

THE SILENT PLAY

Amosa L. Velez

Introduction

Let me begin this paper with a description of two women. They are best friends, Woman A and Woman B. Woman A is a person who loves to live a quiet life. Habitually trying to avoid risks the things that she does are those that are tried and have passed the test of time. After graduation she settles down in a job that involves the minimum of risks and tensions. Her life becomes a routine of ordinary daily chores. Woman B is the dynamic type of person who is in constant search for new ground, as it were, unafraid of the unknown. She is one who ventures into new ways of doing things, as a daughter, as a student and as a career person, and later as wife and mother.

Woman B's dynamic life brought her not only failures but also successes, not only scorns but also praises. From every frustrating experience, she emerged a new woman, with new strength and new self-confidence. Woman B's life is a play, while woman A's is one which, consciously or unconsciously, avoids it. Indeed, in a great woman's life, play is discernible.

What is play? To expound on play, first, I would like to involve a "radical philosophy" which specializes in making sense out of non-sense, believes in man's capacity to survive swimming with or against a destructively strong current; and, secondly, I shall show how B's life is a play and why it is a silent play.

Play in Radical Hermeneutics

The radical philosophy I am referring to is "radical hermeneutics" as understood by John Caputo.¹ Through it I hope to show the significance of play in the life of women.

Hermeneutics is interpretation. It is traceable to Gadamer.² The word "Hermeneutics" has its roots in Hermes who, in Greek mythology, is a bearer of messages from the gods.³ Thus, by extension, the hermeneut hears the message, and interprets for us, so we could understand its meaning. When interpretation is stretched to its farthest which implies not a distancing from the phenomenon but remaining within the flow of experience, staying amidst chaos and, making some sense of it, and in the process discovers one's self, then, that is radical hermeneutics. Caputo asserts that *Radical Hermeneutics* is a philosophy of *kinesis*,⁴ and the "hermeneutics" in Radical Hermeneutics is to be traced back to the project

announced in the twenties by Heidegger, which is a hermeneutic of facticity.⁵

For Caputo, the ancestry of this brand of radical thinking goes way back to Soren Keirkegaard who in turn took a stand in favor of Heraclitus' *kinesis* (movement) as opposed to the Eleatics for whom motion is an illusion.⁶ Kierkegaard wondered if existential movement is possible. He found out that it is indeed possible in what he called "repetition." Caputo says that Kierkegaardian repetition (movement) is not identical in meaning with "recollection" as understood in Plato's philosophy. Platonic recollection is a moving backward--back to the original state from where man has fallen, back to the eternal from being in exile in the temporal, back to knowledge from forgetfulness (learning is remembering, and so there is no advance in knowledge). Kierkegaardian repetition is an inward process of development. I would like to picture it as like driving a car straight ahead while looking at the rear view mirror, now and then, to avoid dangers from behind as it moves forward. Repetition forges ahead, covers ground. It is similar to the process of repeating the enrolment "ritual" every semester/year that moves one higher in his grade/year level. So while recollection (in Plato) is recovery of what has been lost, repetition (in Kierkegaard) is discovery. Caputo sees existential movement as best illustrated in the third of the Kierkegaardian three stages of existence, the religious stage. For him, there is no real repetition in the first stage, the aesthetic stage. Since repetition dulls aesthetic experience, the concern on this level is its avoidance. The aesthete's life having no continuity and depth is prone to monotony and boredom, unlike in the second sphere, the moral stage, wherein the moral man finds life to be constantly reaffirmed. Kierkegaard pictured the moral man as one who is unafraid of commitment, finding the past as meaningful in relation to his present and future. However, there comes a point in the moral man's life when, in spite of meticulously living an orderly existence, things go wrong, and he finds himself experiencing the "dark night of the soul;" self-sufficiency breaks down, and the moral man finds himself at a loss, for there is only the self to turn to.

