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Varying the Self: Bacon's Versions of van Gogh

Brendan Prendeville

1. I am concerned here with the numbered sequence of paintings bearing the title *Study for a Portrait of van Gogh*, nos 112 and 129–133 in John Rothenstein and Ronald Alley, *Francis Bacon, Catalogue Raisonné* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1964). All were shown in Bacon's exhibition at the Hanover Gallery in March–April 1957. The first painting in the series (Sainsbury Collection) was painted in 1956, and was presumably numbered retrospectively. *Van Gogh in a Landscape*, Pompidou Centre, Paris and *Van Gogh Going to Work*, private collection, were both painted in 1957 after the Hanover exhibition (Rothenstein and Alley, 134 and 137). Numbers V and VI were added in the course of the exhibition, and were not in the catalogue. Hugh Davies, in his *Francis Bacon: the Early and Middle Years* (Garland Publishing: New York, 1978), p. 158, quotes the *Evening Standard* review of March 21, 1957, which states that numbers II, III and IV 'were only completed last weekend and were still wet'. Lawrence Alloway, in his *Art News* review (vol.56 no.3, March 1957, p. 48, 'Art News from London') wrote that the pictures were unglazed – presumably because they were wet.

2. Davies, Chapter 6.

3. Ernst van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1992).

4. Alloway, 'Art news from London'.

Francis Bacon's series of paintings after van Gogh's *Self-Portrait on the road to Tarascon* stands slightly apart from the rest of his work, in terms both of technique and of subject-matter. The circumstances of production were unusual, with Bacon painting most of the canvases (nos II to VI, Figs 1–5) in two weeks in 1957, in haste to fill an exhibition at the Hanover Gallery; they were exhibited before the paint had dried and two of the versions (V and VI, Figs 4 and 5) were added in the course of the exhibition.¹ The painter himself came to regard the pictures as mostly unsuccessful, a fact that might invite us to see them as constituting a failed and precipitate technical experiment. General critical opinion, however, has followed Hugh Davies in regarding these as transitional works;² more recently Ernst van Alphen underlined some of their more positively significant features in the context of a broad thematic reassessment of Bacon, in which he developed an original thesis concerning 'loss of self'.³ I want to consider the paintings rather more on their own terms and with relatively little reference to the totality of Bacon's paintings, with respect either to methods or to meaning. In so doing, I hope to look freshly at two matters that certainly were of persistent concern to Bacon, but which the paintings of this series bring together in a unique way: the practice of painting and the theme of selfhood.

Painting, Experiment and the Complexity of the Self

The practice of painting could hardly fail to preoccupy any painter, but these works centre upon painting itself in particular and distinctive ways, partly because Bacon used them experimentally, in an attempted change of artistic direction. It is also significant that these experiments, in which the *matière* of paint becomes highly conspicuous, take as their subject the self-portrayal of the painter on his way to work (no other Bacon paintings expressly portray painters, not even his own self-portraits). It is a subject, then, that concerns selfhood as much as painting – and we could scarcely find a more emphatic, even hyperbolic cultural representation of the self than in the figure and reputation of van Gogh.

In this twofold experiment with subject and technique, Bacon moved away from his pastiche of dark-ground painting and Velázquez (although without forgetting what had drawn him to the latter, as I will argue). In thus transforming his practice, he came to deny himself the aid of some familiar supports: there are one or two vestigial space-frames, but nothing else from his already established repertory. His paintings thereby opened towards wider contemporary practice to a degree without parallel in his work, earlier or later. A contemporary reviewer commented on Bacon's adoption, now, of 'the postwar paintbrush'.⁴ Although there is no evidence that Bacon was responding to the work of any particular contemporary (the paintings were compared with de Kooning's, and de Kooning indeed admired Bacon's work) he was evidently engaging in broad terms with current painterly concerns.

In singling out the least conspicuously Baconian among Bacon's works, I hope to avoid furthering a certain critical tendency to define Bacon as a



Fig. 1. Francis Bacon, *Study for a portrait of van Gogh II*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 198 × 142 cm. Private collection. (Photo: Thomas Ammann Fine Art, Zürich.)

5. Van Alphen, p. 9.
6. Van Alphen, p. 11.
7. Van Alphen, p. 190.

radically – almost categorically – exceptional painter. For van Alphen, emphatically an exceptionalist, the necessary starting-point for any study of Bacon is the emotional effect the paintings uniquely produce, an effect he diagnoses as being ‘caused by a momentary loss of self’.⁵ Van Alphen further asserts, adapting a well-known remark made by the painter, that Bacon’s paintings ‘hit the nervous system, not only of the viewer, but also of Western culture and of its artistic traditions’;⁶ he qualifies this to mean that Bacon’s paintings ‘hit the nervous system’ by simultaneously evoking and upsetting (Western) cultural expectations. He concludes his book with the finding that there is in Bacon a strategic and consistent ‘resistance to the objectifying transformations of stereotypical discourse’ having as its affective consequence for the viewer a ‘re-subjectification’ of the body: ‘this resistance, seen as an ongoing bodily movement, is the self’.⁷ Van Alphen supports this claim with



Fig. 2. Francis Bacon, *Study for a portrait of van Gogh III*, 1957. Oil and sand on linen, 198 × 142 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institute, Gift of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1966.

much telling observation and analysis, but I have reservations. I do not object to the paradox of a selfhood which entails self-dispossession or 'loss of self' (such a paradox is central to Paul Ricoeur's theory of the self, which I will touch on shortly); but I see selfhood in less restrictive terms, as an unstable complex, open continually to historical change, cultural variation and (self-) reformulation, rather than in terms of an opposition between ideological superstructure and internal resistance movement. The emotional teleology van Alphen finds in Bacon appears to me to be the artefact of his analysis; unlike him, I am not inclined to specify a typical affective response to Bacon's paintings, but am more concerned to focus on the painter's actions. This is in order to see how, through his work as a painter, Bacon engaged with the selfhood-complex as mediated by the wider practice of painting.



Fig. 3. Francis Bacon, *Study for a portrait of van Gogh IV*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 152.4 × 116.8 cm. Tate Gallery. (Photo: © Tate, London 2002.)

8. Van Alphen, p. 16.

9. To distinguish art from theory in principle is not to deny that they can interrelate. The first modern use of the term 'theory' in relation to art, in Renaissance Italy, actually tied it closely to practice, since it referred to perspective construction. *Teoria*, in that context, meant something more like our 'method'. The academic art theory of subsequent centuries holds this sense of a percipient practice in varying balance with the neoplatonic idealism inherited from the Humanists. I am also reluctant to follow van Alphen in seeing Bacon's art (or any other) as a 'discourse', in so far as this entails a reduction to 'signs', tending to override action in favour of 'reading'.

It is apposite here to comment on one of van Alphen's rhetorical innovations: he ascribes 'theories' to Bacon – not to Bacon the interviewee but to the painter, whose theories are embedded in his practice: Bacon's art is 'a discourse . . . [which] has propositional content'.⁸ This attempt to avoid casting theory as extraneous to practice is in some respects attractive. However, it actually amounts to attributing to Bacon a systematicity that is in fact van Alphen's (Bacon has schematisms of his own, but that's a different matter). More importantly, it overlooks the specificity of practice, which differs from theory not only in typical content and possible scope but also in terms of fundamental orientation, by virtue of its work in the world: art is in principle something done, not something axiomatically stated.⁹ The point has a particular bearing on the present discussion, since the painter's action and the act of painting are very much at issue in the van Gogh series. It is relevant to add that variation, seriality and repetition are central to artistic practice (manifestly so with Bacon's work, including this series), but play no such

10. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1992) (*Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris 1990).

