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JOHN G. HATCH

Fatum as Theme and Method in the Work of Francis Bacon

"As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport."

Gloucester¹

The elusiveness of Francis Bacon's paintings to critical analysis are a measure of their success. As much as one is tempted to examine a particular influence on Bacon's work, and the temptation is great since Bacon has been quite forthcoming in acknowledging sources, it is practically impossible to draw direct and, consequently, revealing parallels. Furthermore, focusing on any single element in one of Bacon's paintings usually undermines the meaning of the work rather than clarify it. In a sense, though, this was Bacon's objective. In one of his last interviews, Bacon observed:

Most of the time when one talks about painting, one says nothing interesting. It's always rather superficial. What can one say? Basically, I believe that you simply cannot talk about painting, it just isn't possible.²

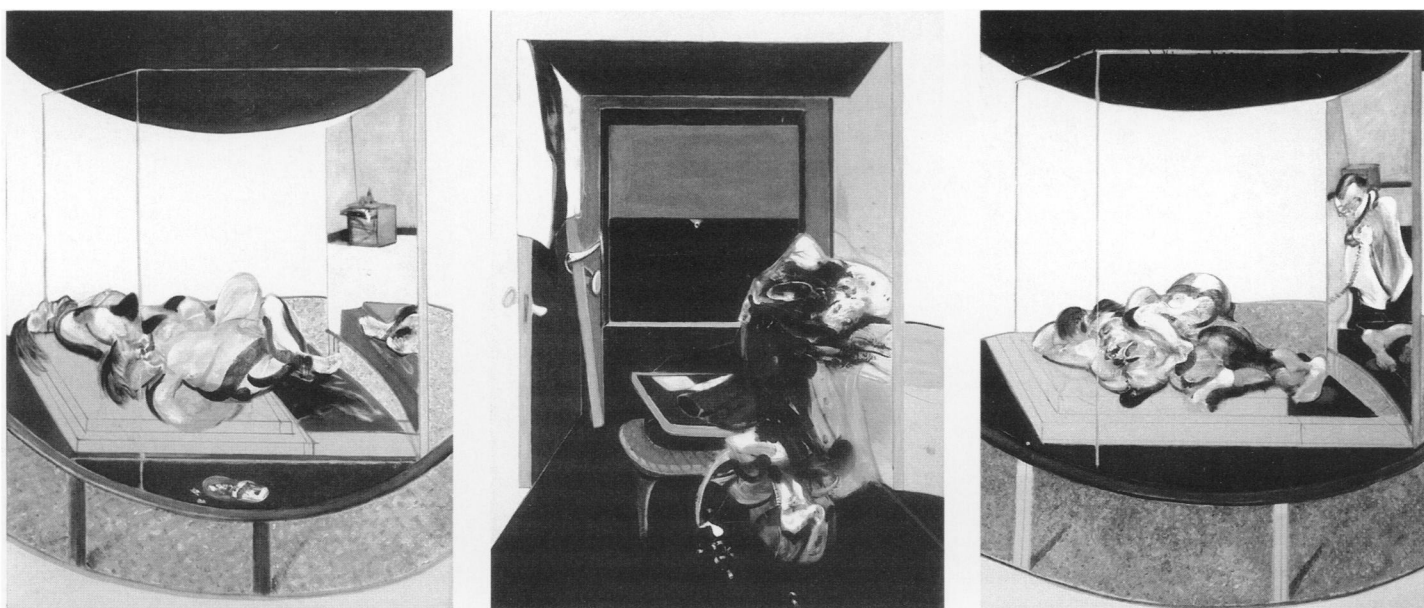
Yet, Bacon's paintings have been talked about a great deal with varying success, as one might expect. Part of the problem is that Bacon himself could not refrain from talking

about them, fueling an interest in possible links between his work and that of painters like Van Gogh and Degas, or writers such as Aeschylus, Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot. That poets and playwrights are mentioned frequently by Bacon is rather curious since he prefaced the passage cited above by noting: "Painting is a world of its own, it's self-sufficient."³ In addition, his desire to allow narrative to play only a very minor role in his work seems to preclude any parallels with literature.⁴ But Bacon stressed his favourite authors too often for them to simply be ignored in the context of his own work.

The key to understanding the influence of writers like Aeschylus or Eliot is supplied by Bacon himself:

...I've hardly ever done things directly inspired by particular lines or poems. I admire them and they excite me and they goad me to try and work much more. That is the way they influence me. It's very difficult to use any poetry for one's painting: it's the whole atmosphere of it that affects me.⁵

In large part what Bacon admired of the writers he read was not what could be appropriated and re-formulated through the language of paint, but rather what could not. Certainly, what the writers had to say was of great importance to Bacon and their



1) «Triptych—Inspired by T. S. Eliot's Poem "Sweeney Agonistes"», 1967, oil on canvas (each panel 198 x 147.5 cm).
Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1972.
Copyright: Estate of the Artist.

message is echoed in his work. However, he was particularly fascinated with the manner in which their message was conveyed. This is made evident in an oft-quoted passage of Bacon's where he paraphrases the poet Valéry: "...I want very, very much to do the thing that Valéry said—to give the sensation without the boredom of its conveyance."⁶ An important aspect of Bacon's desire to emulate someone like Valéry is that what the French writer says in poetry cannot be translated into any other linguistic form, even prose. In other words, the manner in which Valéry conveys what he wishes to say is unique to the medium he is working with: as Bacon put it with reference to music and painting, "they represent two modes of expression which have nothing to do with each other, and that each artist in his field is confronted with very different problems."⁷ And this is what Bacon sought to emulate, of creating imagery which is unique to painting and cannot, in turn, be translated directly into poetry, for example. Certainly the message itself could be appropriated but the means and manner of its conveyance could not. It is this unusual relationship between the message transcending the medium and its expression as unique to the

medium that has led recent writers, like Ernst van Alphen, to label Bacon as both a Modernist and Postmodernist, illustrating well Bacon's success in eluding categorization while highlighting the inherent problems of a Postmodernist approach.⁸