When all human resources with which to take hold of oneself amidst chaos are exhausted, the human person finds himself alone before God. At this moment, there occurs what Kierkegaard considered genuine repetition which takes the form of movement from "self only" to "self before God," from sin to atonement.⁷ This is a movement which shatters the superficiality of an aesthetic man's existence and the self-sufficiency of the moral man's life of commitment.

Religious repetition is an existential movement wherein the individual repeats choosing the self that he is before his God. This is human existence in the concrete wherein the human person finds himself amidst a changing human condition which can stifle his "fighting spirit" and rob him of his identity. Human existence is a flux, a movement--the venue where the individual constitutes himself. The richness and complexity of the

human situation cannot be once and for all totally grasped, captured and encapsulated in concepts. Because it is life itself--a living process--it is elusive and defies definition. Realistically speaking, this "business" of coping with the flux, with changing human conditions, is no joking matter.

In the light of all these, Kierkegaard was not happy with metaphysics, because it makes life easy, it tries to arrest movement (flux) by asserting presence through conceptualization. It makes things permanent (not changing) because their essence is the same. But no matter how impressive our intellectual constructs may be, they cannot really speak for existence. They cannot capture the agony and pain of a humiliating experience, the grandeur of the heroic act of a mother saving her child from shame, the fervor and beauty of a loving gesture, to mention some instances from the lived world. Thus it is understandable that in his reaction to metaphysics, Kierkegaard launched a "program" of overcoming metaphysics, which attained its full realization in Heidegger, Derrida and Caputo.⁸

Radical Hermeneutics, as Caputo presents it, restores difficulty into life. It does not arrest movement. As a philosophy of *kinesis*, it is a philosophy that thrives in chaos, so to say. It looks for sense in nonsense. It finds meaning in the absurd. It is a philosophy that does not seek an escape from the difficulty of living.

Since it dwells in the difficulty of existence, is Radical Hermeneutics not a form of sadism? Caputo says that it is not sadistic. Rather, it is realistic. It recognizes life to be a flux, a movement--where there are ups and downs, there are wins and losses, order and chaos, presence and absence. So, we must let life be; give it free play; let it play its fullest. But if life is difficult, then, it is serious business which must be regarded seriously. How, then, can it be a play? It is precisely because life is serious that it must become a play, Caputo thinks. Play must permeate the seriousness of living.

The Play of Reason in Radical Hermeneutics

It may be asserted that life does not have to be difficult, provided we have truths to live by, principles to facilitate thinking and the solving of problems, and moral principles to show the way to right decisions and actions. Right! But we will not always have those truths to live by.

Let us first consider the thinking life of man. To Caputo's mind, reason should not be delimited by method, by a "conceptual linguistic framework" or even by a principle of reason itself. The principle of reason must take this always into account. And yet, when the question is asked, "What is the reason for the principle of reason?" There is no answer. Caputo

wants to bring play into reason itself, for in his view, in the event of a bankruptcy of reason and breakdown of paradigms "reason finds itself without the help of established rules, on its own, in free play, in motion, in *kinesis*." When scientific principles fail reason, and "it has nothing to fall back on but its own ingenuity, then reason is fully at work," that is, fully in play.⁹

Science, ethics, "art and religious belief make their way by a free and creative movement whose dynamics baffle the various discourses on method."¹⁰ Caputo does not consider this "as a kind of despair in reason, but as the only really sensible, or reasonable, view of reason."¹¹ "The problem with reason today," he says, "is that it has become an instrument of discipline (institutionalized), not a mark of freedom, and that, when it is put to work, it is taken out of play."¹²

The Ethical Play in Radical Hermeneutics

Radical Hermeneutics evokes problems not only of what we can know but also of what we are to do. And this introduces the question of the possibility of an ethics after metaphysics; the question of a post-metaphysical ethics. "But what could an ethics within radical hermeneutics be like? How can there be a morals without a metaphysics of morals?"¹³ Caputo claims that an ethics, even though "a radical ethics, arises not in spite of the foundering of metaphysics... but precisely because of it".¹⁴

