



Spirals, whorls, and faulty containers: The psychoanalysis of form in the art of Marion Milner's *The Hands of the Living God* and the sculpture of Louise Bourgeois

Emilia Halon-Hernandez

"The ego is first and foremost a body-ego. It is not merely a surface entity, but is in itself a projection of a surface" (Freud, *The Ego and the Id*)

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But it is a much more fearful thing to fall out of them...That awful and sickening endless sinking, sinking through the slow, corruptive levels of disintegrative knowledge when the self has fallen from the hands of God. (D.H. Lawrence "The Hands of the Living God")

In the 2012 exhibition, *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed*, held at the Freud Museum in London, a number of the artist's sculptures and artworks were displayed in Freud's home and consulting room. The French-American artist's well-known *Janus Fleuri* (1968), an evocatively corporeal object, hung suspended above Freud's famous couch. Situating Bourgeois so intimately amongst the rooms, objects, and furniture of one of the foundational spaces of psychoanalysis came about after a rich discovery was made in 2010. After Bourgeois's death (born 1911, died 2010), a number of previously undiscovered writings were found at the artist's Chelsea home relating to her experiences with psychoanalysis. Having continually denied undergoing analysis to her close friends and colleagues, the revelation of her 30-year analysis (1952-1982) with Dr. Henry Lowenfeld was a startling one. With these new findings, the 2012 exhibition and the essays that followed it in the two volume *Return of the Repressed* (2012) highlighted "the enduring presence of psychoanalysis as a motivational force and a site of exploration in the artist's life and work" (Larratt-Smith, 2012, p. 2). Bourgeois, both as a woman and as an artist, was thus profoundly impacted by psychoanalysis.

The first years of Bourgeois's analysis coincided with British psychoanalyst, painter, and autobiographer Marion Milner's (born 1900, died 1998) long treatment of a woman called Susan, recorded in Milner's case study *The Hands of the Living God* (1969). Like Bourgeois, the importance of visual art—its use and interpretation in the psychoanalytic setting—forms the heart of Milner's account. Susan was in analysis with Milner from 1943 at the age of 23 until around 1958-1960, and over the years she produced over 4,000 drawings, bringing up to 90 with her to a single session. Whereas psychoanalysis is normally considered a talking cure, both Bourgeois's and Susan's analyses involved the creation of visual art for, and in response to, their analyses. In Bourgeois's so-called "psychoanalytic writings" she records her dreams, feelings, fights, fears, and associations during the period of her analysis in hand written notes and through some drawings (Nixon, 2012, p. 85). Upon reading Bourgeois's psychoanalytic

writings, Juliet Mitchell suggests she did not have analysis for a cure, instead she had more of a training analysis—though a training analysis for becoming not a psychoanalyst but an artist (Mitchell, 2017). Mitchell states that in Bourgeois’s analysis “visual art was her task” (Mitchell, 2017). And when the psychoanalyst and friend of Milner’s, Adam Phillips, asked Milner whether she thought the analysis had “worked” for Susan, she responded— “Of course she never got better...but we got somewhere” (Phillips, 2010, p. xxxiii), with Phillips praising her for never taking for granted what it would mean for Susan to be *better* (Phillips, 2010, p. xxxiii).

In what follows, I take up Mitchell’s comment on what it might mean for these women to be engaged in a visual task as opposed to only a talking cure—and through a reading of both Bourgeois’s and Susan’s use of the form of the spiral, I think about the significance of their unique projects. In so doing, I make two claims: firstly, I argue that the creation of the image allows psychoanalysis to access early psychic experiences that exist prior to language, and that are thus best treated through forms of representation *other* than the customary talking cure. The relationship between psychic experience and the visual was a preoccupation of Milner and other members of the Independent Group of the British School of Psychoanalysis. In Benjamin Poore’s study of the psychoanalyst Masud Khan, he identifies how Khan along with his colleagues Donald Winnicott and Milner (all contemporaries of Bourgeois) were concerned with two questions: “what is the relationship of pictorial expression and psychic life, and what aspects of self experience are actualised by the pictorial in a way that is not possible through verbalisation alone?” (Poore, 2015, p. 230).

Bourgeois said she turned to sculpture because she could express “much deeper things in three dimensions” (Morris 2007, p. 259), and elsewhere states: “for me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture” (Bronfen, 2012, p. 115). Milner writes about how she decided to make the account of her treatment with Susan “centre on the drawings, since I did come to look on these as containing, in highly condensed form, the essence of what we were trying to understand” (Milner, 1988, p. xxi). Bourgeois’s and Susan’s art presents us with self-portraits of particularly early body-ego states, though since these representations are from such an early time, the idea of a ‘self’-portrait is almost paradoxical. Their art puts us in touch with these often unspeakable, unconscious, and early areas of experience that are not easily accessible through other means.