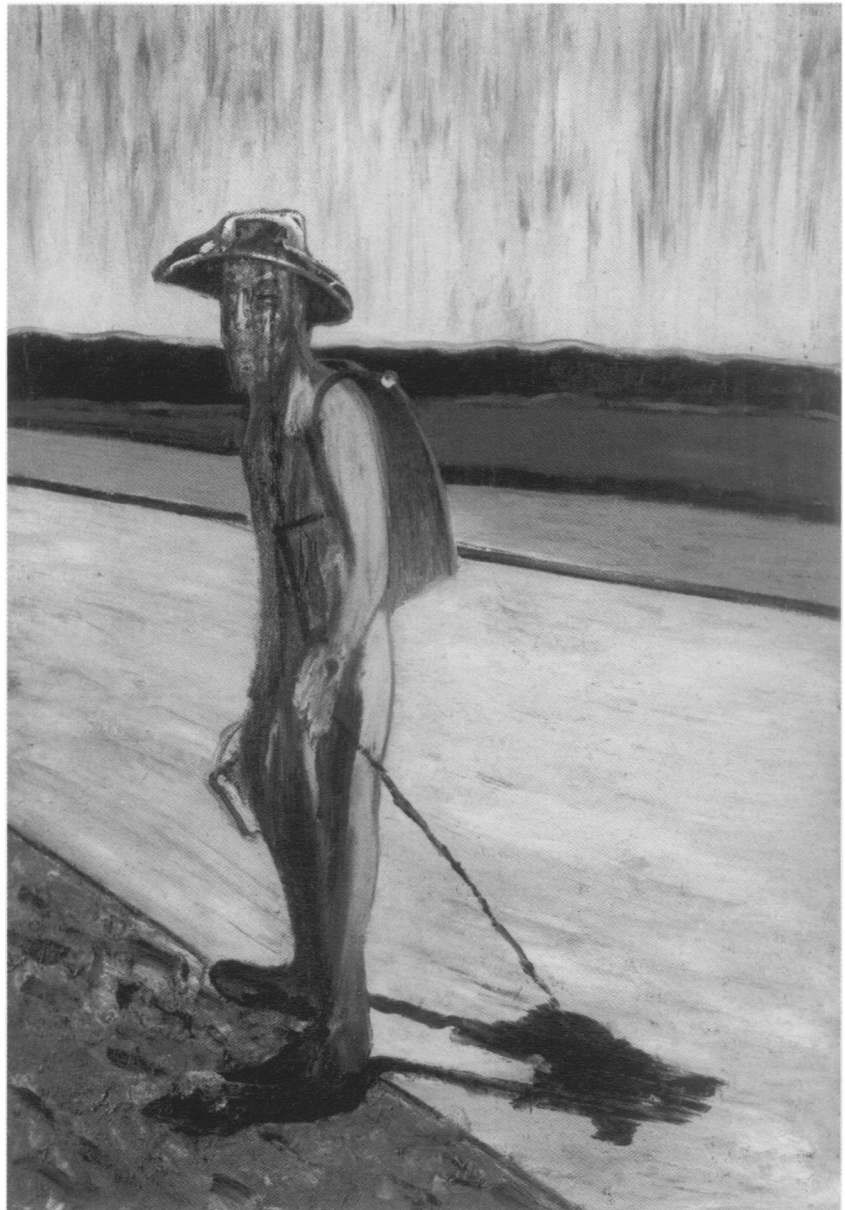


Fig. 4. Francis Bacon, *Study for a portrait of van Gogh V*, 1957. Oil and sand on canvas, 198 × 137.5 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institute, Gift of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1966.

essential role in any theoretical pursuit (Jasper Johns's famous notebook injunction beginning, 'Take an object, do something to it, do something else to it . . .' is at once an encapsulation of art and a model of theoretical incoherence or inconsequence). Correspondingly, I will be concerned here with the artist's actions, rather than with his theories, real or imputed.

None of this prevents me from making relevant reference to theory, more specifically to philosophy, in order to clarify certain concepts. In focusing on the question of selfhood, I will make some reference to Paul Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another*, an extremely searching and inclusive recent philosophical treatment of this theme.¹⁰ This is not because Bacon's work may be 'decoded' by way of



Fig. 5. Francis Bacon, *Study for a portrait of van Gogh VI*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 198.1 × 142.2 cm. Arts Council Collection, Hayward Gallery, London.

Ricoeur, nor on the grounds of any special affinity between painter and philosopher (unlike Deleuze, Ricoeur has not written on Bacon, nor indeed on any visual art), but because Ricoeur admirably defines the traits and complexities of selfhood in a cultural tradition that is relevant for Bacon.¹¹

Ricoeur views selfhood not as capable of any simple definition, but rather as a dynamic complex, cultural and historical. Arguing against both what he calls the hyperbolic Cartesian ego, identified with self-certain consciousness, and its opposite, the self shattered into (linguistic) fragments, as encountered in Nietzsche and his recent French readers, Ricoeur dwells initially on patterns of selfhood discernible in the reflexive structures of three languages, French, English and German,¹² He finds not a uniform self but a dialectical complex, whose elements include 'identifying sameness' as well as selfhood in the sense of self-reference or self-designation (a duality inherent in the contrast between

11. Ricoeur does not, it should be stressed, assert either the primacy or the exclusiveness of any one tradition relative to others. His book is, however, written expressly from within the tradition it critically explores – as is also the case with Charles Taylor's monumental historical study, *Sources of the Self* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1989).

12. Ricoeur, pp. 1–3. Strictly speaking, it is wrong to regard Descartes' *ego cogito* as venturing a theory of selfhood, even if has often been cited in that connection.

13. Ricoeur, p. 319.

14. Ricoeur, p. 333: 'To say that my flesh is also a body, does this not imply that it appears in just this way to the eyes of others? Only a flesh (for me) that is a body (for others) can play the role of first *analogon* in the analogical transfer from flesh to flesh.'

15. While Ricoeur does not mention Lacan, he does engage with a quite different critic of the ego, Emmanuel Levinas; one of the most innovative aspects of his book is his effort to reconcile Husserl's phenomenology with Levinas' ethical principle of the injunction by the other. Introducing the ethical theme, he proposes to 'return to Merleau-Ponty's "I can" and extend it from the physical to the ethical level' (p. 181).

16. John Russell, *Francis Bacon* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1971), p. 91: 'I'd always loved that picture – the one that was burnt in Germany during the war – and as nothing else had gone right I thought I'd try to do something with it. Actually I've always liked early van Gogh best, but that haunted figure on the road seemed just right at the time – like a phantom of the road, you could say.' Bacon in fact knew the painting only from a Phaidon colour reproduction (Rothenstein and Alley, p. 111).

idem and *ipse*, same and self, in Latin). This is a compound selfhood in which otherness is centrally implicated (rather than standing over against the enclosed self). The self, by virtue of the exchanges of interlocution and the reciprocity (not antithesis) of self and other, is transactional. Following the phenomenological tradition, Ricoeur dwells on the 'strangeness' of being a body, an embodied self, finding here a crucial aspect of the self's (own) otherness: 'this body of mine' is also a body among others; it 'adheres to the domain of things', but is also flesh, just as each person is both agent and patient, active and passive.¹³ I do not own my body so much as it possesses me, it is an intimate otherness; equally, I may apprehend the other's body as flesh, an otherness intimated.¹⁴

Ricoeur's account of selfhood, which my brief remarks can not adequately summarise, has many attractions, foremost among them the rescuing of selfhood from the false alternatives of the enclosed ego and its dissolution. Not only is selfhood open to negotiation, it is a negotiation. Much recent cultural theory has been governed by an antinomial model according to which a fortress-like ego, guarding its 'wholeness', is mortified or undermined by an apprehension of its opposite, a formless otherness. This model underlies those theories of 'the gaze' which have pervaded discussion of visual art in recent times and which have been derived, principally, from Lacan. By contrast Ricoeur, who does not foreclose the self, marks it off from no possible extremes of enclosure or dissolution, and so in his account selfhood, historically, may entertain and visit all extremes. Selfhood is certainly historical, but its historicity ought not to be reduced to what van Alphen, following a familiar pattern of thinking, calls the 'Western conception of discrete and integral selfhood'. This is surely *nothing but* a conception, and a commonplace, uncritically reiterated in textbooks of cultural theory. Ricoeur's approach to the issue has the advantage of keeping in view the selfhood we live, its enactment in language and social intercourse.¹⁵ As a philosopher of narrative who has written on literature rather than visual art, he has evaded the antinomies so readily suggested by the spatial arts. In his account the virtue of (literary) art, respecting motifs of the self, is that it runs free of theoretical antinomies and hierarchies, and elaborates its versions of selfhood by variation and experiment. Fiction is a 'laboratory' for selfhood as it ramifies and changes in life and history. By drawing on Ricoeur's account of the self in preference to the antinomial model, I hope to regain a sense of the historicity and temporality both of these Bacon paintings and of our encounter with them. There is a dynamics of experiment and variation in Bacon's work, overriding its repetitions and schematisms, its obtrusively legible polarities. Accordingly, I propose to discuss his paintings primarily as a practice, rather than as a 'discourse'; as something done, rather than as something read. While Bacon's work in general often seems dense with signification, everything in the van Gogh paintings is redolent of action.

