

Beyond the Return of the Repressed: Louise Bourgeois's Chthonic Art

Paul Verhaeghe & Julie De Ganck

Since the fears of the past were connected with the functions of the body, they reappear through the body. For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture.¹

Man became man when he made art—not artifacts, mind you, as Louise Bourgeois herself points out.² Consequently, art has to do with the essence of man, and this sets the door wide open for the interpretation of both this essence and art. For lack of a final touchstone, all interpretations have a speculative character and Lacan warns us repeatedly: "Beware of understanding." The period in which every elongated object was interpreted as phallic, every opening as vaginal, is not far behind us. How can we understand the relation between art and the artist, between art and the art-lover, without falling into psychological ready-mades? The fact that Louise Bourgeois had an almost lifelong relation with psychoanalysis doesn't make things easier. On the contrary, any female artist walking around New York with an oversized phallus under her arm is just begging for psychoanalytic attention. And if she baptizes her piece *Fillette* (1968), "little girl," the feminist interpretation is inevitably thrown in as well, just for good measure. No wonder that the number of publications on Bourgeois matches the breadth of her oeuvre. On top of that, she was a prodigious writer, producing diaries and innumerable loose notes during her many insomniac nights, in a sometimes desperate attempt to give words and images to what haunted her.³

Art testifies to the essence of man, alongside two other typically human endeavors, i.e. religion and science. Different as they may be, these three share a common goal and a common approach: to control unpredictable nature—*mother nature*—via a symbolic system. By implication, this means firstly that man is no longer part of nature and, secondly, that the use of symbols—be they religious (tombstones, bells), scientific (formulas), or artistic—grants us a mostly illusory power over what Lacan called the Real. Some areas of the Real prove to be particularly unruly and obstinate, meaning that we have to try time and again to master them, without much hope of producing a final answer: birth and death, sex and motherhood—in brief, those areas pertaining to our body. Bourgeois puts it quite aptly: "*Toujours sur le métier replace ton ouvrage* [*Always upon the loom your work shall put back*]."⁴ Having come from a family that worked in the tapestry business, she knew probably better than Boileau what she was talking about. And this brings us to the personal question: which parts of the Real were particularly challenging for Louise? To answer this question, a quick review of her life story is in order.

Textbook Oedipal Complex

Born in Paris on Christmas Day in 1911 as a second daughter,⁵ she was three when her father had to leave as a soldier for the Great War. Her mother was desperate and followed her husband through his various postings in France, taking only Louise with her. In 1915 he was wounded and hospitalized at Chartres. After the war, they resumed their business of restoring ancient tapestries in Antony: Louise "specialized"

in restoring the feet.⁶ When she was eleven, her father introduced an English governess, Sadie, into the household to teach his children English and to satisfy his sexual needs.⁷ At that time, Louise took care of her mother Joséphine who suffered from the Spanish flu after the first world war, in part to please her father. Louise's mother died in 1932. When her studies in geometry did not produce the certainty Louise was looking for, she switched to art—Léger was her favorite teacher. In 1938, she was living in Paris and working at the family tapestry gallery on the Boulevard Saint-Germain when she met Robert Goldwater.⁸ They married later that year and left for New York. The couple adopted a boy in 1939 and had two sons of their own in 1940 and 1941. They were part of the art scene, as her husband was a professor in art history. Louise spent her time painting, drawing, and sculpting—her first exhibition of paintings took place at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery in 1945, followed in 1947 by another exhibition of paintings at the Norlyst Gallery. She had exhibitions of sculpture at the Peridot Gallery in 1949, 1950, and 1953. Between 1950 and 1951, the Goldwater family was living in Paris because Robert was on a Fulbright grant, and in April 1951, her father died, initiating a complicated mourning process that spanned years. Her diaries are full of anxiety and depression, rage and guilt, and feelings of abandonment. She consulted briefly with a well-known psychiatrist, Leonard Cammer, before entering psychoanalysis with Henry Lowenfeld upon her return from France in 1951. Frequent references appear in her diary to psychoanalytic theory in general ("Freud and Lacan did nothing for the artist. They were barking up the wrong tree"⁹), and to the privileged relation of the artist to the unconscious in particular ("The artist has been given a gift... It is the ability immediately to short-circuit the conscious and to have direct access to the deeper perceptions of the unconscious"¹⁰).¹¹ On June 11, 1953, she mentions the foundation of the *Société Psychanalytique de Paris* and notes all the names and addresses of the members.¹² In the 1970s she became a feminist role model, although she was not particularly interested in the role ("The feminists took me as their role model, as a mother. It bothers me. I am not interested in being a mother. I am still a girl trying to understand myself"¹³). Her productivity far exceeded the moderate success she experienced during that period.¹⁴ Her husband died in 1973. She continued to fill her house in Chelsea with her work, and from 1980 onwards her atelier in Brooklyn. The magnitude and quality of her work was discovered in the late 1970s by Deborah Wye and Jerry Gorovoy. Wye organized a retrospective of her work at the Museum of Modern Art in 1982. Gorovoy stayed on as a personal assistant, in Louise's words her "*éminence grise*." In her seventies, she was recognized as one of the leading female artists in the world. She died on the last day of May 2010 at the age of 98.

