

Leonora Carrington and the International Avant-garde

Edited by Jonathan P. Eburne
and Catriona McAra
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Reviewed by Caroline I. Harris

In a series of essays that reframe and problematize readings of the artist's paintings, graphic arts, and writings, *Leonora Carrington and the international avant-garde* offers a welcome take on its subject. A particular strength of the volume is its emphasis on the artist's literary works, including novels and short stories. In their introduction, editors Jonathan P. Eburne and Catriona McAra quickly move past a rehearsal of Carrington's life: English, born 1917; participated in the Surrealist movement in Paris; escaped Nazi-occupied France through Spain and Portugal; lived in Mexico City from 1945 until her death in 2011. The essays then forgo lengthy discussions of well-trodden mythopoetic paths like her relationship with Max Ernst or her incarceration in a Spanish mental institution. Instead, the texts provide fresh interpretations of well-studied works like the memoir *Down Below*; invitations to consider understudied examples, particularly of the artist's literary output; and startling re-readings (willful misreadings?) of Carrington's oeuvre through the lenses of radical feminism, posthumanism, and contemporary art practice.

Down Below, first published in 1944, chronicles Carrington's insanity diagnosis and her horrific incarceration in an asylum in Spain. The text has been normatively discussed in terms of André Breton's writings and Surrealist interest in madness. Natalya Lusty's "Experience and knowledge in *Down Below*," while acknowledging those precedents, sets aside the usual interpretations to consider the text through close readings of the works of physician, writer, and anthropologist Pierre Mabilie (to whom Carrington addressed the text). Mabilie worked as a surgeon in the Caribbean during World War II and the French government eventually named him Cultural Attaché to Haiti. His writings and theories

helped to shape the Surrealists' interests in science, hermetic systems, sociology, and anthropology. He, like Carrington, was a force in the redefinition of the movement toward a global context as its original adherents adjusted to their exile from Europe during World War II.

Lusty cites Mabilie's *Mirror of the Marvelous* (1940) in relation to *Down Below*, suggesting that his elaboration of the Surrealist term "the marvelous" as, in Lusty's definition, "a personal journey reconciling the inner self with the outside world and as a collective mythic knowledge," resonates with Carrington's account (64). At stake as well is Mabilie's sense that such a journey could be confronting, even harrowing. While devastating, Carrington's text acknowledges the transformative potential of her destructive experiences. She employs Mabilie's trope of the mirror as a means to connect her trauma to the outside world with the ultimate goal of creating a shared knowledge. Equally important for Lusty, Mabilie provided a model for Carrington to frame the war in terms of a fluidity between personal and communal anguish.

As Lusty's essay suggests, one of the goals of this volume is to shift the discussion of Carrington's work away from the anecdotal to a more intellectual approach and to explore her dynamic role as an intersecting point between European and Latin American modernism. After her arrival in the Americas, she became a vital participant in the Mexican avant-garde while playing a key part with the Surrealists-in-exile. She exhibited with the latter in New York, and *Down Below* first appeared in the magazine *VVV*, which was published in New York during 1942–44, and edited by David Hare in collaboration with Marcel Duchamp, André Breton, and Max Ernst.¹

In "Dissecting *The Holy Oily Body*: Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington and *El Santo Cuerpo Grasoso*," Tara Plunkett suggests a way to unpack Carrington's complex relationship to Surrealism and the Mexican avant-garde. *The Holy Oily Body* is a play, written circa 1947 by Carrington, Remedios Varo, one of her closest collaborators, and Hungarian photographer Kati Horna. Like Carrington, Varo was associated with

the Surrealist movement in Europe before moving to Mexico. The action unfolds in a court on mount 'Pico di Oripipi,' the name a scatological play on Mexico's highest peak, el Pico de Orizaba. The holy oily body of the title is a magical substance invented by Queen Nefatalina's scientist that, when applied to the buttocks, reveals a person's soul. The oil would be used to tell which suitor—the text makes clear the suitor could be male or female—should marry the Princess Pelomiel, who is a dove. The play enthusiastically transgresses the gender norms of fairy tales and Surrealism, parodying the Surrealist femme-enfant and the passive Princess (Pelomiel), the femme fatale and vile temptress (Nefatalina), and the hyper-masculine hero (Von Aguilota).

While explicating its clear debt to Surrealism, Plunkett also grounds the work in the three artist-playwrights' new position as part of intellectually diverse, if often related, artistic communities in Mexico and beyond. Indeed, Plunkett also suggests that the characters' hybrid bodies blur boundaries between the human/animal and body/soul, which might suggest the cultural complexity of the avant-garde circles in which Carrington, Varo, and Horna moved (75). The suitor, Von Aguilota, serves as a literal representation of that idea. He has war wounds on his buttocks that have led to the replacement of the skin with a collage of animal hides. When rubbed with the holy oily body, this patchwork gives rise to his soul in the form of a butterfly.

