

Not the Brush, But the Pen

Federico Patán*



Down Below, 40 x 60 cm, 1941 (oil on canvas).

When I held in my hands two books of Leonora Carrington around 1995, I felt just a trace of mistrust born of the fact that, except for a brief autobiography, they were narratives. Prompted by a completely unfounded belief, I held onto the idea that if one were active in one field of creation, particularly painting, there was not enough creative impulse to make efforts in another. Michelangelo brought me back down to earth: I remembered his sonnets. I almost immediately remembered that Fernando del Paso had made forays into painting.

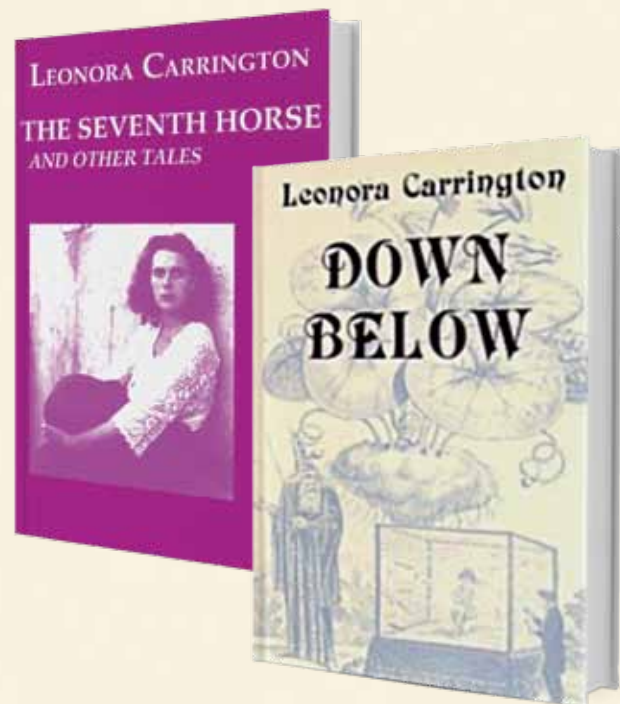
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Now, the degree of mastery an artist has in each of his/her fields is quite another matter. For Leonora Carrington the painter, I had great respect, respect that came of being familiar with and enjoying part of her work. In the land of painting, I am a mere visitor, as I am in that of music. A visitor who enjoys a great deal what he likes, but without attempting anything like the work that is the province of the specialized critic. Full of curiosity, I began Leonora Carrington's books, and I have returned to them for this article. They have lost none of the literary appeal I found in them then.

Short stories, a novella, and an autobiography make up the two volumes I read. The autobiography, *Down Below*, is brief but very intense. The title of the Spanish translation was *Memorias de abajo*, and a pertinent note reports that it was written in 1943, although it is known that there was a version in English that was lost. As already mentioned, it is brief, only about 60 pages long; it deals with a period that was very painful, both historically and personally. Dictated in French from Monday, August 23, to Friday, August 27, 1943, it narrates what happened in Carrington's life during her confinement in a Spanish sanatorium in Santander, where she was held prisoner after a depressive mental breakdown. The historical aspect is expressed in the mention of figures like the group of *requetés*,¹ who raped her one night, or an official who was a Franco supporter who wanted to make her his mistress.

Much of what Carrington narrates in these memoirs is hard to read. However, at the same time, it serves as testimony of the changes that the painter herself was going through. She is not sure, but she did suspect, that everything that happened then helped her to cross the initial threshold of knowledge to the slow but constant loss of an innocence—perhaps naiveté—that we all share at first and we all gradually eliminate using different tools. Amidst what is a testimonial, we suddenly come across affirmations that allow us to better understand the artist's later work. One example would be her idea that she was not obeying the formulas rooted in her mind, the formulas of *the old, limited Reason*, which expresses



one of the tenets of surrealism, the school Carrington belonged to. That is, working with what came from the unconscious and attempting to explain the world of the conscious with it; transforming experiences into artistic material, but doing so with less obedience to reason, which, precisely because it is reason, restricts the artist to a single approach to the interpretation of his/her surroundings.

