# ‘A TERRIBLE BEAUTY’

## Francis Bacon: disorder and reality

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Two years before his death, the self-professed atheist Francis Bacon travelled to Colmar. The man who pronounced ‘I believe in nothing. We are born, we die, that’s it’, made the journey to Alsace to see the Isenheim altarpiece of Matthis Grünewald.

Grünewald’s Crucifixion panel was for Bacon a touchstone, one of the few works of art to which he conceded greatness. According to French author J-K Huysmans, it

> strikes you dumb…. It is as if a typhoon of art had been let loose and was sweeping you away, and you need a few minutes to recover from the impact to surmount the impression of awful horror made by the huge crucified Christ… At the ends of the unnaturally long arms the hands twist convulsively and claw the air... while the feet, nailed one on top of the other, are just a jumbled heap of muscles underneath rotting, discoloured flesh and blue toenails….

Grünewald’s hyper-realism, the blood-spattered pain of his hanging Christ pale against a night-dark landscape, the feet swollen and green-tinged around the wound of the nails, the lips grey with thirst, the thorns gouging into the delicate skin of the forehead and scalp (said to be the most excruciating of tortures) are difficult to look at. Grünewald, as Bacon, peels back the skin of appearances to expose the soul.

‘Truth comes in a strange door,’ Bacon observed in one of many interviews recorded with David Sylvester. The dogged non-Christian (raised in Protestant Northern Ireland) said of the Crucifixion theme, ‘I haven’t found another subject so far that has been as helpful for covering certain areas of human feeling and behaviour….all types of level of feeling.’ Although he painted several Crucifixions, and studies for attendant figures, Bacon’s principal subject was abject humanity, man caged by his mortality, his isolation rendered absolute, often painted elevated on a dais, boxed into abstract space-frames or empty rooms. ‘We’re all in lone, private prisons,’ he said once. It was the incurable Calvary of the human condition, physical

and psychological, that spoke to him, although one of the first Crucifixions he painted, in 1933, hints at a Holy Ghost crucified, its diaphanous skeletal form lighting the darkness. In 'Studies for figures at the base of a Crucifixion' of 1944, he depicts Aeschylus' Furies as blinded, amputated grotesques screaming their outrage at the atrocities of humankind. Later triptychs of 1962 and 1965 use slaughterhouse imagery of splayed carcasses and butchered flesh, the livid red and pink and orange of distorted, eviscerated corpses mercilessly evoking the evil in humanity, the everyday violence of a so-called civilised world.

Grünewald's 16th century masterpiece was painted for a monastery founded for the care of the sick, at a time when disease was correlated with sin. The lonely, the sick and the abandoned, their bodies erupting with boils of the pestilence known as St Anthony's Fire, gazed up at it as they petitioned God for release from suffering. Ergotism, caused by eating diseased rye, infected the blood with poisonous inflammation and produced tumours and ulcers that eventually wasted the whole body. Boils and abscesses crawled up the arms and legs until gangrene rotted hands and feet away.

For Bacon, suffering flesh is inextricably linked with the experience of life itself: 'My art is a reflection of my life,' he declared, and one of his most frequent (no doubt champagne-fuelled) declarations was 'We are meat.' Bodies are meat and for Bacon, Christ on the cross elicits the same response as meat on the butcher's slab, meat that once lived and had sensation but quickly decays when deprived of breath, flesh that bleeds, then putrefies and turns cold as it dies. 'You're working then about your own feelings and sensations, really,' he told Daniel Farson, 'You might say it's almost nearer a self-portrait.' He was not intending blasphemy: he saw all mankind's suffering, including his own, in the Crucifixion.

The ripped, convulsed feet of Grünewald's dying Christ, the sinews congealed with darkened blood, are shocking. We *feel* the wound, the lonely and hideous death beyond what most of us can imagine of pain and doubt, the physical agony in a wilderness of human ignorance and cruelty, the unbroken circuit of human life deprived of redemption, of Calvary without Easter Sunday. The artist gives us more than the moment of despair, he transmits the *actual* despair. The horror of Grünewald's Crucifixion makes you feel what it must be like to be crucified, as Bacon's paintings make you feel the darkness and violence of the human condition. Both are shocking.

Shock is exactly what Bacon was after. 'Some paint … tells you the story in a long diatribe through the brain', but that was not enough: looking at paintings should, as he famously put it to David Sylvester, 'unlock the valves of sensation. A painting

has a life completely of its own. It lives on its own … unlocking the valves of feeling and therefore returning the onlooker to life more violently.' His 'Crucifixion' of 1965 is manacled meat, where 'the very substance of paint can make a direct assault on the nervous system', without the intermediary of brain or intellect, less still of knowledge or speech. For Bacon, reality *was* sensation: 'what is life *but* sensation – what we feel?'

