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PHILIP BARRY'S HERE COME THE CLOWNS *AND THE QUESTION OF THEODICY*[1]

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Abstract: *Philip Barry is best remembered as a comedy writer, very successful on Broadway. While his serious plays often failed on stage, his comedies enjoyed great popularity among theatre goers. An Irish-American, he was a very religious Catholic and a man preoccupied with a spiritual search. Barry's* Here Come the Clowns *(1938), a serious play with autobiographical overtones, focuses on the problem of free will and of human suffering in the world. It is a dramatization the biblical story of Job, as the protagonist is a man who has been inflicted with physical and emotional suffering. Now he wants to ask God 'Why?', because he cannot find any justification or explanation of his traumatic experiences. The purpose of this paper is to examine how the play responds to the problem of theodicy, a term which may be understood in two ways: as a justification of the existence of evil and suffering in the face of benevolent and powerful God on the one hand, and as an accusation of God who allows evil and suffering, on the other. The discussion is conducted in reference to a claim made by a German philosopher, Odo Marquard, that theodicy is possible only in modernity.*

Almost all American religious plays[2] written in the twentieth century deal with the subject of human suffering and attempts to find some justification or explanation of this suffering. Authors such as Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, Archibald MacLeish,

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[2] The term 'religious drama' is very broad and it is interpreted in different ways by different scholars. It must be noted that dictionaries of literary terms do not generally contain the entries labelled 'religious drama'. I adapted the approach of Thomas Adler, who in an essay "The mystery of things: the varieties of religious experience in modern American drama" suggests a division of religious drama according to four central motifs and issues of plays. Plays of the first type revolve around "the tension between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New and the notion of an evolving deity". Hatcher Hughes's *Hell-Bent for Heaven* (1924) is an example of this type of play. Plays which explore the subject of "reconciling the existence of suffering and evil with the concept of a loving God" belong to the second type; Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* (1958) is such a drama. Plays of the third kind examine the problem of the possibility to "know the Unknowable and the related issue of whether man receives revealed truth through institutionalized religion or personal inspiration"; Maxwell Anderson's *Joan of Lorraine* (1946) is given as an example here. Plays of the fourth type, like Jean-Claude van Itallie's *The Serpent* (1968), explore "the continuing necessity for modern, secular man somehow to satisfy his still undiminished need for worship and ritual".

Maxwell Anderson, T.S. Eliot, or Tennessee Williams, focused in some moments of their careers on the problem of human spiritual or physical pain. This preoccupation with suffering understood as undeserved or unjustified evil seems particularly interesting in the light of a claim made by a German philosopher, Odo Marquard, that theodicy has become possible only in modernity (Marquard 12).[3]

In his essay Marquard quotes the definition of theodicy created by Immanuel Kant, who wrote that "[b]y 'theodicy' we understand the defense of the highest wisdom of the creator against the charge which reason brings against it for whatever is counterpurposive in the world" (Kant 24); Marquard narrows it down claiming that theodicy means "questioning righteous goodness of God in the face of evil in the world which He himself created" (Marquard 11-2). Odo Marquard further explains why theodicy is possible only in the modern times; suffering, he states, has always been a part of human existence; but because it accompanied people every day, theodicy was not possible. If you think how to survive another hour, another day or another year, then a piece of bread, a moment of relief, or getting some sleep are much more important than accusation or defense of God. It is only when man acquires some distance from suffering, that theodicy becomes possible; that is why it is attainable only in modern times. Modernity is the first epoch, Marquard claims, in which helplessness and suffering are not obvious and normal elements of man's existence. Now, for the first time, it has become possible to prevent pain, cure diseases, remove evil, or overcome man's helplessness caused by his own finiteness. And because these evils[4] are no longer permanent parts of human lives, God is less and less needed as a Saviour – now He can be made responsible as the Creator (Marquard 12-3).

