

Chapter 6

Painting and Sensation

Cézanne and sensation – The levels of sensation –
Figuration and violence – The movement of translation,
the stroll – The phenomenological unity of the senses:
sensation and rhythm

There are two ways of going beyond figuration (that is, beyond both the illustrative and the figurative): either toward abstract form or toward the Figure. Cézanne gave a simple name to this way of the Figure: sensation. The Figure is the sensible form related to a sensation; it acts immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh, whereas abstract form is addressed to the head, and acts through the intermediary of the brain, which is closer to the bone. Certainly Cézanne did not invent this way of sensation in painting, but he gave it an unprecedented status. Sensation is the opposite of the facile and the ready-made, the cliché, but also of the “sensational,” the spontaneous, etc. Sensation has one face turned toward the subject (the nervous system, vital movement, “instinct,” “temperament” – a whole vocabulary common to both Naturalism and Cézanne) and one face turned toward the object (the “fact,” the place, the event). Or rather, it has no faces at all, it is both things indissolubly, it is Being-in-the-World, as the phenomeno-

logists say: at one and the same time I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other.¹ And at the limit, it is the same body which, being both subject and object, gives and receives the sensation. As a spectator, I experience the sensation only by entering the painting, by reaching the unity of the sensing and the sensed. This was Cézanne's lesson against the Impressionists: sensation is not in the "free" or disembodied play of light and color (impressions); on the contrary, it is in the body, even the body of an apple. Color is in the body, sensation is in the body, and not in the air. Sensation is what is painted. What is painted on the canvas is the body, not insofar as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining *this* sensation (what Lawrence, speaking of Cézanne, called "the appleyness of the apple").²

This is the very general thread that links Bacon to Cézanne: *paint the sensation*, or, as Bacon will say in words very close to Cézanne's, *record the fact*.³ "It is a very, very close and difficult thing to know why some paint comes across directly onto the nervous system and other paint tells you the story in a long diatribe through the brain."⁴ There would seem to be only obvious differences between these two painters: Cézanne's world as landscape and still life (even before the portraits, which are treated as landscapes) versus Bacon's inverted hierarchy that dismisses still lifes and landscapes;⁵ the world as Nature in Cézanne versus the world as artifact in Bacon. But precisely, are not these obvious differences in the service of "sensation" and "temperament"? In other words, are they not inscribed in what links Bacon to Cézanne, in

what they have in common? When Bacon speaks of sensation, he says two things, which are very similar to Cézanne. Negatively, he says that the form related to the sensation (the Figure) is the opposite of the form related to an object that it is supposed to represent (figuration). As Valéry put it, sensation is that which is transmitted directly, and avoids the detour and boredom of conveying a story.⁶ And positively, Bacon constantly says that sensation is what passes from one “order” to another, from one “level” to another, from one “area” to another. This is why sensation is the master of deformations, the agent of bodily deformations. In this regard, the same criticism can be made against both figurative painting and abstract painting: they pass through the brain, they do not act directly upon the nervous system, they do not attain the sensation, they do not liberate the Figure – all because they remain at *one and the same level*.⁷ They can implement transformations of form, but they cannot attain deformations of bodies. In what sense Bacon is Cézannean, even more so than if he were a disciple of Cézanne, we will have occasion to consider later.

What does Bacon mean when, throughout the interviews, he speaks of “orders of sensation,” “levels of feeling,” “areas of sensation,” or “shifting sequences”?⁸ At first, one might think that each order, level, or area corresponds to a specific sensation: each sensation would thus be a term in a sequence or a series. For example, the series of Rembrandt’s self-portraits involves us in different areas of feeling.⁹ And it is true that painting, and especially Bacon’s painting, proceeds through series: series of crucifixions, series of Popes, series of self-portraits, series of the mouth, of the mouth that screams,

the mouth that smiles Moreover, there can be series of simultaneity, as in the triptychs, which make at least three levels or orders coexist. And the series can be closed, when it has a contrasting composition, but it can be open, when it is continued or continuable beyond the three.¹⁰ All this is true. But it would not be true were there not something else as well, something that is already at work in each painting, each Figure, each sensation. It is each painting, each Figure, that is itself a shifting sequence or series (and not simply a term in a series); it is each sensation that exists at diverse levels, in different orders, or in different domains. This means that there are not sensations of different orders, but different orders of one and the same sensation. It is the nature of sensation to envelop a constitutive difference of level, a plurality of constituting domains. Every sensation, and every Figure, is already an “accumulated” or “coagulated” sensation, as in a limestone figure.¹¹ Hence the irreducibly synthetic character of sensation. What then, we must ask, is the source of this synthetic character, through which each material sensation has several levels, several orders or domains? What are these levels, and what makes up their sensing or sensed unity?

