

The BOOK of ANNIHILATION

By Michael Aliprandini

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We were enchanted by this deliciously rich and richly solemn parody of apocalyptic scripture—in which Aliprandini, ghosting as the scribe Héautontimorouménos, summons a siren call for the ‘Age of Incantation’. The author’s brocaded prose and ornate cadence serve as the voce della morte for an impaired and obstinate species blinkered to their future. Oracular zealots raising the banner of annihilation proclaim ‘Death is the New Life’. And within that somnolent prophecy stirs a darker mystery to be sure. This style of writing, deliberately arched and antiquated, sounds new and startling to modern ears; its measured harmonies and gilded arabesques both beguile and puzzle. It’s also the kind of writing that in lesser hands, quickly leads to boredom. We assure you this is not the case here. Gentle reader, you are in good hands with he who calls himself Michael Aliprandini.*

Five stars.

(Spacing, font size and colour are author’s own.)

QUALITY QUOTABLE:

There were sects that rode deranged horses into the frothy waters and there were those that preferred crashing tractors into armored trucks. Others ingested poisonous mushrooms and spoke a renovated language until they doubled over and died. Some swallowed stones, others experimented with livewires, and still others embraced serpents and ravenous beasts.

THE BOOK OF ANNIHILATION

In the beginning were the words and the words were magic in the mouths of men. They pulsed with radiant bursts and illumined the paths and byways of their poetry. Men were in thrall to words and the words were served. This was the Age of Incantation.

The Age did not last. Most men swapped incantation for cant, rich wine for hogwash. Words, indentured, struggled towards magic in a profusion of jingles and doublespeak. Poets still rose in the land. The poets sang and the poets inscribed and many were their glories. But the poets knew their muses were being cut and drained. They counseled: "Protect your resources! Stop the violence! Terralingua suffers exceedingly!" Their counsel went unheeded and so they lamented: "Words

are ghosts guttering in hollow mansions, and silence is wanting in the land. How shall we renovate? We have less to speak yet more need to exaggerate. Grievous is the blight. Our tongues swell and blacken. We tear our mouths."

The poets yearned for an Age of Aphasia, but the Age did not come to pass. Instead, a new prophet rose upon the face of the deep.

▪

The uterus lay on the water and the holy sperm wiggled nearby. Behold, a Celtic prophet was begat. In his fifth year the prophet succumbed to visionary fevers. Heavy metals in the fish, he reckoned, but in truth God had a plan. The dolphin leapt above his pod and looked down upon the gray hundreds and saw he was set apart. He leapt, he frolicked, he

frightened the gulls, and again he looked upon the hundreds and still he was apart. His brain vibrated and all was confusion, but he did as instructed, swimming in haste to Connecht Bay, a peaceful indentation on the west coast of Ireland. The Age of Annihilation was commencing.

▪

The prophet glided over the deep and slipped into a trance as he glided. He located his foremost disciple and tumbled her on the land and set her upright again. “Siobhan O’Feeligan, go down and swim in Connecht Bay,” and she swam.

As Siobhan listened to the prophet, the plankton glowed around them with her newfound awareness. “I’m a prophet in the water and a spirit on the land and a hope in the mind. I’ve forsaken my pod to deliver a message to humankind. You’ve been designated my foremost

terrestrial disciple. Do you accept the mission?”

“Humbly,” she said through chattering teeth. The prophet moved her to the shore and set her upright. Thereafter she strode backwards in flippers from farmhouse to farmhouse, accompanied by a chorus of slamming doors and threats. Still she persisted in the spirit and the spirit persisted in her. She beseeched townspeople to heed the message. “Ladies and gentlemen, the end is nigh. God is coming, but first we must prepare the earth. Obey the edicts of the prophet and enter the fold of the chosen. Every creep that creepeth on two legs should surrender his life to the ground or to the water. I will guide your preparations. Do not tarry. Heal yourselves with Death so that the Theocracy of Peace can reign throughout the land.”

And she was shunned, and the

people of the land carried on consuming and begetting and spoiling.

▪

The prophet recognized that Siobhan needed to grow her ministry. He located a woman in a hospital of the city. She was made to lift her arms so that the spirit of the prophet could tickle her. When she did not giggle, the prophet knew she was grim straight through and would serve him with faithful gloom. “Leave the care of the sick. Henceforth you’re a disciple of the grave-cloth. Drape yourself in cerements, and get yourself to Ballyardcarraig. Seek out Siobhan O’Feeligan, and pledge yourself to her ministry.”

