

The Child, the Container and the Clastrum: the artistic vocation of Louise Bourgeois

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Today I shall be talking about Louise Bourgeois' view of her own artistic vocation. She was quite consciously preoccupied throughout her career with the nature of her unconscious inspiration, and how to gain access to it. As is well known, she drew on her memories of childhood for both subject matter and motivation in her art; childhood never lost for her, she said, its 'magic, mystery and drama.' but it is not only her literal childhood but also her emotional contact with the eternal child within herself that engages her sense of vocation and brings her artworks to fruition. This receptiveness to the child and childhood is accompanied by being well read in philosophy and psychoanalysis (as well as having psychoanalysis for many years). She absorbed ideas in an unpretentious way, for their personal usefulness, and kept a lifelong diary in which she noted down her thoughts sometimes in a very poetic format. Written thoughts were like the 'thought feathers' she called her initial sketches, waiting to be developed into three-dimensional form.

Her Diary, she said, embodied her '...relationship with an unknown... like a lake that one knows but very little, the relationship to the River' (the river of the unconscious – associated especially with the Bievre that ran beside the family home). It is not just a repository for confidences, but a place to map out points of emotional tension. Her function as an artist, she insisted, was not to convince anyone of anything, but to symbolize the reality of particular emotional conflicts and anxieties:

I think that to realize an
anxiety attack and to resolve it
is the highest form of existence
...it is a useful "creation."

It is 'useful' in the sense of 'building bridges' to others. 'How do we deal

with our wounded?’ is how she formulates the challenge of an artistic vocation. She saw her art as a means of ‘survival’, not a free career choice - there was ‘no escape’ from it. ‘I am passionately going somewhere, but I’m not sure where.’

Although Bourgeois is famous for the almost confessional quality of her autobiographical references, which might suggest a solipsistic self-absorbed outlook on her artistic vocation, her use of recollection is in fact quite complex – it is not merely the explanation of present emotional problems by blaming them on past trauma. Often it is less memory and more observation of present reality. She stresses the importance of accurate observation, and how tiring and strenuous this can be. Mirrors and eyes are a frequent feature of her work, testifying to her endeavour to ‘see what is, not what I would like’. It is not just vision that is involved, but all the senses, and at one point she says what a relief it is to have only five senses, not fourteen. She cites Montaigne on the classical advice to ‘know yourself,’ and says ‘Art is a way of recognizing oneself, which is why it will always be modern.’

Bourgeois believed that ‘becoming a better artist’ by working hard and acquiring self-knowledge would make the wider world a better place, and frequently expresses her frustration at the difficulty of fulfilling this aspiration – the acme of art which is ‘successful’ (in the aesthetic, not the career sense).

Bourgeois was a compulsive collector not just of memories but of objects, yet she recognized the sterility of collecting for its own sake and the necessity for using such items in a constructive and useful way. It is easy to wallow in bad memories, she writes, but it requires ‘strength’ to remember good ones. There are different ways of remembering. On the one hand, ‘the Past can become a drug’ and ‘eats up the present.’ For ‘Memory is a marvellous “control” - all data are kept - like a museum curator or an archivist – it is the contrary of life.’ This sort of memory reinforces self-pity and ‘nails a man down for a sufferer’ as Keats would say. It creates a prison – a claustrum – with no exits and entrances. With wry humour Bourgeois narrates a dialogue with an internal part of herself that she calls the ‘war widow’, asking herself ‘How’s the suffering today?’ To indulge in suffering in a masochistic way is the result of an unhelpful superego that she calls the ‘tomahawk conscience,’ hammering in guilt and blame. Another sort of memory however is constructive and re-constructive. Bourgeois speaks

of artist creation as ‘cradling moth-eaten memories’, but the purpose is not just nostalgic and backward-looking but aspirational, forward-looking. One of her Cells is entitled *You Better Grow Up*. Personal growth and education are what she means by self-knowledge and they are the underlying subject of her art, and something that the artist can model for other ‘children’ or viewers.