The question of theodicy is not, obviously, a modern idea. Among the first philosophers who tried to explain the existence of evil in the face of benevolent and powerful God was ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (Safranski 310-1).[5] He observed that evil is experienced both by the people who are just and unjust, both by the pious and the impious; therefore, if God exists, it seems impossible to find any sense in human misery. This led him to the conclusion that God does not exist. Some discussion concerning

[3] I translate the Polish word 'nowożytność' as 'modernity' or 'modern times'. All translations from Odo Marquard's text are mine, except his one citation from Kant's *Religion and Rational Theology*.

[4] Odo Marquard refers to pain, diseases, to human helplessness and suffering as "evils"; this word is used in the Polish translation of Maquard's text from German, on which my analysis is based. In my paper, the word 'evil' is used in the same sense.

[5] According to Epicurus, there are four possibilities: God is willing to prevent evil, but is not able to; He is able to, but not willing; He is neither able nor willing; He is both able and willing. If God is willing to prevent evil, but is not able to, He is weak, so He is not omnipotent, so He is not God. If God is able to prevent evil, but He is not willing to do it, then He is malevolent, He is evil himself, so He is not God. If God is both unwilling and unable to remove evil, than He is both malevolent and weak. And, if God both is willing to and able to remove evil, and evil exists in the world, then God who is able and willing does not exist. The analysis of the four possibilities led Epicurus to the conclusion that there is no God; there may be some gods, he claimed, but they are preoccupied with themselves and do not care about people.

theodicy therefore did appear before modernity, but Marquard insists that the notion has modern character; earlier unquestioned (Ger. *intakte*) religion deprived theodicy of "sharpness", he claims (Marquard 12). After Epicurus numerous other philosophers tried to understand and describe the nature of evil, also in the twentieth century.

Krzysztof Hubaczek, a Polish author, claims in his book, for the last fifty years more than seven thousand books and articles concerning the problem of evil have been published in English (Hubaczek 7). The fact that the question of theodicy appeared with a great force in the twentieth century in the United States of America, seems to be a result of two contradictory and parallel processes – secularization of life and relentless belief in God.

On the one hand, the process of secularization in American society was quickly proceeding in the twentieth century. Darwin's theory of evolution, introduced in 1859, though at first it caused outrage and protest, was gradually accepted not only by scientists and theologians, but also by common people. It seems that the worldwide dispute between the supporters of this theory and the Church authorities, was one of the major causes of secularization, both in America and in Europe in the twentieth century.[6] Such processes and events as industrialization, the rise and fall of great fortunes, World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War in the 1950s, and riots connected with the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, all contributed to general spiritual impoverishment of many Americans, to their disillusionment with previously cherished ideals, and gradual loss of religious faith. While only a minority turned to God and religion in search for consolation, the majority started to look for other explanations and justifications of human existence, or completely rejected any spiritual values.

On the other hand, religion is a part of American tradition and has been present in lives of Americans from the moment they planted first colonies in the New World until the present day. And although the church and the state are officially separated, in fact Christianity is present in lives of Americans, including political life. A good illustration of this presence is the inauguration ceremony, during which American presidents swear in placing their hands on the Bible; American one-dollar note bears the inscription "in God we trust"; so far there has not been elected a president-atheist. A strong connection between religion and 'everyday life' is visible also among common people. In a survey conducted in 1994 one reads:

> A recent study conducted by the George H. Gallup International Institute for William Moss shows that Americans' concerns about society, democracy and the future are deeply rooted in their beliefs about God. While most survey respondents hold staunchly to the view that one can be a good and ethical person without believing in God, a solid majority (61%) say that a democracy cannot survive without a widespread belief in God or a Supreme Being. (Gallup 1)

[6] See also: Conrad Eugene Ostwalt, Jr., *After Eden. The Secularization of American Space in the Fiction of Willa Cather and Theodore Dreiser*, where in the chapter "*America* as Paradise Lost" the author analyses the transformation of religious identity in America at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries; apart from Darwin's theory, industrialization, urbanization and immigration are seen as factors which changed traditional Christian beliefs at the time.

