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About The American Century Theater

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, but overlooked American plays of the twentieth century . . . what Henry Luce called “the American Century.”

The company’s mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to surrender our moorings to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all Americans, of all ages, origins and points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These audience guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.

The American Century Theater is a 501(c)(3) professional nonprofit theater company dedicated to producing significant 20th Century American plays and musicals at risk of being forgotten.

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The Playwright: Archibald MacLeish (1892–1982)

Archibald MacLeish was not really a playwright but a poet who combined poetry with social consciousness to create plays, which he knew had far more impact, not to mention popularity, than poetry alone. MacLeish believed that impact was vital.

Born in 1892, he was the son of Andrew MacLeish, a successful merchant in Glencoe, Illinois, and more importantly from an influence perspective, Martha Hillard, a college professor. It was she who nurtured Archibald’s intense sense of social responsibility and civic involvement.

He majored in English at Yale, then entered Harvard Law School in 1915. By the end of 1916 he was married and on his way to a family of five. MacLeish’s first volume of poetry, *Tower of Ivory*, appeared late in 1917 as he left the States to serve in the Army during World War I. After the war, he returned to Harvard Law School and graduated first in the class of 1919. Eschewing teaching, MacLeish chose to take a job as an editor for the *New Republic*. Next he joined the prestigious Boston law firm of Choate, Hall and Stewart, but the Muses beckoned: law interfered with his poetry, which was now a passion. He quit the firm when he was offered a partnership, choosing to reject the well-worn road for Robert Frost’s road less travelled—the life of a poet.

He and his wife headed to Paris where artists flourished; she was an artist, too—a singer. The MacLeishes became card-carrying members of the famous expatriate literary community of the era, along with James Joyce, E. E. Cummings, John Dos Passos, the Fitzgeralds, and Ernest Hemingway. In Paris he wrote many of the poems—“Ars Poetica,” “The End of the World,” “Eleven,” and “Not Marble Nor the Gilded Monuments” among them—that established his reputation as a major and rising literary talent. (His wife was less successful.)
When the MacLeishes returned to the United States in 1928, they bought a farm in Conway, in the Massachusetts countryside. Archibald MacLeish worked for *Fortune* magazine, writing and publishing poetry all the while, as well as essays and, for the first time, plays. MacLeish rejected the fashionable image of the poet as alienated from society and advocated an activist role, especially in a cauldron of social and political upheaval like the 1930s. He referred to poetry as “public speech,” and his poetry filled MacLeish’s stage and radio plays like *Panic, The Fall of the City*, and *Air Raid*.

MacLeish’s political and philosophical ideas evolved from work to work; he used his art to explore the questions and inconsistencies in his own mind, though his apparent certitude in each work was unsettling to readers who recalled that he had not always taken the same position, even in recent times. Ultimately, MacLeish came to preach a gentle social consciousness that opposed fascism and communism and was leery of the excesses of American capitalism. MacLeish believed that Americans were adrift, and that poetry, especially his poetry, could provide a unifying cultural vision.

MacLeish found himself in a high-profile controversy in 1939 when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt nominated him during his second term to be librarian to the Library of Congress. MacLeish had no experience as a librarian, but FDR wanted him for his progressive political views. He was ultimately confirmed by Congress, and as is often the case when a fresh and unbiased mind takes over an institution, proved to be one of the most successful and deft leaders the Library of Congress ever had, greatly improving its collection and professionalizing its staff. Most important of all for his patron, President Roosevelt, MacLeish also provided support for the New Deal, writing some of FDR’s most uplifting speeches. America has “the abundant means,” MacLeish wrote in one, to create “whatever world we have the courage to desire,” and the ability to “take this country down” and “build it again as we please,” to “take our cities apart and put them together,” and to lead our “rivers where we please to lead them.”

MacLeish resigned from the Library in 1944 but Roosevelt wouldn’t let him go back to writing poetry. The President appointed him Assistant Secretary
of State for Cultural and Public Affairs. After the war and Roosevelt’s death, he served as assistant head of the U.S. delegation to UNESCO. Only after that did he return to private life—and published his first book of poetry since 1939.

In 1948’s “Actfive and Other Poems,” MacLeish abandoned his progressive rhetoric and sounded disillusioned with politics, writing that despite the failure of the state, science, industry, heroes, and the mob, “The heart persists. The love survives.” There remains the impulse to be “beautiful and brave,” “dutiful and good.”

From 1949 to his retirement in 1962, MacLeish became the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard, teaching a seminar in creative writing and giving a lecture course in poetry. During the Fifties he was awarded his second Pulitzer Prize and re-entered the political wars, fighting McCarthyism in essays, poems, the play The Trojan Horse (broadcast and published in 1952) and by supporting those persecuted by Senator Joseph R. McCarthy. In 1958 he published J.B., earning his third Pulitzer. It was and remained his greatest popular success.