Chance, Action Painting, and the Figure in the Road

This is not to say that we can or should disregard the specificity of the imagery. In his re-enactments of van Gogh, Bacon transformed the strange but sprightly figure of the striding painter (Fig. 6) into darker and generally more brutish entities, giving one of them (no. III, Fig. 2) a death's head. Bacon told John Russell that he saw the van Gogh image as 'that haunted figure on the road . . . a phantom of the road';¹⁶ later, in conversation with Peter Beard, he observed that 'most artists are very aware of their annihilation – it follows them around

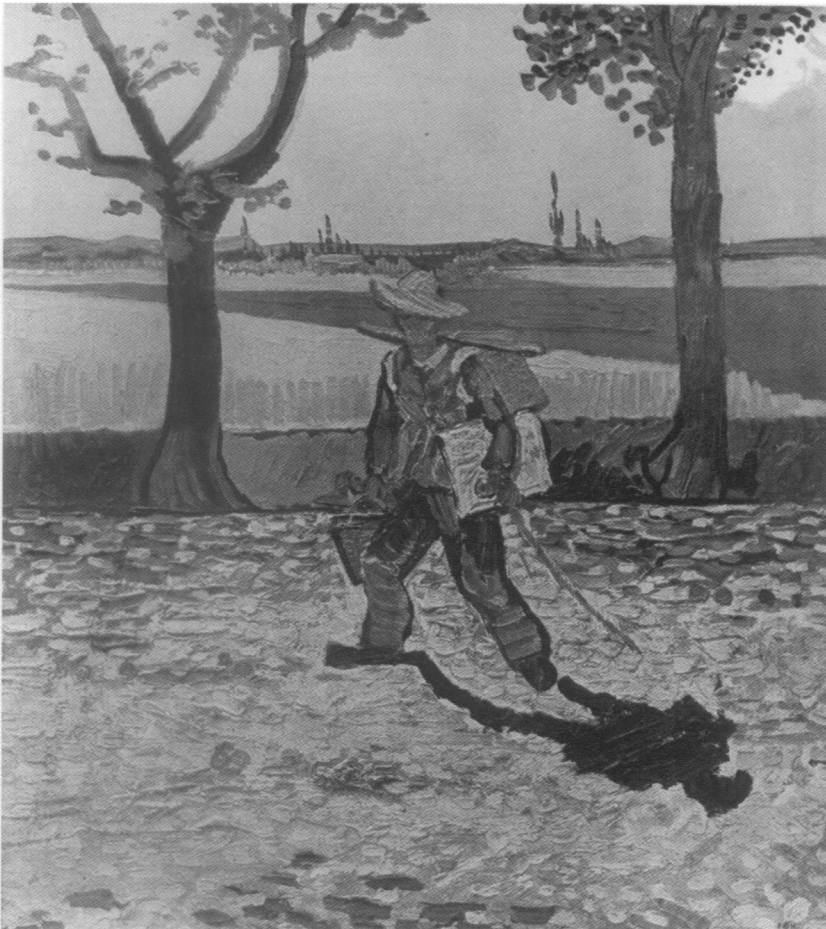


Fig. 6. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-portrait, on the road to Tarascon*, August 1888. Oil on canvas, 48 × 44 cm. Formerly Kaiser-Friedrich Museum, Magdeburg; destroyed 1945.

like a shadow, and I think that's one of the reasons most artists are so conscious of the vulnerability and the nothingness of life, and the vulnerability of their own life or of anybody else's'.¹⁷ The van Gogh image is striking for its trailing shadow, and Bacon indeed referred to van Gogh in his subsequent remarks to Beard – though in connection not with painting but with the wide intelligence demonstrated in van Gogh's letters. The identification of motifs of death was already established as a trope of Bacon criticism by the time of the 'New Images of Man' exhibition at MOMA in 1959, when Study no III was one of five works by the painter selected for inclusion.¹⁸ The catalogue commentary referred to Bacon's preoccupation with 'the vision of death and man's consciousness of dying' – a bland remark that loses touch with the concreteness of the artist's practice, in a dismal drift to generality.¹⁹

Bacon himself was insistent that a painting's 'meaning' could not and should not be thus generalised. In 1953, he wrote in praise of Matthew Smith's sustained effort 'to make idea and technique inseparable. Painting in this sense tends towards a complete interlocking of image and paint, so that the image is the paint and vice versa. Here the brushstroke creates the form and does not merely fill it in. Consequently, every movement of the brush on the canvas alters the shape and implications of the image. That is why real painting is a mysterious and continuous struggle with chance – mysterious because the very

17. 'Francis Bacon: Remarks from an Interview with Peter Beard', ed. Henry Geldzahler, in *Francis Bacon: Recent Paintings 1968–1974*, MOMA, New York 1975, p. 15.

18. Peter Selz, ed. *New Images of Man*, MOMA, New York 1959. The other paintings were *Man in a Blue Box*, 1949, *Study of a Figure in a Landscape*, 1952 (Phillips Collection), *Study After Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, 1953, and *Study for a Portrait of van Gogh No. 1*, 1956.

19. Peter Selz (*New Images*, p. 31) does continue the sentence with specific reference to no. III: 'Always concerned with the vision of death and man's consciousness of dying, Bacon has presented us here with the spectacle of van Gogh returning from the dead to his familiar haunts on the road to Tarascon.' (Even if Bacon may have – perhaps unconsciously – echoed Selz's words, he recast them as a more concrete and less literal image).

20. Francis Bacon, 'Matthew Smith – a Painter's Tribute', *Matthew Smith; Paintings from 1909 to 1952* (Tate Gallery: London, 1953), p. 12.

21. His first solo exhibitions abroad were in 1953 (New York) and 1957 (Paris); work of his was included in important survey exhibitions at MOMA, New York, in 1955 and 1956. For his impact in Royal College of Art circles, see Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma*, London 1996, pp. 159–60 and p. 332 n. 15. For the Slade, see Fiona Bradley, ed., *Victor Willing*, 'Introduction', (University of Washington Press, 2001), p. 12.

22. Russell, p. 91.

23. Russell, p. 92.

24. Lawrence Alloway, 'Art News from London' (see note 1), p. 48.

25. Hirshhorn bought nos. III and IV, no. II was bought by a British private collector, no. IV was bought for the Contemporary Art Society and given to the Tate, and the Arts Council bought no. VI.

26. Michael Fried, 'Bacon's Achievement', *Arts Magazine*, 56, September 1962, p. 28 – a review of the Bacon retrospective at the Tate, rather more critical than appreciative: 'although there are interesting patches, the van Gogh paintings tend to fall apart almost entirely'.

27. Victor Willing, 'Thoughts after a Car Crash: Note after the death of Jackson Pollock', *Encounter*, Vol VII, No 4, October 1956, pp. 66–8, reprinted in Fiona Bradley, ed., *Victor Willing*, pp. 140–2.

substance of the paint, when used in this way, can make such a direct assault upon the nervous system; continuous because the medium is so fluid and subtle that every change that is made loses what is there in the hope of making a fresh gain. I think that painting today is pure intuition and luck and taking advantage of what happens when you splash the stuff down.'²⁰

This eloquent passage has various points of interest, and I will return to it later. Most immediately, its tone and content remind us of the extent to which Bacon was a painter involved with the main currents in the art of his time – and with 'the postwar paintbrush'. By the 1950s, he was an internationally-known artist: Alfred Barr bought *Painting 1946* for MOMA in 1948, and Bacon was included in a major survey of European art at MOMA in 1955. Two of the van Gogh paintings were bought by an American collector. As an artist exhibiting at the leading London avant-garde gallery, The Hanover, Bacon would have been acutely conscious of his position; he was exhibiting internationally, his work was admired by other Modernists (including members of the Independent Group) and he had made a significant impact among younger British artists.²¹ He had a reputation to maintain, and his comments to Russell (published in 1971) suggest that he was aware that he needed to make a change in his work, whose imagery and technical qualities were becoming over-familiar: 'I'd always loved that picture [the van Gogh] and as nothing else had gone right I thought I'd try to do something with it.'²² Russell, in 1971, judged the paintings as among his weakest, with their 'splashy, approximate procedure'²³ (compare Bacon's comments on Smith, and the factor of chance – 'taking advantage of what happens when you splash the stuff down'). Yet the show had an impact, with some reviewers welcoming the change. Lawrence Alloway found that Bacon had 'recovered his form' after having 'stagnated in his own legend' for a year or two.²⁴