Obviously, there are a number of salient points in her biography. Her lifelong fear of abandonment probably started as a mirror of her mother's anxiety when her husband left for the war and both mother and daughter followed him from camp to camp—there is a picture showing little Louise in front of the hospital where her wounded father was treated. We can only guess how a three-year-old perceived her mother's despair concerning her father, especially when she is the one chosen to accompany the mother. The fact that the man introduced a mistress into the household a few years later reinforced her ambivalence—he abandoned her *maman* again. Moreover, the father was always traveling on business away from home, which reinforced Louise's anxiety. As a woman, she never met the father's standard. A month after her father's death, she notes: "He wanted / me to look like a *poule* [*tramp*]. I wanted then to look the contrary of a *poule* [*tramp*] / that is to say a student or an independent woman or an artist or a / saint."¹⁵ Her father did not

want her to become an artist—he thought it was pretentious—and did not think she needed much of an education. He wanted her to get married and groomed her to carry on the family business. Her work wasn't good enough either and he never took her art seriously. Consequently, she herself could hardly consider her work as art and her diaries are full of self-doubt and anger. No wonder she left for the US, marrying a man whom she repeatedly described as the complete opposite of her father.

The psychoanalytic giveaway is undoubtedly the tangerine episode. As an entertainment for his dinner guests, her father would draw an elongated female figure on a tangerine, cut it along the lines, and peel it. When he reached the navel of the tangerine, the white core would come out between the legs of the figure, mimicking a penis. "Well, I am sorry that my daughter does not exhibit such a beauty," he would say.¹⁶ We can only imagine Lowenfeld's broad smile when he explained to Louise the concept of penis envy, especially when she added that she overcame this trauma via a dream featuring a classic symbolic scene: "He was telling his joke, and his eyes fell off on the dinner table, and the cat gobbled up his two eyes. I had achieved my revenge."¹⁷ Castration! Add in the story of the mistress Sadie, which Bourgeois illustrated with slides in a presentation called *Partial Recall* at The Museum of Modern Art in 1983, and we have something like a textbook Oedipal complex.

Beyond Interpretation

Clearly, her life in general and these salient points in particular explain part of her work. It is possible to put forward a number of interpretations, based on what she herself has said or written. Instructive as such interpretations may be, our thesis is the exact opposite: the main part—and in our opinion the best part—of her art cannot be interpreted. Roughly put, this concerns her work between 1960 and 1980, which, for reasons that will be explained later, we call her chthonic work. This impossibility does not reside in the lack of biographical material—as we will see, it is quite possible to link her work from this period to particular events in her life as well. Rather, it has to do with the inherent quality of these works. Not only do they go beyond the usual interpretive canon—by and large the Oedipal template and the ever-failing sexual relationship—they go beyond any narrative core as well. Even more: they are an almost desperate attempt to give form and representation to what is beyond interpretation.

Louise herself was quite aware of this quality and refers to it on several occasions. In an answer to Christiane Meyer-Thoss, she talks about "the sleep of the material" that she is proud to disturb, adding, "I get the materials' dreams, though not in a narrative way, or in symbolic way."¹⁸ On September 5, 1990, Louise discusses her crush on a cousin during her adolescent years and her father's prohibition, about Lacan's fight with psychoanalysis and Jewish men and his love for Jewish women. Out of the blue comes the following: "Literary illustrative theatrical. Bachelard starts with a word not an emotion, or an accident, or a problem. I start with a problem....deeply involved in the subject, not through books but my own experience. Not through jargon of writers or teachers, through my unfortunate own experience. It may be idiosyncratic but it is not literary. Metaphorical."¹⁹ We would not call it metaphorical, however, but "phorical", i.e. bearing, carrying, as a first and necessary stage before the tangent parts of the Real undergo a metaphorical processing, making them less unbearable and introducing them into the ever receding realms of meaning in such a way that we can dilute our anxieties. The Oedipal development is the final, and hence very reassuring, elaboration of the original life and death drives.

