

UNTIL HE COMES

THE APOCALYPSE AND THE CATHOLIC NOVEL

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Apocalyptic novels shock and terrify, assaulting the imagination with jarring spectacles. Fire and famine, death and destruction, disasters and deluges. Cities erased and civilizations blotted out. And—perhaps worst of all—the evil and shameful deeds of our fellow men. These scenes might lead to despair: If, in the end, all will come crashing down, what matters? But some apocalyptic stories do not disturb merely for the shock value. In his introduction to Robert Hugh Benson’s *The Lord of the World*, Ralph McInerny writes that the good apocalyptic novel “can touch us as no abstract argument could . . . can put the apocalypse before the eye of the imagination in a way that both thrills and edifies” (viii–ix). McInerny distinguishes the truly great novel about the future from those that merely project contemporary concerns or attempt to dazzle. Those that possess true merit do so “because they seek the very meaning of human history—and its end” (vii).

This search for meaning is not necessarily hopeless. The Catholic knows that God’s providence guides the unfolding of the ages. If God is guiding history, then it is headed somewhere, to some culmination. This world will end someday, suffering travail till all things are fulfilled. Remembering the finitude of this world and its impending culmination alters how we judge our own times and trials. As apocalyptic novels, Robert Hugh Benson’s *Lord of the World*, Walter Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, and Myles Connolly’s *Mr. Blue* place before our minds the end of history and call us to meditate upon our lives in its light.

A STRUGGLE NOT WITH FLESH AND BLOOD

History is a battleground, a struggle “not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens” (Eph 6:12). *A Canticle for Leibowitz* follows a monastic order through the rehabilitation of a world nearly obliterated by a nuclear holocaust. Man repeats the cycle of history, passing from a “dark ages” through a renaissance to a futuristic society. Following the fiery end of civilization, the monks preserved some of the knowledge man had discovered so that they could re-educate humanity. But Satan is ever at work to pervert even the goodness of knowledge. Abbot Paulo awaits the arrival of a secular scholar, Thon Taddeo, who wishes to research the material the monks preserved. The monks saved knowledge for such study, yet some gnawing apprehension sits at the back of his mind. He sees a vision of a king with crooked scales and loaded dice approaching relentlessly. On his banner, the emblazoned title mockingly proclaims, “*Vexilla regis inferni prodeunt . . .* Forth come the banners of the King of Hell”—the beginning of the last canto of Dante’s *Inferno*, announcing the presence of the evil one himself (152). The abbot glimpses for a moment the working of the devil, riding with the unwitting scholar, come to wrest secrets of power from the goodness of knowledge. He comes with a crooked scale to release knowledge from the balance of virtue so that it may become a tool of domination and destruction.

Abbot Paulo perceives the subtle hand of Satan moving behind the scenes. But sometimes the works of the devil manifest themselves more clearly. The protagonist in Connolly’s *Mr. Blue* describes his idea for a screenplay: all the earth consolidated under the International Government of the World (IGW), a handful of men controlling all resources. By destroying all crops, they force all of mankind into their mechanical megacities of steel and smog. Harnessing the power of knowledge, these despots have semi-mechanized their fellow men. Enslaved humanity follows a precise

clockwork schedule, consuming for their only sustenance the same fluid that fuels their machines. As Blue puts it, “The fantasy of the philosopher had come true: machines had become superior to men” (48). It is a “kingdom of the Antichrist” (52).



Albrecht Dürer—The Four Horsemen

Perhaps the kingdom of the Antichrist will not look so dull. It may, in fact, be far more enticing. Benson's *Lord of the World* depicts a terrifyingly conceivable and dangerously alluring kingdom. When the Antichrist comes, Scripture tells us, he will be an attractive figure. A political figure, arising within secular history, the Antichrist will assume the mantle of divinity and worship. Such is Benson's mysterious Antichrist, Julian Felsonburgh, who appears as if from nowhere. By his eloquence, the force of his personality, and the apparent purity of his life, Felsonburgh suddenly coordinates the cessation of war. The world finds itself at peace and united under one man hailed as the Savior of the World. No war, no bloodshed, no divisions. Universal brotherhood and peace. How attractive this seems! How man longs for peace like this, purchased without cost! Hence tens of thousands acclaim Felsonburgh as God and Lord, "who bore not a sword but peace, not a cross but a crown" (249).

In our times, with a world rent by violence and communities torn by hatred this vision of peace exercises a draw on our hearts. Even Benson's hero, Fr. Percy, struggles within himself against the power of the Antichrist's person and promise. It was as if "a hand gripped his heart—a hand warm, not cold" (116). The allure of the false christ assaulted his heart, "His emotions had been stormed, his intellect silence, his memory of grace obscured, a spiritual nausea had sickened his soul" (117). For weeks he wrestled with the superabundance of the evil influence. Assessing the situation to the Pope, Percy describes how "in the early age, Satan's attack had been made on the bodily side, with whips and fire and beasts; in the sixteenth century it had been on the intellectual side; in the twentieth century on the springs of moral and spiritual life. Now it seemed as if the assault was on all three planes at once" (135). Such will the end times be.