After his retirement from Harvard in 1962, MacLeish continued to write poetry, lyrics, essay and plays. His play Herakles (1967), a warning of the perils of science, is excellent. In 1972, at the age of 80, he penned an important essay in The American Scholar describing his philosophy on libraries and librarianship. He wrote, “If books are reports on the mysteries of the world and our existence in it, libraries remain reporting on the human mind, that particular mystery, still remains as countries lose their grandeur and universities are not certain what they are.”

Archibald MacLeish died in Boston a decade later at the age of 90. He was a poet who used poetry to inspire, to teach, and to change minds, hearts and a nation, and a rare librarian whose influence extended far beyond the book stacks, to the outside world. And he gave the stage J.B.

His was a remarkable life by any measure.
Job asks “Why?” But no satisfactory answer to his question emerges—not from the confrontation with the three comforters, nor from the arguments of Elihu, nor from the framing device of Satan’s wager, nor even from the voice in the whirlwind. In all his glory God appears to Job, who, abhorring himself, repents in dust and ashes. The beauty and the power of the biblical story of Job depend finally not on reasoned answers but rather on an act of faith.

In like manner the verse drama J. B.—Archibald MacLeish’s modern retelling of the Job story—seeks not rationally comprehensible solutions but rather an artistic evocation of this “leap of faith.” In the process of writing his play, MacLeish achieved aesthetic complexity only after a struggle to move beyond solution-seeking. In this evolution, not only did his play improve in dialogue, imagery, and timing; more significantly, its artistic vision widened. Changes in elements such as setting, character, and plot resulted in the transformation of a limited, bitter satire into a larger, poetic statement about the human condition.

The shaping of this poetic statement was a slow and difficult process. MacLeish began working with J. B.’s central visual image—the circus-tent world and the infinite sky—in an early poem, “The End of the World.” The first stanza of this poem describes a dynamic, colorful circus world which comes to a halt when the big top blows off unexpectedly. All turn to see what lies beyond. The second stanza, one long sentence, propels us toward
the culminating lines of the poem to learn what the people see: “There in the sudden blackness of the black pall/Of nothing, nothing, nothing—nothing at all.” Thirty-two years passed before MacLeish replaced this vision of “nothing at all” with Sarah’s injunction to see by love in the dim light of J.B.’s last scene:

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 . . . .

J. B. underwent several “visions and revisions” before reaching its final form. MacLeish began it in 1953 as a one-act drama for BBC production, but by 1956 the still unfinished J. B. had already undergone three drafts to become a three-act play with acted prologue. Not until two years later was the play ready for performance. It premiered at Yale University on May 1, 1958 and was performed again that summer at the World’s Fair in Brussels. MacLeish then rewrote the play and served as consultant for its Broadway production, directed by Elia Kazan. The result was the present J. B., a play which by January 1959 was being acclaimed a “smash success.”

I

An intriguing thing about this “smash success” is that reviewers could not agree on what the play meant. In the Saturday Review, John Ciardi saw the Yale production as a human triumph (March 8, 1958, p. 48), while Henry Hewes argued that the play was a pageantry lacking any real humanity (May 10, 1958, p. 22). Christian Century reviewers also disagreed: Samuel Terrien thought that J. B. presented “modern man’s reaction to the problem of evil without the category of faith in a loving God” (January 7, 1959, p. 9); Tom F. Driver found the play afflicted with “a sort of theological schizophrenia,” divided between its religious and humanistic dimensions (January 7, 1959, p. 22); and Henry P. Van Dusen found the protagonist of J.B. more convincing, more moving than the biblical Job (January 28, 1959, p. 107). Such critical diversity is not surprising given the ambiguity within the play itself. Since the play proposes no logically convincing answers,
members of the audience must either come away from the play in doubt or make their own leap of faith. Unfortunately, many viewers who did make the leap also tried to impose their beliefs upon the play—and then criticized *J.B.* for not sustaining their interpretation.

An instructive way of understanding the play’s hard-earned aesthetic complexity which so plagued the reviewers is to compare an earlier manuscript version (held by the Lilly Library, Indiana University) with the later published play (Houghton Mifflin, 1958). The first things that strike the reader in such a comparison are the slight but important changes in the setting. The manuscript version gives an extensive and detailed description of the setting and its significance. As the audience enters the theater, the stage is dimly lit, revealing a few circus hands cleaning up. On the stage are two circus rings—Job’s house and Satan’s arena. A railed platform represents heaven, with a perch to mark that part of heaven to which only God can climb. Scattered about the stage are clown costumes, while the backdrop suggests a circus tent bedecked with colorful signs of the zodiac. Into this scene come Mr. Zuss and Nickles, who will play-act the parts of God and Satan.

