

Leonora Carrington, Surrealism, and Initiation Symbolic Death and Rebirth in *Little Francis* and *Down Below*

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Abstract

In 1940, the surrealist artist and writer Leonora Carrington (1917–2011) was incarcerated in a Spanish mental asylum, having been pronounced “incurably insane.” *Down Below*, an account of the incident first published in the surrealist journal *VVV* in 1944, acted as an important part in her recovery from mental illness. In it, she works through her experience in the light of her reading of Pierre Mabille’s (1908–1952) book *Mirror of the Marvelous* (1940). This work let Carrington interpret the intricate correspondences she perceived during her illness through the imagery of alchemy, and allowed her to find a similarity between her experience and the trials depicted in many myths, thus infusing her harrowing experiences with symbolic meaning. This article discusses the significance of Mabille and his work for Carrington’s sense of regained health. This is further emphasised through a comparison of the motif of symbolic death in *Down Below* with its depiction in Carrington’s earlier, partly autobiographical, novella “Little Francis” (1937–38). The depiction of a loss of self in this work prefigures the ordeals in *Down Below*, but it is only in the latter text that Carrington also effects a form of rebirth. The article proposes that the enactment of a symbolic rebirth means that *Down Below* can be considered a form of initiation into the surrealist marvellous, and that Carrington’s experiences both parallel and prefigure surrealism’s concerns with esotericism, myth, and initiation, during and after the Second World War.

Keywords

Pierre Mabille; alchemy; myth; André Breton; esotericism; psychosis

Introduction: Leonora Carrington, Surrealism, and Esotericism

Leonora Carrington (1917–2011) is one of the many surrealists that have turned to esotericism for inspiration and alternative forms of knowledge, a pursuit that permeates much of her art, writings, and life alike.¹ Esotericism became of particular importance to her at a difficult time in her life. In August 1940, the then 23-year-old artist and writer was pronounced “incurably insane,”² and incarcerated indefinitely in a Spanish mental asylum. Still haunted by the episode three years later, she relived her experience of illness and imprisonment by narrating it. The account was subsequently published in 1944 under the title *Down Below* in the fourth and final issue of the surrealist journal *VVV*.³ In this unusual autobiographical account, faithful descriptions of the external circumstances of Carrington’s journey and incarceration intermingle with vivid evocations of her psychotic delusions and paranoid projections of the imaginary onto the surrounding world. At the time of writing *Down Below*, her friend Pierre Mabille (1904–1952) was her most important source of knowledge of esotericism. Through his book, *Mirror of the Marvelous* (1940),⁴ Carrington came to recognise her trials in a number of myths and esoteric texts. This made her realise that many of the images and delusions that had overwhelmed, disoriented, and terrified her could be interpreted through the imagery of alchemy and the esoteric notion of correspondences.⁵ In that way, she managed to conceive of these perceptions as manifestations of “the marvellous” and her ordeals as a form of alchemical

¹ In this article, the term esotericism should be seen as equivalent with Western esotericism, a scholarly construct that encompasses a variety of currents including, among others, hermeticism, alchemy, astrology, and occultism. See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Esotericism,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 336–40. I discuss Carrington’s and surrealism’s idiosyncratic relation with esotericism below.

² Leonora Carrington, “Down Below,” in *The House of Fear: Notes from Down Below* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1988), 163.

³ The *VVV* publication of *Down Below* was translated from the French by Victor Llona. The original French version was published as *En bas* in 1945. Carrington established a definite version of the text in English together with Paul De Angelis and Marina Warner for the collection *The House of Fear*. That is the version referenced here, but for comparison I have also consulted the original English version as reprinted in Carrington, *Down Below* (Chicago: Black Swan Press, 1983). For a discussion of the different iterations of *Down Below*, see Alice Gambrell, *Women Intellectuals, Modernism, and Difference: Transatlantic Culture, 1919–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 91–98.

⁴ Pierre Mabille, *Mirror of the Marvelous: The Classic Surrealist Work on Myth*, trans. Jody Gladding (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1998).

⁵ See Mabille, *Traversées de nuit* (Paris: Plasma, 1981), 36–37.

transmutation. She describes this process as a search for “Knowledge,” which she manages to achieve through Mabille’s “philosophy.”⁶

Down Below is one of Carrington’s most widely read and discussed texts, but, although the influence of Mabille on the text is sometimes mentioned, there have been no thorough examinations of the significance his *Mirror of the Marvelous* held for it.⁷ A careful reading of *Mirror of the Marvelous* can contribute to an enhanced understanding of the often bewildering *Down Below*; insight into the nature of Mabille’s influence on Carrington and the text can in turn shed new light on their place in her healing process. The importance of Mabille and his book for both Carrington and her writing becomes even more apparent if we turn to *Little Francis* (1937–38), a lesser known novella that Carrington wrote a few years earlier.⁸ While *Little Francis* is a work of fiction, it has thinly veiled autobiographical content, and in its depiction of identity loss, a descent into the underworld, and the death of the protagonist, the novella prefigures the mental unrest that fed into *Down Below*. In writing *Little Francis*, however, Carrington does not seem to have been able to transform her experiences of dissolution and disorientation into insights, since the narrative ends in despair. A comparison of *Down Below* with *Little Francis* from the viewpoint of *Mirror of the Marvelous*, I argue, shows that the process of narrating *Down Below* can be interpreted as an enactment for Carrington of a form of symbolic rebirth and an initiation into the surrealist concept of “the marvellous,” as Mabille defines it.

Jonathan Eburne makes the important point that in narrating her experiences through the framework of Mabille, Carrington attempted to redirect earlier surrealist understandings of paranoia towards the contemporary surrealist commitment to developing new collective myths.⁹ Indeed, along with Mabille’s writings and person, surrealism’s overall concerns around the time of World War 2 are crucial for an understanding of Carrington’s approach to narrating *Down Below*, not least of her idiosyncratic use of esotericism as an interpretive framework. Carrington’s attitude towards esotericism was in many ways similar to that expressed within organised surrealism. The surrealist founder André Breton (1896–1966) was careful to emphasise that surrealism was not “fideistic” in its use of esoteric material, but that it was

⁶ Carrington, “Down Below,” 163, 164.

⁷ See Susan Aberth, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2004), 48; Katharine Conley, *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 62–63; Jonathan P. Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 217–18, 221; Gambrell, *Women Intellectuals, Modernism, and Difference*, 87–88, 92–93.

⁸ Carrington, “Little Francis,” in *The House of Fear*.

⁹ Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, 218.

rather concerned with esotericism's potential to provide man with a fuller form of knowledge, based on analogies and correspondences, that could restore access to a "key" with which to decipher the world.¹⁰

Carrington herself pursued a lifelong path of exploration that led her to study a multitude of esoteric currents. In combination with her interest in worldwide mythology, Tibetan Buddhism, and G.I. Gurdjieff (1866–1949), this search for knowledge meant that she, as Susan Aberth puts it, "was fully versed in a number of esoteric traditions and her work fluidly employed a vast repertoire of subjects and symbols."¹¹ At the same time, Carrington herself states emphatically that, "I've never been convinced by any sect or cult. The closest I've ever been to being convinced of anything was by the Tibetan Buddhists."¹² Along the same lines, Victoria Ferentinou points out that while Carrington drew from a wide range of esoteric sources as a means of gaining self-knowledge, "she did not become a devout follower of any form of religiosity."¹³ Aberth also writes that "she was incapable of canonical veneration," which means that her treatment of esoteric and religious themes often "veer off into playful satire."¹⁴

According to Whitney Chadwick, Carrington was attracted to esotericism since it engages the point where scientific and spiritual knowledge converge,¹⁵ thus dissolving a persistent antinomy in Western thinking. Just as importantly, she perceived it to be an area where women had historically been able to exercise powers that they had later been robbed of. Chadwick quotes Carrington: "The Bible, like any other history ... is full of gaps and peculiarities that only begin to make sense if understood as a covering-up for a very different kind of civilisation which has been eliminated."¹⁶ Eburne writes that in telling the story that is *Down Below*, "Carrington's broader project takes shape as an investigation into alternative practices of social organization and knowledge production that had been lost, destroyed, or

¹⁰ André Breton, *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 225, 229. See also Breton, *Free Rein*, trans. Michel Parmentier and Jacqueline d'Amboise (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 104–107.

