

Louise Bourgeois and the Witches: the complexity of the feminine in the art of Louise Bourgeois

talk for Opening Conference, Steilneset Memorial, Vardø, Norway (October 2011)

In this talk I would like to try to set Louise Bourgeois' installation for the Steilneset Memorial in the context of her work as a whole, especially her view of the relation between the artist and society. She said: 'My work grows from the duel between the isolated individual and the shared awareness of the group'.¹ The struggle to observe and recognize disturbing feelings lies at the heart of all her work, and was very much a conscious preoccupation, since she took an active philosophical and psychoanalytical interest in her own vocation as an artist. She saw the making of art as an ongoing reparative activity, on behalf of society as a whole. This underlying concern informs her vision here at Steilneset – the chair with its five-fingered flame which burns where a figure is not; the downfacing mirrors which may mingle our reflection with the flickering light: all are contained in the rounded space which we discover at the end of our linear memory-journey through the lives of individuals whose fire was extinguished here in the name of sanctity and cleanliness. Peter Zumthor has described the two parts of the Memorial as a combination of line and point; they also constitute a movement from narrative to denouement - through memory towards understanding.

Bourgeois saw art as something which helps us to look inwards to understand our destructive impulses and the roots of suffering – not just that which happens to us, but that which we generate and inflict on others and indeed on ourselves. Her art is very personal and autobiographical, yet it is about the same wider issues as the Memorial – it is about the constructive power of remembering, and about human vulnerabilities, primitive impulses, and the conflicting emotions of love and hate that are suggested by her title: 'The Damned, the Possessed, the Beloved'.

1 In Frances Morris, *Louise Bourgeois* (London: Tate, 2007), p. 262.

The Memorial, I believe, is not only about remembering but also about reparation for past crimes, and about reflecting in what sense it is indeed possible to reverse or modify the injury dealt to those who were murdered not by crazy individuals but by respectable society hundreds of years ago. The Memorial brings to present-day attention something which might have been buried: the persecution of those who became scapegoats owing to society's suspicion that they had gained satanic powers or hidden occult knowledge that was liable to destroy some part of the social fabric – some religious, racial, or economic imbalance, or subversion in the relations between the sexes (since witches were mainly women). The dominant social group, driven by fear and intolerance, selected individuals who manifest some kind of weakness, oddness, inferiority, or even talent, and used them to exorcise unwanted feelings. As is well known psychologically, the guilt of the persecutor (if unfelt and unacknowledged) is projected onto the victim, who then becomes an object full of bad or dangerous qualities. The illusion is then that the feelings can be destroyed along with their container. Freud (as Bourgeois will have known) was interested in the phenomenon of witches and in the similarity between confessions made under torture, and the phantasies of some of his 'hysterical' patients: and the similarity between the medieval theory of possession and the psychoanalytic theory of 'a foreign body and a splitting of consciousness'.² The social disease which creates witches is analogous to the psychological one induced by hysteria and is to do with the human failure to take responsibility for threatening or frightening feelings.

Bourgeois emphasized that the emotions she was dealing with were 'universal' ones. Instead of 'conversation pieces', she said, her sculptures were 'confrontation pieces'.³ They aim to engage the viewer emotionally. Sometimes, especially when they involve the portrayal of dismembered body parts, they have been found disturbing; but she said her intention was to be 'accurate not shocking'.⁴ In her art she tries to see 'what is, not what I would like'.⁵ The subject may be violent or ugly but the art created may still be beautiful; this is not to glamourise the subject, but to endow

2 Freud, S., letter 56 from extract from the Fliess Papers (1897), *Standard Edition* I: 242.

3 In *Destruction of the Father/Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews*, ed. Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1998), p. 66.

