

❧ INTRODUCTION ❧

BY HELEN BYATT

It seems perverse that a beautiful and resilient woman in her early thirties or forties should identify with a “drooling sack of decomposing flesh.” Leonora Carrington’s main character in *The Hearing Trumpet*, Marian Leatherby, is ninety-two years old, a deaf and toothless “monster of Glamis.” “At first glance this promises to be another geriatric novel,” commented the reviewer in the *TLS*, on the publication of the English language edition. However, this was not a lasting impression.

Luckily, perversity is startling rather than soporific. Carrington saw distinct advantages in accelerating the aging process: “I wanted to appear like a nice old lady so that I could poke fun at sinister things.”¹ In fact, Marian Leatherby does not look like a sweet old lady; she sports a little beard, of which she is rather proud. A hairy chin is a crone’s accessory, so age is obviously no barrier to the quirky qualities of a Carrington heroine. With the help of a magical horn — the hearing trumpet — she also has extrasensory perception. Marian Leatherby is not just a crone, she is a kind of medium.

People who visited Carrington at the time, were compelled to see magic in the surroundings she had created for herself. One visitor to her studio called it “the most dream-saturated place I know,”

¹ Interview with Germaine Rouvre, 3 August 1977. Broadcast by France Culture, 17 October 1977.

whilst another described her study, with its apocalyptic disorder of boxes and jars overflowing with aromatics and spices, the dusty books, pictures of fantastic animals with human eyes, and the strange dolls with birds' heads hanging from the ceiling, as the den of a "sixteenth-century magician."²

Leonora Carrington spent much of her youth amongst the Surrealists who were impressed by *La Sorcière*, Michelet's study of witches, and André Breton in particular associated his view of a witch's creative powers with the female muse. Women writers earlier in the century, such as Laura Riding and Sylvia Townsend Warner, had woven their work with witchcraft. By seeing herself as a crone-like muse, Leonora Carrington acknowledges the past as far back as witches have existed; she also presages the future and the feminist movement's adoption of the witch as a persona for the powerful and independent woman.

The Hearing Trumpet is Carrington's longest work and spans past, present and future. Her personal experiences and fears appear in all her fiction, but perhaps the sense of a writer collecting memories and weighing them up is stronger here than elsewhere. Her audacious voice sounds a distinctive and witty presence, rubbing against the seriousness of the book's quest for ultimate knowledge. The landscape is not just a personal one; *The Hearing Trumpet* is a melting pot for an eclectic mass of images, symbols and allusion, Carrington's version of Jung's collective unconscious. Far from being a repetition of a withered theme, it is actually a writhing, dense thicket that faint-hearted readers would be forgiven for not daring to enter.

Carrington wrote *The Hearing Trumpet* in Mexico, in English.

² Ibid.

After years of circulation underground, it was temporarily lost, and then published in French in 1974. Her arrival in Mexico in 1942 concluded a long and traumatic saga in her life. As a means of escape from an asylum and her family, she made a marriage of convenience during the Second World War to a Mexican diplomat and friend of Picasso's, Renato Leduc. The story of the mental breakdown that she experienced shortly after her lover, Max Ernst, was interned for the second time by the Nazis is recorded in *Down Below*. By the time she was reunited with Ernst it was too late for their relationship. They saw each other in New York where many Surrealists had fled, but the meetings were very painful. During this time Carrington wrote "White Rabbits," "Waiting" and "The Seventh Horse," short stories which put across a wild and disturbing disquiet, though the very act of writing them was purging. Perhaps Leonora Carrington is reflecting on this time when she describes Marian Leatherby as someone who has spent a great deal of her life waiting, most of it fruitless.

Mexico, then, was a new world. André Breton called it the Surrealist place *par excellence*. Carrington is more ambivalent — though she stayed for over thirty years and both her sons were born there. "I felt at home, but as one does in a familiar swimming pool that has sharks in it."³ This unease allows for an odd piece of musing about England, the country Carrington had left so resolutely as a young woman: "I never could understand this country and now I am beginning to be afraid that I never will get back to the north," says Marian Leatherby, as "souvenirs from the far past rose like bubbles" into her mind, of the English scented gardens of Carrington's childhood, cherry trees, meadows, the song of the

³ Ibid.

thrush. Carrington is not a naturally nostalgic exile; she is often quite cutting about the English, while much of Mexico pervades her life and work.