¹¹ Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 97.

¹² Paul De Angelis, "Interview with Leonora Carrington," in *Leonora Carrington: The Mexican Years* (San Francisco: The Mexican Museum, 1991), 42.

¹³ Victoria Ferentinou, "Surrealism, Occulture and Gender: Women Artists, Power and Occultism," *Aries* 13, no. 1 (2013): 115.

¹⁴ Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 102–103.

¹⁵ Whitney Chadwick, "Pilgrimage to the Stars: Leonora Carrington and the Occult Tradition," in *Leonora Carrington: Paintings, Drawings and Sculptures 1940–1990*, (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1991), 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

discredited.”¹⁷ For Carrington then, esotericism spoke to her lifelong conviction that common-sense definitions of reality are arbitrary,¹⁸ and acted as confirmation that there is a repressed history in which women had an influence later denied them. Together with her ironic distance towards her own esoteric readings and quest for Knowledge, this multifaceted use she made of her learning indicates that it is hardly meaningful to define Carrington’s engagement with esotericism as what Antoine Faivre calls a “form of thought.”¹⁹ Faivre famously lists four constitutive components that are intrinsic for esoteric forms of thought. It is, in fact, certainly possible to detect the presence of these components in much of Carrington’s work. Particularly after the crisis that this article revolves around, her art and writings are ripe with correspondences, frequently depict a living nature, rely on her imagination’s creation and interpretation of often hieroglyphically dense images, and, not least, depict an experience of transmutation, often through alchemical symbolism.²⁰ However, relying on such a list of shallow similarities is a risky pursuit. Wouter Hanegraaff points out that Faivre’s definition of esotericism is firmly rooted in Christian theosophy, and as such is rather restricted.²¹ As a consequence of Carrington’s meandering interest in a wide range of esoteric material, there is no such stable framework in which the manifestations of these components in her work can be anchored.²² Carrington’s focus on repressed models of knowing and being suggest that her approach may be more appropriately defined as a search for “rejected knowledge,” as Hanegraaff describes the status of esotericism in Western intellectual and religious history.²³ This approach largely holds up for surrealism, too. If Carrington’s explorations are considered a pursuit of rejected knowledge, her search is similar in spirit to that of surrealism as an organised movement. The term’s elasticity, however, also has the advantage of accommodating her excursions into territory other surrealists have steered clear of, such as the teachings of Gurdjieff.

¹⁷ Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, 243.

¹⁸ Silvia Cherem, “Eternally Married to the Wind: Interview with Leonora Carrington,” in *Leonora Carrington: What She Might Be* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 2008), 21–23.

¹⁹ See Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10–14.

²¹ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 354.

²² See also Faivre’s discussion of the problems inherent in considering surrealism from the perspective of esoteric conceptions of the imagination. Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*, trans. Christine Rhone (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 124.

²³ See Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, especially 152, 230, 233–39.

Speaking more specifically of the esoteric status of *Down Below*, it may be helpful to turn to Henrik Bogdan's sketch of four overarching categories of texts that are related to esotericism. The first three of these are texts that belong to esoteric currents in which Faivre's intrinsic components are either explicitly or implicitly present, or not present at all.²⁴ *Down Below* would seem to fit the fourth of Bogdan's categories, which he calls "migration of esoteric ideas into nonesoteric materials."²⁵ Indeed, *Down Below* is not an esoteric text in itself, but rather one in which Carrington makes extensive use of esoteric material. Carrington, however, does considerably more than add esoteric references as garnishes; rather than just dwelling on the surfaces of the symbols and tales she evokes, it seems that the act of interpreting her experiences through the marvellous lets her penetrate and activate them. Mabille writes that "[a] book on the marvelous ought to be an initiation tract," but that this is impossible to accomplish; instead, he more humbly proposes to suggest some directions into the marvellous.²⁶ Considered as such a journey aided by an occulted map towards initiation, what Carrington undergoes when retelling her experiences evokes symbologist and alchemy scholar René Alleau's proposition that a myth cannot be judged from value systems separate from it, and in fact is essentially "nothing other than the mutation that it brings about in us when we let ourselves dissolve into it."²⁷ Such a dissolution can only be achieved through precisely some form of initiation, and, as we will see more extensively later, Carrington can then indeed be considered to treat the esoteric and mythical content in her narrative as an initiate.

If organised surrealism's increased interest in myth, esotericism, and initiation at the time of World War 2 is reflected in *Down Below*, Carrington may in her turn very well have exerted a reciprocal influence on the movement's thinking about these topics. Marina Warner remarks that Breton admired Carrington because she "had realised one of the most desirable ambitions of surrealism, the voyage into madness."²⁸ While Breton was certainly impressed by the fact that Carrington had experienced madness and been able to return to tell the tale,²⁹ her experiences also had other, more profound

²⁴ Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 18–20.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁶ Mabille, *Mirror of the Marvelous*, 18.

²⁷ René Alleau, *The Primal Force in Symbol: Understanding the Language of Higher Consciousness*, trans. Ariel Godwin (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2009), 132.

²⁸ Warner, introduction to *The House of Fear*, by Carrington, 16.

²⁹ See Breton, *Anthology of Black Humor*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997), 335–36.

implications. By emerging as an initiate into the marvellous after composing *Down Below* and permeating the text with correspondences and references to alchemy, Carrington may be said to have prefigured surrealism's post-war attempts, most notably in the exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, to effect a magical rebirth and renewal through initiation into the new myth of surrealism.³⁰

The purposes of this article are then twofold. I will examine how esotericism aided Carrington in regaining a sense of mental equilibrium, and how Mabile's writings imply that she emerged from her trials as an initiate into the marvellous. Further, I will show how this suggests that Carrington paralleled and to a certain extent prefigured surrealism's concerns with esotericism, myth, and initiation. First, however, I will briefly introduce Carrington to provide context for *Little Francis* and *Down Below*.

Biographical Background and Two Forms of Autobiography

Leonora Carrington was born in 1917 in Clayton Green in northern England, into a wealthy family. She soon showed signs of being drawn to the more unusual side of existence. Ever since she was an infant, she had "very strange experiences with all kinds of ghosts and visions and things that are generally condemned by orthodox religion."³¹ Early on, she developed a rebellious penchant for mischief. She was expelled from several Catholic schools, for instance, for her habit of mirror writing, sometimes with both hands at once. She also decided that she wanted to become a saint or a nun. "I liked the idea of being able to levitate mainly," was Carrington's characteristically dry explanation for this ambition.³² The same taste for the unusual fed in to her receptivity to esotericism. "I do have that kind of mentality. It's certainly been natural to me,"³³ she comments.

As a teenager, Carrington realised that she desperately wanted to escape the life of an obedient society-wife that was staked out for her and become an artist. At the age of 18, in 1935, she went to London to attend art school, to her parents' – especially her father's – great dismay. The following year, she made two decisive discoveries when she started buying books on alchemy and was introduced to surrealism. She read Herbert Read's book *Surreal-*

³⁰ For an extensive discussion of the exhibition, see Alyce Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros 1938–1968* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 116–41.

³¹ De Angelis, "Interview with Leonora Carrington," 42.

³² *Ibid.*, 33.

³³ *Ibid.*, 42.

ism (1936), a gift from her mother no less, where Read mentions alchemy in connection with surrealist art.³⁴ In June the same year, she was able to see a large selection of surrealist artworks in person at the *First International Surrealist Exhibition* in London.³⁵ For Carrington, the most striking work on display was that of Max Ernst (1891–1976), particularly his painting *Two Children Menaced by a Nightingale* (1924).³⁶ The following year, she was to meet the artist in person when he had a solo exhibition in London. A friend of Carrington invited her to an intimate dinner party for Ernst, where the two instantly fell in love, unhindered by the fact that Ernst was 26 years her senior and married. Aberth emphasises that meeting Ernst was a transformational experience for Carrington.³⁷ Through him, she was not only able to liberate herself fully from her family, but she also came into contact with wider artistic circles. When Ernst returned to Paris, Carrington followed. Many years later she was careful to point out that she did not run away with him, but on her own. “I always did my running away alone,” she told Paul De Angelis in an interview.³⁸ When Carrington arrived in Paris, Ernst separated from his wife, Marie-Berthe Aurenche (1906–1960), but neither she nor Carrington’s parents were pleased with the situation.

