The Hearing Trumpet, Leonora Carrington, Penguin Books, 2005

Introduction

People who write about Leonora Carrington (and far too little has been written about her extraordinary art and writings) tend to dwell on the life. They revel in her sheer unexpectedness. She's the nineteen-year-old English debutante who ran away to join the Surrealists, the girl who arrived at a posh Parisian art party wearing only a sheet, then scandalized the party by dropping it and standing naked in the middle of the social circlings. She sat at a restaurant table and covered her own bare feet with mustard. She served cold tapioca she'd dyed with squid ink to guests as caviar. She suddenly stood up in a room full of visitors, went to take a shower fully clothed, and returned dripping to sit on the sofa again. Visitors to her house might wake up in the morning to a breakfast of omelette cooked by her and full of their own hair which she'd cut while they slept. The short biographies of Carrington on recent publications of her fiction include one of the most gloriously unlikely and unimaginable sentences of any author biography: "Subjected to horrifying treatment in a Madrid asylum, she was rescued by her nanny who arrived in a submarine."

Are the stories apochryphal or true? The story goes that at seventeen, after being photographed at the Ritz at her coming-out, then being paraded "on the marriage market" (as she put it herself), in London, at the court of George V in 1936, she sat in

the royal enclosure at Ascot and steadfastly ignored everyone while she read *Eyeless in Gaza* by Aldous Huxley. A girl. Reading. And such a scandalous book. "In those days, if you were a woman, you were not allowed to bet. You weren't even allowed to the paddock, where they show the horses. So I took a book. I mean, what would you do?"[1] Her own rewrite of this time into story form can be found in her early short story "The Debutante", where a girl who has befriended a hyena she meets at the zoo and who teaches her to speak French (in exchange for being taught hyena language back) decides to have the hyena take her place at her debutante ball. "I found some gloves to hide her hands, which were too hairy to look like mine."[2] The story begins in a practical-trick hilarity and ends calmly but bloodily. Its subject is the incipient violence in any real social or self-change. Its stimulus is an unapologetic wildness.

Animals, the wild, and a mix of real and imaginary creatures saturate her writing and her art. Her paintings, dark and colourful, are full of chatting social animals, strange creature-like people, many-armed lizard-snakes, creatures half-human-half-wolf, people turning into birds (or is it birds turning into people?); masked gnomic creatures stand waiting in a space that's part recognizable and part fantasy, somewhere liminal between benign and malign. The paintings evoke a theatricality which reveals the animal nature of humans, the social nature of animals and the magical nature where these meet and become hybrid, often over ritual meals on altar-like tables where the food looks peculiarly alive, and food *is*, literally, alive in her stories. In "Uncle Sam Carrington" the narrator (on her way, incidentally, to meet some high-class ladies who like to stand in their kitchens secretly whipping vegetables while yelling at them about how you can't get into Heaven without wearing a corset) comes upon a moonlit food fight – between two cabbages.[3] "They were tearing each other's leaves off with such ferocity that soon there was nothing but torn leaves everywhere and no cabbages."

Carrington's art is characterized by a dark playfulness; a revelation of unexpected and often spiritedly belligerent life; a

profound, magical and yet quite dinner-table-practical, other-worldly vision; a rejection of standard social and spiritual authority; and a collision of arcane and often stubbornly uninterpretable symbols, some from alchemy or tarot, a range of different mythologies and healing traditions as well as Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, Irish folklore, Cabbala, astrology. But all her life she has maintained an independence from categorization or fixed meaning, "in an adamant refusal to explicate any aspect of her creative production, declaring that her work should speak for itself," as Susan Aberth puts it.[4] Possibly it's this typical Carrington stubbornness about things being anything other than their plain mysterious selves that sends critics towards the life to associate figures in her art and writing with something more simple-seeming and biographical. It's not surprising. Truly the life is remarkable.

She was born in April 1917 into a wealthy northern English family, her father a textile industrialist, her mother an Irish doctor's daughter (Carrington liked to emphasize her mother's gypsy roots). She grew up mostly at the gothic-looking stately home, Crookhey Hall, near Lancaster, the only girl in a family of boys, looked after by their Irish nanny who, with Carrington's mother, gave her her first love of Irish folklore and stories of the *Sidhe*. But she spent much of her girlhood rebelling against both her social class and any institutional rule: she was expelled from Roman Catholic boarding school after boarding school because the nuns found her "mentally deficient"; in reality they were disturbed by her strange propensity for the miraculous, by the basic insolence of a child who questioned why two and two came to four, and particularly by her unsettling ability not just to write with both hands but worse, to mirror-write – to write backwards as well as forwards.

