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Communication as Cure: Treatment & Text in Leonora Carrington's *Down Below*

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This essay details the complex composition of the memoir Down Below by the British Surrealist writer Leonora Carrington. It considers the process of narration as central to the meaning of the text, where the form of language (written or spoken, French or English) has a direct effect on the therapeutic outcomes of narrating mental illness.

Introduction

“By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny/ stranger on display – the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.” (Cixous 261-262)

Fleeing oncoming enemy forces in Southern France in the summer of 1940, Leonora Carrington passed into Spain and suffered a mental breakdown. Declared to be ‘incurably insane’ (Carrington 3) by the British consul in Madrid, it was agreed by her family that she be confined to a sanatorium in Santander. Upon meeting Carrington again in Lisbon after her ordeal, her former lover Max Ernst wrote that ‘I have found (and lost again) Leonora... She is unrecognizable [...] she has not spoken about her life for a year.’ (cited in Chadwick 101). Following their tumultuous separation, the change that Ernst perceives in Carrington is unsurprising. It is striking however that he remarks upon her silence, reading it as a symptom of trauma. By doing so he anticipates the narrative that would take shape two years later as *Down Below*, and the role that ‘speaking about her life’ might take in reasserting her identity, or rather realising a new one.

Narrating traumatic experiences has been recognised as a clinically proven treatment since the 1990’s, spearheaded by the work of James Pennebaker¹ on the tangible

¹ See particularly *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*, (New York: Guilford Press) 1997.

effects of writing as therapy. Simultaneously, the literary subgenre of the mental illness memoir has proven to be a great tool for psychiatrists in understanding the highly subjective lived experience of their patients. Writing in *The Lancet*, Anne Hudson Jones records that such narratives have engendered developments in the treatment of mental illness, as ‘therapies once believed to be efficacious have been abandoned, sometimes in response to narratives of protest by former patients’ (1997: 359).

Down Below is one such valuable account of the lived experience of mental illness and psychiatric treatment. In Santander, Carrington was subjected to the use of Cardiazol, a fit-inducing drug that was a precursor to the better-known psychiatric treatment of ECT (or Electroconvulsive Therapy). Written in the summer of 1943, in an abandoned embassy building in Mexico City, *Down Below* recalls this treatment in unnerving detail, anticipating later works such as Janet Frame’s *Faces in the Water* (1961) or Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963) and their descriptions of ECT. Yet *Down Below* is infrequently cited as an example of mental illness memoir, instead being primarily remembered as a Surrealist text, entwined with that a fixation upon female madness.

Ann Hoff’s work has foregrounded the clinical experience of Cardiazol treatment in *Down Below*. She astutely observes that the author’s association with the Surrealists resulted in an early emphasis upon the symbolic potential of Carrington’s madness, obscuring the value of the text as ‘one of the most comprehensive and accurate patient descriptions of treatment with [...] Cardiazol in existence today’ (Hoff 84). Hoff’s careful comparison of Carrington’s text with clinical reports firmly grounds *Down Below* in reality, reinforcing the work of more recent feminist scholars who have addressed the text ‘in terms of its faithful representation of her mental breakdown and as a critical response to surrealism’s aestheticized representation, and indeed celebration, of female madness’ (Lusty 59). In this vein, illuminating comparisons have been drawn between *Down Below* and André Breton’s *Nadja* (1928), with the brutal reality of the former acting as a corrective to the latter’s adulation of a mysterious, insane muse.²

This essay seeks to build upon this scholarship by examining the composition of the text as ‘treatment’, thus centring the clinical reality of Carrington’s experience, and re-asserting her authorial agency. In addition to the curative potential of writing, this essay

² Comparative analysis of the two texts has been carried out very effectively by Natalya Lusty, see particularly ‘Surrealism’s Banging Door’, *Textual Practice*, 17:2, 2003, pp. 335-356.

examines the confluence of communicative methods in *Down Below*. I will trace the processes of speaking, writing, dictation, and translation at work, examining how these co-existing methods enable a return to identity through narration. This complexity is, I argue, intrinsic to the central themes and concerns of *Down Below*, as well as constituting an essential element of the journey from illness to health.

