

Mark Stevens, "Blood on Pavement," *Francis Bacon: Late Paintings*, (New York: Gagosian, 2015).



Blood on Pavement

Mark Stevens

Late one night, outside a pub known for rough trade in London's East End, Francis Bacon chanced upon some blood on the pavement. He was rather pleased.¹ He was getting old, but an atmosphere of physical risk, in which the body might leak, break, or otherwise come undone, continued to attract him. In the right situation, he did not mind getting beaten up—he believed in it—and he famously and often expressed the hope that the visceral charge in his work would carry directly into the nervous system of the viewer, bypassing the usual filters, and there “unlock the valves of feeling and return the viewer to life more violently.”² It would have surprised no one had he made a shocking image of this smear of blood. Instead, he did something rare. He created a contemplative painting, steeped in melancholy, in which he concentrated with power and luminous subtlety the obsessions of a long life.

Blood on Pavement (c. 1984) is a great summary work. It seems to remember—not just recall—what came before. That does not make it better than the other pictures Bacon painted in the 1980s. But it does center the painting in the discussion of a “late style” in his oeuvre. Talk of late styles can be murky. The phrase sometimes means no more than what an old artist does at the end of his life. At other times, it conveys an almost mystical profundity: as death approaches, the artist simplifies his art, laying aside the immaterial in order to focus upon the essence of his vision. (The frail Matisse, encircled by nudes, flowers, and doves, dances his scissors across the paper.) Bacon himself would have found the reverence directed at late styles mawkish. He had no faith in wisdom or in artists, and he did not believe that virtue attended age. In *Blood on Pavement*, however, he made a classic late style work. It is simple, but profoundly so. It captures what's indispensable in his art. In a retrospective, it would serve ideally as the last painting.

Bacon became interested in blood as a boy. He was severely asthmatic and knew intimately, from the asthmatic's cough, what it was to bring up the buried fluids flecked with pink that drown the body from within. During the Irish “time of troubles” in the 1920s, his neighborhood was often bloodied and, amid the greens

of Ireland, he found himself drawn to the frank reds of the butcher shop. As he grew older, he became aware of high-flown uses of the word *blood*: lifeblood, noble blood, blood of our fathers. (His father admired the bloodlines of both horses and his own illustriously named family.) He also learned of its lower uses: *bloody*, a word not to be spoken in polite circles. Blood could be a marker of bad company, violent opposition, and the criminal underworld, all of which held interest for a young, marginalized homosexual. Blood was incarnadine, but hidden away. A vital truth concealed. When it emerged, it stained, leaked, puddled, scabbed. Blood was pain—and revelation.

Blood also had a special historical and cultural resonance. No art appealed to Bacon more than that of the ancient world, and he was drawn particularly to the Greek tragedies. His art retains the heavy redolent air, like something pungent in the nostrils, of ancient sacrifice; of blood ritually shed, or spilled by a providence that could not be placated, controlled, or known. Inevitably, Christ's wounds and his sacrifice on the Cross, also from the ancient world, fascinated him. He painted several crucifixions and made a picture called *Wound for a Crucifixion* in the early 1930s that he regretted destroying. It contained, he said, a “very beautiful wound.”³ Despite his fierce atheism—or because of it—Bacon welcomed the Christian echoes. However attenuated or symbolic the Christian Mass might appear when compared to its pagan antecedents, blood remained at the heart of the Eucharist. In *Blood on Pavement*, the central image is set on a plane that visually cants forward, not unlike a table, a stage, or an altar.

Although the painting's title conveys its subject, what the blood most resembles is an open wound. But a wound where? In what? To begin with, in the painting itself. Bacon would have enjoyed the idea of symbolically bloodying art. Especially abstract art. He believed that abstract art, by abandoning the world (and particularly the figure), inevitably declined into decoration. He disliked a pale aesthetic narcissism: art should not fall in love with its own practice, elevating itself above the bloody mess of the world. He was especially annoyed when claims made for abstract art became grandiose and hagiographic. “Oh, Rothko,” he dismissively told friends. “It's all *moood*.”⁴ Of course, he himself used whatever interested him, no matter where he found it. His close friend the critic David Sylvester likened *Blood on Pavement* to a Rothko, and Bacon probably had Rothko in mind when he made it.⁵ If the work looks like a Rothko, however, it doesn't act like one. Bacon leaned his lance into the painting. He made abstraction bleed.

Bacon created, in *Blood on Pavement*, a visual synecdoche. The wound represents the figure; the part acts for the whole. (Life itself, after all, is an ever-renewing wound.) Haunted by a palpable absence—someone has left the scene after a moment's violence—the picture seems in any case still to harbor the figure, much as an uninhabited room in Vuillard or Hammershøi retains the human presence. *Blood on Pavement* is steeped in the body; sticky with it. “I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail,” Bacon famously said, “leaving a trail of the human presence and memory trace of past events, as the snail leaves its slime.”⁶ The wound is vividly specific, very much one man's blood. But its centered isolation also gives it an everyman quality.

“Blood on *the* Pavement” sounds like a caption or a news spot, whereas *Blood on Pavement* could stand for the human condition. The twentieth century itself often seems like an open wound.