‘The education of a child is the most complicated process’, said Bourgeois. The unconscious or internal relationships between the child and its internal mother and father – as whole people or as represented by body-parts - are the stuff of sculpture. One must ‘organize’ a sculpture, she says, ‘like a treatment for the sick.’ For Bourgeois, educating the inner child and organizing a sculpture are one and the same thing. Several of her images include a child’s hand, entwined with that of an adult. The child’s hand is ‘grasping, unreasonable,’ like a ‘little god,’ but because it has ‘no strategy’ it has no preconceptions, no false self to stand in the way; the child’s need to know its psychic reality is authentic, and it does this by imagining the contents of its internal mother. It is a process that gives a valid place to good and bad feelings, destructive and reparative modes of being and acting: *I Do, I Undo, I Redo* as Bourgeois calls the rhythm of attack and reparation, dismemberment and re-assemblage: or (in psychoanalytic terminology) idealization, disintegration and reintegration.

Without attack, said the art critic Adrian Stokes, ‘creativity ceases’; but it must be self-aware, and destroy to recreate (as Coleridge put it). Bourgeois says that the expression of murderous feelings in her art is the precise opposite of enacting murder in real life - a sublimation, but also a demonstration of what it is to understand rather than simply to deny. The artist needs to be confrontational, not passively submerged in memory. The child falls into the ‘well’ of depression or the bottom of the river, (in Bourgeois’ imagery) – the claustrophobia of despair - as a result of its own bad feelings, and needs help in being pulled out.

Our picture of Louise as a child is that she was the darling of the family – clever, pretty, dependable - yet full of fears about the damage caused by her own greed, possessiveness and competitiveness. Bright and healthy herself she nonetheless felt herself to be a victim, ‘abandoned’, ‘little orphan Annie’, identified with a baby sister who had died. Yet all the other members of her family were in some sense among the war wounded: an

elder sister with a lame leg (the leg-prosthesis often appears in Bourgeois's sculptures), a younger brother – the much wanted son – who was unable to meet life's challenges, living his later years in an institution. Her father was wounded in the First World War, physically and no doubt mentally (like most who survived), being an emotional but not a strong character; and her mother never really recovered from the Spanish flu that killed more people than the war itself. After this, her father (she said) was 'afraid to make love' to her mother - no doubt contributing to the young Louise's suspicion that sex was dangerous. Her mother, perhaps anxious to avoid sex, then colluded in countenancing her husband's affair with Sadie, the English governess. Sadie was only a few years older than Louise, and consequently aroused her fierce jealousy at having usurped the place of favourite daughter in daddy's bed. Sadie as alter-ego appears in one of the *Ste Sebastienne* images, where a smiling pussy-face splits off from the face of a Ste Sebastienne, stuck with arrow-pins. Pins, said Bourgeois, were weapons, whereas needles were tools of reparation. Smooth Sadie and the sharp pins are linked with 'cutting' remarks ('sadique') directed by her father against women – hence Louise's sense that Sadie 'betrayed' her and femininity, content to be a sweet and smiling masochist. Needles are part of her identification with her mother, who was calm, organized, 'fastidious,' clever and obsessional; and although protective, she also used Louise as her own protector.

Her father, who was a 'charmer,' idolised Louise yet also tyrannised over her; stimulating her responses in a competitive and teasing way, whilst at the same time insisting on his authority and respectability, and when she reached adulthood he still claimed control over her life. She sensed the underlying pathos and wounded vulnerability of this loved but 'phallic' father. Her sculpture *Fillette* is in a sense her answer to a dinner-party trick of her father's in which he cut and peeled a tangerine in the shape of a man, pulling the pith-stalk so it looked like the figure's penis. Louise felt humiliated when, in company, her father said it was a pity she didn't have one. In the famous Mapplethorpe photographic portrait with *Fillette* she presents herself – daddy's little girl, emerging from her fur jacket – as the complete male genitalia, a more complex symbol of creativity than the phallus alone, with its twin breast-like testicles. (More like the psychoanalytic 'combined object'; for as Bourgeois says herself 'we are all male-female'. The pun is on

fille-phall-female.)