Her family sent the problem child away to learn better manners at Miss Penrose's boarding school in Florence, where she constantly visited the museums and galleries, amazed by Ucello, Pisanello and Archimbaldo. "Finished" in Paris, launched as an eligible debutante at her own party at the Ritz,

she announced to her parents' utter dismay that she wanted to study art. Her father suggested she take up fox-terrier breeding instead. She chose to change herself – from rich rebellious daughter to impoverished art student. She enrolled in Amédée Ozenfant's new London Academy; Ozenfant, a Purist (an offshoot of Cubism), made her draw the same apple for six months, until the apple "had become a kind of mummy."[5] Her meeting, at the age of nineteen, and her consequent love-affair with the Surrealist painter Max Ernst, who was married and in his mid-forties and whose paintings she much admired, resulted in her running away from England to Paris. "Not with Max. Alone. I always did my running away alone."[6] Carrington had also met and been befriended by Andre Breton, Roland Penrose and his partner, the photographer Lee Miller, who took some of the most beautiful portraits of the young Leonora. A photo taken by Penrose in 1937 shows Miller and Carrington and two other friends in a social pose, all leaning beautifully on each other – but fast asleep, as if suddenly enchanted, still holding their teacups up.

She became an instant Surrealist wild-child and muse. "She was, in effect, a kind of embodiment of all that the movement held dear in its women: young, beautiful, vivacious, uninhibited, and in possession of an imagination that knew no limits."[7] But the notion of being anyone's muse would make Carrington, who has always seen herself as singular, and whose urge towards singularity has marked both her art and her life, snort with derision. Her time with the Surrealists was equally constraining and liberating; she may have made the perfect objectified *femme enfant* and *sorcière*, but at the same time the Surrealists showed her art at pivotal Surrealist exhibitions along with the work of Meret Oppenheim, Remedios Varo (whose friendship would be crucial to Carrington later in her life), Eileen Agar, and several other women artists.

In France between 1937 and 1940, first in Paris and then living a paradisal country life with Ernst in St-Martin d'Ardèche, she began to write her first stories in French, which were then

circulated in Surrealist publications. The stories were an utterly original mix of recognizable, literal and surreal, like fairy-stories invaded by a box of walking fireworks: stories of a furred woman who can converse with cats, of pale saints and priests who promise useless nourishment to starving people and murder their desires for money, and stories of a much more practical kind of life after death – a skeleton, for instance, happy to be liberated from his pesky flesh because "the mosquitoes didn't bite him any more." But on the outbreak of World War II, Ernst, a German, was arrested as an enemy alien by the French. Carrington took him paints, so he could work in prison. Freed for a short while, he was soon interned again by the Germans after the invasion of France (he was on their list of artists practising "Degenerate Art").

At the age of 23, abroad and alone, Carrington stopped eating and became mentally unstable. A trip to Spain in search of a visa for Ernst ended in her incarceration in a Spanish mental institution for psychosis, where she was treated with Cardiazol, a drug which induced spasms not unlike later ECT procedure. Out of this time came her painful, deadpan account of her madness, *Down Below*.

"It was very much like having been dead," Carrington later told Marina Warner.[8] Escaping the terrifying institution and outwitting the minders sent by her embarrassed parents, Carrington fled to the USA and finally settled in Mexico City, where many of her Surrealist friends, having sought immunity, were now living. There she married the Hungarian photographer Imre Weisz, who'd narrowly escaped Hitler's anti-semitism. Mexico, a place happy to associate spirituality with magic, suited her in many ways. She met up again with her friend, the Surrealist painter Remedios Varo, and their art blossomed through this friendship, which is celebrated in *The Hearing Trumpet* – Carmella, the heroine's friend, is clearly based on the striking Varo. Several other *roman à clef* connections can be made, as they can throughout Carrington's writing (for example in *The Hearing Trumpet*, Dr Gambit can arguably

be read as her parody of the Russian mystic guru Gurdjieff, and Marlborough as the Californian mystic Edward James).

But any reading of the "real" into Carrington's writing is particularly relevant when you allow the Surrealism she lived through to have a different kind of actuality, one also clearly traceable in a glance at the work of her contemporary, Lee Miller, whose 1930s Surrealist-inspired photography gave way to the real-surreal recordings, for example in 1945, of the bodies of the piled-up victims of Dachau, or the daughter of the Leipzig Burgomeister who has committed suicide, dead, as if asleep, on a big leather couch, with a thin film of dust over her face. All of Carrington's writing had taken issue with the surreality of the real, and in her first and very short novel, *The Stone Door*, written in the early '40s, the strange and vibrant initiations and rebirths take place against a pervasive set of war images and recognizable images of Jewish Holocaust institutionalisation.

In this kind of light, the classic *The Hearing Trumpet* is a post-war post-nuclear vision, and one with ramifications in the global-warming era. Its reprint could not be more timely.