There, she visited Frida Kahlo's studio but did not move in Kahlo's and Diego Rivera's circles. Instead, her main group of friends were fellow European Surrealist exiles, among them her second husband the Hungarian photographer "Chiqui" Weisz, the poet Benjamin Peret, and his wife Remedios Varo, the painter. "Remedios's presence in Mexico changed my life," she said.⁴ They had first met in Paris at the home of André Breton, but it was in Mexico that their friendship became so close.

Both women laughed and cackled together, pursuing a series of practical jokes. Like Carmella Velasquez in *The Hearing Trumpet* (clearly the red-haired Varo), they wrote letters to names picked at random from the telephone directory.

Such benign wickedness embodied more serious pursuits. In the *Second Surrealist Manifesto*, André Breton saw the Surrealists' imagination as similar to the alchemists' in that they both attempted to liberate the mind, but for women painters like Léonor Fini, Varo and Carrington, it forms part of a more complex geography of the occult, myth and mystic belief. (Léonor Fini remarks that though Carrington is a "true revolutionary" she was never a Surrealist in any case.) Together Carrington and Varo explored realms beyond their daily lives. Their spiritual inquiries included Tibetan Tantrism — Carrington was to study under a lama in Canada in the mid-seventies — the works of Jung, and an interest in the Russian mystic, Gurdjieff.

⁴ Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 194.

Another person interested in mysticism, though perhaps of a more Californian kind, was Edward James who “spent much of his time constructing an extended series of architectural follies in an isolated patch of the Mexican jungle.”⁵ Carrington met him in 1944 and besides being her friend, James became the most prominent collector of her paintings. (Carrington had never imagined they would be bought or shown.) The illegitimate grandson of Edward VII and an aristocratic eccentric, James has similarities with Marlborough in *The Hearing Trumpet*, Marian Leatherby’s other familiar. Marlborough’s appearance in an Ark amidst ice, echoes a story James tells about his father who sailed to Greenland in a yacht called the Lancashire Witch (quite coincidentally Carrington came from Lancashire).⁶ Whilst the boat was anchored amongst the ice floes in midsummer, his father bought a stuffed polar bear. Edward James later gave this bear to Salvador Dali who dyed it purple and inserted drawers in its chest for keeping cutlery. Whether Leonora Carrington saw the bear in Dali’s kitchen or even heard the story from James himself hardly matters. It contributes to a mass of personal detail and public myth which provides a three-dimensional backdrop to Carrington’s work and fuels the imaginations of readers who are looking for the marvelous there.

If Leonora Carrington inspires readers to build upon her fiction, she retains a sly sense of proportion herself. Both Carrington and Varo took their spiritual explorations very seriously, but they journeyed through them at a remove. Gurdjieff was called “spurious” in the Surrealist journal *Medium*. Carrington does not dismiss

⁵ George Melly, Introduction to *Swans Reflecting Elephants: My Early Years*, by Edward James (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982).

⁶ *Ibid.*

him so abruptly, but through the character of Dr. Gambit in *The Hearing Trumpet*, he is parodied to pieces.

Marian Leatherby suffers the fate of many old ladies and is abandoned by her family and put in a home — Lightsome Hall, which is run on Gurdjieffian lines by the Well of Light Brotherhood. Gurdjieff founded the Institute for Harmonious Development where he practised the main tenet of his philosophy, objective observation. Katherine Mansfield went there and Gurdjieff set the dying writer to work peeling potatoes, just as Dr. Gambit has his old ladies peeling vegetables in the kitchen. Dr. Gambit lacks Gurdjieff's spirit however; Gurdjieff's own personal habits would have made the "disgusting acrobatics" of the Abbess Doña Rosalinda, Dr. Gambit's opposite character in *The Hearing Trumpet*, pale into insignificance. The walls of his room had to be washed down daily.

Institutions encapsulate Carrington's dislike of being shut in and contained. She was brought up a Catholic and attended convent schools but her unconventional behaviour was termed by the nuns as mental deficiency and she was expelled. The staff of a sanatorium in Spain also despaired after her repeated attempts to climb on the roof to be nearer the stars. Even the huge family mansion she grew up in — Crookhey Hall — seemed like a stagnated institution; in her novella *Little Francis* it is described as a place smelling of death and gloomy like a nasty church, whilst her painting "Crookhey Hall" (1947) shows a figure fleeing the building. She is an almost translucent white, a ghostly figure who really belongs to another world. She resembles other creatures who fly through a visionary underworld in Carrington's paintings and stories.