In Paris, Carrington completed her self-portrait *Inn of the Dawn Horse* (1936–1937), which she had started work on in London. The painting gives an intimation of her image of herself as something of a sorceress, and also provides an early example of some of her recurring motifs, not least her totem animal: the horse.³⁹ This was a productive time for Carrington, who also participated in the activities of the surrealist group, and exhibited in the large 1938 surrealist exhibition, *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*. She wrote, too, and published her surrealist short stories in the two small volumes *La Maison de la peur* (1938) and *La Dame ovale* (1939), both of which Ernst illustrated with collages.

After a while, Carrington and Ernst grew tired of Paris and sought to escape Ernst’s wife, who confronted them on numerous occasions.⁴⁰ They made their way to the French countryside and stayed in the village of Saint-Martin d’Ardèche.⁴¹ The period seems to have been largely idyllic, but also

³⁴ See Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 23.

³⁵ For a more extensive biography, see *ibid.*

³⁶ De Angelis, “Interview with Leonora Carrington,” 34.

³⁷ Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 27.

³⁸ De Angelis, “Interview with Leonora Carrington,” 36.

³⁹ For an extended interpretation of the painting, see Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 30–34.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴¹ See Silvana Schmid, *Loplops Geheimnis: Max Ernst und Leonora Carrington in Südfrankreich* (Cologne: Klepenheur & Witsch, 1996).

marked by uncertainty since the relationship was still haunted by Ernst's marriage. At one point, he left the village to go back to Paris and resolve the problems with his wife, leaving Carrington on her own, desperate and disoriented. When Ernst had finally ended things definitely with his wife, a period followed which Carrington, although reluctant to look back, claimed to have been "paradise."⁴² The lovers painted together and decorated their house with fantastic sculptures. Ernst famously had the bird as his totem animal, and his birds and Carrington's horses started living a shared life in their art. There was also an esoteric side to these playfully metamorphosing figures. In her study *Max Ernst and Alchemy* (2001), M.E. Warlick shows that Ernst was deeply affected by alchemy in both his art and thinking. She finds a shared esoteric element in the many manifestations of androgyny in his and Carrington's work. These "sexual inversions of traditional mythic characters" parallel central motifs in *Little Francis* and prefigure much of Carrington's later work.⁴³ The animal hybrids that Carrington and Ernst decorated their house with also show some signs of alchemical symbolism.⁴⁴ Altogether, this illustrates how the couple's interests and motifs fused, aided by a common interest in the esoteric. Their mutual influence upon each other also proved to last far longer than the relationship.⁴⁵ For instance, according to Aberth, the underlying alchemical motifs in Ernst's paintings partly explains the wealth of alchemical references in *Down Below*.⁴⁶ By the time of the composition of that text, though, Carrington had also been provided with a broader influx of ideas.

The idyll was not to last for long. When the French declared war on Germany in 1939, Ernst was interned because of his German citizenship. He was released through the influence of the surrealist poet Paul Éluard, but the following year he was taken prisoner again and placed in an internment camp.⁴⁷ When he finally managed to escape, he returned to Saint-Martin d'Ardèche only to discover that Carrington had left and sold the house. The stress, fear, and continuous separations had proved to be too much for her, and believing Ernst to be indefinitely lost to her, she had started experiencing the symptoms of a mental breakdown. Having sold their house, she fled to Spain with two friends. Soon thereafter, she developed a full-blown

⁴² Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 15.

⁴³ M.E. Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 161.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 161, 166.

⁴⁵ See Renée Riese Hubert, "Leonora Carrington and Max Ernst: Artistic Partnership and Feminist Liberation," *New Literary History* 22, no. 3 (1991): 735.

⁴⁶ Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 42.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

psychosis, and was eventually interned in a mental asylum in Santander under terrifying conditions, seemingly with little hope of recovery. She nevertheless eventually regained enough sanity to flee. She subsequently arrived in New York, where she spent almost a year before travelling on to Mexico, which would become her adopted home for most of the rest of her life.

Little Francis is partly based on events that took place during the first year or so of Carrington and Ernst's stay in Saint-Martin. Carrington wrote the novella in 1937 and 1938, and the insecure and uncertain side of the couple's relationship at the time comes to the fore in the story. *Little Francis* does not seem to have been intended for publication and was long believed to be lost. Finally recovered, it was first published in French translation in 1986, and in the original English in 1988 in the volume *The House of Fear*. *Little Francis* is an autobiographical tale in disguise, where Carrington has turned herself into the young boy Francis, while Ernst has become Francis's beloved Uncle Ubriaco; his wife Marie-Berthe Aurenche is turned into Ubriaco's spoiled and jealous daughter Amelia.⁴⁸ The surroundings, events, and several other people have in turn been transformed by Carrington's imagination. For instance, the paralysed writer Joë Bosquet (1897–1950) takes the shape of Ubriaco's opium-smoking friend Jerome Jones, while the architect Serge Chermayeff (1900–1996), who had spied on Carrington in London on behalf of her father,⁴⁹ becomes the pompous Egres Lepereff.⁵⁰ When Ubriaco departs for Paris and leaves Francis alone, much like Ernst left Carrington to her own devices in the village, this transformation of reality is taken even further. In the fictional version of these events, the abandoned Francis meets the demonic woman Miraldalocks, who leads him down into the underworld. There, he soon realises that his head has turned into that of a horse. Later, Miraldalocks takes Francis with her to witness an execution. When the boy to be executed walks out in front of the guillotine, Francis realises that it is in fact his own doppelganger that stands before him. Eventually, Francis returns to the village, still horse-headed, where the local bar owner exploits his odd appearance in order to attract customers. The story ends with Francis back in Paris, where he gets into an argument with Amelia. Overcome by rage, she hits him over the head with a hammer; the blow cracks his head open, causing his death.

Little Francis switches back and forth between heartfelt descriptions of Francis's joyous life together with Uncle Ubriaco on the one hand, and

⁴⁸ Warner, introduction to *The House of Fear*, 7–8.

⁴⁹ Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 21.

⁵⁰ Warner, introduction to *The House of Fear*, 9.

carnavalesque and outright grotesque depictions on the other, as Carrington transforms her experiences into a black fairy tale with a significant number of references to death and identity loss. The novella's fairy tale character is enhanced by Carrington's idiom. Her authorial voice is deceptively casual, narrating events both fantastic and cruel with a wide-eyed sincerity that almost veils her piercing observations.

Down Below takes place about two years after Ernst abandoned Carrington for the first time. This more directly autobiographical text was composed in August 1943, three years after the events in it took place. Carrington retold her trials orally over the course of a few wrenching days, in an account that was directed to Pierre Mabile and transcribed by his wife Jeanne Megnen. The fact that *Down Below* started out as an oral account goes some way to explain the fact that it too has a distinctly anti-literary style; yet Carrington's deceptively everyday tone in the face of unimaginable horrors, together with her vivid depictions of hallucinatory delusions, render the text close in spirit to much of her fiction.⁵¹

Down Below is a highly unusual form of autobiography, to the extent that Riese Hubert claims that it reverses autobiographical standards through the interference of mythology and the imagination.⁵² Carrington states at the outset that, by talking her memories through, she hopes to transform what she calls "an embryo of knowledge" into a fuller understanding of what had happened to her,⁵³ something that shows as well as anything that the narration is not just a matter of description but is ultimately an urgent quest for insights. She begins the narration just after Max Ernst had been interned for the second time. Left on her own once again, Carrington's behaviour soon becomes increasingly erratic. Escaping France with two friends, she ends up in Spain, where her delusions worsen. The on-going war plays a considerable part in her breakdown. Apart from being stricken with a crippling fear of

⁵¹ For Katharine Conley, *Down Below* reflects the fact that women traditionally have rather been storytellers than writers (Conley, *Automatic Woman*, 64). While Carrington's writing does have a marked tendency towards an oral style, it is evident that this is not her only mode of narration. In the case of *Little Francis* and *Down Below*, this anti-literary style may of course be an effect of Carrington's youth, but her later writings suggest that it may well have been a conscious choice. Her novel *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974), for instance, shifts between the meandering vernacular of the 92-year-old, slightly senile narrator Marian, and the archaic tone of a found manuscript that, in true gothic manner, occupies a considerable part of the novel. This variation in style can further be compared with Carrington's novella *The Stone Door* (1976), where the intricate symbolism culled from esotericism and the Kabbalah is entwined with the everyday in language that is far more conventionally "correct" than in the other examples mentioned.

