

Chapter 2

Note on Figuration in Past Painting

Painting, religion, and photography – On two misconceptions

Painting has to extract the Figure from the figurative. But Bacon invokes two developments which seem to indicate that modern painting has a different relation to figuration or illustration than the painting of the past has. First, photography has taken over the illustrative and documentary role, so that modern painting no longer needs to fulfill this function, which still burdened earlier painters. Second, painting used to be conditioned by certain “religious possibilities” that still gave a pictorial meaning to figuration, whereas modern painting is an atheistic game.¹

Yet it is by no means certain that these two ideas, taken from Malraux, are adequate. On the one hand, such activities are in competition with each other, and one art would never be content to assume a role abandoned by another. It is hard to imagine an activity that would take over a function relinquished by a superior art. The photograph, though instantaneous, has a completely different ambition than representing,

illustrating, or narrating. And when Bacon speaks of his own use of photographs, and of the relationships between photography and painting, he has much more profound things to say. On the other hand, the link between the pictorial element and religious sentiment, in past painting, in turn seems poorly defined by the hypothesis of a figurative function that was simply sanctified by faith.

Consider an extreme example: El Greco's *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (1586–8) [106]. A horizontal divides the painting into two parts: upper and lower, celestial and terrestrial. In the lower half, there is indeed a figuration or narration that represents the burial of the count, although all the coefficients of bodily deformation, and notably elongation, are already at work. But in the upper half, where the count is received by Christ, there is a wild liberation, a total emancipation: the Figures are lifted up and elongated, refined without measure, outside all constraint. Despite appearances, there is no longer a story to tell; the Figures are relieved of their representative role, and enter directly into relation with an order of celestial sensations. This is what Christian painting had already discovered in the religious sentiment: a properly pictorial atheism, where one could adhere literally to the idea that God must not be represented. With God – but also with Christ, the Virgin, and even Hell – lines, colors, and movements are freed from the demands of representation. The Figures are lifted up, or doubled over, or contorted, freed from all figuration. They no longer have anything to represent or narrate, since in this domain they are content to refer to the existing code of the Church. Thus, in themselves, they no longer have to do with anything but “sensations” – celestial, infernal, or

terrestrial sensations. Everything is made to pass through the code; the religious sentiment is painted in all the colors of the world. One must not say, "If God does not exist, everything is permitted." It is just the opposite. For with God, everything is permitted. It is with God that everything is permitted, not only morally, since acts of violence and infamies always find a holy justification, but aesthetically, in a much more important manner, because the divine Figures are wrought by a free creative work, by a fantasy in which everything is permitted. Christ's body is fashioned by a truly diabolical inspiration that makes it pass through all the "areas of sensation," through all the "levels of different feelings." Consider two further examples. In Giotto's *Stigmatization of St. Francis* (1297-1300) [105], Christ is transformed into a kite in the sky, a veritable airplane, which sends the stigmata to St. Francis, while the hatched lines that trace the path to the stigmata are like free marks, which the Saint manipulates as if they were the strings of the airplane kite. Or Tintoretto's *Creation of the Animals* (c. 1550) [109]: God is like a referee firing the gun at the start of a handicapped race, in which the birds and the fish leave first, while the dog, the rabbits, the cow, and the unicorn await their turn.

Thus we cannot say that it was religious sentiment that sustained figuration in the painting of the past; on the contrary, it made possible a liberation of Figures, the emergence of Figures freed from all figuration. Nor can we say that the renunciation of figuration was easier for modern painting as a game. On the contrary, modern painting is invaded and besieged by photographs and clichés that are already lodged on the canvas before the

painter even begins to work. In fact, it would be a mistake to think that the painter works on a white and virgin surface. The entire surface is already invested virtually with all kinds of clichés, which the painter will have to break with. This is exactly what Bacon says when he speaks of the photograph: it is not a figuration of what one sees, it is what modern man sees.² It is dangerous not simply because it is figurative, but because it claims to *reign over vision*, and thus to reign over painting. Having renounced the religious sentiment, but besieged by the photograph, modern painting finds itself in a situation which, despite appearances, makes it much more difficult to break with the figuration that would seem to be its miserable reserved domain. Abstract painting attests to this difficulty: the extraordinary work of abstract painting was necessary in order to tear modern art away from figuration. But is there not another path, more direct and more sensible?