



A Canticle for Leibowitz

Walter J Miller, Jr

*A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1960) is one of the most important English-language books of the second half of the twentieth century. It is science fiction. It is as good as anything that was written in the 'mainstream' at that time.

*A Canticle for Leibowitz* is about the nuclear Holocaust. It is alternative history. Miller imagines that nuclear war broke out in the 1960s, shortly after his novel was written, and that civilisation was destroyed. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is amongst other things a post-apocalyptic novel.

Miller's history is based on the intellectual history of Europe after the fall of Rome. Miller's concept of history is cyclical. A very similar intellectual sequence is repeated in the former United States, after the nuclear Holocaust. It is also a pessimistic history, even perhaps fatalistic. After two thousand years the Holocaust happens again.

The novel is in three parts, divided from each other by several hundred years. A Dark Age occurs six hundred years after the Holocaust. Six hundred years later, there is a scientific renaissance, and dynastic states are emerging from the chaos. After another six hundred years, an industrial state emerges. It is sophisticated enough to develop nuclear weapons, and launch another nuclear war.

The action of the novel centres on the Albertian Order of Leibowitz. The Albertian order, to my mind, is a wonderful invention of Miller's. It is a celibate order, modelled rather closely on the Benedictines. Its abbey is in the South-western desert, on the road to 'Old El Paso'. The members of the order are Bookleggers or Memorisers. They are tasked with preserving the fragments of the scientific knowledge of the ancient 'Euro-American' civilisation. They dutifully conserve and copy; they understand very little of the scientific legacy.

Almost all the action takes place in and around the Abbey of the order. Abbots change and the abbey evolves, but the location of the action in the abbey is consistent. It is one of the devices that unites the three parts of the novel.

Much of the record of the ancient culture has been destroyed. The Simplification was a wave of bloody and destructive lynchings and book-burnings that followed the Holocaust - the 'Flame Deluge', as Miller dubs it in a passage of biblical pastiche. One of the martyrs of the Simplification is the eponymous founder of the Order, Leibowitz himself.

Leibowitz was a weapons engineer who lost his wife in the Holocaust. He joined the Cistercians, an offshoot of the Benedictines, and became a priest. After some years he was permitted to found his order and preserve the 'Memorabilia', as the fragmentary manuscripts are known. 'Memorabilia', I think, is another wonderful invention of Miller's. Albertus Magnus, the patron saint of the order, was a thirteenth-century philosopher and theologian who was very much involved in the revival of science.

The action of the first part of the novel turns on the case for the canonisation of Leibowitz. It is finally successful, and Leibowitz becomes a saint. In the Dark Ages of the opening chapters of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, it is the miraculous that matters. At the beginning of the novel the simple novice, Francis, encounters an enigmatic, cynical pilgrim in the desert. The pilgrim, in an illiterate age, knows not only Latin but Hebrew. The pilgrim sets off a chain of events which result in Brother Francis discovering relics of the Blessed Leibowitz. The reader, though not Francis, soon realises that the pilgrim is in fact Leibowitz – six hundred years after his death. This concealing of information from the characters while it is revealed to the reader is an example of the irony that pervades the novel.

Leibowitz is a mysterious, subversive and thoroughly delightful figure. He is the most complex of the characters, to call them that, in the novel. He survives, by some no doubt miraculous means which Miller never explains, his very public martyrdom and death. He is the pilgrim in the first part of the novel and the 'hermit' in the second. In the third and final part, he becomes the old beggar. He is, of course, a Catholic priest, a Catholic martyr and finally a Catholic saint. Notwithstanding his emphatically endorsed Catholicism, he is also a Jew.

Leibowitz is, in fact, the Wandering Jew of Medieval legend. He waits for a Messiah. The Messiah never comes. In the world of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, there is no hope of salvation. Christ the Redeemer is not present in the novel. Miller, who for several years after World War Two was a Catholic, had lapsed.

In the second part of the novel there is a revival of interest in science. Pfardentrott, a rather mad scientist from the newly emerging state of Texarkana, has heard of the documents. He wants them sent to Texarkana so that his collegium can examine them. Finally he accepts that he has to go to the abbey.

Pfardentrott is shocked. He is shocked because some of the monks have managed to build a

primitive dynamo which powers an arc light. He is also shocked because the texts he finds in the abbey are of great value, and no-one other than the monks knew of their existence.

Pfardentrott and the abbot try to be civil. Finally they clash. Pfardentrott believes that religion is superstition. The abbot believes that scientific curiosity is Original Sin. He believes it led to the Flame Deluge, and that the revival of science will lead to another holocaust.

The monks dismantle the dynamo. They take down the arc light and put the crucifix back. Pfardentrott leaves. It is a hollow victory. At the beginning of the third and last part of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, the Holocaust is already impending.

The Order has acquired a spaceship. It has been busily recruiting spacers as monks. Its role is to take the memorabilia on microfilm and ensure the continuity of the Apostolic Succession of the Catholic Church on the colony planets among the stars. The idea of a medieval order of monks with a spaceship is rather wonderful.

Someone starts the nuclear war. The monks give shelter of refugees, many of them sick and injured. An organisation called Green Star relief sets up a Mercy Camp down the road. It offers legalised euthanasia to the incurable. The abbot rows with the doctor who is testing the refugees for radiation. The doctor argues that pain is the only form of evil he can deal with. The abbot responds that in the eyes of the church euthanasia is evil.

This is an argument between the values of humanism and the need for obedience to God's will. The orthodox interpretation of Original Sin is that it is rebellion against God. It could hardly be more serious.

It is not clear who wins. The doctor leaves. The abbot is nearly arrested for picketing the Mercy Camp. He tries to persuade a very sick woman to refuse euthanasia for her child. He

fails.

The small party of monks leave for the stars. The abbot is convinced that human beings will display exactly the same self-destructive tendencies on a new planet. This may be survival, in some sense. It is not salvation.

One of the most mysterious and puzzling stories in *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is the story of Mrs Grales. Mrs Grales is a tomato seller. She suffers from genetic damage as a result of the Flame Deluge. She has a second head growing from her shoulder. She calls the head Rachel, and wants it baptised.

At the end of the novel there is another nuclear strike. The abbot is dying. Mrs Grales has died, but her second head lives on. The abbot tries to baptise her. Rachel refuses. She is preternaturally innocent. She was not born in sin.

The abbot takes Rachel's innocence as hope for salvation. It is more ambiguous than that. Rachel is innocent, but she is also a mutant. It is not quite clear that she is human. Is Miller suggesting that humanity can only be saved if it evolves into something else?

*A Canticle for Leibowitz* is saturated with Catholic images. The theology may be heretical. Miller uses it to make his novel deeply coherent intellectually. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* prophesies nuclear war. It is prophetic in another sense. It is a fundamentally serious tract for the times.

As a young airman Miller participated in a raid on the Abbey of Monte Cassino, the original house of the Benedictine order. As a young husband, the detonation of a nuclear device over Hiroshima spared Miller being posted to the Pacific theatre to risk his life again. Miller's reflections on these experiences clearly contribute to the writing of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

*A Canticle for Leibowitz* won a Hugo. The year before, Miller had won his first Hugo for his short novel, *The Darfsteller*. In *The Darfsteller* Miller announces his decision to quit science fiction, and his intention of writing 'one last great' before he does so. He also predicts that he will not know what to do with the rest of his life.

The 'one last great' was *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Miller was thirty-seven when it was published. He lived for more than another thirty years. He wrote and published very little. After the death of his wife he committed suicide.

He never did figure out what to do with the rest of his life.

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