The nurse made haste and threw herself at the flippers of the foremost disciple. “The prophet has enslaved me. Enslave me in the mysteries of your ministry.”

“Rise, grim woman, and together we

will witness miracles.”

They strode backwards to the Slough of Despond where they met a gigantic serpent writhing on the grass. Siobhan slit the belly of the serpent. Out slipped an irritable man covered in gore. “Leave me be,” Héautontimorouménos shrieked. But the spirit of the prophet bellowed in response: “It’s not your hour. You must record my gospel and the events that form the Age of Annihilation. Do not lament. Your time will come. Until then, be prepared for the delights of self-defecating humor.”

And the stink of serpent belly trailed the three disciples. The two women stirred up a great froth of soulfulness throughout the land while the irritable scribe loafed around and yawned a lot and periodically scribbled the notes that would become *The Book of Annihilation*.

▪

It came to pass that a community of pub-

dwellers heard the news. They removed their clothes and walked with their pints to the cliffs above Connecht Bay, there sculling their final taste of ale and tossing the empty glasses into the waves. “We have reached the leaping place. Legion dwells within us. We cast ourselves into the watery maw.”

And as the pub-dwellers did their duty, the prophet performed a mirthful back flip. Thereafter a weekly pilgrimage was made to the cliffs above Connecht Bay, and every month hundreds of pilgrims leapt into the fold.

Heartened by the success, the earthly triumvirate went swimming in the waters of the bay. The prophet praised them and scared them. “Be forewarned. Enemies are ranging against us. Remember, my disciples. Persecution makes us strong. Persecution is the proving ground.”

As foretold, various councils convened. They discussed the call

entreating humankind to ruin.

The psychiatrists furrowed their brows and discussed the mood-enhancers that might counteract the messages of a dolphin with a messiah complex. They proposed theories and tested new cocktails. But they were confounded.

The holy men furrowed their brows and broke down in sweaty fits. When their prayers went unanswered, they tore their robes and fulminated: “A curse worries the sanctity of life. A dolphin-shaped devil stalks the waters near the land. Let our mouths overflow with prayer and propaganda.”

The philosophers pondered three of the prophet’s theoretical pronouncements: (a) *It is not suicide but survival that is pathological.* (b) *Human existence is a knot. Alexander instructed on the handling of knots.* (c) *Smote thyself.* After subjecting the theses to the

most incisive analysis and finding the dolphin's ontological oo-la-la less wearisome than the alternatives, they cheered the end of philosophy.

There came to Ballyardcarraig a delegation of concerned marine biologists. Fearing that the cetacean was being molested by interpretation, they trailed Siobhan bearing placards of protest: *INTERPRETATION IS THE REVENGE OF THE INTELLECT ON MARINE LIFE*. But the prophet came down hard upon them and they were made to perform aerial twists. In their nausea they were granted the wisdom that marine life would enjoy the blessings of a future only in the absence of men. And they became great preachers on the land and in the boats.

Meanwhile, Siobhan and her ministry were thrown into a jail cell occupied by common drunks. They listened to the message and pointed out

that their kind was the first to have shown the presence of mind to get right with death. The prophet heard their pleading and freed the lot of them. As word spread of the miraculous escape, police authority was troubled throughout the land.

Despite the reactionaries enlisted against them, good news arrived with the force of a tidal wave. Communities of believers were springing up around the world and performing their duty according to rituals that amused the prophet with their extravagance. Thus was ushered in the most creative period of the Age of Annihilation. There were sects that rode deranged horses into the frothy waters and there were those that preferred crashing tractors into armored trucks. Others ingested poisonous mushrooms and spoke a renovated language until they doubled over and died. Some swallowed stones, others

experimented with livewires, and still others embraced serpents and ravenous beasts. And the news bespoke widening victory: a million dead in a single week. A great woe settled on the holy men, and the prophet fixed his grin and rejoiced. “God is a million lives nearer. Multiply the death! Bipedal extinction approaches!”