After her mother's death, said Bourgeois, she was consumed by a 'rage to understand' – not literally why her mother had died and 'abandoned' her, but the nature of her own feelings about this loss. Her preoccupation with types of enclosure (lair, nests, cells), her love of hanging figures, and her attention to means of linkage – lines, hairs, wires, ladders, and articulation between objects – all testify to this concern with holding and containment. Works like *Amoeba* and *Soft Landscapes* evoke the process of emergence and amoeboid, blind, pre-organized states, like feminine landscapes awaiting male fertilization. The flow of memory, like the river of the unconscious, contains and shapes their bas-relief forms like water over stones. Other prototypes are the Table and the Bed, at the heart of male-female confrontation, with lines of tension indicated by carefully placed elements as in theatre.

It took many years of constructive remembering for Louise to get in touch with the anger she felt towards the 'bad' aspects of her mother: the Sphinx-like *Fox* who appeared to protect the little girl whilst at the same time placating the bad daddy by offering him little Louise as a kind of hostage to the family business (the child is the tiny 'fallen woman' tucked beneath the *She-Fox*). Bourgeois' awareness of ambivalence appears in sculptures such as the Janus figures. She seems ultimately to have felt that her mother's 'mincing fastidiousness' was not entirely healthy, spinning a claustrophobic, imprisoning type of web under the guise of being purely a hard-working spider forging links with her needle that would keep the family together. Her mother may not have used the phallic rigid 'pin' as a means of control, but she could use her feminine pliant 'needle' as a subtle means of influence. She, like the father, embodied good and bad qualities for the child.

It seems to have been necessary for Louise to distance herself geographically and go into mourning over her family's absence in order to investigate the 'abandoned' child that she found within herself. Using her newfound psychoanalytic jargon, she called this investigation the 'return of the repressed.' Her mother's death in 1932 freed Louise to escape the claustrophobia of her family situation; in 1938, when war was brewing, she more or less eloped with Robert Goldwater – becoming a 'runaway girl.' While Louise escaped, through her marriage, her younger brother Pierre

remained, she felt, at the ‘bottom of the well’ – the place of depression washed over by the “bad Bievre” mother rather than the ‘good Bievre’ with its ‘musical murmur’.

Bourgeois abandoned her family in order to recreate them. During the periods when she returned to France, she said her creativity vanished and she became filled with the passive, self-indulgent, ‘moping’ type of memory rather than the innovatory and reconstructive. ‘Confine what is known to libraries and computers...I work in the unknown, in the lost.’ The ‘lost’ is a metaphor for the future, unknown shape of the personality, a quest that never reaches a finite conclusion: ‘Louise is the child who runs away in search of another family. Still looking in 1992’ (she wrote, age 81).

The roles of the internal family members might appear repetitive but actually they are changing all the time. Or as she put it near the very end of her life *I’m still growing!!!* (with three exclamation marks). Her memory is still being reconstructed. (As Yeats said similarly, in his old age, ‘Myself must I remake’.)

The moving force behind her art progressed, she said, from ‘fear of falling’ to ‘hanging in there.’ The fear of falling is the earliest fear, namely the baby’s. Bourgeois identified with the ‘desperate pleading baby’ and one of the dreams she notes down is of a baby held precariously in the hand of a huge man who, despite his size, was unable to provide a secure container. Her sculpture moved from ‘rigid monoliths’ to spirals and hanging works, concerned with not losing ‘the thread’ of thought and continuity. Spirals have ‘possibilities,’ turning and re-turning. Though Bourgeois rejected the idea of a ‘signature style’ (and her signature was always changing) she was in search of forms that could embody or contain her preoccupation with never-ending learning and growing, with existentialist ‘becoming’ – expressed at its most primitive level in the many drawings and sculptures of the multiple breast-nipples that feed the infant.