My aim in recounting the circumstances in which Bacon produced the paintings is to retrieve a sense of the painter's *agency*: to see him as one artist working among others at a certain time, subject to particular pressures and constraints but also guided by the imperatives lucidly set out in the Matthew Smith essay. The evidence suggests that, in 1957, Bacon attempted a self-consciously gambler-like return to centre stage, as if staking everything on the propitious figure of van Gogh after 'nothing else had gone right' and in the process playing with chance, making a play with splashes. The gamble paid off, to the extent that the paintings sold, with two going to the American collector Joseph Hirshhorn, and not long afterwards Bacon signed with the Marlborough.²⁵

Bacon's new dealers would certainly have had an eye to his likely American sales, and this brings us back to the question of the 'postwar paintbrush' and its relevance to the van Gogh series. In 'New Images of Man', *Study No. III*, reproduced in colour in the catalogue, could be seen alongside European *matière* painting (Appel, Dubuffet) and 'action painting' (Pollock, de Kooning). In 1960 Michael Fried compared the van Gogh paintings with de Kooning's work, in terms at once critical and appreciative.²⁶ In 1956, the young Victor Willing, an admirer of Bacon's work, had published an article in *Encounter* on the death of Jackson Pollock, writing in manifestly Baconian terms: 'The surface of a Jackson Pollock canvas involves us in the most raw visual sensation of applied paint that we are likely to have experienced. The marks strike directly on the nerves . . .'²⁷ Patrick Heron, in his review of the 1957 Hanover Gallery show, prefaced his critique of Bacon with remarks on 'the absolutely obvious and overt spontaneity of American painting of the Pollock generation'. In Bacon, too, he found a spurious spontaneity: 'today the mere speed of paint

flicking has become the most powerful criterion', and Bacon's work had always shown this 'evident quickness'.²⁸ However, the van Gogh series was more distinct from Bacon's previous work than this suggests, in the positive attention Bacon here gave to the ground rather than to the figure which, inversely, now appears in negative. It was this distribution of painterly action across the surface that made the paintings superficially comparable with de Kooning's *Woman* series.

One feature, however, markedly distinguishes them not only from de Kooning but also from Matthew Smith as described by Bacon: figure and paint do *not* merge, as Michael Fried astutely pointed out.²⁹ Rather than arising through the overall configuring of paint like a de Kooning 'Woman', Bacon's figures stand out distinctly against the painted landscape. These are indeed far more particularised images than anything in Smith or de Kooning, and in each of the paintings Bacon makes sure to include distinguishing traits: straw hat, paintbox, walking stick and so forth. The figure refuses to merge with the paint formation as a whole, not because Bacon fails to make images and paint 'interlock', as he claims regarding Smith, but because the figure itself has a more self-isolating presence (or quasi-presence) than anything in Smith (or than de Kooning's 'Women').

Furthermore, what is true of the figures also stands for other separable elements of the paintings: road, trees, sky and the bands of the background landscapes. The drawn configuration of these elements channels and demarcates into zones the broad smearings of colour, which vary from the more impetuous (III) to the more self-contained (V). This assembling of elements is the constant, the rule, which organises the variations, and central to it is the relation of interdependence between figure and road. In this respect, Patrick Heron compared Bacon's realisation unfavourably with that of van Gogh, whose 'genius is *formal* (!). He makes the edges of the road absolutely horizontal . . . Bacon's road edges slip awkwardly up from right to left, with an awkward false perspective which neither defines reality nor composes, because the result is a *slipping* design which will not stay still.'³⁰ In all of this, however – the figure-ground relationship, the angling of the road – it is important to see what motivates Bacon's 'failures'. I do not mean in the sense of imputing motives (as one might reasonably say: Bacon wanted to restore his reputation by pastiching current painterly techniques; or, he wanted to avoid simply restating the van Gogh composition); what I want to suggest is that his 'failures' suggest the direction of his effort – his *way to work*.

The elaborations of the figure-ground relationship, the 'slipping' and 'splashing', the varying orientation of the figure relative to the viewer, its ambivalence between stillness and movement – all these can admittedly be recognised as recurrent in Bacon's later practice. What is of present relevance, however, is that these features reflect a repertory of painterly operations, and this series, if it indeed inaugurates a new development in Bacon's work, does so in ways that emphatically evoke the painter's physical action, in terms of a singular and appropriate motif; one that thematically links selfhood and painting. (It is important to notice that I am *not* saying that the paint is an index of Bacon's unique temperament; nor that the selfhood in question is discernibly his.) In altering the spatial composition relative to the original, and setting the road in oblique perspective, Bacon gives an emphasis of his own to the figure's relationship to the road: it is a 'phantom of the road', not a figure in a landscape, and is as attached to the road as his shadow. By turning the road into perspectival depth, Bacon gives it something of the function of his space-frames (only II has a box-frame around the figure). Like them, it

28. Patrick Heron, 'London', *Arts*, Sept. 1957, p. 13.

29. Fried, 'Bacon's Achievement': '. . . in many of his paintings it is precisely this interlocking of image and idea that does *not* happen.' (Bacon in fact wrote 'idea and technique . . . image and paint'.) 'Where de Kooning in his *Women* tries to reach the human figure through the handling of paint . . . Bacon trusts rather naively to the figure (of van Gogh on a road) and to traditional composition to make his paintings cohere.'

30. Heron, 'London', p. 13. The exclamation and italics are his.

31. *Lust for Life*, MGM 1956, directed by Vincente Minnelli, was based on Irving Stone's novel, and starred Kirk Douglas and Anthony Quinn (as Gauguin. The artists are played by American actors, and bourgeois types, including Theo, by British actors – as natural and repressive, respectively). The art historian John Rewald was an adviser and much care went into the art direction, which called for the painting of facsimiles and the creation of sets corresponding to the subjects of the paintings. Minnelli regarded the film as a prestigious project that would enhance the status of film as an art. He used all his ingenuity as a director of musicals to transform motifs from the paintings into scenes of narrative action. Immediately prior to this sequence, the painter casts a long shadow as he leaves at dawn, exiting the frame at left; fade to a horizontal travelling shot of him on the road, his shortened shadow before him; he comes to two trees and pauses, framed by them, to turn to the distant view, then rushes on. (For Minnelli, see James Naremore, *The Films of Vincente Minnelli*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1993.)

32. Stendhal, *Le rouge et le noir*, Pléiade ed., Bk. 2, Ch. 19, p. 557: 'Well sir, a novel is a mirror which travels along a high road. Sometimes it reflects to your eyes the blue of the heavens, sometimes the mud of the puddles in the road . . .' The phrase first appears earlier in the book, in slightly different form, attributed to a seventeenth-century writer, as the epigraph to Ch. 13: 'A novel: it is a mirror that one takes along a road.' (Plato originally used the metaphor of the travelling mirror, but of course in terms critical of *mimesis*).

33. Julius Maier-Graefe's *Vincent, der Roman eines Gottsuchers* (Munich, 1921), set out the life in novelistic style. Irving Stone went further in this direction in *Lust for Life: a novel about van Gogh* in 1934. For the early mythography of van Gogh, see Carol M. Zemel, *The Formation of a Legend: van Gogh Criticism, 1890–1920* (Umi Research Press: Ann Arbor, 1980). Bacon himself has of course already been the subject of two biographies, Michael Peppiatt's, cited above, and Daniel Farson's satisfyingly scandalous *The Gilded Gutter Life of Francis Bacon* (Pantheon Books: London, 1993); Bacon's life too has been fictionalised on film. Peppiatt (p. 168) writes 'Characteristically enough, Bacon's interest in van Gogh was quickened by seeing Vincente Minnelli's *Lust for Life*'.

simultaneously situates the figure for the viewer and embodies the figure's own perspective, the latter sense heightened here by the connotation of a journey (even if the figure is, in two cases at least, arrested).

A lone figure travelling down a road is the epitome of the fictional narrative. From the folk tale to the road movie, the road appears as the spine of many a narrative in which a character sets out on a journey of fortune and hazard. The image of the traveller is inseparable from the narration of life-stories, particularly those concerning adventure, encounters by chance. Van Gogh's Tarascon painting seems to carry a recollection of Gustave Courbet's *The Meeting*, 1854, in which the painter shows himself meeting his future patron Alfred Bruyas by the side of a road, onto which he casts a distinct shadow. Although there is no evident encounter in van Gogh's picture, one is implied in the turning of the painter's head. Vincente Minnelli, working the painting into the action of his film *Lust for Life*, has van Gogh (Kirk Douglas) pause momentarily as he walks along the road to look in towards the landscape,³¹ thus returning the painting's motif to the narrative of van Gogh's life-journey. He also thereby avoids the cinematic anomaly of an outward gaze, meeting that of the viewer. In contrast, the sense of a human encounter is certainly central to Bacon's variations on van Gogh, even if Bacon's figures do not invariably follow the original – in which the gaze is turned to the viewer who, in the first instance, had been the painter himself.