The second claim I make is that part of Susan’s and Bourgeois’s task in creating visual art through psychoanalytic practice is about giving form to that which otherwise feels formless. In other words, by creating an art object in the external world that can be held both physically and mentally in the hands and mind of another, they are giving a material solidity to their own subjectivities. At the heart of Susan’s analysis was Milner’s belief that Susan needed to be reborn into her own separate identity, rebuilding ego-boundaries for a more secure sense of being. Much of Susan’s suffering was attributed to her experience of never having felt herself to be a separate person from her mother. For Bourgeois, scholars such as Mignon Nixon have noted the devotion in her art to questions of subjectivity, in particular to the theme of emergence—to the emergence of the subject (Nixon, 2012, p. 89). Phillip Larratt-Smith writes of Bourgeois’s work how “her art [works], in whatever medium, are symptoms of her

suffering, even as they transcend it by embodying it—and her art is perhaps fundamentally about her body ego, the first ego” (Larratt-Smith, 2012, p. 19). It is the nature of this transcendence through embodiment that needs to be explored in greater depth to more fully understand the nature of their autobiographical art work. Bertolt Brecht in his poem “Motto” writes the following lines: “I’m like that man who carried a brick around with him/ To show the world what his house used to look like” (Brecht). Throughout this paper, I explore what it might mean to think of Susan’s and Bourgeois’s art as functioning in a similar way to Brecht’s brick, as evidence of earlier internal homes or containers.

By reading the form of the spiral in both women’s art—it is a symbol of central importance in both their work—I show how we can access representations of powerful early body-ego states around the struggles of emerging as an individuated subject due to a failure of containment in infancy. However, there are clear differences between Susan and Bourgeois that must be noted—one is a celebrated artist, one is not. Susan, though Milner never explicitly diagnoses her, was considered to have suffered from schizophrenia (see Winnicott’s preface to the 1969 book). Danielle Knafo writes how necessary it is that the artist “may sometimes visit the neighbourhood of madness and disassemble, but he does not make his home there” (Knafo, 2012, p. 33). Bourgeois, as her art and writings attest, had the capacity to do this, whereas Susan suffered greatly from that fact that the neighbourhood of madness also made its home in herself. What they do share is a talent for abstract symbolism—in other words, they are able to express very powerful early body-ego states of not feeling held or contained through their use of the symbol of the spiral. By body-ego states, I refer to what Freud called the first-ego: the sense that the self-demarcations that form in our consciousness during infancy are based on our sensory experience of our bodies as distinct from other objects that define and limit our sense of who and what we are.

This article draws on Bourgeois’s art works and her own insights into their meaning, as well as on her more properly “psychoanalytic writings.” Whereas Susan’s drawings are analysed by Milner for their meaning, Bourgeois verbalises the psychological content of her own art work. Thus it is important to take into consideration who speaks for whom, since Milner also titles many of Susan’s drawings herself. Much of Milner’s own professional and autobiographical writings are preoccupied with the nature of the struggles expressed in Susan’s drawings, and so the other voice in this essay alongside Bourgeois’s is that of Milner’s through Susan. Recognising who speaks on behalf of whom is important when the need to establish one’s own identity is at the core Susan’s analytic treatment. Although Milner speaks for Susan’s drawings, this does not necessarily mean she dominates or erases Susan’s voice. By giving verbal expression to Susan’s images, Milner might be understood in her role as analyst as aiding Susan in the process of expressing a selfhood that is in becoming.

Reading the Spiral



Figure 1: Louise Bourgeois, *Spiral Woman* 1984. Bronze, hanging piece, with slate disc 29.2 x 8.9 x 11.4 cm.; Slate disc: 3.17 x 86.3 cm. diameter, The Easton Foundation; Photo: Allan Finkelman © The Easton Foundation/DACS, London



Figure 2: Susan (title by Milner), *Retreating to Madness?* (Fig 43 HOLG) n.d. (Milner, Marion. *The Hands of the Living God: An Account of a Psycho-analytic Treatment*. London: Routledge, 2010. Fig 43 p158)

If we were to categorize the artistic style of Bourgeois and Susan's art, we might call them Abstract Symbolists for their repeated use of abstract symbols and forms to communicate and express themselves. Of this artistic style and Bourgeois's work, Larratt-Smith writes how "Abstraction usually indicates that the unconscious mind is in the ascendant, whereas the figure or fragments thereof are traces of a problem, which Bourgeois is consciously addressing" (Larratt-Smith, n.d.). From the numerous abstract motifs that appear in Bourgeois's oeuvre, "the spiral holds a distinct place" (MOMA, n.d.), reoccurring in various guises and mediums as a favourite form of the artist's (Larratt-Smith, n.d.). Bourgeois has written in relation to her use of the spiral how:

[it] is an attempt at controlling the chaos. It has two directions. Where do you place yourself; at the periphery or at the vortex? Beginning at the outside is the fear of losing control; the winding in is a tightening, a retreating, a compacting to the point of disappearance. Beginning at the centre is affirmation, the move outward is a representation of giving, a giving up control: of trust, positive energy, of life itself. (Bourgeois cited in Schiller, 2017, p. 230).

