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LOUISE BOURGEOIS: *The Return of the Repressed*

by Courtney Fiske

Philip Larratt-Smith, ed.
Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed
(Violette Editions, 2012)

In the early months of 2010, a trove of loose-leaf paper was discovered in Louise Bourgeois's Chelsea apartment. Marked with pen, pencil, and typewriter ink, the pages featured a fluent blend of French and English prose, punctuated by an occasional drawing. The writings hailed largely from the years spanning 1952—when Bourgeois was refining her brand of metaphoric abstraction in her *Personages*, a series of precariously assembled totemic structures—to 1964, when Bourgeois debuted her now-canonical sculptural aesthetic of turgid, visceral forms rendered in emotive arrays of latex, wax, and resin. This new, organic idiom followed an 11-year hiatus from the art world, during which Bourgeois underwent strenuous analysis at the hands of an émigré Freudian, Henry Lowenfeld—a foreigner, like herself, expatriated from a Europe ravaged by war.

Combined with a similar find of six years prior, this cache amounted to over 1,000 pages of rich psychic self-documentation. Here, Bourgeois had recorded her dreams, anxieties, and desires; parsed her sessions with Lowenfeld ("L.," in her affectionate abbreviation); and jotted ideas for new sculptures. Reproduced in part and translated for the first time in a sleek volume edited by Philip Larratt-Smith, Bourgeois's literary archivist, these writings reveal Bourgeois as an artist whose profound engagement with psychoanalysis was anchored in a sustained, often tortuous praxis.

From adolescence onwards, Bourgeois was a fastidious diarist, at times making multiple entries in a day. Larratt-Smith's volume thus comes as a supplement of sorts to the numerous anthologies of Bourgeois's writings already in print. For readers familiar with Bourgeois, most facets of the artist constructed here will come as no surprise. Shame, frustration, self-loathing, guilt, and fear—of abandonment, of betrayal, of her own virulent emotions—collude to keep Bourgeois in a state of perpetual crisis. Feeling herself wounded and lacking, the artist filters her emotional life through her

forays in psychoanalytic theory: Melanie Klein, Anna Freud, Marie Bonaparte, and Otto Rank are just some of the figures who receive mention. Her writings reveal an exacting knowledge of the existing literature—so exacting, in fact, that she fears "dirtying" her analysis through her keen awareness of its precepts.

True to psychoanalytic form, Bourgeois fixates compulsively on the traumas of her past. The protagonists of her childhood psychodrama are, predictably, her father, Louis, a withholding philanderer; her mother, Joséphine, a weak, sickly woman; and Sadie, the object of her father's infidelities, only six years older than she. Her Oedipus complex, a subject over which she spills much ink, is textbook—so much so that her verse often reads like a Freudian case study. She alternates between disdain for her mother, a castrating figure who "dispossessed me from my / big Father + P." (that is, phallus), and sympathy for a woman cuckolded by her husband. Toward her father, Bourgeois experiences the desire to both "return" and "to eat to kill to devour to come / ...to take / his strength and to be killed as punishment." Bourgeois's need to rehearse and, therein, repeat these Oedipal traumas borders on obsessive. Tellingly, her ruminations on the present fail to escape the abiding frame of her past, as she casts her husband, the acclaimed art historian Robert Goldwater, and children in conditioned roles, aligning Robert with both her mother and her father and nursing a disturbingly vivid fear that her offspring will murder her.

But *Return of the Repressed* offers more than staid rehashings of psychoanalytic scenarios. The most interesting moments occur when Bourgeois tempers her inner analyst and adopts a poetic, associative style, appending symbolism to her bodily processes or stringing verbs and nouns in iterative lists that ape the Surrealists' automatic writing. In these passages, Bourgeois's art-making and her analysis emerge as reciprocal endeavors, each a form of autobiography, striving to give tangible, if not wholly coherent, form to the unconscious. The repeated acts of cutting, carving, and cleaving on which Bourgeois's sculptural practice turned provide an outlet for her "gushing of emotional force," alternately analogized to "a hydra writhing" and "a sea of lava." More than a means of sublimation, art enables her to fashion hermetic worlds defined by their own, involuted logics: spaces where she feels both in control and psychically at ease. "I do not have to live in an empty world / world of vacuum," she wrote in 1958. "I can create / my own, artist world of omnipotence + fantasy." Modeling space, for Bourgeois, was a way to stave off the void within.

Psychoanalysis may have colonized Bourgeois's sense of self, but her writings show her as anything but a model patient. Lowenfeld's goal, she well understood, was to allay her phobias and mute her aggression: to flatten, in short, her emotional highs and lows onto the dulled plane of "acceptable femininity." Conformity, however, contravened the outsider edge so critical to Bourgeois's artistic vision, which reveled in messy, uncontainable forms and hinged on a manic, eruptive sort of creativity. To be cured was to relinquish her aspirations to artistic greatness: a contradiction that Bourgeois surely realized. Her sessions with Lowenfeld functioned less to curb her neuroses than to further her art. "Depression set in, and paralyzing fears, Somatic ailments / ... How to use this knowledge to make me work," she mused in 1951.

Bourgeois's psyche is, by now, well-mapped terrain. While such exhaustive exegeses have undoubtedly enriched our understanding of Bourgeois's oeuvre, their side effect is a certain circumscription, an enclosure of her work in the terms of a discourse that seems increasingly dated. Compelling us to defer to the authority of Bourgeois's psychobiography and Freudian dogma before reaching critical judgments,the danger is that these textual supplements occlude broader, more open interpretive approaches to her practice. Readers would thus be ill served to approach *Return of the Repressed* as yet another readymade exposition of Bourgeois's iconography.Instead, it seems most productive to view the volume as Bourgeois's take on Duchamp's *Green Box* (1934): a collection of writings as exquisitely perplexed as the artist's work itself.

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