A first response must obviously be rejected. What makes up the material synthetic unity of a sensation would be the represented object, the figured thing. This is theoretically impossible, since the Figure is opposed to figuration. But even if we observe practically, as Bacon does, that something is nonetheless figured (for instance, a screaming Pope), this secondary figuration depends on the neutralization of all primary figuration. Bacon himself formulates this problem, which concerns the

inevitable preservation of a practical figuration at the very moment when the Figure asserts its intention to break away from the figurative. We will see how he resolves the problem. In any case, Bacon has always tried to eliminate the "sensational", that is, the primary figuration of that which provokes a violent sensation. This is the meaning of the formula, "I wanted to paint the scream more than the horror."¹² When he paints the screaming Pope, there is nothing that might cause horror, and the curtain in front of the Pope is not only a way of isolating him, of shielding him from view; it is rather the way in which the Pope himself sees nothing, and screams *before the invisible*. Thus neutralized, the horror is multiplied because it is inferred from the scream, and not the reverse. And certainly it is not easy to renounce the horror, or the primary figuration. Sometimes he has to turn against his own instincts, renounce his own experience. Bacon harbors within himself all the violence of Ireland, and the violence of Nazism, the violence of war. He passes through the horror of the crucifixions, and especially the fragment of the crucifixion, or the head of meat, or the bloody suitcase. But when he passes judgment on his own paintings, he rejects all those that are still too "sensational," because the figuration that subsists in them reconstitutes a scene of horror, even if only secondarily, thereby reintroducing a story to be told: even the bullfights are too dramatic. As soon as there is horror, a story is reintroduced, and the scream is botched. In the end, the maximum violence will be found in the seated or crouching Figures, which are subjected to neither torture nor brutality, to which nothing visible happens, and yet which manifest the power of the paint

all the more. This is because violence has two very different meanings: "When talking about the violence of paint, it's nothing to do with the violence of war."¹³ The violence of sensation is opposed to the violence of the represented (the sensational, the cliché). The former is inseparable from its direct action on the nervous system, the levels through which it passes, the domains it traverses: being itself a Figure, it must have nothing of the nature of a represented object. It is the same with Artaud: cruelty is not what one believes it to be, and depends less and less on what is represented.

A second interpretation must also be rejected, which would confuse the levels of sensation – that is, the valencies of the sensation – with an ambivalence of feeling. At one point, Sylvester suggests, "since you talk about recording different levels of feeling in one image . . . you may be expressing at one and the same time a love of the person and a hostility towards them . . . both a caress and an assault?" To which Bacon responds, "That is too logical. I don't think that's the way things work. I think it goes to a deeper thing: how do I feel I can make this image more immediately real to myself? That's all."¹⁴ In fact, the psychoanalytic hypothesis of ambivalence not only has the disadvantage of localizing the ambivalence on the side of the spectator who looks at the painting; for even if we presuppose an ambivalence in the Figure itself, it would refer to feelings that the Figure would experience in relation to represented things, in relation to a narrated story. But there are no feelings in Bacon: there are nothing but affects; that is, "sensations" and "instincts," according to the formula of naturalism. Sensation is what determines instinct at a particular moment, just as

instinct is the passage from one sensation to another, the search for the “best” sensation (not the most agreeable sensation, but the one that fills the flesh at a particular moment of its descent, contraction, or dilation).