▪

Now a pharmaceutical company, lured by the killing to be made, began manufacturing Omega Pilgrim, an easy-swallow pill for those who didn't want to leave a mess or waste time devising a creative departure. The CEO sought the prophet's endorsement, but the prophet balked. “Make available a generic version of the pill for developing countries and lower income families.” When the company refused, the prophet performed his first miracle of international scope. The pill was

multiplied around the world. “Ingest,” the prophet intoned merrily. “Enjoy permanent existential analgesia!” And many were the pilgrims who leapt into the omega.

One day the scribe interviewed the prophet over the side of a dinghy. “Would you respond to rumors that your portfolio is flush with shares in generic Omega Pilgrim? Some sources suggest that your miracle was merely the opening play in a vast campaign for market domination. You're planning to jack up the prices once everyone is hooked on death, right?”

And the prophet responded: “Nay, that is gross slander. Profits will be widespread: freedom from the struggles of humankind and his corruption. The dividend will be peace, quiet, and cleanliness.”

“Can you share with our worldwide audience why the Age of Annihilation is

beginning at this particular time?”

“We have long been losing faith in humankind’s ability to lose faith in itself. For millennium we’ve attempted to cohabit, but man is a stubborn creep who persists in creeping along sinister paths and byways. His faith in God, in hope, in progress inspires the most pernicious ignorance. He’s unable to live without illusion, yet the illusions he manufactures are malign. It’s nearly too late. In order to save the earth and its more peaceful brethren, humankind must set upon itself, root and branch.”

“Wow,” the scribe said. “Any other suggestions you can share?”

“Let it be. Let it be razors, let it be the noose. Cliffs are dramatic and so are shotgun blasts. Cigarettes take decades, but overdoses have their perks. Let it be strenuous sex, if you have a heart condition. Let it be a body of water and stones in your pockets. Many are the

ways to die and some are ways to die well, even artfully. Let it be poison or a leap into speeding traffic, and do not neglect to throw the babies out with the bathwater. As I speak, let it be.”

“Would you care to comment on the value of humankind’s accomplishments?”

“What is this, The Hague? Muckrake your puny heart and ransack the archives, little scribbler, and you will find man’s accomplishments wanting by any measure except that of man.”

“Are you by any chance forgetting Caravaggio? Bach? Godard? Sebald? Waits?”

“You yourself can answer that. Remember I saved you from the belly into which you had cast yourself. Art is a diddle in the beginning and the middle. In the end, like everything else, it just drops dead.”

The prophet shot an ambiguous geyser from his blowhole that brought

the interview to a close.

SUPPER ON THE WAVE

The disciples encircled the prophet in Connecht Bay. Around them a new batch of recruits treaded water. They listened to his sermon while tossing him tasty marine morsels. “Disciples recently and long faithful, I commend you with the highest praise. The time has come to initiate you into the final mystery. Rub my belly!” the prophet said, and they did as commanded. The prophet adopted the position for defecating, and la crème de la crap spurted into the waters. “Eat of my anus!” the prophet said, and they did. “Imbibe of my waters!” and they did. Their bellies full of salty water and fishy shit, the disciples were moved to shore and set upon their feet. Meanwhile the new recruits swam towards the Americas and merrily merrily merrily perished in right reason.

■

In boardrooms around the globe, there was much wringing of power-ties. Production was dropping as the Age of Annihilation gathered pace, so too consumption. With entire markets vanishing overnight and many a sweatshop standing empty, business prospects looked bleak. Military-industrial complexes were scaled back as enemies self-destructed. Without access to the latest high-tech toys, warmongers lathered themselves into a sulk.

At the special congress that was convened, an ambitious grunt speechified a plan. “I fear we’re not being proactive enough. You see turmoil and cutbacks where I see golden sacks. We just need to approach vis-à-vis a different paradigm. Our mistake is to not be capitalizing enough on the consumers’ decision before they execute it. Revenues from Omega Pilgrim (both the

minty-fresh and the cinnamon burst) are merely a sliver of what we can accomplish. Essentially, we need more buzz and more products. Toys and gizmos, baubles pitched at every income level. Comic books. Gift vouchers and farewell cards. Bestsellers and blockbusters with clever product placement. How-to manuals for the implacably idiotic. Cartoon and video game tie-ins. Dolphin language tapes for the commute and fruity dolphin-shaped cereal. And let's give death a makeover. Raise the hemline and by all means show a little cleavage. Ditch all that black and parade it in pastels. Indoctrinate through woozy power ballads and corporate-sponsored news segments. Get the mavens and connectors onto the talk show circuit. Pitch Omega Pilgrim as the ultimate cure for every ailment, from chiggers and dandruff to depression and diverticulitis.