⁵² Riese Hubert, "Leonora Carrington and Max Ernst," 724.

⁵³ Carrington, "Down Below," 164.

what she perceives to be the robotic, inhuman Nazis, Carrington also seems to suffer an enormous sense of guilt since she believes it to be her responsibility to put an end to the war. Soon, she is incarcerated in a Spanish mental asylum in Santander. The major part of *Down Below* is devoted to Carrington's forced stay there, where she is subjected to humiliating treatment, like being strapped naked to her bed for days on end. She is also injected with the anti-psychotic drug Cardiazol, which provokes a horrible feeling that she is being torn apart in the very core of her identity.

At one point in the narration, Carrington declares that she is afraid that she will slip into fiction, since she is unable to recall all the details of the events. Ann Hoff has shown that it is nevertheless likely that much of the external circumstances that Carrington describes are accurate. Her horrifying depictions of the effects of Cardiazol and her physical maltreatment match both the recorded effect of the drug and the common treatment of psychotic patients at the time.⁵⁴ For the purposes of this article however, the most important aspect is not the veracity of the narrative, but its combination of external circumstances with subjective depictions of the surroundings and Carrington's own mental life as she perceived them at the time, affected as she was by her psychotic interpretative delirium. This retelling is then fused with her active interpretation of the events through the framework of Ma-bille's writings on the marvellous, which means that the imagery of alchemy and the structure of myths are imposed on the events in the course of re-counting them. This method is closely related to the preoccupations of other exiled surrealists at the time, even if Carrington approached it with a whole other urgency.

Surrealism and the New Myth

Some time after her escape from Santander, Carrington reached New York, where she was reunited with several of the surrealists she had known in Paris. André Breton and many of his cohorts had managed to escape war-torn France and ended up in the United States in different stages. Carrington spent almost a year in New York, and this period constitutes her most active participation in organised surrealism.⁵⁵ She doubtlessly made an impact: in his "Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto or Not," published in the

⁵⁴ Ann Hoff, "I Was Convulsed, Pitiably Hideous': Convulsive Shock Treatment in Leonora Carrington's *Down Below*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 32, no. 3 (2009): 83–98.

⁵⁵ Penelope Rosemont, ed., *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 102.

inaugural issue of *VVV* in 1942, Breton praises Carrington as “one of today’s most lucid and daring minds.”⁵⁶ He mentions her alongside names like Pierre Mabille, the writer Georges Bataille (1897–1962), and the painter André Masson (1896–1987), as examples of thinkers and artists invested in examining the possibilities and nature of a modern mythology,⁵⁷ or what Breton in the prolegomena calls “a new myth.”⁵⁸ The new myth that Breton calls for here is central to surrealism’s concerns at the time,⁵⁹ and as his thinking about its possibilities and nature took a more pronounced shape, esotericism became an ever larger part of it. Breton’s book-length essay *Arcanum 17* (1945) shows this clearly. In it, he interweaves ancient myths, the esoteric content dormant in the poetry of surrealist forerunners such as Gérard de Nerval (1808–1855), Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), and Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891), and 19th century occultist Eliphas Lévi’s (1810–1875) description of magic initiation, into a potent counterforce against the Christian myth that, Breton claims, has repressed vital knowledge about the world.⁶⁰ This synthesis of rejected knowledge, then, consists both of references to occultists, and the recognition that there is an esoteric content in poetry and myth. Central to all these, for Breton, is the role of analogies and correspondences as means of interpreting and give new knowledge of, and meaning to, the surrounding world. This search for the new myth was the driving force behind the short lived *VVV*, in the four issues of which surrealism radicalised its critique of Western civilisation and sought to construct an alternative to it by turning to “primitive” cultures, poetry, and esotericism.⁶¹ Similar preoccupations seem to have predominated the surrealist activities in other ways. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) was exiled in New York together with the surrealists and contributed to

⁵⁶ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 287.

⁵⁷ See Nikolaj Lübecker, *Community, Myth, and Recognition in Twentieth-Century French Literature and Thought* (London: Continuum, 2009), 64.

⁵⁸ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 294.

⁵⁹ For a concise and illuminating discussion of surrealist myth, see Michael Löwy, *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 13–19.

⁶⁰ Breton, *Arcanum 17: With Apertures Grafted to the End*, trans. Zack Rogow (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2004), 115–19.

⁶¹ See Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros*, 83–84. For more on the surrealists’ activities in New York, see Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, trans. Alison Anderson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 391–413; Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1995); Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (Boston: Black Widow Press, 2009), 450–82.

VVV, and he even likened some of the games the surrealists played there with an “initiation rite.”⁶²

Many of Carrington’s New York activities suggest that she not only shared this interest in esotericism and mythology, but contributed to their development in a surrealist context. In the first issue of VVV, Carrington took part in an enquiry, “Concerning the Present Day Relative Attractions of Various Creatures in Mythology & Legend,” where the twenty one participants ranked “fifteen creatures of diverse mythological derivation in order of their attraction.”⁶³ The Sphinx turned out to be the most highly favoured creature, but Carrington only ranked it as number six and, significantly, preferred the unicorn, the werewolf, and the vampire. The first of these is of course closely related to her totem animal the horse, while the latter two may have appealed to her due to their liminal nature and dependence on transformation – something that Carrington, having suffered a mental breakdown, must have been able to sympathise with. VVV number 2–3, published in 1943, featured a “non-euclidian” tarot design, which Roberto Matta had conceived together with Carrington. As mentioned earlier, *Down Below*, too, was first published in VVV, in its fourth and last issue in 1944. Eburne considers the text an example of the pursuit of rejected knowledge that took place in the journal. Carrington’s overall insistence on the function of the myths she creates as “the sacred origins of new patterns of behavior and new social arrangements” is certainly close to Breton’s goal of delineating a new collective myth.⁶⁴

Carrington also took part in the 1942 exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism*, which was organised by André Breton and Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968). Much like the reworked tarot, her contributions to the exhibition are significant as an example of her unorthodox engagement with esotericism.⁶⁵ Carrington exhibited the painting *La Chasse* (1942), but, more importantly in this context, she also contributed an ink drawing to Breton’s enigmatic compendium, “On the Survival of Certain Myths and on Some Other Myths in Growth or Formation,” which was featured in the catalogue.⁶⁶ Carrington’s *Brothers and Sisters Have I None* (1942) is included there as an example of the

⁶² Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, 453.

⁶³ Reprinted in Rosemont, *Surrealist Women*, 166–67.

⁶⁴ Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, 242.

⁶⁵ For descriptions of the exhibition, see Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros*, 84–88, and Lübecker, *Community, Myth, and Recognition in Twentieth-Century French Literature and Thought*, 58–60.

⁶⁶ Breton, “On the Survival of Certain Myths and on Some Other Myths in Growth or Formation,” in *First Papers of Surrealism* (New York: Coordinating Council of French Relief Societies, 1942).

myth of the androgyne. Aberth describes the image as a “cross between a personal drawing and a hermetic diagram,” where “the details coalesce to chart an inner topography.”⁶⁷ The drawing is accompanied by an alchemical etching where the intermingling of water and fire is depicted as a man and a woman embracing, a unification of opposites which does not lead to resolution and harmony but to the productively tension-filled co-existence of antinomies that surrealism strived for.⁶⁸ On this page then, myth and alchemy fuse with personal experience in a way that may be considered a tentative example of the interpretation of madness through the marvellous that Carrington herself would enact in *Down Below*. The androgyne is also an appropriately selected myth for Carrington, which points back to her earlier exploration of the motif together with Max Ernst, while simultaneously affording a glimpse of the future, where androgynous figures, often both ageless and ancient, would populate her stories and paintings.

Half a decade earlier, in “The Political Position of Surrealism” (1935), Breton had claimed that surrealism would prove to have the ability to transform the personal myths of artists into collective myths, and he made a direct connection between this new collective myth and the emancipation of man.⁶⁹ If surrealism’s concerns during the war were to a large extent directed towards tracing the contours of this myth, Carrington’s activities in New York, and to an even greater extent later in Mexico, have to be considered striking examples of a similar pursuit. In her interpretation of personal experience through the imagery and language of esotericism and myth, Carrington translated highly personal obsessions into bewildering yet more universally recognisable imagery. *Down Below* is undoubtedly the most accomplished example of such a transformation. But to approach a fuller understanding of the significance of her use of alchemy and myth in order to transform intolerable suffering into knowledge, we need to turn to the influence of Pierre Mabille.