For Bourgeois, the spiral represents two dichotomous responses to the world. In the spiral that winds centripetally, beginning at the outside, there is a deathly withdrawal. By contrast, the centrifugal spiral that grows from the centre represents an open engagement with life¹. Here Bourgeois describes two responses to chaos, or perhaps more accurately, two different experiences of chaos. The death-inducing spiral seems to perceive chaos as something that will make one lose control, leading to the extermination of the self. We might understand this kind of chaos that threatens the self as an expression of what Bion called "catastrophic chaos," a feeling experienced when there is felt to be no boundaries to contain anxiety, leading to psychic catastrophe (Bion cited in Glover, 2009). Donald Meltzer also describes this anxiety as akin to being engulfed by a hostile space, a void and emptiness that feels like a "falling forever" (Meltzer cited in Glover, 2009). Conversely, the centrifugal spiral represents "a giving up of control" (Bourgeois cited in Schiller, 2017, p. 230), where chaos is no longer felt to be unbearable and existentially threatening but can be tolerated and precipitate growth. Indeed, Bion stresses how chaos is the beginning of life (O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 119), and Milner in her work on creativity in *On Not Being Able to Paint* recognises the importance of tolerating chaos and creating order out of it in the capacity for creativity (Milner, 1957, p. 148).

Bourgeois's *Spiral Woman* (1984) (Fig 1) very powerfully represents the centripetal spiral state of facing a catastrophic chaos. The bronze sculpture of a woman enveloped by a spiral hangs over a black circle on the floor, spinning continuously by

¹ There is something universally resonant in the spiral symbolising both energy and entropy. In Nico Israel's 2015 book *Spirals: The Whirled Image in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art*, he explores the centrality of spirals in modern and post-modern art and literature. For the Futurists, spirals were used to articulate speed and potentiality, whereas in the later-century work of Robert Smithson and Samuel Beckett "the spiral began to serve as a sign of anaemia that challenged those early-century associations" (Israel, 2015, p. 151).

mechanical rotation. This black circle is the black void that sucks one into psychic disintegration and extermination, the “compacting to the point of disappearance” (Bourgeois cited in Schiller, 2017, p. 230). Larratt-Smith has noticed how “Bourgeois’s journals again and again recount her feeling of emptiness, of being a void,” which he thinks “the hollow core or void at the center of her spirals paradoxically conveys” (Larratt-Smith, 2012, p. 20). This void at the spiral’s vortex seems here to be represented by the black circle below. Commenting again on *Spiral Woman* (1984), Bourgeois draws attention to the significance of hanging and spinning in the sculpture. She tells us:

This is what it means: She hangs up in the air. She turns around and she doesn’t know her left from her right. Who do you think it represents? It represents Louise. This is the way I feel...she is herself, hanging, waiting for nobody knows what. (Morris, 2007, p. 279)

And elsewhere she states how “The spiral is somebody who doesn’t have a frame of reference. The only thing is this hanging, this fragility” (Morris, 2007, p. 279). Feeling spun into confusion and lacking a frame of reference alludes once again to the experience of a catastrophic chaos. The spiral woman in her fragile, endless hanging also expresses why it might be that the catastrophic chaos looms so strongly in the first place. The feeling of having no “frame” is, in other words, expressing a faulty experience of “containment” in Bion’s sense, or an insecure experience of being “held” in Winnicott’s terms. I read the spiral that contains the woman as representing an experience with a fragile container, for there is felt to be a void that looms just below. This feeling is also reflected in one of Bourgeois’s psychoanalytic writings, in which she writes about identifying in a dream with a “desperate pleading baby” held precariously in the hand of a huge man who, despite his size, is unable to provide a secure container (Bourgeois cited in Meg Harris Williams, 2012, p. 37). This more explicitly psychoanalytic association reveals how the visual register of both art and dream illuminate one another.

Turning to Susan’s drawings in *The Hands of the Living God*, it is Milner who reflects on the spiral image for psychoanalytic insight. In Susan’s drawings, the spiral is also adopted as the primary form through which to express comparable anxieties about containment. Milner gives “this particular form she uses so often” in her drawings the name “whorls” (Milner, 1988, p. 150). In the earlier years of the analysis, Susan used the whorl shape repeatedly in the place of feet, shoulders, and breasts. Milner understands the whorls as containing in them two kinds of feelings, much like Bourgeois’s spiral dialectic:

I thought of another aspect of the whorls, to do with the way she so often used them, in her drawings of heads, in the place where the shoulders should be; for I thought of how one prelude to the satisfying of an infant’s desires for the mother’s care is the experience of being picked up by the shoulders. I even considered whether her continual anxieties about getting herself knocked down in the street might not be partly connected with the hidden desire to be picked up once more by her shoulders as she was in infancy. (Milner, 1988, p. 142)