Such direct access is rare, and it is not a matter of choice. On the contrary, her chthonic work may be understood as her attempt literally to keep her sanity ("art is a guaranty [sic] of sanity"²⁰), the other alternative probably being a psychotic breakdown. Her diaries show that the death of her father caused a complicated mourning process—depression is too simple a word for it. Freud talks about *Trauerarbeit*, the work of mourning, and equates it with the *analytische Arbeit*, the work undertaken by someone in analysis. In both cases, the identity of the person is deconstructed as the identificatory layers that constitute the ego are extirpated, owing to either the literal loss of a loved one (mourning) or the loss of the identification's protective function (analysis).²¹

It is our hypothesis that the combination—being in analysis because of complicated mourning—forced Louise from the normal Oedipal structure via the pre-Oedipal level towards a confrontation with the Real as the core part of the unconscious. As Lacan puts it: It "is something that comes to us from the structural necessities, something humble, born at the level of the lowest encounters and of all the talking crowd that precedes us..."²² Her resulting work is *not* a return of the repressed; it is an always desperate attempt to remember what can never be remembered in order to be able to forget it, at last.

A Classic Reading: Love and Betrayal

Before and to a certain extent after this confrontation, Bourgeois's work can be read via the classic canon. This is especially clear of her work before the 1950s, when she struggled to come to terms with her position as an expat, a wife, a mother, and a female artist. Her diaries reflect the expected joys and sorrows. She doesn't get along very well with her mother-in-law; she quarrels with her husband and has deep regrets two days later. On July 19, 1940, she notes: "Morality – never get mad to / somebody. if you do don't show it / politeness is not a vain word / *méfie toi – de la colère c'est la pire ennemi* [beware – anger is the worst enemy]."²³ Her sudden outbursts of anger will be a lifelong problem. Her homesickness is reflected both in *Personages* and *Femmes Maisons*. The sculptures represent free-standing figures that can be put against a wall and carried around—Jerry Gorovoy tells us that some of them even had handles. Thirty years later, she opts for the opposite—"a sculpture has to stand."²⁴ In a 2001 *New York Times* review Grace Glueck describes them very aptly as "enigmatic people-sized totems"²⁵—they probably express her longing for those whom she had deliberately left behind. The drawings present women whose heads are a house or a building, mixing memories of her home at Choisy and the New York skyscrapers. At the same time, the house is a classic symbol for the mother, while the usually naked body marks feminine eroticism. Motherhood and sex is always an impossible combination.

From 1942 onwards, there are regular entries concerning her work, alternating with worries about the children and household. Her 1947 diary testifies to her struggle for recognition. On December 18, she notes (in translation): "Note for future dark days – / since the exhibition I have not worked / (dark days) all of a sudden this evening / the dark shroud is lifted / and instead of having lost and / being late I have taken a / leap forward – to have confidence / and not to try to do too much."²⁶ The strange mixture of a fierce independence, a begging for approval, a lack of confidence in her work, and a depressive reaction to success will remain a constant throughout her lifetime. This can be traced back to her original family situation, to

a father who did not take her seriously and the accompanying sibling and Oedipal rivalry, the latter being intensified by the presence of the mistress/governess.²⁷

