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## THE PATIENCE OF J. B.

THERE WAS A MAN from the land of Uz whose name was Job; and, because he asked an ultimate question and insisted upon getting an answer, the world has not been able to forget him. In our own day of anxious and perplexed questionings he appears to be particularly relevant. So C. G. Jung has singled him out as a pivotal figure in the development of the human consciousness, while Archibald MacLeish has re-told his story in modern dress. Jung's *Answer to Job* is a historico-psychological study, spinning a web of theory around the Old Testament narrative. MacLeish's *J. B., A Play in Verse* is a creative work of imagination, taking the theme of the Book of Job and showing that it can provoke us still into thought and wonder. Yet, within the limits of his dramatic form, MacLeish theorizes too. He uses the stage as a platform on which to stand and speak his mind concerning the meaning of the universe in general, so that this overt "message" calls out for critical attention quite apart from the qualities of his play as a play. When an author trails his coat he must want people to see if they can tread on it. Quite simply, this is what I intend to do. What follows is not an estimate of *J. B.* as a piece of literature but as a vehicle for communicating a philosophy of life—a guided missile aimed at the target of our sensibilities. I am concerned most of all with the use MacLeish makes of his biblical starting-point, how—and why—he modifies the original story.

The starting-point is never in question, for the play takes for granted an overall familiarity with the Book of Job. Without this background *J. B.* would lose its chief impact, which is that of ironic contrast. Deliberately cutting down the structure of his characters from the heroic scale that gives high seriousness to the actors in the Job saga, MacLeish makes them of a size to fit into the Century of the Common Man—where *common* means so often *shorn of dignity*. The title indicates as much. The man who is known familiarly by his initials may be admired, envied, pitied, or despised. But he is not likely to be treated as Job was treated by his three friends, who approached him with the respect due to a human being and did not

lightly invade the privacy of his sorrow: "And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great." In place of this kind of consideration, J. B. is bullied by three most unfriendly exponents of contemporary ideologies, each dinning into his reluctant ears a party programme with the dreary insistence of a travelling salesman.

But of first importance in this connection is the counterpart in *J. B.* of the Dialogue in Heaven. Two broken-down actors making a seedy living as circus vendors, Mr. Zuss and Nickles, find masks of God and Satan and begin to play out the story of Job in the corner of the circus tent where they work (it is late at night and they are alone). As they intone the words of the King James Version, the trials of J. B. and his wife Sarah appear before them like a vision. They play their parts through to a finish, but on occasion drop their masks and add their own comments on what they see. By this means—a most brilliant one from the angle of stage-craft—MacLeish has provided himself with a debating-floor on which to discuss the justification of the ways of God which is offered in the Book of Job. And he uses the device in order to reject most emphatically the biblical answer.

Indeed, in one respect at least, MacLeish agrees with Jung over the meaning of the Book of Job for modern man. In his *Answer to Job* Jung maintains that God's "speech out of the whirlwind" is basically a confession of inadequacy, the reaction of an inferior consciousness in face of a superior one. Behind the bluster and the boasting which God puts forward instead of a reasoned reply to Job's question concerning the meaning of his sufferings there lies, so Jung argues, a futile attempt to escape the self-knowledge which is demanded by the challenge of Job's moral awareness. And the entire lack of critical self-consciousness which God displays contrasts not only with Job's rational and ethical concern; it contrasts also with the intellectual acuteness of Satan who forces God into the position of having to face his own handiwork, the man Job, without being able to explain His conduct toward him. MacLeish also suggests that the intelligence of Satan is undeniable, and the stupidity of Deity equally obvious. This point is emphasized by the masks worn by the two old actors. Mr. Zuss's mask is "*a huge white, blank, beautiful, expressionless mask with eyes lidded like the eyes of the mask in Michaelangelo's Night*". Nickle's mask is open eyed. In keeping with his symbolic blindness, Mr. Zuss is portrayed as pompously self-satisfied (it is significant that he, but not Nickles, is called "Mr.") and condescending in his attitude toward his companion. The latter, on the other hand, is quick in tongue and mind. At the conclusion of the "whirlwind" speech, Mr. Zuss behaves precisely according to the formula laid down by

Jung. He is upset by the realization that J. B., by not answering him back, has won a moral victory over him. He "chokes" as he reports:

Then he *calmed* me!  
Gentled me the way a farmhand  
Gentles a bulging, bugling bull!  
Forgave me! . . .  
  for the world! . . .  
  for everything!