In the later published play, the scene is less specific, more universal. The significance of the platform, stage, deal table, and seven chairs is left up to the director and the audience to determine. The clothing lying about has “the look of vestments of many churches and times.” The tent is a simple and unobtrusive, if not tattered, canvas. The circus hands are absent. The play’s tone and atmosphere—rather than being confined to a circus performance—are more generalized and familiar, as the stage directions explain: “The feel is of a public place at late night, the audience gone, no one about but maybe a stagehand somewhere cleaning up, fooling with the lights.” The resulting increase in objectivity not only makes it easier for the audience to identify with the action; it also leaves interpretation of that action open. Mr. Zuss’s performance may invite us to see the platform as “heaven,” but the play does not insist solely on that view.
II

Into this more universal setting MacLeish puts less obtrusive and more human characters than those he had initially created. In the manuscript, Mr. Zuss is an old and pompous actor with a resonant voice. Nickles is a gaunt, sardonic youth with a cracked, harsh voice. While these two characters who frame the main action seldom agree with each other, both men repeatedly interrupt the scenes involving J.B. They discuss him while he discusses Thanksgiving with his family. Like a stage manager, Nickles dresses and prompts the soldiers and reporters for their roles as messengers of death. Indeed, he himself acts as J.B.’s butler, admitting the soldiers who will report the first loss—the death of J.B.’s son. Mr. Zuss also directs the action, beating a dull and ominous thud on the drum before the announcement of each disaster. Moreover, it is to Mr. Zuss on his perch that Sarah looks after the reports of the first and second losses. A spotlight follows her gaze to reveal Mr. Zuss stepping back—as though to avoid her eyes—and raising his Godmask, as though to hide behind it. The masks themselves further isolate the God and Satan of the wager from the human level of the action. They are oblivious of J. B.’s suffering. When Mr. Zuss raises the Godmask, it appears to go as blank as the moon in a hard glare. It is the mask of a God of cold, impersonal force with blind eyes and a face of stone. These massive mask figures upstage not only J. B. in his suffering, but even Mr. Zuss and Nickles themselves. The human beings are engulfed by the roles they play: the allegory consumes the humanity.

In the revised play, Mr. Zuss and Nickles are both old men who “betray in carriage and speech the broken-down actor fallen on evil days but nevertheless and always actor.” They are contemporaries in age and experience. Unlike the earlier characters, the pair can’t be misread as the man of faith opposing the man of despair, as age and experience posed against youth and naïveté, or as the quarrel of traditional beliefs with modern mores. Nor can the questions which arise from their wager be reduced to social issues. The equality of these two later characters frees the audience to judge for itself between their positions.
Just as the roles of Mr. Zuss and Nickles are made more balanced, they are also made more human. They no longer direct the action. They may play at being God and Satan, but we are always aware of them as broken-down actors playing. They speak between J. B.’s scenes, not during them. Nickles no longer prompts the messengers. The first two drumbeats are offstage, while the stage directions for the third leave it unclear whether Mr. Zuss actually strikes the drum or whether the sound comes from offstage as the light fades. Neither Sarah nor the spotlight looks toward Mr. Zuss after the losses. Thus he does not need to step back or hide behind an impersonal Godmask.

These changes result in the greater importance of J. B. As a character suffering his losses, J. B. attracts our attention and sympathy in a way that J. B. as a puppet of the gods never could. Moreover, the suffering of the later J. B. is inexplicable, not the easily dismissed consequence of a wager as in the first version. We are, like Job, uncomforted before the contingencies of the human condition. The changes in the roles of Mr. Zuss and Nickles turn them into persons who under other conditions might themselves have Job’s role to play. Even as they fumble for their masks of God and Satan, they, too, hear a “Distant Voice” anticipating their own lines (Job 2:3), and they respond to the voice:

Nickles: Who said that?
Silence.
Mr. Zuss: They want us to go on.
Nickles: Why don’t you?
Mr. Zuss: He was asking you.
Nickles: Who was?
Mr. Zuss: He was.
Nickles: Prompter probably. Prompter somewhere.
Your lines he was reading weren’t they?
Mr. Zuss: Yes but . . . .
Nickles: shouting Anybody there?
Silence.
Mr. Zuss: They want us to go on. I told you.
Nickles: Yes. They want us to go on . . . .
I don’t like it.

