

The Monastic Figure in a Dystopian World: Discussion Response Notes
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Katy Carl

I'd like to build on the themes Fr. Gregg has drawn out first by situating the novel in its literary context, both as a science fiction classic from the golden era of Asimov and Clarke and Heinlein (published in 1959, it won the 1961 Hugo Award, which, along with the Nebula, recognizes distinction in science fiction writing) and as a little-recognized expression of the height and flourishing of the American Catholic literary voice in the late 1950s and early '60s. The novel stands in interesting relationship to several other classics from this era but perhaps most of all to Ray Bradbury's (also 1953) *Fahrenheit 451*. That novel takes place in a time that to some degree parallels the "Simplification"—Bradbury's firemen are in Miller's terms "simpletons" and encourage others to become so, while in secret, memorizers and "bookleggers" commit to memory texts that they then transmit to other members of their communities in other places. (The term "bookleggers" seems to be of Miller's coinage, but it could equally well be applied to the teams of exiles we meet at the end of Bradbury's novel.) Miller directly identifies memorization as one early method that his monks use to preserve the "Memorabilia" during the height of the violence, in the absence of stable and fully equipped scriptoria that would permit them to produce physical editions—and since Bradbury published in '53 and Miller in '59, we can posit but not prove that Miller may have been inspired by Bradbury's vision of a new monasticism.

But, like the space trilogy and like Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953), whose 'ascension'-like ending shares some kinship with this novel's, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* features a fineness of craft at the sentence and the structural level that invites us to class it as literature. More than this, though, the novel exists at the intersection of what Walker Percy, writing about the novel in 1971, identifies as the "x-axis" or horizontal dimension of human existence in which most science fiction tends to be primarily interested, and the "y-axis" or vertical dimension which Percy identifies with the Judeo-Christian spiritual tradition of revelation, God speaking into human history and human beings responding. It's rare to find fiction in the 20th century that is greatly interested in this y-axis or vertical dimension—and even rarer to find science fiction that is interested in it—and it seems worth exploring how Miller renders a world in complementary dimensions in his fiction, in such a way that readers can receive that vision.

For years now the cultural water we swim in has been heated by the worry that the ascendancy of the Internet, the rise of pop culture, and the decline of print media are working together to usher us into a new Dark Age. To raise the temperature further, a certain apocalyptic flavor has haunted both news and commentary of late. In the face of all this I would still like to hope that the demise of culture in our time

has been greatly exaggerated. This is despite a sense of agreement with what Christian artist Makoto Fujimura writes in his recent book *Culture Care*, that the metaphorical water upstream of culture in the contemporary world is often polluted and needs to be filtered of toxins, even if not exorcised of “the demon Fallout.” Even so, I would like to hope that Fr. Stephen is right in what he says about the *durability* of human culture through cataclysm and hardship, even if what survives, survives precisely “as weird.”

Sometimes the farther away from something we are, the stranger it seems to us. Sometimes the converse is true, and things seem stranger from close up. If the prophet is, as Flannery O’Connor wrote, a realist of distances, the novelist has to be a realist of temporalities, and Miller has the distinction of being both kinds of realist. A lot more could be said about how Miller uses and renders a sense of passing time in his novel, but one thing that’s wonderful about how he does it is the way he brings forward repetition and rhythm—the daily routines of the monastic rule—in comic, ironic, and ultimately poignant juxtaposition to dysfunctional happenings in human affairs and to Nature’s implied vengeance against the folly of humanity. In the face of environmental and sociological dystopia, repetition and rhythm work as beacons of reassurance that grace is not absent from the desert, no matter how bleak or distorted the view.

Even for readers who are not Catholic, the symbolic value of the novel’s Catholic practices holds, not only because of how attentively and concretely Miller renders them on the page, but also because of how deeply a genuine belief animates the characters’ motivations. The faith is far from being mere window dressing or decoration. One of the Church’s most common forms of piety shows up in the first scene, a literal touchstone of reality, in the form of Br. Francis Gerard’s rosary beads. Thinking as a writer of fiction does, I love the way Miller has the characters interact with this physical object: Francis Gerard, not the brightest quill in the monastic scriptorium, is simply doing his best not to get himself eaten by the pilgrim, who he is worried may be a cannibal. But Francis becomes unconsciously profound when he holds up his string of rosary beads and says to the pilgrim: *Do you understand these?* In fiction it’s always compelling when a character is saying more than he knows he’s saying. Francis Gerard’s line of dialogue functions here in this way. The semiotic value of the rosary beads, the way in which they themselves are a sign and a word that speaks into the scene beyond what we tend to think of as mere “symbolism” in literature, communicate several things instantly to the reader. They should also communicate several things to the pilgrim in the scene, if it turns out that he “understands them.” They are a sign of peace, a white flag of surrender. They represent that the person carrying them, if he carries them in good faith, will not do harm. To the pilgrim, they also signify the belief Miller has already described, that (in those days of destroyed fertility due to nuclear winter) “that which was born alive was, by the law of the Church and the law of Nature, suffered to live, and helped to maturity if possible, by those who had begotten it.”