The particular literary references found in Bacon's paintings are never direct in the sense where one can simply chart the events portrayed in a painting according to the narrative of the text which inspired it. Bacon himself sought to diffuse any such correspondence between text and image; for example, *Triptych—Inspired by T. S. Eliot's Poem "Sweeney Agonistes"* [Fig. 1], according to Bacon, was given its title by the Marlborough Gallery after he told them he had just been reading *Sweeney Agonistes*.⁹ More importantly, though, the very nature of the literary sources Bacon drew upon made it impossible to simply translate text into image. Eliot's poem, *Sweeney Agonistes*, which is presented as a fragment of a play, lacks any type of character description or stage direction to allow it to be visually/physically recreated on stage. Even a more traditional Eliot stage work like *The Family Reunion* saw its 1939 London production soundly criticized for its personification of the



2) «Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion», 1944, oil and pastel on hardboard (each panel 94 x 74 cm). The Tate Gallery, London. Copyright: Estate of the Artist.

Eumenides, which fell far-short of the powerful and evocative literary description presented in the text; as one critic of the 1939 production put it: "...it is one thing to suggest an eerie presence in fiction, quite another to present the Eumenides in evening dress in the window embrasure."¹⁰ In terms of Aeschylus' Oresteian Trilogy, the problem is similar. How does one translate in visual terms Aeschylus' famous line, "the reek of human blood smiles out at me"? This is a powerful literary simile which if one were tempted to translate it in visual terms would certainly appear banal if not ridiculous. This may partly be why Bacon preferred the Surrealist writers to the painters, or William Blake the poet rather than Blake the painter, in that the painters too often tried to literally translate the imagery of the writers.¹¹

Bacon was not interested in translating from one medium to another for the simple reason that any translation involves some sort of interpretation, which Bacon wanted to avoid at all cost:

Explanation doesn't seem necessary to me, either of painting or of other artistic fields, such as poetry. I don't

believe that it's possible to give an explanation of a poem or a painting.¹²

Furthermore, translation involves a loss in terms of the original meaning which, for Bacon, is conveyed in large part by the manner in which a particular language is used.¹³ He does not dismiss the use of other media as a source of inspiration or stimulus (and one can certainly be affected by the "atmosphere" of a work) but, as Bacon states with reference to music and painting, "to transcribe the language of painting into the language of music or vice versa, to me seems quite impossible... they are two such different fields."¹⁴

In stressing that it is not any particular detail of a poetic work that inspired him but rather the atmosphere generated, Bacon was describing his own work as well. In the opening pages of the published interviews with David Sylvester, Bacon remarks: "the other day I painted a head of somebody, and what made the sockets of the eyes, the nose, the mouth were, when you analyzed them, just forms which had nothing to do with eyes, nose or mouth; but the paint moving from one con-



3) «Study After Velasquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X», 1953, oil on canvas (153 x 118.1 cm). Purchased with Funds from the Coffin Fine Arts Trust; Nathan Emory Coffin Collection of the Des Moines Art Center, 1980.1. Copyright: Estate of the Artist.

tour into another made a likeness of this person I was trying to paint.”¹⁵ In other words, meaning emerges in the totality of the image rather than in any one of its constituent parts. But even this is not entirely correct since the seriality of many of Bacon's paintings and the re-emergence of certain figures and themes indicates that if one is to make sense of Bacon one has to look at the totality of his work and not at a single image; as Bacon himself pointed out: “one image against the other seems to be able to say the thing more.”¹⁶ This presents a daunting task for anyone wishing to write about Bacon, but it is not an impossible one. What it means is that any aspect of Bacon's work one wishes to de-contextualize and examine must eventually be re-contextualized to be of any value. In essence, if one is going to examine Bacon's work one must approach it in a manner similar to how Bacon created it.

The manner in which meaning is conveyed is why Bacon is interested in certain writers and painters; it is an aspect of his own work which he focuses on almost exclusively in his interviews. For Bacon, how one paints is just as important as what one paints; but too often the technical aspects and imagery in his work have been treated separately.¹⁷ His interviews often convey an exasperation with questions pertaining to the images used in his paintings, and understandably so, since the imagery is simply a manifestation of the theme embodied in the act of painting itself. When Bacon speaks of how he paints he is equally addressing what is painted and one must examine the crucifixion theme, Aeschylus' Oresteian trilogy, or Eliot's poetry and plays, for example, as painted subjects that are tightly interwoven with how they are painted. As with most of us, Bacon was attracted to certain stories, themes, painters, writers, etc., because what they expressed paralleled in some way his own views on the human condition. These views were inevitably a magnification of his own experience and would be constantly acted out every time he painted.

Painting 1946 (Museum of Modern Art, New York) is the work most often cited in any discussion of Bacon's working methods. As Bacon has often related, he began with the intention of painting a bird alighting on a field:

but suddenly the lines that I'd drawn suggested something totally different, and out of this suggestion arose this picture. I had no intention to do this picture; I never thought of it in that way. It was like one continuous accident mounting on top of another.¹⁸

Here, Bacon describes what became a highly productive interaction between intentionality and accident that dictated his painting technique for the rest of his artistic career. Even as late as 1992, a year before his death, Bacon still



4) «Head VI», 1949, oil on canvas (93.2 x 76.5 cm). Arts Council Collection, Hayward Gallery, London. Copyright: Estate of the Artist.

approached the canvas with a certain idea of what he wanted to do only to witness this idea transformed with the application of paint.¹⁹ At times Bacon toyed with the Surrealist idea of simply letting chance or accident completely determine the appearance of his works, but this would have undermined their essential theme, namely that of “the interaction of... accidents and the will of the artist...”²⁰