But the trouble is, 'if anything is strong, people think it is painful'. As he remarked to David Sylvester in 1973, 'We nearly always live through screens – a screened existence. And I sometimes think, when people say my work looks violent, that perhaps I have from time to time been able to clear away one or two of the veils or screens.' In common with Beckett, Bacon was possessed with a determination to 'touch the bottom', declaring that when you realise nine-tenths of everything is inessential, 'what is called 'reality' becomes so much more acute.'

His figures as sacks of flesh, as repugnant offal-bags or curtains of raw beef, face us with an elemental truth. His paintings may dismay and disgust us, but they shake us out of our complacency.

> 'Some people think that my paintings are horrible. Horrible! But then you only need to think about the meat on your plate…. No work that anyone can do can ever have the violence that life itself has got: I can only think that they never think about life.'

His insight into the truth of the human condition is deeply unsettling, facing us with uncomfortable truths and taboos about life as flesh and animality. But there's a point to his provocation. Grünewald, using religious imagery equally ghastly and potent, painted his retable as a *therapeuticum*, a healing agent for the desperately sick as they prayed for a miracle cure. Both artists knew that the truth can be transformative as well as painful. Grünewald's realism spoke to the lowly and disgusting condition of those struck down with St Anthony's fire: *by His wounds are we healed.* Bacon referred to Grünewald's horror as 'a grand horror, in the sense that it is vitalising.' That the work of one of the most disturbing artists of the 20th century commands higher prices than any other post-war painter suggests the possibility, likewise, of Bacon's work speaking to the psychological sickness of a secular and degenerate society, a society that acknowledges him as one of the greatest interpreters of the contemporary nightmare by consistently filling the galleries of his exhibitions. (He himself would have scoffed at the record-breaking sale of one of his triptychs to a billionaire football-team manager: Bacon derided the circus of art-as-commodity or investment, the ownership of *objets d'art* as status-symbols aggrandising the rich and

the ignorant. 'The whole thing has become so boring and bourgeois. Art is just a way now of making money.' He cared nothing about what people thought of his paintings, realising that their reactions largely reflected personal attitudes to art and life. 'I think most people enter a painting by the theory that has been formed about it and not by what it is.' He abandoned and destroyed many of his own paintings, and was derogatory about many that survived.)

Can a man as brutally honest as Bacon really be the 'morbid poet of the world of evil', as some critics would have it? Bernard Levin dismissed his 'puffing and booming' as 'one of the silliest aberrations even of our exceptionally silly time.' But paintings that attract so many and evoke such violent responses do so because they challenge our conditioning. Bacon's art is a fearless response to the cry of the human heart, to existential anxiety. Explanation was anathema to him: 'it's almost an impossible thing to talk about…. Pavlova was right when somebody asked her what she meant when she was dancing *The Dying Swan* and she said, "Well, if I could tell you I wouldn't dance it."' Bacon was repelled by attempts to express what cannot be explained in rational terms. 'I loathe all explanations of that sort.' His response to the inexpressible or the inexplicable was to paint it.

'One of the things I have wanted to do is to record the human cry…the whole coagulation of pain, despair'. Over and over again he tried to paint the scream itself rather than the horror that provoked it: the scream of the Odessa steps, of his Velásquez-modelled popes, of his studies for heads. Bacon had an obsessive fascination with the mouth, it represented for him the access point and container of all human experience and feeling. The scream that emanates from the canvas is the cry of human solitude, distress and dereliction. One only has to look at the George Dyer triptych of 1973 to realise that his images are painful to look at not only because they are violent, but because they are compassionate. Maggi Hambling wrote in 1985: 'I consider him full of love in his response to humanity – full of truth…. His paint physically, sensually, *is* pain, pleasure, humour, love, isolation and death – more intensely than anyone else's alive today.' The paintings of dark businessmen alone behind the bars of their understanding are animals trapped in and tortured by the awareness of their ignorance and mortality: 'Where is God in all this?' is the silent scream. No true atheist would ask such a question because no true atheist wishes to be cured of his unbelief. Nor would a non-seeker bother to ask it. As Helen Lessore wrote of Bacon, 'The very agony of his unbelief becomes so acute that, by the intensity of its involvement with final questions, the negative becomes as religious as the positive.'

Distortion of scale, as Grünewald had found with his outsize Christ on the Isenheim cross, is a way of seeking beyond appearances, reaching beyond what we perceive as reality. Bacon told Sylvester, 'All I want to do is distort the reality of the human figure into reality….. I'm always hoping to deform people into appearance. I can't paint them literally.' To capture this he had to capture movement, and his distortions bring that movement, that life, to his figures. He claimed there was no violence intended in the distorting process, his images were images of the real world, of the violence of life. 'Just read the papers,' he said, 'nearly all reality is pain…. People tend to be offended by facts - or what used to be called the truth.' His violence is a recognition of Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil' embedded in the story of the 20$^{th}$ century. 'Life is so violent: so much more violent than anything I can do.' By de-facing and de-forming his figures Bacon was seeking to portray truth, fearlessly rattling the bars of our seeing.

