

A-theology and the Recovery of the Sacred in Georges Bataille and Francis Bacon

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In this paper I want to examine the relationship between “a-theology” and the sacred in the select works by Georges Bataille (1897-1962) and the artist Francis Bacon (1909-1992). Throughout their work Bataille and Bacon express the influence of religion (in the sense of the institutions of religion) through their employment of images of the Christian faith. However, their use of the images of Christianity is not theological in the sense that they are not employing the images to support theological truths. They are instead using the images to articulate the “death of God”. Their art occupies a position which is outside the institutions of religion and yet remains fascinated by the images. In other words, they are only able to express their disillusionment through continual reference to that tradition. How then is it possible to describe their work which, in some sense, is dependent on a theological inheritance but is also strongly repelled by this heritage?

The term that can be said to accommodate their respective practices is “a-theology”. The theologian Mark C. Taylor employs the term “a-theology” to consider “the margin of differences *between* Hegel and Kierkegaard by rethinking

the “death of God” as the *impossibility* instead of the realisation of the Parousia”¹. In their a-theological interpretations they do not simply utilise the material symbols but go further and demythologise the sacrament so that instead of experiencing the sacred through the symbolic frame of a ritual, for example, we experience the “real presence”². What Bataille and Bacon are doing is showing us the violence of the sacred which is experienced when the function of the ritual, which is to safeguard the violence of the sacred, collapses³. In their various depictions they are taking the reader/viewer to the holiest of profanations, where the sacred is recovered in the profane. It is here where we experience the primal theological moment of Christ’s abandonment at the foot of the Cross, as articulated in the cry, “My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?”⁴ In their a-theological perspectives, we are examining religious sentiments but from outside the systems of theology.

In order to demonstrate the a-theological “turn” of Bataille and Bacon I have constructed two counteractive narratives. Firstly, we have a Christian one, which is predetermined by the resolution of fragmentation into wholeness. In this tradition we have *sparagmos*⁵ followed by re-binding, where religion is conceived of in the sense of *religare*—a re-binding of the fragments that have fallen apart⁶. This pattern of fragmentation followed by salving, or making whole, underpins many religious traditions particularly the Christian narrative, which pivots around the sundering of

¹ M. C. Taylor, *About Religion, economies of faith in virtual culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 39.

² The theological term *real presence* emphasises the actual presence of the Body and the Blood of Christ in the Sacrament. This belief is contrasted with others that maintain that the Body and the Blood are present only figuratively. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, éd. E. A. Livingstone, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 483.

³ L. R. Rambo defines the ritual as that which “serves as a bridge between the profane and the sacred”. *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. A. Richardson, J. Bowden, Londres, SCM Press, 1983, p. 509.

⁴ Matthew 27: 46-47.

⁵ Discussing the concept of *sparagmos* (or dismemberment) Girard traces how the fragmentation resulting from rituals of *sparagmos* result in the restoration of unity and order (both on a cosmological and political level). See R. Girard, *Violence and the sacred*, trans. P. Gregory, 1979, p. 132.

⁶ Mark C. Taylor observes how the term *religion* itself is derived from the Latin stem *leig*, which means “to bind”. M. C. Taylor’s ‘Introduction’ in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 8.

the body of Christ (on the Cross), which is made whole through the Resurrection. Within this usage, to quote from Taylor, “religion therefore functions to heal the wounds, mend the tears, cover the faults, and close the fissures that rend self, society and world”¹. The relationship between fragmentation and rebinding underpins many religious traditions. What is interesting in this context is the contradiction at the heart of Christianity, a religion which insists upon the resurrection of the body and yet then goes on to marginalise the body and consider salvation from the vantage point of the soul.