Bacon is extremely cautious in using the terms accident or chance and often phrases the dialogue between will and accident in Freudian terms of the conscious and unconscious:

What does finally appear on the canvas, in the best of cases, is probably a mixture between what the painter wanted and... accidents... It seems to me that in painting,



5) «Study for Portrait of Van Gogh II», 1957, oil on canvas (198 x 142 cm). Private Collection. Copyright: Estate of the Artist.

and perhaps also in the other arts, there's always an element of control and an element of surprise, and that distinction perhaps comes back to what psychoanalysis has defined as the conscious and the unconscious.²¹

It is Bacon's emphatic distaste for metaphysical explanation which accounts for his use of the terms accident or chance; he is quite explicit in dismissing ideas of divine inspiration, muses, or any such other-worldly terms in explaining his working method.²² In a discussion of the combination of will and accident, Michel Archimbaud asks Bacon: "A sort of mysterious alchemy in a way?" To which Bacon replies, in predictable fashion:

No, it's more chemistry really; it's the natural phenomenon of substances mixing to give new substances. There's no mystery...²³

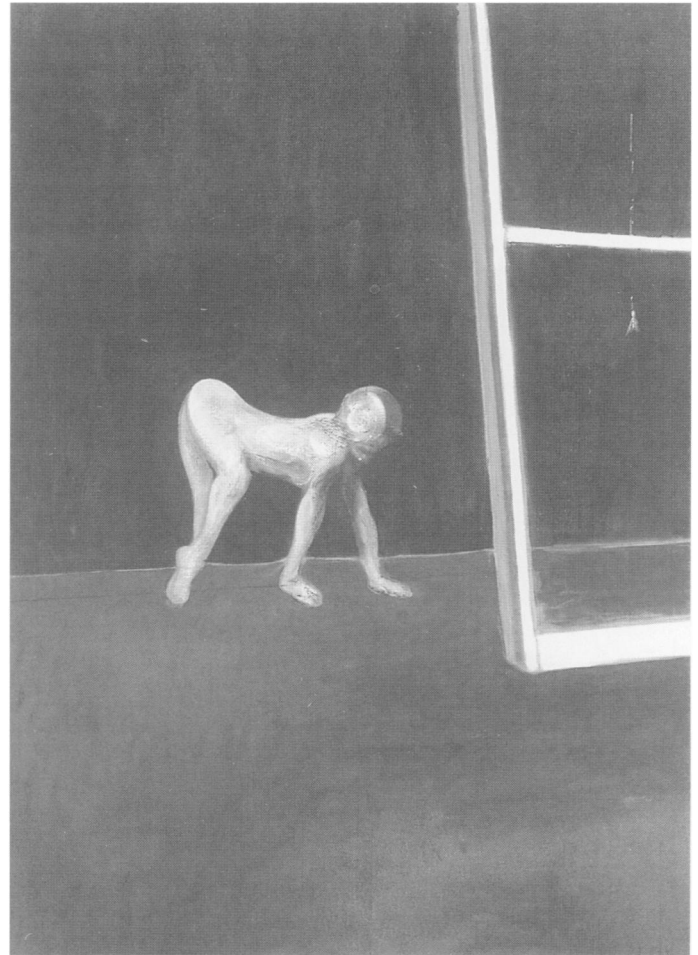
Yet, there are times when Bacon's guard is down, when there is a great deal of mystery involved which Bacon is, more often than not, at odds to explain.²⁴ He comes close to admitting an independent volition on the part of paint itself which the artist interacts with:

When I was trying in despair the other day to paint the head of a specific person, I used a very big brush and a great deal of paint and I put it on very, very freely, and I simply didn't know in the end what I was doing, and suddenly this thing clicked, and became exactly like this image I was trying to record. But not out of any conscious will, nor was it anything to do with illustrational painting. What has never yet been analyzed is why this particular way of painting is more poignant than illustration. I suppose because it has a life completely of its own. It lives on its own, like the image one's trying to trap; it lives on its own, and therefore transfers the essence of the image more poignantly.²⁵

One is hesitant to characterize Bacon's formal technique in terms of a conflict between individual will and fate but the above clearly implies it. In addition, Bacon often remarks in published interviews his pleasure at witnessing the sort of inevitability chance marks can give:

...what so-called chance gives you is quite different from what willed application of paint gives you. It has an inevitability very often which the willed putting-on of the paint doesn't give you.²⁶

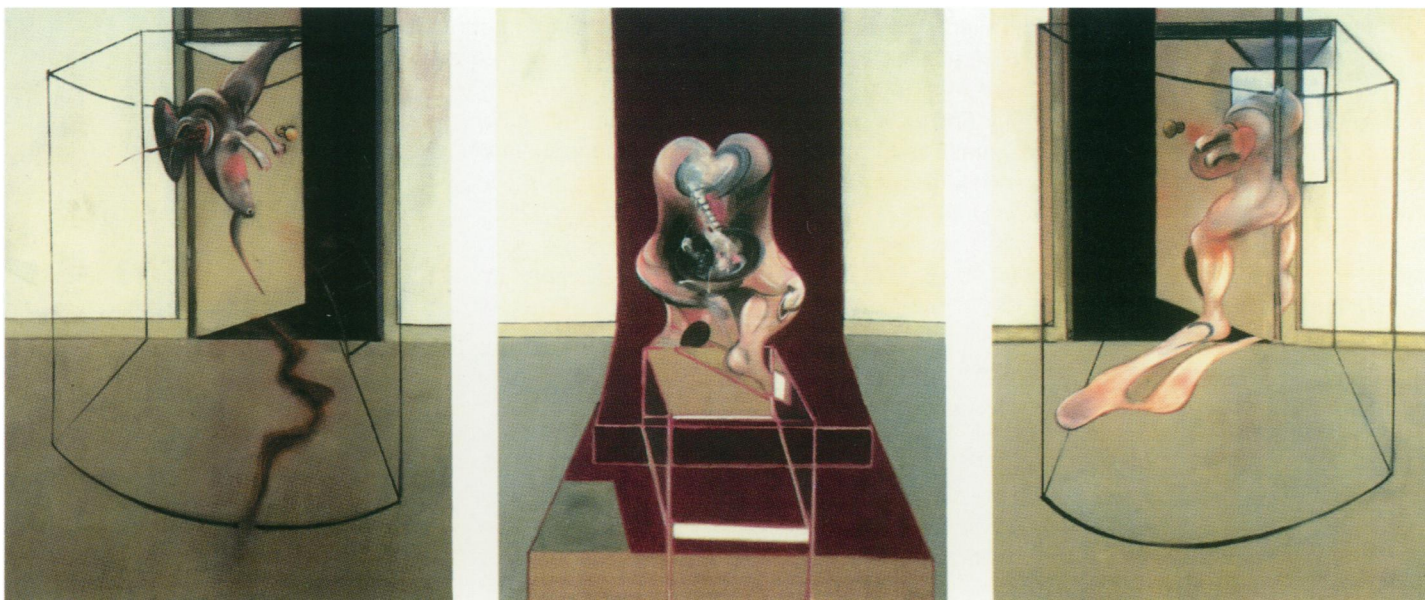
There is, though, an element of control at work in this process which relates to Bacon's characterization of the inter-