If Carrington physically escaped from institutions, mentally she answered her fear of their restrictions by impelling them onto another plain. "Institutions like the far north are also cut off from

civilization,” says Marian Leatherby commenting on their inhumane aspects but also immediately associating them with Lapland, home, according to Carrington, of the “most magical people in the world.”⁷ These walled places are internalized, becoming maps with signposts pointing towards a spiritual goal.

In *Down Below*, asylum buildings take on a “hermetic significance.” Among them is a green and fertile garden, the colour of the philosopher’s stone. In the golden sun room Leonora sees herself bathing in an alchemical bath. “Down Below” itself is a hut which is also an underworld through which she can pass once she has knowledge. Though similar alchemical symbols exist in *Lightsome Hall* — the kitchen, the tower, the bee pond for example — the outhouses are taken from more personal, lighthearted references. The buildings shaped as toadstools, boots and birthday cakes conjure up Lewis Carroll and nursery rhymes. There are also ordinary bungalows which “steady the flight of fancy”: perhaps the need to escape is not so burning as in the earlier book. The mind which snatched at objects in a frenzy, imbuing them with more significant meanings in *Down Below* is more of a quirky collector in *The Hearing Trumpet*.

References are reworked however. Both Carrington’s and Varo’s spirits were too independent to absorb passively anything passed down to them. They both rejected Catholicism. “What you grow up with you are given dogmatically, what you find you conquer yourself,” said Varo. Carrington’s rebellion began when she was young, and early stories such as “As They Rode Along the Edge,” sniff out “the Odour of Sanctity” that she finds distasteful. Here, St. Alexander’s perverse penance of wearing underwear

⁷ Gloria Orenstein, *Symposium* vol. 42:4 (Winter 1989).

filled with scorpions and adders is adversely contrasted with the half-human and wildly sexual heroine, who has a rampant affair with a wild boar.

In her later play, *The Invention of Mole*, a sanctimonious archbishop is cooked in a stew because he declares religious activities “as such” are reserved for the clergy. “Every time the public does participate actively in the ceremonies, then discord, disputes and confusion arise.” His discrimination exemplifies what Carrington really dislikes about all religions: “I do not know of any religion that does not declare women to be feeble-minded, unclean, generally inferior to males.”⁸ In *The Hearing Trumpet* Marian Leatherby asks, “why was Eve blamed for everything?”

Eastern religions seemed more attractive because they focused on balance between the sexes and because the dividing lines between the dimensions of existence were not drawn so sharply. Edward James introduced Leonora Carrington to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* which, according to Jung, “offers an intelligible philosophy addressed to human beings rather than gods.” Many of its ideas about reincarnation and rebirth emerge in Carrington’s writing and painting, but ultimately she rejects any one rigid frame of thought. James comments “She is not an inflexible believer in the soul’s reincarnation” and has never “been dogmatically for or against any religious credo or philosophical idea (unless it be in the cause of women’s equality to man, or even superiority).”⁹ Carrington ultimately finds even Eastern religions male-centred. “You look down one day to see that they have bound your feet.”

⁸ *Leonora Carrington: A Retrospective Exhibition* (New York: Center for Inter-American Relations, 1975).

⁹ *Ibid.*

The Hearing Trumpet contains two religious worlds. Externally we see the supposedly religious community at Lightsome Hall in Santa Brigida. It is a community over-interested in manipulating its inmates. Inlaid inside this — stories within a story — are the ancient texts Marian is given to read, with their commentary on Doña Rosalinda, the Abbess of the Convent of Santa Barbara de Tartarus. Tartarus was the Greek mythological underworld, and so Carrington has created another world, with its own religion that reflects Lightsome Hall as if through a distorted mirror. Any semblance of restraint or control here is shattered. The Abbess, Doña Rosalinda, is pre-Christian — she plays with unbaptised children and, like Michelet's sorceress, she makes herbal remedies. Doña Rosalinda gallops fearlessly through the night on a quest for ultimate knowledge. Like many Carrington heroines she has the hybrid energy of a woman who is nearly an animal. On the other hand, Dr. Gambit plods on, searching for "even a faint glimmer of Truth" but is cowed by what the daily papers might say about the way he runs his Institution.

