

Plenty of novels (and films and all) offer images of a dark, dystopian future, or at least a post-apocalyptic confusion, and that generally means imagining strange government forms, from tribal to hyper-technological, alternative histories, weird new organizations, wasted landscapes, zombie viruses, all kinds of imaginative tools to create a fiction that can say something about our own day and future. What makes Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* so unusual, and so interesting, is that he chooses to build his story around a fictional monastery and monastic order as it passes through a solid millennium of history, from the 26th to the 38th century, and with descriptions of its origins a half-millennium earlier in the 20th century, and all in only a few hundred pages. It sounds like an unlikely proposal for successful fiction, but the insight Miller had is perhaps this: though monasteries may be the dullest, most retrograde, most unsurprising places day-by-day, they are also mysterious and become weirdly interesting over the very long run. At the root of the novel is a very monastic insight into the nature of life and human hope and the invariably strange ways that we endure.

Miller seems to have pulled the inspiration from the story from his own traumatic war-time experiences. Not even twenty years old when Pearl Harbor was attacked, he enlisted and became a radioman and tail-gunner on US bombers, on countless missions over Italy as the Germans tried to maintain their hold on it at the end of the war. This is like one of those details that becomes part of his hagiography: He served on one of the many bombers that dropped more than a 1,000 tons of explosives on Monte Cassino, the monastery founded by St. Benedict himself in the sixth century, a monastery in some ways like a mountain fortress but which had also housed vast numbers of manuscripts of most of the Classical tradition and a beacon of culture for a millennium and half. It was a fiasco of an operation in many ways, and seems to have guided Miller's thoughts after the war. Thus, although he wrote the first part of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* little more than a decade later as a by-then Cold-War-era nuclear apocalypse novel, but that deterrent policy of Mutually Assured Destruction – of, “if the stakes are high enough no one will play” –, he actually keeps the nuclear insanity at the edge of the story and focuses on the monastery in the middle, on the place of long-inherited culture that is threatened by a new barbarism. The novel is more a reflection on seeing that actual ruined monastery than on nuclear strategy.

And that is why it is still so interesting. Now, to be honest, we have not really exited from the fear of nuclear destruction, so we don't have to reach far, but our interest in the novel's situation is heightened by our sense that the typical dystopias of totalitarianism, post-apocalyptic tribal rebuilding, technological dehumanization, viral disaster, or ecological tipping points, are rooted in some vast human problems, in barbarism. So if we think of the novel's question not as “what would post-nuclear-apocalypse life be like” – a scenario we like to think is unlikely – but rather more broadly, “How do we get ourselves into a dark age? Are we already in one? How do we survive one with a sense of true human dignity and purpose? And of course, what is the relationship between the progress of civilization and its downfall?” We can talk about this more, but I can't help adding now that Miller understands the dark age as a time when the monks gather countless scraps of information they cannot understand in the hope that one day an “Integrator” will come to reveal the patterns within it, to “fit things together again”. We live in an Information age, with virtually infinite data and content available to us... but does it fit together in a coherent whole? Is it “integrated”? Do we know which things are important to preserve and which aren't? Maybe we have been rendered foolish by our abundance rather than our deprivation.

Anyway, the novel has three parts, which were actually first published separately in a magazine. First, *Fiat Homo*, Let there be man, which takes place in a non-scientific, barbarously uncivilized era when the monastery has its relics, the Memorabilia, but cannot piece them together – and the main event here involves the canonization of Blessed Isaac Edward Leibowitz after a certain long-term novice Francis Gerard of Utah discovers an ancient fallout shelter and manages to preserve a blueprint of an electric dynamo (though without understanding it). The second part, *Fiat Lux*, Let there be light, skips ahead half a millennium, to a kind of Renaissance: governments and kingdoms are in place, and secular scientists have begun rediscovery science and mathematics – and the main event is, when a famous secular scientist finally makes a visit to the monastery to inspect the Memorabilia, and it turns out by one of the monks has just invited electric lighting. The third part, *Fiat voluntas tua*, thy will be done, passes on another half millennium to a highly advanced, space-faring humanity that has reinvented nuclear weapons – the main event, the advent of another nuclear apocalypse, the destruction of the abbey, and the escape of a group of bishops, priests, and monks on a space ship to take the Memorabilia to the Alpha Centauri colony and preserve the Church’s tradition, even if Earth be totally annihilated.