For him, Radical Hermeneutics is a "lesson in humility." It emerges purified from its struggle with the flux. To say that it "is a lesson in humility" is to enter into the ethical mode. The message of radical hermeneutics for morals is to sharpen our sense for the limitations of our schemes, of the finitude of the metaphysical world; and that "none of us occupies a privileged place of insight, none of us has access to a god (or goddess) who passes on to us any hermeneutic secrets".¹⁵

What is the nature of this post-metaphysical ethics? This radical ethics is called ethics of dissemination. It is so called because it is an ethics which aims to disperse oppressive power clusters. It addresses the sociology "which instantiates the binary oppositional schemes of Western metaphysics: higher and lower, ruler and ruled, cause and effect, science and opinion, master and slave,... male and female, rich and poor, privileged and unprivileged,"¹⁶ in which the privileged represses and alienates its opposite. An ethics of dissemination is an ethics of otherness, that favors the non-privileged against all structures that "secretly depend upon, and are the effects of, the opposite which they suppress."¹⁷ Hence, it "begins by systematically reversing these oppositional schemes, reversing the discrimination,... in order to finally displace oppositional arrangements in favor of the open

and nonexclusionary".¹⁸ An instance of reverse discrimination as practiced in the business world is the preference for woman instead of the man who is equally qualified for the position applied for.

Thus in working for a solution to a problem, this ethics sees to it that there is a free assembly of diverse points of view in which men and women with mixed motives and with unequal intellectual abilities together will solve the problem. It can be an on-going dialogue between peoples to prevent cultural relativism. The important thing is to keep the play in play. "In the ethicopolitical sphere, the notion of play does not mean that we abandon reason and let the chaos wash over us. It means that we keep the debate fair and free from manipulative interests."¹⁹

At this point, it might become evident that radical ethics is not after all without a paradigmatic exemplar. This post-metaphysical lack of principles as foundations, "generates a new morality of civility and fair play."²⁰ This entails looking for that rare someone "who plays a game for the love of it and who plays fairly".²¹

An ethics of dissemination is not against institutional organization or the concept of community. It requires rather the power of repetition to keep all such institutions free, to keep them in "motion, flexible, in flux, reformable, repeating forward"²² (like in Kierkegaardian repetition). It recognizes that institutional organization is the usual way to get things done, that we tend naturally to organize our practices along systematic lines. The role of an ethics of dissemination is only to keep such organizations honest, to be watchful of the equally "natural" tendency, once established, to resist change, to maintain the status quo.²³ This complements a post-metaphysical rationality, which accepts scientific schemes, but is willing to shift paradigms once the old ones no longer address present problems.

Radical ethics takes its stand with those for whom the system was not designed--women, children, the mad, the ill, the poor. "It assumes that all systems represent the will of the most powerful as well as of the most reasonable, and it operates on behalf of those who lack power..."²⁴

The Mystery of the Play of Life

In connection with what Caputo has contended about the possibility of a Radical Hermeneutics, it must be easy, at this point, to see what is meant by the play of life. Human existence is so complex that no matter how one tries to order his life, problems can upset this orderly life all of a sudden; or, it may surreptitiously gain momentum until problems are totally out of control. Or, out of the everydayness of life, something suddenly erupts, breaks through, leaving us almost "mesmerized," only to disappear

again. As Caputo would say, there are certain breaking points in the habits and practices of our earthly existence "where the flux is exposed, where the whole trembles and the play irrupts,"²⁵ and the assurances of everydayness are nullified. That which breaks down in the breakthrough is the spell of ideation, the illusion that through our concepts we have encompassed the world. This does not negate conceptual thinking, and the work of science, ethics and institutions. Rather, to Caputo's mind, somewhere, sometime, somehow in the margins and fringes of everydayness, something keeps breaking out, unexpectedly, only to disappear again, leaving us perturbed.²⁶

