fact that he used this image 25 years later in Study for a Nursemaid in the film 'Battleship Potemkin' (1957).) However, he was already fascinated by photographs before his arrival in Paris, and it was even to become a methodological starting point for his work. His rather morbid interest in the excessive excrescences of the body had also taken root before his reading of Bataille's texts, and to such an extent that Bacon visited all the second-hand bookshops to obtain medical books containing explicit illustrations of diseases of the mouth. We can thus conclude that, even if Bataille's texts did influence him, their impact was not decisive.

And did Bataille know Bacon's work? It is not certain whether he was familiar with his work in the thirties - which was all destroyed later, incidentally - but we do know that he met him at a later date. His last book - The Tears of Eros (1961) - is a description and illustration of how the suppressed relationship between death and eroticism has been depicted over the centuries. There are no abstract works among his selection of illustrations, from the Lascaux cave paintings to paintings from the 1950s. Nevertheless, the paintings that he selected are not representations of the reality in which we live. They are overloaded with symbolism. The representations are full of tension. In other words, Bataille only selects those images which give us a glimpse of the intensity beyond the boundaries of the representations themselves. He included one painting by Bacon: at first sight two men making love on a bed that is enclosed in a tubular frame. The canvas is somewhat grimy, seems to be unfinished, and is filled with smears and scratches. The caption is as follows: "Francis Bacon, the room. Hannover gallery, London. Francis Bacon, a young English painter who is one of the most important of his generation, is distinguished by unusual paintings which express an idiosyncratic lack of polish."¹⁶ 'Idiosyncratic lack of polish'? Bataille is attracted by this violence. Apparently he recognises something in this

representation. But his comment is restricted to this brief remark. The rest - including the influence of their relationship with Leiris - is food for speculation.

3. Antennae for the Zeitgeist?

Let us adopt a broader perspective. These summary biographical details refer to the influence which the cultural and socio-political climate of the inter-war period had on them. We can thus widen our perspective somewhat by anchoring this summary biographical thread to this more general aspect. The 1930s were a turbulent period in every way. In cultural terms, tradition was being systematically overturned - dadaism, surrealism and Documents are only a few examples of this trend. In the political arena, the initial innovation was followed by a reactionary backlash culminating in the rise of fascism. Both tendencies contain a more or less naked version of violence. Bacon and Bataille react in an over-emotional way, perhaps even neurotically, amid this sea of violence. They experience an ambivalent human reality which is constricted by the tendency to control the violence of nature, on the one hand, and the opposite tendency to let violence loose on a massive scale: from conceptual and artistic to verbal and manifest political violence. (John Russell¹⁷, an advocate of psychological explanations, sees the violence of war as the constitutive element in Bacon's work.)

This ambiguity is not confined to the inter-war period. Violence is a problem of the entire modern period. The elimination of violence from public life at the end of the 18th century has not prevented it from rearing its head elsewhere. The monopoly of violence by the state apparatus has only brought about a superficial and temporary peace. It has made violence unrecognisable as an omnipresent compulsion and as catastrophic, explosive dissipation: as institutionalised violence it is internalised in all kinds of practices by individuals, or it makes its appearance as a disciplinary, rationalised genocide. The modern era, with its wars, nuclear rivalry, post-colonialism, unemployment, terrorism and environmental pollution may not be more violent than other eras - there was enough violence in the pre-1800 world as well - but then it was possible for some of this violence to run riot as a public spectacle within the limits of what was socially regulated, ranging from carnival to the public execution of criminals. In the past it was a sign of divine wrath or regal vengeance; in the modern era it is only an expression of powerlessness on the part of an individual who is basically peace-loving. Since the exercise of violence has become the exclusive prerogative of the secular state and every form of private violence has been penalised or converted into an educational compulsion, violence as a positive experience has disappeared from the scene, despite the fact that it goes on around us every day. We thought that we could control external nature with industrial technologies and inner nature with therapeutic technologies, but we are virtually forced to look on in suffering as these processes lead us to total destruction. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the evil which unleashes

violence is no longer the exclusive property of an empire on the other side of the Iron Curtain, but that it is part and parcel of our ordinary suburban life. Violence is unrecognisable as an experience, it is true, but it is omnipresent as an overwhelming activity. The impossibility of thinking it positively wreaks a catastrophic revenge in violent excesses which go beyond the reach of our imagination.