Abigail Susik provides the most specific discussion of Carrington's contributions to the Mexican avant-garde in "Losing one's head in the 'Children's Corner': Carrington's contributions to *S.NOB* in 1962." Founded and edited by Salvador Elizondo, with editorial assistance by Emilio García Riera and artistic direction from Juan García Ponce, *S.NOB* reflected international trends in progressive art and culture and critiqued class, social privilege, and politics. Carrington contributed drawings and short prose texts to the publication, and Susik convincingly demonstrates that she helped shape the aesthetic of the publication.

Anna Watz's "A language buried at the back of time": *The Stone Door* and poststructuralist feminism" offers a provocative reading of the artist's first novel from the mid-1940s through the discourse of radical feminism. Like all Carrington's fiction, *The Stone Door* (first published in French translation in 1976, and in its original English in 1977) resists simple explication (90). Chapter one introduces three men who live in a deep forest where they appear to determine the operations of the universe, called "the plan." In Chapter two, a woman named Amagoya reads the diary of another woman. Amagoya both reads the diarist's dream narratives and enters her own, confounding time and location. The last chapters of the novel deal with Zacharias and his epic (and disjointed) journey to locate and open the stone door, destroy "the plan," and unite with the nameless woman. Zacharias encounters elements from dream imagery in earlier chapters and morphs into Böles Kilary (a Wise King), a figure from the diarist's dreams (95).

Watz recognizes that Carrington's esoteric imagery can be read in terms of Surrealist practice and her study of the occult. For example, an egg gives birth to a non-gendered white child in the novel, a detail clearly drawn from the alchemical tradition. Yet, Watz argues that *The Stone Door* can be read through poststructuralist feminist thought, and "the plan" resonates with the notion of patriarchy. She explains that throughout her oeuvre, Carrington challenged monosexual discourse and created fragmentary, intertextual, and metafictional works like *The Stone Door* and *The Hearing Trumpet* (1950). Her language defies fixed interpretation, creating a space outside traditional phallogocentric discourse. Watz contends that Carrington's aesthetics thus provide a link between French/Mexican Surrealism and 1970s feminist avant-garde writing, anticipating one of the key questions engaging feminist and non-feminist thinkers, "the pursuit of a speaking position of non-complicity with phallogocentric ideology" (101–02).

In another thought-provoking essay, "Carrington's sensorium," Janet Lyon proposes that the artist's works may be read in terms of contemporary discussions



Fig. 1. Leonora Carrington, *The Lovers* (1987), oil on canvas, 30" x 40 1/2". Private collection, Mexico. © 2015 Estate of Leonora Carrington / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

of the post-human and disability theory (these are positions reliant on the artist's "critique of humanism," a "dissolution" of the normatively reductive terms on "embodiment," wherefore "no right or wrong body" exists in life [163–64, 169]). Carrington's *The Lovers* (1987; Fig. 1) speaks to this "indeterminate" exploration of bodily 'disability' (171). Watz and Lyon do not suggest a direct philosophical connection between Carrington's work and these theoretical frameworks. They imply that something in Carrington's practice makes her works uniquely useful to such avenues of inquiry. As McAra suggests in her essay, "A nonagenarian virago: quoting 'Carrington' in contemporary practice," for twenty-first-century artists, Carrington's influence rarely functions in the way art historians might want: as active transmission and passive acceptance. Rather, hers is an oblique resonance. In McAra's terms, Carrington functions more as "a 'medium' to be worked in and through" (195).

Leonora Carrington and the international avant-garde provides challenging new readings and fecund analysis of Carrington's little-studied written texts, juxtaposed with consideration of her painting and graphic work. Yet, paradoxically, the authors remind the reader that Carrington's oeuvre notoriously resists the interpreter's desire to "tame" it into tidy explications. As Eburne explains in his fascinating "Poetic Wisdom: Leonora Carrington and the esoteric avant-garde,"

she steadfastly opposed what she called "dogmatism," knowledge that suggested totality or systematic comprehension. Thus, while savoring these astute scholarly investigations, we are cautioned to refuse (as Leonora did) the closing of the hermeneutic circle. In this regard, it seems apt to give Carrington's son, scholar and artist Gabriel Weisz, the last word. In "Shadow children: Leonora as storyteller," he describes his mother's works as "savage objects," rightly warning us—and it is profound advice for anyone engaged in writing about visual art: "If to define is to set a safe vantage point from where one can observe art without any risk, then let us hail the savage object, since the empire of interpretation belongs to a power system that legitimates that ownership of a small turf aggressively defended by specialists" (139). •

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Notes

1. On Carrington's 18-month stay in New York, beginning in July 1941, see Salomon Grimberg, "Traveling Toward the Unknown, Leonora Carrington Stopped in New York," *WAJ* 38, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 2017), 3–15