This mysterious voice serves as a reminder to us that we too are in a play under another’s control. We too might one day have Job’s role to play. And as a result, suddenly that role takes on larger dimensions for us. We are personally implicated in the suffering and challenged by the subsequent leap of faith—rather than being concerned merely with the intellectual interpretations others place upon that suffering and faith.

MacLeish’s efforts to focus upon J. B.’s role lead to changes in the roles of even the minor characters. For example, in the manuscript the women pity J. B.; they go to him and invite him to join them. Although J. B. in his agony does not see or hear them, they sit in a circle about him shielding him from the night. Indeed, they are to remain in this circle throughout intermission. In the published version of the play, on the other hand, they enter later, say less, and make no attempt to mitigate his suffering. J. B. remains alone, unspoken to, unshielded. No human kindness reduces his suffering; no human intervention diverts the man’s desire to know why he suffers. The central question of the play remains uncluttered.

III

MacLeish’s revisions of the final scenes provide perhaps the clearest examples of his changing attitude toward the role of J. B. and the nature of the play. In the earliest version, J. B.’s repentance is portrayed as defeat and humiliation. J. B. sees himself as nothing and therefore as unworthy of receiving answers. He utters the biblical line “Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent” (Job 42:6) and sinks to his knees. Unsatisfied with this version, MacLeish corrected the manuscript by hand to give J. B. a triumph even in repentance. Although in the depths of abnegation he sees himself as nothing, J. B. finds freedom in acceptance of this condition. After reciting Job’s confession, this second J. B. slowly raises his head and squares his shoulders.

In the published play MacLeish uses neither of these responses. Instead, J. B. utters his line and the light fades out, relieving him of the necessity to act
in either manner. The audience must decide if J. B.’s repentance is a Victory or a defeat. Not even Mr. Zuss and Nickles know for sure whether J. B. has been ennobled or crushed: Nickles sees submission; Zuss, defiance.

Nickles: He misconceived the part entirely.
Mr. Zuss: Misconceived the world! Buggered it!
Nickles: Giving in like that! Whimpering!
Mr. Zuss: Giving in! You call that arrogant,
Smiling, supercilious humility
Giving in to God?

After their debate Mr. Zuss informs Nickles that the play is not over—God restores J.B. at the end. Nickles, snorting, refuses to believe that J. B. could start over again. He then tries to persuade J. B. to reject God’s offer, but J.B. ignores this advice. At this point the two versions again differ. In the original Mr. Zuss also tries to win J. B. to his viewpoint and receives a similar rebuff. In the published play, however, Mr. Zuss is spared the indignity of pleading his cause and, by implication, God is also spared the indignity of justifying his ways to man. Moreover, God’s position is not defined in the limited terms of the early Zuss’s proposal. In the closing scene, J. B. accepts his wife Sarah in what may well be also an acceptance of God—the human affirmation of divine love. As MacLeish said in the playbill for the Yale production: “It is in man’s love that God exists and triumphs; in man’s love that life is beautiful; in man’s love that the world’s injustice is resolved” (as quoted by Tom F. Driver, “Clean Miss,” The Christian Century (June 11, 1958), p. 693).

This acceptance of Sarah differs greatly in the two versions of the drama. In the original, J. B.’s initial response to her is harsh and bitter. He demands to know what she wants. He then launches into a diatribe reciting his interview with God. He had sought reasons a man could live with: God had had no reasons, only wonders and omnipotence. In the middle of his harangue, J. B. suddenly stops and asks Sarah why she has returned. She says that she has done so for love, but J. B. mocks the idea of love in a world where one must lose what one loves most. During J. B.’s speech, Sarah begins to restore order. When she picks up an unlit lantern, J. B. tells her to use her love to
light it. Then he himself lights the lantern, Sarah leans her head on his shoulder, and a warm, intimate, human light fills the room. Sarah suggests that love will yield understanding. J. B. takes her in his arms, but he cannot accept her suggestion. He says that man can never understand: he exists and that is all. He can suffer and because he suffers, love; because he loves, suffer. But it is in ignorance that human beings still must live.

In the published play, J. B. is not the bitter and defiant man who resents his position and almost rejects Sarah and love. When he finds her sitting on his doorstep, J. B. exclaims “Sarah!” and tells her “roughly” to “Get up!” Although he starts to make her leave, J. B. reconsiders and asks “more gently” where she has been. Sarah describes the “mountains of ashes” that are the world now and tells J. B. why she had deserted him: He had wanted justice in the world and she could offer only love. She thought she knew an answer:

I thought there was a way away . . .
Water under bridges opens
Closing and the companion stars
Still float there afterwards. I thought the door
Opened into closing water.

