

Whimsy, Misanthropy, Mythology: Leonora Carrington's Black Humor

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Abstract

Like the other women artists and writers of the first generation of Surrealists, Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) let the men theorize while she made art that didn't always fit those theories. André Breton created the very useful concept of "black humor" (*humour noir*) in 1936, but declared that such misanthropic writings should be hostile to "whimsy" (*fantaisie*), which I loosely define as involving surprise, un- or anti-systematic thinking, and seemingly low stakes. Carrington's short fiction, from the 1937 "The Debutante" all the way to 1975's "The Happy Corpse Story," demonstrate a way to deploy black humor and whimsy together. Harder to combine with whimsy is Carrington's turn to mythological thinking, as one of the writers who engage in "ethnographic surrealism" during her over sixty years as an expatriate in Mexico; her "A Mexican Fairy Tale" shows (the limits of) her attempts to combine cosmological thinking and whimsy. I end suggesting that fantasy and prophecy, two categories in a different contemporary of Carrington's, E. M. Forster, in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), marks the affinity between whimsy ("fantasy") and cosmology ("prophecy") as modes which reject the well-made novel's psychological realism, just as you'd expect from a proper Surrealist.

Keywords: Leonora Carrington, Surrealism, André Breton, black humor, fantasy, prophesy

Introduction: Flight and Flightiness

Of the great writers and painters of the Surrealist movement, Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) is the one that got away. To be sure, almost all of the great names from that movement—Breton, Ernst, Buñuel, Peret, Dali—escaped the Nazi takeover of Germany and invasion of France. But Carrington, notoriously, had to flee multiple captors. Born in an upper-class Anglo-Irish family, she had to flee family expectations to follow her artistic bent; she then followed Max Ernst to France, being his lover in the French countryside for a few idyllic years in the late '30s; then, when the Nazis invaded France and the Vichy government arrested Ernst as an undesirable alien,

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Carrington had a mental breakdown and was institutionalized in Madrid, which put her back under the legal control of her awful family. To judge by her 1943 memoir *Down Below*, she was indeed in bad shape, but the treatment in the institution was appalling. Yet, she managed miraculously to escape again: the family was transferring her from the asylum in Spain to one in South Africa, and while she was under the guard of various family emissaries in Lisbon, she chanced upon a friend from her Paris years, Renato Le Duc, who smuggled her into the Mexican embassy, where they married and emigrated to New York. After a certain amount of drama involving Ernst, also in New York, and Ernst's own voracious savior Peggy Guggenheim, she and Le Duc divorced amicably and Carrington made her way to the Surrealist expatriate community in Mexico City. There the fleeing stopped: she married Hungarian photographer "Chiqui" Weisz and had two sons, and settled into the great creative friendship between herself and the Spaniard Remedios Varo, outliving Varo's death in 1963—outliving almost everyone, living happily in Mexico City until 2011 at the age of 94.²

It took the feminist revision of the Surrealist movement before Carrington really began to get her due in international circles. For convenience's sake we can take Angela Carter's short essay "Alchemy of the Word," 1978, as the first British feminist to defend Surrealism from its own sexism, and in which she name-checks Carrington directly ("They liked William Blake, and they liked Lewis Carroll, and they liked Bishop Berkeley. Leonora Carrington wrote, still writes, prim, strange, surrealist fictions, but the movement never traveled across the Channel, not even in the 1930s, just as women never took it over" [512]). The "women [who] never took it over" would be discovered and would indeed basically take over the movement for academic criticism starting in 1985, when Whitney Chadwick's *Women Painters and the Surrealist Movement* grouped together Carrington, Varo, Frida Kahlo, Dorothea Tanning, and Kay Sage, among others, placing their work into the forefront of the movement's artistic production (while also skewering

² While there is no definitive biography of Leonora Carrington, both her son Gabriel (*The Invisible Painting*, 2021) and niece Joanna Moorhead (*The Surreal Life of Leonora Carrington*, 2019 and *Surreal Spaces*, 2023) have written memoirs and done some research about Carrington, whose memory of her own life was no more trustworthy than a Surrealist's memory needs to be. For the time spent in the Spanish insane asylum, probably the most reliable material is by Marina Warner in her edition of *Down Below*, 2017; for the details of her escape from her parents' plan to relocate her in an insane asylum in South Africa, and the two years she spent in New York after that, see Grimberg's excellent 2017 essay.

Breton's condescending rhetoric towards them), until these painters have arguably eclipsed all the male painters of the era with the exception of Dali and possibly Ernst.³

In this article I will be making the argument that, paradoxically, the writings of Carrington most closely conform to the discourses of Surrealism in the period when she was most in motion, that first decade of her writing in which she jumped between European cities and gained a reputation for willfulness and flightiness. Perhaps this shouldn't be surprising, given the Surrealists' expectations of women—and their theories of humor. Carrington achieves a different kind of flightiness, a different place to express her sense of humor, during her sixty years in Mexico, where admittedly she paints much more and writes much less. But we will examine some of these written texts for some insights in how to be funny about other people's worlds, and about the world you'd like to build for yourself.

I hope also to make some tentative suggestions about “literary flightiness”—an affect of a text or of a person that in English is often labeled whimsicality or whimsy. Whimsy's principal features include surprise or the unexpected; a refusal to follow systematic or at any rate publicly accessible procedures, perhaps to the point of obstinacy (the “whim” of whimsy); and a presumption of low stakes (a tyrant may act upon his whims, but we are unlikely to call the affect of his actions whimsical). An aesthetic category that inevitably evokes other categories such as the cute or the zany,⁴ the whimsical seems in principle to be not just comical but also optimistic; we will see, however, that that is not at all the case.