Although his complacency has been disturbed, the shock to his ego, however, does not produce any genuine illumination, and he leaves the stage discomfited but no wiser than before.

If MacLeish shows little sympathy for the purblind Mr. Zuss, he does not side with the intelligent Nickles either, even though he treats him much more sympathetically. That Nickles, with his painful honesty, sees the world as it is he certainly is willing to admit. The "little song" which Nickles sings to himself at various times represents something of MacLeish's own summing up of man's situation in the universe:

I heard upon his dry dung heap  
That man cry out who cannot sleep:  
"If God is God He is not good,  
If God is good He is not God;  
Take the even, take the odd,  
I would not sleep here if I could . . ."

All the same, MacLeish rejects Nickles the Uncreator and the Non-Sayer. If the beautiful blank face of the God-mask is blind, the Satan-mask in which the mouth "*is drawn down in agonized disgust*" and the eyes "*though wrinkled with laughter, seem to stare*" is not receptive enough to discern final truth. Nickles, after Mr. Zuss has gone on his way, approaches J. B. and offers his friendship. He makes no impression. J. B.'s gaze is fixed in another direction, and Nickles is forced to follow Mr. Zuss off the stage so that J. B. can receive the revelation which MacLeish has in store for him—and for us!

The Gospel according to MacLeish is proclaimed when both God and the Devil are forgotten and when the credulous faith of the believer and the cynicism of the unbeliever alike are put away as childish things. These good tidings of great joy which give *J. B.* a happy ending arrive (could one have guessed it?) *via* Mrs. J. B. That lady has decided to leave her husband to enjoy his sorrows and his sores by himself and to end it all. But she finds a sprig of forsythia blossom among the

ashes of a dead world (maybe the whirlwind was The Bomb!) and thoughts of suicide vanish. She then quickly persuades J. B. to think about themselves rather than about God. They are supposed to be alone together when he breathes the single word, "Sarah!" and, following the stage-direction, *drops on his knees beside her in the doorway, his arms around her*. But surely they cannot be quite alone. There must be soft background music filtering in from Hollywood, and a publicity man somewhere around composing the banner headline: HE WANTED TO TALK RELIGION BUT SHE KNEW WHAT HE NEEDED WAS LOVE.

It is, of course, most unfair to suggest that MacLeish turns his back on the Jewish-Christian understanding of existence merely to capitulate to the slogans of Hollywood at their crudest. Yet it remains true that the values which he champions are those which Hollywood has taken over and popularized: the values of romantic humanism. In this philosophy of life the maxim of classical humanism, "Nothing in excess", is accepted and combined with the romantic maxim, "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom". In other words, romantic humanism believes that prudence dictates the ordinary decisions of living. One should be just, courteous, temperate, and unselfish in one's dealings so far as circumstances permit. But romantic humanism does not believe (as does classical humanism) that the necessity for virtue is built into the very scheme of things, or that to deny justice and temperance is to deny one's own nature. It believes instead that feeling is the final court of appeal; and therefore it believes that in the last resort there is no justice, and that temperance can be a denial of life and not a rule for living if it happens to conflict with the heart's desire. In particular, it believes that the longing for aesthetic and for erotic satisfaction represents the highest peaks of human feeling. Only through achieving our desires in those directions can we win through to a truly human wisdom that is almost divine.

A friend of mine remarked that *J. B.* reminded him strongly of Arnold's poem "Dover Beach", and certainly the parallel is very close. In "Dover Beach" Arnold affirms that the Sea of Faith has ebbed, allowing mankind to see that the world has "really neither joy, nor love, nor light,/Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain". Without religious faith, we see life as it is. He concludes that the meaninglessness of all things only makes the human *eros* the more valuable. One thing alone is needful: "Ah, love, let us be true/To one another". In exactly the same tones, MacLeish's propheticess, Mrs. J. B., proclaims the primacy of the feeling-element:

Blow on the coal of the heart.  
The candles in churches are out.