Pierre Mabille and the Marvellous as Surrealist Esotericism

Pierre Mabille had a crucial role in the conception of *Down Below*. Carrington had first attempted to write about her psychosis and internment when she was still in New York, at the encouragement of Breton, but that version of

⁶⁷ Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 54.

⁶⁸ See e.g. Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 123–24.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 210, 230–33.

the text was never published and the manuscript was lost.⁷⁰ In Mexico, she met Mabile through her friend Remedios Varo (1908–1963) and her husband, the surrealist poet Benjamin Péret (1899–1959). Carrington knew Mabile from her time in Paris, where he had introduced her to the Kabbalah and the writings of Gershom Scholem,⁷¹ prefiguring the role of a spiritual guide of sorts that he would now assume for her. This time around, he was to introduce her to a much larger body of rejected knowledge. He provided her with a copy of his book *Mirror of the Marvelous*, and then convinced her to make a second attempt at recounting her experience of psychosis and incarceration.

It is worth taking a closer look at Mabile's person, in order to get a sense of the importance he had for Carrington, as well as for surrealism, at the time. Born in 1904, Mabile first came into contact with the surrealists in 1934. He soon started contributing to the journal *Minotaure* (1933–1939), where he eventually came to serve as an editor alongside Breton. He was a physician by profession, but also had an extensive knowledge of psychoanalysis, art, and, not least, esotericism. Mabile was a disciple of the contemporary French occultist Pierre Piobb (1874–1942), who was thus one of the decisive influences in his intellectual and spiritual development.⁷² Through the teachings of Piobb, along with his wider readings in esotericism, Mabile developed a monist philosophy that was based on the belief that “everything is in everything,”⁷³ that mind and matter must cease to be considered separate from each other, and that man should perceive himself as a microcosm regulated by the same laws that structure the entire universe.⁷⁴ Mabile was also a Freemason,⁷⁵ which may go some way to explain his persistent preoccupation with initiation,⁷⁶ an aspect of his thinking that permeates *Mirror of the Marvelous*. While Mabile is a relatively seldom discussed figure in the history of surrealism, José Pierre claims that he “supplied the ‘scientific’ endorsement that made it possible for a twentieth century observer to venture into the occult without too great risk to his reputation,” and that he was

⁷⁰ Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 47–48.

⁷¹ Salomon Grimberg, “Leonora Carrington, What She Might Be,” in *Leonora Carrington: What She Might Be*, 80.

⁷² See Sarane Alexandrian, *Le surréalisme et le rêve* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 444; Remy Laville, “Pierre Mabile ou la route vers l'Âge d'Homme,” in *Mélysine VIII: L'âge ingrat*, eds. Henri Béhar and Pascaline Mourier-Casile (Paris: L'âge d'homme, 1986), 73; Breton, “Drawbridges,” in Mabile, *Mirror of the Marvelous*, x.

⁷³ Laville, “Pierre Mabile ou la route vers l'Âge d'Homme,” 73.

⁷⁴ Breton, “Drawbridges,” xi. See also Mabile, *Traversées de nuit*, 35–36.

⁷⁵ Laville, “Pierre Mabile ou la route vers l'Âge d'Homme,” 73.

⁷⁶ Alexandrian, *Le surréalisme et le rêve*, 444.

inspirational in his steadfast preference for the poetical imagination's supremacy over stale dogma.⁷⁷ According to Sarane Alexandrian, Mabille significantly enough also "initiated" Breton in geomancy and astrology.⁷⁸ Overall then, Mabille appears to have been a strong force in the surrealist movement's already discussed focus on myth, esotericism, and initiation during the war.⁷⁹ He also took this interest further than many other surrealists. If Breton cautiously maintained a certain playful distance from esotericism and initiation,⁸⁰ Mabille, being a Freemason with a radically monist view of the world, seems to have had a deeper, if somewhat idiosyncratic, engagement with these phenomena – still marked by a synthetic approach that prevented him from adhering to one particular "form of thought," but with an acute sense of the radical, transformative possibilities inherent in esoteric experience.

The marvellous has been one of the central concepts in surrealism ever since the inception of the movement: in the first surrealist manifesto, Breton exclaims that "only the marvelous is beautiful."⁸¹ While the marvellous thus signifies the surrealist conception of beauty as something shattering and convulsive, it also has broader implications, since at the same time it describes the central surrealist experience of reality as something more than meets the eye; the marvellous, in other words, pertains to surrealism's attempts to dissolve the definite borders between reality and the imagination, detect correspondences that are obscured by rationalist thinking, and reveal the adventure in everyday life.⁸² Mabille's book-length charting of the topography of the marvellous is undoubtedly one of the most ambitious attempts to explore the concept in all its richness. For Mabille, "[the marvellous] evokes all the extraordinary and unbelievable phenomena that together constitute the essential domain of fantasy," and it speaks to its audience's longing for "a world custom-built according to their desires."⁸³ Ultimately, the marvellous is a life-altering search for a different form of knowledge, for "[t]heir desire is to rip away the veil that hides from them the total reality of

⁷⁷ José Pierre, "André Breton and/or 'Minotaure,'" in *Focus on Minotaure: The Animal-Headed Review* (Geneva: Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, 1987), 106.

⁷⁸ Alexandrian, *Le surréalisme et le rêve*, 444.

⁷⁹ See Pierre, "André Breton and/or 'Minotaure,'" 118. See also Tessel Bauduin, *The Occultation of Surrealism: A Study of the Relationship Between Bretonian Surrealism and Western Esotericism* (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2012), 27.

⁸⁰ See Breton, *Free Rein*, 96.

⁸¹ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 14.

⁸² See also Mabille, *Traversées de nuit*, 31.

⁸³ Mabille, *Mirror of the Marvelous*, 4.

an incomprehensible universe.”⁸⁴ His faith in this potential is reflected in the book’s erudition and scope, for Mabille interweaves explication of the nature of the marvellous with examples of it in the form of excerpts from a vast number of sources, ranging from ancient myths to folktales, from gothic novels to modern poetry. They also include a masonic initiation ritual, “Reception of a Master Following the Scottish Ritual” (n.d.), and excerpts from alchemical writings by Johann Valentin Andreae (1586–1654) and Basil Valentine.⁸⁵ The approach is methodologically close to Breton’s construction of the surrealist tradition, in which he considers a dizzying number of forebears to be surrealist in one respect or another,⁸⁶ and is also a revealing example of the logic behind surrealism’s appropriation of culturally and historically distant sources.

The texts in *Mirror of the Marvelous* that belong to commonly recognised parts of esotericism may be quantitatively few. Mabille’s charting of the marvellous, though, does not only stand out in its scope, but also in his distinction between what might be called a popular, or exoteric, and a hidden, or esoteric, side of the marvellous. For Mabille, the surface meanings of folklore and myth display the popular side of the marvellous. In this respect, the marvellous is an inherent feature of storytelling before it is turned into either religious morality or high culture; in other words, before it is made to serve a fixed purpose. He considers this popular side of the marvellous highly valuable since it acts as a reservoir of poetic knowledge that can be turned against the strictures of classicism and Christianity, as well as against conventional morals and demands of good taste and moralistic utility in storytelling.⁸⁷ In this, the marvellous speaks to the unconscious of all those who do not have the time or means to penetrate its secrets.⁸⁸

In Mabille’s definition, myths and esoteric texts that manifest the marvellous are united in their more or less veiled initiatory patterns, but the relevance of this esoteric side of them only becomes fully clear to those initiated. Mabille even states that certain people are predestined for such an initiation into the marvellous.⁸⁹ In connection with this, Mabille’s reasoning often

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁵ There are no exact biographical data available for the latter. As Mabille himself remarks, “the very person of Basile Valentin[e] is shrouded in mystery,” and, like many other authors of alchemical texts, he is “no doubt fictitious, a means of concealing collective works” (Mabille, *Mirror of the Marvelous*, 58–59n3).