1. Fashionable Misanthropy and Short-Lived Whimsy

Carrington makes her literary debut with a story about a debutante. Written when she was about twenty, “The Debutante” is the first story in her first collection, *The Oval Lady* (“La dame ovale” in French—almost all of her short stories in her European period were written in French), and although it is a story about a ferocious refusal to conform, it turns out to conform to another set of values quite closely—a set of values that were articulated before, but not published until after, the completion of the story. “The Debutante” is a very good example of *l'humour noir*, black humor, which Breton set out to describe in an anthology he compiled in 1936. In his 1996

³ For a fine calibration of the mutual influence of Ernst and Carrington, see Suleiman 1994, “The Bird Superior Meets the Bride of the Wind.” Pretty much every art historian who studies Carrington and Remedios Varo wants to examine the relationship of their painting: see Chadwick, Aberth, and Kaplan.

⁴ I am of course alluding to the groundbreaking work by Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*; I will return briefly to her work in the footnotes of my conclusion.

translation of it (re-issued in 2017), Mark Polizzotti describes how the anthology first bounced from publisher to publisher, and then its first edition in 1940 was initially censored by the French government; but between 1936 and 1940 four more stories were added to the edition—and one of them was Carrington's "The Debutante." Breton was certainly convinced that the story exemplified his theory of black humor: was he right to do so?

Breton offered not just an anthology of stories, and a label under which to group these stories, but also a conceptual definition of the label: the book's introduction, "Lightning Rod," argues for a kind of nihilism or misanthropy as the basis for the humor that he is proposing, a "superior revolt of the mind" of the Romantic who is angry at the mismatch between the nobility of his own soul and the inadequacy of the real world. This formulation, as it so often is in Breton, is from Hegel; and Breton continues by using the vocabulary of another of his touchstones, Freud:

Like wit and the comic [Breton is quoting from *Jokes and the Unconscious*], humour has in it a *liberating* element. But it has also *something fine and elevating*, which is lacking in the other two ways of deriving pleasure from intellectual activity. Obviously, what is fine about it is the triumph of narcissism, the *ego's* victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure. (n.p., italics in the original)

As in the previous Hegelian material, we see Breton declaring that the best humor is a stance of superiority or invulnerability facing a dangerous, possibly worthless, world. But we also see a step away from the Hegelian formation that projected an ideal world that the real world was not living up to: that would be the stuff of satire or moralism, and the black humorist supposedly wants none of that.⁵ For Breton, the contempt towards institutions and authorities which is so characteristic of most of the poetic movements of the post-World War One avant-gardes makes a fertile ground for practicing black humor, and for perceiving moments of black humor in the

⁵ For this reason it's surprising that Breton begins the history of black humor with Swift's famous *A Modest Proposal*, usually taught as a work of satire. In his introduction to the excerpts written by Swift, Breton implies that Swift expected nothing from mankind, and so I suppose he would brush off any suggestion that Swift hoped, by means of *A Modest Proposal*, to reform the British treatment of the Irish: "From one end of his life to the other, [Swift's] misanthropy was the only disposition that never altered, and that events never belied."

works of the literary tradition—indeed, many of the authors in the anthology appeared in the list of precursors that Breton included in the first Surrealist manifesto.

In his hairsplitting desire to name a kind of literature and distinguish it from other kinds of writing, we have already seen how Breton has quoted a moment in Freud where Freud wants to distinguish humor from “wit” and “the comic,” the first merely formal, the second often a product of a rather optimistic world-view; Breton ends his foreword claiming that the black humorist must also avoid two further traps:

Black humour is hemmed in by too many things, including stupidity, sceptical sarcasm, light-hearted jokes ... (the list is long). But it is the mortal enemy of sentimentality, which seems to lie perpetually in wait—sentimentality that always appears against a blue background—and of a certain short-lived whimsy (*d'une certaine fantaisie à court terme*), which too often passes itself off as poetry, vainly persists in inflicting its outmoded artifices on the mind, and no doubt has little time left in which to lift towards the sun, from amid the poppy seeds, its crowned crane's head.

While it seems clear to me that the “blue background” of the sentimentalist is a reference to the fin-de-siècle Symbolists who used that color to symbolize the infinite in perhaps the vaguest possible way—as a Latin Americanist, I can't help but think of the darker short stories of Rubén Darío such as “The Bourgeois King” and “The Blue Bird,” where the high vague ideals of their foolish poets end when they die of exposure or by suicide—, I am stopped short but also charmed by the image he provides of “a certain short-lived whimsy,” which “no doubt has little time left in which to lift toward the sun, from amid the poppy seeds, its crowned crane's head.” Really, this image looks as if it could come out of any number of Leonora Carrington's mid-career or later paintings.

But not, perhaps, her first story. “The Debutante” exemplifies the misanthropy that was the preferred humor of Leonora's elders. Written in a simple direct French that translates back into a simple direct English, the story's first-person narrator is an upper-class girl who is expected to attend her debutante ball, and simply doesn't want to go. Even before the day arrives, she is a misanthrope in training, preferring trips to the zoo to human friendship:

When I was a debutante, I often went to the zoo. I went so often that I knew the animals better than I knew girls of my own age. Indeed it was in order to get away from people that I found myself at the zoo every day. The animal I got to know best was a young hyena. She knew me too. She was very intelligent. I taught her French, and she, in return, taught me her language. In this way we passed many pleasant hours. (Carrington 2017, 3)

The deadpan tone in which an impossible thing is presented perhaps reassures the “Bretonian reader” that this intelligent hyena is not a disqualifying whimsy.