For Susan, Milner sees the whorl as representing the desire for a holding and supporting embrace as well as the dreadful feeling of “falling forever” that Meltzer describes as a result of when the container fails. Thus, for both Bourgeois and Susan, falling is the falling apart of self and psyche. Milner reports how Susan felt her experience of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) as a young woman had destroyed any sense of ever having been held as an infant. She recognises how in many of Susan’s drawings “the terrible knowledge that this was what she had lost, she had fallen out of the hands of the living god” (Milner, 1988, p. 411). DH Lawrence’s poem “The Hands of God,” from which Milner takes the title of the book, describes falling out of the hands of the living god as “That awful and sickening endless sinking, sinking/ through the slow, corruptive levels of disintegrative knowledge/ when the self has fallen from the hands of God” (Lawrence). An accurate description of what it might feel like to have experienced a failure in feeling contained and held, Susan’s severe symptoms, suffering, and drawings attest to this profound and enduring body-ego state. The endless hanging “fragility” of Bourgeois’s *Spiral Woman* (1984) evokes powerfully the dreamed of baby that is precariously held, always in a state of insecurity as to whether she will fall or not from “the hands of the huge man” (Harris Williams, 2012, p. 37), her version of the hands of the living god.

Milner finds evidence in some of Susan’s drawings that she is beginning to be able to experience for herself the feeling of what the life-giving, trusting centrifugal spiral represents. In a series of drawings from the same session, Milner interprets the whorls or cowl shapes as “standing in for my supporting role” in the session. She wonders: “could not this symbol also be expressing the thought that the idea of something that will support her and feed the homes from inside herself, it is felt first of all to be her own creation, something growing out of her own substance, as hair does, or faeces” (Milner, 1988, p. 139-140). As Bourgeois creates her spiral centrifugally, from the inside growing outwards, Susan must also create something from within, developing her own internal sense of containment. But to do this is no easy feat and requires waking “up to a sense of tragic loss” (Milner, 1988, p. 137).

In one of Susan’s drawings, Milner comments on how “there is a look as if the pain of waking up is too great to be borne” (Milner, 1988, p. 137), a pain which might cause what she sees as expressed in the drawing (Fig 2) entitled *Retreating to Madness?* (Milner, 1988, p. 137). She writes how “there is almost a look of impending sudden retreat into something else, something mad. And it is during this session that she tells me of her dread about the summer holiday” (Milner, 1988, p. 137). Susan pleads with Milner not to put her into a mental hospital during the holidays, here expressing a fear that the break in the analysis would feel as if she was put away somewhere that “she would ‘go quite crazy’” (Milner, 1988, p. 137). Thus, the whorl that envelops the woman in Fig 2 does not seem to symbolise a sense of the containing support Milner finds in some of Susan’s other drawings.

Instead, the spiral here is more akin to that centripetal vortex that Bourgeois describes, that constricts and squeezes out life. For Bourgeois also, a break in her analysis and the anger it generates towards her analyst Dr. Lowenfeld is expressed through the imagery of the spiral form. In another of her psychoanalytic writings,

Bourgeois's rage towards Lowenfeld taking a holiday is associated with the murderous twisting and squeezing of the spiral:

I detached myself from Lowenfeld/ and my rage of the last weeks comes from there.../The frustration (self imposed + intolerable [along with]/ Guilt are the enemies in n 1 and n2--/...the spiral/ means squeeze out of, wring the laundry/ wring dry—spin dry—twist your own idiot/ twist his arm to make him do or talk or give/ squeeze him, here is then the message of my spiral/ that is going on since Lowenfeld left July 15th--/...Do not forget/ this Louise, that has been difficult, for Robt also!!! (Bourgeois cited in Mitchell, 2012, p. 78).

The force of anger is reflected in the chopped, splintered, and literally “broken” language of the passage itself. Bourgeois has also related the spiral to a “dream of getting rid of my father’s mistress. I would do it in my dreams by twisting her neck,” feeling a deep sense of betrayal towards her father, mother, and mistress for sustaining the arrangement² (Schiller, 2017, p. 226). For both women, the analyst’s “break” is experienced as a betrayal, an abandonment, one that fractures Bourgeois’s sense of self and her forms of self-representation, both aesthetic and linguistic.

While Bourgeois’s murderous twist in her spiral seeks revenge, Susan feels Milner’s leaving as an abandonment in which Milner will betray her by exiling her to a mental hospital. Milner calls Susan’s drawing *Retreating to Madness?*, and here I want to emphasise the dual meaning of the “madness” evoked. This is not only the madness of mental instability, but also the anger that Susan feels towards Milner’s perceived betrayal, illustrated in the woman’s face in Fig 2 which does look quite angry. Here the spiral is the inverse of a container: it is the maddening experience of abandonment, an anger towards the object that forces one to confront those early body-ego states of loss and existential fear.