⁸⁶ See for instance the list that begins with “Swift is surrealist in malice,” in “Manifesto of Surrealism,” in Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 26–27.

⁸⁷ Mabille, *Mirror of the Marvelous*, 31.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 18–19.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

approaches the idea of the esoteric marvellous as a repository of “rejected knowledge,” particularly when he describes the diminished insights into its initiatory structure in the contemporary world and bemoans the disappearance of a succession of men who held “the true keys to the marvellous.”⁹⁰ While the marvellous can serve as a vital source of inspiration for everyone then, it is only those initiated into it who are able to perceive its function as a transmitter of knowledge that can be used to enact an ontological transformation. For Mabille, this transformation requires both “an outward conquest of nature and a constant inward searching,”⁹¹ and takes the shape of a perilous journey that “goes from the depths of the abyss to sheer peaks.”⁹² Hence, the marvellous is certainly not exempt from discomfort; there is a cost to the increased knowledge brought by a journey to the heart of it.

Initiation into the Marvellous

Leonora Carrington talked her way through *Down Below* with Pierre Mabille and Jeanne Megnen almost immediately after having read *Mirror of the Marvellous*. Prior to this, her time at the mental asylum in Santander had figured in some of her artworks. One example is the etching *The Dogs of the Sleeper* (1942), which Salomon Grimberg describes as “painful to look at.” According to him, Carrington herself is here represented by the tormented dog that is contorted, tied to a tree, and desperately howling.⁹³ She also titled a painting *Down Below* (1941), which shows suitably grotesque figures that presumably reflect her distorted view of the world at the time of her mental illness.⁹⁴ Mabille, however, seems to have provided her with a framework that allowed her to do more than represent the horrors, and instead see a pattern in the signs that overwhelmed her, and so reach new insights that allowed her to interpret them. In this way, her trials became charged with meaning in a manner that allowed her to use them as raw material for further knowledge about herself and the world.⁹⁵ This search for lost meaning is also related to

⁹⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁹¹ Ibid., 16.

⁹² Ibid., 105.

⁹³ Grimberg, “Leonora Carrington, What She Might Be,” 61–63.

⁹⁴ See Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 50.

⁹⁵ As touched upon earlier, *Down Below* has gone through many revisions. Part of these consisted in Carrington playing down the references to Mabille, but also eliminating a mention of Pascal. Alice Gambrell discusses the alterations in some detail, and comes to the conclusion that they are a sign of Carrington’s wish to avoid what she, in another context,

historical context. Carrington's breakdown may largely have been triggered by the imprisonment of Ernst, but her psychosis was also deeply entangled in the horrors of the on-going world war as a whole. Alice Gambrell claims that with external circumstances so horrible that they in themselves resembled frightening hallucinations, Carrington's identification of herself and her body with the surrounding world could in fact be "read as an extreme form of lucidity."⁹⁶ Likewise, even the Santander psychiatrist, Dr. Luis Morales, so demonically depicted in *Down Below*, wondered in retrospect if Carrington "was actually sane in her adaptation to society as it was at that time and if now she would even be classified as ill."⁹⁷ Carrington herself leaves less room for doubt on the matter. In *Down Below*, she even claims that her incarceration was "a godsend, for I was not aware of the importance of health, I mean of the absolute necessity of having a healthy body to avoid disaster in the liberation of the mind."⁹⁸ Just before that, she states that in living through the experience of insanity, she had begun collecting "the threads which might have led me across the initial border of Knowledge."⁹⁹ This harrowing episode then also brought with it a potential for knowledge, but one which she did not know how to extract. In order to do this, she needed to talk her experiences through and interpret them. Eburne points out that the symbolism in many of her delusions resembles that of other recorded cases of paranoia.¹⁰⁰ Carrington however differs significantly in her use of them as fodder for subsequent interpretation, in which she superimposes her newfound knowledge on the events as she revisits them.

Mabille provides us with some insight in the relationship between madness and the marvellous. In a later comment on *Down Below*, he writes that reading his *Mirror of the Marvelous* gave Carrington the insight that one should not try and repress an experience like the one that she had gone through, but instead sift through it for valuable knowledge by examining it unflinchingly.¹⁰¹ In the stories contained in Mabille's book, she found several images that were similar to those that she had perceived during her illness; she also

called "opinion dependency." See Gambrell, *Women Intellectuals, Modernism, and Difference*, 91–98. For the purposes of this article, it is enough to consider Mabille's role in the text's genesis, and to carefully note the probable impressions his writings made on Carrington's interpretation. Her subsequent attempts to temper the allusions to his work also may not serve to discredit it, but merely to mark her independence.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 95.

⁹⁷ Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 46.

⁹⁸ Carrington, "Down Below," 164.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 163.

¹⁰⁰ Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, 222–23.

¹⁰¹ Mabille, *Traversées de nuit*, 36–37. See also Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 48.

recognised planetary symbols and alchemical imagery which correlated with the signs she used to transform mundane things with during her psychosis, a connection that now lent her delusions a heightened esoteric significance. In the narration this is expressed in the many densely meaning-charged constellations of symbols that are rapidly transforming and acquiring new layers of significance through Carrington's psychotic interpretative delirium. In Mabille's monist view of the relationship between mind and matter, such products of the imagination have the same ontological reality as physical experiences. He connects this with an esoteric notion of correspondences when he writes,

Paraphrasing Hermes who said, 'all is above as it is below to make up the miracle of a single thing,' we could say that all is within us as it is outside of us to make up a single reality. Within us, scattered fantasies, distorted reflections of reality, and repressed expressions of unfulfilled desires mingle with shared and familiar symbols.¹⁰²

To transform this fluid mass of intuitions and half-formed experiences into contact with the marvellous, the habitual way of regarding one's inner and outer surroundings must be disrupted. Mabille finds some "ways into the realm of the marvellous" in "magical ceremonies, psychic exercises leading to concentration and ecstatic states, the freedom of mental automatism, and simulating morbid attitudes," which, he claims, can all result in clairvoyance.¹⁰³ Carrington's experience of mental illness appears to have been a particularly perilous journey along these paths to the marvellous.

"After the experience of *Down Below*, I changed. Dramatically. It was very much like having been dead," Carrington tells Marina Warner.¹⁰⁴ On a map of the asylum in Santander that Carrington drew to accompany *Down Below*, the radiography house where she underwent her Cardiazol treatments has the form of a coffin that contains a two-headed person. "Was this 'treatment' to her a kind of death and thus the coffin image with its implications of transformation and resurrection?" Susan Aberth asks.¹⁰⁵ Carrington does indeed describe the effect of Cardiazol as a disruption of her very being, an annihilation of her deepest self. *Down Below* is then not just a harrowing account of mental illness and incarceration. Its depictions of dissolved identity and Carrington's wish to go "down below" mean that it can also be

¹⁰² Mabille, *Mirror of the Marvelous*, 16.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Carrington quoted in Warner, introduction to *The House of Fear*, 18.

¹⁰⁵ Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 50.

read as a description of a symbolic death, which is essential both as an alchemical stage and as an element in initiation rituals of diverse kinds.¹⁰⁶ The importance of esotericism and Mabile's sketch of an initiation into the marvellous for Carrington's search for meaning in this experience of dissolution stand out even more clearly if we compare the treatment of this theme with the depiction of symbolic death in *Little Francis*.

Little Francis also fits many of Mabile's definitions of the marvellous, but rather of the popular kind that Mabile finds manifest in folktales – that is, an unconscious version that has the force to excite the imagination and stimulate cravings for a world that contains more than what meets the eye. In this case, the marvellous appears as a product not just of Carrington's unfettered imagination but of her lack of literary ambition, too. This point is valid for all of Carrington's writings, but it is particularly apt when it comes to *Little Francis*, since the tale was written “in an exercise book with very few corrections” and appears to have never been intended for publication.¹⁰⁷ Carrington's disregard not just for perfection, but also for classical conventions and literary propriety, means that her tone and characteristic unpredictable humour approach the mode of folktales, if with an added surrealist black humour. In this approximation and perversion of the folktale, *Little Francis* also seems to show some influence from the German Romantic tales that Ernst introduced her to at the time.¹⁰⁸ As Warner puts it, Carrington's “authentic simplicity of manner” also merges with “an inconsequent, dry tone and well-bred English manners,” at the same time as it borrows freely from both English nursery rhymes and Irish fairy tales.¹⁰⁹ This incongruence lies at the heart of Carrington's literary style throughout her oeuvre. There is also much in the novella that looks forward to Carrington's continued preoccupations, such as “her lifelong exploration of the potential of the androgyne.”¹¹⁰ Carrington's transformation of herself into the young boy Francis also revealed aspects of her relationship with Ernst to her of which she was not aware before,¹¹¹ something that implies a transmutation of biographical facts through the intervention of the imagination, and so looks forward to the method she employs in *Down Below*.