The relationship between fragmentation and rebinding is articulated in the example of Grünewald’s *Crucifixion* panel from the Isenheim altarpiece (1515-1516). In this panel the body of Christ is highly distorted and *grotesque*. Every limb on the body is twisted unnaturally and deformed. Even the skin is splattered with bloodstains. The viewer is witnessing a torture of unprecedented proportion. The exaggerated size of the body and tonal range of the palette transforms the body into a monstrosity. “No other Crucified Christ in all Western art exceeds this one as an expression of the full ghastly horror of Christ’s terrible death”². However, through the narrative cycle which is set up between the Christ figure and the figures at the foot of the Cross, the distortions on the body of Christ are figuratively resolved into wholeness through the prophecy of hope and salvation. This narrative is enacted through the relationship between the figures of sorrow, on the one hand, as represented by Mary the Mother, who is supported by St John and Mary Magdalene, and the figure of hope as represented by John the Baptist (with the symbolic lamb of God) who, with outstretched finger, points ahead to the Resurrection, thus offering a prophecy of hope. The suffering as symbolised by the brutalised body of Christ is teleological. In this example we are dealing with a work that speaks of horror and suffering and is set within a liturgical setting in which the theological function of the work is to open one to the grace of God. Redemption

¹ M. C. Taylor, *Disfiguring. Art, Architecture, Religion*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 46.

² P. Murray and L. Murray, *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 239.

comes only when we accept human brokenness, only to pass through to a higher stage, through transformation into a new life. In this narrative cycle the *grotesque* is a precursor to salvation.

The second tradition that I want to examine is the post-Christian or an “a-theological” tradition. This narrative runs parallel to the first tradition up to a point and then diverges at the point of fragmentation. In this tradition the fragments are not resolved into wholeness but remain as fragments. This articulates the impossibility of the presence of the divine: we are confronted with an absent presence. Bataille and Bacon’s work can be situated within this context. They dislocate the experience of the sacred from the institutions of Christianity and work through their respective expressions on the body, where the body operates as a locus for the experience of the “coincidence of opposites”¹—the revelation of the sacred from outwith the profane. The experience of the sacred is revealed through their language of transgression and distortion, where they explore notions of abjection and the *grotesque*.

Bataille’s “a-theology”

In his writing Bataille makes a distinction between the sacrality of the image of Christ on the Cross, which he describes as “the most sublime of symbols”² and the homogeneous and profane conception of God. In ‘The Sacred’³ Bataille addresses the problems he has with Christianity. Discussing the commonalities of

¹ The theological phrase for the “coincidence of opposites” is the *coincidentia oppositorum*. The principle of the *coincidentia oppositorum* is one of two principles in Nicholas of Cusa’s (1401-64) work, *De Docta Ignorantia*. *Docta ignorantia* was the highest stage of intellectual apprehension accessible to the human intellect, since Truth, which is, absolute, one, and infinitely simple, is unknowable to man. Knowledge by contrast is relative, multiple, complex, and at best only approximate. The road to Truth therefore leads beyond reason and the principle of contradiction; it is only by intuition that we can discover God, the “coincidentia oppositorum”, wherein all contradictions meet. *Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. E.A. Livingstone, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 401.

² G. Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. B. Boone, London, Athlone Press, 2000, p. 17.

³ Which is an essay which was first published in *Cahiers d’art*, 1-4, 1939, p. 47-50. It has been compiled in an anthology of selected writings, entitled *Vision of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. A. Stoekl, 1985, p. 240-245.

religious activities in the history of religions Bataille concludes that where Christianity differs is that it identifies “the moment of communal unity”¹, that is the sacred, with a transcendent being. He refers to the association between the sacred and the transcendental being as disjunctive. The only restorative measure which returns the sacred to its original nature is effected by the “death of God”². Bataille declares God as representing “the only obstacle to the human will, and freed from God this will surrenders, nude, to the passion of giving the world an intoxicating meaning”³, that is, of recovering an experience of the sacred. In “The Use Value of D. A. F. De Sade” Bataille argues that it is the imposition of the framework of the institutions of religion onto the sacred that has distorted its nature, God becomes a transcendental signified, that is, representative of “homogeneity”. The solution is to kill this “sign of universal homogeneity”⁴, that is to kill God. Only then will the sacred be restored to its ordinary and transgressive nature. The sacred is recovered through instances of rupture and fragmentation and not through religion which “has betrayed the needs that it not only supposed to regulate, but satisfy”⁵. In Bataille’s “a-theology” God appears as radically other to Himself, as a “terrifying [...] and decomposing cadaver”⁶.