Miller draws these strands together in various ways, like certain returning images and artifacts (most especially the undying “Wandering Jew” and the statue of Leibowitz), but he obviously does not have space for continuity of character or the exposition of all the developing cultural and political tensions. He comes up with tantalizing weird bits, like Texarkana as a major imperial center, with its Viceroy Mayor and Supreme Vaquero of the Plains, in contest with the Empires of Denver and Laredo. Each part has its carefully chosen key players: the first has Abbot Arkos, the novice Francis Gerard, and the investigators from New Rome; the second has Abbot Paulo of Pecos, the bickering duo of the librarian monk and the inventor monk, and the visiting secular scientist, Thon Taddeo; and the third has Abbot Zerchi, Brother Joshua who will lead the monks in space, and Doctor Cors, the relief doctor and “mercy killer.” These characters have their interests, but I think Miller is making the institution itself, and its history, the character that we need to examine.

What guides his thoughts, I think, is the interplay of familiar tropes of monastic historiography: that, on the one hand, monasteries preserved ancient culture and thus made way for the rebirth of culture; that they did so in a space that is separated from society but is itself a small society, and that belongs to the Church while not being identified with the hierarchical Church; and, on the other hand, that monastic life preserved knowledge precisely by means that seem backward from the scientific point of view, by a sort of blind allegiance to preserving in static form what later ages would think needs to become effective and productive. What Miller does is recreate this fun dynamic rather carefully in a post-apocalyptic future and use it to reveal important human qualities and mysteries that shine out against the darkness of human self-destructiveness.

Miller’s use of this monastic conservation of knowledge without understanding is the source of much of the fun of the book. He creates scenes in which we the readers understand what something is, but hear the monks’ strange interpretations, especially in part one when civilization is still pretty much absent. So, when Brother Francis finds relics of the past in a fallout shelter, he finds a grocery list from Leibowitz: “pound pastrami – can kraut – six bagels” – words of cliché meaning for us, but which the monks have to puzzle over as if they had some mysterious meaning. Imagine a church today – for all I know there is one somewhere – that claims as a relic one of the lists St. Joseph made when shopping at the local deli in Nazareth. When Francis finds electrical components like transistors, we hear that the monastery has some

of various shapes and colors in their museum but have made no guess about their purpose (yet they know it must be something), and that the neo-pagan hill people around use them to make necklaces, or even ingest them: they call the electronic components “parts of the body of the god,” since the wisest of their gods is *Machina Analytica* – Latin for “computer” – and so they think that a shaman can become infallible by swallowing old capacitors. This behavior is hilariously foolish to us, but at the same time the hill people actually preserve the information that these bits have to do with a computer. Similarly, when Brother Francis sees the words Fallout Survival Shelter, he worries, because he thinks the Fallout is some kind of demon of fire being sheltered within – which is not exactly wrong. This idea inhibits his curiosity about what is inside the “Inner Hatch” of the shelter, but it also encodes in him a sense of a true danger.

Of course, the greatest example in this comedy of tradition is the highlight of Part One: the circuit diagram blueprint that Francis discovers, and of which he decides to make an illuminated copy out of devotion to Blessed Leibowitz who designed it. He has no idea what the blueprint’s lines and squiggles actually signify, but they can all see that they signify *something* with beautiful interrelationship of parts – they don’t even realize that the blue background of the print is not an essential part of the whole, and so they have wasted a lot of ink copying them before, darkening the whole. Francis dedicates years of his life to producing a truly beautiful illumination... of something he cannot even understand, out of the hope that his patron will be canonized, and maybe someone someday will understand. His effort seems so futile – in fact his work is stolen by bandits on his way to New Rome – yet his brainlessness seems to be consecrated: he is “martyred” by a group of mutant cannibals who shoot him with an arrow right through the head, and the arrow is still transfixing his skull when it rolls out of a tomb when the atomic blast hits the abbey at the end of the canticle. And the fruit his work does eventually bear is... the reinvention of atomic weapons and yet another Flame Deluge?