¹⁰⁶ See Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), and Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*.

¹⁰⁷ Warner, introduction to *The House of Fear*, 8. See also the discussion in note 45.

¹⁰⁸ Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 38.

¹⁰⁹ Warner, introduction to *The House of Fear*, 10, 13–14.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

Yet, in writing *Little Francis* Carrington appears to have only taken the first few steps on her journey towards the marvellous. Much like Mabelle claims that all tales of the marvellous conceal a theme of initiation, so it is possible to make out a tentative initiatory pattern in *Little Francis*. Warner points out that the novella appears to foreshadow the breakdown Carrington experienced a few years later.¹¹² This can be seen in her descriptions of the insecurity Francis feels towards his beloved Uncle Ubriaco, or his desperation at being abandoned by his uncle and left alone in the village. Viewed from the perspective of a tentative initiation into the marvellous however, the imminent breakdown is even more apparent in the many symbolic deaths Francis is made to undergo throughout the novella.

To begin with, the horse's head Francis suddenly acquires is a significant detail. While the horse otherwise tends to stand for liberation in Carrington's works, here the horse's head becomes a sign neither of independence nor of marvellous metamorphosis, but rather of a monstrous form of loss of identity. Warner points out that the name Francis is significant since it is that of a saint "closely associated with the understanding of animals."¹¹³ Nevertheless, in *Little Francis* there is a recurring and, for Carrington, unusual ambivalence towards animals. Francis is equally attracted to and repulsed by a mysterious woman called Pfoebe Pfadade, who initially seems to be enigmatically and intimately connected with the horse, as Francis hears her galloping away into the night after their first encounter. Later however, he sees her riding a horse, violently whipping the tortured creature. Pfoebe also has an intimidating goat-like smell and at one point performs a frightening dance with a goat. This can be contrasted with the central, and much more positive, role the goat has in the open-ended utopia that takes shape at the close of Carrington's later novel, *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974).¹¹⁴ This ambivalent depiction of animals suggests that Carrington experienced a general sense of disillusion and loss of anchoring at the time, as otherwise positively represented totemic beings appear frightening.

When Amelia hits Francis over the head with a hammer towards the end of the novella, "a big hole appeared in the horse's skull and streams of blood made a strangely shaped pool on the floor."¹¹⁵ Francis's fractured and bleeding head corresponds with an event at the very beginning of the novella.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹³ Warner, "Leonora Carrington's Spirit Bestiary; or the Art of Playing Make-Believe," in *Leonora Carrington: Paintings, Drawings and Sculptures 1940–1990* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1991), 15.

¹¹⁴ Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet* (Boston: Exact Change, 1996).

¹¹⁵ Carrington, "Little Francis," 147.

When Ubriaco and Amelia are on their way home from a concert, they see a dead horse that has been killed in an accident lying on the road. Amelia is so terrified by the “horrible blood pouring and pouring out of the big hole in his head,” that she jumps out of the taxi they’re in.¹¹⁶ There is no key given to the exact meaning of the repetition of this motif, but its character of both divination and esoteric correspondence positions it as an intimation of the correspondences that would so overwhelm Carrington during the time of *Down Below*. A similarly vague and hazy causality is established earlier. When Miraldalocks makes the horse-headed Francis watch the decapitation of his double, the event acts as a dreamlike retroactive explanation of Francis’s loss of his own head.¹¹⁷ In line with these half-formed peeks into a world governed by esoteric laws, Carrington’s intuitive approach in writing *Little Francis* seems to have meant that her feelings of impending doom and approaching mental instability truly remained in the embryonic form that she mentions in the beginning of *Down Below*. *Little Francis*, then, indicates that Carrington was already stricken at that point with a crisis intense enough for her to experience it as a form of symbolic death. Lacking insight into the esoteric side of the marvellous, she was however incapable of perceiving this death as a way towards a corresponding symbolic rebirth.

Francis’s descent into the underworld is another poignant example of a motif with obvious correlations to both symbolic death and psychological crisis; it also links *Little Francis* further with *Down Below*. While the “down below” that Carrington is so intent on visiting in the latter narrative is in fact merely a pavilion for the mentally ill, its very name, together with Carrington’s intense attraction to the place, posits it as an imagined, mythological underworld.

In an essay prompted by the French edition of *Down Below*, *En bas*, in 1946, Mabille himself comments that *Down Below* is similar to the French romantic writer Gérard de Nerval’s *Aurélia* (1855), and that, much like that book, it also resembles an alchemical manuscript.¹¹⁸ Both of these references are important for the argument in the rest of this article. Nerval’s *Aurélia*, which Carrington was not familiar with at the time,¹¹⁹ is the depiction of the writer’s own bouts with mental illness. He finishes his account by likening

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹¹⁷ The motif of the double may in itself be argued to be a symbolic signal of death. As the psychoanalyst Otto Rank (1884–1939) has famously shown, the double in literature, particularly that of the German romantics that Ernst acquainted Carrington with, is often a sign of impending death and the perils of narcissistic introspection. See Otto Rank, *The Double*, trans. Harry Tucker Jr. (London: Karnac, 1989).

¹¹⁸ Mabille, *Traversées de nuit*, 37–38.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

his trials with what the ancient people describe as a descent into the underworld, or “the initiatory ordeal *par excellence*,” as Mircea Eliade phrases it.¹²⁰ Eliade references Jean Richer’s claim that “the theme of Orpheus’ descent into Hell dominates the entire literary creation of Nerval,” and agrees that this initiatory pattern could be a sign that “Nerval traversed a crisis comparable to a *rite de passage*.”¹²¹ He seems more sceptical towards the role played in this construction by Nerval’s readings in esotericism, and finds it “difficult to believe that a poet of his scope chose the initiation structure because he had read a number of books on that subject.”¹²² Eliade seems to imply that in a great poet the appropriation of an initiation structure is an intuitive act that necessarily predates readings on the subject; it is, as it were, immanent within great poetry. This approach appears close to that of Mabille, for whom the initiatory structure, as we have seen, is ever-present in tales of the marvellous, often without the knowledge of either the narrator or the reader. Yet in Carrington’s case it is exactly her readings in esotericism, primarily as they are mediated by Mabille, that allows her to discern a similar structure, and this insight into the esoteric side of the marvellous is what marks the greatest change between *Little Francis* and *Down Below*. Variations on the motif of the descent into the underworld are important in both stories, but for all the changes Francis experiences he is unable to undergo a real transmutation, and there is no possibility of rebirth from his multiple deaths.

If Mabille’s comparison of *Down Below* with *Aurélia* emphasises the nature of the former as an initiatory journey, his likening of it with an alchemical manuscript is equally important. M.E. Warlick writes that the alchemical references in *Down Below* suggest “that [Carrington] viewed her descent into madness and recovery as a type of alchemical journey, not unlike the psychological ‘introversion’ described by [the early psychoanalyst] Silberer long ago.”¹²³ In *Down Below*, then, the horrors of identity dissolution are used much as prime matter that can be refined through the alchemical work that consists of reliving them and interpreting them. The resulting alchemical transmutation effects a symbolic rebirth, which is the outcome of any successful initiation.

In retracing the events as seen through the rich topography of the marvellous, Carrington is able to discern a revelatory meaning in the patterns and correspondences she perceived at the time of her crisis. When the world appears to her as a network of intriguing symbols and signs, revisiting it she

¹²⁰ Eliade, *The Quest*, 123.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 123, 124.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 123.