In *On Nietzsche* (1945) Bataille discusses how Christianity could be accused of covering up its core of violence, through its narrative of salvation. He felt that Christianity “recognised Evil generically, in light of redemption, but refused to acknowledge its presence at the heart of religious experience”⁷. To expand:

¹ “The Sacred”, ed. and trans. A. Stoekl, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1985, p. 242.

² The “death of God” was most explicitly proclaimed by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* (1882). Bataille was introduced to the philosophies of Nietzsche by his teacher, the Russian émigré philosopher Lev Shestov in 1923. Richardson discusses the influence of Shestov’s mediation of Nietzsche’s works on Bataille. “Following Nietzsche, the recovery of God could only be accomplished by first passing through his own nothingness. If one accepted that God did not exist, it became essential to take God’s place, to become God oneself, since one was faced with a nothingness in which all things needed to be created”. M. Richardson, *Georges Bataille*, Londres, Routledge, 1994, p. 32.

³ “The Sacred”, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

⁴ ‘The Use Value of D. A. F. De Sade’, in G. Bataille, trans. Stoekl, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁷ Sylvère Lotringer’s ‘Introduction’, in G. Bataille, trans. B. Boone, *op. cit.*, p. xii.

There is in Christianity a will NOT to be guilty, a will to locate the guilt outside of the Church, to find a transcendence to man in relation to guilt. This accounted for the church's inability to deal with Evil, except as a threat coming from the outside.¹

Bataille renounced Christianity for precisely these reasons—because it failed to recognise the violence and by extension the experience of the sacred. Richardson argues how for Bataille Christianity was “unable to give him a framework to come to terms with the intensity of his feelings. It was, in fact, not religious enough”². Rather than simply dismissing Christianity he overcame it by working his way through it and beyond. Richardson summarises his viewpoint: “It should not be a matter of turning ones back on Christianity, but rather of going beyond it, creating what he called a ‘hyper-Christianity’”³. To recapitulate an earlier claim, Bataille stands outside the institutions of Christianity and can only express his disillusionment by continual reference to it. In his a-theology, Bataille unpicks the symbol of Christ on the Cross, and shows (in *On Nietzsche*, for example) how it has become sanitised and banalised in the Christian tradition, and returns it to its place as a “symbol of unequivocal evil”⁴ and the “most sublime of symbols”⁵. Through his appropriation of the symbol, Bataille recovers the experience of the sacred by virulently affirming the sense of violence and abandonment in the primal scene of desertion at the foot of the Cross⁶. Bataille's recovery of the experience of the sacred involves a return to the *sarx* rather than the *soma*, to the Passion of Christ. He does this by emphasising the inextricable relationship between sexuality and the body. The sacred is not recovered in or through a sense of wholeness of the body, through the risen nature of *soma*, but precisely in the excremental and wounded nature of the body⁷. In this meeting of opposites, the excremental becomes sacramental, and the experience of the sacred or sacrality is dislocated from

¹ *Idem.*

² Richardson, M., 1994, p. 115.

³ *Idem.*

⁴ G. Bataille, trad. B. Boone, 2000, xii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶ Matthew 27: 46-47.

⁷ This is an idea which is recurrent in classical mythology, for example in the *Bacchus*. From the perspective of aesthetics it also relates to the sublime, which cannot be represented in positive terms and only in absence and negation.

transcendence and is relocated within the somatics of the lived body. I have isolated examples from Bataille's erotic novel, *Story of the Eye* to articulate the "coincidence of opposites" between the excremental and the sacramental. This relationship can be observed biblically in the tradition of *kenosis* which describes the emptying of God or the Godhead into nothingness⁹.

