A Canticle for Liebowitz and Cyclical History

by Pedro Blas González (October 2020)

Snake Bay at Night, Russel Drysdale, 1959

The Simplification had ceased to have plan or purpose soon after it began, and became an insane frenzy of mass murder and destruction such as can occur only when the last traces

of social order are gone.[*]

—*A Canticle for Leibowitz,* Walter M. Miller, Jr.

Linear human history is a common plotline of many golden era science fiction novels (1934-1963). That is, history progresses toward, well, a utopian resolution of human reality. This belief goes hand in hand with another dominant feature of utopian scientism: scientists and social engineers will make the future better than the past. The implication of this utopian notion is that man will become a superior being, embodying an unprecedented higher form of consciousness. Though, we are never informed about the source of this ultra-altruistic, conspicuous consciousness. Nonetheless, liberation from the alleged burden of free will and morality are desirable ends, according to those who follow the utopian road to Shangri-La. The Russian writer Aleksey Tolstoy ("the comrade Count") took utopian pipe dreams to an astronomical level—literally. His 1923 novel *Aelita* introduces socialism to class-conscious Martians. Imagine that! What could be next? Man's attainment of Godhood?

This is not the case in Walter M. Miller's (1923-1996) astoundingly literate and lyrical 1960 novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz,* one of the greatest of science fiction novels ever published. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* won the 1961 Hugo Award for best novel, the premier literary award for science fiction.

The story is of a post-apocalyptic world. The novel is divided into three parts that serve as intertwined novelettes: Fiat Homo (Let There be Man), Fiat Lux (Let There be Light) and Fiat Voluntas Tua (Thy Will be Done).

The plot of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* unravels over thousands of years. This is a thematically significant aspect of the story. After a nuclear war destroys civilization (the

“Flame Deluge”), the inhabitants of Earth become isolated and must fend for themselves. Miller does not waste time lamenting the apocalypse per se. Instead, he focuses on human nature and the cyclical nature of human history.

The first part of the novel, Fiat Homo, takes place in the desert of the Southwest United States where monks of The Albertian Order of Leibowitz, a Catholic monastery, preserve sparse scientific knowledge of the last collapsed civilization.

A novice monk named Brother Francis Gerard is in the desert observing Lenten fast. Looking to build a dwelling place, he discovers a fallout shelter and encounters a mysterious man who asks Gerard for directions to the monastery which, incidentally, he never goes to. This exchange sets up the author’s mystique about Leibowitz. Is the stranger an apparition of Leibowitz? Or, is he instead a demon?

Inside the shelter, Gerard discovers relics, mundane papers, including a shopping list that are attributed to Leibowitz, the founder of the monastery who died over 600 years earlier. The monks honor and safeguard Leibowitz’s allegiance to encyclopedic knowledge, much the same as what takes place with the “book people” at the end of Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*.

Immediately after the destruction of civilization, a period called “Simplification” began that persecuted and killed anyone who possessed scientific knowledge; they were blamed for the apocalypse. Consequently, the world was turned into a new Dark Ages; books were destroyed and illiteracy flourished. Angry mobs destroyed all semblance of civilization.

The second part of *A Canticle*, Fiat Lux, continues another six hundred years into the future. This part of the novel sees electricity and other inventions re-invented,

giving man a hopeful outlook on life and civilization. A new civilization slowly begins to blossom from the rubble. Yet this does not take place as a natural symbiosis. Instead, the fledgling civilization is the result of sacrifice, strife, and the embrace of enlightened human values. This is the portion of the book where Miller makes the case that history is cyclical; alternating creative and destructive ages.

Throughout the novel, readers are alerted to Miller's many allusions to Christianity and Catholicism, especially the ontological mystery. Catholic readers of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* will undoubtedly appreciate the purity and orthodoxy of Miller's Catholicism, as the author contrasts this with cyclical secular history.

While *Canticle* was published in 1960, the three parts that make up the novel had already appeared in science fiction publications as novelettes. The novel was published before the Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council began in 1962. This is a feature of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* that goes unnoticed by many critics. For instance, Miller makes use of an abundance of Latin prayers and discussions of good and evil.

The major objective of the Second Vatican Council was to reconcile Catholicism with the secular modern world. In retrospect, traditional Catholics consider the council a colossal failure that has drastically weakened Catholicism.

Canticle displays a marked difference from the ecumenical embrace of the modern world that the Council ushered. Miller's traditional Catholic position in the novel is indicative of man's sacred and divine nature that is made manifest in history. The author contrasts this with secular history as cyclical, given man's inability to settle accounts with truth and constructive values accrued through history. Any thoughtful consideration of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* must engage these essential points of human nature and man's trek through space and time. In Catholic terms, the latter is

emblematic of man’s temporal and sensual fallen-ness.

Fiat Voluntas Tua, the third part of the novel, also takes place six hundred years further into the future. The third part of the novel is best described by George Santayana’s poignant philosophy of history that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Having learned little from history, civilization continues where it left off before the nuclear apocalypse: euthanasia and destructive technologies that serve to stunt man’s spiritual and moral sensibility grow in dominance. A second nuclear apocalypse takes places.

The monks of the Order of Leibowitz wisely use the technology at their disposal to send members, along with other people, on a spaceship to Alpha Centauri to establish a society that is conducive to the cultivation of man’s soul. While this is ironic, it also speaks volumes about an individual’s capacity not to become objectivized and corrupted by technology in any age. The author showcases man’s need to settle accounts with the inability to perfect human nature through utopian means.

A Canticle for Leibowitz is an alluring story of redemption and man’s search for transcendence. The novel is a dazzling work of visionary stoicism. In 1947 Miller converted to Catholicism. He was 25.

Canticle is also a novel of values. Miller takes the reader on a trip to a possible future that is never far from the horizon of possibility. One important difference between *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and other science fiction novels is that the events and situations of Miller’s novel signal a flawed, and in Catholic terms, fallen humanity. Instead of a worldly garden paradise and Elysian fields, man creates an earthly hell: “The closer men came to perfecting for themselves a paradise, the more impatient they seemed to

become with it, and with themselves as well."

The aforementioned is symbolic of Miller's understanding of man's existential and spiritual restlessness; building an altar to technology and scientism is one of the culprits of this restlessness. By creating a vast emporium of earthly delights, an Arcadia of sorts, man makes himself obsolete, for he must continually turn to greater pleasures in order to sustain himself. Some call this form of hedonism progress. Not Brother Gerard, and certainly not Miller.

Brother Gerard embodies the life of a simple man. His devout Catholic beliefs enable him to exist peacefully in a turbulent world of mayhem, destruction and murder. His innocence affords him the inner peace that keeps him from getting caught up in the trivial and mundane wrangling of a hopeless secular world.

A Word of Caution About *A Canticle for Leibowitz*

In some respects, science fiction readers are more wide-eyed and have a greater penchant for the literary imagination than other readers.

The three parts of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* are not to be construed in the manner of a Hegelian dialectic, where thesis and anti-thesis synthesize in historical consciousness; the manifestation of an Earth-bound God as Absolute Spirit. Nothing that abstract and impersonal takes place in Miller's novel. On the contrary, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* clearly puts on display the cyclical and contradictory nature of lazy human history.

Miller suggests that man's openness to the possibility of Grace affords history coherence, and meaning and purpose in personal existence. This is what sustains the characters in *CanticleOrtega's 'Revolt of the Masses' and the Triumph of the New Man, Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity*. He also published a translation

and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset’s last work to appear in English, “Medio siglo de Filosofia” (1951) in