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Éditorial/Essai

Louise Bourgeois: From depressed mother to philandering father, the birth of a genius

Louise Bourgeois : d'une mère dépressive à un père coureur de jupons, la naissance d'un génie

Abstract

At the age of forty-one, Louise Bourgeois began a psychoanalysis with Dr. Henry Lowenfeld. She continued her treatment for thirty-three years and stopped it only after the death of her therapist. Psychoanalysis has therefore been central to her life as a woman and an artist. After a brief biographical sketch of the two protagonists, we propose in this essay a new understanding of the role that Louise Bourgeois' childhood had in the creation of her art so deeply moving. We base this proposal on a psychodynamic analysis based on the theoretical concepts of "dead mother" and "negative Oedipus complex" as well as on the description made by Henry Lowenfeld of the artistic personality of his patient.

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Keywords: Louise Bourgeois; Henry Lowenfeld; Creativity; Psycho-analysis

Résumé

À l'âge de quarante et un an, Louise Bourgeois a commencé une psychanalyse avec le Dr Henry Lowenfeld. Elle a poursuivi sa cure pendant trente-trois ans et ne l'a arrêtée qu'à la mort de son thérapeute. La psychanalyse a donc eu une place centrale dans sa vie de femme et d'artiste. Après un bref rappel biographique des 2 protagonistes, nous proposons dans cet essai une nouvelle compréhension du rôle que l'enfance de Louise Bourgeois a eu dans la création de son art si profondément émouvant. Nous basons cette proposition sur une analyse psychodynamique à partir des concepts théoriques de « mère morte » et de « complexe d'Œdipe négatif » ainsi que sur la description faite par Henry Lowenfeld de la personnalité artistique de sa patiente.

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Mots clés : Louise Bourgeois ; Henry Lowenfeld ; Créativité ; Psychanalyse

In 1952, soon after her father died and suffering from a deep depression, Louise Bourgeois, aged forty, went into Psychoanalysis. She remained thirty three years in treatment until in 1985 her analyst, Dr. Henry Lowenfeld, passed away. Death is what separated this therapeutic couple. Psychoanalysis therefore had a huge place in her life and its effects played an indisputable role in the unfolding and maturing of her creative process. This essay is a psychoanalytic tribute to her artistic genius (Fig. 1).

1. The myth of the origins: a screen memory

When after forty two years of work, Louise Bourgeois suddenly was given what was in 1982 the first large scale sculpture retrospective for a woman at the Museum of Modern Art of New

York, she not only stunned the world of contemporary art with her vast body of work but she also insisted on making public what was to become the quasi-mythical story of her childhood trauma.

This is how it went. In 1922, when Louise was aged ten her father hired a young English woman named Sadie Richmond to become the English tutor of the Bourgeois children. Catastrophically for Louise, Sadie became the father's mistress and even lived in the family home on and off for almost a decade. As Diana Princess of Wales famously said it was a couple of three and obviously there was one too many. Although Louise's mother had fallen ill before Sadie arrived, her health started deteriorating in 1922 and after ten years of suffering she died in 1932. Note that the last ten years of the mother's illness approximately

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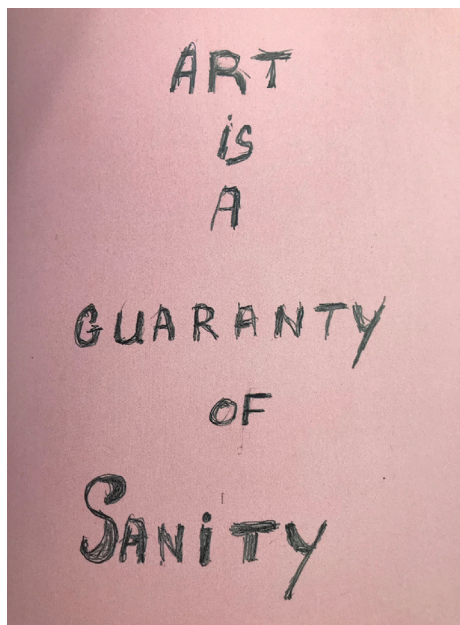


Fig. 1. Louise Bourgeois' comment on art and mental health.

correspond to the ten years of Sadie's tenure as teacher of the children and mistress of the father. Every time I hear that story I cannot avoid making the association between the mistresses' name Sadie and sadism because of the cruelty of this situation and the very real possibility of a causal link between the father's affair and the mother's disease and death.