The whorl that almost totally envelops Susan’s woman in the drawing signifies, for Milner, Susan’s retreat into something— “there is almost a look of impending sudden retreat into something else, something mad” (Milner, 1988, p. 137). This retreat is more than just anger, but also a primary defense mechanism. Through a reading of Thomas Ogden, Britt-Marie Schiller’s interpretation of the brass coil that encircles Bourgeois’s *Spiral Woman* (1984) sheds some light on what this whorled retreat consists of for both Bourgeois and Susan. Schiller understands the brass coils that wrap around the woman in *Spiral Woman* (1984) as embodying

the sensory enclosure of the autistic-contiguous mode almost like a second skin wrapped tightly around the body, as hard and shell-like as an autistic object (Ogden 1989), which is associated with a diffuse sense of danger. In

² For Bourgeois, the original betrayal was felt to be her birth. In a diary entry written when was seventy-eight, Bourgeois writes: “The abandonment/ I want revenge/ I want tears for having been born...To be born is to be ejected/ To be abandoned, from there comes the fury” (Bourgeois cited in Schiller, 2017, p. 229). Britt-Marie Schiller writes how the “traumatic and unassimilated experience of being born seems deferred, repeated and assimilated in the betrayal and abandonment by her father and Sadie [the mistress], and Bourgeois wants revenge on both” (Schiller, 2017, p.229) and we might add to this list also Dr Lowenfeld.

the autistic-contiguous mode the danger is experienced as an anxiety of formless dread...while in the paranoid-schizoid mode an autistic object can function as a protective armour. (Schiller, 2017, p. 227)

The second skin and protective armor that Ogden speaks of as a defence against danger, anxiety, and the feeling of “formless dread” (Ogden’s adaptation of Bion’s “nameless dread”— that is, an experience stripped of containment and meaning) builds upon Esther Bick’s infant observations and Frances Tustin’s work with autistic children (Ogden, 1988, p. 32). Bick has spoken of the infant’s formation of a “second skin” as a defence against the overwhelming feelings of disintegration that a faulty sense of containment can establish. Building on this, Tustin found in her work with autistic children how “they seem to be surrounded by a shell which prevents us from getting in touch with them,” a hard shell that is also created in defence against the “catastrophic chaos” (Tustin, 1988, p. 17).

In Ogden’s thinking, the autistic-contiguous position is an infantile psychological organization, “a sensory-dominated mode in which the most inchoate sense of self is built upon the rhythm of sensation (Tustin 1984), particularly the sensations at the skin surface (Bick 1968)” (Ogden, 1988, p. 33). This is a mode that everyone oscillates between, along with the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. The creation of a hard shell occurs not only in autism but in the universal autistic-contiguous mode of experience. As a defensive strategy however, it shuts out relations with the outside world, and the self diminishes.³ The child psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim’s use of the term “empty fortress” also evocatively represents the world of the autistic child that signals “not only a withdrawal from reality but a disavowal from the self” (Nixon, 2005, p. 88).

The defensive hard shell then is symbolised in the centripetal spiral of Bourgeois’s schema, a “tightening, a retreating” of the self, “a compacting to the point of disappearance” (Schiller, 2017, p. 230). This prevents the emergence of the more stable and solid sense of subjectivity with which both Bourgeois and Milner (on behalf of Susan) are preoccupied. Like Bourgeois’s two kinds of spirals, Milner identifies whorls as either “nest[s] or prisons” in Susan’s drawings (Milner, 1988, p. 156). In Susan’s drawing, Fig 4 the “Baby seal in a coiled serpent nest” (Milner, 1988, p. 154), she speculates about what the coil might be representing: “my first impression of it was that it was a cozy nest, but soon I became more and more impressed by the sense of tremendous power in the encircling snake-like coil. It might even be a boa-constrictor,

³ In *The Hands of the Living God*, we learn that Mrs X (Winnicott’s wife Alice Buxton Winnicott) finds Susan in the N.I. Hospital and becomes interested in her “because she was so beautiful—‘She looked like the Botticelli Venus rising from the waves.’” (Milner, 1988, p. 3). In the myth of the Birth of Venus that the painting is based upon, Venus is born from a giant scallop shell, emerging fully grown on the shore. In Roman mythology Venus represents love, beauty, desire, sex and fertility. We might also read the myth as the story of someone emerging from their auto-generated hard shell of autistic defences, opening themselves to the world of relations with others. But for Susan her episodes of radiating beauty, of possessing “a kind of shimmer” are symptoms of her suffering through extreme mental states pre-ECT (Milner, 1998, p. 11).

and the baby animal its prey” (Milner, 1988, p. 154). Both Bourgeois’s *Spiral Woman* (1984) and Susan’s *Baby Seal* seem preoccupied with the tension between the two kinds of spiral—the nest or prison—capturing ambivalent and unreliable early experiences of containment.