4 Christianne Meyer-Thoss in conversation (Zurich: Ammann Verlag 1992), p. 119.

5 *Louise Bourgeois*, dir. by Nigel Finch (London: Arena Films, 1993). Edited transcript in Bernadac & Obrist, p. 261.

it with the kind of understanding that is beautiful in itself, founded as it is on not hiding or denying those primitive aspects of ourselves that it is better to acknowledge. She was interested, she said, in the irrational roots of aggression and how 'we destroy the very thing we most desire'.⁶ She speaks of the 'monster' within or the 'deadly beast that inhabits me',⁷ of being in a 'creativity rage' and transferring feelings she experienced 40 years ago.⁸ Looking in the mirror she sees a 'Medusa',⁹ the ugliness of a non-idealized reflection. Contradicting Sartre - and certainly contradicting the ecclesiastical judges who condemned the witches - she insisted that hell is not in other people: 'hell is inside you'.¹⁰

The point of unearthing buried feelings however is not to repeat but to revise. Unpleasant feelings are not to be remembered passively or with self-pity, but rather should be used as fuel to 'burn through' a new work (to borrow a phrase of Keats - who wrote 'the fierce dispute/ Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay/ Must I burn through').¹¹ This is the healing function of art. Aggression in her view was connected with fear - of the unknown or the alien - such as we find in society's view of witches. 'In real life', she said, 'I identify with the victim; in my art I am the murderer.'¹² In this she was referring to the rhythm of destroying-to-recreate that underlies the artist's use of materials. The very making of art, especially sculpture, involves a rhythm of attack and reparation. It echoes the psychological process of investigating the destructive impulses within oneself, but with a creative purpose.

For to represent murder in art, or to attack a piece of stone with an artistic purpose, is the precise opposite of acting murderously in life: 'I am free because I use the aggression I am suffering from against the sculpture'.¹³ The exposure is a kind of catharsis or exorcism (both words she uses) that checks violent action and converts its energies into beauty and harmony. 'To be an artist is to guarantee to your fellow human that the wear and tear of living will not let you become a murderer'.¹⁴ Artists - as people - don't

6 In *Louise Bourgeois* ed Robert Storr, Paulo Herkenhoff, Allan Schwartzman. Phaidon (2003), p. 117.

7 Louise Bourgeois unpublished notes held at the Louise Bourgeois Studio (LB-0356).

8 Louise Bourgeois unpublished notes LB-0566.

9 Louise Bourgeois Diary held at the Louise Bourgeois Studio, November 13, 1992.

10 In Bernadac & Obrist, p. 269.

11 John Keats, 'On sitting down to read *King Lear* once again'.

12 Louise Bourgeois Diary April 30, 1992

13 In Frances Morris, *Louise Bourgeois*, p. 36

14 Louise Bourgeois Diary August 27, 1984

get better and better, she said, but they become ‘able to stand more’.¹⁵ Owing to a privileged access to the unconscious, they become ‘aware of an anxiety crisis’ that is then solved through the artwork, and can ‘create bridges’ with the unconscious conflicts of others. The type of memory that the artist uses constructively is an active type, that turns the past into the present: ‘if you cannot abandon the past then you become a sculptor’. And ‘I organize a sculpture the way we organize a treatment for the sick.’¹⁶ To remember the past through art-creation, however aggressive, is a healing activity.

The primary inspiration for Bourgeois’ art was her own childhood, a period which for her never lost its ‘magic and mystery’.¹⁷ Family relations were complex owing to the *ménage a trois* comprised by her mother, father and his mistress who was employed to teach the children English. [There was also a certain amount of disability within the family, despite their prosperous tapestry-repairing business: a brother who was mentally fragile, a sister with a lame leg (which often appears in Bourgeois’ sculptures), a mother in poor health, and a father in many ways childish.] The young Louise’s jealous resentment of the English governess was complemented by a love-hate relationship with her father, whom she criticized for his ‘cutting’ attitude to women,¹⁸ and a certain ambivalence towards her mother, who was the dominant force in the household, yet who tolerated the mistress. Mme Bourgeois was a meticulous organizer and needlewoman, and Louise admired her, yet also felt her at times to be ‘the poisoning mother, the witch that wants to kill you’; in the guise of offering protection, ‘the shelter becomes a trap, she deceived me’.¹⁹ [SHE FOX]. The tools of her craft were ambivalent: needles (said Bourgeois) were used for assemblage and reparation; whereas pins – very similar in shape - were incisive, hurtful and destructive.²⁰ We might remember the association of both pins and needles with witches – as mentioned by Freud, and as in the old superstitious belief that people could be injured by having pins stuck in a doll supposed to represent them. ‘I’ve spent my life making holes everywhere,