The scenes I have isolated from the novel articulate instances when the ritual (which in its customary usage functions to mediate between the sacred and the profane) falls apart or becomes de-ritualised thereby bringing us into contact with the "real presence" of the sacred. The two events in chronological order are Simone's Confession and Sir Edmond's Mass. Through his transformation of the ritual into "the real", Bataille was emphasising one of the fundamental tenets of Christianity—that the rituals are only made possible and credible by the fragmentation of the body. The Christian ritual is a simultaneous acknowledgement of fracture, which is also a celebration of reconstituted wholeness.

Simone's Confession (*Story of the Eye*)

Simone persuades the priest to hear her confession and he re-enters his tabernacle. Whilst Simone is confessing, she begins masturbating. She then confesses to the priest, "Father, I still have not confessed the worst sin of all"¹⁰, this being "that I'm tossing off while talking to you"¹¹. In this example Bataille is taking a standard Catholic ritual and is entering fully into it in a literal sense. Simone is confessing her sin whilst she is committing it, which makes it a genuine confession. The worst sin of all is to actually commit your sin. By doing this Simone is paradoxically acknowledging the sacrality of the moment—to debase is to enhance—and, in a coincidence of opposites, Simone enforces the sacrality of the moment.

⁹ For example in Philippians 2: 6-11, Isaiah 53: 4-12 (*The Suffering Servant*) and Psalm 22: 19 (where the second half of the Psalm shifts in tone to that of exaltation and glory).

¹⁰ G. Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. J. Neugroschal, London, Penguin, 1982, p. 60.

¹¹ *Idem.*

Sir Edmond's Mass (*Story of the Eye*)

This occurs after the revelation that the hosts and wine that are used at Mass are none other than semen and urine respectively. This shocking revelation is turned onto the priest, where he is forced to drink his own urine and come onto the hosts. In a bizarre pastiche Bataille transforms the life-giving elements of the bread and wine, which symbolised the new Covenant, to semen and urine. Bataille's pastiche of the elements of the Mass is therefore closer to the original elements, but without the justification of the "symbolic" narrative. In a sinister twist to the Christian narrative (where Christ provides the elements of the Mass, the body and blood) the priest is obscenely providing us with the elements of the Eucharist, through his penis. In Augustine's perspective semen was regarded as a life-giving element within the context of the procreation act. Here it becomes associated with sin and the detritus of life. We have a meeting of opposites, where the generative meets with the destructive, and the notion of communion meets with a sense of "a-community" fragmentation and no sense of reconstituted wholeness.

In these two examples Bataille literalises the ritual so that instead of being able to interpret the Mass, or the Confession symbolically, they become unremittingly bodily. They are examples where we come face to face with the "wholly other" or what is analogous to the experience of the sacred. They articulate Bataille's a-theology which clearly employs established traditions and rituals but with the intention of deconstructing the ritual and turning it inside-out.

Bacon's a-theology: an examination of *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*

Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion of 1944 marked a pivotal moment in the artistic career of Bacon. Arguably, it was the painting that established Bacon's career in the art world. Bacon "had stated emphatically and on more than one occasion that nothing he did before 1944 is of any value

whatsoever”¹. For the purposes of this paper I am going to unpack the significance of the motif of the Cross and will only cursorily comment on the significance of the three figures. I have chosen this example because I think it articulates Bacon’s atheology, which continues to obliquely refer to the central narrative of salvation but in such a way that displaces it. It is an example of an absence or death of the Christian narrative and yet it continues to provoke questions of the sacred. The painting stimulates an endless proliferation of “anti-religious” sentiments, where Bacon continues (in his art) to be fascinated by the tradition and yet repulsed by it.

The descriptive nature of the title of the painting indicates that Bacon is alluding to the scene where the three mourners are gathered at the foot of the Cross. Bacon universalises the particular, Russell states, these characters are not spectators at *the* Crucifixion but at *a* crucifixion². The use of the indefinite article transforms the meaning and intentions of the painting. These are not necessarily the three figures that one would commonly associate with being situated at the foot of the Cross, that is the three figures who are the most beloved in the tradition: Mary the Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and St John. Therefore the identity of the figures becomes unspecified. Peppiatt suggests that he used the term “studies” because he intended to “execute variations until he got the essence of it”³. Bacon explains that he uses the word “study” rather to imply that his paintings, “although brought to a state of completion and valid in their own right, are not to be regarded as definitive statements”⁴. In diametrical opposition, the Christian narrative, as seen in the Grünewald example, is teleological (in the sense of being purposeful and tending towards an end) and has resolution. Bacon is leaving the viewers in an anticipatory state, where there is no fulfilment.