6) «Paralytic Child Walking on All Fours», 1961, oil on canvas (197.5 x 140.9 cm). Haags Gemeente Museum. Copyright: Estate of the Artist.

action between will and accident as one between the conscious and unconscious. The artist does not simply take all the chance marks produced, but only interacts with those which in a very Freudian sense are uncanny.²⁷ Nevertheless, herein lies Bacon's attraction to such subject matter as the crucifixion of Christ, Aeschylus' Orestes, or Eliot's work, each deals in some form or another with the interaction between free will and 'fate.'

Bacon would never have approved of the use of the term 'fate', especially given how vehemently anti-religious he



7) «Triptych Inspired by the Oresteia of Aeschylus», 1981, oil on canvas (each panel 198 x 148 cm). Astrup Fearnley Musee for Moderne Kunst, Oslo. Copyright: Estate of the Artist.

was.²⁸ But there is no doubt he believed in some kind of secularized notion of fate on a number of different levels, all revolving around conflicts between individual volition and events that appear to be beyond our understanding and control; they become fate when we ascribe meaning to them, or as Bacon put it with reference to life in general:

I think of life as meaningless; but we give it meaning during our existence. We create certain attitudes which give it a meaning while we exist, though they in themselves are meaningless, really.²⁹

For Bacon, religion is a system of attitudes which creates and imposes meaning upon life in order to give it some sense or purpose and, not surprisingly, it is one of the first subjects of his work.³⁰

Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion [Fig. 2] is an incomplete work, as Bacon himself admitted, and one which he had intended to complete.³¹ John Russell has argued that this triptych does not relate specifically to the crucifixion, but it seems inevitable that the death of Christ is the first thing one would think of upon hearing the word 'crucifix-

ion' and Bacon must certainly have known this.³² The story of Christ represented, for Bacon, that of the penultimate tragic hero: an individual who has, as Bacon himself put it, "been forced by circumstances into a unique situation."³³ To ensure the fulfillment of Christ's fate, Bacon has the Eumenides present at the Crucifixion, Greek mythological figures who ensured the carrying out of divine justice.³⁴ What is particularly interesting about the Eumenides is that they were specifically enforcers of divine justice in cases of familial murder, and thus are quite relevant for an image depicting the sacrifice of a son by his father.³⁵ Whether Bacon was aware of the specific role of the Eumenides and did not simply look upon them more generally as enforcers of divine rule is difficult to determine. But why should they be depicted as witnesses to the Crucifixion? One would assume that Christ was willing to accept his fate and that the Eumenides need not be present; but Bacon may have had in mind Christ's rather curious last words, "Father, father, why hast thou forsaken me," introducing an element of doubt which could have required the services of the Eumenides.³⁶

Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion was soon followed by the Pope series. These works, inspired by

Velasquez's *Pope Innocent X* (1650: Galleria Doria Pamphili, Rome) and photographs of Pope Pius XII, also deal with tragic figures in unique situations. The Pope is an individual who must relinquish all sense of self-identity (including his family name) in order to become the representative of a system of beliefs that no human being could ever be expected to adhere to completely. Like Christ, the Pope has very little opportunity to cheat fate because he is such a visible or public figure; as Bacon put it: "He's in a unique position by being the Pope, and therefore, like in certain great tragedies, he's as though raised onto a dias on which the grandeur of this image can be displayed to the world."³⁷ The tragedy of the situation in the Pope images for Bacon, a devout atheist, is that the individual has relinquished himself completely to a stifling system of beliefs and one which is an illusion veiled as an ultimate truth, i.e., a human creation which has been ascribed to some higher order of being which does not exist.³⁸ More importantly, as will be suggested in Bacon's later works, the system itself denies the basic biological instincts that lie at the heart of human nature. This is the source of the violence Bacon often portrays, one which is mental rather than physical, although it can ultimately manifest itself in physical violence.³⁹

In *Study After Velasquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* [Fig. 3] Bacon literally portrays the veil of illusions that mentally traps the Pope and elicits his cry of horror.⁴⁰ But Bacon had toyed with another visual device that could more successfully convey the message of mental entrapment or isolation, namely his space-frames as found, for example, in *Head VI* [Fig. 4]. On a formal level, these frames act to isolate the image and minimize any potential narrative.⁴¹ However, this formal device does equally serve as a metaphor for psychological entrapment, highlighted by the fact that the skeletal outline of the frame could never function as a physical barrier. A further irony is found with the number of times isolated figures in space-frames are surrounded by a vast, open spatial setting, generating a "perverse space", as David Mellor characterizes it.⁴² One wonders why Bacon's figures do not simply walk out of their prison. A similar idea is presented in Bacon's anthropomorphized images of animals and, specifically, *Study of a Baboon* (1953: Private Collection) where the primate is fenced in and emits a cry of despair at being trapped, echoing the numerous human cries found in Bacon's paintings. Yet, the fence only closes-off the top portion of the picture and the baboon could easily make its escape into the open landscape beyond. Again, the point is that the barrier is mental rather than physical.⁴³

