

The Mind and the Moon: My Brother's Story, the Science of Our Brains, and the Search for Our Psyches by Daniel Bergner

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Review: *The Mind and the Moon: My Brother's Story, the Science of Our Brains, and the Search for Our Psyches* by Daniel Bergner

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Abstract: I begin my wide-ranging review by highlighting the mature work from the early 1950s onward of the American Jesuit cultural historian and media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955). Then I highlight the American journalist Daniel Bergner's new 2022 book *The Mind and the Moon: My Brother's Story, the Science of Our Brains, and the Search for Our Psyches* (Ecco/ HarperCollins), with special attention to his account of the life and quietly inspiring work of Caroline Mazel-Carlton and her lifelong struggle with hearing voices.

My favorite scholar is the American Jesuit cultural historian and media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) in English at Saint Louis University, the Jesuit university in St. Louis, Missouri. In 1970, Ong received a secondary appointment as the William E. Haren Professor of Humanities in Psychiatry in the School of Medicine at Saint Louis University.

However, in the closing years of Ong's long and productive life, he suffered the debilitating effects of Parkinson's disease – about the same time that Pope John-Paul II also suffered the debilitating effects of Parkinson's in the public glare of TV and photographers.

As the American journalist Daniel Bergner (born in 1960) reports in his new 2022 book *The Mind and the Moon: My Brother's Story, the Science of Our Brains, and the Search for Our Psyches*, the psycho-active drug Thorazine that was widely used by psychiatrists to treat “the psychotic and the manic” (p. 67) was usually accompanied by “some degree of Parkinsonism in nearly all who took the drug” (p. 68).

Question: Do infra-human animals in their natural habitat experience “the psychotic and the manic” experiences that human animals are treated for by psychiatrists who prescribe Thorazine and other psycho-active drugs?

Now, I have discussed Ong's work on Western cultural history and media ecology in my lengthy *OEN* article “Walter J. Ong's Philosophical Thought” (dated September 20, 2020).

Ong characterized his pioneering mature thought from the early 1950s onward as phenomenological and personalist in cast. In my opinion, his pioneering thought about our Western cultural history deserves to be more widely known. I have honored both the phenomenological and the personalist cast of Ong's thought in the subtitle of my introductory book about his life and eleven of his books and selected articles, *Walter Ong's Contributions to Cultural Studies: The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication*, 2nd ed. (2015;

1st ed., 2000).

Ong's most widely translated and most widely read book is his most accessible book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (Methuen, 1982). But also see Ong's 1967 book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, the expanded version of his 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University.

I draw on Ong's 1982 book and certain other works by Ong in my 2012 article "Walter Ong and Harold Bloom Can Help Us Understand the Hebrew Bible" in the journal *Explorations in Media Ecology*.

Now, over the years of my teaching at the University of Minnesota Duluth (1987-2009), I taught an introductory-level survey course on the Bible about twenty times. Because of my interest in Ong's pioneering phenomenological and personalist account of our Western cultural history, I was interested in the Jewish biblical scholar James L. Kugel's 2017 landmark book *The Great Shift: Encountering God in Biblical Times*.

No, in Kugel's descriptive account of the great shift in biblical times, as he styles it, he does not happen to advert explicitly to Ong's phenomenological and personalist account of our Western cultural history. Nevertheless, Kugel's descriptive account of the great shift in biblical times can be interpreted as the historical shift from what Ong refers to as primary oral thought and expression transcribed visually in writing to the subsequent cultural influence of the visualist phonetic alphabetic literacy.¹

Now, because the ancient Jewish homeland was on an important trade route, it was conquered at different times over the centuries by different ancient empires. For example, it was conquered by Alexander the Great, whose conquest brought with it the ancient Greek language and culture. As a result, the ancient Hebrew scriptures were translated into ancient Greek.