Bourgeois said that she was ‘interested in the phenomenon of inspiration’, and cites Ernst Kris on how ‘inspiration is the regression of the active into the passive... admitting we have no power, we become more than ourselves; we think in ways the mind has no normal access to.’ Inspiration from the unconscious with its godlike internal objects, male and female, is what keeps the mind growing and developing, so it becomes more than itself. It is a religious vertex on art, moving away from preoccupation with

control and display (the reason she disliked the Surrealists), to identification with the helpless infant and the way it links up with its source of mental sustenance. The unknown becomes known – not predetermined, but revealed. Bourgeois said that she had a ‘religious temperament’ and that her freethinking father and atheistical family culture left her feeling hampered by a lack of religious education; and she stated explicitly that ‘Art is my religion’.

The scale of Bourgeois’ iconic giant spiders such as *Maman* emphasizes the child’s powerlessness in proportion to its huge and god-like source of self-knowledge. It also demonstrates the union of male and female aspects, to create a container that is neither phallic display nor female comfort. The psychoanalyst Donald Meltzer has written that ‘The integrated combined object learns from experience in advance of the self and is almost certainly the fountainhead of creative thought and imagination.’

Maman is a metal transformation of the weaver’s fabric: it unites thread and metal, delicacy and power: arousing apprehension yet at the same time giving the child room to play. Bourgeois said she wanted to be able to move around underneath *Maman* – in line with her many childhood play ‘tents’ (‘textile sculptures’), bearing in mind the fact that the large tapestries restored by the family had originally served as room dividers; recalling also playing beneath the family table, as in her much earlier sculpture *The Blind Leading the Blind*, which she associated with watching her parents’ legs moving about as they prepared the dinner. The spider’s complex articulated legs (male components) are strong and mutually reinforcing, forming a series of arches radiating from the central body. Each leg is an ‘arch of hysteria,’ a wound bundle of muscle and nerves, recalling the twisted rolls of tapestries wrung-out in the river Bièvre, or the arched skeins of hair in her drawings. Hair, she writes, ‘represents beauty.’ These carefully poised legs are resilient and flexible by comparison with the stiff table-legs. They hold in equilibrium the hanging egg-sac of the spider mother, suggestive of a birth looming; the white marble eggs are Louise’s siblings, the world’s babies, towards whom her child-self had always felt ambivalent – both greedy and jealous of parental love, whilst at the same time wanting to help the “wounded” through her art. At the same time Louise herself is not falling, lost or abandoned – she is ‘hanging in there’.

There are many leg-ladders (lines of energy) and many spaces between

them, leading out of the claustum to the sky beyond – and twisting back in again. The way the lines unfold downwards, mapping the sky-space, can be associated with Bourgeois's love of geometry and the 'calming' quality of gridded paper and of the colour blue, all qualities associated with her mother – the good mother. The sculpture revises a nightmarish dream in which her mother had appeared as Death, in the shape of a wicker basket veiled in clothes. Indeed the spider however huge has its own vulnerability and crushability – it does not represent unequivocal protectiveness. *Maman* still also evokes fear and apprehension but it is open to movement and dialogue: a container not a claustum. It is evidence of how the containing symbol can speak for itself – 'the work teaches, not the artist' as she put it. Confident in her work's achievement she no longer needs to resent the phallic daddy-figures or the enveloping, subtly constricting mummy-figures of her earlier struggles to find a home for her art in the world.

Bourgeois, who once said she had 'too much identity,' in her old age felt able to wait for inspiration to seek her out. She describes herself as a 'Lady in waiting,' 'happy to be this breathing spider,' waiting for the sun to appear through the window and 'orient' her: 'to orient yourself means to be able to wait':

Lady in waiting is
almost invincible
she's also peaceful
and isn't going to
bother anyone - I'm
happy to be, this breathing spider.

Or as Emily Dickinson wrote: 'The soul should always stand ajar, ready to welcome the ecstatic experience.'