4. The death of God

Against this background of violence as a dilemma, both Bacon's paintings and Bataille's writings offer themselves as strategies for the positive treatment of violence. Dawn Ades also assigns them this common endeavour: "It should be emphasised that it is not my purpose here to suggest that Bacon illustrated Bataille in some way, but that their enterprises, partialities and attitudes run parallel."¹⁸ Their enterprise can be regarded as the undermining of what they regard as the failed Enlightenment project, in which a steady progress in truth, the humanisation of history and an increasing control over the world were deemed possible.

They both point to the violent act of the modern human being *par excellence*: what Nietzsche announced as Patricide, the death of God. He is the key absent figure. Perhaps this is why Bacon's paintings are mere 'studies' of figures at the base of a crucifixion. The crucified himself remains out of the picture, beyond the representation. The place where once God's throne or his worldly vicar, the Pope or the Monarch stood, is now a gaping, empty chasm. Every question of truth must throw light on this void, but it is an illumination which proves to be transient. Image and text become black holes which absorb every truth, every theory, every glimmer of light. These absorbent holes have a pendant in interiority, where the indecidable zone mentioned earlier is to be found. It is a zone to which is relegated everything that evades the grasp and comprehension of modern individuals: insanity, disease, perversion, crime. The disappearance of the sacral, of divine sovereignty as the ultimate foundation of truth and values, has thrown them back on themselves. The experience of violence that is intrinsic to sovereignty - as wrath or vengeance - no longer refers Outside or Upwards, but Inside, to a sovereign 'interiority'. If the desires of the flesh used to refer to demonic temptation or God's scourge, they now only refer to a deficiency in the human heart. AIDS no longer refers to possession by the devil, but above all to the alleged perverted character and dissipated life-style of the person in question. At best, it refers to the lack of control over technology: an irresponsible selection of blood donors.

Modern human beings no longer experience death in terms of the hellish light of eternal fire or the diffuse light of a blessed condition, but against the background of an everlasting darkness. The *unio mystica*, the terrible blissful union with God, has been supplanted by the *horror vacui*, the fear of emptiness. While people used to strive toward union with God or a pact with the devil, nowadays they reach toward

this void in pseudo-rituals, in the ecstasy and bliss they hope to find in sex, drugs, drink and rock 'n roll - ecstatic experiences which have no purpose and which are sought as an end in themselves.

That is why Bataille places so much emphasis on the unpleasant aspects of modern life. They still offer people the prospect of a transgression of their boundaries and an experience which approaches the mystic experience. It is the experience of pointlessness, of absolute dissipation which, paradoxically, gives activity its meaning: saving in order to gamble, producing in order to freak out. If the spirit drowns in the flesh, interiority steps out of itself. 'Expérience intérieure', says Bataille, 'an 'inner' experience. But he understands " (...) 'expérience intérieure' as what is usually called a 'mystical experience': the state of ecstasy, at any rate the disunity of a mediated emotion."¹⁹ It is not a devout experience, but a religious one. It is not a question of the 'interiority' of modern human beings, but of the experience in which inner and outer are linked. Epistemologically, it is the experience in which the subject-object dichotomy is transgressed. Inner experience is above all the experience of the border between the two. That is where the body becomes flesh (*la chair*), and where it suddenly falls prey to its own division.

Are the weekly visits to the bar, disco, museum, stadium, bingo hall or brothel necessary forms of dissipation, pseudo-rituals which we no longer recognise as such? Can violence no longer be ritualised positively? It certainly can. According to Bataille, art and eroticism are the rituals of dissipation *par excellence*.²⁰ It seems that violence can still be evoked and exorcised in these practices. These experiences make the void, death, livable. He thus sees a direct connection between *la petite morte* and death, between death and the orgasm.