Some sources suggest *The Hearing Trumpet* was first written in Mexico City in the early 1960s. A more recent source suggests it was a lot earlier – 1950, when Carrington was in her early thirties; Susan Aberth, in the beautifully illustrated *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, goes on to say: "Carrington told me that she wrote the entire book while seated in the Cafe Garibaldi in the Plaza de los Mariachas in the midst of cacophonous noise."[9] Carrington's friend, Albert Lewin, attempted to have the book published in New York, but couldn't interest publishers in the subject matter – "a 92-year-old English feminist held captive in a medieval Spanish castle turned into a nursing home."[10]

This startling, light-footed, funny and delightful novel brimming with energy and inventiveness, a book whose root, for all that, is still deep in the horror Carrington recorded only seven

years before in *Down Below*, was first lost, then found, then published in French translation, as *Le Cornet Acoustique*, in Paris in 1974. Its original English version saw publication in 1976. It is her most sustained writing, her most mature written achievement – and in its own way a statement on maturity, and the meanings of maturity.

Marian Leatherby, its heroine, is ninety-two and decrepit. The modern world has made her invisible and inaudible to her family, who despise her. Her friend Carmella gives her the gift of a huge hearing trumpet, which allows her simply to hear what's there: "ordinary conversation became quite audible to my ears." What she overhears is her family deciding to pack her off to a Christian institution for old ladies, run by the Well of Light Brotherhood who are "financed by a prominent American cereal company" – traditional religion in Carrington's analysis never comes without money behind its power. Lightsome Hall and its environs are a gross childish deception; its old ladies live in nursery-rhyme houses "to trick the old ladies' families that we led a childish and peaceful life." Its teaching, by the ineffectual Dr Gambit, is based on finding "the inner Meaning of Christianity" and is a mix of cod-therapy talk and religious salesmanship. It is a place of fake spiritual voices, hilariously stupid ritualising and apparitions for the sake of attention-getting. But over and above it all, a strange portrait of a "nun with a leer" overlooks the meal-table, winking with "a most disconcerting mixture of mockery and malevolence" at the unsatisfied old ladies below her, and Marian Leatherby becomes, instead, an initiate to a different, better belief system, where this unnatural-seeming nun reveals things as excitingly differently natured. After this, Marian witnesses a murder, becomes a kind of ancient anarchist, and helps stage a revolution. She finds out what it means to be born again. She learns how to survive in the real wild world.

From the very beginning Leonora Carrington indicates the surreality of everyday existence. The old lady's maid prefers to talk to her cats, not her children, to whom she never talks,

"although I think she likes them, in her own way." Marian herself has a "short grey beard which conventional people would find repulsive. Personally I find it rather gallant." Is this heroine a surreally bearded lady, or could it simply be the description of every old lady's chin? Her family sits round a fire lit by an electric log. What could be more surreal? Finally, the novel's more enlightened characters are astonished at the surreality of "millions and millions of people" all obeying "a sickly collection of gentlemen that call themselves 'Government'!" They wonder if it wouldn't be more "pleasant and healthy for human beings to have no authority whatsoever. They would have to think for themselves, instead of always being told what to do and think by advertisements, cinemas, policemen and parliaments." They, like the novel, advocate a very simple anarchy – one of independent thought.

Fundamentally, *The Hearing Trumpet* is a book about profound disconnection; at its centre are people unable to hear each other, or unwilling to. It's about how we hear, and how we don't, or can't, and it's about what happens when people can hear or see differently. "I try to empty myself of images which have made me go blind," as Carrington once said.[11] It is almost as if the book – which reads on its parodic surface like an Agatha Christie domestic mystery, but one melted, dissolved by extreme heat, into something unthinkably other, and reconstructed as the casebook of an alchemist – wishes to jettison all preconceptions, all notions of accepted and "civilised" narratives. In it, for instance, Englishness is nothing but an old woman's ghostly dream of youth where a charming though dismissive young man who has called round for a game of tennis "has dissolved into thin air and I can see the rhododendrons through your stomach. It's not that you are dead or anything dramatic like that, it is simply that you are fading away and I can't even remember your name. I remember your white flannels better than I can remember you." Still, it's a novel whose social graces are indelibly, delightfully English; its down-to-earth prose voice denies the rarified; and Marian's own voice

keeps things splendidly commonsensical; hard not to trust a narrator who says something as assured as "I never eat meat as I think it is wrong to deprive animals of their life when they are so difficult to chew anyway," or graced with such politeness, even at what seems the end of the world, as to be able to say "it would really have been a very pleasant gathering if we had not been menaced by starvation at a future date."

