

## Barbara O'Brien (pp 128- 137)

Barbara O'Brien, the woman who took a Greyhound Bus across the United States in the 1950s at the behest of voices (O'Brien, 2011), recorded a glossary of terms, words that functioned as new language. The language came from her voices and repurposed ordinary words, for the most part, with singular definitions that sometimes introduced imaginary and strange ideas. A repeating word central to Barbara's experience was "Operator", defined as "A human being with a type of head formation which permits him to explore and influence the mentality of others" (p. 199). Terms such as "Latticework" seem more ordinary, described as "The structure of the mind of a Thing which results from habit patterns" (p. 199). This idea is not so strange or difficult to grasp in its meaning outside psychosis. Some words described mechanical means by which the Operators did their work, such as "Stroboscope, equipment used to probe and explore the minds of Things. Can be used over a distance of one mile, in a straight line" (p. 199). Then there was the phrase, "Shoot temples full of shack", delineated as "a process which prevents the use of the stroboscope" (p. 199). As in any esoteric language, words and definitions proliferated as they became embedded in a logical relation to one another. The terms of this language not only explained what happened to Barbara, but how it happened, by what means. Caught in its fine net of meanings and logical connections, one may well wonder how she emerged from her experience of voices and delusions. Barbara not only returned to live a full life, the voices predicted her recovery. She writes, "I told both [a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst] that my voices had told me that I would be well within two weeks" (p. 162). She adds, wryly, "And the ability of the analyst to recognize the fact that a spontaneous recovery was on its way and the inability of the psychiatrist to recognize the same thing is worth emphasizing" (p. 162). It is clear, in retrospect, that her own unconscious guided her, using the voices:

*There was a very obvious awareness in my subconscious mind during the days that immediately preceded the cessation of the voices, that when the voices would cease, the mentality would be in a vacuum for a time and the organism, consequently, was going to need guidance on the outside. It was necessary that the dry beach be parked safely somewhere. (p.162)*

There are several striking words in this brief passage. First of all, while Barbara makes an attribution to "my subconscious mind", it is her voices that guide her to the analyst. There is nothing repressed here that requires her to decipher meaning or direction. She refers to her mind as "the mentality" and her body as "the organism", as though her subjective experience of inhabiting mind and body has vanished, or diminished greatly. Once she realises that the Hook

Operators had been delusions, Barbara experiences what she calls “the dry beach”. In her own words,

*For ten days, the dry beach. My scalp felt strained as if some nerve would break at any moment, but the interior of my head felt empty and dry, as if its cells had been hollowed out by a ruthless knife and replaced with a sandy shore. (p. 115)*

She found the radio unbearable, did not remember how to read, forgot how to navigate walking in traffic in a city, could not follow or understand the plot of a film; her mind was blank much of the time and she slept a great deal, usually fifteen hours a night by her account. Then, on the eleventh day, her dry experience was broken by “a wave”. She describes the experience:

*The wave fell, disappeared into the sands and left on the beach a thought. I remembered suddenly the purpose of the traffic signals and what the green and red lights meant. I passed a newsstand and saw a newspaper headline which announced that a star had fallen from a window. The dry beach contemplated the headline with mild surprise. How could a big thing like a star get into a window? A wave cascaded gently on the shore and I realized suddenly that the star was probably a Hollywood star. Death of a Salesman said a movie marquee. The dry beach blinked at the marquee and speculated vaguely that a Sales man might be a native from some country named Sales, probably in Asia. Then a wave broke and I remembered that I had read the play and I was aware sharply of the name of the country in which the salesman was a native. I was grateful for the waves. The waves could remember, deduce, apply insight. The dry beach could not. (p. 117)*

At this point, Barbara begins to recognise and remember the world she left behind, but the process of returning is not voluntary. While she was caught in delusion, her voices directed everything she did, taking over her thoughts as well as her acts. In the months after the voices vanished, Barbara experiences “waves” as thoughts or insights, as well as signs, omens, and images that direct her acts, her speech, and her writing. All come from an external source, outside herself and her intentions. In analysis, she learns to attribute these external signs and influences to her unconscious. But her unconscious is not repressed, to be painstakingly uncovered, deciphered, giving up its secrets and logic almost unwillingly; rather, her unconscious takes on the function of the Operators, directing her in the face of questions and situations she simply does not know how to navigate alone. Via the analyst, she has a space in which to speak and to sift through her experience of these sudden, external messages, which are disconcerting to her, as much and more than the Hook Operators had been for her. Barbara describes a kind a persistent blankness in the early days of the analysis; she had nothing to say spontaneously, or,

for that matter, nothing in response to the analyst's questions. *And then, unexpectedly, one day after the analyst had asked me something, a wave cascaded abruptly onto the beach. Surprised, I absorbed it and passed it on to the analyst. In my youth, I said, I had entertained ideas about writing fiction and had put the ideas away with other toys. Startled at hearing me say anything, the analyst surveyed me a second, and suggested immediately that I write something.* (p. 118)