Bacon too is convinced that the most intensive way of living, the movement of the flesh beyond the spirit, is equivalent to death. He sees our problem not so much as the Shakespearean dilemma of "to be or not to be", but in the paradox "to be and not to be".²¹ The question of death - i.e. the absolute dissipation of every identity - also occupies a prominent position in his thought. He says himself that he is constantly "followed by a sense of mortality. For, if life excites you, its opposite, death as its shadow, is bound to excite you too. Perhaps it is not a question of excitement, but you are aware of it, just as you are aware of your life".²² Erotic and death, ultimate ecstasy and sudden loss of identity are evoked in Bacon's canvases.

5. Artistic and philosophical violence

Well, it is precisely this dilemma, which has been our lot since the 19th century, which is immune to psycho-analytical or social psychological explanations. Bataille's *La Somme athéologique* and Bacon's crucifixions refer to this wider perspective. But how do they give their project shape? Not in the same way, since they both have to take into account the specific demands of their medium: painting

and science, visual idiom and the discourse on truth. Violence acquires a different form in a canvas than in a text. Philosophical violence is not the same as artistic violence. Let us first consider which violence we are talking about.

Bacon's violence is different from the violence that we see in paintings by Delacroix, Goya or Rubens, for example. He does not paint recognisable acts of violence. It is not the theme, but the style of painting and the use of material which is violent. However, the erasure, scratching and rubbing have their effect on his themes: we experience them as violent too. The opposition between form and content is transcended, as the form largely intensifies and determines the content.

Bacon's early figures are first isolated in frames, and then deformed. If we turn to his later portraits, we recognise the same technique, or rather tactic. The faces avoid any eye-contact, and are usually somewhat averted. If they do face the spectator, the eyes are usually blurred, glassy or 'dispersed'. The spastic dissolving of the body is a tactic of "a body which tries to escape through one of its organs in order to pass into the surface, the material structure."²³ The organs are so intensified that they lose their specific functions. The screaming mouth of the first paintings is transformed to become the spasms of the deformed body.

Bacon inflicts violence on his models. He isolates them, deforms them, wipes the scream from their faces, dissolves structures. The face and the body become movements of the flesh. This cruel assault has nothing to do with an urge to distort reality. It is the product of Bacon's insight that reality is chaos, chance and violent. But violence has many faces: "I think that the violence of my life, the violence in which I have lived, differs from the violence of the painting. If you talk about the violence of the paint, it has nothing to do with the violence of war. It is connected with an attempt to recreate the violence of reality."²⁴ In other words, Bacon does not represent violence; he produces it in his activity as a painter, not by the painting itself, but by "the suggestion of the painting itself, which can only be conveyed by the paint."²⁵ Bacon does not re-present violence, he presents it.

The painting is thus not a representation of reality. It is a reality in itself, i.e. the creation of a reality which is realised as an experience by both the painter and the spectator. The following question is put to Bacon in one of his interviews with Sylvester: "Is our reaction to that [to the presence with which the painting is endowed, HO] not a reaction to the form's own qualities, which is apparently connected with our experience, (...) but not in a way which boils down to a comparison with something else?"²⁶ Bacon's affirmative reply confirms that one of the roots of violence is the surrender to chance. The intensity of the images is due to a unique moment of chance which they embody. Bacon 'systematically' leaves room for chance in creating a canvas. His intervention, arbitrary smears or scratches, lead to new discoveries. His 'unconscious' desire takes effect in an interaction between violent intervention and the material. Bacon has to follow this movement. He surrenders to the process of production and loses his grip on it. That is how the

intensity of bodily violence is inscribed in the resistant material. Its forms lend the bodily violence its significance. The flesh becomes image, the image becomes flesh. This violence determines not only production, but consumption too. In other words, the visitor to a museum or gallery undergoes this experience anew. Bacon appeals to the spectator's instinctive urges. He appeals not to the intellect but to the instinct. As a radical materialist, he wants his disturbing pictures to penetrate the main 'perceptive capacity' of the spectator: the sensation or the nervous system. Bacon literally gets on the spectator's nerves.