Overcome at this suggestion, J. B. drops “on his knees beside her in the doorway, his arms around her.” Sarah reveals that her love for life was too strong to let her find her way away: “Even the forsythia beside the/Stair could stop me.” Together J. B. and Sarah rise and look into the darkness of their home. J. B. remarks that it is too dark to see. It is Sarah who replies that one must trust in love to see, for love is “all the light now”:

Blow on the coal of the heart and we’ll know . . .
We’ll know. . .

Rather than insisting that J. B.’s repentance and acceptance of life is some third possibility opposing those offered by the Godmask and Satanmask, the new ending leaves our interpretation of his actions open. By reducing J. B.’s bitter defiance and by eliminating his comments about his interview with the whirlwind, MacLeish has successfully avoided dictating to us the nature of J.
B.’s repentance and the adequacy of God’s answers. By letting Sarah propose love as a reason to begin again, MacLeish is able to leave J. B.’s own reasons ambiguous or at least unarticulated. We no longer have J. B. talking of the human tendency to start again in blind ignorance. J. B. suffers, questions, repents, and begins again through love. This human love may or may not be an attribute of divine love. His repentance may or may not be a victory. His questions may or may not be sufficiently answered. The play does not seek to solve these issues. Rather, it seeks to embody them in dramatic art.

MacLeish’s changes between the manuscript and published form of J. B. move the play from specifics to the universal, from the allegorical to the human, from mediated to unmitigated suffering, from imposed rationalizations to the dramatic action which is left to speak for itself. Not only do these changes help to define J.B.’s suffering and repenting as the central images of the play, but they also effectively hide MacLeish’s own interpretations of these images. The critics who look to the play for answers will be disappointed. J. B.’s aesthetic ambiguity evokes in us Job’s question “Why?” and demands that our own leap of faith supply the answer.

From The Book of Job

1:1 There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil. 1:2 And there were born unto him seven sons and three daughters. 1:3 His substance also was seven thousand sheep, and three thousand camels, and five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she asses, and a very great household; so that this man was the greatest of all the men of the east. …

1:6 Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them. 1:7 And the LORD said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the LORD, and
said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.  
1:8 And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? 1:9 Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, Doth Job fear God for nought? 1:10 Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. 1:11 But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face. 1:12 And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD.

1:13 And there was a day when his sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother’s house: 1:14 And there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them: 1:15 And the Sabeans fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. 1:16 While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. 1:17 While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. 1:18 While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother’s house: 1:19 And behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. 1:20 Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, 1:21 And said, Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD. 1:22 In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly…

2:3 And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one
that feareth God, and escheweth evil? and still he holdeth fast his integrity, although thou movest me against him, to destroy him without cause. 2:4 And Satan answered the LORD, and said, Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life. 2:5 But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face. 2:6 And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, he is in thine hand; but save his life.

2:7 So went Satan forth from the presence of the LORD, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown. 2:8 And he took him a potsherd to scrape himself withal; and he sat down among the ashes.

2:9 Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die. 2:10 But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips.

2:11 Now when Job’s three friends heard of all this evil that was come upon him, they came every one from his own place…

2:13 So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great.

3:1 After this opened Job his mouth, and cursed his day. 3:2 And Job spake, and said, 3:3 Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived. 3:4 Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it. 3:5 Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it; let a cloud dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it. 3:6 As for that night, let darkness seize upon it; let it not be joined unto the days of the year, let it not come into the number of the months. 3:7 Lo, let that night be solitary, let no joyful voice come therein. 3:8 Let them curse it that curse the day, who are ready to raise up their mourning. 3:9 Let the stars of the twilight thereof be dark; let it look for light, but have none; neither let it see the dawning of the day: 3:10 Because it shut not up the doors of my mother’s womb, nor hid sorrow from mine eyes. 3:11 Why died I not from the womb? why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly? 3:12 Why did the knees prevent me? or why the breasts that I should suck? 3:13 For now should I have lain still and
been quiet, I should have slept: then had I been at rest, 3:14 With kings and counsellors of the earth, which built desolate places for themselves; 3:15 Or with princes that had gold, who filled their houses with silver: 3:16 Or as an hidden untimely birth I had not been; as infants which never saw light. 3:17 There the wicked cease from troubling; and there the weary be at rest. 3:18 There the prisoners rest together; they hear not the voice of the oppressor. 3:19 The small and great are there; and the servant is free from his master. 3:20 Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, and life unto the bitter in soul; 3:21 Which long for death, but it cometh not; and dig for it more than for hid treasures; 3:22 Which rejoice exceedingly, and are glad, when they can find the grave? 3:23 Why is light given to a man whose way is hid, and whom God hath hedged in? 3:24 For my sighing cometh before I eat, and my roarings are poured out like the waters. 3:25 For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me. 3:26 I was not in safety, neither had I rest, neither was I quiet; yet trouble came.