Coming Back to Life: (Re-)writing *Down Below*

Carried into the sanatorium, and “handed over like a cadaver to Dr Morales” (Carrington 18), the depths of Carrington’s psychiatric trauma are characterised by a sense of depersonalisation, of remoteness between the self and the body. This depiction recalls the detachment of Julia Kristeva’s definition of the cadaver, who writes:

“The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance.” (3).

The etymology of cadaver highlighted here - ‘*cadere*, to fall’ – speaks to a condition in which the ‘dead’ are not only a physical body divested of consciousness, but something remote, detached and distant from an ordinary existence. Madness can be observed as a breakdown at the most basic level of human communication, where one’s own reality is no longer compatible or recognisable to the wider society. This is mirrored on an internal level, in the midst of experiences such as hallucination, memory loss, or the distorted perception of time, where the link between body and mind is disrupted. That is, as well as failing to be understood by others, the individual is unable to rationalise themselves. With hindsight, Carrington indicates that she felt an awareness of such a disconnect even as she found herself in the midst of it: “I realized that my anguish – my mind, if you prefer – was painfully trying to unite itself with my body” (9).

If, in the depths of distress, Carrington becomes a version of Kristeva’s ‘cadaver’, then through the process of writing she may find a way to return to her body, or the ‘dead figure’ as Cixous terms it. But the genesis of *Down Below* would prove to be far from straight-forward - its myriad versions and contributors reflecting the complexity and fluidity of human subjectivity. Marina Warner provides a comprehensive note in the most

recent English edition of 1987 (re-issued with a new introduction by Warner in 2017), which charts the many versions of *Down Below*:

“First written in English in 1942 in New York (text now lost). Dictated in French to Jeanne Megnen in 1943, then published in *VVV*, No.4., February 1944, in a translation from the French by Victor Llona. The original French dictation was published by Editions Fontaine, Paris, 1946. Both the French dictation and the Victor Llona translation were used as the basis for the text here, which was reviewed and revised for factual accuracy by Leonora Carrington in 1987.” (Warner in Carrington, 69)

Existing scholarship has dealt with this exceptionally complex publication history to varying degrees, but often it is noted briefly and set aside in favour of more direct textual analysis. But which version should be the focus of such analysis? It might be anticipated that the original French should be considered the ‘true’ version, as the most direct source of Carrington’s writing without the filter of translation. Yet this edition has overwhelmingly been ignored, even in works directly comparing *Down Below* to other works of French Surrealism, such as André Breton’s *Nadja* or Pierre Mabilie’s *Miroir du merveilleux* (Lusty 57-71). Several factors are most likely at play here, namely: the scarcity of the French edition, the earlier publication date of the English translation, and the prominence of English in Carrington’s work overall. It might also be argued that the lost English original has a ghostly claim on the ultimate text, seeping into its structures and patterns. Initially conceived in English, and first published in English, it is somewhat an accident of fate that the French version exists at all. How can this uniquely bilingual text be reconciled?

As evidenced by the note above, the 1987 English edition offers the most comprehensive presentation of the fractious elements of the text, particularly given the further inclusion of a postscript (told to Marina Warner that same year). It seems reasonable to conclude that this version was considered by the author to be a ‘final’ offering.³ For this reason and in the interest of legibility it is this edition which is cited in the analysis at hand. However, while this is certainly the latest version that exists of *Down Below*, it seems unnecessarily dismissive and narrow to consider it the ‘definitive’ version. Indeed, full understanding seems impossible without an awareness of the various

³ Several of Carrington’s interviewers in later life indicate an intense reluctance on her part to revisit the events recounted in *Down Below*, making the 1987 interview and revisions all the more significant.

interventions and interlocutors involved in the long genesis of the text. Such an awareness proves essential to the central questions raised by the text of recovery from profound mental illness, and the role of collaborative narration in that process.