The ever complicated theme of love and betrayal finds confirmation in two texts written in 1947. *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* is accompanied by nine engravings, but the link between text and drawings is rather loose.²⁸ *The Puritan* was laid aside for 50 years before it became a hand-colored art book with purified architectural images. The first text consists of nine unrelated scenes depicting the failure of love and communication. The second tells the story of a man "as pure and perfect as the New York sky." Trouble starts when a woman enters the scene—a woman who "had no taste for fun"—and falls in love with the man. Something comes between them, and then there is "the silence of the completely dead." Later, the man dies, and everybody cries. These stories may be read as a *roman à clef*. The year before her father dies, her diary testifies to a number of family crises, probably because of Louise's love for Alfred Barr. An entry from January 11, 1950 reads: "my desperately falling in love / with impossible A.B. coincides / with a deep depression."²⁹ The sibling rivalry and the Oedipal competition reappear in a note dated "February 12, 1959," as it presents a schematic view of her original family constellation and contains a significant reference to her rivalry with Sadie. In translation: "the big ones A+B+C Parents + nurse / the small ones a b c Henriette Louise Pierre / Sadie is Henriette and Pierre true / rival successful + female / the important is Pierre, successful + / male my aggression made him trip / Henriette unsuccessful + female + despised / my mother successful + female / fluctuation along the day – the / trip chaotic by the hour / road chaotic and sinuous / defraction [sic] angles –"³⁰ Obviously, her sister Henriette was no match for her and she defeated Pierre (her brother), the only rival left being Sadie, as the mother seems to be an independent figure. *Quarantania* (1947) is probably the best rendering of the original family constellation and the feelings it evoked.

All this endorses a classic reading, namely the unhappy childhood—the Great War, the father-philanderer, a successful mother-businesswoman, sibling rivalry, lack of recognition and love—as an artist's goldmine and the basis for Louise's later inner conflicts between motherhood and femininity and her struggles as a female artist in a male-dominated world. Remarkably enough, she herself seems to refuse this reading of her work—at least this is the message conveyed in the interview with Donald Kuspit.³¹ Remarkable, because this classic interpretation is true to a certain extent. Generally speaking, many works of art have a consoling quality, as we recognize our own worries and sorrows presented in a form which we ourselves are incapable of producing. The Oedipal template in its many variants still holds good as an explanatory background.

The thing about the Oedipal structure is that it keeps us busy forever, because it causes the failure of all romantic and sexual relationships. While we are so busy, we don't need to face what lies underneath. The classic template implies a role distribution: the man/father is the incarnation of the law and the (incest) prohibition, the mother is the first love object, an idealized icon of tenderness, and the children compete for his or her attention while harboring secret death wishes against the other parent. In everyday reality, however, no man is able to live up to his function as a father and, more often than not, he transgresses the rules he is supposed to represent. Motherhood is a sealed cap on top of a volcano of passion and eroticism with a violence that is hard to conceal. The children re-embodiment these duplicities without being aware of it—*The Blind Leading the Blind* is not a bad title for the *dance macabre* that happens under the Oedipal table.

What Lies Beneath: Mother and Body

This classic template has been seriously corrected by Lacan³²—a correction that we believe would have made Louise Bourgeois very happy. It is not so much that the Oedipal scheme and its consequences are wrong, but rather that the Oedipal conflict does not constitute a problem in and of itself. On the contrary, it presents a solution for an underlying threat. As long as we can remain focused on our never fully satisfying relationship(s), romantic and/or sexual, we don't need to confront a more fundamental danger. The Oedipal scheme is a social construction, an invention through which we make ourselves believe that we are facing more or less arbitrary rules and prohibitions that we might surpass. We never do, and for good reason: underneath lies a more threatening realm, one for which words are lacking. This threat is associated with the pre-Oedipal mother, appearing in our nightmares and in psychotic delusions as a two-way goddess: having produced her child, she can gobble it up again. For Lacan, even this threat is a secondary construction, because it covers our horror in confronting the Real of our body and its *jouissance* at the fringes of the literally unthinkable.

It is a matter of historic justice that we can find the first inklings of this realm in the same culture that gave us the Oedipus complex. By and large, the Greek tragedies describe an evolution stretching from Pentheus to Orestes, with Oedipus in between. Orestes escapes because of the installation of the Law—the Athens tribunal acquits him of matricide (Clytemnestra having murdered Agamemnon, his father). Oedipus's fate is sealed despite and because of all his efforts. Pentheus stands no chance—he is discovered spying on the women performing their secret bacchantic rites which no man is allowed to see. Hours later, Agave staggers into the palace square, still in ecstasy, triumphantly carrying a severed head in her bloodied hands. She cheers and sings: under the influence of Bacchus she has caught a wild animal together with her sisters, not with nets, not with spears, but with her bare hands. Together they drove it into a corner and tore it to pieces with their nails and teeth, screaming and howling; now she comes to show off her booty. The head is that of Pentheus, her own son. The story is that of Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae*, and the scene is one of the most gruesome from the plays that have been passed down to us.