On the same day that Susan gave Milner the *Baby Seal* picture, she also gave Milner another drawing, *Ammonite I* (Fig 5). This pencil drawing likewise depicts a coiled creature, but its form gestures toward a more individuated sense of an emerging subjectivity. Milner writes how “unlike the *Baby Seal*, the creature and the spiral shape are here one entity, there is no sense of its being enclosed by something ‘other’—whether nest or prison—or, if it is a kind of nest, it is its own body that the creature is nesting in” (Milner, 1998, p. 156). Bourgeois’s earlier *Spiral Woman* sculpture made in 1951-2, Fig 3, also takes on a similar form in being purely made up of a wooden spiral. Unlike the later 1984 sculpture, there is no woman enclosed within the spiral. The earlier *Spiral Woman* and Susan’s *Ammonite I* show less of a preoccupation with unreliable containment or the hard shell defences against its failure, and more of an expression of the development of an individuated self. Milner writes of *Ammonite I* (which she gives two names):

I called this drawing ‘The Coiled Snake’, but did not feel it was malevolent; and I noticed too that the eye is here placed in the middle of the tube that is the snake’s body. Also the whole picture could be seen as a coil of faeces, but one that is very much alive. It was interesting that what I have called its eye is a flattened form of the circle with a button in the centre, which was the symbol she had used for what she had called ‘the soul’. *It is as if she is here again depicting a dawning sense of self* (Milner, 1988, p. 156) (italics are mine).

In this drawing Susan has created a version of Bourgeois’s centrifugal spiral, depicting a rudimentary but emerging and alive subjectivity that seems to be growing outwards into the world. Bourgeois’s *Spiral Woman* (1951-2) is also formed of a centrifugal spiral—developing from the vortex outwards in contrast to the centripetal spiral encircling the figure in 1984, which starts from the periphery in order to envelop. Moreover, this earlier spiral is held up by a steel stand, firmly connected to the ground unlike the later spiral that hangs and spin above the black circle. The wooden plank placed on top of the earlier spiral also evokes a sense of balance and sturdiness. Similarly, a symbol that emerges in the later stages of Susan’s analysis is the tree, which Milner understands as “depicting Susan’s growing sense of her own separate existence, upright, in a body, with her feet upon the ground...a symbol for the ego’s direct non-symbolic sense of its own being” (Milner, 1988, p. 383). These two art works thus seem to chart a more secure, individuated, and stable emerging subject. Whilst for Milner these developments point towards a successful milestone in the analysis with Susan, for Bourgeois there is less a sense of linear development than an ability, part of her artistic talent, to tap into these different states at different times.



Figure 4: Susan (title by Milner), *Baby seal in a coiled serpent nest* n.d. (Milner, Marion. *The Hands of the Living God: An Account of a Psycho-analytic Treatment*. London: Routledge, 2010. Fig 51 p175)

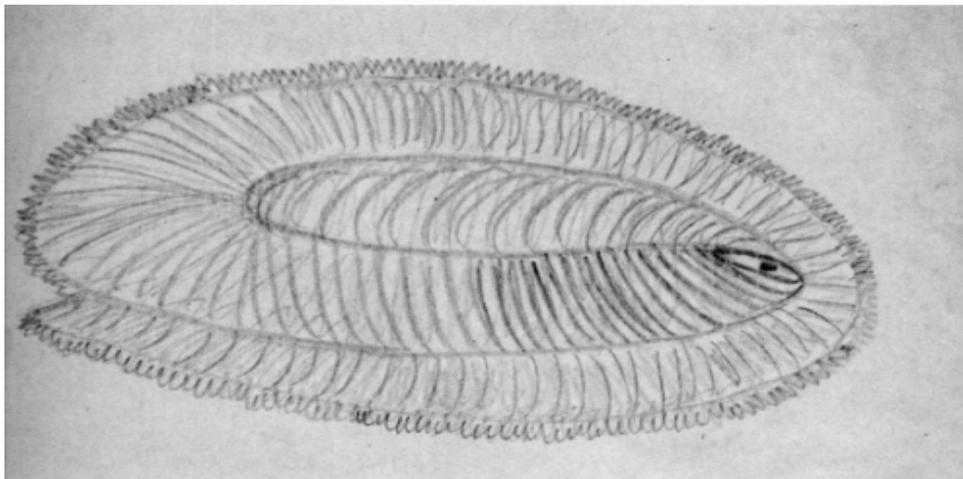


Figure 5: Susan title by Milner), *Ammonite I* (Fig 52) n.d. (Milner, Marion. *The Hands of the Living God: An Account of a Psycho-analytic Treatment*. London: Routledge, 2010. figure 52, p177)



Figure 3: Louise Bourgeois, *Spiral Woman* 1951-1952. Unique Painted wood and stainless steel; 158.8 x 30.5 x 30.5 cm Collection Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA Photo: Allan Finkelman © The Easton Foundation/DACS, London

Giving form to a sense of formlessness

Bourgeois's and Susan's art make eloquent statements about their early body-ego experiences and suggest that through a lack of proper containment the self can feel formless and precarious. But it is significant that they are able to give artistic form to these feelings of formlessness and disintegration of the self. Bourgeois once described herself as a "very concrete woman" (Harris Williams, 2012, p. 33), and Juliet Mitchell has written how Bourgeois "makes literal and concrete what she feels and experiences," being able to go "into what is unbearable/unknowable (which is why it is repressed) and make[s] it conscious in visual form" (Mitchell, 2012, p. [79](#)).