Caputo notes Heidegger's having referred to "something" we cannot get around, "in the sense of something we cannot avoid running into somewhere along the way and in the sense of something we cannot surround...or encompass with our concepts."²⁷ It is the absence of that which is present—it is in fact the play of presence and absence. It is the mystery to which we must be open.²⁸

Caputo regards it the role of Radical Hermeneutics not to "come to grips" with the mystery but to cope with it or to "stay in play with it." Its role is "to construe," which means "to deal with his loss of meaning by confronting the meaning of the loss," of the absence; it means "the particular way one has found of remaining open to the mystery and venturing out into the flux".²⁹

What or who could this mystery be? Is there a way of, at least, getting a glimpse into this mystery? Yes! There is nowhere to go to have this glimpse but to the "self" since the human person himself is the venue "where the abyss opens up, where the whole trembles, where the ground gives way."³⁰

This mystery must be God if we were to appropriate the mystical thinking of Meister Eckhart. Eckhart asserted that beneath the humdrum of conceptualizing and willing, is a certain deep spot (to which Caputo concedes) which he called "ground of the soul," where the soul can establish contact with God. It is a breakthrough where we come to understand the God which is not the same as the God of the theologians and priests. It is a point where one senses not being flooded with light but falling into an abyss where all the familiar concepts about God fall apart.³¹ This "breakthrough" to an altogether strange and forbidding region is at the same time a "breakdown" of everything familiar and comforting.³²

This mysterious depth of human existence that ushers the play of absence and presence is most evident in the human person's twofold relationship with God and with one's fellows. First, there is the human being's relationship with God, which is expressed profoundly in Meister Eckhart's *Gelassenheit*. *Gelassenheit* for him means living "without why."

This means that the soul's relationship to God should be without reason; it is loving God without expecting anything in return. Moreover, *Gelassenheit* means a releasement of life which he identifies with love--which lets life well up and flow over, which overcomes the mean desires of egoism in order to let God flow in the world, and in others.³³ *Gelassenheit* is letting God be in our life.

Secondly, there is the human persons' relationship with one another. Since each one of us has that "fine point of the soul" or that "deep spot" or inner recess that makes us unfathomable, is human communication ever possible? How can we relate to one another? Since every one of us is a mystery, the first natural thing for me to do is to let the other be. "The respect the other commands plays on the mystery of depths we cannot fathom. When we drop our metaphysical plumb lines we never hear them touch bottom. We know that we have to do here with a system we cannot dominate, a puzzle we cannot decipher".³⁴ Thus an ethics of dissemination is also an ethics of *Gelassenheit*--"which means an ethics of letting be" (Heidegger), of releasement, and of letting the play be.³⁵ And since *Gelassenheit* means living "without why," whose highest expression is love (Eckhart), I will have to accept the other as this other is and not for any anticipated returns.

The Play in the Mystery of Life

The play of life is indeed a reality. It is observable in the life of men and women alike, in their conceptualizations, decisions, experience of failures and successes, beliefs and unbeliefs. In the world of thought, the wanderings of a human person that allow the human mind free reign, that is, to be fully at play, will give birth to novel ideas and philosophies, scientific discoveries and inventions. In the world of action, what Eckhart declared--that the life and love of God are not reserved for just a few privileged souls, or for men only but also for women--has echoed down the centuries from the medieval times through the modern period to our day, finding expression in equal human rights.³⁶

One of the avenues where the surface of everydayness becomes transparent and the flux shows through is the human face. (Caputo points out that Levinas has called attention to the face). The mystery that the human person is, breaks through the body and the face which lend discourse a spontaneous support even as they give us away at times when we want to keep our feelings hidden. Hence, Caputo thinks that the human face is not just a surface. It is made complex with hidden depths and concealed motives, which is perhaps why a person "hiding something" cannot look straight into the eyes of the other. "Flickering in the twilight of presence/absence, the face is a mysterious (Heidegger) and undecidable (Derrida)

form. We catch a glimpse momentarily, *augenblicklich*, in the blink of an eye, of a light in the eye of the other, which leaves us wondering, puzzled, provoked. It is the 'face' as the most conspicuous point of access, the outermost surface of our body, which opens the way to the recess, the 'ground' of the soul, its most hidden chambers".³⁷