FAKE EDENS AND FALSE VIRTUES

While Satan sometimes launches these all-out attacks, frequently his lies are more insidious. The Book of Revelation prophesies a new heaven and a new earth, an existence without sorrow or tears, with God dwelling in the midst of his people, chasing away every shadow of darkness in his own marvelous light. Man, acutely aware of not yet possessing this paradise, sometimes succumbs to the temptation to try to create his own utopia here and now. Satan happily meddles in such attempts. Benson, Miller, and Connolly all depict man's futile striving for a new Eden apart from God.

In *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Thon Taddeo epitomizes man's attempt to grasp at paradise through science. The scholar, having sucked out a treasure of lost knowledge from the monastery's library, proclaims the imminent usurpation of a new king. Echoing the confidence of early modern philosophy, Taddeo prophesies that knowledge's reign will bring man mastery over nature. Subduing nature, man will conquer disease and famine, eradicate every social ill, and engineer a utopic future. Weaponize knowledge and establish Eden. It seems so simple, always nearly in our grasp. More experiments, more funding, a little more time and we will have it. Our own heaven on earth. A better world formed by our own hands.

Dom Paulo shatters the illusion. Taddeo dreams of returning the world to some lost cultural epoch, of surpassing it, and building a world better yet. The abbot rebukes him, "It never was any better, it never *will* be any better. It will only be richer or poorer, sadder but not wiser, until the very last day" (224). Man will never re-establish Eden. As the Psalmist says, "In his riches, man lacks wisdom" (Ps 49:20). Progress in the sciences will not perfect man or the world in which he lives.

Unable to make heaven on earth, man resorts to pseudo-cures. The last section of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* portrays the sad result of such an attempt. For all his progress, man still suffers.

The reality of suffering confounds “advanced” cultures. Doctor Cors tells Abbot Zerchi “pain is the only evil I know about” (284). Uncomfortable with pain, the fictional society establishes “Mercy Camps” to end the lives of those enduring great suffering. This is Satan’s great mockery of Christian mercy, perverting both knowledge and compassion. From a window in the monastery, the abbot observes a camp, growling, “*Evenit diabolus!*” (290). Indeed, Satan has come, his banners now overlaid with false mercy.

The prevailing worldview in *The Lord of the World* shares this inability to cope with suffering. Society clutches at the crown Felsonburgh bears and rejects the cross Christ carries. Benson’s society throws down the cross and takes up the instruments of euthanasia. Early in the novel, Mabel Brand, the young wife of an important politician, witnesses a vehicular accident. The scene contrasts the priest, Fr. Percy, and “the ministers of euthanasia.” A man lies before Mabel, body mangled, crying out in pain, calling out with his last breaths for Jesus and Mary. And suddenly, Fr. Percy is there. Mabel saw him “wave his hand in a swift sign, and heard a murmur of a language she did not know” (27). Mystified, relief fills her when the ministers of euthanasia snuff out the sufferer. Yet, a corner of her heart seems unsatisfied. Later, she asks her husband what one ought to tell people as they die. “Why, nothing,” is all he can respond (28). Death has no meaning beyond the cessation of pain. Euthanasia is a meaningless response to the perceived meaninglessness of suffering.

That is the kind of Eden man can build without God. Without God, striving to build heaven on earth ends by truncating man. Society lowers its horizons, “friendliness took the place of charity, contentment the place of hope, and knowledge the place of faith” (254). Severed from the guidance of supernatural virtues these purely human ones become weak and faint, no defense against the worming tongue of the evil one. So Satan whispers that man can grasp divinity and rebuild paradise.

The Christian stands as an eschatological sign to remind man continually that he cannot build heaven on earth. At the climax

of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, man, supposedly more advanced and civilized, closer to Eden than ever before, immolates the world in another fiery nuclear inferno. Lying wounded in the rubble of his ancient monastery, Abbot Zerchi notices the skull of a long dead monk beside him. To his confrere, the abbot whispers, “What did you do for them, Bone? . . . Help them rebuild, give them Christ, help restore a culture? Did you remember to warn them that it could never be Eden” (314)? It could never be Eden. It will never be Eden. Neither science nor world governments nor the lies of the devil and the Antichrist will ever give man the paradise he desires.

SACRAMENTS AND THE SECOND COMING

The Christian view of the future avoids a naive optimism. Despite the progress of science, there will be no utopia. And as the end times approach, life will not be easy for Christians. Scripture prophesies mass apostasies, rejection, and persecution. Illusions of all mankind peacefully united in the true faith with the Church sovereign and universally recognized for her wisdom and beauty must be abandoned. During the end times, the Church will not triumph gloriously in any worldly sense. She will be crushed and diminished. But she will not be destroyed—“the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Mt 16:18). Our hope rests not in worldly power, but in the rock-solid foundation of Christ’s promise. The preface to *Lord of the World* opens with a discussion between Fr. Percy and an old Catholic politician. The politician recounts the long list of defeats suffered by the Church. Asked if he thinks matters will improve, the man admits, “I see no hope until . . . Until our Lord comes back” (10). This recognition is not despair, but a profound understanding of hope. Our hope is our God. The hope of Christ’s coming is the real meaning of the end of the world. Through all the upheavals and persecutions the Church must endure, awaiting the coming of our Savior.