Real love is devouring love. Does this mean that the beloved mother hides a dangerous creature that is just waiting to re-incorporate her offspring? It wouldn't be hard to argue that Bourgeois's work invites such an interpretation, especially concerning the *Maman*-spiders. There are plenty of fairytales in just about every culture warning us about witches and stepmothers who feast on their children, and the post-Freudian reading of the pre-Oedipal period is basically a story about who eats whom. This is the second level, just beneath the Oedipal one, the latter protecting us against a falling back. The pre-Oedipal danger is associated with the mother and the body, the Oedipal protection with the father and the law.

In Louise's case, this protection was precarious. Her father did not endorse her identity as a woman and an artist, thus installing an ever-lurking uncertainty. When he died, she disappeared as well—she stayed literally in bed for years, as her son Jean-Louis tells us.³³ The diaries of 1951–53 are full of depression, anger, and anxiety. The mother appears in nightmares where Louise looks for help from her husband, father, or analyst, though not one of them is able to help her. On December 3, 1951 she notes that her childhood anxiety is returning, together with a memory about her father who taught his children not to be anxious by obliging them to go out in the dark. That following night she has a nightmare, written down at 7 P.M.: "Very very tired

day because of the dream. / That dream about my mother was a horror." The dream starts with the idea that she is going to find something terrific in a dream and that Robert, her husband, has to get the meaning—the symbolic order and law resides with the man/father. When the bets are called in, no man can live up to this task; her husband lets her down, she doesn't manage to get his help in spite of her screaming:

[...] there it is catch it. every / thing is set. the *angolse* [anxiety] is horrible. and it comes: it is my mother / I call come come and I pound on Robert she is going away. and he does / not wake up. Then in asurhuman [sic] effort knowing that he fails to answer / I call her and try to reach her again, and suddenly I reach a climax / and satisfaction in a long kiss. I am surprised to see that I wanted / it, and she leaves in my mouth an object like an almond. which was in / her mouth. I take it out in my fingers and think that is strange, I / notice that it does not move. I notice also that it is hard enough / to resist the pressure of even my thumb nail, 'it is harder than soap / I think that marble is harder. Then I want to put it away for exami / nation.' may be [sic] it is not the truth but it may be a form of truth, / you know so little, you have to try everything you can to learn how / to read around you At a level above mother and the almond. I am worried / about R. not hearing and answering the signal. I am going to loose [sic] my / truth. now that I hold it, I am going to lose it. I pound again on his / chest howling: *maman. maman* [...].³⁴

Interpreting this dream without the associations of the dreamer is impossible. Nevertheless, it is easy to see that the man/husband is not much help, and that the mother is associated with horror and climax, a combination that Lacan captures in his notion of *jouissance*. Generally speaking, it is precisely the association between motherhood and *jouissance* that explains our atavistic anxieties about and aggression against women. They return in yet another nightmare, dated November 4, 1953. Louise has tried in vain to help her father, when the following scene pops up:

[...] the / bucket is 3 quarters full of a / pink bloody liquid a little / gelatinous / I as I look further I see / a brain whole and floating / and I wake up in horror / thinking. It is my own body / she put in there – / then my mother calls loud / to me and say 'Louise do you / know that your red trunk / which is in the luggage / compartment has holes in it.'³⁵

These dreams illustrate the pain and the pleasure at the pre-Oedipal level, where mother and infant are condemned to each other because of the primary caretaking interactions. This level precedes genital sexuality and even gender differentiation as such; only the body with all its openings and contents count in interactions with the primary (m)Other. From that period onwards, *jouissance* and its prohibition are inevitably linked with the mother, together with the ensuing aggression. The father/man is as of yet no help. Another nightmare, dated December 15, 1954, expresses this very clearly (in translation): "[...] L. [Lowenfeld, her analyst] has just come / here to visit me, I cannot pay much / attention to him because the toilet / is overflowing – Alain [her son] does not / know how to handle it. Robt. [her husband] / is at the store + cannot be every / where." There are insects as well, "too many to / think about squashing them." The dream ends with Louise peeping through a keyhole: "[...] a powerful / arm pops in and grabs my / wrist. the shock is / just deathly by its terror and / suddenness I wake up."³⁶