This season, death is the new life. We need more mumbo-jumbo, not less!”

And the plan was met with widespread approval. Executives and their drudges buckled down to business. Industry was fired up, and the advertising blitzkrieg shot death into everyone's eyes. And behold, in the great creative ferment that was frothed, scores of consumers performed their duty every day.

▪

Not all business leaders were convinced of the plan. They called an emergency meeting at Davos. Representatives of ISIS and the Vatican were in attendance. Those assembled came to the conclusion that they shared a common goal, and they laid out a plan to extirpate the cult once and for all. A crackpot team of interdenominational zealots was charged with saving humankind. The leaders huddled and chanted: “Hail the

dictatorship of consumption! Hail the dictatorship of life! Hail the dictatorship of fright!”

▪

The disciples joined the prophet in Connecht Bay. “My faithful ones, it’s been revealed that the moment for an overthrow of the two-footed tongue has not yet arrived. Soon I will be taken from you. Humankind has bungled the endgame, too. In future, beware of noble schemes that do not accord it eternal pride of place! Disciples, rub my belly!”

And the disciples did as commanded. The water burbled and the plankton glowed like sleazy neon and a tremendous fear came hard upon them. Blood burst from the prophet’s blowhole, covering them in the schlock of it. His fixed smile bent into a menacing grimace as he executed a series of aerial spins. “Exit humankind! Furry critters leap into the mouths of serpents, horses

gallop off cliffs, and their triumph over base instinct lays sweetly on the mind. Millions of right-thinking men have performed their duty. Yet humankind still persists in dubious faith. You think you know God but you know Nada! When will the Theocracy of Peace reign upon the land? I will return with a pouch and a hope. Await my resurrection Down Under.”

And the dolphin glided away in a dazzle of sound and color.

The foremost disciples tore their wetsuits and hatched alternative plans. Siobhan and the nurse were captured as they attempted to flee to Australia. Charged by an international tribunal for crimes of mystical malpractice, they popped themselves off in prison with hidden doses of Omega Pilgrim. The prophet submitted to the net, and the zealots clubbed him with holy glee. His grinning head adorns the office wall of

the latest financial kingpin, and the flukes were presented to the Pope in an official ceremony. Somewhere just over the Syrian border, in a less official ceremony, the bearded bogeymen received the dorsal fin. And humankind persisted in its more retarded apocalypse.

The scribe hid in a farmhouse in order to complete *The Book of Annihilation*, set down in year one, *anno delfinus*. To guarantee broad circulation, he threatened a rash of psychic-controlled bombings, and several high-profile newspapers deigned to print the testament. Then Héautontimorouménos took himself back to the Slough of Despond and slipped into a serpent's maw and found his freedom in his ending.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Some years ago, I was reading the King James version of The Hebrew Bible and became enchanted by the richness and quirkiness—to a modern ear—of its*

language and cadences. Contemporary language is often so impoverished that majestic prose can come across as unintentionally parodic.

When I started writing my own "scripture" in "The Book of Annihilation," I tried to mimic this language and these cadences in order to posit an Age of Incantation in which the reserves of English were utilized more fully and words were less debased. At the same time, I was parodying New Age hogwash and Christian rituals; blasphemy and subversion are important in my work, in part because I grew up Catholic, in part because our age of religious extremism (whatever its variety) is reckless and disturbing.

I sort of occupy the position of the book's scribe, Héautontimorouménos, whose name means the self-torturer and who tortures himself to death with gnarly existential questions. 2020-2021 has been a difficult and tragic period in human history, but many torturous questions of a broader scope remain. "The Book of Annihilation" asks: Given our track record, wouldn't the planet and its non-human creatures be better off without homo sapiens?

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Michael Aliprandini lives in Italy and works internationally as a curriculum developer and teacher-trainer. His short stories and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in several publications, including *Litro*, *Queen Mob's Tea House*, *Counterclock*, *Fresh Ink*, *The Bacon Review*, *Crooked Arrow (Bullseye)*, and *Columbia Journal*. He is a fiction reader for the online UK edition of *Litro*.