Barbara went out, bought paper, and began to write. In her account, she was not aware of what she was writing, and as soon as she stopped for the day, could not recall anything she had typed. She writes,

*I was composing as fast as I was typing . . . I typed for two hours and sat back to read what I had written. The material was a little difficult for the dry beach to follow but the story seemed to be about some woman and some man and some people the woman knew who were getting ready to do something to the man.* (p. 118)

She wrote daily for two hours, and though she could not keep track of time, she arrived to write precisely at 2.00 p.m. each day, as if directed by an external "Something". She wrote an entire novel in about thirty hours in this fashion.

Barbara describes the process: "The words came from nowhere, shot down through my fingers, and appeared magically on the paper" (p. 120). She realises that famous writers and musicians sometimes describe their own creative process in these terms, too, as though directed from without, as though their work had been written or composed by itself. Her analyst explains that the process is unconscious, and what is unfolding through her unconscious (the waves, the writing) is simply more evident than is usually the case. As I read Barbara's narration of the time after the voices left her, what stands out for me is that her unconscious is not only externalised and cut off from her intention and volition, but utterly transparent in its directives. She identifies to the position of the "dry beach", and the "waves" offer thoughts and whole sentences to her. She describes writing as though it happens without her participation. Except for the fact that she is the typist, it is as though language speaks or writes by itself. She identifies these experiences as coming from her unconscious because she is in analysis, but the analysis does not decipher her experiences. Perhaps there is nothing to decipher here. Yet, Barbara comes to realise that her unconscious can act on her behalf. After all, the Hook Operators directed her at the start of her journey, demanding that she bring her portable typewriter, a heavy item to carry around when travelling by bus. It interests me, too, that Barbara's explanation for what happens to her in these weeks and months of returning to "reality" (and making a life again) echoes her experience of psychosis. "Something" beyond her own thinking, intention, and even her capacity to

comprehend what is at stake, reminds her how to navigate the world, directs her writing (and time-keeping), shows her the way to a job as receptionist, predicts situations, and tells her what to say, and, when she runs out of money, helps her to win money against the odds in Las Vegas by showing her which numbers to choose. This “Something” is able to think in her place and direct her life, and, when she opposes it, this “Something” becomes more insistent. At the end of this period, she explains, “Something abruptly unscrewed its odd attachment and stopped extending” (p. 125). Here “Something” sounds perilously close to the activities of the Hook Operators working through the Imaginary body invasively. Although Barbara calls “Something” her unconscious, it is not the unconscious as a chaining of signifiers, connecting elements from the unconscious to lived history and puzzles of sexual desire. In fact, as she puzzles over what was the cause of her schizophrenia (and her Freudian analyst argues it was a deficit in sexual experience), she disagrees with him. She finds nothing about her sexual life connected to her schizophrenia, or to her unconscious for that matter. I think she is right to protest these ready-made interpretations. She experiences language as invasive, as a parasite in her mind, even during this time of recovery. For a long time after the voices stopped, she is not alone with herself, with her own thoughts. For a long time, she is unable (of her own accord), to reshape her life, make decisions, and piece together why it was that she became psychotic. In fact, Barbara puzzles over what happened to her and its consequences for the last third of the book. She returns to reasoning, as she knew it before her psychotic experience: “And then abruptly, overnight, the strange equipment was put away in storage, the regular machinery was hauled onto the dry beach and connected” (p. 137).

This passive voice perspective and the allusion to machinery moved around and connected reads as an extension of the experience of “Something” that intervenes; it happens to her. None the less, Barbara regains a sense of herself:

*With the return of reasoning came the return of emotion. I awoke one morning, sat down to breakfast, and found myself thinking and feeling. Before I finished my cup of coffee, I was grasping for the first time just what had happened to me and what it had done to my life. (p. 137)*

As Barbara begins her life again in California, far from the small town where she grew up, went to college, and took her first job, she sees her unconscious as

*that fine friend of mine which has manoeuvred me so adroitly in insanity, had manoeuvred me, also in sanity, into resigning my job and into writing notes to myself to remember that I must never return to the company for which I had worked. (p.140)*