15 Interview with Donald Kuspit (1988) in Kuspit, *Bourgeois* (New York: Vintage, 1988), p. 23.

16 In Bernadac & Obrist, p. 226.

17 *Louise Bourgeois: Album* (New York: Peter Blum Edition, 1994); rpt. in Bernadac & Obrist, p. 277.

18 Louise Bourgeois notes, LB-0410

19 Louise Bourgeois notes, LB-0235

20 “Statements,” in *Louise Bourgeois: Designing for Free Fall*, Christiane Meyer-Thoss (Zurich: Ammann Verlag, 1992), 178.

either with a needle or with a chisel', said Bourgeois.²¹

One of Bourgeois' sculptures tells the story of Oedipus, whose own parents drove a pin through his ankles, symbolizing the emotional hindrance that is everyone's natural inheritance in terms of the Oedipus complex. [BABY OEDIPUS]. To walk independently is an ongoing struggle; and life is indeed a *Passage Dangereux* – the title of another of her installations. [PASSAGE DANGEREUX].

Because of the focus on family life, the Table and the Bed figure prominently in her work as a kind of stage for phantasy. One such work was *The Destruction of the Father*, a large sculptural tableau representing the phantasy that one day the family, fed up with the father's boasting, dismembered and devoured him for dinner. [DESTRUCTION OF THE FATHER]. She called it a 'murderous piece' which 'dealt with ordinary, garden-variety fear... what interests me is the conquering of the fear, the hiding, the running away from it, facing it, exorcising it, being ashamed of it, and finally, being afraid of being afraid' (in Kuspit).²² Or in another variation, the child's phantasy is to 'kill and devour father and mother and get killed as a punishment'.²³ [RED ROOM – PARENTS]. Table and Bed are in a way interchangeable: being the concrete foundation for acts of destruction and creativity. 'The fear of sex and death is the same' she said; 'my sculpture allows me to re-experience the fear, to give it physicality so I am able to hack away at it.'²⁴ Devouring and copulation are both 'a killing scene'.²⁵ The circular pit housing 'Damned, Possessed and Beloved' is a variant on such a scene and setting – suggesting the confusion associated with attempting to control the body and its insides, a phantasy acted out by society in its superstition and ignorance.

These kind of primitive superstitious values were associated by Bourgeois with the narcissistic patriarchal system subscribed to by both her father and by the male-dominated art world of her youth. It oppressed the unvalued artist-children especially women. Although she denied being a feminist in the conventional sense, she continually reviewed her position as a woman, in relation to both family and the art world, concluding: 'To