4:1 Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said, 4:2 If we assay to commune with thee, wilt thou be grieved? but who can withhold himself from speaking? 4:3 Behold, thou hast instructed many, and thou hast strengthened the weak hands. 4:4 Thy words have upholden him that was falling, and thou hast strengthened the feeble knees. 4:5 But now it is come upon thee, and thou faintest; it toucheth thee, and thou art troubled. 4:6 Is not this thy fear, thy confidence, thy hope, and the uprightness of thy ways? 4:7 Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished, being innocent? or where were the righteous cut off? 4:8 Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same. 4:9 By the blast of God they perish, and by the breath of his nostrils are they consumed. 4:10 The roaring of the lion, and the voice of the fierce lion, and the teeth of the young lions, are broken. 4:11 The old lion perisheth for lack of prey, and the stout lion’s whelps are scattered abroad. 4:12 Now a thing was secretly brought to me, and mine ear received a little thereof. 4:13 In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth on men, 4:14 Fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake. 4:15 Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up: 4:16 It stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof: an image was before mine eyes, there was silence, and I heard a voice, saying, 4:17 Shall mortal man be more just than God? shall a man be
more pure than his maker? 4:18 Behold, he put no trust in his servants; and his angels he charged with folly: 4:19 How much less in them that dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, which are crushed before the moth? 4:20 They are destroyed from morning to evening: they perish for ever without any regarding it. 4:21 Doth not their excellency which is in them go away? They die, even without wisdom.

5:1 Call now, if there be any that will answer thee; and to which of the saints wilt thou turn? 5:2 For wrath killeth the foolish man, and envy slayeth the silly one. 5:3 I have seen the foolish taking root: but suddenly I cursed his habitation. 5:4 His children are far from safety, and they are crushed in the gate, neither is there any to deliver them. 5:5 Whose harvest the hungry eateth up, and taketh it even out of the thorns, and the robber swalloweth up their substance. 5:6 Although affliction cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground; 5:7 Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward. 5:8 I would seek unto God, and unto God would I commit my cause: 5:9 Which doeth great things and unsearchable, marvellous things without number: 5:10 Who giveth rain upon the earth, and sendeth waters upon the fields: 5:11 To set up on high those that be low; that those which mourn may be exalted to safety. 5:12 He disappointeth the devices of the crafty, so that the hands cannot perform their enterprise.

5:13 He taketh the wise in their own craftiness: and the counsel of the froward is carried headlong. 5:14 They meet with darkness in the daytime, and grope in the noonday as in the night. 5:15 But he saveth the poor from the sword, from their mouth, and from the hand of the mighty. 5:16 So the poor hath hope, and iniquity stoppeth her mouth. 5:17 Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty: 5:18 For he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth, and his hands make whole. 5:19 He shall deliver thee in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee. 5:20 In famine he shall redeem thee from death: and in war from the power of the sword. 5:21 Thou shalt be hid from the scourge of the tongue: neither shalt thou be afraid of destruction when it cometh. 5:22 At destruction and famine thou shalt laugh: neither shalt thou be afraid of the beasts of the earth. 5:23 For thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee. 5:24 And thou shalt know that thy tabernacle shall be in peace; and thou shalt visit thy habitation, and shalt not sin. 5:25 Thou shalt know also that
thy seed shall be great, and thine offspring as the grass of the earth. 5:26
Thou shalt come to thy grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in
his season. 5:27 Lo this, we have searched it, so it is; hear it, and know
thou it for thy good.

6:1 But Job answered and said, 6:2 O that my grief were throughly weighed,
and my calamity laid in the balances together! 6:3 For now it would be
heavier than the sand of the sea: therefore my words are swallowed up. 6:4
For the arrows of the Almighty are within me, the poison whereof drinketh
up my spirit: the terrors of God do set themselves in array against me. 6:5
Doth the wild ass bray when he hath grass? or loweth the ox over his fodder?
6:6 Can that which is unsavoury be eaten without salt? or is there any
taste in the white of an egg? 6:7 The things that my soul refused to touch are
as my sorrowful meat. 6:8 Oh that I might have my request; and that God
would grant me the thing that I long for! 6:9 Even that it would please God
to destroy me; that he would let loose his hand, and cut me off!

6:10 Then should I yet have comfort; yea, I would harden myself in sorrow:
let him not spare; for I have not concealed the words of the Holy One. 6:11
What is my strength, that I should hope? and what is mine end, that I should
prolong my life? 6:12 Is my strength the strength of stones? or is my flesh of
brass? 6:13 Is not my help in me? and is wisdom driven quite from me? 6:14
To him that is afflicted pity should be shewed from his friend; but he
forsaketh the fear of the Almighty.