The space-frame as a visual metaphor of mental entrapment is used in a number of contexts to comment on the different strictures that are imposed upon us and that, ultimately,

we impose upon ourselves. Bacon condemned any establishment which served to stifle individuality or the expression of individual will.⁴⁴ This was an aspect of Surrealism that appealed to Bacon, as he pointed out in his interviews with Archimbaud: "I think I've been influenced by what the movement represented in terms of revolt against the establishment, in politics, religion and the arts..."⁴⁵ But he also attacked our blind acceptance of society's rules as outside of our control, i.e., as something which is in the hands of fate. Bacon's *Man with Dog* (1953: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo), inspired by an Eadweard Muybridge photograph and Giacomo Balla's *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* (1912: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo), shows a dog on a leash walking by a gutter. It presents yet another comment on the human condition, namely that of the domestication of our basic biological/animalistic instincts which are suppressed in the name of civilization, religion, etc. The leash is held by the lower half of a shadowy figure whose identity is unknown, but this oppressor's shadow suggests a human presence. In essence, the oppressor is ourselves or rather the social structures which we create and endorse.⁴⁶

There are a number of figures in Bacon's work which elude the trappings of society's conventions. In large part, these figures have done so because they have been rejected by society. Vincent van Gogh is one such figure whom Bacon admired and painted in a series of four works based on Van Gogh's *The Painter on His Way to Work* or *The Road to Tarascon* (1888: destroyed during World War II). In Bacon's *Study for Portrait of Van Gogh II* [Fig. 5] Van Gogh is depicted walking along a road which is shouldered by a space-frame. Significantly, the Dutch artist is presented outside this frame. What is unusual, though, is that Bacon seems to have toyed with the idea of putting Van Gogh in the space-frame since there is the shadow or pentimenti of the back line of the frame having extended fully to the bottom of the road on the left. This momentary indecision on Bacon's part may have resulted from the fact that Van Gogh had nevertheless suffered at the hands of fate by simply being rejected by society; in other words, Van Gogh had not made a conscious choice to reject society. What may have tipped the scales in favour of Van Gogh's placement outside the frame was that he still managed to fulfill his artistic ambitions despite the obstacles.⁴⁷ A similar ambiguity in terms of figures on the margins of society is found in *Paralytic Child Walking on All Fours* [Fig. 6]. Based on photographs taken by the nineteenth-century photographer Eadweard Muybridge, Bacon depicts a paralytic child who, because of its disability, could never be an active participant in society. That child is presented against a plain, dark background except for an oversized window frame on the right

which again does not enclose the figure. The child's placement against the plain background implies an isolated existence free from the conventions of society symbolized by the window frame, a variant of Bacon's space-frames. However, its walking toward that frame suggests nevertheless a desire to be part of that society.

The connection between fate and society's conventions and beliefs is made explicit in Bacon's paintings inspired by Greek tragedy. The shadow of Greek tragedy looms over most of Bacon's work in terms of the repeated presence of the Eumenides. Their role and reason is made explicit in *Triptych Inspired by the Oresteia of Aeschylus* [Fig. 7]. In the central panel one finds a seamlessly mutilated figure which may be that of Agamemnon or a composite of the trail of bodies which began with Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigenia. In the left panel is found a composite figure of the Furies or Eumenides seen emerging through a doorway into a space-frame. In the right panel is Orestes who is attempting to escape out of a space-frame and through a doorway. In this work, the space-frame represents divine order which Orestes transgressed by murdering his mother and that the Fury is attempting to enforce. Significantly, in Aeschylus' account, Orestes does escape thanks to the intervention of the Goddess Athena, despite an impassioned plea on the part of the Furies. Bacon possibly relished this aspect of the tale since, as he told David Sylvester, he would prefer to find himself in the Christian hell "because, if I was in hell I would always feel I had a chance of escaping."⁴⁸ Perhaps Bacon's interest in Orestes was that he successfully escaped or finally acted outside of divine or societal structures, a goal which Bacon himself strove for and which he sought out in the people he befriended.

But one must question whether Orestes did escape fate. His assumed exit through the door leading out of the space-frame makes one wonder where that door leads. The blackened doorway found in the Orestes triptych had become a recurring feature in Bacon's work after the death of his companion George Dyer in 1971. Significantly, in *Triptych May-June* (1973: Private Collection, Switzerland) we find one of the rare instances of a figure actually placed within the blackened doorway: the three panels depict Dyer's death in a Paris hotel, with the middle one casting a shadow in the form of a Fury. In a sense, Orestes as well could not escape the ultimate fate we all face, that of death. The goddess Athena may have intervened to save Orestes from the furies but this represented only a postponement of the inevitable.⁴⁹

As Bacon grew older and more of his friends died, he questioned our ability to escape fate despite one's best efforts. A couple of years after his Oresteian triptych, Bacon

painted *Oedipus and the Sphinx after Ingres* (1983: Private Collection, California). In this ancient Greek myth Oedipus demonstrates his cunning in answering the sphinx's riddle, but the doorway he will proceed through reveals the ominous presence of a Fury. The answering of the riddle is but the prelude to the tragic unfolding of Oedipus' fate (that of murdering his father and marrying his mother) which had been predicted before his birth and which his parents sought to escape. The injury to Oedipus' foot is a continual reminder of his parent's failed attempt at avoiding the tragic destiny that befell them. Bacon had alluded to the Oedipus story in an uncharacteristic earlier work, *Three Studies from the Human Body* (1967: Private Collection). In this painting, two figures are shown falling into a void while a third hangs on to a horizontal shaft. The two falling figures may be acting out the desire for total freedom, one which Bacon had often toyed with in those moments where he wanted to simply throw a bucket of paint at the canvas in the hope that an image would appear,⁵⁰ but the injured foot of the right figure is a subtle reminder of Oedipus' fate whose every action was unknowingly predestined.