But how concrete is this violence to which we are exposed? The writer Bernlef sums up his experience of Bacon's work in the following way: "He knows how to convey an experience to the spectator of his paintings, which brings about a combination of fascination and repulsion."²⁷ Horror, then, although Bacon himself denies it. A combination of fascination and repulsion: the unsuspecting museum visitor who turns away in disgust and comes back the next day with his wife to show her what awful rubbish hangs there this time. His reaction bears witness to incomprehension and helplessness, but they can function as precursors of a positive indecidability. The spectator loses his/her hold on the canvas, on the world as a represented space, and on him/herself as the autonomous centre of signification. The canvas allows of only once choice: surrender or withdrawal.

So if Bacon's work testifies to anything, it is to a specific kind of violence which can only indirectly be referred to political violence. It is a property of the painting, but it can only be detonated in an experience. The confrontation with the spectator is essential. Or, as the art critic Edward Lucie-Smith put it: "As far as modern art is concerned, I consider that the right question is not 'what is happening in the painting?' but 'what is happening in the spectator?'" At heart, modern painting is not about what happens on the canvas, but what the painting does to the spectator."²⁸

We should be on our guard. As in the case of Russell, the danger of a psychological reductionism is lurking just around the corner. It is not a question of two separate questions. I would like to connect them with one another. It is not a question of an event that takes place inside the spectator, but of a disturbing event, *beyond the deliberate intentions or precisely out to destroy any coherent experience on the part of the spectator*, in which a new experience is formed. It is precisely in this quality that violence offers itself. By speaking exclusively in terms of the experience of the spectator, there is a danger that the meaning of the painting will be sought either in the intentional act of the painter or in the meaning attributed by the spectator's gaze. In both cases the painting loses its autonomy and once again becomes a medium in which a message is conveyed by a painting subject to a perceiving subject. Instead of this view in which subjectivity remains the exclusive arena of signification, a choice is being made here for the primacy of the work: the work does not communicate anything, it signifies. It is not a medium, but the destination which is sought for its own sake. It is not a situation, but a solidified process. That makes the

experience of art a sovereign experience. The work presents itself as the banishment to an Outside, by which the signifying activity of the artist and the spectator of the work of art is suddenly suspended in an ecstatic experience.

philosophical violence

Perhaps this view of the violence in the canvas is palatable for those who already display a measure of goodwill to it, but once we start talking about the violence in and of the text the going gets rougher. What on earth are we supposed to understand by it? Can a text be violent? We are not here concerned with texts on violence. Bataille did write them regularly, but he is barely distinguishable from a run of the mill sociologist in them. I am much more interested in the effect of the texts, a violent effect which, as I shall argue, is analogous to the effect of the canvas. If the experience of reading is expressed in an equally ambiguous experience of fascination and repulsion, and if the meaning is not left up to the reader, but on the contrary evades the reader's grip and comprehension, leaving him/her in a state of frustration and irritation, then the text might be called violent.

Let us start with the production of the text. What ideas does Bataille himself have about writing? One of his most dramatic characterisations is to be found in the opening sentence of his book on Nietzsche: "What obliges me to write, as I see it, is the fear of going mad."²⁹ Writing to counter fear, writing as therapy! Is that the key to understanding it? Certainly not. This would allow every failure to understand on the part of the reader to be attributed to Bataille's frustrations and helplessness. Of course, some see Bataille's 40 years of writing in a wide variety of genres and on the most diverse themes as the clearest proof of the absolute failure of this therapy. His strange turns of thought, the style which is sometimes entirely fragmentary, the tendency to develop and break up insights in one and the same text, or even to push them over the brink of hallucination, all fail to convince many professional philosophers. No, Bataille inflicts violence on truth and philosophy. He plays tricks with the achievements of science. He does not understand truth; he assaults it.³⁰

But perhaps Bataille takes philosophy as an activity too seriously. Perhaps his love of wisdom is too importunate, which might also explain the contravention of the integrity of the body of the text. Still, Bataille's presumed failure can be seen in an entirely different light. Perhaps he does not want to eliminate fear entirely, but only to exorcise it. In other words, to evoke it within a strict form in order to allow it to rage within defined limits. Perhaps Bataille is out to write to show the movement itself, the violent train of thought, instead of harnessing it in order to seize and comprehend reality. Perhaps he writes in the awareness that reality can never be put into words. But at the same time he recognises that words are a necessary instrument and our main means of access to reality. The world is simultaneously born and dies in language.