Dr. Gambit's room is "stuffed to suffocation point" with dead emblems — "brass Buddhas and marble Christs." Opening out on to the heavens, Doña Rosalinda's octagonal room bristles with books bound in animal skins and engraved rhinoceros horn. There is something excessive about it that makes her libido seem to balance on a hair's breadth between being liberating and fearful. Letting go of all inhibition is dangerous, as Carrington knew from the horror of her own madness. This knife-edge is often drawn through sexuality in Carrington's fiction. In "The Sisters" a pastiche of romantic dreaminess in a moonlit garden nestles with nightmare. A scene of orgiastic passion is daubed with decadence that smells of rotting death:

Drusille, naked to her breasts, had her arms around Jumart's neck. The heat of the wine warmed her skin like a flame, she gleamed with sweat. Her hair moved like black vipers, the juice of the pomegranate dripped from her half-open mouth.

Meat, wine, cakes, all half-eaten, were heaped around them in extravagant abundance. Huge pots of jam spilled on the floor made a sticky lake around their feet. The carcass of a peacock decorated Jumart's head. His beard was full of sauces, fish heads, crushed fruit.

Drusille is a series of dangerous women — Medusa, Persephone, Melusine.

In *The Hearing Trumpet*, the opposing male and female forces of sterility and fecundity are brought together inside the central motif, the quest for the Holy Grail. It is not a head-on clash; the novel is not a separatist celebration of a totally female world. Rather, it is like a series of Chinese boxes, each containing another version of the myth. The story of the Grail itself provides plenty of scope for this; as a symbol for the quest for supreme mystical experience, it has permeated pre-Christian and Christian culture and has been used as a literary metaphor from Malory to Eliot. Though on one level Carrington is undoubtedly out to reclaim its meaning for women, on another, she is a muse who has an eclectic eye for stories, references and allusions. She has said that fiction is a way of making your own personal geography, hypnogogically, and never writes on a two-dimensional track.

As a narrative, the novel reveals four different quests for the Grail that cleverly slot inside each other. Doña Rosalinda's passionate and mysterious quest is glimpsed through the ancient manuscripts that Marian reads; Marian's own search is comically extrapolated when she falls into a cauldron and emerges with the knowledge of the Triple Goddess; an odd band of senile old ladies,

magicians, poets and animals set out to reclaim the Grail collectively; and finally, there is the author's own search. In all Carrington's writing, one glimpses Marian Leatherby's sense of perpetually trying to solve an insoluble mathematical problem. Carrington says she was born in mysterious circumstances, "mathematically."¹⁰

The medieval Christians plundered the Grail myth from the Celts, or at least, that is the attitude struck here. The male characters tend to be caught up in the Christian versions of the story, while the females belong to an earlier matriarchal version associated with fertility rights. Marian Leatherby's ineffectual son is called Galahad; Galahad was also the virgin Christian knight who claimed the Grail. As a character, he is dismissed early on in the narrative, and the story he pertains to is also written out. One of the most famous Christian accounts of the quest of the Grail, Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, is discarded with a pun when the character Maude is murdered, for Maude is Arthur in disguise, an imposter. Carrington has neatly reversed ownership of the myth.

The versions of the quest that remain are a compound of various pre-Christian sources: a compound of the fairy tales and Celtic stories that Carrington heard from her Irish nanny and read in childhood books. Robert Graves's book, *The White Goddess* (1948), was a revelation to her, and many of the myths surrounding the mother goddess and the muse from his book, surface in *The Hearing Trumpet*. (Carrington must have preferred Graves's vision of the muse to that of the Surrealists — the *femme-enfant*. She said recently that she had never had time to be that.)¹¹

¹⁰ Leonora Carrington, *Jazzmathematics or Introduction to the Wonderful Process of Painting*.

¹¹ Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, 66.

White goddesses, female guardians of the Grail, people the novel as though it was a platform for them to gather together across great chronological and cultural distances. Many of them appear in her short stories and paintings — the white goddess of the Sidhe (pale Celtic people who live underground), Epona the horse goddess, Icelandic shamans, the Greek goddess Diana, and the horned moon goddess Isis, the great castrator of Lawrencian fiction. Taking a central place is Venus, the goddess of love, but like Isis, her love is dangerous. Graves explains that she “fatally courted Anchises... to the hum of bees.” Here and elsewhere in Carrington’s work, she is associated with an unrestrained appetite; her worshippers are wild. It makes one think twice about all the old ladies in *The Hearing Trumpet* quietly praying to her.