In fictional convention, the reader often 'meets' or 'finds' the hero as a traveller isolated on the road. Stendhal famously described the novel itself as 'a mirror which travels along a high road', in a passage that is itself an aside to the reader, as if encountered at the verge of the narrative.³² Van Gogh's was of course a much-narrated life-story: in addition to the volumes of his letters – an inadvertent autobiography – two biographies had been published long before the time Bacon painted the Hanover pictures (Minnelli's biopic had come out in the previous year).³³ While Bacon's paintings could hardly be said to present the mythic persona thus built up since van Gogh's death, they cannot evade it either. The long-established account of van Gogh characterised him as solitary and dedicated, as one who suffers and struggles, and it attributed consequent moral qualities to his work. None of this was inappropriate: from Maier-Graefe's biography onwards, van Gogh offers a strong example of what Ricoeur calls the 'mandated self', the self sent forth as if on a mission, dedicated and defined by profession. This is the selfhood of self-designation, of the reflexive *moi-même*: I myself undertake to do this, I will do it myself. (The tendency to regard the painter's remarkable human qualities as integral to his work was reinforced when the painter's work was exhibited in the aftermath of war, in 1947, in Paris and London.) Bacon's observations on van Gogh show that he too saw him in exemplary terms but in these paintings, which manifestly bear on the painter's profession, the central figure is in most cases a sluggish, thuggish, doubtful and hesitant presence: the characteristic Baconian anti-hero, one might say, but here counterposed to a specific and numinous reputation. In each painting as a whole, however, with perhaps the exception of no. V, we find precisely the handling of paint that Bacon had mandated for himself in his Matthew Smith essay: '. . . [a] continuous struggle with chance . . . every change that is made loses what is there in the hope of making a fresh gain. I think that painting today is pure intuition and luck and taking advantage of what happens when you splash the stuff down'. Painting, like the fictional journey, is a chapter of accidents; the road, as Bacon enacts it in versions II and III, is a place of daring action and chance encounter. It is not for us to *read* it as such, so much as to *meet* it, on the terms offered in each case.

Bacon's Variations

Fame reduces selfhood to an image, separated from what Ricoeur terms its 'anchorage' in 'events in the world', where it is a body among bodies, an individual named among, and in relation to, others. The icon or simulacrum of selfhood lacks all that is indispensable to actual existence, and yet it has an appropriative power of its own. In spite of what Minnelli called his 'astonishing likeness' to the painter, Kirk Douglas, as a film star, could not but transfigure van Gogh in his own image.³⁴ Van Gogh's self-portraits were themselves transfigurative, albeit in quite different terms, and it is worth noting how completely Bacon avoided any restatement of their features, in his own paintings. In the Sainsbury Collection painting of 1956, which presaged, yet differs from, the 1957 series (Fig. 7), Bacon gave relatively clear definition to van Gogh's face, but rendered an appearance more akin to photographic record than to the intensified face of the self-portraits. There is something here that resembles the van Gogh glimpsed in the recollection of a centenarian in Arles, at the end of the twentieth century: 'disagreeable, smelling of alcohol and very ugly'. The words bring us up with a shock, not so much because they appear to contradict the hagiography but more immediately because they summon before us a mortal van Gogh, a man who has lived in the world with others, one having as obdurate and ordinary a corporeality as our own.

'Obduracy' indeed describes the uneasily corporeal quality of Bacon's van Goghs. They are lumpen and inert, save in the only version – no. VI – in which Bacon chose to merge figure with landscape (Fig. 5). Here, a long knife-stroke scrapes diagonally through the blue-black paint of the figure, repeating the strokes that define the road down which the painter strides. This painting, which has the steepest (and the most contradictory) perspectives, evokes van Gogh's own emphatic perspective constructions, particularly those of his versions of *The Sower*, which evolved at about the same time.³⁵ This painting gets nearest to the dynamic interidentification of character and journey-space that is to be found in fiction.

While it is only in one case that figure and road begin to merge, Bacon interprets the two elements as a joint entity in all the versions. In no. II, he reiterates the shape made by figure and shadow together in the original painting, but turns the figure to the right, towards the shadow that is continuous with it. Because the figure is in effect itself a shadow, the thickly smeared hues of the road take on the complementary connotation of bodiliness, flesh. Ernst van Alphen pointed out the meat-like quality of Bacon's road surfaces, most conspicuous in version III; he describes the settings as 'bodyscapes', but it is always the road alone that most expressly refers (or belongs) to the figure.³⁶ In no. II, the road is a particularly complex intermixture of reds, yellow, ochre, white and dark blue. The figure's identification with it is emphasised by the black triangle below and the less dark boundary at the further side. The figure stands on this demarcated flow of bright paint, its right profile clearly defined to mark its orientation along the direction of movement, even if it is itself immobile, anchored by a huge misshapen limb. The 'slipping' quality complained of by Heron confers the sense of movement: the landscape slides obliquely past while the figure is still. There is an analogy with tracking shots in cinema (as in Minnelli's re-enactment), where the frame holds the moving figure still by travelling with it, while the space traversed passes by in a blur – and in no. II there is indeed a space-frame (like that of a viewfinder) around the figure. In the relatively few cases in his oeuvre where Bacon depicted horizontal movement, he oriented

34. Tony Thomas, *The Films of Kirk Douglas* (Citadel Press: New York, 1972), intro. by Vincente Minnelli, p. 7. In his pioneering study of stardom, Richard Dyer argues that in so far as stars 'embody the type of "the individual" . . . they embody that particular conception of what it is to be human that characterises our culture.' In those terms, Douglas's portrayal would re-emphasise the received view of van Gogh as epitomising autonomous individuality (Richard Dyer, *Stars* (BFI Publishing: London, 1979), 2nd edition with supplementary chapter by Paul McDonald, BFI Publishing: London, 1998, p. 99). The star, unlike the ordinary actor, never ceases to be recognised as her/himself in the role (and therefore as a real yet remote and inaccessible person), and in this sense too there is a redoubling of exceptional individuality (Dyer, p. 20). The star is both more and less 'real' than the actor, both more of an artefact and yet more resoundingly actual. Hollywood production values contribute to both aspects, intensifying artifice and yet heightening evidence of physicality, to the point of exaggeration. Douglas and Quinn are both typically 'physical' Hollywood stars.

35. Van Gogh painted two versions of *The Sower* not long after he painted the Tarascon picture, in August 1888. The landscape configurations in the paintings resemble each other, and in a drawing of the road to Tarascon (Kunsthau Zürich; F. 1502 in J. B. de la Faille, *The Works of Vincent van Gogh*, J. M. Meulenhoff: Amsterdam, 1970), van Gogh slants the perspective to the left, as in the Sower paintings – and as Bacon does in his versions. Since *The Sower* is such a familiar image, it would not be surprising if Bacon conflated it with the Tarascon scene in his reworkings – or if we do in looking at them.

36. Van Alphen, p. 142ff.

37. William Townsend, *The Townsend Journals: an artist's record of his times 1928–51*, Tate Gallery London 1976, ed. Andrew Forge, entry for 14 Nov. 1950.

38. Matthew Gale, *Francis Bacon: Working on Paper*, Tate Gallery London 1999, nos 26–28 and fig. 15. *Van Gogh in a Landscape*, 1957 (Centre Georges Pompidou) shows van Gogh in the distance, walking along a road that curves across the background and turns upward in the foreground. This curving formation has an antecedent in one Muybridgean image, *Study for a Crouching Nude*, 1952 (Detroit) and a relevant application in another, *After Muybridge – Study of the Human Figure in Motion – Woman Emptying a Bowl of Water and a Paralytic Child on All Fours*, 1965 (Stedelijk), where the figures move on a kind of elevated walkway.