Although one of Bataille's first books - the 'pornographic' novel Histoire de l'oeil,³¹

which was published under a pseudonym - was a product of a psycho-analytic treatment, this connection proved to be incidental. Fear already plays a double role in the production of this book. Agreed, it is possible to elevate fear to the status of the main driving force in his work.³² But we must not forget that it concerns a fundamental experience which can never be reduced to the personal problems of the author. This experience stands out against the background of the death of God. It finds concrete expression as fear and desire for an unattainable object. While Bataille's work is thus propelled and fuelled by this experience of fear, it also exposes itself to the excess and dissipation of every coherence. Reading his work therefore implies a confrontation with a stylised state of possession, which the narrow perspectives of the discourse of the human sciences can only reduce to a traumatic experience or a neurotic tension. This reductionist vision completely misses a fundamental dynamic between his life and his writing.

Bataille's 'neurosis' is primarily a product of an attitude to the world which was assumed in the course of the 19th century, which can be labelled modernity. In the academic world this attitude is manifested as writing about things, describing things as objects. Bataille tries to adopt a different attitude in his description of things. He turns his texts into black holes in which the presumed objectivity - and consequently subjectivity - disappears.

Like Bacon's painting, Bataille's writing is an obsessive activity. This obsession receives new form in the disillusionment of the unsuspecting reader, who expects to find a new truth, but who finds nothing but non-sense as initial fascination turns into distaste. The reader feels as misled as a cheated lover. But it is precisely this seductive quality which accounts for the power of Bataille's texts, not in the production of truth, but in the seduction to the other side of truth, which need not be untruth. However, it is not the language itself which seduces, but the forces at work in the text. The pleasure provided by consumption of the text evokes fascination and repugnance. The text offers itself only to slip out of our eager clutches at the last moment.

Those who read Bataille in the hope of finding a coherent theory will be disappointed. His lack of regular themes is matched by the lack of clearly defined concepts or a central perspective. Meanings are slippery and perspectives shift within the entire oeuvre and within individual texts. However, this slipperiness is a component of the seductive strategy rather than a sign of theoretical incapacity: it is the erotic force of the text. The reader is invited to surrender to the body of the text. It is a text of pleasure, about which Roland Barthes has the following to say: "it creates a situation of loss, which creates a sense of unease (...) causing the historical, cultural, psychological foundations of the reader, the coherence of his predilections, values and recollections to founder, and throwing his relation to language into crisis."³³ The text demands openness and surrender, but not in an authoritarian way. Bataille's writing is too playful and his themes too suspect for that. They do not

legitimate any authority: they challenge it. Instead of accumulating and producing truths and meanings, his writing throws them away. Instead of providing answers to questions, there is an immense piling up of questions. Like the canvas, the book is only the material effect of a practice, which is understood as experience. The text as a rounded off whole is in a certain sense purely fortuitous. Bataille also stresses this regularly with a number of stylistic tricks, such as breaking an argument off in the middle, fragmenting his own texts or explicitly retracting what he has just said. (Does this not match Bacon's erasures and rubbings?) Do these stylistic tricks free the body of the text, its flesh, perhaps even the naked and violent desire for wisdom as incessant questioning?