Subsequently, the ancient Jewish homeland was conquered by the Roman Empire. But the ancient Greek language and culture persisted. The historical Jesus was crucified at the time of the ancient Jewish Passover festival in Jerusalem under the authority of the Roman Empire. Subsequently, all of the texts gathered together in the canonical New Testament were written in the ancient Greek language.²

Now that you know the background of my interest in Ong's pioneering mature work from the early 1950s onward, perhaps you will be able to understand why I was deeply moved when I read Daniel Bergner's somewhat lengthy article in the *New York Times* titled "Doctors Gave Her Antipsychotics. She Decided to Live with Her Voices" (dated May 17, 2022). Briefly, Bergner's somewhat lengthy article is a profile of a woman named "Carol Mazel-Carlton who began hearing voices when she was in day care."

Now, I have never tried to count up all the ancient Hebrew prophets who had what today's psychiatrists would refer to as auditory and visual hallucinations. Fortunately, the Jewish biblical scholar James Kugel does not refer to auditory and visual hallucinations in his 2017 book *The Great Shift: encountering God in Biblical Times*. But I have already suggested above

that we can understand Kugel's landmark book as being about what Ong (1982; 1967) refers to as primary oral thought and expression.

Consequently, it now strikes me that what today's psychiatrists refer to as auditory and visual hallucinations can also be understood descriptively as manifestations of primary oral culture in the human psyche today.

I dare say that native English speakers will understand what I mean by the human psyche. However, at the risk of seeming pedantic, let me say here that the word psyche is a transliteration of the ancient Greek word that can also be transliterated as psuche. The transliterated word psuche is also one of the ancient Greek words that form our common English word psychology – the other being transliterated as logos.

Daniel Bergner's New 2022 Book

Now, Bergner's somewhat lengthy article is based on his new 2022 book *The Mind and the Moon: My Brother's Story, the Science of Our Brains, and the Search for our Psyches*, mentioned above. The main title of Bergner's book harkens back to two goals announced by President John F. Kennedy in the early 1960s: (1) that science would take us to the moon; and (2) that science would make the "remote reaches of the mind accessible" and cure psychiatric illnesses of the mind with breakthrough medications (see pp. 73, 74, 81, and 187).

In Bergner's book, in addition to his more fully detailed profile of Caroline Mazel-Carlton, he also discusses his musically talented younger brother's sad story and the sad story of another man (a fictionally named lawyer for an activist civil rights organization). Not surprisingly, Bergner's account of his brother Bob's life is the most thoroughly developed of the three lives (pp. 1-2, 14-22, 53-65, 131-134, 136-137, 142-153, 204-205, 206, 207-213, 278-284, 288-297, and 299-302).

Question: Because Bob Bergner and his wife Pam are still alive and well, what are their lives going to be like after their friends and acquaintances have read his brother Daniel's detailed account of his life and struggles? Similarly, with Caroline Mazel-Carlton's life going forward. Will they become the public faces of a new movement to live one's life free from taking psycho-active meds – of going off their recommended prescribed meds, as it were?

In addition, Daniel Bergner tells the story of the remarkable development of psycho-active drugs and introduces us to certain neuroscientists engaged in conducting studies of psycho-active drugs, including their recently discovered humility about what they do not know about the human mind and the brain.

For example, the neuroscientists Eric Nestler (pp. 23-26), Donald Goff (pp. 23-26), and Esther Blessing (esp. pp. 39-43) emerge as Bergner's heroes because of their candor and intellectual humility. By contrast, the pharmaceutical companies that make extraordinary profits from psycho-active drugs emerge as the villains.

The number of drugs that Bergner mentions makes me wish that his new 2022 book included a comprehensive index (including all of the capitalized and uncapitalized names of meds).

The remarkable development of psycho-active drugs included the discovery of the psycho-active salt compound lithium carbonate (p. 20), which was initially referred to as a miracle drug

because nobody understood how it worked. It is still not well understood. As odd as it sounds, Bergner also reports that in the early twentieth century, the naturally occurring substance lithium carbonate had been “included in the lemon-lime soda 7-Up” (p. 206).