But perhaps it is the amoral violence, perpetrated by female figures against female figures, that really gets this story into the anthology. Our narrator doesn’t want to attend her own debutante ball, so the hyena volunteers to go instead of her. She smuggles the hyena out of the zoo, and when they are in her bedroom they try to come up with a convincing disguise. They ignore the hyena’s smell, although when the girl’s mother enters the room while the hyena is in hiding, it is the hyena’s smell that is disquieting. The solution to disguising the hyena involves some collateral damage:

At last she said, ‘I think I’ve found the answer. Have you got a maid?’

‘Yes,’ I said, puzzled.

‘There you are then. Ring for your maid, and when she comes in we’ll pounce upon her and tear off her face. I’ll wear her face tonight instead of mine.’

‘It’s not practical,’ I said. ‘She’ll probably die if she hasn’t got a face. Somebody will certainly find the corpse, and we’ll be put in prison.’

‘I’m hungry enough to eat her,’ the hyena replied.

‘And the bones?’

‘As well,’ she said. ‘So, it’s on?’

‘Only if you promise to kill her before tearing off her face. It’ll hurt her too much otherwise.’

‘All right. It’s all the same to me.’

Not without a certain amount of nervousness I rang for Mary, my maid. I certainly wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t hate having to go to a ball so much. (5-6)

Our narrator's frank disloyalty to the human race, her preference for her own convenience over another person's life, makes for a suitably black humor. The text continues with further gruesome humor at poor Mary's corpse's expense: the hyena rips off Mary's face, eats most of the body and saves the rest for a snack later, and is quite proud of how she looks before she heads downstairs to the ball ("In front of the mirror, the hyena was admiring herself in Mary's face. She had nibbled very neatly all around the face so that what was left was exactly what was needed. 'You've certainly done that very well,' I said.") (6)

Was Carrington aware of how well the story would fit in Breton's definition of black humor? Well, while the hyena attends the ball in her stead, the narrator curls up with a good book — *Gulliver's Travels*, by (of course) Jonathan Swift. The story ends quite abruptly. A bat flies in the window, which frightens our protagonist; but then her mother sweeps in and declares the ball ruined:

My mother entered, pale with rage.

'We'd just sat down at table,' she said, 'when that thing sitting in your place got up and shouted, "So I smell a bit strong, what? Well, I don't eat cakes!" Whereupon it tore off its face and ate it. And with one great bound, disappeared through the window.'

(7)

End of story—many of Carrington's stories end abruptly. I find it curious that the hyena doesn't kill anyone else at the ball, choosing instead just to eat her own (the maid's) face. The story is a fantasy of declaring one's own animality during the most intense surveillance of one's social definition; the hyena had said that she might like to attend the ball to see what food would be eaten there, but she rejects the human cakes and eats the human face instead. As for the pose of invulnerability that Breton claims is characteristic of black humor, well, the hyena escapes and the story ends before any consequences fall on our protagonist; but really it is our narrator's deadpan amoral tone that creates the (black) humor. And the protagonist is not fully invulnerable: in a story noted for its great economy and lack of distractive events (which Carrington will indulge in in almost all her later stories), her reading of *Gulliver's Travels* is interrupted by a bat: "About an hour later, I noticed the first signs of trouble. A bat flew in at the window, uttering little cries. I am terribly afraid of bats. I hid behind a chair, my teeth chattering" (7). It would be

witty to say that this single interruption of the story, understood by the protagonist as an omen of the failure of the hyena's disguise, is the banishing of what Breton called "short-lived whimsy...[attempting] to lift towards the sun, from amid the poppy seeds, its crowned crane's head," a sun bird transformed into a dangerous creature of the night by the pope of Surrealism's demand that Carrington write black humor the way that he wants it, and not the way that she wants it.⁶

For that kind of whimsy, which coexists serenely with the black-humored misanthropy that characterizes most of her early oeuvre, one could consult pretty much any other story in her pre-1939 output. For instance, the premise of "The Royal Summons" is rather gruesome: a queen, who is declared to have gone mad yesterday ("It's the heat," says a servant), summons our narrator to be her representative at a royal council, which turns out to be scheming to assassinate the queen. There it is decided that the assassination will involve taking the queen to the royal zoo and letting the lion loose to eat her. The narrator does not defend the queen or even warn her of the plot, but instead ends up winning the checkers tournament that decides who will bring the queen to the royal zoo. She does try to flee that responsibility, but is chased down by a cypress tree that uproots itself, and the story ends as she walks the queen towards the zoo. Neither the queen nor the councilors seem to be particularly sympathetic or in the right; the protagonist's attempt to avoid participating in the business is half-hearted. This is just something societies do. But clearly all the details of the assassination involve whimsy, the checkers tournament, the cypress tree; even the proof that the queen is mad:

The queen was in her bath when I went in; I noticed that she was bathing in goat's milk.

"Come on in," she said to me. "You see I only use live sponges. It's healthier."

The sponges were swimming about all over the place in the milk, and she had trouble catching them. A servant, armed with long-handled tongs, helped her from time to time.