21 Louise Bourgeois Diary, January 11, 2001.

22 Kuspit, p. 21.

23 Louise Bourgeois notes, LB-0230

24 In Bernadac & Obrist, p. 227.

25 Louise Bourgeois Diary, June 27, 1991.

be a woman is a defenseless thing'.²⁶ She related an episode in which her father, as a party trick, peeled a tangerine into the shape of male doll with a pith-stalk penis, and teased his daughter publicly for not having one herself. [ORANGE EPISODE]. 'The beast in me wakes up, it's hate – being a woman, to have lost at the big game' (the game of the art world).²⁷ Her Surrealist father-figures were the prevailing powers; artists like herself were at best neglected, at worst witches - a focus of both suspicion and humiliation. 'There is no feminist aesthetic' she said 'but there is a psychological content' and it is 'the story of all minorities'.²⁸ An early series of drawings was on the semi-humorous but also slightly witch-like theme of *Femme Maison* [FEMME MAISON]. The long hair, streaming in long skeins out of the box-body, reappears in many later works and is associated with 'beauty' and also with binding [capturing, linking] – perhaps as in spellbinding.²⁹ [ALTERED STATES]. There is a precursor here of the flame-shapes in the Steilneset installation, suggesting links with the wild and untamed that must have been part of the phantasy of the public spectators at the burnings. At Steilneset we see both the fiery feeling, fluidity and turbulence that she associated with the colour red, as in 'Altered States'; and the geometrical containment that she associated with the sky and the colour blue. (She described the New York sky as a blue aluminium sheet holding towering skyscrapers in place – building she associated with people, 'lost presences'.)

Bourgeois said she felt drawn to art as a means of psychological 'survival' rather than a free career choice – there was 'no escape' from it.³⁰ Her identification and empathy with 'minorities' has its roots in a perpetual feeling that (despite her privileged upbringing) she was an abandoned child, driven by 'a rage to understand' the tragic elements in life.³¹ This was associated with feeling small, a child, female, a 'little orphan Annie'. 'If I am abandoned again I am going to set the house on fire' she wrote in a diary, 'rocking to infinity the red skein'.³² Or again, 'I am abandoned. Put a match to the whole thing. Red, red, red, red.'³³ In order to understand,

26 Louise Bourgeois notes, LB-0250

27 Louise Bourgeois notes, LB-0188

28 In Storr, Herkenhoff & Schwartzman, 142.

29 "Statements," in Meyer-Thoss, 178.

30 Kuspit, p. 68.

31 In Bernadac & Obrist, p. 207.

32 Louise Bourgeois Diary, February 5, 1960.

33 Louise Bourgeois Diary, May 27, 1994.

rather than just wallow in uncontained emotion, she needed to distance herself from her French emotional roots and review them from an artist's perspective. When at the outset of the Second World War she married and went to live in New York she saw herself as a 'Runaway Girl'; driven by the 'search for truth' and the 'secret of my anxiety'. She was an American artist, she said, and could never have become an artist in France, where the old society with its hypocritical notions of respectability induced in her a kind of emotional paralysis and claustrophobia. Both art and psychoanalysis enabled a more constructive and less indulgent type of remembering. She found useful the Kleinian psychoanalytical theory of creativity as a type of mourning for the past or lost: 'I work in the unknown, the lost', she said.³⁴

In America Bourgeois had moved from painting to sculpture, realizing she needed three-dimensional expression and - even more - a space in which there was physically room for herself, with a 'centre of gravity' in which objects could turn around her 'like planets'.³⁵ She began to arrange and rearrange individual sculptures in a semi-theatrical way. Her theatrical spaces contain dramas of the inner world, either liberating or imprisoning and claustrophobic. They are intended to be viewed from different angles, and to stimulate communication between the mind of the artist and viewer through a spatial interchange. Often there is a chair, which seems to be awaiting its occupant, possibly a child, or the viewer who has stumbled across it. Many of her installation pieces, especially the long series of room-sized Cells, contain mirrors that invite the viewer to partake in the scene, or catch them unawares so that they are caught up in it. The more the sculpture is about the artist and her personal struggle, the more it is about us, the viewers. Eyes also, like mirrors, became a regular feature of her work. She knew the stressful nature of observation for both artist and viewer, and warned against the kind of voyeuristic desire for pornographic spectacle, as must have been the case with the witch-burnings. The only guard against this destructive looking is introspection – looking that does not 'cancel out' the responsibility of the viewer.³⁶ [CELL- EYES AND MIRRORS]

One of her early exhibits in America was a series of *Personnages*, abstract

34 Louise Bourgeois Diary, LBD-1994, 21 June 1994.

35 Louise Bourgeois notes, LB-0140

36 "Artist's Notes: Louise Bourgeois," in *Dislocations*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991), rpt. in Bernadac and Obrist, p. 210.