Now, before the discovery of lithium as an effective treatment for people in the throes of an acute manic episode (such as Bergman’s younger brother experienced), people in the throes of an acute manic episode often eventually died from exhaustion – a fact that Bergner does not mention in his account of his younger brother Bob -- or in his discussion of Kay Redfield Jamison’s 1995 book *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (pp. 137-139 and 206).

In effect, Bergner raises the following questions: What are the long-term effects of taking lithium carbonate? Does it work by causing brain atrophy? If this is how lithium carbonate works, wouldn’t Bergner’s brother and Kay Redfield Jamison be well advised to stop taking it regularly and wait until they experience the onset of another acute manic episode?

Now, Bergner aptly refers to the psyche – and the mind. He refers to the centuries-old philosophical debate between materialists and immaterialists (i.e., non-materialists). According to him, today’s psychiatrists tend to favor a materialist view of the human psyche based on brain research (e.g., pp. 37 and 48). According to him, Freud and Freudian psychoanalysis tended to represent a non-materialist account of the human psyche (e.g., 44 and 48). In plain English, materialist psychiatrists dispense with psychotherapy (as representing an immaterial view of the human psyche) and rely exclusively on psycho-active drugs. Jamison, for example, did not undertake any kind of psychotherapy. Instead, she relied on lithium carbonate.³

Thanks, in large measure to pharmaceutical companies and their marketing campaigns, psycho-active drugs are today a big business. Today, not only psychiatrists but also ordinary medical doctors can legally write prescriptions for psycho-active drugs. But do such drugs work by causing brain atrophy? If they do, what are the long-term results of such brain atrophy?

Now, in Bergner’s inspiring discussion of Caroline Mazel-Carlton’s inspiring life of learning how to cope effectively with her inner voices, he introduces us to the Hearing Voices Network support groups “for people with auditory and visual hallucinations.” What psychiatry terms psychosis, the Hearing Voices Movement (HVN) refers to as non-consensus realities. Bergner says, “It was in HVN’s belief that describing voices and visions in detail, that filling a room with phantasms, would not infuse them with more vivid life or grant them more intransigent power, but would partly by lifting the pressure of secrecy and diminishing the feeling of deviance, loosen their hold” (p. 264).

Bergner also informs us that today’s psychiatrists refer to denial of one’s diagnosis as anosognosia and that it is seen as a glaring symptom of psychotic disorder (p. 232).

Question: If, say, Bergner’s younger brother Bob, or, say, Kay Redfield Jamison, is not in denial of his or her diagnosis, wouldn’t he or she be capable of recognizing the symptoms of the onset of his or her manic tendency and then take lithium for a limited time to counter the possible onset of a psychotic breakdown?⁴

However, the Hearing Voices Movement shows how people who hear voices can learn to cope effectively with them by learning how to listen to them. In addition, the listening practices used

in the Hearing Voices Movement are also be used by people who work in suicide prevention that Caroline Mazel-Carlton helped organize, known as Alternatives to Suicide. I imagine that the practice of careful listening can also be used in other contexts as well, which is why I am writing this review of Bergner's new 2022 book.

The practice of listening carefully to voices in one's own psyche opens a whole new realm of application of Ong's 1958 essay "Voice as Summons for Belief: Literature, Faith, and the Divided Self," which he reprinted in his 1962 book *The Barbarian Within: And Other Fugitive Essays and Studies* (pp. 49-67). It is also reprinted in *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (2002, pp. 259-275).

Now, I was in the religious order in the Roman Catholic Church known formally as the Society of Jesus (1979-1987). The Jesuit order, as it is known informally, was founded by the Spanish Renaissance mystic St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), the author/compiler of the book of instructions known as the *Spiritual Exercises*. In the first year of the two-year Jesuit novitiate, I made a 30-day directed retreat in silence (except for the daily conferences with the retreat director) following the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola. In the daily conferences with the retreat director in a directed retreat, the retreat director mostly listens to what the retreatant says.

