AFTERWORD

THE FIRST time I read *The Hearing Trumpet*, I knew nothing about its author, so I had the incredible experience of coming to this short novel in a state of innocence. I was wholly unaware, for instance, that Leonora Carrington had been a painter, that she spent most of her life as an expat in Mexico, and that in her youth she had been in a relationship with Max Ernst, one of the greatest surrealists. But the anarchic tone and perverse nature of this little book made a powerful impression, one that has never left me.

There are two qualities in fiction that I find particularly astonishing and moving: open-endedness and wild metaphysics.

The first quality is structural. Open-ended books intentionally leave themes and ideas unrestricted, rendering them a little blurred. They grant us wonderful space for making our own surmises, for seeking associations, for thinking and interpreting. This interpretive process is a source of great intellectual pleasure, and it also acts as a friendly nudge toward further prospecting. Books of this sort have no theses, but they arouse questions that would not have occurred to us otherwise.

To my mind, the second quality, wild metaphysics, touches on a very serious question: Why do we read novels in the first place? Inevitably among the many true responses will be: We read novels to gain a broader perspective on everything that happens to people on Earth. Our own experience is too small, our beings too helpless, to make sense of the complexity and enormity of the universe; we desire to see life up close, to get a glimpse of the existences of others. Do we have anything in common with them? Are they anything like us? We are seeking a shared communal order, each of us a stitch in a piece of knitted fabric. In short, we expect novels to put forward certain hypotheses that might tell us what's what. And banal as it might sound, this is a metaphysical question: On what principles does the world operate?

I think that this, in fact, is exactly where the difference—so hotly debated in my own literary era—lies between so-called genre and non-genre fiction. The true genre novel presents us with recognizable perspectives, using a ready-made world that has familiar philosophical parameters. The non-

genre novel aims to establish its own rules for the created universe, sketching its own epistemological maps. And this is the case whether the book is a love story, a murder mystery, or the tale of an expedition to another galaxy.

The Hearing Trumpet eludes all categorization. From its first sentence on, it presents an internally coherent cosmos governed by self-generated laws. In doing so it passes disturbing comment on things we never stop to question.

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In the patriarchal order, on reaching old age a woman becomes an even greater bother than she was when young. Just as patriarchal societies think up and organize thousands of norms, rules, codes, and forms of oppression to keep young women in line, they treat old women (who have lost their alluring erotic power) with a similar degree of suspicion and aversion. While maintaining a semblance of sympathy, members of such societies endlessly dwell on the former beauty of older women with a certain covert satisfaction, pondering the effects of the passage of time. Further marginalization is achieved by pushing them into social nonexistence; they are often financially impoverished and stripped of any influence. They become, instead, inferior creatures of no concern whatsoever to others; society does little more than tolerate them and provide them (rather reluctantly) with some sort of care.

This is the status of Marian Leatherby, the ancient narrator of *The Hearing Trumpet*, as the novel opens. She is full of life but hard of hearing. And she is doubly excluded—first as a woman, then as an old woman. Essential to her character is a quality she shares with the novel as a whole: eccentricity (eccentricity being one of the modes allowed to an old woman when she’s not playing the role of a kindhearted granny). Indeed, casting a deaf old woman in the role of narrator, heroine, and governing spirit, and populating a book with a group of odd old ladies, indicates from the start that this novel will be a highly eccentric, radical affair.

Things that are eccentric are by definition “outside the center”—outside long-established norms and all things regarded as self-evident, on the beaten path. To be eccentric is to view the world from a completely

different perspective, one that is both provincial and marginal—pushed aside, to the fringes—and at the same time revelatory and revolutionary.