The lights have gone out in the sky.  
Blow on the coal of the heart  
And we'll see by and by . . .

The universe carries no meaning, religion has lost its power . . . but the road of excess (*fan the heart's fire—it can't blaze too brightly!*) will surely lead to the palace of wisdom. In short, MacLeish teaches what Arnold once taught: that faith and hope do not abide at all but that human love compensates for their loss. If man has anything to live for it is, as Arnold suggested in his poem "The Buried Life",

When a beloved hand is laid in ours  
A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast,  
And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again.

Neither reason nor faith holds the key to life. That is found nowhere except in *feeling*. So long as we find some desire strong enough to make us want to live, understanding can wait—we'll see by and by.

Romantic humanism is far from being an unworthy philosophy of life. In Arnold, who was one of its best advocates, it carried a note at once tender and heroic, and MacLeish is clearly in the Arnold tradition. The difficulty about it is that it must somehow keep a strong element of humanism in it if it is not to degenerate either into maudlin sentimentality or else into an amoral romanticism which is ready to destroy a universe in order to indulge a passing whim. "All for Love or the World Well Lost" is sometimes a possible slogan to adopt—provided that the worth of the world *per se* is fully recognized. Unfortunately, because it rejects meaning outside the domain of feeling, romantic humanism finds no way of preserving humanistic values intact and thus of perpetuating itself. Left to its own devices, the pulse of feeling is apt to stir when stimulated by something quite trivial and perhaps thoroughly vicious. The coal of the heart, when blown upon, may well produce mainly blinding smoke and noxious fumes. So, without the undergirding virtues of classical humanism to keep it intact, romantic humanism inevitably dissolves into antinomianism. For Arnold, whose training in the Christian-Classical tradition conditioned his entire outlook, it was inconceivable that emotion, however important on its own account, should not be controlled by morality. For twentieth-century man living in a post-Christian and a post-Classical environment, Arnold's certainties no longer hold. Instructed by psycho-analytic theory and by the frightening lessons of modern history, we are not so easily persuaded that the recipe for the good life is to dismiss the universe and say, "Ah, love, let us be true . . ." By the same token,

we are not likely to be entirely convinced that the problems raised in the Book of Job are adequately dealt with in the Gospel according to MacLeish as this is expounded in *J. B.*

I am writing a note upon *J. B.* and not attempting a treatise entitled *Answer to Mrs. J. B.*, so I can do no more than indicate two places where it seems to me that MacLeish's treatment of the story of Job as a tract for the times is unsatisfactory. The first has to do with the figure of Nickles.

In order to be an effective Devil's Advocate the character who wears the Satan-mask ought to represent the sceptical voice in contemporary thought—a loud enough voice in all conscience! Yet Nickles is simply an old-fashioned atheist railing against the notion of Providence. He has hardly anything in common with the atheistic existentialist, who takes for granted the meaninglessness of human life and does not waste his time disproving religion. MacLeish strains his language in an effort to reproduce the accent of present-day disgust with life, but the result is anything but convincing. Lines such as these:

Job won't take it! Job won't touch it!  
 Job will fling it in God's face  
 With half his guts to make it spatter!  
 He'd rather suffocate in dung —  
 Choke in ordure —

have nothing in common with the *nausea* of Sartre; instead, they suggest Thomas Hardy gone berserk. And the ending of Nickles's "little song" reveals how he is actually, under his cynic's cloak, a romantic at heart. He sings of the man on the dry dung heap who confesses,

"I would not sleep here if I could  
 Except for the little green leaves in the wood  
 And the wind on the water."

Any one who is comforted by ripples on water and green leaves is not really seeing the universe in terms of guts and dung. One has the feeling that, had Nickles stayed a moment longer and seen Mrs. J. B. holding the forsythia blossom, he would have burst into tears and promised to be god-father to the next little Job.

The second deficiency in MacLeish's handling of the story is much more important. This is his entire failure to grapple with the *religious* significance of Job's conduct under his sufferings, and it involves emptying the character of the central actor in the plot of all the positive content which it has in the biblical account. I have already remarked how rapidly *J. B.* gives up his concern about God when Mrs.