(17)

⁶ For a different project it would be interesting to pursue Carrington's ambivalence towards the male figures of Surrealism in this early part of her career. Breton praises Max Ernst explicitly in the *Anthology* for his collage-novels, and Ernst boosted the visibility of Carrington's story collection *La Dame ovale* by including collage illustrations for the stories. In my opinion these illustrations do not really catch the tone of the stories; much more helpful to understanding the early stories is Carrington's noted self-portrait, "Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse)," with her in riding clothes sitting on the left, a hyena crouched on the right (a la "The Debutante"), with a rocking horse above her (which figures prominently in "The Oval Lady"), and horses running outside visible through a window (horses figure prominently in "The House of Fear"), all stories from this first collection. It's as if to say, Let the alternate patriarchs bring me to your attention, but then watch what I do, not what they say about me.

Is that proof that someone is mad? It's proof that the characters live whimsically. And in society—as opposed to the world of horses, wild boars, and feral cats of her other stories—it's whimsy all the way down the social ladder:

I went to fetch my car, but my chauffeur, who has no practical sense at all, had just buried it.

"I did it to grow mushrooms," he told me. "There's no better way of growing mushrooms."

"Brady," I said to him, "you are a complete idiot. You've ruined my car." (16)

There is, in short, nothing short-lived about Carrington's combination of black humor with whimsy. To be sure, we do not see it in her memoir of the insane asylum, *Down Below*. Whimsy is sorely tested again—although intermittently present—in the stories she wrote processing New York and her reunion with Max Ernst, now married to Peggy Guggenheim ("White Rabbits"; "Waiting"). Nor is it at all evident in her novel *The Stone Door*, written in the late 1940s to translate her marriage to Chiqui Weisz into esoteric alchemical symbolism. (And yet, that novel's humorlessness is probably part of the reason that the reader intuitively feels that Carrington's authorial decisions do not depend on whim but rather on autobiographical and esoteric correlations: many "illogical" sequences and images are actually following logics that we do not have access to.) Eventually, over the sixty years she spent as an expatriate in Mexico City dark whimsy resurfaces and flourishes, perhaps when she feels invulnerable once again, perhaps as she faces a mythology and cosmogony that is not that of rotten, decadent Europe.

2. Happy Corpses and Cycles of Rebirth

We have only six stories by Carrington that are definitely from the sixty years of her life in Mexico. Curiously, the two she wrote in Spanish combine black humor and whimsy through unexpectedly Cold War thematics, involving Soviet Russia and the United States (or, if you prefer, a gift of learned Soviet rats to a Mexican psychoanalytical association, and a utopian future which involves the extraction of pharmaceuticals from the embalmed corpse of Stalin). Significantly, the most metaphysical story, "My Mother the Cow," in which a character seeks

wisdom from a cow goddess, is completely humorless, with neither whimsy nor black humor; when the elderly Carrington is confident in offering wisdom she casts aside misanthropy and feels compassion: she laments the social need for masks of identity but avoids the tone of contempt that is the characteristic position of the black humorist, and she avoids the insertion of the random or absurd that is the tactic of the whimsical imagination.⁷

Much of her written production of these years is given over to her novel *The Hearing Trumpet* (written in English in the 1950s but published first in French in 1974), which I will not discuss for reasons of space; suffice it to say for this project that it is full of black humor and whimsy, in tandem with a story that, while it is clearly set in Mexico City, has cosmological ambitions that are mostly Celtic and European, involving the Knights Templar and tales of European monasteries and convents. It is a true work of cosmological synthesis, of building up a world on Carrington's own terms (and thus accepting of the arbitrariness and positivity we associate with whimsy), while exposing the everyday callousness of our world and wreaking strange revenges on it (a project in which black humor is easily deployed).

Hence, the two most interesting, and rather delicate, examples of Carrington's short fiction during her Mexican years engage with the mythological world she encounters there. I suggest that her encounter with Meso-American mythologies and cosmologies both freed her and constrained her in exciting ways. "A Mexican Fairy-Tale" and "The Happy Corpse Story" offer her a thematics of death and rebirth not seen in her previous fiction, while allowing her to feel a sort of compassion for her fictional human characters that we had hitherto not seen.

Carrington as a Surrealist expatriate was a relatively typical participant in Mexican intellectual culture. From his very first visit there in 1936 André Breton considered contemporary Mexican culture to be lawless and violent, and, always with the exceptions of Diego Rivera and Octavio Paz, he made no attempt to interact with Mexican intellectuals, many of whom engaged in a strident nationalism that put the European emigrés at a disadvantage even as the emigrés used their status as Europeans to deploy cultural capital.⁸ But, again like Rivera

⁷ The sixth of these stories, "My Flannel Knickers," does try to work the thematics of her ideas about the traps of identity into a story with whimsical elements. I am not sure the story makes a lot of sense on its own terms, but if you think of it as a story told by a sculpture (placed on a traffic island in the middle of a highway), it suggests a paradoxical monument to the lack of self. Like the other three stories I do not treat in my main text, there is no effort in this story to deal with particularly Mesoamerican mythological material.