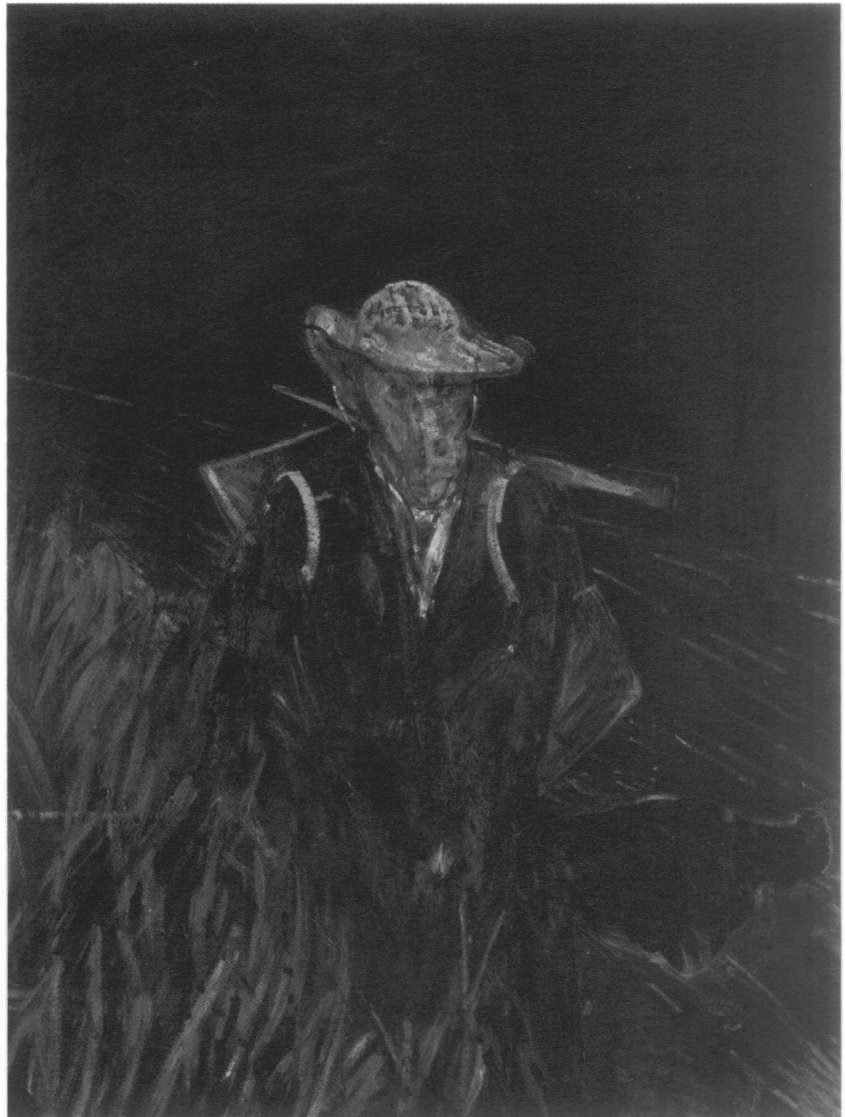


Fig. 7. Francis Bacon, *Study for a portrait of van Gogh I*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 198 × 142 cm. Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, University of East Anglia, Norwich.

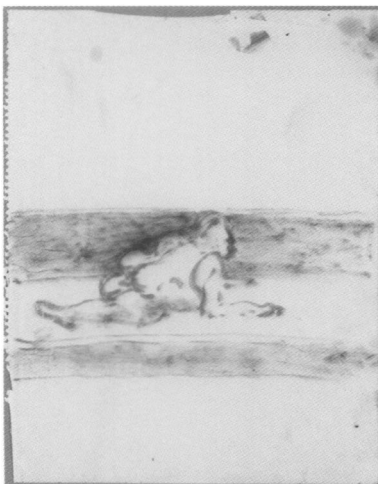


Fig. 8. Francis Bacon, *Blue crawling figure, no. 1*, c.1957–61. Oil on sketchbook sheet, 34 × 27 cm. Tate Gallery. (Photo: © Tate, London 2002.)

the figure itself horizontally. Here, where this is not the case, the road becomes the mobile element, indissociable from the figure though distinct from it. In 1950 William Townsend recorded a conversation between himself, Bacon and William Coldstream where Bacon, showing samples of his collection of illustrations, described one as ‘a trap set out and a smear across it, a kind of slime, showing that a human being had passed through’.³⁷ Here, the road is a smear, associated with human passage, and the figure’s action is suggestive of sliding rather than walking.

We can find comparable characteristics in the small works on paper that have come to light since Bacon’s death, most relevant being the series of crawling figures adapted from Muybridge photographs.³⁸ In no. 1 of this group (Fig. 8), the figure moves horizontally between parallel smeared bands that make a kind of track, retaining the sense not only of Muybridge’s settings but also of his method, which amounted to a kind of proto-cinematic tracking, one

entailing an analytical freezing of action. Bacon retains that sense of a figure held for vision, but his summary re-enactment has an animating effect, substituting for an external, observed body one that the painter activates from within. What he draws in paint is equivalent to what psychologists term the 'body-schema', 'the spatial image which everybody has [of] himself', in Paul Schilder's formulation³⁹ – the body as deed.

In most of the paintings after van Gogh, the figure is an inert presence braced against the generally horizontal or sloping path of painterly action. In nos. IV and VI (Figs 3 and 5), partial exceptions to this rule, the figure-ground distinction is less marked, for divergent reasons: a sluggish coalescing movement of figure and landscape in IV, a general dynamism in VI. (The red-green band at the bottom of VI has no legible status, but serves to compress and so intensify the activity of the road, and to redouble – literally underline – the sense of energetic crosswise action.) The series as a whole gives more pronounced expression to a contrast that was inherent in the original: the figure in van Gogh's painting is walking and turning to look out, and the act of looking back, which calls for a responding attention, effectively arrests the movement in its passage, an arrestation reinforced by the framing effect of trees and road.

The duality of movement and arrest is central to Bacon's variations,⁴⁰ and if he moderates the contrast in IV, he explores opposite extremes in V and VI, which he must have worked on more or less simultaneously. In no. VI, the only stubbornly static elements are the identifying characteristics of the figure: straw hat, mahl stick and profiled features, all of which seem incongruously to be carried along unimpaired in the general commotion. The figure in V (Fig. 4), standing to look, has predominantly the passive air of standing to be looked at, held for vision; here, in contrast with no. VI, the halting figure also stills the landscape. The pose resembles that of a woman in a magazine photograph Bacon cut out and kept at some time.⁴¹ She, similarly, stops to look back, arrested to be seen, a dark shape against a receding country road. The figure in V is, like her, a negative presence, and his features are formed over a dark ground, as in Bacon's preceding practice. Vestiges of a space-frame appear under the vertical brushstrokes of the sky.⁴² In painting the sky, Bacon defined the head of the figure negatively, and left the same dark ground colour to appear in the band at the horizon, so that the viewer's eye-level and the head, turned outwards, intersect. With a huge foot planted across the verge near to the bottom of the canvas, the attenuated figure is taller in the frame than is the case in any other version. In contrast with the striding shadow in VI, smallest of the figures, this one is reduced to stasis and to appearance, apparition. That which is held to be seen cannot move. It has immobilised itself in order to attend and to be an object of attention. It has given up its impetus in order to be seen clearly and in a quasi-interlocutory way.

Through his variations, Bacon experiments with a dialectic essential both to selfhood and to painting in the tradition that concerned him: painting is something done and something seen, selfhood is active and also passive. If I say 'I am my body', this entails both that I am 'in' my actions and also that I am in a merely passive sense one (physical) body among others. In this latter sense, I appear in common view and have identifiable traits, just as I bear a name, but my agency as such is not visible or similarly describable. These dimensions of my selfhood are quite inextricably bound together; the moral paradox of their disparity and linkage is central to the tradition of realist portraiture which fascinated Bacon. The portrait conventions that he caricaturally reinterpreted in his pictures of the 1950s portrayed 'selves' in the sense and in the terms

39. Paul Schilder, *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body: Studies in the Constructive Energies of the Psyche* (Trench, Trubner and Co.: New York, 1950, reprinted 1970), p. 7. The use of body-schema theory to explain the learning and repeatability of actions has an obvious bearing on painting, 'Action Painting' in particular. Frederick Bartlett, in *Remembering, a Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1950, first edition 1932), quotes the pioneer of body-schema theory, Henry Head: 'By means of perpetual alterations in position, we are always building up a postural model of ourselves which constantly changes. Every new posture is recorded on this plastic schema . . .' (p. 199). In executing a quick stroke in tennis, Bartlett argues, the body draws on postural memory deposited by the 'schemata', but, as with actual remembering, never merely reiterates: 'I do not . . . produce something absolutely new, and I never repeat something old. The stroke is literally manufactured out of the living visual and postural "schemata" of the moment and their interrelations.' (p. 202) Bacon, in expounding the innovative and risky character of Smith's practice, obviously leaves out of account the painter's repertory of learnt actions, his 'schemata'; this despite the great, even strategic, part played by repetition in his own work. For a phenomenologically-based account of learnt action in a different field (piano improvisation) see David Sudnow, *Ways of the Hand* (Barnes and Noble: Cambridge and London, 2001).

