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I tried to nod and move away at the same time, but my knees were trembling so much that instead of going towards the staircase I shuffled crabwise nearer and nearer the pot. When I was well within range she suddenly jabbed the pointed knife into my backside and with a scream of pain I leapt right into the boiling soup and stiffened in a moment of intense agony with my companions in distress, one carrot and two onions.

A mighty rumbling followed by crashes and there I was standing outside the pot stirring the soup in which I could see my own meat, feet up, boiling away as merrily as any joint of beef. I added a pinch of salt and some peppercorns then ladled out a measure into my granite dish. The soup was not as good as a bouillabaisse but it was a good ordinary stew, very adequate for the cold weather.

From a speculative point of view I wondered which of us I was. Knowing that I had a piece of polished obsidian somewhere in the cavern I looked around, intending to use it as a mirror. Yes, there it was, hanging in its usual corner near the bat's nest. I looked into the mirror. First I saw the face of the Abbess of Santa Barbara de Tartarus grinning at me sardonically. She faded and then I saw the huge eyes and feelers of the Queen Bee who winked and transformed herself into my own face, which looked slightly less ravaged, owing probably to the dark surface of the obsidian.

LEONORA CARRINGTON *The Hearing Trumpet* (1976)

SURREALISM

SURREALISM is better known and easier to define in the visual arts than in literature: Dali, Duchamp, Magritte and Ernst are well-established figures in the history of modern art. But there was a literary branch to the movement, which evolved in the nineteen-twenties and thirties out of earlier modernist and Dadaist experiments. Indeed, the chief theorist of Surrealism was a poet, André Breton, who declared that it was founded on "a belief in the supreme quality of certain forms of association heretofore neglected: in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought."

Leonora Carrington is a rare example of a Surrealist equally committed to visual and verbal art forms. A recent retrospective exhibition of her paintings at the Serpentine Gallery in London aroused much interest, and her novels and stories, published rather obscurely in several languages at long intervals over several decades, are beginning to attract critical attention, especially from feminists. Born in England, she was part of the heroic age of Surrealism in pre-war Paris, where she lived with Max Ernst for several years, before migrating to Mexico and the United States. Her work is now perceived as pioneering a good deal of postmodernist experimentation, especially by women artists and writers such as Angela Carter and Jeannette Winterson, who use surrealist effects to subvert patriarchal cultural assumptions.

Surrealism is not quite the same as magic realism, which I discussed earlier (Section 24), though there are obvious affinities between them. In magic realism there is always a tense connection between the real and the fantastic: the impossible event is a kind of metaphor for the extreme paradoxes of modern history. In surrealism, metaphors *become* the real, effacing the world of reason and common sense. The Surrealists' favourite analogy for their art, and often its source, was dreaming, in which, as Freud demonstrated, the unconscious reveals its secret desires and fears in vivid images and surprising narrative sequences unconstrained by the logic of our waking lives. The first great surrealist novel in the English language was arguably *Alice in Wonderland*, the story of a dream. Its influence is perceptible in this passage from Carrington's *The Hearing Trumpet*: in the jumbling together of the cruel

Abbess who was canonized as a saint, but was in fact a worshipper of the primal Mother or fertility goddess associated with the cult of Aphrodite, who appears to the narrator in the form of a queen bee. The story develops into a neo-pagan, feminist revision of the Grail legend, facilitated by apocalyptic natural events – a new Ice Age and an earthquake. A tower cracks open and reveals a staircase which the narrator follows into the underworld, where she meets her own double stirring a cauldron, and has the experience described in the extract. The splitting of the subject into observer and observed, both “meat” and cook, is a characteristically dream-like effect, as is the juxtaposition of the homely detail, “I added a pinch of salt and some peppercorns,” with the violent and grotesque image of cannibalism. Such humorous touches are characteristic of the best Surrealist art, without which it is apt to become empty portentous and tiresomely self-indulgent. Fortunately Leonora Carrington is as witty as she is imaginative.

and the grotesque with the domestic and the droll, in the matter-of-fact narration of fantastic events, and in the Cheshire-Cat-like visions of the faces in the obsidian mirror.

The narrator is a ninety-year-old Englishwoman called Marion Leatherby, apparently living in Mexico with her son Galahad and his wife Muriel. Marion is very deaf, but one day her friend Carmella gives her an ear-trumpet of amazing sensitivity, with the aid of which she overhears her son and his wife planning to put her away in a home for senile women. This early part of the novel is very amusingly written in a whimsical and eccentric style which it is possible to “naturalize” as the private thoughts of an intelligent but confused old lady:

Time, as we all know, passes. Whether it returns in quite the same way is doubtful. A friend of mine who I did not mention up till now because of his absence told me that a pink and a blue universe cross each other in particles like two swarms of bees and when a pair of different coloured beads hit each other miracles happen. All this has something to do with time although I doubt if I could explain it coherently.

Once Marion crosses the threshold of the Home, however, events take an increasingly fantastic turn. In her living-quarters, for instance:

The only real furniture was a wicker chair and a small table. All the rest was painted. What I mean is that the walls were painted with the furniture that wasn't there. It was so clever that I was almost taken in at first. I tried to open the painted wardrobe, a bookcase with books and their titles. An open window with a curtain fluttering in the breeze, or rather it would have fluttered if it were a real curtain . . . All this one-dimensional furniture had a strangely depressing effect, like banging one's nose against a glass door.

The institution is run by an authoritarian born-again Christian, against whom the narrator and her friends eventually rebel, inspired by the portrait of a mysteriously winking nun on the dining-room wall. This nun is identified as an eighteenth-century