There is a third, more interesting, hypothesis. This would be the motor hypothesis. The levels of sensation would be like arrests or snapshots of motion, which would recompose the movement synthetically in all its continuity, speed, and violence, as in synthetic cubism, futurism, or Duchamp’s *Nude* [102]. It is true that Bacon is fascinated by the decomposition of movement in Muybridge, which he has used as a subject matter. It is also true that he obtains very intense and violent movements of his own [39], such as George Dyer’s 180 degree turn of the head toward Lucian Freud [42]. More generally, Bacon’s Figures are often frozen in the middle of a strange stroll [68], as in *Man Carrying a Child* [22] or the Van Gogh [23]. The round area or the parallelepiped that isolates the Figure itself becomes a motor, and Bacon has not abandoned the project that a mobile sculpture could achieve more easily: in this case, the contour or pedestal would slide along the length of the armature so that the Figure could make its “daily round.”¹⁵ But it is precisely the nature of this daily round that can inform us of the status of movement in Bacon. Beckett and Bacon have never been so close, and this daily round is the kind of stroll typical of Beckett’s characters: they too trundle about fitfully without ever leaving their circle or parallelepiped. It is the stroll of the paralytic child and its mother clinging to the edge of the balustrade in a curious race for the handicapped [36]. It is the about-face in *Turning Figure* [30]. It is George Dyer’s bicycle ride

[40], which closely resembles that of Moritz's hero: "his vision was limited to the small piece of land he could see about him To him, the end of all things seemed to lead, at the end of his journey, *to just such a point . . .*"¹⁶ Therefore, even when the contour is displaced, the movement consists less of this displacement than the amoeba-like exploration that the Figure is engaged in inside the contour. Movement does not explain sensation; on the contrary, it is explained by the elasticity of the sensation, its *vis elastica*. According to Beckett's or Kafka's law, there is immobility beyond movement: beyond standing up, there is sitting down, and beyond sitting down, lying down, beyond which one finally dissipates. The true acrobat is one who is consigned to immobility inside the circle. The large feet of the Figures often do not lend themselves to walking: they are almost clubfeet (and the large armchairs often seem to resemble shoes for clubfeet). In short, it is not movement that explains the levels of sensation, it is the levels of sensation that explain what remains of movement. And in fact, what interests Bacon is not exactly movement, although his painting makes movement very intense and violent. But in the end, it is a movement "in-place," a spasm, which reveals a completely different problem characteristic of Bacon: *the action of invisible forces on the body* (hence the bodily deformations, which are due to this more profound cause). In the 1973 triptych [73], the movement of translation occurs between two spasms, between the two movements of a contraction in one place.

Then there would be yet another hypothesis, more "phenomenological." The levels of sensation would really be domains of sensation that refer to the different sense

organs; but precisely each level, each domain would have a way of referring to the others, independently of the represented object they have in common. Between a color, a taste, a touch, a smell, a noise, a weight, there would be an existential communication that would constitute the “pathic” (nonrepresentative) moment of *the* sensation. In Bacon’s bullfights, for example, we hear the noise of the beast’s hooves [56, 57]; in the 1976 triptych, we touch the quivering of the bird plunging into the place where the head should be [79], and each time meat is represented, we touch it, smell it, eat it, weigh it, as in Soutine’s work; and the portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne [41] causes a head to appear to which ovals and traits have been added in order to widen the eyes, flair the nostrils, lengthen the mouth, and mobilize the skin in a common exercise of all the organs at once. The painter would thus *make visible* a kind of original unity of the senses, and would make a multisensible Figure appear visually.

But this operation is possible only if the sensation of a particular domain (here, the visual sensation) is in direct contact with a vital power that exceeds every domain and traverses them all. This power is rhythm, which is more profound than vision, hearing, etc. Rhythm appears as music when it invests the auditory level, and as painting when it invests the visual level. This is a “logic of the senses,” as Cézanne said, which is neither rational nor cerebral. What is ultimate is thus the relation between sensation and rhythm, which places in each sensation the levels and domains through which it passes. This rhythm runs through a painting just as it runs through a piece of music. It is diastole–systole: the world that seizes me by

closing in around me, the self that opens to the world and opens the world itself.¹⁷ Cézanne, it is said, is the painter who put a vital rhythm into the visual sensation. Must we say the same thing of Bacon, with his coexistent movements, when the flat field closes in around the Figure and when the Figure contracts or, on the contrary, expands in order to rejoin the field, to the point where the Figure merges with the field? Could it be that Bacon's closed and artificial world reveals the same vital movement as Cézanne's Nature? Bacon is not using empty words when he declares that he is cerebrally pessimistic but nervously optimistic, with an optimism that believes only in life.¹⁸ The same "temperament" as Cézanne? Bacon's formula would be: figuratively pessimistic, but figurally optimistic.