40. Bacon's figures are either ambiguous in their action, or are haunted by what they are not doing, as if hesitating. Two parallels occur to me: Brecht's recommendation that an actor should 'at all essential points . . . imply what he is not doing' (*Brecht on Theatre, the development of an aesthetic*, trans. and ed. John Willett, Hill and Wang: New York, 1989, p. 137); and a line from a poem by William Empson (famous of course for his study of literary ambiguity), 'The heart of standing is you cannot fly' ('Aubade').

41. This is reproduced on p. 17 of the catalogue for the 1996 Centre Pompidou retrospective.

42. One trace descends in a shallow diagonal from the top right corner, to meet another crossing horizontally from the left side, somewhat above the head of the figure.

43. At the Louisiana Museum for Moderne Kunst, January–April 1998, exhibition organised by Steingrim Laursen. Versions II, IV, V and VI were shown.

defined here. Baroque realists like Velázquez exploited the physical properties of oil paint (its smeariness, sliminess) to afford viewers the experience of a fictional (yet corporeally immediate) encounter with another self, an *analogon*, one stilled to look back in a moment equivalent to and answering to one's own stilled attention. It is a stillness in which movement is latent, and the medium of oil paint simultaneously gives the stillness, as mass, and movement, as trace.

In the van Gogh series, the presence of this tradition is less evident than in almost all the rest of Bacon's work, displaced by his engagement with 'action painting'. More vertical in their proportions than van Gogh's painting (which Bacon knew only in reproduction) and on much bigger canvases, their figures larger in the frame, these paintings address the viewer at bodily scale. The rare chance of seeing a group of them together – one that presented itself to me when four were shown at Humlebaek in 1998⁴³ – affords a particularly strong apprehension of Bacon's physical involvement in their creation, of the improvisational urgency with which he reconfigured the pattern of his actions in each fresh canvas. The sense indeed of being 'inside' the painting is inherent in the way he reworks the motif, painting rapidly and with attack around a shadowy centre.

Yet even within this radical shift in his practice, Bacon remains a realist, in the specific terms outlined. Abstraction is never remotely a possibility: even in his nearest approach to American painterly materialism, the paint is never present purely as itself. The band at the bottom of version VI is the only seeming exception, and it points to the rule that in general Bacon renders each surface-asserting band of paint as a fictive spatial entity, as if hinged back from the picture-plane – in the 'slipping' perspective Heron complained of. Nonetheless, because of the 'all-over' rendering of those same bands of paint, and the frequently driven and impetuous handling, the paintings body forth the painter's actions in a way unparalleled in his work as a whole. See, for example, the bottom half of III (Fig. 2), where the pressure of Bacon's palette knife has brought an impression of the stretcher to the surface. To the degree that each of the figures is realised as a 'smear', like the road surface into which its movement is displaced, it appears as something at once enacted and imbued with action (mostly stalled), affirming continuity between the act of painting and the painted entity. Bacon's broad, figure-defining wet-in-wet strokes with loaded brush or knife in versions II and III work towards that end; yet such 'struggles with chance' are contradicted by the pedantically exact delineation of profile in II, and the almost derisory addition of paraphernalia in all of the versions. The figures are contradictory in other ways too: they are substantial, even heavy presences (in III, sand is mixed with the dark blue in the figure) and yet they are absences, voids in the intense chromatic landscape, and almost featureless within their profiles. Cut out to be seen, they fail to appear.

They are the converse of Bacon's dark-ground paintings, including his versions of Velázquez, where impasto denoted presence to vision. If, in the van Gogh series, Bacon's paint is never only itself, it is sufficiently itself to produce a disparity – quite marked by comparison with baroque practice – between paint and image, painterly action and painted appearance. On the other hand, what keeps these works (like Bacon's painting in general) within the ambit of realism is his manifest pursuit not only of perspectivalism but of a merging of perspectives. In a Velázquez portrait, in Stendhal's *Le rouge et le noir*, and even in the Minelli sequence of van Gogh's walk to Tarascon, the viewpoints of the person portrayed and of the viewer or reader are reconciled, made reciprocal. The camera tracks a movement as if drawn by the character it frames; the mirror travelling along a road enables the reader to 'see' from

within the action; the painted figure looks back with a temporality that draws from or seeks out our own – and Bacon’s reworking of Muybridge invests a seen with a felt action. Inherent in such a blending of perspectives⁴⁴ is the condition that the figure portrayed in its world, on its side, must appear to me as a counterpart to me in mine; it is this two-sidedness and structural ambiguousness of realism that persistently engages Bacon. In the van Gogh series, it appears linked to an allied two-sided relationship: that between action and appearance.

Both factors – structural ambivalence and the dualism of action and appearance – were already given in van Gogh’s painting, in the figure who walks and turns to look out. By tilting the landscape while enlarging the figures within more upright canvases, Bacon reinterprets in more dynamic terms the two dimensions or axes already given in the van Gogh: a horizontal dimension of action and a vertical of interlocution, appearance, identity; or, an axis of the journey intersecting with an axis of the encounter. By addressing the viewer through emphatically physical means and at bodily scale, Bacon’s paintings draw us into mimetic engagement with a movement that crosses our own, as we come to the painting; as if our action is to become the converse of the one we see, as if we were its counter-weight, stopping when it stops. Viewing is meeting, and in the meeting is a kind of mimicry.

Ricoeur’s complex account of selfhood might be seen as defining the self in terms of intersecting dimensions, without any ‘core’ but ‘anchored’ in bodily existence. It offers us a better model than many others for understanding self-portrayal and the portrayal of other selves in the tradition it speaks for, precisely because it posits an unstable self actualised in reciprocation. In the reciprocity of self and same, *ipse* and *idem*, Ricoeur finds a basis for all reciprocation. These terms define two modes of ‘permanence in time’: on the one hand *ipse*, the personal undertaking (enacted over time) and on the other *idem*, the passive bearing of traits (unchanging over time).⁴⁵ The figure in Bacon’s version II (Fig. 1) is oriented along its path but stilled, and cut out in profile as if for identification. The black triangle cutting the bottom corner both accentuates the mobility of the road-band which seems to draw the figure onwards, and also marks it off as a kind of platform on which the figure makes his appearance. The deep, flatly-painted black of the triangle makes the shadowy figure and the shadow itself seem in contrast all the more substantial. It is as if the triangle, in its deeper negativity, drew an absence into the painting, by incorporating into it the boundary between the viewer’s domain and that of the depicted figure. The strip of variegated red, green and yellow at the road’s near edge would then constitute a line of intersection. In viewing the painting, we may re-encounter experimentally the intersecting of self and other that constitutes selfhood. We meet our double and surprise ourselves with recognitions.

There is a diversity of senses in which these reiterative paintings have to do with doubling. The realist conventions of spectatorship which permit viewer or reader to ‘enter’ the fictive space while being situated outside it, here coexist with a quite different and contemporary impulsion towards being ‘inside the painting’. I am alluding here not only to Jackson Pollock’s famous declaration, but also to Bacon’s remarks on Matthew Smith.⁴⁶ There is a compounding of doubleness too in Bacon’s having painted new versions of what was on van Gogh’s part a self-portrayal in the profession of painter. This necessarily implicates Bacon himself, with van Gogh’s figure serving as his double. It can also be claimed that the original image itself took the form of a *doppelgänger*: van Gogh depicts a traveller going as if parallel to one’s glance

44. Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses intersecting perspectives in *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (Routledge: London, 1962), p. 353.

45. See Ricoeur, p. 2–3. On p. 2 Ricoeur writes ‘Our thesis will be throughout that identity in the sense of ipse implies no assertion concerning some unchanging core of the personality’.

46. I am writing here with Michael Fried’s work on realism and ‘beholding’ very much in mind. There is a certain fitting irony in the fact of his path having crossed Bacon’s just after the era of the ‘postwar paintbrush’, in that no painter since that time has made greater play with the matter of beholding than Francis Bacon has done; perhaps the notion (or experience) of being ‘inside the painting’ constitutes a common point of departure for these two very different trajectories.

47. See Judy Sund, *True to Temperament: van Gogh and French Naturalist Literature* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1992).