⁸ Their decision to limit themselves to cultural matters as opposed to engaging in overt politics was at least in part due to their status as emigrés: any direct criticism of the Mexican government could get them expelled from the country. See Faber 2002 about the exiles of the Spanish Civil War. After having been invited to Mexico by the

and Paz, Breton was fascinated by Mexico's pre-Columbian civilizations. Leonora Carrington lived among Mexicans; her expatriate friend Kati Horna trained her photographic eye upon contemporary Mexicans; but Carrington chose mostly to think about the mythological, pre-Columbian Mexico—which she nevertheless believed still existed in the present.

The pop-kitsch version of Mexican mythology comes to the fore in the funnier of the two stories, "The Happy Corpse Story." Or is it Mexico? The main character would not be out of place with the foolish and somewhat effete Europeans of her pre-1940 fictional output:

*White girl dappled mare
The stags and the ferns in the wood.
Tuft of black hair caught on a thorn
She went by so fast
Now she is gone.*

The young man, dressed in purple and gold with a blond wig and carrying a jukebox, threw a tantrum and fell on the mossy knoll in a passionate fit of weeping.

"She never returned," he cried. (163)

It's quite a Carrington set piece, beginning with a lyric passage, then giving the character contradictory outlandish details—the royal colors of purple and gold and the wig implying an aristocratic court; carrying the jukebox instead of a musical instrument implying modernity and contemporaneity (and also, lack of talent to play an instrument); and the infantilizing description of his fit of weeping. But his interlocutor could be right out of a Tarot deck, or a popular culture such as Mexico's that plays with death:

"Sentimentality is a form of fatigue," said the Happy Corpse, greyish, swaying to and fro on the gnarly elm, like a wasp's nest.

"Nevertheless," shrieked the young man, "I must seek her, because I am in love." (163)

socialist president Lázaro Cárdenas, the Spanish Civil War and World War II exiles had to reconcile themselves to the growing right-wing turn of succeeding Mexican presidents. Leonora would encode some political criticism of the 1968 massacre of Tlatelolco into one or two of her canvasses, such as "Operation Wednesday" (1969), dedicated to a doctor who performed free plastic surgery on protestors wounded at the massacre; she then left Mexico for some time since her sons had been at the protests and her name was included on a denunciation of "Communist intellectuals" published by the somewhat unhinged novelist Elena Garro. See Stara 2023. Vis-à-vis orthodox politics, Carrington is better known for contributing art to the nascent Mexican feminist organizations of the early '70s.

The Happy Corpse seems to agree with Breton's ban on sentimentality in *The Anthology of Black Humor*, and the plot of the story will entail shaking the sentimentality out of the protagonist. It will involve motifs that also go back to the *Anthology*, where Breton in his preface specifically recommended the woodcuts of José Guadalupe Posada as an exemplar of black humor, with his *calaveras*, dancing corpses and social satire that "brought to life all the upheavals of the 1910 Revolution" (Breton, n.p.). The corpse invites the young man to cut it down, catch it, and then ride it like a horse all the way to his love. Bait and switch: once it has been mounted, the corpse tells the young man that actually they are traveling to Hell. Of course, there are trickster figures and journeys to the underworld in other mythologies, but the Aztec journey to and through Mictlán is particularly ornate and central to its mythology, and I think it is correct to see Carrington working through a specifically Mexican thematics in the structure of "The Happy Corpse Story."

The combination of black humor and whimsy is so seamless in this story that one wonders how Breton could have found them antithetical. The Corpse and the young man are accompanied by a terrier named Great Scot. The Corpse is pockmarked with holes, and speaks to the young man on its back through a hole in the back of its head. The Corpse tells a story about its father, with the kind of satire on modern industrial life typical of late twentieth-century modernity, and the literalization of turns of phrase typical of whimsy:

As they unraveled themselves from some tendrils of poison ivy, the story continued. "My father was a man so utterly and exactly like everyone else that he was forced to wear a large badge on his coat in case he was mistaken by anybody. Any body, if you see what I mean. [... He was] an executive for a firm: this meant that he actually executed persons with showers of legal documents proving that they owed him quantities of money that they did not have." (165)

Some of the interruptions along the way show that the author is just as whimsical as the corpse narrating the journey: they are briefly accosted by the ghost of the highwayman Dick Turpin, and the Corpse comments: "He is going to the Fantomat [...] an automatic Fantomator. There are a lot of them, chainwise, as we get nearer and nearer to Hell" (166). The story of the Corpse's

father frightens the young man, but he is even more terrified by what he sees on the journey: “beasts, garbage cans overflowing with decomposed entities, leaves chasing each other chaotically, so that no shape was ever constant, grass behaving like animated spaghetti, and a number of nameless vacuums, causing events that were always unhappy or catastrophic” (167)

Carrington manages a very delicate shift of tone as the cosmic further shifts in the direction of the familial. The young man asks after the Corpse’s mother:

Here the Corpse almost paused. The trees were scarcer, so that a stretch of desert was visible in the distance.

“My mother committed suicide from boredom. My father was so busy that she had nobody to talk to. So she ate and ate and then shut herself in the refrigerator and half froze and half suffocated to death. [...] I composed a poem in her memory. It goes like this:

*When Father’s Face was hard to bear
Mother went into the Frigidaire.
Father, said I, I’m so unhappé
Mother is completely frappé.”* (167-8)

The tone is still flip; certainly the poem is, continuing with the machines of modernity (the jukebox, the Fantomator/ Automat, and now the Frigidaire), the Franglais wordplay. But the pause before it speaks, the declaration of unhappiness when alive by a so-called “happy” corpse, and the gesture towards the parents’ genuine marital dysfunction, help prepare the reader for the story’s dénouement:

The Happy Corpse stopped suddenly, throwing the youth to the ground, saying: “You silly boy, [...] I am your mother. How would I have ever carried you so near to Hell had I been another, a stranger?”