During this period of waiting, the papacy stands as a point of stability and sign of endurance. In *A Canticle for Leibowitz*,

the Church develops a contingency plan should man attempt to annihilate himself. A spaceship with three bishops and a number of priests and monks will preserve the Church in the colonies on other planets. Should the pope and the rest of the bishops suffer extermination, a successor and ministers of the Sacraments will survive. As Abbot Zerchi tells the passengers, “as long as Man lives elsewhere, the office of Peter cannot be destroyed” (277). Christ will always have a vicar to feed his flock.

In Benson’s tale, the forces of the Antichrist destroy Rome in a fiery bombardment that mingles the blood of the pope and cardinals with bones of ancient martyrs. Suddenly, the young Fr. Percy finds himself the last successor of St. Peter. Felsonburgh, hailed as God and Savior, controls the world, while “the Vicar of Christ sat in a whitewashed room in Nazareth, dressed as simply as his master, waiting for the end” (253). With the forces of evil seeming to have the upper hand, the new pope and his few cardinals remain the last obstacle to the eradication of Christianity. Like his master, the pope is betrayed by one of his followers. Learning that the pope convened a meeting of his cardinals for Pentecost, Felsonburgh leads an armada of aircraft to the final confrontation.

Standing in unity with the pope, the priests of the Church will bring Christ to the world in the Eucharist until that Second Coming. As the nuclear blast razes his monastery, Abbot Zerchi rushes to the tabernacle, retrieving “the Christ-filled ciborium” (310). Upon regaining consciousness among the ruins, the priest’s first thought is: “Anyone needing the last rites? Viaticum” (310)? Like his predecessor whose bones lie scattered next to him, the abbot had given Christ to man, fulfilling the Lord’s promise: “I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:20). To the very close of the ages, God is with his Church especially through the Sacraments administered by his priests.

With such an emphasis on the priesthood and the Eucharist, it is not surprising that these three novels mark the final confrontation with liturgies. In *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, the pope, learning of the impending nuclear holocaust, celebrates two

special Masses, beseeching the Lord to come and save his people. Mr. Blue, in Connolly's novel, recounts the activities of the last Christian on earth, Fr. White. Having concealed his vestments and secretly grown wheat, Fr. White steals out of his apartment late one night. In those long months of waiting in the kingdom of the Antichrist, one desire animated Fr. White's soul: "I shall bring God back to earth" (54). Climbing to the highest tower, Fr. White celebrates Mass "in the citadel of the Antichrist" (58). As alarms sound, mobs surge below and bombers above, Fr. White serenely and reverently says his Mass. And then, at the words, "*Hoc est enim corpus meum,*" the earth melted away, and through the sky torn asunder, "ribbed with lightning came Christ as he had come after the Resurrection" (61). The promise contained in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist finds fulfilment in Christ come again in glory.

Christ remains with his Church through the Eucharist, which strengthens the faithful to endure the trials of the end times. Knowing that the final assault approaches, Percy celebrates Pentecost Mass with his cardinals and processes out to battle armed with the Eucharist, singing the *O Salutaris* and *Tantum Ergo*. There Antichrist and Christ confront each other, "the final piteous Prince of rebels, the creature against God" (351). In that moment of arrogant triumph, when Felsonburgh seems victorious, his false utopic kingdom secure, comes the Revelation. However much he struts and blusters, Satan's pryncedom perishes. Our God, not the rebellious enemy, is the Lord of history. When its Lord appeared, "then this world passed, and the glory of it" (352).

ENCOUNTERING OUR FRIEND

What will there be when the glory of this world has passed, when the final false Eden has faded and the last Antichrist has fallen, when man has stopped grasping for paradise and all of Satan's arrogant perversions have ceased? The end shall be a termination and a culmination. This world and its failures and

imperfections will give way to eternal realities. Paradise will come, but not as the result of technological tinkering. It will not be balefully dull nor shallow and truncated. Those pseudo-Edens could never satisfy because they lacked divine stability. Without Christ, human utopias come up short and lapse into hellish mockeries. For only when God dwells among his people, only then “death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rv 21:4). Peace and the end of suffering—but on God’s terms, not man’s; through God’s initiative, not man’s. What man could never accomplish, despite his greatest effort, Christ will bring as a gift to his faithful. What Christians foretaste in the Eucharist, what sustains them in the Sacraments, will then come to full measure. God “will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them” (Rv 21:3). The Sacraments foreshadow and provide a foretaste of the definite and ultimate union of man and God. Longing for this union, strengthened by the Sacraments, Christians endure the illusory Edens until the end of history. Then the apocalypse, even with all its trials and persecutions, will end in a joyful encounter with God, whose friendship alone constitutes our paradise and beatitude.

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