At the beginning of the mother's long illness, Louise accompanied her to various therapeutic spa towns in the South of France. During the last years of her mother's life she became very involved and fulfilled the functions of a quasi-nurse while somehow managing to also attend drawing, piano and English classes. One easily imagines the traumatic nature of the situation: Louise caring for her mother at one end of the house while at the other end the father is in the company of Sadie. However psychoanalysts are well aware of the fact that such stories frequently are screen memories fooling both their author, the patient, and their audience, the therapist. And in this case, the public at large.

So, we must not let ourselves be mentally paralyzed by the fairy tale nature of this story and we should remember that Louise Bourgeois started her psychoanalytic cure soon after the death of her father because of the deep depression she fell into as a result of his passing. We can therefore safely assume that in spite of the traumatic story in which the father is a "quasi *ogre*", his daughter deeply loved him to the extent she needed professional help when he died, so profound was her grieving.

2. Louise Bourgeois' psychoanalyst and his mysterious Viennese patient

So, in 1952 because of a painful depression a new character enters Louise Bourgeois' life: Dr Henry Lowenfeld, who was to become her analyst for the following thirty year. Who was he? Born in 1900, Henry Lowenfeld was a second generation

Freudian very close, when he was young, to two of Freud's disciples: Wilhelm Reich and Otto Fenichel whom the creator of Psychoanalysis considered to be uncontrollable bolsheviks. The young Lowenfeld was therefore passionate about the human psyche and socialism. He was also very interested by art and artists.

In 1938, fleeing Nazi Austria, he emigrated to America where he became a member of the very orthodox New York Society of Psychoanalysis. But, shortly before leaving Vienna, on June 23, 1937, Lowenfeld made a presentation at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. This presentation which drew many researchers' attention because of its title "Psychic trauma and productive experience in the artist" probably is the reason Louise Bourgeois later chose him to be her analyst [1]. What did Henry Lowenfeld have to say about trauma and creativity before the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society on June 23, 1937?

It took a bit of research to unearth the text of his presentation. Finally, in the archives of the Bibliothèque Sigmund Freud in Paris, I found the complete text of Lowenfeld's presentation. I have read quite a few publications having to do with Louise Bourgeois' trajectory as it relates to Psychoanalysis and many authors have spotted Lowenfeld's text and imagined that one way or another it drew Bourgeois' attention because of its title. I have however not yet found a publication which deals at length with its actual content. And as you will see it was well worth spending time hunting for it.

Let us begin with the description Lowenfeld made of the artist suffering from a creative block who came to consult him. (My translation from the French text.)¹.

"A thirty year old woman who started therapy because of worsening anxiety episodes, various somatic problems and since already a few years inhibitions in her creative process. (...) She was a vivacious and intelligent woman, she had a pleasant appearance and a slightly unfriendly expression. Her behavior betrayed a combination of fearful timidity and aggressivity. (...) She drew and painted. (...) She was gifted, original and had a fertile imagination. (...) It is between the age of seventeen and twenty two that she achieved the greatest creativity in the artistic field."

"After a sexual relationship with a man older than her, she had a few lesbian affairs in which she played a passive role and from which she derived relative satisfactions. During the same period, she had a few flings with men which left her indifferent until the day she met the man who was to become her husband. In him she saw a powerful and athletic man. This aspect attracted her and it was, according to her, the determinant factor in her choice. However, after their wedding, he opted for a position of total devotion, playing a passive role while she took the active, masculine part to the extent that sometimes she was sadistic and cruel. She was capable of being sexually aroused, but never completely satisfied."

¹ I have taken the liberty of thematically reorganizing Lowenfeld's paper for the purpose of this lecture.

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