¹²³ Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy*, 166.

is able to make out their alchemical significance. For instance, she writes, “I was transforming my blood into comprehensive energy – masculine and feminine, microcosmic and macrocosmic – and into a wine that was drunk by the moon and the sun.”¹²⁴ She explains that her interpretation of these notions through alchemical imagery is an at least partly conscious method, something that rhymes well with Mabille’s conviction that mental trials can provide access to the esoteric meaning of symbols. At one point she reveals that in revisiting her memories, she uses the idea of the egg “as a crystal” to look at the period she treats. She explains herself by claiming that “[t]he egg is the macrocosm and the microcosm ... the task of the right eye is to peer into the telescope, while the left eye peers into the microscope.”¹²⁵ As one of the central alchemical symbols, the egg stands for the alembic vessel in which the work takes place. Here, Carrington combines the egg with the figure of the union of microscope and telescope to fuse her reliance on alchemy with an expression of her insight into the need to take both the great and the small into account, to see them as complementary and interdependent phenomena rather than be overwhelmed by either self or world.¹²⁶ This dual focus and its attendant reconciliation of opposites can also be seen as an allusion to the hermetic motto “as above, so below,” which Mabille, as mentioned earlier, uses as a foundation to elaborate on his own belief in the interrelationship between exterior and interior, reality and the imagination, upon which his monist philosophy rests.

The alchemical nature of Carrington’s initiatory journey is made even more explicit in a passage where she assigns an alchemical meaning to the few objects she possesses in captivity. Most significantly, her “face cream Night, in the black-lidded jar, contained the lemon, which was an antidote to the seizure induced by Cardiazol.”¹²⁷ This description encapsulates the alchemical process, with the black lid and the name Night signifying the stage of putrefaction, and the lemon the yellow pre-stage to the completion of the Work. Here, alchemical symbolism is brought to bear on the everyday in order to transform it and refine its mundane contents into a veritable key to the esoteric mechanisms discernible in her crisis. The passage then also encapsulates the meaning and purpose of the entire narrative, where the initiatory patterns inherent in stories of the marvellous are brought to bear on horrifying experiences in order to refine them into esoteric knowledge.

¹²⁴ Carrington, “Down Below,” 177.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹²⁶ See also Gloria Orenstein, *The Theater of the Marvelous: Surrealism and the Contemporary Stage* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 124.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

Carrington may also have found some solace in Mabile's belief that only those predestined for the adventure that is the marvellous journey can carry it out to the fullest. "[T]here are a few rare individuals destined to reach the farthest limits, to surmount the ultimate obstacles,"¹²⁸ writes Mabile. This triumph comes at a cost, for they are "subject to a series of trials and tribulations others will never experience."¹²⁹ Hence, Carrington's own sufferings are made meaningful not just through the imagery of the marvellous, but through Mabile's very definition of the nature of the marvellous journey as something inherently taxing and potentially lethal that only a select few can complete.

Carrington's interpretation of the motif of symbolic death through alchemical transmutation culminates in a form of symbolic rebirth, since it transforms gruesome experience into Knowledge. Carrington's narration of *Down Below* can then also be considered an initiation into the marvellous, as Mabile defines it. With this said, it may be worth repeating that to the extent that the marvellous in Mabile's definition can be considered esoteric, it rests on a specifically surrealist treatment of esotericism. And the form of initiation Carrington went through, after first experiencing her illness and then reliving it, is undeniably a highly private one. It nevertheless seems meaningful to describe the outcome of *Down Below* in precisely those terms. As Henrik Bogdan points out, many esoteric rituals of initiation depend just as much on the initiate's subsequent interpretation of their experience as on the ritual itself.¹³⁰ In fact, rituals of initiation cannot be understood without an interaction between experience and interpretation: "Without the experience there is nothing but meaningless symbols for the esotericist to interpret, and without the interpretation the experience fails to become initiatic."¹³¹ This is especially pertinent when it comes to the case of Carrington. Her experience of an initiatory symbolic death is what makes the imagery of the marvellous accessible and meaningful to her on a more profound level, but without the interpretative guidance provided by Mabile's philosophy, she would not have been able to use her sufferings as a way towards transmutation.

Mabile underlines the fact that an intensified encounter with the esoteric side of the marvellous leads to an ontological transformation. In his words:

¹²⁸ Mabile, *Mirror of the Marvelous*, 207.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*, 47–48.

¹³¹ Ibid., 48.

[T]hose led by their destiny to abandon the ordinary way and overcome the obstacles have been so profoundly changed by the time they enter the marvelous building that they haven't been able to return to the crowd afterward to give them their impressions and tell them what they've seen. With an altered mental state comes an altered language that makes communication impossible, whether or not it's desired.¹³²

The fact that Carrington, contrary to Mabille's statement here, actually managed to communicate her experiences, is one reason why *Down Below* has become one of the most important surrealist texts of the 20th century, considered an unmatched report from the other side of the mirror of sanity.¹³³ The narrative can also be said to exemplify the dual side of the marvelous, since its fascinating autobiographical content has attracted many readers as well as researchers for whom its esoteric significance has most likely gone unnoticed.

Closing Remarks: Post-War Surrealism and Initiation

If Carrington's political guilt in the face of the world war was a contributing factor to her breakdown, she may have found some comfort in the fact that there is an indirect political significance to her plunge into the marvellous. This brings us back to her intimate relation with surrealism's wartime concerns and their post-war development. In *Mirror of the Marvelous*, Mabille describes the marvellous as a necessary antidote to "the inadequacies of outdated mysticism and academic rationalism," which can furthermore be put in the service of "human victory," words that assumed new significance in the face of the disasters of war.¹³⁴ In 1944, in Mexico, he made some important additions to his thinking about the marvellous in *Le Merveilleux* (1946). He concludes this brief book with the utopian statement that the marvellous is a force of renewal, which unites all of humanity and is the only way for it to regain hope.¹³⁵ In the light of this, with *Down Below* Carrington can be said to have refined personal anguish and withdrawal not only into Knowledge, but also into an inspirational example of the benign and transformative potential of the modern marvellous.

¹³² Mabille, *Mirror of the Marvelous*, 18.

¹³³ See e.g. the entry on Carrington in Breton, *Anthology of Black Humor*, 335–36.

¹³⁴ Mabille, *Mirror of the Marvelous*, 43–44.

¹³⁵ Mabille, *Le Merveilleux* (Saint-Clément-la-Rivière: Fata Morgana, 1992), 53.

Mabille's line of reasoning here corresponds as closely as ever with Breton's hopes for the new myth, which was meant to provide a new foundation for a society caught between narrow-minded rationalism and reactionary repression. The similarities between Carrington's initiatory experience and surrealism's evolution on this point come to the fore with the exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, which Breton organised at the Galerie Maeght when he had returned to Paris after the end of the war. The exhibition had esotericism, myth, and magical rebirth as its main themes, and it was conceived as an initiatory passage for the visitor to wander through.¹³⁶ Much like Breton's *Arcanum 17*, *Le Surréalisme en 1947* brought together surrealist forerunners, esotericism, and mythology in order to create a fertile environment for the emergence of the new myth.¹³⁷ The initiatory structure was meant to contribute to the exhibition's function as a "force of magnetization and cohesion," which could channel the fragmented collective desire and let it converge "toward a single point where a new myth awaits us."¹³⁸ Breton's ideas are not only clearly indebted to Mabille's writings on the marvellous, with their intricate intertwining of poetry and myth with esotericism, initiation, and renewal. His goal of initiating contemporary man into a surrealist outlook coalescing around the tentative new myth was also more concretely prefigured by Carrington's ordeals and her subsequent transformation of them. At the time of the exhibition, Breton even remarked on the crucial role of poetry and art in surrealism's interest in initiation, which was important enough for him to claim that "that is what surrealism intends to keep on pursuing."¹³⁹ Much like Nerval, Carrington showed the experiential reality underlying such poetic initiation.

Carrington's use of the "rejected knowledge" inherent in the esoteric side of the marvellous thus did not just serve to bring her a regained sense of health and meaning, but both paralleled and contributed to the development of surrealism. Most importantly, by interpreting her highly personal experiences as expressions of the marvellous, Carrington enacted precisely that transformation of personal mythology into the type of collective modern myth that Breton went to such lengths to explore.

¹³⁶ See Breton, "Projet initial," in *Le Surréalisme en 1947* (Paris: Galerie Maeght, 1947), 135–38.

¹³⁷ For an exhaustive description and analysis of the exhibition, see Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros 1938–1968*, 117–41.

¹³⁸ Breton, *Free Rein*, 92.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

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