Jeremy Millar’s *The Oblate*
Converting – to what?

A response by Marcel Barnard to Millar’s 2013 video work *The Oblate*, interspersed with stills from the artwork.
Watching *The Oblate*: becoming a convert

The meticulous dedication to the binding of an old book and its detailed filming open a world of silence, sponsored only by the rustling of papers, the groaning breathing of a monk, the buzz of a bee, the chirping of a bird. And finally, after nearly three hours, two words, softly but audibly spoken by the monk. A silence of three hours gives birth to two words: ‘That’s it’. Those two words provide a huge weight to the silence that preceded it and to the work that was performed in it. I could not help perceiving them as a modern rendition of Jesus’ last words on the cross: ‘It’s finished’.

Watching the movie isolates me painfully slowly from the nervy, noisy, edgy world in which I live. That is not a particularly pleasant experience. Repeatedly I said out loud to the monk on my screen: ‘Come on, man, go, do something useful. Buy a new copy of the book’. But in the end, the film makes me realize the foolishness of the ordinary life that I am attached to. Eventually, the artisanal bookbinding and its cinematic recording open an imaginative world-that-could-be before my eyes. They evoke the poetics of the possible. Perhaps I too could slow down... Perhaps I too could dedicate my life to a concentrated labour... Perhaps I too could realize a world of silence... Perhaps I too could surrender to the small world that is surrounding me...

*The Oblate* subtly unsettles my life, it brings me in a liminal mood, it detaches me from what is and pulls me in a non-existent universe that could be. Eventually, I become a convert, for three hours at the most.

While watching the movie, I ordered the book online at Amazon.com. It was delivered in three days. That’s my world.
Converting to the rustling of a leaf in the wind

Watching *The Oblate* by Jeremy Millar opens a world of forgone traditions and religiosity, and at the same time transcends the topical secular age in which the viewer lives. *The Oblate* facilitates a conversion: but to what? Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God; the God of medieval theology and classic ontology, the first Mover, the Supreme Judge, the Almighty, the Omnypresent. A return to that God is impossible. Nevertheless, modern art sometimes opens a space which provides the opportunity of turning to a, let’s call it: god—perhaps, a weak god, a silent god, a god rustling like a leaf in the soft blowing of the wind, a god that glows in the soft whispering of two words: ‘That’s it’. A god with a lowercase letter. A god that never can be ontologized, fixed, grasped, pointed to; who is completely emptied.
Monastic life in the Western, Latin, church is regulated by the Rule of Benedict (Nursia 480 – Montecassino 547) one of the most impressive and influential scripts of Western civilisation. Benedict is by right the patron saint of Europe. Even so, his legacy is tottering. The monastic life that he reformed and regulated has disappeared, Europe as a political entity is shaking on its foundations (and the church that is built on the supposed birthplace of Benedict, in Nursia, Italy, suffered serious damage during the last earthquake). The Rule is a blueprint of a liminal community on the edge between heaven and earth in a time that heaven was undisputed and spoke with a clear voice, in a time that earth was evidently earth under the heaven.

The monk in Jeremy Millar’s The Oblate belongs to the Benedictine Order, which follows the Rule of Benedict according to a mild interpretation of it (as Huysmans explains in L’Oblate, the book that the monk is binding). The lonely monk in Millar’s movie presents worlds that have been lost or are about to disappear. The monk of The Oblate bears a past which heritage is about to expire. Millar warns us not to do so lightly or quickly. He forces us to take time to consider our heritage and to reinvent it, to convert to it in our own way.

The life of nuns and monks is characterized by three virtues: obedience, silence and humility. Three words that are completely strange to our late-modern world of egocentrism, noise and arrogance. Obedience, silence and humility are performed, exercised and strengthened by submission to the double imperative: ora et labora – pray and work. Benedict pre-
scribes manual labor to his brethren and sisters monastics in the 48th chapter of his Rule: ‘Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore the brothers should be occupied at certain times in manual labor, and again at fixed hours in sacred reading.’ Inertia is the greatest threat of monastic life. Monastic life consists of manual labor, reading, and praying. Benedict held the earthly and the heavenly close. Devotion to the divine requires contemplation of the earthly task.