Bacon claimed that his perpetual fascination with the subject of crucifixion was for two reasons. From a formalist perspective the “very fact that the central figure of Christ is raised into a very pronounced and isolated position” endows it

¹ R. Alley, J. Rothstein, *Francis Bacon*, London, Trustees of the Tate Gallery, Thames & Hudson, 1964, p. 11.

² J. Russell, *Francis Bacon*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1993, p. 11.

³ M. Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon, Anatomy of an Enigma*, London, Phoenix, 1997, p. 87.

⁴ R. Alley, J. Rothstein, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

with greater aesthetic possibilities than if all the figures were placed on the same level¹. The Crucifixion was linked to the abattoir, where the position of the Christ was similar to the slaughter of an animal in an abattoir. From the spectrum of non-belief (non-belief in the institutions and narratives of religion), the crucifixion could be interpreted anthropologically as the behaviour between one man and another². He told Sylvester how he felt that the crucifixion is “a magnificent armature on which you can hang all types of feeling and sensation”³. The painting *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* articulates Bacon’s atheology. The theological narrative of salvation is distorted in this painting for two reasons. Firstly, we are dealing with a generic crucifixion and, secondly, because of the notable absence of the cross. In a conventional reading of the theological narrative of the Crucifixion of Christ, as described in the Grünewald example for instance, the body of Christ on the Cross operates as both the theological and aesthetic focal point. However, the absence of such a motif in this example means that the focal point is deflected onto the viewers. It becomes up to us to deal with the consequences of crucifixion. One suggestion is that we cannot see the crucifixion because we become ensconced in the brutality of the action itself of putting to deal. Therefore the Crucifixion is no longer a spectacle, in the sense of something that we look at, we are actually implicit in the making. Wilson Yates suggests that these figures represent “the ones who crucify or embody the emotions that feed the vengeance and cruelty of the act of crucifixion”⁴. Stephen Spender says:

These appalling dehumanized faces, which epitomize cruelty and mockery are those of the crucifiers rather than the crucified. His figures are of those who participate in the crucifixion of humanity which also includes themselves. If

¹ D. Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact, Interviews with Francis Bacon*, Londres, Thames & Hudson, 1987, p. 46.

² *Idem*, p. 23.

³ In his interviews with the art critic David Sylvester Bacon confessed that he hadn’t “found another subject so far that had been as helpful for covering certain areas of human feeling and behaviour”. D. Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact, Interviews with Francis Bacon*, Londres, Thames & Hudson, 1987, p. 44.

⁴ W. Yates, “The Real Presence of Evil: Francis Bacon’s *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*”, *Arts*, n° 8, 1996, p. 24.

they are not always the people who actually hammer in the nails, they are those among the crowd which shares in the guilt of cruelty to the qualities that are— or were—beneficently human, and which here seem to have banished forever.¹

Bacon places the three figures on the same eye level as the viewer because he is offering the viewer a reflection of him/herself. This is what we have become. Our natural reaction is to recoil from these menacing beasts and this sensation is heightened² if indeed they are us. By deflecting the focal point onto us Bacon is stipulating that, in order to make sense of these creatures, we have to place ourselves at the centre of the interpretation of them.

As well as altering the dynamics within the narrative, Bacon is also doing something which can be described in terms of Bataille's "hyper Christianity". He is unpicking the symbolic aspects of the Cross, which has altered its interpretation from being an instrument of bloody torture to becoming a banalised and sanitised shorthand, and his deconstruction of the metaphorical elicits and elucidates the literal horror of the Cross. Bacon is presenting a mirror-image of the Christian version of the three figures at the foot of the Cross; we have the obverse of the Christian Crucifixion. The symbol of the Crucifixion, which transforms death into life, and sin into salvation, becomes defamiliarised and returns to its original meaning as an instrument of torture. In Bacon's usage the Cross is returned into the abattoir and is positioned in what we would now understand as a Girardian context, (in terms of acknowledging the violence of the sacred) where it is returned to its literal primitive origin, as a symbol of punishment or agony.