You see how Miller invites us to a double cynicism: first, of course, science and worldly politics lead to repeated mass destruction, and the Enlightenment hope in progress toward an earthly paradise is foolish – but in addition, this ironic view of the monks misinterpreting what they preserve tempts us to look down on them as well, to see their religious dedication as basically blind superstition – a deprecation of monastic life heightened for most readers by the presentation of a pre-Conciliar abbatial style (as lord and ruler) and the abundant Latin.

But I think this temptation to be cynical is... a temptation, is not a final reading. Miller wants us to focus not on the monks’ understanding, or unwitting usefulness for human progress, but on their wisdom and fidelity. This is why the monastic figure is central to this dystopia: focusing on the monk here means looking at the life of faith not in its mystical aspect or as a matter of profound individual faith, something then to be opposed to a fact-based scientific worldview; rather, the monk draws attention to faith as practical fidelity, observance of norms of practice – whatever has to do with Leibowitz, we simply preserve, sacrificing all other things even if we can’t see quite why. This practical fidelity to tradition is easy to mock, but for Miller it reveals something essential about human life: we live not by alternating between or just choosing adherence to observable, scientific fact or unwavering obedience to transcendent divine command, – we are not trying to attain at every moment to complete engagement with absolute truth – rather we are engaging at all times with part of a story, we are holding on to the human desire to live and hand on true life, not the need to get it right. What Miller is at pains to show is not that human civilization is fragile or futile, sinking always back toward ignorance or reaching its own annihilation: rather, human life and its traditions are durably... but durable as *weird*.

Things last a surprisingly long time, but they become strange, are encoded as legends and fables, within which however the real truth somehow remains.

Miller's trans-historical portrait of the Albertian Order of St. Leibowitz as a radical, almost absurd devotion to preserving whatever they can of the human past, in chronicle, in science, in liturgy, in order, in art, is not meant to exalt brainless traditionalism, but to exemplify, as monks do in their weird way, the radical clinging to life. We might say that the big question in the novel is what should guide science and the use of power – what is wisdom? – but the specific moral conflicts of the novel all revolve around the fundamental question of life or death: in the first part, the monks (and the Church) cling to the idea that even the multi-headed nuclear mutants are created in the Image of God and demand rights and decent treatment for them, when everyone else thinks they simply aren't human (sort of post-apocalyptic lepers); again, in the third part, after radiation is once again afflicting mankind with terrible diseases, the long conflict is between the abbot and the doctor: the doctor proposes euthanasia as a the merciful solution, and the abbot stubbornly, even violently, protests this – and endures his own immense pain with fortitude. And again at the very end, when the world is going up in flames, the monks take to the stars. At every point it would have been easy to give up – accept the “red card” and go to be euthanized at the government center, just give up and let the nukes fall – but the monastic practice simply is to keep going, not to wonder whether it's good to keep going but just to do it and thus cultivate the instinct for life and preservation of culture. The foolishness and ineffectiveness of the monks' attempts do not make them less beautifully human. The Order represents, then, a sign of hope: training oneself to keep it going, in the faith that even passing human things, human culture, has the potential for adding up in a story to some real meaning.

A key word that the novel uses for this area of humanity's true openness to perfection and meaning is “preternatural.” Early on, Br. Francis distinguishes: “In his own mind, there was no neat straight line separating the Natural from the Supernatural order, but rather, an intermediate twilight zone. There were things that were *clearly* natural, and there Things that were *clearly* supernatural, but between these extremes was a region of confusion (his own)—the preternatural—where things made of mere earth, air, fire, or water tended to behave disturbingly like *Things*.” The monks, and the novel, stand in this zone of preternatural confusion, in which we hope natural things add up to their final meaning without somehow needing ever to seem supernaturally perfect along the way. The cynical side of the novel shows that Eden, paradise, is not something we are going to recreate naturally; man's scientific progress, unenlightened by real humanity, tends toward annihilation not perfection. The closest thing to natural paradise is the “Mercy Camp” in which those untreatable cases are sent to be quietly put to death. After the fall, happiness on earth, earthly paradise, will be a new creation within the old. That is to say, just as historical culture is preserved in the novel as strange, partly corrupted, weird, legend-wrapped, hardly understood fragments, so humanity itself endures as something warped but beautiful, capable of revealing meaning, worth holding onto.