Chthonic Art

Even a nightmare fails in its attempt to represent the unthinkable; we wake up before the final confrontation with what is literally undreamt of. Louise's insomnia spells may be understood as a nightly vigilance to keep the horror at bay, with the insomnia drawings functioning as a charm to ward off the danger of the Real by introducing it into the Symbolic. This is the final level, i.e. the confrontation at the border with the truly unconscious, facing the most fundamental forces that drive us, Eros pushes towards synthesis, destroying all individuality in a deadly fusion, Thanatos precipitates towards analysis, destroying all unity and giving birth to the individual in a deadly isolation. These two principles govern the organic world, from chemistry to the male-female relationship. By and large, their reign is unconscious for us and we only confront them in those moments that are called "existential": death, birth, sex. Even then, we are usually well-protected because we have buried this Real under the layers of the Symbolic, usually in a mixture of religious, scientific, and artistic forms. For some, this defense is broken through, meaning that they have to construct a new one by themselves for themselves. Such is the case with Louise Bourgeois.

As previously suggested, *chthonic* is the best denomination for her work from that period (incubating in the 1950s, produced mainly in the 1960s and 1970s, roughly speaking). In its original Greek signification, *chthonic* means pertaining to the earth, subterranean. Chthonic art must be distinguished from and contrasted with Oedipal art, which is always in one way or another a sexual-genital and relational processing of these originally undifferentiated and more anxiety-provoking forces. Such processing is almost completely lacking in chthonic works, as shown by the different versions of *Soft Landscape* (1963–67), *Portrait* (1963) and *Lair, Amoeba* (1963–65), *Le Regard* (1966), *Germinal* (1967), *Avenza* (1968–69), *Cumul* (1969), and *Sleep* (1967). These works cannot be interpreted, in our opinion, because they are themselves first attempts to interpret what can never be fully represented. In Louise's words: "It is not an image I am seeking. It's not an idea. It is an emotion you want to recreate, an emotion of wanting, of giving, and of destroying."³⁷ Because chthonic precedes the traditional erotic level, it is not surprising that Louise Bourgeois rejected the sexual interpretations of her work.³⁸ Such automatic interpretations say more about the interpreters than they do about her work.³⁹

Once these works had provided her with a more or less stable footing, we see a return to the first inklings of shared meanings at the pre-Oedipal level with its ambivalent bond between mother and child and with the onset of gender differentiation. The latter is illustrated by the different versions of *Janus* and *Fillette, She-Fox* and *Nature Study*. The former appears in her comment on a drawing (*Untitled*, 1986) of a large pair of shears with a smaller version between its legs, linked by an umbilical cord. She tells us that the big pair is her mother, and she is the small one: "That she was a monstrous cutting instrument didn't matter to me. I liked her the way she was: very dangerous."⁴⁰ Ten years later, the spider project (1995–97) or *Maman* endorses this return to the pre-Oedipal level from her horrific encounter with the Real. In part nine of the film *The Spider, the Mistress and the Tangerine*, Louise tells us that the spider is her mother and an ode to her mother: "it represents a reconciliation." She says this while walking around the spider, pulling and hitting the legs ("they can take a lot"). The Laurie Anderson soundtrack—"so hold me Mom, in your long arms, in your automatic arms..."—adds to the work's eerie quality.

After returning from the borders of the Real via the pre-Oedipal stage back to the normal level, meaning the Oedipal stage of sexuality and gender relations, the quality of her work, compared to that before the 1950s, is much higher—the confrontation with the fringes of madness proved to be very fruitful. A number of her later works condense the Oedipal and the pre-Oedipal level. That she herself is conscious of this condensation appears from her commentary on *The Twosome* (1991) as a rendering of the attraction of adultery for the male and female elements and at the same time of the effort of a child to gain independence.⁴¹ With *Arch of Hysteria* (1993) she deliberately mixes the two genders, but now with an erotic, almost seductive quality. *Altered States* (1992–94) brings the couple back, although originally still with a dominating woman/mother. This is no longer the case in the many versions of *Couple*. With the different versions of *Red Room* and *Cells*, as imaginary constructions of childhood memories, fantasies and anxieties about love and betrayal in the intimacy of the family, she can truly say “I have been to hell and back. And let me tell you. It was wonderful.”⁴² Her return is illustrated by her diaries from the early 1990s as well, mirroring the anxieties of her early years, the Oedipal craving for The Father included—in translation: “I have to manage to find a good father / a professor, a scholar, a genius, a / doctor [...]”⁴³