Contrary to expectations, Carrington’s purpose is not to create an overpowering, conglomerate image of deadly women. Venus’s association with bees in *The Hearing Trumpet* does not point towards a castrator, but rather to the magic pneuma, a union of male and female, the union that was “the sweet means of reconciliation of opposites and the unveiling of the marvellous” for the male Surrealists. For when bees get together, when “a pink and a blue universe cross each other in particles like two swarms of bees and when a pair of different coloured bees hit each other miracles happen.”

Though Carrington undoubtedly shares the androgynous ideal, she serves it with a pinch of salt. Santa Brigida “creeps with ovaries,” but it is populated with bald and bearded crones, and cross-dressing is all the rage in Santa Barbara as well. Nothing is too serious for slapstick.

The androgyne created out of such a union is also an alchemical symbol. The alchemists, too, were interested in the search for

the sacred pneuma. *The Hearing Trumpet* is colour-coded alchemically, the three colours of the alchemical process — black, white, and gold or red — all have significance. The Black characters — the ancient alchemist Zosimos, Venus's priestess Christabel Burns, as well as the female initiator of Doña Rosalinda's last rites — are the "nigredo," the blackening stage. The out-of-season snow which covers Marian Leatherby's world is the second stage, the "whitening," a process which leaves a world populated by sexless crones, animals, and Taliessin, the Celtic poet, who appears in myths drinking the sacred broth of the Grail. It is questionable whether the final gold stage is ever reached.

The cauldron represents the alchemist's oven where the "whitening" takes place, as well as being the Celtic symbol for the Grail itself. Cauldrons make frequent appearances in Carrington's work, they sit comfortably between the daily and domestic world and the other world. Marian Leatherby falls into one, and for a split moment sees a vision of the Triple Goddess, an image which seems to bind together the vast range of allusions that have gone before — she sees Venus, herself, Doña Rosalinda and all the disparate sources they are drawn from. It is as though the outer walls of the Chinese box are momentarily crystal clear, revealing an infinite packing of public and private myths. Carrington's vision is not set in stone. It is impossible, and not really desirable, to dissect every reference or allusion, for they all cohabit marvellously. Part of the pleasure of reading *The Hearing Trumpet* is watching the continually shifting waters move over invisible depths.

Marian's vision is a cacophony, rather than a crescendo. Carrington is never momentarily serious, she chips away at her own quest. Marian Leatherby watches her feet bob around in the cauldron and worries about the souls of the carrot and onions in

there with her.¹² Other moments of alchemical revelation are also vaguely absurd and smack of the improbabilities of fairy tale, rather than the earnestness of alternative religion. Doña Rosalinda herself swells into a grotesque balloon and pops. Being eaten, as Marian Leatherby is, is a symbol of rebirth which Carrington uses less kindly in other stories. In “A Mexican Fairy Tale,” a character is told not to worry when he is chopped up like meat stew because “this is only a first death.” This drastic abruptness goes back to the black humour of her earlier stories.

In *The Hearing Trumpet* alchemical cooking is definitely domestic. There is something comfortingly homely at the heart of the novel which allows the reader to live dangerously without being frightened. The alchemist’s kitchen is very ordinary at Lightsome Hall. Fudge is made there. Eating is comforting; the old ladies’ orgies consist of gorging themselves on chocolate biscuits. These childish delights ward off fear; Leonora Carrington says she faints if she sees blood, but that her fiction turns fear into comedy. If she wrote about someone else being poisoned by a chocolate it would make her laugh, but if it happened to her it would not be funny at all.¹³

Humour brings Carrington’s writing almost back down (or up?) to earth. It is an essential ingredient in her modern-day myth, making the bizarre or frightening easier to swallow. It also discourages the muse who might otherwise take herself too seriously. Carmella’s misplaced machismo, with her machine guns and nail files, is not just a Greenham-like joke against the male world that

¹² Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹³ Interview with Germaine Rouvre.

invented the atom bomb, it is also a kindly joke about the fantastical imaginations of elderly crones: imaginations which are full of pent-up, wild energy; extrasensory imaginations searching beyond the barriers of daily life. They cackle resoundingly.

LONDON, 1990

Thanks to Marina Warner for her help.