By the 1960s Bacon began to focus on how we are controlled by our own internal drives. This theme was implicit in a number of earlier works and, especially, those dealing with animal imagery. Bacon uses animal imagery to comment on our basic and fundamental biological nature and how we often try to conceal it under the veil of culture or civilization. Bacon's images of human defecation, figures crouched in a landscape, even the primal cry, are all directed to illustrating what Sylvester described as "moments of acute awareness of [our] animal nature."⁵¹ Bacon views civilization as having domesticated those primal urges that we share with the animal world and which are the root cause of human violence. Like Georges Bataille (whom Bacon was certainly aware of since he owned copies of *Documents* and was close friends with one of its editors), the English artist admired past civilizations which acknowledged those basic instincts we share with animals.⁵² This is why he periodically produced images inspired by Egyptian sphinxes, like *Sphinx I* (1953: Private Collection, California).⁵³

The theme of entrapment and our persistent desire for escape is probably nowhere better summed-up than in one of Bacon's better known passages which relates the slaughter of animals to the Crucifixion and, in turn, to humanity in general:

I've always been very moved by pictures about slaughterhouses and meat, and to me they belong very much to the whole thing of the Crucifixion. There've been extraordinary photographs which have been done of animals just

being taken up before they were slaughtered; and the smell of death. We don't know, of course, but it appears by these photographs that they're so aware of what is going to happen to them, they do everything to attempt to escape. I think these pictures were very much based on that kind of thing, which to me is very, very near this whole thing of the Crucifixion.⁵⁴

What is fascinating in all this is that Bacon himself uses traps in his paintings to capture his subject and bring out its true character.⁵⁵ The geometric structures found in the background of his paintings, as well as the space-frames, are often such traps, paralleling the artificial structures used by the Greek and Classical poets which Bacon admired so much.⁵⁶ The reason is rather simple for Bacon in that it is only in extreme situations that the reality of the image can manifest itself; where the veils of idealization or rather attitudes, as Bacon would put it, are completely removed.⁵⁷ However, this does put Bacon in a rather awkward situation as observer and sometimes tormentor of his subjects. Bacon was fully aware of this as is reflected in his inability to paint from a live model and his self-portrait with camera in the right panel of *Triptych—Studies from the Human Body* (1970: Private Collection).⁵⁸ As spectators of his work we are accomplices in this voyeuristic world, as Bacon never ceases to remind us, by way of the intimacy of the scenes he publicly displays to us and the manner in which he physically presents his works by the mid-1960s—behind glass and elaborately framed.⁵⁹

Bacon never sets forth the ideal of a world devoid of artificiality: he would remark: "...all life is artificial: social justice makes it more pointlessly artificial."⁶⁰ On the one hand, one cannot escape death as the ultimate fate of humanity and, on the other hand, there are those basic instinctual drives which we must struggle with just as Bacon struggled with his unconscious in the creation of a work; as Bacon himself pointed out: "...we are born and we die, but in between we give this purposeless existence a meaning by our drives."⁶¹ In *Triptych—Inspired by T. S. Eliot's Poem "Sweeney Agonistes"* death is presented in the central panel but is framed on each side by eros: pairs of naked figures are shown in bed with the right couple fornicating before us. Sexuality is certainly one of the most instinctual of our drives and also the one which Western society has worked the hardest at suppressing as Bacon would have learned from his reading of Freud. The latter was

further magnified in Bacon's case as a homosexual living in Britain. The figure on a telephone in the right panel watching the scene is society's judge or the spy who reports on such acts of indecency, while ironically acting out the voyeuristic urge that exists in all of us. But while there is the problem of society's judgment on sexuality there is also the awareness on Bacon's part of the destructive nature of letting our instinctual drives act without restraint. Bacon never calls for a complete liberation of our instinctual urges, just as he would never simply fling a pot of paint at the canvas, despite how strong the temptation. For Bacon, there always had to be an equitable dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious, whether in painting or in life. He saw the consequences of the domination of either as destructive.

In the end, the conflict between the social and the individual, for Bacon, is simply an expression of the constant struggle between the conscious and unconscious. The infamous Eumenides which torment so many of Bacon's figures can be viewed as either enforcers of social justice or as the conscious mind acting to control the unconscious. In fact, there is some ambiguity as to whether the Eumenides in Greek tragedy are not simply an objectification of our conscious mind acting on the unconscious; in T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion* this is exactly how the Eumenides should be viewed and interpreted. In terms of Bacon's painting technique, the conflict between our drives and our conscious mind presents itself initially in terms of a preconceived idea of what the painting should look like and then facing the frustration of never achieving that goal because the paint appears to have a will of its own; it also emerges in the contrast between the geometric structures and the figures which populate them, or between the illustrational features of the faces of his figures and the abstracted distortions. Yet, for Bacon, that will of the paint is really a manifestation of the unconscious. The conflict itself is resolved, although never fully, by fine-tuning the conscious mind to be able to respond to the demands of the unconscious in a favourable and productive manner, or as Bacon put it, to be receptive to accident. Bacon never abandons conscious control when painting, but he never gives it absolute control, just as he would never want to give society absolute control over his life. In a sense, Bacon's critique of society is essentially one of forcing individuals to take control over their own life, mediate their own urges, rather than leaving it completely in the hands of fate.

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¹ Cited in, David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, 3rd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 133.