Van Alphen suggests that Bacon's use of the motif of the crucifixion was part of an aesthetic critique of the tendencies of representation within Western art to "fix" the body to one viewpoint. In Van Alphen's words:

The motif of the crucifixion is not merely the token of bodily suffering and sacrifice. In the context of Bacon's polemic with the Western tradition of iconic representation, it is the inevitable consequence of representation, the tearing apart of the body, the destructive effect of reproductive mimesis, which the crucifixion betokens. And this is even more obvious in those works where the crucifixion is not represented by the cross or by slaughter, but subtly and microscopically by nails. As indexes of the immense suffering and the total

¹ *Idem.*

² Especially by the use of the device of the triptych, which is spatially inclusive.

mortification of the body, the nails suggest that any attempt to represent iconically may be regarded literally as an attempt to *nail the body down*.¹

In Bacon the aesthetic boundaries we place upon the body are broken down and the body irrupts. This becomes Bacon's aesthetic critique. It might be argued vis-à-vis Van Alphen that his use of the crucifixion was actually deeply Christian because he was establishing the *sparagmos* that occurs on the Cross, which sunders the body into fragments (and has universal consequences). As stated in the above quotation, the crucifixion (and other indexes, such as hypodermic syringes) establishes the disparity that arises between the portrayals of the body in Western art and Bacon's desire to convey the "living" vitality of the body. Bacon's confrontation with the modes or categories of representation within Western art, specifically Christian art, is what constitutes his a-theology. His resistance to categorise his bodies within the existent modes of representation within Western art could be viewed as incarnational. It also may be regarded as proto-postmodern in the sense that postmodernism examines the fragmentation of identity and the perpetual quest for wholeness (which is expressed by the Cross). Ironically, although Bacon defies categories of representation within Western art, his approach towards the Crucifixion is arguably more a-theological precisely because of his language of incarnation and embodiment.

Bacon's use of the Cross is radical. He does not employ it as a static device on which to pin down a body but uses it dynamically, to portray the resistance of the living body against the threat of death. He is taking the viewer back to the origins of religion, to the spectacle of the Roman crucifixion or the outletting of violence that Girard focuses on as indicative of the overlap between the violence and the sacred. In order to experience the "wholly other", that is analogous to the experience of the sacred, the viewer is diverted away from the institutionalised interpretation of the Crucifixion within the confines of the Christian narrative to the slaughterhouse, where it is man's transformation into meat at any unspecified moment that relates to the human flesh of Christ. The meat in the slaughterhouses is not man's meat and this is coupled with the allusion to the transformation of

¹ E. Van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*, Londres, Reaktion Books, 1992, p. 93.

Christ into human flesh which brings us to the experience of the “wholly other” and the horror of the sacred as articulated by the primal cry of Christ on the Cross. The unacceptability of Christ becoming associated with the slaughterhouse opens us onto the abyss, a feeling analogous to the unequivocal evil that Bataille speaks of in *On Nietzsche*.

Through the interaction of viewing the Crucifixion meets with its radical opposite—so the symbol of salvation and the resurrection becomes desymbolised and represents its radical opposite, that is, an instrument of torture. With this shift of context, the Christian sense of community, as evoked by the Eucharist, becomes transformed into the “a-community” of the abattoir, where animals are strung up in isolation. By enabling the viewer to experience this meeting of opposites, Bacon’s art can be considered sacramental (as the channel through which one can appropriate the power of the Christian narrative). The viewer does not experience the “wholly other” within the institutions but in the *sparagmos*; in the Dionysian realm of intoxication, where the otherness becomes self and self is the only “other”.