In the same article it is stated that "virtually all Americans say they believe in God or a universal spirit. Most believe in a personal God who watches over and judges people. . . . It should come as no surprise to learn, then, that the United States is one of the most religious nations of the entire industrialized world . . . " (Gallup 1-2). Although, as the study further suggests, the religiousness of Americans can be described as shallow, the presence of God/a divinity in their private and public lives remains beyond doubt.

Taking the above remarks into consideration, it does not seem surprising that twentieth-century man once again felt confused: on the one hand, seeing suffering of his fellow-men he started to doubt the existence of a benevolent God; on the other, he still continued to believe in the God of his forefathers. On the one hand "pursuit of happiness" is an "unalienable right" of every American citizen; on the other this citizen is exposed to suffering either his own, or his fellow-citizens. This situation led to a state already mentioned in relation to Odo Marquard: God was no longer perceived as a Saviour, He was Creator who should be made responsible for the existence of evil in this world. Theodicy returned in its double meaning: as an attempt to explain the existence of evil in this world an at the same time as an accusation of God who allows it. As drama, like other forms of literature, is to a large extent a reflection and a response to the changing attitudes and events in the world, American playwrights also responded in various ways to the new situation. Dramatists, like (earlier) philosophers, attempted to examine the problem of evil in their plays.

One such playwright is Philip Barry (1896-1949), best remembered as a comedy writer, very successful on Broadway. An Irish-American, he was a very religious Catholic (Roppolo 15)[7] and "a man involved in a most serious spiritual search which he pursued throughout his life" (Bogard, Meserve, and Walter 269). While his serious plays often failed on stage, his comedies enjoyed great popularity among theatre goers. Almost all his plays contain some references to religious issues.

When he was in his late thirties, the playwright experienced great personal tragedies: first his little daughter died in infancy, and a year later his oldest brother, Edmund, also died. This, together with unsuccessful staging of some of his plays and the difficult situation in the world (the Great Depression in America, the approaching war in Europe, the advance of fascism), compelled Barry to look for some explanation of these painful events. Reading the Bible, he found a passage referring to the war in Heaven between Michael and Satan who was cast out from Heaven into the earth.

> And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. [Revelation, 12: 7-9.]

The excerpt from the Book of Revelation inspired him to write his only novel, *War in Heaven*. Soon the playwright adapted it for the stage as *Here Come the Clowns*

[7] As a boy, he attended Nazareth Hall Academy, a Roman Catholic secondary school in Rochester, New York.

(1938) (Roppolo 83-87), a play which became a very important voice in the philosophical and theological discussion concerning theodicy, as its dominating question is, why evil happens to innocent people.

The play is set in an American city, as the author put it, "several years ago", in the back room of Ma Speedy's Café des Artistes. The time covers only two hours late in the evening on Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, just after midnight. When the play opens two artists, Major Armstrong and John Dickinson, discuss an event which happened during the performance in the Globe theatre that evening: Clancy, a stagehand who was absent for a year, unexpectedly appeared looking for someone. Gradually, other artists start arriving at the Café: Clancy also arrives. Nobody is sure whom Clancy is looking for; they suspect that it is "The Old Gentleman himself – the owner of the Globe, James Concannon" (Barry 441). But everyone knows that the owner had not been seen anywhere for a long time. One of the guests says: "I even doubt if he's here at all any more" (Barry 441), and having checked that Mr. Concannon's private room is locked, he asks "Who runs things now, anyway?" (Barry 442).

It is then that mysterious Professor Pabst, "a world-famous Illusionist", arrives. The Café's owner says about the Professor: "You're just everywhere at once, *you* are!" (Barry 442). Pabst sometimes speaks with an accent and sometimes without, as if he were pretending to be someone he is not. He also seems to know other people's secrets. From the moment of his appearance, religious implications seem to accumulate.