J. B. suggests that it is love which makes the world go round. And this is possible because MacLeish has made Job into an entirely passive character who simply lets things happen to him, much to the very natural disgust of every one around. As he stands for nothing, Mrs. J. B. has only to wait for the psychological moment in order to convert him to her way of thinking. She, at least, has the courage of her romantic convictions. Of course, it must be admitted that J. B. has, before this, a victory of sorts to his credit. By sheer refusal to get angry or rebel against his fate he has awakened a trace of self-criticism in Mr. Zuss. But this is a purely negative victory. Simply by the act of sitting still he has aroused in some one else a sense of the limitations of mere activity. When action on his own part is required, however, he has nothing to offer, making his move at last simply as a response to the decision made by his Sarah. He is the epitome of uncomplaining patience—and of nothing else whatever.

Now the whole point of the Book of Job is that Job is a complainer of the first magnitude who haunts the Complaints Department of the universe and will not go away until he has had his case looked into by the head of the firm in person. MacLeish seems to have been misled into casting Job in the role of patience-on-a-monument through ignoring the biblical Job and accepting the Job of popular legend who has been created by a naive reliance upon a few phrases from the King James Version. "Ye have heard of the patience of Job", says a familiar text from the Epistle of James. But this "patience" is the fortitude of a martyr in the face of death, and the Revised Standard Version translates it, more adequately, as "Steadfastness". In all his troubles, Job refused to believe that God was unjust, as he refused to believe that he, Job, was being punished for his sins. In this he was most obstinately steadfast, yet he was (as we should say) most impatient about it! Then there is the monumental mistranslation in the King James Version: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him", which turns up in *J. B.* emphasized by stage directions requiring silence before and after the line. In the Book of Job the context makes clear that Job is not saying, "I will be faithful whatever happens", but rather "I will prove my point even if I must die in the process". The R.S.V. translation reads as follows:

Let me have silence, and I will speak,  
 and let come on me what may.  
 I will take my flesh in my teeth,  
 and put my life in my hand.  
 Behold he will slay me; I have no hope;  
 Yet I will defend my ways to his face.  
 . . . . .  
 Behold I have prepared my case;  
 I know that I shall be vindicated.

Any resemblance between the angry, active, talkative Job who is utterly convinced of his innocence and the J. B. who says "I have no choice but to be guilty" is only coincidental, as they put it in the disclaimer notices printed in the front of novels. Job could never have even imagined himself speaking as J. B. does when he complains rather petulantly,

What I *can't* bear is the blindness —  
Meaninglessness — the numb blow  
Fallen in the stumbling night.

Job's complaints are of another order. He does cry out that God has made him afraid and hemmed him in with darkness. Yet he stays on his feet in the darkness. His three friends fail to trip him up and finally run out of words in their attempts to drive him into a corner, *because he was righteous in his own eyes*. In other words, J. B. lacks Job's basic convictions and therefore does not know Job's problem. For that reason he is soon converted to Mrs. J. B.'s faith that God is a luxury in a world where the sole joy, light, certitude, peace, and help for pain comes from human love. Job, on the other hand, is not concerned to discover how life can be made bearable. He is concerned to know how he stands in relationship to a living God when life is unbearable and yet must be endured.

MacLeish may be right in thinking that J. B., rather than Job, portrays the hopes and fears of modern man. Is he right in thinking that a re-publication of the romantic humanism of Matthew Arnold is the Gospel which our age is waiting to hear proclaimed and will willingly embrace? If the preoccupation of such writers as Camus and Faulkner with the problem of evil and responsibility indicates anything, perhaps it indicates that there are questions being asked at the present time which cannot be brushed aside by saying, "Ah, love, let us be true . . .!" This is not to suggest that the questions now occupying men's minds are the same as Job's. Rather, these questions drive toward the same area and focus on that issue which Job knew as *righteousness*. Neither the little green leaves in the wood nor the touch of a beloved hand can stop these questions being asked, for we know in our bones that beauty and love cannot be cultivated in isolation from the whole of our existence. Good and evil—God and Satan—have to be striven with in every generation. In so far as it ignores this stubborn fact, the romantic humanism of J. B. fails to come to grips with the religious realism of the Book of Job.