“Mummy?” said the youth, trembling violently. “Forgive me.”

“You always used to eat strawberry-jam sandwiches for tea.”

They were both lost for a moment in memories of the strawberry-jam sandwiches. (168)

Reconciliation between mother and son over the memory of strawberry-jam sandwiches is sentiment, but the over-specific detail that is characteristic of Carrington's whimsy (like burying a car to grow mushrooms) quietly satirizes the sentiment.

Carrington is no longer the egotistical debutante who will kill a maid to avoid a ball. Now that the journey (and perhaps the reconciliation?) has taken the young man's mind off his immature love, the Happy Corpse gives the young man a way to return from Hell (it involves Great Scot), before it dissolves in ashes and, "laughing heartily," returns to the tree where the story began. Taking advantage of narrative structures typical of mythical Mexico while still engaging with familiar European and modern vocabulary, Carrington folds the cosmic into the domestic, in a way that maintains the style of black humor while being less cruel, less misanthropic, more interested in cyclical patterns, than the fierce young woman who wrote "The Debutante."

An interest in cyclical patterns prevails in the last story I will analyze, "A Mexican Fairy Tale," also published for the first time in 1975. Carrington thought about mythological Mexico in a somewhat compartmentalized fashion. In her own paintings, like those of her friend Remedios Varo, the pictorial vocabulary is European when it is recognizable at all: many of the figures come from Celtic mythology, and some of the color palettes and perspectives recall Hieronymus Bosch.⁹ But she also received a commission in 1963 to paint a mural for the very prestigious National Museum of Anthropology about "the magical world of the Maya," a project which took her two years and during which she made visits to contemporary Mayan communities far to the south of Mexico City in the jungle of Chiapas, where the last legs of the journey required traveling by mule.¹⁰ Unlike the strictly historical murals by Diego Rivera that, say,

⁹ Leonora's Celticism has been emphasized in the book edited by Dawn Adés to accompany an exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (2013); Carrington was very happy to discuss it in interviews. Aberth makes comparisons between Bosch paintings and Carrington's "The Giantess" among other paintings. For a canvas in which (something like) Greek mythology shares space with Celtic mythology, see her painting "And Then We Saw the Daughter of the Minotaur" (1953).

I confess I am very excited to hear of the imminent publication in English (October 2026) of Carrington's plays; I don't know if all of them in the collections are written by her or if some are in the anthology because she did their sets or costumes. For a good summary of her 1946 play *Penelope*, finally put on stage by a young and crazy Alejandro Jodorowsky in 1962, see Stara 2023. Carrington also did the sets for Octavio Paz's adaptation of the Hawthorne story *Rappaccini's Daughter*. I.e., neither of them deals with Mexican mythology.

¹⁰ The cultural cachet of Europeanness goes some way to explaining how Carrington was chosen for the project; it also seemed to have gotten her past Mexican machismo, since the only women who received mural commissions were foreigners. But the movement itself evolved far from the original ideals of Diego Rivera, and if either Frida Kahlo or María Izquierdo had lived into the 1960s they also might have been selected to fill the museum walls—museum walls, not the open everyday public walls of the earlier muralist movement. Again, Stara 2023 provides an

reconstruct market scenes in Aztec Tenochtitlán before the conquest, Carrington's mural portrays contemporary communities of Tzoltzil and Tzetzal-speaking Mayan Mexicans, with their Catholic churches and crucifixes, living between the Mayan gods of the sky and of the underworld, and her work can rightly be seen as an example of "ethnographic Surrealism," that side of the movement that focused on the continuing presence of non-Western cultures as a source of resistance to the disenchantment of modernity.¹¹ "A Mexican Fairy Tale" alternates mythological thinking with whimsy and something like black humor, with mythological thinking triumphant.¹²

The story begins in a small-town village named San Juan with generic Mexican types, the two children Juan and María, and María's domineering father Don Pedro. The tone is deliberately simple, even at the level of a story for children: "His name was Juan, his job was looking after pigs./ Juan never went to school, none of his family had even been to school because where they lived there was no school" (137). While tending pigs Juan hears a voice from a "ruin," a voice he hears simultaneously within himself and from a ruined temple, and goes to Don Pedro to borrow a ladder so that he can investigate. The Don Pedro figure is a figure of social satire: Juan has to make up a lie to get Don Pedro to lend the ladder, because "if I tell him about the voice he might hurt it" (138). And indeed, the old man is a straightforward domestic tyrant who yells at his wife: "Don Pedro's family were afraid of him. Don Pedro was terrified of his boss, somebody called Licenciado Gómez, who wore neckties and dark glasses and lived in the town and owned a black motorcar" (139).

At first it seems that the humor in the story is confined to the secular world: Juan gets the ladder, takes it to the ruin, faints from the labor of dragging the ladder, and is awoken by a talking bird, "something green, blue, and rusty, glittering like a big myrtle sucker" (139), who carries a glass of water from the Bowl of Life. Juan is too frightened to drink the water willingly, and throughout the story Juan's small character flaws are played for gentle, if also grotesque humor: he complains about the pigs, whereupon the bird gently commands a cactus flower to slice itself up to feed the pigs, who eagerly eat the cactuses and then immediately dissolve into

excellent description of the shifts in Mexican intellectual life in the 1960s that allowed Carrington's reputation in Mexico to expand beyond the circle of expatriates and their patrons.