6:15 My brethren have dealt deceitfully as a brook, and as the stream of
brooks they pass away; 6:16 Which are blackish by reason of the ice, and
wherein the snow is hid: 6:17 What time they wax warm, they vanish: when
it is hot, they are consumed out of their place. 6:18 The paths of their way
are turned aside; they go to nothing, and perish. 6:19 The troops of Tema
looked, the companies of Sheba waited for them. 6:20 They were
confounded because they had hoped; they came thither, and were ashamed.
6:21 For now ye are no thing; ye see my casting down, and are afraid. 6:22
Did I say, Bring unto me? or, Give a reward for me of your substance? 6:23
Or, Deliver me from the enemy’s hand? or, Redeem me from the hand of the
mighty? 6:24 Teach me, and I will hold my tongue: and cause me to
understand wherein I have erred. 6:25 How forcible are right words! but
what doth your arguing reprove? 6:26 Do ye imagine to reprove words, and the speeches of one that is desperate, which are as wind? 6:27 Yea, ye overwhelm the fatherless, and ye dig a pit for your friend. 6:28 Now therefore be content, look upon me; for it is evident unto you if I lie. 6:29 Return, I pray you, let it not be iniquity; yea, return again, my righteousness is in it. 6:30 Is there iniquity in my tongue? Cannot my taste discern perverse things? …

Archibald MacLeish’s “Ars Poetica”

J.B. is one of the two most famous and celebrated works of Archibald MacLeish. The other is his poem “Ars Poetica.” Written in 1926, it was and is credited with changing the poetry world. Some commentary:

Archibald MacLeish, who like Cummings arrived on the poetic scene after the first imagists had created the new movement, nevertheless can be credited with the poetic summing up of imagism in his “Ars Poetica” in 1926.

The Latin title is borrowed from Horace, who wrote a prose treatise in the first century A.D., the Silver Age of Rome, called “Art of Poetry,” advising poets among other things to be brief and to make their poems lasting. MacLeish wanted to link the classical with the modern in his poetic “treatise” as a way of implying that the standards of good poetry are timeless, that they do not change in essence though actual poems change from age to age and language to language. His succession of opening images are all about the enduring of poetry through time, as concrete as “globed fruit” or ancient coins or stone ledges, and as inspiring to see as a flight of birds or the moon rising in the sky. The statements are not only concrete but paradoxical, for it is impossible that poems should be “mute” or “Dumb” or “Silent” or “wordless,” which would mean that there was no communication in them at all; rather, what MacLeish is stating in his succession of
paradoxical images is that the substance of poetry may be physical but the meaning of poetry is metaphysical: poems are not about the world of sensible objects as much as they are about invisible realities, and so the universal emotions of grief and love can be expressed in words that convey the experience in all its concreteness, yet the words reach into the visionary realm beyond experience, toward which all true images point. The final paradox, that “A poem should not mean but be,” is pure impossibility, but the poet insists it is nevertheless valid, because beyond the meaning of any poem is the being that it points to, which is ageless and permanent, a divine essence or spiritual reality behind all appearances.

—From Singing the Chaos: Madness and Wisdom in Modern Poetry by William Pratt. Copyright © 1996 by the Curators of the University of Missouri.

“Ars Poetica” has been called MacLeish’s ultimate expression of the art-for-art’s-sake tenet. Taken as one statement of his theory, the poem does defy the “hair splitting analysis of modern criticism.” Written in three units of double-line stanzas and in rhyme, it makes the point that a poem is an intimation rather than a full statement, that it should “be motionless in time”; that it has no relation to generalities of truth, historical fact, or love—variations, perhaps, of truth, beauty, and goodness.

—From Archibald MacLeish by Signi Lenea Falk. Copyright © 1965 by Twayne Publishers, Inc.

The poem, as “Ars Poetica: makes clear, captures a human experience, an experience of grief, or of love, or of loneliness, or of memory. Thus a poem becomes a way of knowing, of seeing, albeit through the senses, the emotions, and the imagination. MacLeish often said that the function of a poem is to trap “Heaven and Earth in the cage of form.”

Here is the poem that made Archibald MacLeish famous:

**Ars Poetica**

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A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds

*  
A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,

Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind—

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

*  
A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

A poem should not mean
But be.
The Reverie

In the original production of Archibald MacLeish’s J.B., director Elia Kazan, prompted by MacLeish, who worked with him on the premiere, began the performance with a pre-show “reverie,” which consisted of circus performers presenting routines with Biblical and theological themes, in the midst of circus music and trappings. The pre-show was deemed necessary to lay the groundwork for J.B.’s circus imagery.