wooden figures like skyscrapers which she said represented ‘missed presences’ whose spirit came to her while working the sculptures.³⁷ [PERSON-NAGES]. Sculpting was itself a form of remembering, even of calling up spirits, of possession in the old sense of prophesy which was considered both mad and true – and not so distant from the activity of witches. Indeed she described herself as working ‘under a spell’; also saying that art is intended not to seduce but to make the spell ‘manageable’.³⁸ For the aim of her art is to ‘save a soul from suffering’.³⁹

In *Ste Sebastienne*, a drawing in several versions, she presents herself as under siege and as two-faced – smiling and agonized. [STE SEBASTIENNE]. Indeed many of her sculptures are a type of self-portrait (even when not designated as such) and prefigure the flaming witch: as for example ‘Spiral woman’. [SPIRAL WOMAN]. Spirals, she said, ‘turn in a void of anxiety’, but they have ‘possibilities’ for reaching outward,⁴⁰ even when they appear to bind or cocoon the figure within. By presenting her own anxiety in aesthetic form she makes a link with the unconscious of others. Art, she said, is a ‘guarantee of sanity’,⁴¹ collecting in vials the ‘precious liquids’ of human emotions and giving them (as Shakespeare put it) a ‘local habitation and a name’. [PRECIOUS LIQUIDS]

For Bourgeois, art had a religious aspect which is nothing to do with the hierarchical practices of any established religion, but is rather the opposite: it is connected with discovering the truth about oneself, as in the classical dictum ‘Know thyself’ which she quotes from Montaigne. ‘Art is my religion’, she said.⁴² This kind of religion subverts conventional divisions between godly and satanic. In the service of art, the artist is a kind of mediator who is used by their own inspiration on behalf of society.

The chair for the burning witch is not so different from the tapestry-covered confessional chair she made for a chapel in France, with an inscription above reading ‘Resurrection, reparation, redemption, restoration, reconciliation’. In the witch’s confessional, five flames replace the five words - like the fingers of a hand (another of Bourgeois’ favourite symbols

37 “Interview with Susie Bloch,” *The Art Journal* 35, no.41 (Summer 1976), rpt. in Bernadac and Obrist, p. 106.

38 Kuspit, p. 23.

39 In Bernadac & Obrist, p. 343

40 Louise Bourgeois notes, LB-0028

41 Louise Bourgeois notes, LB-0688

42 “Conversations with Robert Storr,” in Bernadac and Obrist, p. 215.

for healing and linking). It is interesting that in contrast to her usual representations of bodies and body parts, here there is no body, only a spirit. Constructive memory entails a constant revisiting and reworking of the original emotional conflict. We can see how this is embodied in the symbolic flame whose flickering light recalls continuously the spirit of those from the past and catches the attention of the present.

Bourgeois thought that Freud, despite his irreligiosity, believed in 'resurrection'.⁴³ Nothing can be done about the past, but it is up to the viewer to make changes in the present. The flame is both the spirit of the dead and the life of the future, which is full of potentiality if it can be 'remembered' constructively by visitors, as indicated by the mirrors which are a constant feature of her work. 'I have faith in the symbolic action' she said. The symbolic action is the opposite of the literal action. It is a form of contemplation - a spiritual not a physical reality. The mirrors looking down on the conflagration are the eyes of the voyeurs – but if we catch our own reflection we can see the Medusa within.

The artist is in one sense always a witch, not only in working under a spell, but in perennially subverting whatever is the established order of things, on the fringes of society. The artist is there to remind us that in order to make reparation for the crimes of the past, we have both to understand the witch-elements in ourselves (in the sense of violence and aggression), and also to acknowledge their place in our psyche, as the ancient Greeks gave a place to the primitive Furies within their civilized city-state. Otherwise the burning of witches will simply continue in other forms, for human nature does not change. As Emily Bronte wrote:

Men knelt to God and worshipped crime,
And crushed the helpless, even as we.

43 In Bernadac & Obrist, p. 187