Conclusion: Art, Beyond Religion and Science

As far as we know, humans are the only living creatures who are more or less consciously confronted with their own lack of understanding of what drives them. We try to solve this lack either by religion, by science or by art, i.e. three different constructions in the Symbolic designed to master the Real. A religious person puts his or her faith in God, thus blocking his or her arrival at his or her own truth, God being the unfathomable answer. A scientist is convinced that he or she will find The Final Answers in an as yet to be discovered formula, combining knowledge and truth (and preferably a Nobel Prize). This started with Descartes, and it is no coincidence that Louise refers to him and his solution.⁴⁴ As a young adult, she cherished the hope of finding peace and stability in mathematics. In contrast to most scientists, she had the courage to recognize the futility of this hope, and turned to art for a more personal confrontation: “the day I understood that there were other geometries besides Euclidean, I experienced a sharp disappointment. It was for me the death of a symbol ... The new equation was art.”⁴⁵

In contrast to science and religion, art is a personal, even private, attempt to come to terms with the human condition via an ever desperate attempt to produce form and meaning. The easiest way to do this is to fight the social conventions of sexuality and eroticism, giving the artist an image of rebel whilst permitting him or her at the same time to stay at the safe side of the barrier. Very few artists are obliged to go further, their art becoming a means of survival when confronted with the Real of the body. In between stands the mother, the one who gives birth, the one who conceives and the one to whom we finally return, Mother Earth.⁴⁶ It is a matter of poetic justice that Louise Bourgeois ended her career with red gouache drawings of pregnant mothers or even of the birth process itself, identifying explicitly with the new-born child or even with the fetus, as she told Jerry Gorovoy.⁴⁷ Philip Larratt-Smith is right when he points out that these drawings are the mirror-image of her first *Femmes Maisons*: she has come full circle.⁴⁸

Notes

1. Louise Bourgeois, "Self Expression is Sacred and Fatal: Statements," in Christiane Meyer-Thoss, *Louise Bourgeois: Designing for Free Fall* (Zurich, Switzerland: Ammann Verlag, 1992), 195.
2. See "Freud's Toys," *Artforum* 28, no. 5 (January 1990), 111–13; rpt. in Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, eds., *Louise Bourgeois: Destruction of the Father/Reconstruction of the Father (Writings and Interviews 1923–97)* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press in association with Violette Editions, 1998), 189.
3. The magnitude of the material obliges us to be explicit about which sources we have used for our contribution. From a psychoanalytic point of view, it is important to focus as much as possible on the material produced by Louise Bourgeois herself. As such, we are very grateful to Philip Larratt-Smith and the Louise Bourgeois Studio for making this possible, by inviting Paul Verhaeghe to New York and giving him access to the Louise Bourgeois Archive. During a one week research stay, he studied the diaries from 1940 to 1942, which cover her first years in the US and the adoption/birth of her sons; 1947 (exhibition at the Norlyst Gallery); the years 1950–56 (death of her father and mourning period); 1972–74 (death of her husband). The diaries of 1976, 1978, 1980, 1984, and 1986 were given only a cursory glance. The diaries from 1992 to 1994 were studied as thoroughly as the first ones. The final diaries, covering 2001–03, were examined as well. Additionally, he read several of the so-called "loose documents," a collection of Bourgeois's papers that have been ordered and numbered by the Louise Bourgeois Studio. At the end of his stay, he listened to Jerry Gorovoy speak about his extensive experience with Louise Bourgeois. Besides all this, we used interviews with Bourgeois (Donald Kuspit, *Bourgeois* [New York, NY: Elizabeth Avedon Editions/Vintage Contemporary Artists (a division of Random House), 1988], and Christiane Meyer-Thoss's interviews with the artist, 1986–89). The many interview fragments from *Louise Bourgeois: The Spider, the Mistress and the Tangerine*, a film directed by Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach (2008; New York, NY: Zeitgeist Films, 2009, DVD) proved very useful as well. And finally, we immersed ourselves as much as possible in her work.
4. LB-0272 (January 29, 1958). Bourgeois's quote references a line from Boileau's *L'Art poétique* (1674): "Vingt fois sur le métier remettez votre ouvrage," which became a common French saying meaning: "nothing is ever perfect enough." In her diaries, Bourgeois often mixed French and English. English translations of the French parts and editor's notes are given between [].
5. Louise was actually the youngest of three daughters. Her oldest sister, born out of wedlock, died before Louise was born. The second daughter was Henriette. Louise also had a younger brother, Pierre.
6. Around the age of eight years, Louise acquired the position of draftsman in her grandmother's tapestry atelier. During school holidays and on Sunday, Louise drew in the missing parts of old tapestries, starting with the drawing of feet. See "A Memoir: Louise Bourgeois and Patricia Beckert," in Bernadac and Obrist, 118.
7. In Louise's eyes it felt like a double betrayal. She was betrayed not only by her father, but also by Sadie, who was only a few years older than Louise herself. Louise thought she and Sadie were going to be friends, but instead Sadie deceived her. See "Child Abuse: A Project by Louise Bourgeois," *Artforum* 20, no. 4 (December 1982), 40–47; rpt. in Bernadac and Obrist, 134.
8. Louise Bourgeois transformed a part of the house in the Boulevard Saint-Germain into her own gallery, where she was selling prints and paintings of Henri Matisse, Pierre Bonnard, Pablo Picasso, et al. It was in this gallery where she and Robert Goldwater met. See letter from Louise Bourgeois to Colette Richarme, September, 1938, pub. in Bernadac and Obrist, 30.
9. Louise Bourgeois, "Statements," in Meyer-Thoss, 200.
10. Meyer-Thoss, 119.
11. At this time Louise immersed herself in psychoanalytic literature, from Freud to Klein, from Jung to Horney, from Stekel to Rank, et al.
12. LB-1953.
13. Cajori and Wallach.
14. After her third and final show at Peridot Gallery in 1953 she did not have another solo exhibition until 1964 at the Stable Gallery in New York.