‘I shall be delivered’: Communication as Cure

It is desirable then for studies of *Down Below* to grapple with the implications of its publication history. This has been achieved with considerable insight with regard to the initial publication of the text in the February 1944 issue of *VVV*, showing as it does Carrington’s assured position amongst the reformed Surrealist circle in the Americas. Natalya Lusty’s analysis considers the significance of its inclusion in a volume on the theme of ‘collective myth’ and uncovers intertextual links with works by Bataille and Mabille (57-71). Particularly valuable is that this approach expands the scope of *Down Below* beyond an exploration of individual madness and toward a more encompassing understanding of human knowledge and experience. Lusty goes on to consider the direct role of Mabille in the writing of *Down Below* and how his presence in that text suggests the possibility of collective gain from personal trauma. Pierre Mabille, a doctor and intimate member of the Surrealist circle, is absent from the expansive note on the text above, yet he had perhaps the greatest influence on the composition of *Down Below* after Carrington herself. He is the interlocutor she addresses directly in the opening pages of the text (using the formal ‘vous’ in the French), and he encouraged her to attempt to record her experiences in Mexico City in August 1943, possibly with the explicit intent of treating her trauma. Lusty writes:

“[...] it seems Mabille treated Carrington for severe anxiety and post-traumatic stress stemming from her experience in Spain, and that part of her treatment involved encouraging her to work through traumatic memories by formally recording them in the essay, *Down Below*.”(Lusty 61)

Framing the narrative as a treatment aligns closely with Carrington’s own comments on the writing process in *Down Below*, ‘I am in terrible anguish,’ she says, ‘yet I cannot continue living alone with such a memory ... I know that once I have written it down, I shall be delivered’ (Carrington 39). The need to unburden oneself to another highlights the centrality of communication to Carrington’s project. Of course, Mabille’s

profession as a doctor suggests a therapeutic slant to this process, and although it cannot be characterised as analysis, it is possible to infer some of the shared ownership over a narrative of that kind, where there exists a “two-way affair” – two persons having a living, emotional interaction, observing and influencing each other.’ (Brennan xiv).

The murky boundaries between speech and writing in *Down Below* adds another dimension to this process, where the already-published Carrington is also writing a text for a presumed eventual audience. Writing has also been purported to have therapeutic benefits; Siri Hustvedt theorises on those benefits for the treatment of mental illness, based on her own experience of teaching creative writing in a psychiatric hospital. Such benefits, she argues, are ‘connected to language as relational.’ She continues:

“Writing is a perceived transition from inside to outside, and that motion is in itself a step in the right direction, a passage into a dialogical space that can be seen. [...] writing lifts us out of ourselves, and that leap onto paper, that objectification, spurs reflective self-consciousness, the examination of self as other.” (104)

By ‘delivering’ herself of her burden, Carrington enters this dialogical space, sharing the burden with an ‘Other’, whether an imagined reader or a trusted friend. The rebirth of *Down Below* is linked to this act of writing; in Mexico in 1943 Carrington is not serenely memorialising her turmoil, she writes in the hope that this act will be her most effective cure. The level of formality with which this was intended as a treatment is unclear; Warner is somewhat less concrete than Lusty and describes Mabile as ‘a friend’ who ‘urged’ Carrington to attempt to recreate the lost text (xxv). Within the text itself Mabile is silent, his impact suggested only from the perspective of Carrington, who hopes that he will act as a guide, believing that he ‘will be of help in my journey beyond that frontier by keeping me lucid’ (3). The text in effect traces two journeys to that promised space ‘Down Below’: the first to the promised building of that name within the sanatorium, marking the journey back to sanity; the second through the medium of narrative, returning ‘beyond that frontier’ into the memory of her experience. Casting Mabile as a guide in that journey indicates the profound risk to the individual of writing an autobiography of trauma, and casts light on the potential value of a third party in the conventionally solitary act of writing.

Translation & Trauma: Transcribing *Down Below*

The other crucial silent voice in the text originating from this period is that of Mabelle's wife, Jeanne Megnen, who is credited as the transcriber of the text. In fact, her input is silent to such a degree that her presence has been called into question. Lusty writes that:

“Although the VVV and later versions of the essay conclude with the words ‘as told to Jeanne Megnen,’ Mabelle’s wife, thereby suggesting its oral transmission, throughout the essay itself Carrington repeatedly draws attention to her actual ‘writing’ of the narrative.” (70)