If the retreat director senses, in lay terms, that the retreatant is experiencing the onset of a manic episode, then the retreat director would tell the retreatant to stop the retreat. Otherwise, the retreat director's role is to listen carefully to what the retreatant says each day about his experiences during the periods of contemplation/meditation, and then assign the retreatant with the new material for contemplation/meditation.

I don't want to push my next point too far as a possible analogue for Caroline Mazel-Carlton's practice of listening carefully to her voices. However, the instructions in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola, translated by Louis J. Puhl (1951) do regularly call for the person on retreat to make a culminating exercise of carrying on both sides of a colloquy with Jesus or Mary.

Based on my own extensive experience of face-to-face spiritual direction in the Jesuit order, not just in the 30-day retreat but in numerous other shorter retreats and other experiences of spiritual direction, I can attest to the efficacy of having someone listen to you carefully can contribute positively to one's personal psychological resilience. In Ong's terminology, Jesuit spirituality tends to be personalist in cast.

Indeed, the biblical injunction "Hear, O Israel" (Deuteronomy 6:4) enjoins us to practice careful listening. However, even if listening carefully to persons who are considering suicide can contribute to suicide prevention, I do not want to seem here to suggest that carefully listening to a person always and everywhere contributes to their psychological resilience and thereby prevents them from experiencing psychological highs and lows.

For example, the Victorian Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) experienced spiritual direction in the customary Jesuits ways, and yet he memorably expressed certain highs and lows in his life in his poems. Concerning Hopkins' sonnets of desolation, see Ong's 1986 book *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (University of Toronto Press, pp. 62 and 145-159). Ong also discusses Hopkins as a proto-personalist (pp. 94, 97-99, and 121-122).

Of course, we have no way of knowing how well (or not) Hopkins, Ong, and others who made 30-day retreats in silence (except for the daily conferences with the retreat director) following the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola carried out the repeated instruction to carry on a colloquy with Jesus or Mary. However, in former First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's 2003 book *Living History*, she recounts what happened when she carried out the instruction of the humanistic psychologist Jean Houston to carry out both sides of an imaginary conversation with former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (pp. 264-266).

Hillary Rodham Clinton says, "My friendship with Jean [Houston] came to light a year later in a book by Bob Woodward, *The Choice* [1966], about the 1996 political campaign. Woodward referred melodramatically to Jean [Houston] as my 'spiritual adviser' and described some verbal exercises she had introduced to me and my staff to help us find new ways of thinking about our work. He was particularly keen to talk about the time Jean [Houston] asked me to imagine a conversation with Eleanor Roosevelt. As I often invoked Eleanor [Roosevelt] in my speeches and even referred to imaginary conversations with her to make a point, I had no trouble responding to Jean [Houston's] suggestion, and never expected it to generate any interest. But a passage from Woodward's book about the exercise was excerpted on the front page of the *Washington Post* as an expose" (p. 265).

In light of this episode, can you imagine what Bob Woodward and the editors of the *Washington Post* would say about Caroline Mazel-Carlton's practice of listening to her voices?

Now, Bergner suggests that biological psychiatry today is not personalist in cast. He says, "Psychiatry – and especially biological psychiatry – may be inherently impaired when it comes to such listening. This is, partly, through no fault of its own. Science and medicine require systems of knowledge and treatment, systems of seeing and understanding, diagnosis and intervention, and systems aren't kind to individuality. They can't be. To commit oneself completely to individuality would be to renounce classifications and categories, and this would be to renounce science" (p. 297).⁵

Bergner also says the following: "But partly, too, psychiatry is impaired by fears, terrors we all share, of difference and despair and danger, so that the profession's reflexive reaction to distress and to divergent realities, to life's agonies and its precipices, is to provide whatever medication is available, and to urge its or permanent use, no matter how flawed the drugs, no matter often futile, and no matter how potentially damaging – because to acknowledge medicine predominant and persistent failure in the realm of the mind, to think hard before prescribing, to relinquish the edicts of protracted or lifelong medication, to surrender the illusion of control, would be intolerable not only to biological psychiatry but maybe to most of us, with our yearning for immediate solutions and the promise of safety" (p. 298).