Everyone is curious and continues guessing whom Clancy wants to find and see, but Pabst suggests that Clancy is looking for God Himself, which Clancy confirms:

> And why not? Isn't He everywhere? Is there a nook or a corner where He's not? What's there so strange in going out to find Him? Others have done it, and others will again! . . . I have to find Him! 'Tis a necessary thing to me. I have some things to ask Him which nobody else can answer. I know it is His will that things happen as they do, but I've come to a place where I have to know the reason for certain of them. - And know I will! (Barry 453)

Clancy explains his earlier absence by saying that he had visited many places "among the poor and the lowly" (Barry 454), where, as he supposed, it is easy to find God, but the search was unsuccessful. Pabst replies: . . . A man searches for the Truth and calls it "God" – Why not? It has many names, and as many faces. CLANCY: - It has one: and that's the name and the face of God! (Barry 454).

Pabst wants to reveal to some of the guests the truth about their problems in order to make them abandon their illusions about themselves and he begins to tell the secrets of the participants of the meeting. In fact, he makes the participants reveal their fears, anxieties and secrets. He calls them "as fine a collection of wretched, unhappy human beings as ever it has been my privilege to behold", "the world in miniature" (Barry 452). He acts like a master of ceremonies, making the Café customers performers in his show.

It becomes apparent that the Café symbolizes the contemporary world, as it is a part of the building of the Globe theatre; those who inhabit it resemble actors: they put on masks which Pabst forces them to take off, thus revealing the painful truth about

themselves. As more guests-actors reveal their problems, it becomes evident that everyone has some burden to bear. For most of them the truth is painful and difficult to face. Clancy, like other actors, reveals his "decline and his fall". His confession resembles Philip Barry's painful personal experiences, which suggests that the play may be the author's attempt at reconciliation with his own suffering. Clancy says that in his youth he suffered poverty; he did not have much, but even that little was taken away from him: he lost his house, his savings, the sight in one eye, his job, and his younger brother who died. But the worst was the loss of his little three-year-old daughter, who caught a cold and also died. This daughter, Angela, was all his own, he said. Eventually his wife also left him. Having listened to Clancy's story, Pabst expresses the opinion that all such deprivations mean something. He says: "They all have some purpose in the scheme of life" (Barry 463). And this is what Clancy wants to know: he would like to ask God what is the purpose of suffering.

It is then that Clancy receives the final blow: he learns that his little daughter who died was not his own child. Nora, his wife, reveals that she married him in order to protect her lover and to give their child a name. Having learned that, Clancy shouts heavenwards:

> You up there, why do You send such blank confusion upon the world? What's the earthly good of half the things that happen? – Things that on the face of them are blundering injustices with no sense nor purpose – what's the reason for them? . . . Have You not said You'd come when we called You? Then where are You keeping Yourself? . . . Then come to me! Come! (Barry 479)

But there is no answer. Someone says: "All we can do is to make the best of it", which resembles a phrase in T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, "the best of a bad job".

Now Clancy seems to have reached a dead end, for he knows the truth but does not know how to cope with it. Instead of setting him free, the truth he learned about himself "only moved him into another kind of prison" (Barry 460). When, resigned, he is about to leave the Café, James Concannon, the mysterious man who runs the theatre, arrives, saying that he has been "to and fro – up and down – all over". Mr. Concannon may be vaguely associated with God: the initials J.C. may suggest Jesus Christ; Clancy calls him "the noblest, the godliest man" (Barry 482). Concannon's coming on Easter Sunday, soon after midnight, seems to be some response to Clancy's call; God eventually revealed Himself. Clancy insists that Mr. Concannon was sent to answer his questions. He begins to inquire about matters he considers important: first he wants to know why the earth is "full of human misery, of death and tyranny and torture?" Then he asks: "if it's Good that rules over us, why is it Evil that always seems to have the upper hand?" (Barry 482). But Mr. Concannon is unable to give any answer that might satisfy Clancy.