48. Van Alphen discusses *doppelgänger* with reference to a thematics of mirroring (Van Alphen, p. 73 ff.). Autocopy, the experience of a dissociated seeing of oneself, as if from outside, arises in psychological literature on the body-image. Body-image theory played a part in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, and Gilles Deleuze, whose writing on Bacon makes significant reference to phenomenology, touches on the theme of autocopy. He sees it as symptomatic of a dissonance between the 'body without organs' (Antonin Artaud's term) and the organised body. He finds nineteenth-century accounts of hysteria highly suggestive for our understanding of the body in Bacon; they describe 'a very special sensation of the inside of the body, since the body is felt, precisely, beneath the organism [and] transitory organs are felt, precisely, beneath the organisation of fixed organs. Furthermore, this body without organs and these transitory organs are themselves seen, in phenomena of internal or external 'autocopy': this is no longer my head, but I feel myself inside a head; I see, and I see myself inside a head.' (Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon, logique de la sensation*, De La Différence: Paris, 1981, p. 35.)

49. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 315.

50. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (Zone Books: New York, 1988 (trans. of 5th edn, 1908), p. 57. Bergson's use of the terms 'real' and 'virtual' is idiosyncratic, so some explanation is called for. He argues that affection is a function of the body's capacity to act (in real terms), while perception, which measures the greater or lesser imminence of something external to us, apprehended as threat or promise, 'never expresses anything but a virtual action.' When the distance between ourselves and the external threat/promise has collapsed to zero, 'our body is the object to be perceived. Then it is no longer virtual action, but real action, that this specialised perception will express, and this is exactly what affection is.' (pp. 56–7). The Bergsonian body stands in a permanently unstable, ambivalent relationship to its surroundings, with 'perception' and 'affection' naming fundamental shifts in orientation. His 'real' and 'virtual' therefore are polar terms in the dynamics of our relationship to our surroundings. (What we might think of as the spatial 'real world', is for Bergson a projected basis for practical activity, rather than being a *pregiven*).

and returning it, a traveller that is himself. Van Gogh 'sees' himself here not as in his other self-portraits, but more remotely, as if like a character in fiction (it has been argued that he interpreted Provençal landscapes and figures partly by way of contemporary novels).⁴⁷ The experience of seeing oneself from outside is constitutionally impossible in any literal sense, and in any sense in which it does occur is necessarily uncanny, for one cannot 'own' one's image and appearance in the terms in which one's self is owned. Uncanny self-seeing is indeed a widely attested experience, epitomised not only in accounts of *doppelgänger* but also in psychologists' descriptions of autocopy.⁴⁸ Catching sight of one's own shadow holds an intimation of this alienated vision, and van Gogh's conspicuous shadow in the Tarascon painting is central to Bacon's variations, as well as being one of his first uses of a motif that was to be of lasting importance. However, as I have noted, he also makes the figures themselves shadow-like in their coarse substance and in the case of version II he gives the shadow-figure a sharp profile, a mark of identity that causes it to become a standing silhouette. This portrayal of a self's 'other' can become for us another self, not through empathy (which Bacon's paintings scarcely invite) but by virtue of Bacon's experimentally dissonant deployment of the dimensions of self-experience. There is no pursuit of harmony here: it is in coming apart that the terms of selfhood come into play.

Philosophies of embodiment, in the phenomenological tradition Ricoeur acknowledges, imply that the experience of the double is inherent in our constitution as bodily selves. This is the case with Husserl, whom Ricoeur particularly draws on, and also with Merleau-Ponty, in his complex account of the 'two-sidedness' of the body, as sensing and sensed.⁴⁹ Phenomenology has special relevance for visual art, which more expressly than the other arts addresses us in corporeal terms. The realist, post-Renaissance positing of a spectator before the work, even if it enforced a principle of commanding vision (or a vision subject to authority) also brought new scope for self-reflection; our ideas of 'self-reflexiveness' owe much to perspectivist tradition. What we see, if we stand before a full-length portrait, is a quasi-reflection, an imitation self. If this implies the obedient copying of a stereotype (Hamlet, the prince, is 'the glass of fashion and the mould of form'), it also leaves open the possibility of slippage, for the terms of selfhood may slip apart, as the paint obtrudes, within the portrayal. The paint surface is near to hand, the portrayed figure apparently far; yet this assigning of positions is insecure, since the paint surface is 'outside' me in a way the figure is not. In the Tarascon painting, van Gogh portrayed himself as an other, out in the world, but the figure looks back as if to claim its attachment, from within the accretions of paint – as paint that walks. Henri Bergson, writing not long afterwards, detected a constitutional instability in perception, by virtue of its relationship with affection (sensation, feeling): rather than being continuous with each other – as in previous accounts of perception – they differed in kind, coinciding only at the surface of the body, 'the only portion of space which is both perceived and felt'; I perceive things 'where they are, in themselves and not in me', whereas feeling is 'in my body', a function of my real and not my virtual actions.⁵⁰ Painting answers to this Bergsonian bi-polarism in so far as it affords us, as viewers, a shifting of orientation whereby we find ourselves both within and outside what we see. Bacon exploits this possibility in his van Gogh series by polarising the affective and perceptual dimensions of his practice. In version III, for example, the intensity of the hues around the central darkness puts the viewer inside the painting, as does the kinaesthetic appeal of the worked paint, yet at the same time the material surface obtrudes, there where it is; the figure, isolated,

stands there as an object (with marks of identification), yet in its isolation it is redolent of feeling and so has immediacy as well as remoteness. It is a sensate thing.

Bacon's later paintings often evoke a very common corporeal experience of dissonance, the jarring sensation of arrested motion, when the body's weight suddenly throws itself against a movement it had been helping to impel. He would frequently paint figures caught in a twisting motion, with out-curving brushstrokes suggesting the motion of flesh, thrown outward against the restraint of hips or spine. In the van Gogh series, however, the body shapes are among the most rigid in Bacon's work, despite the fluid strokes that define them, and nothing here is thrown out from the containing mass, still less escaping entirely, like excrement or an ejaculation. They are – especially in the cases of II and III – stalled in the midst of, and cut out against, an activity which passes and surpasses them, yet which nonetheless is somehow their own. They are also substantial shadows onto which light falls, the lit bringing into play a sense of the hidden. What does not appear within the boundary marked for appearance is, surely, the body's unlit mass, its inertial, mortal, intestinal substance. Standing amid the action yet withdrawn from it, Bacon's standing shadows nonetheless recall a different and very familiar van Gogh figure that by contrast emphatically does initiate an action, namely the most famous version of *The Sower*, contemporary with the Tarascon picture, as I noted earlier.⁵¹ This *Sower* has a dark sexuality, its phallic arm thrown out to cast the seed. There is by comparison an infertile phallicism in the Bacon figures, although the paint strokes flow around them as they do around the *Sower*. The reiterative, ejaculative acts of painting – repeated throws, splashes, chances⁵² – are separate from the figure 'inside' them (they thus both resemble and differ from the famous serial action photos of Jackson Pollock, dead the year before).

In painting these figures and the flowing paint of the road, wet-in-wet, Bacon realised anew the potential of oil paint to hold in contradictory combination the properties of solidity and liquidity, the inertial and the mobile. The paintings play variations on this dualism. In a different way in each version, the figure stalled against slipping fields of colour acts as a pivot for a reciprocal movement, like that of a tracking camera, tended to the viewer. In versions II and III, the painter's own passive stillness as a witness before his work casts a shadow across his vehement agency within it. Placing an apparition in the path of painterly action, Bacon slippingly paints the slipping place of selfhood, in its strange otherness. Separating act from appearance, he frames, at the crossing of perspectives, a figure whose maleness is asserted negatively, in a venture of chance.

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51. The version of *Autumn 1888*, in the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam.

52. Antonin Artaud (*Van Gogh le suicidé de la société* (Edition K: Paris, 1947), pursuing his assertion that there are no *fantômes* in van Gogh, 'no visions, no hallucinations', evokes the concreteness of van Gogh's practice and, in a painting of a wheatfield, the enactment of repeated motif by reiterative action: 'je repense à son champ de blé: tête d'épi sur tête d'épi, et tout est dit' (p. 48). Artaud mimics in words van Gogh's painterly practice. Van Gogh had himself once equated (written) signs and seeds: he envisaged placing a painting of a bookshop between 'an olive grove and a wheatfield, the sowing season of books and prints.' (Quoted by Sund, *True to Temperament*, p. 146).