The Institute, or care home, where Marian is sent by her family, is run by Dr. and Mrs. Gambit. It too is eccentric, comprising a series of bizarre dwellings—shaped like a toadstool, a Swiss chalet, an Egyptian mummy, a boot, a lighthouse —impossible and absurd, straight out of a Bosch painting or some oneiric funfair. But here eccentricity can be seen as emblematic of the oppressive, patronizing, and infantilizing attitude we take toward old people. The word "gambit" is derived from the Italian word *gambetto*, literally "little leg," which also turns up in the phrase *dare il gambetto*—to trip up, or to plot against. The Gambits are the hypocritical, pretentious representatives of an equally hypocritical society, and their methods are summed up by the expression "for their own good." The Gambits always know what is proper and healthy for their wards, submitting them to an ill-defined psycho-pedagogical doctrine not unlike the one embraced by followers of Rudolf Steiner. The most comical example of this ideology are the "Movements," perhaps a nod to the Gurdjieff movements, that the old ladies are obliged to perform on a daily basis.

The Gambits' mission involves constant observation and judgment of their residents, another feature of the vague, quasi-religious concept of self-perfection bordering on sadism with which they indoctrinate their charges. As Dr. Gambit tells Marian:

> "Reports in your particular case show the following list of interior impurities: Greed, Insincerity, Egoism, Laziness and Vanity. At the top of the list Greed, signifying a dominating passion. You cannot overcome so many psychic deformities in a short space of time. You are not alone as victim of your degenerate habits, everyone has faults, here we seek to observe these faults and finally to dissolve them under the light of Objective Observation, Consciousness.
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> "The fact that You Have Been Chosen to join this community should give you enough stimulation to face your own vices bravely and seek to diminish their hold over you."

Behind the Gambits' beneficence lies a quite specific economic motive. Yes, the Gambits make money from the old people they claim to perfect. In fact, they do not operate out of a sense of mission at all but in order to make

a living. In invoking the sin of Greed, Carrington reminds us of the deeply hypocritical connections between religious institutions and economics.

Another of the novel's eccentrics is Carmella, the heroine's great friend, said to have been inspired by Carrington's old friend and fellow painter Remedios Varo. Carmella has been allowed to retain some influence in the world because she is a *rich* old woman, and there's nothing people respect as much as money and those who possess it. As a result, Carmella enjoys unquestioned power to make things happen. Her appearances at the dreary Institute are dramatic; her ideas are absolute, steered not by reason but by imagination and a different way of thinking. In her character eccentricity is elevated to the rank of Goddesshood.

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In the early 1960s and into the 1970s, Leonora Carrington was active in the women's liberation movement in Mexico. She was notorious for designing a poster depicting Adam and Eve offering an apple to each other. Similarly, in *The Hearing Trumpet*, Carrington reclaims and inverts traditional, foundational stories, in the process creating one of the most original feminist texts ever written. The book contains the quintessence of feminism in a narrative that is subversive and surrealist in its invocation of an unconventional metaphysical order. *The Hearing Trumpet* forthrightly introduces eccentricity into the feminist debate as a perspective that's a legitimate alternative to the patriarchal one: whatever is eccentric is Goddess-like in spirit.

In our age, the Goddess was expelled from the center long ago by her "Sterile Brothers" (as Carrington calls them); her kingdom is now in the provinces of perception. Nevertheless, the Goddess will always be present wherever the binaries—either/or, native/foreigner, black/white—beloved by the Sterile Brothers are exposed as limited. Theirs is the simplest and crudest way of organizing a complicated world, of achieving power over it. By their logic, to fit a too-tall patient to a too-short bed, one should cut off his feet, not seek a longer bed.

I consider Goddesshood to be womanhood deepened and expanded by the manifold treasures of culture and nature. The Goddess is a powerful archetype, and her very existence is pure provocation to a patriarchal structure. No wonder that in many parts of the world women are made to

cover their faces and bodies. Women's physiology—which would seem to be the most natural thing in the world, like their corporeality—is always a problem, something not to be discussed. Civilizations might be described by the mechanisms they have invented and implemented to control Goddesshood.