Indeed, Bourgeois experimented, throughout her artistic career, with mediums of different hardness and concreteness; she alternately used bronze, steel, marble, wood, plaster, and latex to symbolize different emotional registers. Milner also attributes to Susan this ability to give form to the unknowable and unsayable, finding in her drawings an expression of "pre-logical, non-discursive modes of thinking in that part of our minds of which we are not usually conscious" (Milner, 1988, p. xx). Their making concrete and literal that which is formless is significant. What Mitchell calls the "unbearable/unknowable" (Mitchell, 2017, p. [79](#)) is also what we might call the

“formless dread” that both women express, to take Ogden’s terminology. In reference to Bion’s term “nameless dread,” Ogden finds that the term “formless dread” “might better reflect the nature of anxiety in the autistic-contiguous mode since the experience of shapes, rhythms and patterns are the only ‘names’ that exist in this mode” (Ogden, 1988, p. 38). Shape, rhythm, and pattern can be re-established through the creation of the aesthetic object. Through the form of the spiral, Susan and Bourgeois grapple with the representability of the “formless dread.”

I think we can understand Bourgeois’s and Susan’s act of creating and giving form as part of a reparative act, not so much in the Kleinian sense of repairing damaged objects, but as a way of staving off formless dread through the giving of form.⁴ For, in contrast to Susan’s language of visual symbols, Jacobus writes of *The Hands of the Living God* that Milner realizes that the Kleinian “language of ‘internal objects’ had meant nothing to Susan” (Jacobus, 2005, p. 144). Instead, what is of importance is her discovery of three-dimensional oral space, as she uses her tongue to explore the difference between what is part of her body and what is part of the external world (Jacobus, 2005, p. 144). As Susan is able to give form by creating images, she also comes to give a sense of form to her own subjectivity.

As I mentioned previously, Poore has stated that, from the 1950s through to the 1980s, the Independent Group was preoccupied with psychic experience and its visual rather than linguistic expression. The philosopher Paul Ricœur, who was writing on psychoanalysis during this period, also understood the image rather than language to be of primary concern for psychoanalysis (Ricœur, 2012, p. 114). Bourgeois’s art and Milner’s work with Susan’s art are similarly engaged with this turn to the visual, and through the practice of art making bring to the fore the importance of creation and form. Their art depicts feelings of formlessness and a lack of containment, but through the creation of aesthetic objects they give form to an emergent subjectivity. The internal world is given the material quality of the external world, and the creation of an aesthetic object as part of their treatment provides a “concreteness” that the talking cure cannot achieve in the same way.

Finding form and giving form is thus critical artistically and therapeutically, in a similar way to how thinking the “unthought known” of Christopher Bollas’s schema becomes a key part of the analytic process. To this, I would add that the creation of form for both Susan and Bourgeois is so important because of how form comes to be something to be *handled*. Though Bourgeois works with the more corporeal medium of sculpture, the role of drawing for Susan in the analytic situation is also significant. The 4,000 drawings Susan gave to Milner during her sessions was another way for her to be handled both physically and psychically by her analyst, a handling that contains and holds to make up for a body memory that after the ECT was missing. In Bourgeois’s case, Larratt-Smith writes how “her art is perhaps fundamentally about her body ego... suggesting that her mental unstableness had to do with her difficulty in getting a firm

⁴ For an in-depth reading of Klein’s aesthetics and politics of reparation see Laubender (2019) in this volume.

grasp on her body, taking it for granted as a coherent whole” (Larratt-Smith, 2012, p. 19). But as Bourgeois famously said in one of her artworks: “Art is a guaranty of sanity” (2000). And so, perhaps creating forms to be handled and held in the mind of the audience was one way for both Bourgeois and Susan to get a firmer grasp on themselves.

As shown in *The Hands of the Living God*, Milner is also finely attuned to how Susan desperately needs to be handled, held, and contained. Milner’s sensitivity to this is also to be found in her other books. For example, in John Fielding’s review of Milner’s earlier book, *Eternity’s Sunrise* (1987), he writes the following:

At the centre of her new book is a series of visual images, drawn from the diaries she kept on journey abroad, to Greece, Israel and the Himalayas. As before, extracts from her diaries or notebooks are quoted and meditated on, or rather, turned over, handled—one wants a word that conveys the physicality of the activity. Sometimes the images are concrete, the objects or keepsakes that she brought back from holiday. (Fielding, 1988, p. 66)

Milner calls this process “Telling the Beads,” with Fielding suggesting she intends these moments to be handled like the beads of a rosary (Fielding, 1988, p. 67). Milner asks of herself and the reader to handle these images in our minds, inviting a kind psychic touching and holding. Fielding ends his review by commending Milner for her use of “words to create moments of poetry to help us find our imaginary body” (Fielding, 1988, p. 68). Perhaps this is part of the visual task Juliet Mitchell talks about—a task that involves evoking the body-ego to be handled and contained in the mind of the artist, analyst, and audience. In his appraisal of Bourgeois’s psychoanalytic writings, Larratt-Smith writes how the artist “invented a new kind of language for sculpture—a language that was essentially psychoanalytic” (Larratt-Smith, 2012, p. 1). But inversely, I think we can say that Milner and Susan’s work in *The Hands of the Living God* and Bourgeois’s sculpture invented a new visual and formal language for psychoanalysis.