Bataille eroticises the solidified text back into a field of forces. The written word gives way to the activity of writing. The air of completeness of the book conjures up only the illusion of a totality. Writing becomes a means, a mediatory activity between writer and reader for the production of truth. According to Bataille, this desire for control destroys the autonomous effect of writing. Its sovereign aspect is lost. The question disappears, the answer and the solution are provided. Bataille refuses to accept this position. He continues putting questions and thwarts every attempt to reach a solution. Bataille lacks the will to know. It is not replaced by an unwillingness or incapacity to know, but by a will to not know. Or perhaps a will to ask: "The answer is the question, the question which is the world, the question which is death."³⁴

6. The in/re-surrection of the flesh

So word and image became flesh. The body of the text offers itself in pleasure, while the materiality of the canvas reveals itself as violence. In violence and pleasure, in death and eroticism, the body loses its coherence - which is only knowable as the totality of scientific objectifications - and is experienced as a field of intensities: as 'flesh'. Its violence is held in check by these objectifications, and this activity is confirmed in therapeutic technologies. However, the 'flesh' resists every conceptual annexation: the wilderness and limbo refuse to be circumvallated, the violence of the flesh refuses to be pinned down. We should therefore regard the concept 'flesh' as a limit term: it continually evades us, forming the receding horizon toward which our thoughts move.³⁵ Michel Leiris explains this in this study of Bacon as follows: "Through the mediation of the figures, the spectator who approaches them without idées fixes gains direct access to a reality of flesh and blood which is not very different from the suffocating experience provided by the physical act of love-making in everyday life."³⁶ Like Barthes, he emphasises the need to distance ourselves from self-evident truths and prejudices. While Bataille's way of doing this is to throw all negative and positive forms together, Bacon elaborates the traditional themes and genres in such a way that they acquire an erotic charge. He 'hystericises' the Popes and the Crucifixions, paints triptychs or their

portraits - something which has become almost impossible in the modern era. If Bataille perverts traditionally loaded symbols and images, Bacon hystericises them. While it was primarily the mouth which served as an entrance and channel to the flesh (as a 'parody') in the early works, in the portraits it is the 'dispersed' face, deprived of any structure. This is where Bacon's portraits differ from a Velasquez or a Goya. The latter still express the truth in all its glory. The self-assurance of Pope Innocent X, the complacency of the family of Charles IV (though Goya did add a light touch of irony here), are still representations of the figures of a sovereign world. Bacon disrupts this order. When he paints Innocent, he hystericises him, which entails a gain in imaginative 'truth' for the contemporary spectator. The latent violence of the sovereign power that remains hidden in the tranquil sublimity of Velasquez' painting is made manifest in Bacon's portrait. Bacon's Pope screams for recognition. He sits as an insignificant body, as a shell robbed of all its power, riveted in the hollow universe of his lost sovereignty. Bacon's Pope is from another world. In the experience of the spectator the Pope becomes an impossible signifier of his world.

Thus Bacon's paintings not only play with the truth and the world; they are put at risk, and ultimately lost in the gamble. In a recent interview Bacon says: "But painting is difficult, it's so difficult. It is a lie; a lie which is necessary to get at the truth, or to state a truth."³⁷ The status of this 'truth' is dubious. It has no existence outside the painting, it is the product of the painting. But the painting still 'refers' to something which is experienced as an irrepressible human 'truth'.

After the isolation in frames and behind veils and after the deformation of the faces, the total dissipation finally occupies the foreground: the figures begin to merge into the material surface. The access to interiority as flesh is no longer restricted to the mouth. The whole body is swallowed by the flesh; it is turned inside out. Bacon displays interiority as exteriority, like a sacrifice.

The body is no longer structured by the skeleton and supported by muscles, but it disintegrates and merges with the world. The cohesive, objectified body is sacrificed. The flesh is thereby partly meat, partly flesh. It is virtually impossible to distinguish between the two. Where the 'body' still appears to be intact - i.e., where it still displays an uninterrupted contour - it already presents itself in a state of 'boning', from Painting 1946 (1946) and Crucifixion (1965), where the flesh literally falls from the bones, to The second version of painting 1946 (1971), Meat carcass and a bird of prey (1980) and Three figures and a portrait 1975 (1975). The flesh of physical desire is also the meat that is consumed in the ritual meal after the sacrifice to ratify the physical community with the gods. Death and eroticism coincide.