Alluding to the terminology of the main title of his new 2022 book, Bergner says that "the mind is much, much farther away than the moon ever was, immeasurably, ineffably so" (p. 298).⁶

In conclusion, I have written the present review of Daniel Bergner's new 2022 book *The Mind and the Moon: My Brother's Story, the Science of Our Brains, and the Search for Our Psyches* primarily to lend concept support to Caroline Mazel-Carlton's practice of listening carefully to her voices and to her extension of this practice in the Hearing Voices Network and the program

known as Alternatives to Suicide. However, in lending the conceptual support that I have adduced here to the practice of listening carefully to voices that are difficult to listen to, I am also implicitly supporting the non-materialist philosophical view of the human psyche – over against, and in preference to, the exclusively materialist view of the human psyche advanced by biological psychiatry.

Notes

¹ For a succinct discussion of primary oral thought and expression, see Ong's 1982 book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (esp. pp. 36-77), mentioned above.

² For a relevant discussion of ancient Greek culture, see the classicist Eric A. Havelock's 1963 landmark book *Preface to Plato*. Ong's review of Havelock's book is reprinted in *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry* (2002, pp. 309-312).

³ For an accessible discussion of the non-materialist centuries-old philosophical position, see Mortimer J. Adler's 1990 book *Intellect: Mind Over Matter*. The three great monotheistic religious traditions represent the non-materialist philosophical position about the human soul/psyche. Ong, for example, represents a non-materialist.

⁴ I should point out here that certain people have regularly experienced manic symptoms but without ever having a psychotic breakdown. See John D. Gartner's *The Hypomanic Edge: The Link Between (A Little) Crazy and (a Lot of) Success in America* (2005); Peter C. Whybrow's *American Mania: When More Is Not Enough* (2005); and Nassir Ghaemi's *A First-Rate Madness: Uncovering the Links Between Leadership and Mental Illness* (2011).

⁵ Ong also discusses "systems of seeing and understanding," but in a different context in his 1956 essay "System, Space, and Intellect in Renaissance Symbolism," which he reprinted in his 1962 book *The Barbarian Within: And Other Fugitive Essays and Studies* (pp. 68-87), mentioned above. It is also reprinted in volume three of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1995, pp. 9-27).

⁶ Now, for an accessible book related to Caroline Mazel-Carlton's quietly inspiring story, see Daniel B. Smith's *Muses, Madmen, and Prophets: Rethinking the History, Science and Meaning of Auditory Hallucination* (2007; reissued with a different subtitle in paperback edition in 2008).

For another but more difficult book related to her inspiring story, see Julian Jaynes' *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1977). But also see Ong's discussion of Jaynes' book in his 1982 book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (pp. 29-30), mentioned above.

For a Jungian account of the origins of ego-consciousness (= Jaynes' post-breakdown of the bicameral mind) out of the larger consciousness of what Jung and his followers refer to as the Self (often capitalized; = Jaynes' bicameral mind), see Erich Neumann's *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, translated by R. F. C. Hull (1954). Ong discusses Neumann's 1954 book in two of his own books: (1) *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (1971, pp. 10-12 and 18); and (2) *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality [Gender], and Consciousness* (1981, pp. 18-19, 25, 92, 100, 111, 115, and 148), the published version of Ong's 1979 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University.

The Swiss psychiatrist and psychological theorist C. G. Jung (1875-1961) conducted dangerous self-experiments in which he used the technique that he came to refer to as active

imagination – a technique through which he experienced auditory and visual hallucinations, which he then subsequently elaborately processed through works of art he created. See Jung's *The Red Book: Liber Novus*, translated by Mark, Kyburz, John Peck, and Sonu Shamdasani; with a contextual essay and notes by Sonu Shamdasani (Norton, 2009).

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