Emilia Halton-Hernandez is a CHASE-AHRC PhD student in the School of English at the University of Sussex. Her doctoral research is on the work of the psychoanalyst, experimental diarist and painter Marion Milner. More broadly she is interested in psychoanalysis, life writing and image-text studies.

Works Cited

Brecht, Bertolt. (2008) Translated by Michael Hoffmann. *E-verse Radio*. <http://www.everseradio.com/motto-by-bertolt-brecht-translated-by-michael-hofmann/>

Bronfen, Elisabeth. (2002) *The Return of Repressed*, Vol.1. London: Violette Editions.

Fielding, John. (1988) Telling the Beads: A Review of *Eternity’s Sunrise* by John Fielding. *Winnicott Studies: The Journal of the Squiggle Foundation. A Celebration of the Life and Work of Marion Milner*. (3): 64-68.

Freud, Sigmund. (1961) *The Ego and the Id, and Other Works: (1923-1925)*. London: The Hogarth Press.

Glover, Nicola. (2009) *Psychoanalytic Aesthetics: An Introduction to the British School*. London: Karnac. E-book. http://www.psychanalysis-and-therapy.com/human_nature/glover/chap4.html

Harris Williams, Meg. (2012) The Child, the Container and the Claustrom: The Artistic Vocation of Louise Bourgeois. *The Return of Repressed*, Vol.1. London: Violette Editions.

Israel, Nico. (2015) *Spirals: The Whirled Image in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Jacobus, Mary. (2005) *The Poetics of Psychoanalysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Knafo, Danielle. (2012) *Dancing with the Unconscious: The Art of Psychoanalysis and the Psychoanalysis of Art*. New York: Routledge.

Larratt-Smith, Phillip. (2012) Introduction. *The Return of Repressed*, Vol.1. London: Violette Editions.

Larratt-Smith, Phillip. "Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed." *Proa Exhibitions* <http://proa.org/eng/exhibition-louise-bourgeois-obras-1.php>

Laubender, Carolyn. (2019) "Empty space: Creativity, femininity, reparation, justice." *Free Associations*, 75.

Lawrence, D.H. (2010) The Hands of God. *Quarentia*. <https://markmeynell.wordpress.com/2010/07/26/d-h-lawrence-and-the-hands-of-god/>

Schiller, Britt-Marie. (2017) The Primitive Edge of Creativity: Destruction and Reparation in Louise Bourgeois's Art. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*. 16(2): 221-250.

Milner, Milner. (1957) *On Not Being Able to Paint*. London: Heinemann.

Milner, Milner. (1988) *The Hands of the Living God: An Account of a Psycho-analytic Treatment*. London: Virago Press.

Mitchell, Juliet. (2017) New Perspectives on Louise Bourgeois feat. Juliet Mitchell, Siri Hustvedt MoMA LIVE. *YouTube*, uploaded by The Museum of Modern Art, 7 November 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoE2rTyPiNY&t=1380s>

Mitchell, Juliet. (2012) The Sublime Jealousy of Louise Bourgeois. *The Return of Repressed*, Vol.1. London: Violette Editions.

MOMA. *Spirals. Louise Bourgeois: The Complete Prints and Books, MOMA*. <https://www.moma.org/explore/collection/lb/themes/spirals>

Morris, F (ed.) (2007) *Louise Bourgeois*. London: Tate Publishing.

Nixon, Mignon. (2012) L. *The Return of Repressed*, Vol.1. London: Violette Editions.

Nixon, Mignon. (2005) *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: October Press (MIT Press).

O'Loughlin, Michael. (2014) *The Ethics of Remembering and the Consequences of Forgetting: Essays on Trauma, History, and Memory*. Maryland, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Ogden, Thomas. (1988) "On the Dialectical Structure of Experience—Some Clinical and Theoretical Implications" *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* (24): 17-45.

Phillips, Adam. (2010) Introduction *The Hands of the Living God* second edition. London: Routledge.

Poore, Benjamin. (2015) *Modernism and the Making of Masud Khan*. Diss. Queen Mary University.

Ricoeur, Paul. (2012) *On Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012

Tustin, Frances. (1988) To Be or Not to Be: A Study of Autism. *Winnicott Studies: The Journal of the Squiggle Foundation. A Celebration of the Life and Work of Marion Milner*.