¹¹ See Merkel 2025 for Carrington's illustrations of Laurette Sejourné's *Supervivencias de un mundo mágico*.

¹² I have no fully satisfactory explanation for the misdirection in the story's title: fairy tales are never cosmological the way this story is. I suppose Carrington uses it make clear that she is inventing this story rather than retelling an existing mythological story.

“little meats,” and just as he was too timid facing the bird at first, he is too gluttonous when he smells the meats, and eats five pigs. The mythological creatures speak sententiously: “‘You do not understand pigs,’ said the bird, whirling. ‘Pigs have an angel’” (140); the mole that the bird summons to make the sauce for the meats (I presume it’s partly a bilingual pun about *mole* sauce) says, “I am blind, but I wear a star from the firmament on my nose” (141). Although kept mostly in check, the narrative voice indulges in occasional whimsy: “her wings moved like an electric fan” (140); “she whistled like an express train” (140); and, in the narration itself, “Laughing like a drainpipe the bird took out a telescope and a pair of pincers” (141). These gestures towards contemporaneity do not conceal or soften the mythic death Juan must undergo:

Mole wore a scabbard under his fur. Quickly he drew out a sword and, swish and shriek, cut up Juan into small pieces just like [the cactus] Piu had sliced himself up to feed the pigs.

The head and hands and feet and guts of young Juan jumped about shrieking. Mole took Juan’s head tenderly in his hands and said: “Do not be afraid, Juan, this is only a first death, and you will be alive again soon.” (142)

The mythological project of the first half of this fairy tale can accommodate some black humor at the expense of Juan, who perhaps does not deserve his suffering as much as the son of the Happy Corpse deserved his, and it will be a human girl, not a dead mother, who rescues him and joins him in their fate.

María’s half of the story does without humor almost completely; even the scene with Don Pedro at the very beginning reminds the reader more of the possibility of machismo violence than of Pedro’s stupidity. María searches for Juan with the help of a celestial dog, whom she understands immediately (“María understood that the dog was an ally. She thought: this dog is an ancient” [144]) and during the search she transforms into a crone. She finds Juan’s head, who begs her to sew his body back together. She does so, while Juan complains and wails, and when she is finished, she has been able to reattach all of his parts except his heart. Juan sees the heart on the top of the wall; ignoring María’s advice he tries to pursue it himself, but a vulture grabs it and flies it to the Pyramid of the Moon. More mythical narrative ensues. They enter a cave in the pyramid, confront a red jaguar (which is or was turned into a statue), and the bird and the mole

return, bind the two children together, prepare a funeral pyre, and the two jump into the fire to become the smoke that becomes the Evening Star that will become Quetzalcóatl, who will return in mythological cycles. “Juan-Mari keeps returning, so this story has no end” (148).

The misanthropy that can support black humor has been dispelled by the logic of cosmological narration: the world of Don Pedro is unworthy of protagonists like Juan and María, who nevertheless can participate in larger rituals to keep enchantment and the divine in this world. Perhaps more interestingly, Carrington can preserve some elements of the arbitrariness and unexpectedness we associate with whimsy through odd similes and quirky elements of her mythical anthropomorphisms—until the very end, where whimsy is also purged, not by the decree of the Pope of Surrealism but by the demands of a syncretistic, mostly Mayan cosmogonical imagination.

Tentative Conclusion: Fantasy and Prophecy

I hope to have shown in this essay that Leonora Carrington’s short story oeuvre began in the tradition that André Breton concurrently named black humor, an intellectual revulsion against the shortcomings of the world or society and an attitude that holds the world in contempt. Even when the black humorist is just as subjected to the meaningless rules of society or the cosmos as everyone else, they can take the distance necessary to point out the cruelty or arbitrariness of these rules, expecting neither reform nor reparation. In her Paris years, Carrington’s version of this black humor was strictly misanthropic: Nature and its creatures—hyenas, lions, boars, cats—were just fine, the problem was the humans. Over the course of her long life, Carrington’s dim view of society changed little if at all. What changed was her view of the cosmos. Thanks to readings in a variety of esoteric traditions as well as her experiences in Mexico (mediated through the “ethnographic surrealism” that prized both the pre-modern world, and a popular culture that spoke freely and even flippantly about death), Carrington also wrote stories that eventually avoided some elements of the black humor tradition, replacing misanthropy with mythology. While she still mocks her protagonists who shriek their lost love while carrying a jukebox or chase a vulture to rescue their missing heart, the reader can sense more tenderness, more compassion for the plight of us stupid humans, and even a maternal willingness to sacrifice for them (although sometimes instead we have to sacrifice ourselves to keep the magical cosmos going, to be sure). As these stories deepen into mythology, either the magic world of the Mayans

or her own more idiosyncratic view of the world and the underworld, Carrington does tell fewer jokes, a withdrawal of what I have called, without fully defining it, whimsy—whimsy, that bird with a crowned crane's head which a haughty André Breton banished from his definition of black humor.