² Francis Bacon: *In Conversation with Michel Archimbaud* (London: Phaidon Press, 1993), p. 171.

³ Francis Bacon: *In Conversation...*, p. 171.

⁴ Too often, in the literature dealing with Bacon, the assumption is made that Bacon wanted to completely eliminate narrative or story-telling from his work. However, this was never the case. Bacon sought simply to diminish its role in favour of the sensations his works are meant to convey. Even David Sylvester assumed Bacon wanted to avoid telling a story in his paintings, to which Bacon replied:

I don't want to avoid telling a story, but I want very, very much to do the thing that Valery said—to give the sensation without the boredom of its conveyance. And the minute the story enters, the boredom comes upon you. (Sylvester, p. 65)

Nevertheless, the myth of Bacon's anti-narrative stance persists and plays an important part in Ernst van Alphen's recent book on Bacon. Ernst van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁵ Sylvester, p. 152.

⁶ Sylvester, p. 65.

⁷ Francis Bacon: *In Conversation...*, p. 100.

In his interviews with Michel Archimbaud, Bacon notes that context is important for understanding an artist and may explain some of the changes that occur in the arts, but it is also a question, for Bacon, of new techniques being introduced which are crucial in the development of the arts. In essence, for Bacon, the subject matter is always the same and the instincts to which an artist responds are the same, what changes are the materials and images one responds to, or, as Bacon put it: "...the only persistent problem for the artist is to express a subject which is always the same and which cannot be changed, by finding a new form of expression each time." *Francis Bacon: In Conversation...*, p. 80 & 73-77.

⁸ Van Alphen, 49-57.

⁹ Sylvester, p. 197.

¹⁰ Rolf Laessoe, "Francis Bacon and T. S. Eliot," *Hafnia, Copenhagen Papers in the History of Art* (vol. 9, 1983), p. 119.

¹¹ Francis Bacon: *In Conversation...*, pp. 121 & 127.

¹² Francis Bacon: *In Conversation...*, p. 74.

¹³ In his conversations with Archimbaud, Bacon notes his frustration with translation and how it is impossible to regain the power of the original language when translated. (*Francis Bacon: In Conversation...*, pp. 112-113).

¹⁴ Francis Bacon: *In Conversation...*, p. 101.

¹⁵ Sylvester, p. 12.

¹⁶ Sylvester, p. 22.

¹⁷ In the interviews with Sylvester, Bacon speaks almost exclusively about technique and often diverts any of Sylvester's questions about themes and subject matter back to formal issues. In the interviews conducted by Archimbaud, Bacon undergoes a barrage of questions relating to influences with Bacon more often than not simply acknowledging his admiration for a particular writer or painter. Archimbaud has little success in drawing out any information beyond this.

As with many of Bacon's contemporaries, technical aspects are the best place to start in order to understand the work; Post-World War II art in general has frustrated critical analysis because meaning is so tightly interwoven with technique (Jean Dubuffet and Alberto Giacometti are two obvious examples). The current state of scholarship, which is reeling from the excessive formalism of the recent past, has yet to reconcile itself fully to the possibility of a fruitful relationship with formalism; recent work on European Post-World War II art is beginning to rectify this situation.

¹⁸ Sylvester, p. 11. In 1993, Sylvester noted that *Painting 1946* had started out as a depiction of a chimpanzee in long grass, then changed to a bird of prey alighting on a field. I do not wish to question Sylvester's account, especially in light of his long-standing friendship with Bacon, but to my knowledge Bacon's published accounts of the work make no mention of his intention of painting a chimpanzee. (David Sylvester, "Bacon's Course," in Achille Bonito Oliva (ed.), *Figurable: Francis Bacon* (Milano: Electa, 1993), p. 26)

¹⁹ Francis Bacon: *In Conversation...*, p. 83.

²⁰ Francis Bacon: *In Conversation...*, p. 86. In the Sylvester interviews, Bacon expresses it in the following terms: "You know in my case all painting—and the older I get, the more it becomes so—is accident. So I foresee it in my mind, I foresee it, and yet I hardly ever carry it out as I foresee it. It transforms itself by the actual paint." Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 16. Dawn Ades clarifies the distinction between Bacon's use of chance and that of the Surrealists in her essay, "Web of Images," in Dawn Ades and Andrew Forge, *Francis Bacon* (London: The Tate Gallery and Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 12.

²¹ Francis Bacon: *In Conversation...*, pp. 83-84. The first explicit reference to Freud made by Bacon is found in the Sylvester interviews (p. 170) and it is in the Archimbaud interviews that Bacon actually confesses to being an avid reader of Freud (p. 84). For discussions on some of the Freudian aspects of Bacon's work, see Ades, pp. 15-17, and Andrew Forge, "About Bacon," in Ades and Forge, p. 26.

²² Francis Bacon: *In Conversation...*, pp. 80 & 86. See also, Lorenza Trucchi, "The Delirium of the Body," in Oliva (ed.), p. 114.

²³ Francis Bacon: *In Conversation...*, p. 88.

²⁴ Bacon admits as much in a 1973 interview with Hugh Davies: "In my things I'd like them to be in one sense very exact but you couldn't tell what the exactitude is, mysterious because how they come about is mysterious, images which unlock other images." Hugh Davies and Sally Yard, *Francis Bacon* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), p. 110. He makes a similar confession to Sylvester at around the same time as the Davies interview. (Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 100.)

²⁵ Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 17.

²⁶ Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 99.

²⁷ Andrew Forge touches on the possible connection of Freud's notion of the uncanny and Bacon's work. See Andrew Forge, "About Bacon," in Ades and Forge, p. 26.

²⁸ Archimbaud, p. 121.

²⁹ Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 133.

³⁰ Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 134.

³¹ Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 112; Francis Bacon: *In Conversation...*, p. 166; and, Davies and Yard, p. 16, n. 18. It should be pointed out, though, that Bacon never really considered any of his works as completed.