*All systems tend towards disorder,* wrote Newton. Behind the distortion and disfigurement of Bacon's subjects lies a perception of the disorder of reality. His work refers back to naked matter, to the universal tendency to dissolution as formulated by Shrödinger in 1944 as the second law of thermodynamics. Entropy, the mathematical measure of the disorder present in a system, points to the prevalent disintegration of life, to the fragile borderland between order and disorder. If left on their own, things fall apart, run down, and become inert. Chaos is the common condition of life. But, as Bacon said, 'I believe in a deeply ordered chaos, and in the rules of chance.' This is only just short of a profession of faith. His paintings are an attempt to introduce order into the mess of everyday existence, his subjects often contained in box-like divisions, or delineated cages, or hexagonal ground-planes, or against eventless horizons. He frames them in uniformly plain gilt frames (he used the same framer throughout his career). By shocking us he arouses sensation, then frames our incoherent response. He shakes us into a glimpse of an only-just-controllable reality, suggesting an order implicit in disorder, catharsis within the stasis. 'I'm a cement-mixer', he said once, 'a pulverising machine', an appropriate metaphor for the religious impulse to build, to connect, to impose order on something we do not understand and cannot control. 'With Nietzsche I believe that man must remake himself.'

Underlying the immediate violence of his imagery there is a profound search going on. Bacon, daily in his studio converting pain – to him the hallmark of existence - into the will to organise things, was all too familiar with the paradox that it's sometimes necessary to break something to discover what it is. His canvases may evoke disgust, horror, visceral recoil, yet the distortion and disfigurement of his subjects are an attempt to make sense of our existential suffering. And therein lies its

beauty. ‘There is no beauty without the wound,’ Bacon was fond of saying. His artist’s eye found beauty in butchers’ meat that other people, even meat-eaters, find repellent. He saw beauty in the carnage of a car crash strewn over a road in late afternoon sunshine. He sees a Turner sunset in a bloodstain. This beauty is there in his paintwork, in the exquisite flesh tones, in the brushstrokes of a drain cover or in a pure flat colour chosen for a background.

Bacon takes up a struggle that is as old as art itself – with life and its accomplices flesh and pain, death and tragedy. A crucifixion is emblematic of the ultimate disorder where evil prevails. it is the archetype of human cruelty inflicting inhuman pain. He towers over the painting of the second half of the 20th century, but the artist who arrests the moment will never be a man of the past. As Alan Bowness put it in his introduction to the Tate Gallery 1985 retrospective, the time is *now*.

> ‘No artist in our century has presented the human predicament with such insight and feeling. The paintings have the inescapable mark of the present…for Bacon the virtues of truth and honesty transcend the tasteful. They give to his paintings a terrible beauty that has placed them among the most memorable images in the history of art. And these paintings have a timeless quality that allows them to hang naturally in our museums beside those of Rembrandt and Van Gogh.’

The old man stood before Grünewald’s Christ at Colmar, terrifyingly alone on the Cross. Having pronounced, ‘I believe in nothing. We are born, we die, that’s it’, Bacon later said, ‘I often say anything, you know, to pass the time’. Daniel Farson, for many years a close friend, wrote that ‘In his perverse way, Francis Bacon is one of the deeply religious painters of the century.’ Maggi Hambling concurs: speaking to Mark Lawson after the opening the Tate exhibition in 2008 she said, ‘a desperate search for God is his driving force – despite his protestations of atheism.’ The darkness that fell over the earth at Calvary is not the final statement for Bacon: he saw that there is a necessary violence, a violence which opens the door to something else. As he pointed out, ‘images can shatter the old order leaving nothing the same as before.’

Bacon had spoken of how people come away from the Grünewald Isenheim altarpiece ‘as though purged into happiness, into a fuller reality of existence.’ Whether this was true for him too as he faced the last months of his life, we may never know. In the last triptych he painted in 1991, he steps off the earth into the darkness of one of his black rectangles, looking out from a reflective, haunted self-portrait. ‘You don’t know what it’s like to be eighty and alone at midnight,’ he said to his godson Francis

Wishart. But it cannot be insignificant that, knowing he was critically ill, he chose to be admitted to a Catholic convent where he died with a crucifix hanging on the wall behind his bed. He was cremated to taped Gregorian chant, in a coffin with a metal cross on the lid.

Looking up into the larger-than-life Christ Crucified in the Isenheim altarpiece the ageing artist would have seen in the rictus hands and tortured feet the desolation of love and death he too had spent his life representing on canvas: images of man vanquished, but in the shockingly distorted figures, a spirit that confronts and challenges the Furies.

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