Am I wrong in seeing in the following description a hint of surrealism? During a drive, she noted that the highway was flanked by rows of coffins. Aside from its value as a brief testimonial of what happened in Spain after the Civil War, the description encompasses the possibility of a canvas. In 1987, in an epilogue included in the book that includes this text, *Down Below*, the painter would remember that in Ávila she saw a long train with many cars of sheep bleating from the cold. She described it as appalling. The same thing happens here as with the previous quote: here you feel the seed of a canvas. And then I remembered that Carrington wrote her first short stories between 1937 and 1940. That is, at a very young age. So we must conclude that she worked on both means of expression in parallel. In one of them, painting, she achieved her goal of an image that gave the thematic intent of the canvas, and in the other, she ensured that the movement of history took care of that same task, creating a way of looking at the world.

The chronological reading of Leonora Carrington's writings shows how she integrated the experiences she was having into her narrative. And it was the same with Mexico. First, it is a matter of introducing into her stories hints of Mexican speech, and then of dedicating an entire text to it ("Mexican Story," written in the 1970s), and also of departing from historical fact, as she does in *La invención del mole* (The Invention of Mole, 1960) to offer us a delicious satire. Another attraction of the text is that the author risks experimenting with another genre: theater. The simple introduction of the characters obliges us to smile in complicity, since she breathes life into both Moctezuma and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The way they come together is unimportant; what is interesting is the dialogue they establish, during which they examine the criteria for the basis for the Catholic religion, criteria that scandalize Moctezuma. Then the plot begins to explain to us how *mole* was created, through information given to the archbishop. A complete and utter anachronism; however, it does make it possible to celebrate the black humor the author uses to handle the plot. Added to this are certain clarifications, as though bringing us up to date, in Moctezu-

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ma's first speech, that he speaks "naturally in Náhuatl," or that another character is knitting "a tube sweater for Quetzalcóatl."

This sense of irony already appears in her first short stories, the ones written in the 1930s. For example, in "When They Went along the Path on the Bicycle," a dialogue takes place between a woman who goes to die in a convent and the mother superior of the Convent of the Little Smile of Jesus' Anguish As the visitor talks about saving her soul, the mother superior fills her in about the cost of the services she is requesting. The story is a succession of images that recreate a world close to ours, but full of situations that make it magi-



Alejandro Jodorowsky's production of Leonora Carrington's play *Penelope* (1957). Set design and costumes by Leonora Carrington.

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Private collection. © Estate of Leonora Carrington

The Temptation of St. Anthony, 120 x 90 cm, 1947 (oil on canvas). Private collection.

cal based on slight changes to our reality. For example, that the protagonist, Virginia Fur “had a head of hair several meters long” or the number of cats —50— that always accompanied her. These slight exaggerations suffice for our vision of the world to broaden and depart from the everyday to be enriched.

Perhaps for this reason, many of the stories have a certain flavor of fairy or popular tales. Leonora Carrington wrote most of them in French or English, given that Spanish entered her life relatively late. This might lead us to ask whether her work belongs to Mexican literature. If this is decided by the simple presence of the Mexican, there would be certain reason to ask. But equally, it would be appropriate to ask if her place

is in English literature. Having chosen to exile herself in Mexico, having lived among us for most of her years, having introduced the Mexican gradually into her plots, the question answers itself.

The most interesting thing is that she worked in two fields, painting and narrative: seeing how the immobility of the canvases transforms into movement in narrative and how surrealism is expressed in two ways in her artistic production. **NM**

NOTES

¹ The *requetés* were volunteers or platoons of volunteers who fought in the Spanish civil wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on the side of religious tradition and the monarchy. [Editor’s Note.]