This comment is confined to a footnote, so there is no speculation as to why Megnen would be falsely credited, although it seems a remarkably strange act of obfuscation.⁴ It is true that Carrington refers explicitly to ‘writing’, although not in a physical sense – there are no mentions of pen and paper and ink - instead she says: ‘I have been writing for three days’(Carrington, 32) and ‘How can I write this when I’m afraid to think about it?’(39). Stranger still is that in addition to these references to writing, elsewhere in the text there are the direct addresses to Mabelle that take the aspect of speech, or fragments suggesting an oral tradition of storytelling (‘I must go on with my story’ (32)). These conflicting asides are consistent with a difficult, multi-layered generation of the text, which feasibly could have included conversations with Mabelle, dictation to Megnen, and traditional writing.

Given the emphasis within the existing scholarship on the English language version of *Down Below*, it is perhaps unsurprising that the role of Megnen as transcriber has been effaced. A cursory comparison of the French publication of *En Bas* with other French texts by Carrington of a similar date shows a greater level of fluency and grammatical accuracy. This seems unlikely to be the work of copy-editors, as Carrington’s French publisher Henri Parisot consistently printed her work without correction, finding her anglicisms ‘charming’ (7). This precedent includes the letter from Carrington to Parisot that prefaces the French second edition, which contains several such errors. At a practical level it seems highly likely that Carrington had some linguistic support in the creation of the text, not least

⁴ Ann Hoff, on the other hand, acknowledges Mabelle’s presence without elaboration, writing somewhat obliquely ‘[Carrington] tells her friend Jean Megnen and Megnen’s husband, psychiatrist Pierre Mabelle (to whom she dictated this testimony)’ (85).

because, despite its brevity, *Down Below* is still significantly longer than the shorter works Carrington had previously written in French. As the lingua franca of the circle of international artists and intellectuals Carrington mixed with in both Paris and New York, French can be traced as a hallmark of collaboration in her prose. In her first published piece of fiction, the Max Ernst illustrated and prefaced 'La Maison de la Peur', and subsequent short stories written in French in Paris, it becomes apparent that Carrington chooses to write in French, a language she didn't write fluently, when it serves a practical collaborative purpose. As a point of reference, with the exception of *Down Below* each of Carrington's longer works of fiction - the novels *The Hearing Trumpet* and *The Stone Door*, and the novella *Little Francis* - were written in English. Notably, the latter predates *Down Below*, having been written while Carrington was resident in France with Ernst. This pattern of collaboration in a non-native language persists in Carrington's use of Spanish in her later short-form fiction.

These details make a more compelling case for Megnen's presence as transcriber, and the role she played in offering practical support in the creation of the text. It remains to be seen, however, what effect this process has on the artistic expression of the text. Dictation has the immediate effect of creating a distance between the author and her words, an effect which is compounded by her use of French. Given the intense difficulty Carrington describes in the 'writing' process, and indeed her later affirmations of this as the most challenging period of her life, what purpose does Megnen serve? Mabile may be the guide, but Megnen is the recipient and the transmitter of the words. When Carrington says 'How can I write this when I'm afraid to think it?' (Carrington 32) perhaps the answer is the third pathway of dictation: more than merely internal thinking, and less isolating than writing, what potential is there in *telling* such a story? Such a format is reminiscent of the confession, or indeed of a talking therapy. Remembering again that by the summer of 1943 Carrington had already written and lost a version of *Down Below* in English, dictation is a distinct choice which sets this text apart from her other works in either language.

The distancing effect of dictation and French may serve a protective purpose, but Carrington is also aware of shifts and expansions of meaning when using a language which is not her own. This sense of distance is echoed in Carrington's comments on the Spanish language within the text itself; she says:

“The fact that I had to speak a language I was not familiar with was crucial: I was not hindered by a preconceived idea of the words, and I but half understood their modern meaning. This made it possible for me to invest the most ordinary phrases with a hermetic significance.”(12)

In Henri Parisot’s praise of Carrington’s naïve French there is something of a gendered paternalism, but here Carrington offers her own insight as to the potential of writing or speaking in a language not entirely familiar. Marina Warner has noted the strange quality of the language of *Down Below*, no doubt born of this extraordinary gestation; she writes:

“This journey to and from oral and written versions, to and from French and English translations, accounts for the difference in tone between *Down Below* and Leonora’s other writings. [...] it has only moments of distinctive Carrington drollness. It’s as if, in her dementia, she vacated her own being, becoming for a while other, uttering in a different voice, to a different pace, using another sentence structure.” (in Carrington 1988; 17)

‘Becoming for a while other’ by inhabiting another language is a compelling idea particularly in the context of Surrealism. The potential, as Carrington sees it, ‘to invest the most ordinary phrases with a hermetic significance’ allows elements of the everyday to be subjected to new scrutiny. Everything is felt to be new. This sensation of strangeness in the familiar is pertinent therefore not only to speaking a different language, but to the sensibilities of Surrealism and, most crucially, the disconnection of mental illness. Trauma is an obvious factor in the absence of ‘drollness’, here there is an entanglement of subject matter and form where the two become so interdependent as to be almost indistinguishable. That is, there is a profound symbiosis between the content and the process of *Down Below*, and the distancing effect of speaking the text in French is a necessary product of the very experiences narrated.

Unusually amongst Carrington scholars, Alice Gambrell takes great account of the French text,⁵ offering a detailed, linguistic analysis of the revisions Carrington made for the 1988 ‘final’ version. The changes that Gambrell records are striking considering the questions at hand, for one, she reports that ‘notably, the passive voice if repeatedly excised

⁵ It is perhaps for this reason that Gambrell also notes the potential significance of Megnen’s role, speculating that ‘the reader of *Down Below* seems to have entered into a private realm where women are together [...] telling their secrets to one another.’ (87).

and replaced with the active. On the whole, the 1988 text is surer, more forceful, and more commandingly written than previous versions' (92). This important entry upon the text suggests the continual resurgence and renewal of identity, and centres the way in which memory and time interact with one another. In the newer version, a more assured self emerges, where the text has been filtered through Carrington, then Mabile and/or Megnen, the translator, and again through Carrington herself. In this vein, perhaps the most interesting change that Gambrell notes – at least for our purpose – is the following: 'Twice, for example, Carrington deletes passages from the early versions in which she claimed to be incapable of describing her ordeal.' (92). As explored above, there remains in the revised text references to the great difficulty that Carrington felt in recording her experience; but perhaps at a distance of some forty years the older Carrington can be assured in the knowledge that she *has* shared her experience, and in doing so, overcome it.

Conclusion

The assurance that Carrington arrives at has been derived, at least in part, through the collaborative process of narrating *Down Below*, but central to her repossession of her own identity is an internal, incommunicable sense of self. Having begun as the depersonalised cadaver, Carrington emerges from this experience not as a beautiful muse of the Surrealist imaginary. Instead, she adopts her beloved figure of the crone (despite still being only in her mid-twenties). On the publication of the first French edition of the text, she writes to her publisher:

I accept the current Honourable Decrepitude – what I have to say now is as unveiled as possible – to look through the monster – do you understand that? No? Never mind.

(“J’accepte L’Honorable Décrépidité actuelle – ce que j’ai à dire maintenant est dévoilé autant que possible – Voir à travers Le monstre – Vous comprenez ça? Non? Tant pis.” [sic]; my translation, Carrington 1973: 8)

The ‘unveiled’ account of profound mental illness in *Down Below* offers a unique insight to its readership, but Carrington neither seeks nor expects understanding from her

audience. This suggests a more internalised meaning to be derived from narration, and a resolution to her warring interior life that remains ineffable.

Earlier in this essay, I discussed the usefulness of identifying a ‘final’ version of *Down Below*, arguing that the multiple versions of the text are themselves intrinsic to understanding its meaning. These various versions and revisions themselves become testament to the unending project of formulating an identity. Carrington centres the process of writing, of becoming. The process of *Down Below* is therefore not a straightforward, upward trajectory from ‘death’ to ‘life’ but instead it looks inwards to the ‘cadaver’ or ‘dead figure’, which exists alongside the other versions of oneself. Carrington writes in the same letter that: “I am seeking to know Death in order to be less afraid” (“je cherche à connaître Le Mort pour avoir moins peur” [sic]; my translation: 8). Her use of the present tense, even after the completion and publication of the text, is telling, the process of self-narration continues.

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