³² John Russell, *Francis Bacon*, rev. ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 11.

³³ Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 26.

³⁴ Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 112.

³⁵ Rolf Laessoe proposes a biographical reading of this work based on Bacon's difficult childhood relationship with his father, view-

ing the *The Three Studies...* as a secularized projection of Bacon's personal feelings toward his father. Rolf Laessoe, "Francis Bacon's Crucifixion's and Related Themes," Hafnia. Copenhagen Papers in the History of Art (vol. 11, 1987), pp. 19-23.

³⁶ Laessoe, "Francis Bacon's Crucifixion's and Related Themes," p. 23 & n. 41. In the Sylvester interviews, Bacon mentions his fascination with a Cimabue image of the Crucifixion (*Crucifixion*, 1272-74, Chiesa di Santa Croce, Florence), describing it "as a worm crawling down the cross." (Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 14) Implicit in this statement is the notion of escape.

³⁷ Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 26.

³⁸ At this juncture, it is important to point out the probable influence of Sigmund Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) on Bacon's thoughts regarding religion and civilization. Freud's text examines the formation and function of religious ideas within culture and condemns religion which he feels should be replaced by a more scientific/materialistic approach to the problems of human society. This line of thought is further expounded upon in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929), which Bacon may have also been familiar with.

³⁹ Attempts have been made to identify the source of the horror which elicits the screams expressed by a number of Bacon's figures, yet there really is no object or scene which generates such a reaction. The anguish is one of mental entrapment rather than a response to some scene of horror occurring outside the frame of the paintings. Bacon has always defended himself against being a painter of violence in the literal sense of the term. He admits his images are violent, however, the violence he seeks to portray is that of the destruction of the self by the structures which humanity creates and imposes, i.e., a mental or psychological violence. The more confining the system, the more destructive its results, explaining, in part, Bacon's fascination for the dictators of Nazi Germany. (Sam Hunter, "Francis Bacon: The Anatomy of Horror," *Magazine of Art* (vol. 95, Jan. 1952), p. 12; and, Davies and Yard, pp. 16-17.)

⁴⁰ Interview with Hugh Davies (June 26, 1973), cited in Davies and Yard, p. 110; and, Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 82.

⁴¹ Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 23. One of the reasons why Bacon may have wanted to minimize the role of narrative in his work is that narrative does involve implicitly explanation or structured meaning, which is what Bacon saw as the main cause of the destruction of self-identity.

⁴² David Mellor, "Francis Bacon: Affinities, Contexts and the British Visual Tradition," in Oliva (ed.), pp. 100-101.

⁴³ The connection between the fence in *Study of a Baboon* and the space-frame is made explicit in *Chimpanzee* (1955: Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart) where the partially enclosed fence is complemented by the presence of a space-frame.

⁴⁴ Bacon declared himself a conservative in terms of politics because, for him, the Right endorses a less socially interventionist type of government. As he put it:

I want my life to be as free as possible... And so in politics I have tended to vote for the Right because they are less idealistic than the left and therefore one is left freer than one would be if encumbered by the idealism of the Left. I always feel that for me the Right is the best of a bad job. (Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 199)

⁴⁵ *Francis Bacon: In Conversation...*, p. 128.

⁴⁶ The few paintings of children Bacon produced also involve this notion of entrapment by the conventions of society, something Bacon himself was quite familiar with given the difficulties he had with his father. The forcing of the child by the parent to conform to the conventions of society is partly the message Bacon wished to convey in such works as *Man Carrying a Child* (1956: Private Collection, New York) and *Man and Child* (1963: Louisiana Museum, Humleback). In the Sylvester interviews, Bacon comments on child art as loosing all its spontaneity and vitality once "they've been influenced by their environment." (Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 178)

⁴⁷ There is the possibility that William Blake is yet another of these figures presented outside the margins of society, whom Bacon painted in a series of portraits based on a life mask. But Bacon is rather ambiguous about his interest in Blake. (*Francis Bacon: In Conversation...*, pp. 120-122)

⁴⁸ Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 200.

⁴⁹ In Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, a book which Bacon admired, the author recounts Midas' inquiry as to what fate is best for humanity to which the seer Silenus replies that the best fate is unattainable, not to be born, second is to die early.

⁵⁰ Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 107.

⁵¹ To which Bacon responded: "But surely any art is always made up of those qualities?" (Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 80). In another part of the Sylvester interviews, Bacon notes how human locomotion in his imagery is continuously linked with animal movement. (Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 116) It may have been this that attracted Bacon to Muybridge's photograph of the paralytic child. These parallels between animal imagery and human figures are the basis of Gilles Deleuze's elucidating description of Bacon's work. See G. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1984).

⁵² Ades, pp. 13-18.

⁵³ On Bacon's admiration for Egyptian art, see, Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 176.

⁵⁴ Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 23.

⁵⁵ Bacon noted: "as an artist you have to, in a sense, set a trap by which you can hope to trap this living fact alive. How well you can set the trap? Where and at what moment will it click?" (Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 57)

⁵⁶ *Francis Bacon: In Conversation...*, p. 167.

⁵⁷ In an interview with Hugh Davies, Bacon observed: Great art is always a way of concentrating, reinventing what is called fact, what we know of our existence—a reconcentration... tearing away veils that fact acquires through time. Ideas always acquire appearance veils, the attitudes people acquire of their time and earlier time. Really good artists tear down those veils. (June 26, 1973: cited in Davies and Yard, p. 110)

⁵⁸ Lawrence Gowing, "Francis Bacon: The Human Presence," in Lawrence Gowing and Sam Hunter, *Francis Bacon* (London & Washington: Thames and Hudson, Ltd. and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1989), p. 18. See also, Trucchi, p. 114.

⁵⁹ Davies and Yard, p. 115; and, Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 87.

⁶⁰ Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 125.

⁶¹ Sylvester, *Interviews...*, p. 134.