Watching The Oblate while living after Nietzsche’s sledgehammer blows to the God of classic ontology, thus after ‘the death of God’, one realizes again: if the spiritual and the divine are to be evoked at all, then it is possible only through a dedication to ordinary life. Reinventing the past, returning to god after God, converting would only be possible in this way. Perhaps. Millar’s utmost concentration on the monk who performs his craft, and the monk’s utmost concentration on the binding of an old book, may through this dedication transcend the empirical world and open another world-that-could-be. For the monk, bookbinding is the prerequisite for singing seven times daily from the book of the Psalms, the songs of king David and of the Messiah of the tribe of David. Labour conditions the entering of the divine world as presented in the Psalms, whereas this divine world points back to ordinary life: no songs are more saturated with everyday life than the psalms.
Chains of references to the past and future

The Oblate unleashes a chain of meanings. It is filmed in Quarr Abbey, a Benedictine monastery on the Isle of Wight, that specializes in, among other things, book binding. Quarr Abbey was founded by the monks of Solesmes, Brittany, France, when they had to leave France because of its rigid secular laws in 1901. For liturgists like me, the abbey of Solesmes is like a beacon in the liturgical life of the church.

The abbot Prosper Guéranger (1805 – 1875) is, rightly speaking, the founding father of the so-called liturgical movement that has determined the liturgy of the 20th century in all established churches all over the world. Guéranger re-invented the Gregorian music, which was completely forgotten, as well as the liturgical year calendar, by delving into old manuscripts.

His younger contemporary, the French writer Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907), became a roman-catholic convert at the end of his life, and vowed to be a so-called oblate at the abbey of Ligugé, which was refounded from Solesmes. Oblates join the life of prayer with the monks, without living inside the abbey. Huysmans wrote about his conversion in four novels about his alter ego Durtal. The last of the four novels is L’Oblat, which the monk on Millar’s film is rebinding. The novel meticulously describes the life, particularly the liturgical life, in one of the daughter-abbeys of Solesmes shortly after Guéranger’s revolutionary reinvention of the medieval liturgical traditions of the church.

Moreover, Huysmans’ novels play an important role in the last novel of one of France’s most renowned, and controversial, writers, Michel Houellebecq, Soumission.
The book was published at the day of the attack on Charlie Hebdo; the edition of the satirical weekly in the bookstalls then had an image of Houellebecq on the front page. *Soumission* also thematises a conversion.

The protagonist of *Soumission* (Submission), François, is a literary scholar at the University of Paris III for the Humanities. His sex life has reached a dead end; previously he had only sex with young students or watched internet porn. A difficult relationship with one of the students, Myriam, ends when she emigrates to Israel due to an increasing unsafe situation for Jews in France. As an academic, François studies the works of Huysmans, and the first line of the novel is: ‘Pendant toutes les années de ma triste jeunesse, Huysmans demeura pour moi un compagnon, un ami fidèle (…)’ [During all the years of my sad youth, Huysmans stayed for me a companion, a reliable friend (…)].

The life of Francis is a deflated life. In this sense he is, as Houellebecq suggests, the image of France. An image of Europe as well.

In 2022 Mohammed Ben Abbes wins the elections with his party, called Muslim Brotherhood, and becomes president of France. The country is changing rapidly with Arab money. Polygamy is permitted, the minimum age for girls to marry is lowered. Universities are Islamized and financed by Saudi Arabia. A job is offered to Francis at the Islamized university and his life takes a drastic turn. He converts, it seems, to Islam and is considered to marry some young women who will be chosen for him. ‘Soumission’, the Arabic word for it is ‘Islam’.
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‘Reading’ or watching *The Oblate* in its network of references reveals the film as a complex piece of art that is open to many meanings. The indirect and unintentional reference to Houellebecq’s *Soumission*, which was published after the launch of Millar’s *The Oblate*, destabilizes my original interpretation of Millar’s work as a space that enables the choice of returning to a god—perhaps, a god with a lowercase letter. Returning to the gods is always ambiguous, as religion always is. However, it is an option worth considering.

Sources


– Michel Houellebecq, *Soumission*, s.l., 2015

– Joris-Karl Huysmans, *L'Oblat*, 1903 (Amazon fulfilment)