Well, not quite: what Breton banished was “une certaine fantaisie” (Breton 1966, 22), which Polizzotti has elegantly translated as “a certain whimsy,” and he is right to do so: in context, Breton means a certain fancifulness or capriciousness, not the genre of the fantastic; what Breton disapproves of is a certain attitude towards the narration and to the reader that, partner to sentimentalism, lets the reader keep the wrong sort of distance from the awful world we all live in. Carrington clearly disagreed with Breton on whether her fancifulness and capriciousness, the primping of the talking hyena wearing the dead maid's face or the chauffeur who buries the car in order to grow mushrooms, would detract from her dark vision of society balls or aristocratic politics. And yet they do detract, a little; and even in the later tales, when a talking bird (which we accept without difficulty) takes out a telescope and a pair of pincers so that it can pick up the slices of cactus and put it in a bowl, the whimsy slows us down, asks a little more from us as a reader versed in the normal conventions of reading, even reading mythological fables.

Curiously, a near-contemporary of Breton's was also working through the category of fantasy-as-whimsy. In his 1927 book of lectures *Aspects of the Novel*, novelist and Cambridge don E. M. Forster dedicates two of his final chapters to elements of fiction that, he says, ask more of the reader than the usual attention to story, plot, and characterization. He pairs them: fantasy and prophecy.¹³ Both of these modes suggest that there are forces working in the world beyond or behind the normal social human world, and not all readers are inclined to follow the author down the routes that they plot. Forster is particularly anxious not to reduce “fantasy” to the presence of the supernatural in a fiction; instead, he takes as its exemplar Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, a book without any supernatural phenomena, but where “facts have an unholy

¹³ It would be witty to say that it is just my own personal whimsy that directs the reader to Forster's century-old lecture series instead of to some more contemporary theories of humor in narrative. For those who think that a more recent and rigorous approach to a reader-response theory of whimsy is preferable, I enthusiastically recommend extrapolating from Sianne Ngai's recent work on “our aesthetic categories” and on “the gimmick,” but I think their approaches are, perhaps surprisingly, compatible. Ngai and Forster are both Kantian; they are both interested in how we make aesthetic judgments in societal contexts; Ngai is also a Marxist, of course, and she is fascinated by literature as a kind of labor and producer of surplus value, while Forster is adamant about not historicizing the act of writing or reading fiction and is rather apologetic about literature as an institution. I think the world of both literary critics, but I've thought the world of Forster's book for forty-five years and give him the last word in this essay.

tendency to trip up the past instead of begetting the future, and the obstinacy of inanimate objects, like Dr. Slop's bag, is most suspicious. Obviously, a god is hidden in *Tristram Shandy*, and his name is Muddle, and some readers cannot accept him" (164). Facing the recalcitrance of objects also generates long trains of subjective thought (in chapter one, Forster's other example of a fantasist is Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness musing about a mark on the wall across from her writing desk; and—and he acknowledges that it is controversial—he ends the chapter declaring that *Ulysses* is also an example of all of the myriad ways the mind can work upon or around a drab and uncongenial reality), so the combination of wrapping thoughts—and words—around objects produces a heightened awareness in the reader of the author's subjectivity, their willfulness towards the world. Carrington's texts do not always pay homage to the minor god Muddle, but we seldom forget that it is she who is making the surprising, anti-systematic, low-stakes decisions that make her texts fantastic-whimsical.

As we have seen, the stakes of Carrington's anti-systematic decisions do not stay low.¹⁴ The opposite pole to fantasy for Forster is prophecy. It too asks more of a reader than a conventional realist novel does: the exemplar he chooses for the mode is *Moby-Dick*, fiction that takes on the sublime, whereas fantasy, he says, lodges itself in the ridiculous and trivial.¹⁵ Some readers, Forster says, will not accept this transcendence of realism either. Not particularly interested in Surrealism, a decade before Carrington publishes her first stories, Forster anticipates for us Carrington's arc of refusal of the tools of the conventional realist novel, as she goes from fantasy to prophecy in sixty years, from black-humored whimsy to a mode that rejects black humor and can barely accommodate brief moments of whimsy.

But then any extended examination of whimsy as a mode or style would do well to ignore what Breton said and look at what Carrington and other Surrealists actually did. If the core of a definition of whimsy includes willfulness (whim), it will often be present in the work of nonconformists and transgressors; if the reader finds the whimsical to be a surprise coming out of left field, a queen bathing in milk with live sponges or an unhappy wife dying by locking herself up in a refrigerator, surely these insertions into a fiction produce the same *frisson* that we

¹⁴ They also are not always anti-systematic, but sometimes follow esoteric systems: a reader can't always parse the alchemical or Gurdjieffian trains of thought that structure some of these works (and paintings). As Forster says, not all readers accept this demand placed upon them to follow a hermetic text.

¹⁵ The pairing of prophecy vs. fantasy, expressed in this way, is reminiscent of the conversation in *A Passage to India* among the British characters, who, facing the chaos of Indian politics and their own cultural misunderstandings of it, remark that India is full of both "mystery" and "muddle," and it isn't clear to the outsider how to distinguish between them.

get when we see the unexpected juxtaposition of an umbrella and a sewing machine upon an operating table. Whimsy or willfulness is a particularly interesting category for the Surrealists, given their belief in the power of the unconscious in art: resistant as they were to explaining their artworks, they claimed that their real act of creativity was not in putting crazy things in but having the strength of will not to edit them out. As we live in increasingly surrealist times to which black humor feels like an entirely appropriate response, whimsy is coming back, at least according to the New York Times (“‘Whimsy,’ a New Trend, May Be a Life Raft for Zillennials,” 5/20/26); well, so is Leonora Carrington.

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