This is the part played in the novel by Mrs. Grales, the tumater-woman who pesters Abbot Zerchi in the last part. She is a nuclear-mutant, and at some point a second head grew from her shoulder – she claims it is her daughter, sometimes, and names it Rachel, and she wants to have it baptized. The parish priest is wary of this strange devotion to the totally inactive head, and the abbot defers to his judgment. But as the end of the novel approaches this other head begins to take on life: it seems to smile at people from under its hood. Bro Jacob has a dream in which the head, about to be surgically removed, claims, “I am the immaculate conception”! A mutant Madonna of Lourdes. At the end, as the final nuclear holocaust is upon them and the

abbey is about to be destroyed, Zerchi is hearing Mrs. Grales' confession, and as he absolves her the shockwave hits the church. Mrs. Grales' is dead and Zerchi is half-crushed under the stones of the ancient building. When he cries out he hears a response: Rachel, the mutant head, has come to full life. As the old, withered half of Mrs. Grales dies, this younger head comes to life and the whole body seems to be becoming younger – almost like a new human being shedding the chrysalis of an older body. Rachel can only repeat what is said to her, but she is at peace, seemingly unaffected by the radiation. Zerchi knows to strive to the last to be faithful to his mission in the minutest details, and so tries to baptize her – but she refuses, and he sees by some mystery that she does not need it... This is really weird, but she is, like, immaculately conceived – the radiation that corrupted Mrs. Grales genes serves as the Holy Spirit that gives birth in her. Rachel refuses baptism, and then picks up the ciborium of Eucharistic hosts and instead of receiving from Zerchi, she gives the Eucharist to him as he dies, his last viaticum. His honest, stubborn fidelity to what the monastic order demands of its members has brought him to this moment of revelation right at his death.

Man survives in perfected form... as a half-dead two-headed mutant! That is the new Eve. It is a new paradise, a rejuvenation though in a wasteland – Eden is grotesque, but the innocence and beauty are somehow still there. Maybe we can say that the Albertian Order of St. Leibowitz, and all the members of it in the novel, have sought to play the part of Mrs. Grales, the ignorant but devoted woman who recognizes, before anyone else, the nature of the creature that is coming to life on her shoulder, who has borne her cross and cared for this new life that would only come to fullness when she herself had passed away – the old becomes new. Rachel is “born free,” free for a new history; she understands his place and his rituals as if by *direct instruction*, able, though wordless, to “sense the Presence under the veils.” As Zerchi fades away, Rachel touches his forehead in a kind of anointing with her cool fingertips, and she says the one word, “Live”! That key word of hope. He dies, of course, but he recognizes in her the *weird, grotesque yet holy* perfection of new creation. Miller writes: “The image of those cool green eyes lingered with him as long as life. He did not ask *why* God would choose to raise up a creature of primal innocence from the shoulder of Mrs. Grales, or why God gave to it the preternatural gifts of Eden—those gifts which Man had been trying to seize by brute force again from Heaven since first he lost them. He had seen primal innocence in those eyes, and a promise of resurrection. One glimpse had been a bounty, and he wept in gratitude. Afterwards he lay with his face in the wet dirt and waited.”

I think the story is a true comedy, not a farce or pastiche – his experience of innocence in her is not a delusion. The whole effort of the Albertian Order of St. Leibowitz was to make way for this new life – it was never just “to pave the way for a renaissance of science.” Those monks flying off into space are not looking for a world more perfect than this one, but simply trying to keep the hope of true life alive. Miller is not being cynical about mankind and its progress, but is recognizing the proper scope of human life and exalting the lowly.