When womanhood demands what it is owed—recognition of its strength and power, of its very Goddesshood—it is banished to the cellar, imprisoned in the dungeon. Deprived of contact with consciousness, it loses its ability to speak and can only "murmur"—as the Grail murmurs in *The Hearing Trumpet*. It becomes imprecise and blurred. It is unable (or unwilling) to use the awkward, refined patriarchal diction, essayistic flights, virtuoso sentences, and nonchalant musings on art so prized by the arbiters of culture, high above the dungeon of the despondent Goddess. Its language is coarse and irreverent, not at all adapted to people's typical perceptions but wild, laughable, eccentric, untamed. It is often perceived as incomprehensible, and as a result it is sometimes judged as kitsch. Kitschy and lacking taste—a charge that is so often flung at women. Apparently Joseph Conrad said that the best criterion for the quality of a book is that women don't like it—because women can only like bad literature. Well, I have to admit that I like what Conrad wrote very much. Sincerely.

All right. So be it. Kitsch is our ocean. All those cyclical processes, menstruations, and recurrent migraines. Mumbo jumbo, healing herbs, and infantile trust in the power of nature. An unhealthy love of animals, sentimentality, the feeding of stray cats. Being overprotective, poking one's nose into everything. All those flowers in little pots, all those little gardens, the hollyhocks, the rags, the lace, the stitching, the knitting, the romance novels, the soap operas, "women's literature," "emotionality," the accusation of mental weakness that has been pressed on us for centuries. The reservoir of misogynist scripts is immense and seemingly bottomless. In modern times, in a thoroughly patriarchal world, we can only talk about the Goddess ironically, winking like the Abbess in the painting that hangs in the Gambits' dining room, and with a hidden smirk, half serious, half mocking. Having been actively displaced and ridiculed for thousands of years she can only express herself in this covert way. It's worth pondering how many subjects related to women's experience have been marginalized, derided, ridiculed, or altogether displaced. For hundreds of years women have been raised within misogynist, patriarchal religions that openly

discriminate against them to some degree. They take part in cultures that are never fully theirs, or that are even in outright opposition to them. From youth, women are drip-fed doctrines that position them as inferior, weaker, less capable, or in some other way handicapped. They grow up in a mist of ubiquitous misogyny, often veiled and not fully self-aware, which is intrinsic to culture, language, images, interpersonal relations, history, and economics. It is only in the last few decades that the real story of women, marginalized into near nonexistence, has patiently tried to break free. And when it emerges into the appropriated world, it can find itself at a loss for words.

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Leonora Carrington recognizes this subversive, eccentric position of womanhood. In both her painting and her writing she has a marvelous way of subscribing to André Breton's belief in the need to align art with alchemy or occultism. She makes liberal use of our European esoteric imaginarium, while avoiding the pompous solemnity that often accompanies it.

The Hearing Trumpet is a hermetic text; it refers to things that are hidden, displaced, and forgotten. In order to be fully interpreted it requires from the reader a certain familiarity with its allusions, even as it mocks this sort of competence by pulling all sorts of striking and astonishing tales from its trunk of wonders.

The Abbess's winking eye should be immortalized on every future cover of this book; it should become its hallmark, as should Marian's deafness. Together they comprise a set of instructions for approaching the novel. At the very beginning of the book, Carmella gives Marian a hearing trumpet, which miraculously allows her to be selective about what she hears. The winking eye is telling us to place everything in inverted commas and to trust the "as if" on which myth and literature rely. From here on we shall follow after Leonora like this—with one eye winking, mischievously, kitschily, taking everything that she serves up to us at face value.

And she serves up a lot—the book is a true carnival. At the moment the Winking Abbess is identified as Doña Rosalinda Alvarez Cruz della Cueva from El Convento de Santa Barbara de Tartarus—onto the stage of *The Hearing Trumpet* steps the Goddess. From this point on, the borders between reality and fantasy, the solemn and the absurd, the sublime and the

ridiculous dissolve into the surrealist tissue of the novel. History opalesces with pastiche, and the book meanders down multiplying paths of references to esoteric pop-cultural texts, stories about the Holy Grail, the Knights Templar, and Mary Magdalene, and to a whole host of alternative histories of mankind that folk strains of religions have been playing with for a long time.