Their discussion provokes other guests to join in: they also start asking questions. Major Armstrong, the midget, asks Mr. Concannon: "Tell me if you will, Sir – tell me His reason for – for creating thing like – like me and Ma Speedy [a homosexual]. Why are – why are freaks?" (Barry 483), to which he receives the answer: "Would you deny Him a sense of humor?" (Barry 483). Thus, Mr. Concannon does not explain anything; instead,

he takes off what was a disguise and it appears that he is Pabst, and that it is Pabst who is the owner of the Globe. Realizing this, Dickinson exclaims: "The Devil is God now" (Barry 484). He draws his revolver, intending to kill Pabst. But it is Clancy who receives the deadly shot. Before he dies, he realizes something about human being:

> DICKINSON: I tell you the Devil is God! . . . and we do his will!
> CLANCY: No - that's as wrong as the other! Oh, I see now it's no will of God things are as they are – no, nor Devil's will neither! It's the will of all them like himself [Pabst], the world over – men bad by their own choice – and the woods full of 'em! . . . the proud will of Man is my answer! The free will of Man, turned the wrong way. (Barry 485)

Eventually, Clancy expresses his belief that free will, even if it turned to Bad, may rise again; it can even overcome death and resurrect itself, he claims. And he dies, hoping for some afterlife.

The reception of the play by critics was favorable,[8] but the plot was described as "unusual and baffling, the symbols obscure, the answers to the problem of good and evil lost in a haze of mysticism" (Roppolo 88). As a result, an irritated Barry answered his critics, explaining some obscure parts of the play in an article in the New York *World Telegram* (Saturday, December 10, 1938) (Roppolo 88). He commented, for example, on Clancy's struggle against evil: "it is infinitely better to die in this struggle than it is to live in fear or in the questionable security which follows any compromise with all these things in government and human society that we know in our hearts to be wrong" (Roppolo 88).

Barry's play does not give a definite answer to Clancy's (and the playwright's, and many other people's) questions. On the contrary, it shows that contemporary man is perplexed and cannot distinguish between lies and truth, and that the problem of theodicy still remains unresolved; Clancy thus describes human life: "With pride at the top and despair at the bottom and all manner of misery in between – turning lies into truth and truth into lies until nobody knows the one from the other –" (Barry 485). This might explain why Barry made his characters actors (Clancy is several times referred to as a "clown"): it is never certain when they are acting and when they are not, it seems impossible to distinguish their real faces from the masks they wear. The fact that they are actors might also suggest that they resemble dummies (a dummy is one of the characters in the play): what happens to them is not really their choice, though it seems to be; their fate is, in fact, in hands of others who pull the strings, and who, like Marble—one of characters, are like ventriloquists.

As the confusion of modern man affects his adherence to some values and his religious beliefs, therefore Mr. Concannon, who was believed to be "the godliest man", turns out to be Pabst, a man with an evil nature, who, in fact, is a world famous Illusionist. As Meserve points out, "Curiously, the distinction in the play between God and the Devil is consciously vague, revealing man's confused ideas concerning both truth

[8] Interest in the play was, however, short-lived; it ran for only 88 performances. Though for the playwright it was a financial failure (he had put about $24,000 into the production), it was "a prestige play" which repaired Barry's reputation, damaged by his earlier plays.

and God" (Bogard, Meserve, Walter 270). But at the same time Barry expresses his belief that man has power to oppose evil. Although evil is everywhere and it is impossible to "rid the world of evil in a blow", man can as easily choose Good as he chose Bad, Clancy suggests. In this way Barry seems to express his conviction that though the world is God's, it is man who is responsible for his deeds, and for who he is. Thus, although the problem of theodicy remained unresolved, the play communicates the reassuring conviction, that man is able to deprive evil of its prevailing power.

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