In this light, the pilgrim's reaction is both telling and amusing: "Oh," he says, "one of *them*": one of those strange beings who believe that all other beings born in this strange time, no matter how freakish their appearance or behavior, deserve to live. So the rosary works as a shorthand, a synecdoche of particular belief, a substitution by which a simple sign comes to represent a rich and complex reality. By extension, we can say that the monastic life in the novel works as this kind of multivalent sign. Its characteristic practices are allowed to function not only as markers of time but as a stable backdrop representative of unchanging truth, against which the repetitive human drama of the Phoenix—fall, destruction, preservation, and redemption—can play out with greater clarity.

In 1971, writing about *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Walker Percy warned us that quote "When one age dies, its symbols lose their referents and become incomprehensible." Percy is referring mainly to the scientific texts in whose preservation and understanding—or otherwise—Miller interests us for most of the novel. Interestingly, though the fate of scientific referents waxes and wanes throughout the text—and Miller generates much comic and ironic horsepower out of this fluctuation—the significance of religious referents seems to remain stable. The rosary beads appear again, centuries later, still meaning more or less the same thing they meant at the novel's opening: a sign of peace, an affirmation of life. In this scene, Fr. Zerchi is counseling a young woman whose hip has been broken after a nuclear blast and who along with her infant daughter is suffering from radiation sickness. Here again, Miller doesn't find it necessary to break this intensely emotional moment to spell out the history and significance of the rosary. The object is left to speak for itself. Miller simply has Fr. Zerchi reach into a pocket and hand the woman the beads. And his question to her echoes Francis Gerard's question to the pilgrim: "You know what it is?"

"Certainly, Father," she says. And later, after he very gently asks her to live out the rest of her short life rather than going to the euthanasia clinic, he recalls the way she held the rosary and thinks, quote: "The woman had handled the beads with fingers that knew them; there was nothing he could say to her that she didn't already know."

As readers we are invited to wonder: *Does* she already know? How much does she know? And will that knowledge be enough to support the action of her will in the face of what looks, quite understandably, like a reason for despair? Has the symbol lost its referent for her? To what degree has it lost, or could it lose, its referent for us? And what would be at stake if it did?

It may help here to take a look at what Miller, explicitly or implicitly, identifies as the characteristic habits of the Catholic imagination—to think in centuries, to take the long view, to balance the historical with the individual, to resist fear, to identify and oppose moral wrong not through mob mentality or emotivism but through clear reasoning and spiritual discernment. The harm Miller explicitly calls on us to avoid, more than any other, is "not suffering, but the unreasoning fear of suffering, the craving for worldly security, for Eden." He's also inviting us to hold on to both our symbols and their

referents—for a dystopia, for Miller, seems to be what happens when symbols and referents become unmoored from each other. In this case we (a) can no longer receive meaning, or (b) even if we can receive it, we can't act on it—or (c) can only act on it harmfully, not helpfully. It's worth thinking, as Fr. Stephen encouraged us to do, about how we might avoid arriving in dystopian territory and what we might do to correct course if we found ourselves, in some sense, already there.

I'll end by raising two questions that I think are implied in the novel's ending: (1) How do we hold on to the inherent meaning that lies “deep down things” when parts, even necessary and vital parts, of our matrix of symbols and referents have been ripped away from us, perhaps by acts of violence from outside, or of indifference on the part of malevolent or even merely natural forces beyond our control? (2) How do we continue to hold on to hope when any reasonable practical justifications for a material hope in this world are taken away from us?

The context of Miller's conclusion invites the reader to locate hope not in the natural or even in the “preternatural,” except in as much as both of these are gifts from the supernatural, precisely from God, residing in this strange middle ground where nature meets grace and the results begin to look uncanny. Catholic editor and novelist Caroline Gordon, writing to Flannery O'Connor in 1958, says not only of Catholic fiction but of fiction more broadly and generally: “There is only one plot. The scheme of Redemption. All other plots, if they are any good, are splinters off this basic plot.” Gordon also tells O'Connor that the end of a story should achieve “altitude” so as to more closely attain to something approaching a divine perspective on human affairs. Certainly, what Miller is up to in his conclusion fulfills and more than fulfills these two demands—for redemption, for altitude—despite the wholesale destruction that remains behind on the doomed Earth after the pilgrim Church leaves it.

After such destruction, however, the only mode Miller can find in which to symbolize and adequately render a sense of redemption is the literal achievement of escape velocity. The moment when the novel's Pope Gregory will only pray any longer for justice on earth does, and should, give us chills—and not only because of the superior narrative power that Miller's structure and context has given it—but because that prayer for justice constitutes a tacit acknowledgment that, in the storyline as it then stands, prayer for peace is a lost cause.

This fictional moment's fabulated nature should not blind us to its applicability to our moment. Instead it should cause us to ask: What are we doing now to lead toward or away from a moment where peace become impossible and only justice remains? What can we do to turn our steps back toward the way of peace? I'll indicate a direction I think Miller would be happy to see us take, and I'll do so in his own words: “Speak up, destiny, speak up! Destiny always seems decades away, but suddenly it's not decades away; it's right now. But maybe destiny is always right now, right here, right this very instant, maybe.”