In some respects, the wound may have served the elderly Bacon better than a more realistic image of the figure. He may have originally intended to make *Blood on Pavement* part of a triptych; but the addition of two further images, likely including more conventional Bacon figures, would have diminished the mystery of the solitary panel. He had always disliked the idea of “illustration,” in which an artist traces out a literal appearance or narrates a particular story. He preferred what he called “elliptical form,” by which he meant form that suggests rather than defines.⁷ Don’t, in other words, pin the figure in with a literal line or still the body with a photographic realism, but, in the Venetian tradition, render form more mysteriously. (In *Blood on Pavement*, the central image is just a few strokes, splatterings, and tonal variations that somehow convey the sensation of blood darkening and congealing.) The phrase “elliptical form” also meant something else to Bacon, however, something critically important. He hoped his pictures would remain open—elliptically—to memory and the imagination.

No painting in Bacon’s oeuvre is more elliptical than *Blood on Pavement*. The way he painted it—the touch, light, color, and arrangements of form he brought to bear—kindles imaginative play much as poetry does, prompting the viewer to wander in the work as he or she might look about in a poem, finding things, being uncaring, making analogies, associating freely, and following paths that lead in directions that are neither right nor wrong. This sort of imaginative play is not typically the province of the art historian, but that does not make it any less important. The painting invites—demands—imaginative response. What is happening to the wound? What is the situation of the figure? If, for example, the painting’s somber light is contemplative, conveying the brutal facts with a Whistlerian softness, what then of the hard black rectangle at its top? It weighs upon the wound. It’s the largest of the three stacked rectangles, and it has no interior light or sign of the artist’s hand. It is opaque, blank, characterless. Bacon’s sense of death—thoughts of death weighed on him every day—had this disturbingly featureless quality. He did not believe in death’s drama. (No black curtain comes down in *Blood on Pavement*.) But you would never want to announce that the black rectangle “represents death.” That would close off the picture. Death is more interesting unannounced.

All the drama takes place in the middle rectangle, the smallest and busiest of the three, which envelops the wound. The wound itself, rather than appearing grisly, looks as beautiful as a crushed ruby, full of depths and inner tightenings; four white highlights, like sparks of expression in an eye, add sharpness and definition. The grayish tan around the wound is softly painted and, as mentioned earlier, seems to cant the space forward. The wound appears enacted. It is still changing. Like a surgeon or a ticket holder in the dress circle, the viewer must look slightly downward at the drama, since the top of the wound begins at about the midpoint of the painting and then descends. On three sides of the wound Bacon has added a diaphanous wash—misty, like watercolor or reverie.

The transitional spaces are full of enigmatic import. Some slight intermingling occurs between the black rectangle and the bruised rectangle, for example, but otherwise the connection between the two is small. Their relation has a visual effect—of startling contrast—but is also provocative in the elliptical way: the opaque black lends a poignancy to the image of the wound, as if nothing above were paying attention. The transitional space between the middle and lower rectangles has many more incidents of color, line, and touch, and the two lower rectangles also commingle visually. Again, there is a compositional reason. Together, the lower two rectangles counter the downward pressure of the black rectangle; that confrontation creates a pleasing visual tension around the wound. But the lowest rectangle—which appears rather remote, like a vanilla sky—also adds a powerful note of the ordinary to the picture. It makes elliptical sense that it should have a porous connection to the bruising space above it: life is always passing by, like the hum of traffic outside the window, even as the wounded go about their bloody business.

Blood on Pavement, many would argue, reduces existence to just a puddle of blood. To which the right response is, “Yes, but—” Bacon was indeed a great deflator who took the air out of illusions. But deflation has power only when what’s being lost is palpably present, as the bull stamps and bellows before its sacrifice. (The pin must have the bubble to create the pop.) Bacon used elliptical form to shadow and infuse his art with the illusions that have been lost, which makes their loss the more telling. Where religion was concerned, his friend Helen Lessore—whose opinion about his art Bacon valued—said that “the very agony of his unbelief” and the intensity of his involvement with “final questions” were so acute that “the negative becomes as religious as the positive.”⁸ Bacon knew what it was to live well. That knowledge gave life to his intimations of death. *Blood on Pavement*, the work of an artist nearing death, is paradoxical. So much has been taken away, but nothing has been left out.

1 John Eastman, interview, August 19, 2015. Bacon’s friend John Edwards, who had accompanied Bacon to the pub, told Eastman the origin of *Blood on Pavement* (c. 1984).

2 David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. 17.

3 John Russell, *Francis Bacon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 17. Bacon’s description of the work led Russell to describe the image as a “specimen wound.”

4 Anne Madden, together with Louis le Brocqy, interview, Dublin, May 7, 2008.

5 Eastman, interview. Sylvester had told Eastman that he believed Bacon had Rothko in mind when he painted the picture.

6 *The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors*, edited by Andrew Carnduff Ritchie (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), p. 63. Usually, only the first part of Bacon’s statement is quoted. His full statement reads, “I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and memory trace of past events, as the snail leaves its slime. I think the whole process of this sort of elliptical form is dependent on the execution of detail and how shapes are remade or put slightly out of focus to bring in their memory traces.”

7 Ibid.

8 Helen Lessore, *A Partial Testament: Essays on Some Moderns in the Great Tradition* (London: Tate Gallery, 1986), p. 77.