This production follows the desires of the playwright and the tradition of the work. Here are three of the components of the Reverie in this production of J.B.

The Touch of the Master’s Hand

—Myra “Brooks” Welch

’Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin,
But held it up with a smile:
“What am I bidden, good folks,” he cried,
“Who’ll start the bidding for me?”
“A dollar, a dollar”; then, “Two!” “Only two?
Two dollars, and who'll make it three?
Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice;
Going for three—” But no,
From the room, far back, a gray-haired man
Came forward and picked up the bow;
Then, wiping the dust from the old violin,
And tightening the loose strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet
As a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer,
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said: “What am I bid for the old violin?”
And he held it up with the bow.
“A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two?
Two thousand! And who'll make it three?
Three thousand, once, three thousand, twice,
And going, and gone,” said he.
The people cheered, but some of them cried,
“We do not quite understand
What changed its worth.” Swift came the reply:
“The touch of a master’s hand.”

And many a man with life out of tune,
And battered and scarred with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd,
Much like the old violin.
A “mess of pottage,” a glass of wine;
A game—and he travels on.
He is “going” once, and “going” twice,
He’s “going” and almost “gone.”
But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd
Never can quite understand
The worth of a soul and the change that’s wrought
By the touch of the Master’s hand.

**Saint Peter at the Gate**

—*Elizabeth E. Harmon*

Saint Peter stood guard at the golden gate
   With solemn mien and air sedate.
   When up to the top of the golden stair
   A man and a woman ascending there.

Applied for admission, they came and stood
   Before Saint Peter, so great and good.
The woman was tall, and lank and lean,
    A little sneer on her lip was seen.

The man was short and thick and stout,
His stomach was built so it rounded out.
His face was pleasant and all the while
He wore a kindly and pleasant smile.

O, thou who guards the gate, said she,
We two came here beseeching thee
    To let us enter the heavenly land
And play our harps with the angel band.

Of me, Saint Peter, there is no doubt,
There is nothing in Heaven to bar me out.
I’ve been to meeting three times a week,
    And almost always I’d rise to speak.

I’ve told the sinners about the day
When they will repent their evil ways.
I’ve shown them what they’d have to do
If they’d pass in with the chosen few.

I’ve talked to them loud and long,
For my lungs are good and my voice is strong.
So, good Saint Peter, you can clearly see
The gate of Heaven is open for me.

But my old man, I regret to say,
Has not walked in exactly the narrow way.
He smokes and swears, and grave faults he’s got,
And I don’t know if he’ll pass or not.

But oh, Saint Peter, I love him so,
To the pleasures of Heaven let him go.
I’ve done enough, a saint I’ve been,
Won’t that atone? Won’t you let him in?

And say, Saint Peter, it seems to me
The gate is not kept as it ought to be.
You should stand by the opening there
And never sit down in that easy chair.

And say, Saint Peter, my sight is dim,
But I don’t like the way your beard is trimmed.
   It is cut too wide, and outward toss,
   It would look better narrow, cut straight across.

Saint Peter sat quiet, and stroked his staff,
But in spite of his office he had to laugh,
Then said, with a fiery gleam in his eye,
   Who is tending this gate, you or I?

Then he arose in his stature tall,
   And pressed a button on the wall.
And said to an imp, who came all aglow,
   Escort this woman to the regions below.

The man stood still as a piece of stone,
   Stood sadly, gloomily there alone.
He thought, if the woman went down below,
   That he would certainly have to go,

   Slowly he turned, by habit bent,
   To follow where ever his good wife went.
Saint Peter was silent, with head bent down,
   He raised his head and scratched his crown.

Thirty years with that woman there?
   No wonder this man has no hair.
Thirty years with that tongue so sharp?
O, angel Gabriel, give him a harp.

They gave him a harp with golden strings,
A glittering robe and a pair of wings,
And he said, as he entered the realms of day,
Well, this beats smoking anyway.

And so, the scriptures had come to pass,
*The last will be first and the first will be last.*

**The Clown’s Prayer**

Author unknown

As I stumble through this life, help me to create more laughter than tears, dispense more cheer than gloom, spread more cheer than despair.

Never let me become so indifferent, that I will fail to see the wonders in the eyes of a child, or the twinkle in the eyes of the aged.

Never let me forget that my total effort is to cheer people, make them happy, and forget momentarily, all the unpleasantness in their lives.

And in my final moment, may I hear You whisper:

“When you made My people smile, you made Me smile.”