She comes to see that Hook Operating was going on all around her in her former office, and that she had escaped it. She then decides to take a job in California as a writer of publicity, and, in doing so, finds her - self in a “horribly familiar” office environment in which “there was no way of protecting yourself from these hatchet men except by picking up a sharper hatchet and learning how to use it” (p. 195). Although she learns some strategies for self-protection, Barbara realises that if she were to rise in the organisation, she would have to “become an expert at swinging the hatchet, clutching and fondling the knife” (p. 196). Instead, she resigns, and takes another job at the bottom of the pecking order, determined to make sure “I never became overly bright about learning the business” (p. 197). She does not want to risk becoming a Hook Operator. At this point, as the book ends, I wonder about what she encountered in those offices that posed a massive threat. The hatchet men and their knives can be read as metaphors, of course, but they are all too real for her. There is no principle, no recourse to advice, help, or trustworthy authority to assist her in these situations, so she resolves never to rise in any organisation. I hope it was a strategy that worked for her, because we do not know. Her book was written under a pseudonym; we know nothing of the actual author, or her continuing life story. Psychoanalysis did not cure her, perhaps because it was not modified to fit her experience. After all, Freud invented psychoanalysis for neurosis. Yet, her time with a psychoanalyst, one who listened to her and trusted her unconscious, no matter its eccentric formations, provided Barbara a bridge from psychosis to a gradual, supported period of returning to the world, to work, to a life outside insanity, a life of her choosing. Yet, I cannot help but wonder about that very thing that triggered her psychosis; some baffling, threatening situation repeated with each office job. Barbara used what she learnt from the Hook Operators to navigate the world, rebuilding her life in relation to them, their directives and their language, but her new life carried traces of her experience in psychosis. Those traces, in fact, became her unconscious guides. However, such traces are of “the Real”—outside the Symbolic—and they can, at least potentially, lead back to madness. Whitney Robinson, the young woman who experienced a mental breakdown in her first year in college, writes in her memoir about her confrontation with the voice of a demon and changes in her experience of language, which devolves, at times, into poetry. She recounts, with a sense of irony that perhaps only the young can invoke with such a keen edge, her encounters with the mental health system: hospitalisations, medications, dire warnings about her future, and life in a half-way house. Her story of returning from psychosis (Robinson, 2011) reads as a story in progress. Yet she insists on finding a way to live in the world, return to college, and make her way without relying on medication. Several turning points in this narrative depict Whitney’s return as a process of finding a link to a future she can embrace, and a connection to her own humanity,

which has been compromised through her experience of psychosis and its medical treatment. Whitney battles with her psychiatrist about medication throughout the book, alternatively taking various antipsychotics, and refusing them. She depicts Dr Caspian as someone who does not know her experience, but as a kind man who worries about her. She describes to him the side-effects of her medication as “nausea, terror, dry mouth and trembling” (p. 128). He tries to convince her that she will get used to the medications and their side-effects, but, sharp-eyed adolescent that she is, Whitney says that none of the older patients has become used to such side-effects. When she collapses from a higher dose of the same medication, Dr Caspian tries a second antipsychotic. He is clear with her that she will have to take these medications all her life. She writes about the effects over time: “I think it’s the drugs that are causing this, quite literally turning my world gray. They are not just antipsychotic, they are anti everything. I do not feel scared or violent, but I also do not feel” (p. 221). She is caught in a bind: if she takes the medication, her world is gray, she can barely function, and the demon is kept at bay. But, when she goes off the medication, feels alive once more, and is able to think, the demon returns. She is also implicated in his return, and his dismissal, as we will see. Whitney signs a consent form for electroconvulsive therapy and then revokes her agreement, and when she cannot be talked into changing her mind, she is transferred to a half-way house residence. There, patients maintained on medications learn basic life skills.

She describes her fellow patients:

*Most of the patients fall into one of two categories—the broken ones who trace hieroglyphs on paper and rant about nanotechnology in the rice pudding, and the silent ones who drift like hungry ghosts through a world they can neither escape nor manipulate. (p. 191)*

One cannot read such a sentence without seeing the intelligence that formed it. But, to her carers, Whitney can only learn a few simple rules, and must be watched, medicated, and reminded how to behave in an appropriate way continuously. She comes to believe this pattern will be her future, and that her doctors have “. . . earned the right to ticker with my chemicals” though this makes her “slow, unimaginative, too literal to be seduced by demons or other creatures of poetry and dreaming” (p. 192). This, for me, is the saddest chapter in her book. Then, something unexpected happens, which devolves into a crucial turning point. Whitney sits in a group of patients in an exercise of writing letters none of them will mail, and she writes a letter to her demon. She throws her letter into a recycle bin later, and one of the doctors discovers it. Dr Hunter calls her into his office and tells her about another patient who went on to graduate school in physics. “I teach some very bright students,” he says, “and even among them

you would be exceptional” (p. 203). At this point, Whitney turns away, “Please don’t. I’m not. Please don’t offer me the world. I’m not ready to take that weight again” (p. 203). Yet, even before this point, her letter to her demon carries the message that she is finished with him, and she knows it. She has written,

*So if it was only me you were trying to destroy—well played. Beyond that, I can only confess that sometimes my deeper structures wish you were still observing, that you could bathe me once more in the pure light of delusion and fill the part of me that was born empty. Some - times the scar tissue is not enough. Signed, Your Other, the one left real as we reach the end of this. (p. 206)*

The Other, for Lacanian analysts, is the site of language itself, the treasury of signifiers through which we speak and are recognised. The language of the demon—his poetry—infiltrates and stays in Whitney’s language. He has the status of a delusion, but also of being Real, real enough to address as an entity in a letter. After reading the letter that has been returned to her, Whitney knows it is the end with the demon.