15. LB-0466 (dated Thanksgiving Day, 4th Thursday in November 1951).
16. Cajori and Wallach. When she told the story some 50 years later, Louise Bourgeois cried in a way that even Jerry Gorovoy had never seen.
17. Ibid.
18. Meyer-Thoss, 122.
19. Louise in conversation with Jerry Gorovoy (LB-0051). See also Cajori and Wallach.
20. LBD-1992 (April 16, 1992). See also Donald Kuspit, "Louise Bourgeois in Psychoanalysis with Henry Lowenfeld," in this publication, p. 26, note 3.
21. [1917], "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), 237–60.
22. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. J. A. Miller and trans. A. Sheridan. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994), 47.
23. LBD-1940.
24. Meyer-Thoss, 63 and 69.
25. "Art in Review: Louise Bourgeois, 'The Personages,'" in *The New York Times*, April 27, 2001, E31.
26. LBD-1947.
27. Much of Louise's guilt, feelings of unworthiness and her continual need for reparation proceeds from the fact that she knew precisely what she wanted, namely, the father. She could not destroy that desire nor her knowledge of it, and therefore had to destroy him, i.e., the seduction extending to other attractions to father figures (teachers, analysts, her husband, et al.). For an illustration, see LBD-1994 (September 3, 1994).
28. Louise Bourgeois told Deborah Wye and Carol Smith not to link the prints too closely to the narratives. See *The Prints of Louise Bourgeois* (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994). Both *The Puritan* and *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* are published in Meyer-Thoss.
29. LBD-1950.
30. LB-0143.
31. Bourgeois, 1988.
32. Paul Verhaeghe, *New Studies of Old Villains* (New York, NY: Other Press, 2009).
33. Cajori and Wallach.
34. LB-0454.
35. LBD-1953.
36. LBD-1954.
37. "Statements," Meyer-Thoss, 194.
38. Jerry Gorovoy, in conversation with the author, July 2010.
39. In a BBC documentary directed by Jill Nichols (*Imagine... Louise Bourgeois Spider Woman*, 2007), only the sculptor Antony Gormley voiced a different reading: "She has made her pain into form... anxiety, anxiety is the thing we need to find a form for."
40. Quoted in Meyer-Thoss, 133. Drawing reproduced on p. 222.
41. *Louise Bourgeois*, directed by Camille Guichard (Paris: Terra Luna Films and Centre Georges Pompidou, 1993).
42. Statement was embroidered on a handkerchief: Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled (I Have Been to Hell and Back)*, 1996.
43. LBD-1994 (September 3, 1994).
44. Meyer-Thoss, 71.
45. Quoted in Meyer-Thoss, 53–54; see also 135 and LB-0043 (January 2, 1961).
46. See Sigmund Freud [1913], "The Theme of the Three Caskets," in *The Standard Edition*, vol. XII (1958), 291–301.
47. See Nichols.
48. "Mother Nature," in *Nature Study*, exh. cat. (Edinburgh: Inverleith House, 2008), 4.