In Bacon’s art the meeting point between the divine and the human, the two different realities, occurs in the “space” of “real presence”. The phrase, “real presence” is used in two contexts which are related but different. In this context I am using it in the Eucharistic sense to refer to the meeting of the divine and the human in the sacrament. In the second context, I am using it to refer to Bacon’s establishment of “reality”. It is a term which Michel Leiris uses to describe how Bacon wrenches the object from out of its representation in the profane and places it in an unfamiliar environment, which evokes the uncanny, which is the situation of the sacred, by virtue of it being set apart¹. This gives his paintings “a heightened sensation of presence”². Leiris describes how:

Certain elements which are made to appear all the more imbued with life through having been visibly separated off from the profane banality of the

¹ The etymological root of the term *sacred* means to set apart. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1914), Durkheim describes how the sacred is not a quality inherent in certain objects but is a quality that can be localised in objects as they become set apart and forbidden. Durkheim, E., trad. K. Fields, 1995, p. xlvi.

² M. Leiris, *Francis Bacon*, trans. J. Weightman, London, Thames and Hudson, 1988, p. 27.

humdrum (saved from the commonplace, wrenched out of ordinariness, placed either literally or figuratively on a podium, by means of various devices).¹

The above quotation bears similarities with an idea articulated on page four: Bataille's aspiration to kill God (the sign of universal homogeneity) and return the sacred to its originary and transgressive nature. In other words, a profane understanding of God is displaced to express the virulence of the sacred. Bacon could be seen to be applying a similar treatment to the symbol of the Crucifixion. In the example of *Three Studies at the Base of a Crucifixion* Bacon unpicks the profanised and sanitised Cross and wrenches it from out of the "ordinariness" which it holds within the salvation narrative. He concomitantly "sets it apart" metaphorically speaking outside the parameters of the painting. Within this interpretation the "real presence" is the meeting of opposites between the standard symbolic interpretation of the Cross within the framework of salvation and the deconstructed interpretation of the Cross within Bacon's pictorial idiom.

Conclusion

I examined two traditions: the Christian theological tradition as represented by Grünewald, which acknowledges the wounded Christ on the Cross, and the atheological tradition as represented through the respective practices of Bataille and Bacon. With regard to the first tradition the emphasis is placed on the salved body—the body made whole and this is where the sacred is experienced. Philip Shaw (vis-à-vis Erich Auerbach) discusses how the "humility" of the Incarnation derives its full force from the contrast with Christ's divine nature: lowly and sublime, *humilis et sublimes*². However, the emphasis on the lowly nature of Christ is part of a greater intention to aggrandise the glory and magnificence of God. Shaw states that, "despite the focus on the suffering body of Christ [...] the aesthetics of the Christian sublime seeks to overcome its origins in the flesh"³ and accomplishes this

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

² Shaw, quoting from, E. Auerbach's *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. R. Manheim, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965, p. 41 in P. Shaw, *The Sublime*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2006, p. 19-20.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

by purging the Christian sublime (which Shaw identifies as *agape*) of *eros*, thereby acknowledging the selfless love, which comes from the impulse of the soul⁴. This tradition locates the body in the spirit.

The other tradition, which runs counter to the former one, is where I situate Bataille and Bacon. They remain with the *sarx*, with the wounded flesh of Christ, which they acknowledge is sacred precisely because of the wounded and fragmented nature. They reverse the direction of the Christian dialogue and instead of locating the body in the spirit, they locate the spirit in the body. This moment of animating the body is profoundly Christian because it is a literal enactment of the incarnation. The sacred is recovered then not in the sense of wholeness and salvation but in the brute materialism of the body. Ironically, by taking us back to the body they are doing something very Christological by acknowledging the semiotics of the body in relation to the doctrines of Incarnation, Resurrection and the presence of the body in the Eucharist. What I have described as their a-theology then is not simply about their employment of the symbols of the Christian tradition but something far more radical. In their respective disciplines Bataille and Bacon move beyond the framework of salvation and takes us back to the Passion of Christ, where we come face to face with the “real presence”.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22-23.