Bacon's crucifixions, Lotar's carcasses and Bataille's text on the abattoir all refer to this experience of the flesh which can never be grasped intellectually.³⁸ Not science, but only an inner experience can restore the awe inspired by 'flesh'. The repulsion

and fascination, associated with the sacrificial ritual (or the spectacle of slaughter in the abattoir for an unsuspecting passer-by), are evoked by means of Bacon's canvases and Bataille's texts. Their paintings and writings perform the act of sacrifice. And as sacrifice used to establish contact between the human community and the gods, the communication in the void left by the disappearance of the gods is realised in the work of art. Writer and painter, reader and spectator do not communicate with one another in the work of art; the communication realised through the work of art is a dis-location. Communication is no longer an exchange of information, but a sharing in an ecstatic experience.

Violence is conceived as a 'religious' experience, by which the established religion becomes a self-parody. Its history bears witness to the need both to impose limits and to transcend them in order to guarantee the identity of the community. The crucifixion of Christ was subject to the same ritual mechanism: the violent sacrifice of his death established a new communication between humans and God, facilitating a new identity - that of the Christian community. This sacrifice is re-enacted every Sunday in the eucharist: according to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the wafer and the wine are not symbols of the body and blood of Christ, but they actually become body and blood through the ritual. Cannibalism flourishes in our churches. But at the same time the abattoirs and battle-fields are the scene of the unthinkable sacrifices for a society which can no longer conceive of God, violence or death. While Bacon's figures destroy the coherence, Bataille sacrifices truth in his parodies. Both in the production and in the consumption of the work, violence acts as loss of self, ecstasy and dissipation. It constantly moves in the repetition of the ritual toward its own suspension.

7. Art and philosophy: the reality of appearance

Are we not being too easy on him? Is Bataille not simply a dirty old man? Can we attribute him more noble motives than the sublimation of his sexual frustrations? And if so, is his view of reality and truth still livable? Does it not deny us any access to truth, or at any rate a meaningful perspective? Do we not fall back into absolute relativism, or even into fatal nihilism? I do not think so. Unless we lose sight of the constant duplication of the perspective-bound truths presented here. Bacon expresses this duplication as follows. He calls himself a cerebral pessimist and a 'nervous optimist'. The former expresses the impossibility of grasping life intellectually, while 'nervous' optimism still considers the direct experience of things to be possible through instinct - a deconstructive experience which enables us to live new values.

The paradox in dispute reveals itself as a positive sense of tragedy. It is expressed in the insight that we have to impose limits (prohibitions, language, values, identities), while at the same time we know that life will push us beyond these limits and 'unmask' them as appearance. Human existence, the reality of the limit is only

revealed in this transgression. This tragic dynamic presents an entirely new relation between appearance and reality, between truth and untruth. Parody surrenders truth to untruth without destroying it. Art can offer philosophy the reality of appearance. Instead of the destruction of the world's illusions - the modernist project - philosophy will derive new strength from art enabling it to generate new values, devise new perspectives without linking them with the universal claims of a discourse which is out to establish truths. In short, art offers philosophy a game with truth, or rather: truth games.

Well, this truth game is played in the unresolvable tension between truth and untruth, between appearance and reality. Bataille mythologises, perverts and eroticises established theories and methods by exposing them to seduction in order to expose their blind spot - thinking violence and the violence of thinking. Bacon intensifies the body to the limits of representation. In this way they both take risks with limits and in their momentary dissipation they confront us with an impossible experience: the experience of the flesh.

Bataille's texts draw their inspiration from art insofar as they outline a reality which seduces us, or at any rate fascinates those of us with perverse inclinations. The rest experience only distaste and repugnance for so much conceptual and verbal violence. All the same, neither he nor Bacon appeals to a 'more real' reality. Their truth is as empty as it is self-evident. They do not offer any new truth nor any solution. If they mention solutions at all, they are never durable truths, but they are always a literal 'solution' in an unspeakable experience:

"If eroticism is situated at the acme (of the human spirit, HO), the question which I pose at the end of my book is situated there too.

But it is philosophical in nature.

The highest form of philosophical reflection, I believe, coincides with the acme of eroticism.

(...)

What are we without language? It has made us what we are. Language alone reveals at the limit the sovereign moment where it ceases. But at the end the speaker recognises his helplessness."³⁹