She writes:

*For the second time I awaken in the dark, frozen in a night-terror state of arousal and unreality. I feel him breathing, forbidden fruit hot copper exhale, and wait trembling for him to speak. But something in my mind is beyond his authority now—the neurons to which he whispers are drugged and stupefied. When I feel him fading away, I am seized by a paroxysm almost as violent as when he came, but of my own making. He isn’t squeezing my lachrymal ducts; the tears splashing onto the sheets are those of a free agent. (p. 208)*

These two experiences, that letter that forecasts the end with the demon, and a recognition of her intelligence (the opening of another future), set the stage for the next step Whitney takes. She discovers a stack of pamphlets announcing a contest for student research on mental illness. She nabs one, tucks it away, and gets to work. A month later, she hears from the medical director that she has won the contest. The staff at her treatment facility are baffled, but Dr Hunter is not surprised. Whitney reads her paper, which includes aspects of her own experience, at a grand rounds, and receives her award. Following this recognition, the staff begin to see her in a new light, and they have higher expectations for her. In short, she returns to living at home, and then re-enters college. She also chooses to come off her medication, finding her way with the clarity of mind and energy such a choice opens. At her father’s suggestion, she tries many alternative strategies, even meets with a shaman, which seems to her and her family better than anything else on offer. What changes, and what aspects of psychosis remain with Whitney? In a sense,

everything changes for her as she goes back to college, and we see this as she calculates her risk in daring to be part of humanity again. On the other hand, her experience of psychosis (and the possibility of identifying with it as a disease that excuses her from trying) stays with her as a shadow.

*Everything is changing, changing, falling apart, putting itself back together again. Suddenly, I'm afraid and want to go home. I want to have a disease, to be exempt. If I said I can't take this, I can never be one of these bright and normal creatures, if I were to collapse . . . people would understand. It's shocking how easily everyone accepts excuses from me now. But after all this it just wouldn't be a very poetic ending, and I don't have any better criteria by which I determine how to live. So in a fairly inconsequential action that nonetheless requires more of me than anything yet, I enter the room and find a seat among my classmates. (p. 235)*

Her subjectivity shines in this passage, her choice to do something that seems “inconsequential” with far-reaching effects. In the afterword to her book, Whitney tells her readers that she has been hospitalised again since the publication of her book. She has tried medications and stopped, graduated from college, and dropped out of graduate school. What has changed for her then, really changed? Writing was a way to record her experience, but I think it was more than that; it formed a new purpose for her, a way with language. She writes, “Words burn in me and I try to express them. I may desire silence, but that’s not the hand I was dealt” (p. 238). She has made a destiny out of the traces of her experience in psychosis, and it has ignited a desire to write. It is her choice, not something imposed. And yet, and yet, she knows (as anyone who has inhabited psycho - sis knows) that language, what we make meaningful and what we experience as real through it, has been imposed on us.

*Demons surround us. In this way, they are much like words, omnipresent—in lecture halls, in chatrooms, in pine forests, in bus terminals . . . we never escape them. They occupy no physical space, they have no meaning independent of their hosts. Parasitic, without mercy, our constant shadows . . . they force us to fall, stagnate, become. They make us interesting, they make us doubt. They form our souls from an undifferentiated light. (p. 238)*

What remains in Whitney’s language that carries over from psychosis? She does not dismiss demons as unreal, but takes her experience as singular, a knowledge gleaned from an unforgettable experience. Furthermore, she links that knowledge of demons with language, “they are very much like words, omnipresent”. Again, I am reminded of how hard it is for most people to understand how deeply we are formed of language and live with what has been imposed on us, from infancy. But for those who have lived psychosis, it is easy to know (and to



say), that language is “parasitic, without mercy”, and it works as a charged, luminous force in us. “They” in the last line of Whitney’s book refers back to words, but words have been linked metonymically with unseen demons, which form us “from an undifferentiated light”. As I read this line, I think here is where delusion carries truth, not just for Whitney, but a truth of what it is to be human. It is the kind of truth that cannot be separated from what is elusive, poetic, in language. And in my mind, her desire to write links Whitney to the writers and poets in the play, “After the Disaster”.