The story of the Winking Abbess is the story of the Holy Cup containing the elixir of life, which has been stolen from its rightful owner, the Goddess (who appears here under various guises), by "sterile" monks and hidden by the Templars in the cellar of their monastery. Only a woman is capable of extricating this genuine treasure, though the Templars do not seem to know this. Generally speaking, the chief adversary of both the Winking Abbess Doña Rosalinda and Marian Leatherby is Christianity—for the former it is represented by the Templar order and the ruthless bishops, and for the latter by an oppressive New Age Christian mentality of pointless self-denial and external control.

The tale of Doña Rosalinda's mission to rescue the Grail is a series of fantastical and unexpected adventures. It is at the same time a story of repossession, of an anti-Crusade that restores the correct order in a fraudulently appropriated world. In this story within the story, Carrington produces a wonderfully comical parody mimicking those mysterious texts found in jars in the desert, such as the discovery at Nag Hammadi in 1945, which undoubtedly reinvigorated the religious imagination of secularized twentieth-century man. She makes copious reference to figures and names from the Gnostic treatises, including the Pistis Sophia.

The curious and patient reader will detect some surprisingly erudite references not only to Gnosticism but to esoteric religious syncretism of all sorts, both ancient and contemporary. Such a reader will take note of the name of our abbess: Doña Rosalinda della Cueva (from the cave), Abbess of the Convent of Saint Barbara of Tartarus, is associated (fittingly in the light of her further adventures) with the mysterious, powerful figure of Barbarus or Barbelo, who resides in—naturally!—"the *depths* of Pleroma" (to use the Gnostic term mentioned in the Apocryphon of John). Barbelo is the first creative force, hers is the womb of the world, she is the prototype for the Shekhinah and Sophia in one. She appears as a bearded female figure, the Mother-Father, and as Anthropos, the first hermaphrodite. As if in answer, Carrington seeds *The Hearing Trumpet* with characters of fluid

gender—a bearded woman, a cross-dresser, a transsexual. Amid the several bizarre figures of earthly provenance in the book the reader will also find the character Taliessin, a figure taken straight from Welsh mythology. He is the Goddess's messenger and the first man to be endowed with the gift of prophecy; here we meet him as an immortal postman.

What's more, *The Hearing Trumpet* is a thoroughly surreal work, written oneirically—in other words, quite devoid of consistency or strong connections between cause and effect. There is certainly no gun hanging on the wall here, so there's no reason to expect it to go off in the final scene. Things happen rather as they do in a dream, with sequences of events emerging subtly, arising from remote associations. When she is first mentioned, the sister of Marian's friend Marlborough is a cripple; later it is suggested that she has two heads, and when she finally appears at the end of the book, she is neither a cripple nor two-headed, she simply has the head of a wolf! This kind of alternative causality doesn't detract from our experience of the book one bit; instead it illustrates the process by which Carrington produced the novel, layering successive ideas, one on top of the other. As the narrative self-corrects, it is a sheer pleasure to follow the mysterious flow of the unfolding story.

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In old age a person becomes eccentric. This appears to be a natural law of development, once adapting to society is no longer essential, and the paths of the individual and the community start to diverge. Perhaps old age is actually the only time in life when we can finally be ourselves, without worrying about the demands of others or conforming to the social norms that we have been constantly instructed to follow. At last the adolescent obligation to belong to one group or another ceases to apply.

That is why the philosophy of eccentricity expressed in *The Hearing Trumpet* is connected with age. It can be treated as a special message from the old to the young, going against the current of time. We must do eccentric things. Where everyone is doing This, we must do That. While the whole center is noisily establishing its order, we shall remain on the periphery—we won't let ourselves be drawn into the center, we shall ignore it and surpass it.

Thus eccentricity is posited as a spontaneous, joyful rebellion against everything that's established and regarded as normal and self-evident. It is a challenge flung in the face of conformity and hypocrisy.

Ultimately, *The Hearing Trumpet* is a book that brings great delight. Let us enjoy the opportunity to share in this wild tale about an old lady who couldn't go to Lapland, so Lapland had to come to her.

—OLGA TOKARCZUK
Translated from the Polish by Antonia Lloyd-Jones