More than anything else, though, it works to revive its reader's own senses, suggesting by its combination of funniness, charm and narrative ingenuity that you "eject the poison from your system with some hearty mirth." It's also very concerned, as Carrington always is in her art, with "creative cooking" and with the political and transformatory power in the domestic space. It invests religion with orgiastic appetite. It questions how and what we eat; its anarchic revolt and its alternative religion both take place round the preparation of food. Its final act of rebirth is an act of self-devouring that sets the self free.

Its own recurring symbol is the "fatal hearing trumpet", which Carrington's heroine compares quite early in the book to the Angel Gabriel's apocalyptic trumpet, "although I believe he is supposed to blow his and not listen through it, that is, according to the Bible, on the last day when humanity rises to ultimate catastrophe." Not only does *The Hearing Trumpet*, in its seemingly tiny sphere of doddering old ladies arguing about their own hierarchy, deal with people whose power complexes are "like Hitler"; not only does it chart, in the shape of the good Carmella, a healthy anarchic paranoia in a post-atomic age whose end is terrifying and apocalyptic. More, it is full of respect for nature and its creatures, and full of warnings about a people who've forgotten the natural. Part of its riddle is to alert us to the fact that "the poles were changing ... the effects of such a change would be disastrous to many inhabitants of the planet."

"People under seventy and over seven are very unreliable if they are not cats." *The Hearing Trumpet* is also very keen on unexpected maxims, and the rewriting of cliched maxims. "One

can never be sure of the future." In it, Carrington rewrites the future. She rewrites our expectations of people over seventy, and of old ladies generally (not just with the glorious Marian Leatherby, but in one case the most conventional of old Lightsome ladies is revealed as drug-pushing, cross-dressed, and quite the opposite of a lady). She rewrites the legend of the Holy Grail into a legend of "unholy curiosity". She liberally, ecstatically, rewrites swatches of both the New and Old Testaments, constructing an alternative, earth-friendly, female-centric spirituality instead. She rewrites "diseased imagination" into a new afterlife myth. She rewrites the known or recognized world into something otherworldly. She rewrites the hearing trumpet from apocalyptic sign to the accessory of a good outlaw; there it is, near the end of the book, swinging on its cord "Robin Hood style" as (the rewritten, new-age old-age Maid) Marian reaches to adjust it.

Could Marian Leatherby's great age also be a reaction against Carrington's Surrealist objectification as astonishingly gifted child-woman? Probably, and probably Marian is a version of the crone of Celtic mythology, the wise old woman whose wisdom is the magic key to all the human ages and fertilities. Whitney Chadwick, writing about Carrington's paintings of the late 1980s, summed up her attraction to the figure: "she has rejected the ideals of youth and beauty that dominate both contemporary culture and most of the history of western painting ... the painting of aged and wrinkled faces – along with the restoration of knowledge and power to the elderly – are perfectly in keeping with Carrington's belief that unless women reclaim their power to affect the course of human life, there is little hope for civilisation."[12] In reality – and Carrington is at pains to point out Marian Leatherby's sore bones and gone teeth – old age is also a simple proof of the passing of time, the changing of things. "Time, as we all know, passes," as Marian says. (Time has even – and here briefly, Leonora Carrington's mask slips – made Surrealism respectable, because "even Buckingham Palace has a large reproduction of Magritte's

famous slice of ham with an eye peering out. It hangs, I believe, in the throne room," the debutante who fled to what she thought the opposite of respectable says, now witnessing the institutionalizing of what stood for her own wildness.)

But *The Hearing Trumpet* is a rewrite of time too – something which will either make of us a "terrible old carcass", or a renewed, rewritten self. It demands we perceive differently, and that we find life where we really didn't expect it. It asks its readers to allow the dark, allow the wild and rethink how power works. It is a work of massive optimism, in the end, as its "infuriated ecclesiastics and secret police" are "beaten back by the wolves"; as the inhabitants of its world wait for the new ice age to pass and the grass and flowers to come back.

Fifty-five years on, at the time of writing this introduction, Leonora Carrington is now almost the age of Marian Leatherby, and she is still a working artist; her most recent paintings and sculptures show people chasing birds, or turning into birds; people and animals standing in mysterious correspondence; a celebration of music between creatures and people which magically produces starred birds and strange otherworldly beings; a giant black dog holding the icon of a small person in its paw; a lizard-fish being punted like a boat by another bird-lizard-fish, carrying several other similar hybrids safely in its back.

They feature the same quest, the quest she's been on since she first (at the age of four, so the story goes), stood and drew her first horses on the stately walls of Crookhey Hall. She has been applying the natural and the wild directly to the walls of the institution ever since, with the remarkable ability to write a story forwards, backwards, in either hand, in any direction. Her instinct for how the story goes and her concern with how differently it might go have made for an art of oracular alternative worlds, a body of writing unlike anyone else's, and one of the most original, joyful, satisfying and quietly visionary novels of the twentieth century.

Ali Smith, 2005