Thus, human persons being mysterious personal centres, human interaction is replete with experiences of presence and absence discernible in the human face. When at times we experience an uncomfortable uneasiness in a group, maybe at a party, and we feel the place as stuffy, it is not actually the "presence" of others which "fills the room" but their "absence." "And not just absence but the interplay of presence and absence..., of the look in someone's eyes which leaves us provoked, solicited. It is the *lethe* [absence] in *a-letheia* [presence] which inspires the mix of awe, fear and admiration".³⁸

The Silent Play in the Mystery of Life

I would like now to single out the play of life which is most observable in the feminine experience. At the start of this paper, I mentioned that it is woman B's life which is a play. Woman B may be a Ph.D. holder or a woman who has not gone that far in her educational attainment. She may be single or married, a career person or simply a home-maker. In woman B, the interplay of absence and presence is observable: absence in being misunderstood, in experiencing failure, in not being able to solve problems, in rejection; and presence in being understood, experiencing success, in solving problems and in being accepted. This is play which connotes the dynamic elements involved but silent insofar as it takes place quietly, subtly, like a deep river's current silently flowing by.

It can be said that the human face is the stage where the human drama is played, something which does not escape a sensitive person, particularly a woman who is generally accepted to be more sensitive than a man. Let me trace one theme of this drama of life, which makes play come closest in meaning to drama. A budding career girl is lucky if and when in the office where she works, everyone is honestly transparent. Otherwise, in the case of keen competition, she may experience finding herself joining a group, for instance, during a "coffee break" where despite the polite greeting, she can feel that she is not welcome at all. During the period of courtship, man and woman look into each other's eyes. The eyes may hide or may reveal true feelings or their opposite. The woman may peer into his eyes in search for truth. "The look of love which says nothing at all says more than any words".³⁹ And when in their friendship, a misunderstanding occurs, she trembles deep within by just the sight of him because the "cold look with which the words are calmly delivered discloses an even greater anger than angry words".⁴⁰ She feels intensely

his absence in his presence. And when during reconciliation, he apologizes, the man can read the look of hurt which "says more than the words which say it does not matter".⁴¹ In marriage, happy the woman whose husband is a one-woman-man, or the man whose wife is a one-man-woman. But in the event of a marriage breakdown, the woman is almost always the loser. Her man (who is no longer hers) may still come home to her and their children but the "routine words of love are betrayed by eyes which show that love has gone dead".⁴² A smile, a slightly arched eyebrow can give away everything.... The play of absence and presence weighs heavy in a wife's understanding silence whose husband has gone astray. The husband is present but absent for there is no love: so near yet so far is he. Her husband promises that from now on he will behave, that he will have nothing more to do with other women, but the wife can tell through the face that her husband does not mean what he says. It is, of course, also true with a man who suffers from the infidelity of the wife.

The erring husband may threaten separation. She may say that she is not afraid to live without him, but the "look of fear betrays the brave words."⁴³ Alone, with children to care for, she may find life too much to carry on, and yet it is at this darkest moment when she feels God being farthest that she experiences Him nearest to her. She feels God's presence in His absence.

And the play goes on. A mother may emerge from the room with pale and fragile look but her face beams with joy knowing that her sick child has come out safely from a crisis (J. Goldbrunner). The play as absence and presence is also experienced by the mother in relation to her children. When in disciplining her children she is misunderstood by them as one who no longer loves them, it is at this very moment when she is thought to be absent that she is most present to them; that she in fact is hurt in making them cry as she disciplines them towards growing to be responsible human persons. The children on their part may also be, in a subtle manner, the playground of absence and presence in relation to their mother. There are children who are not expressive of their affection, and may even behave as though they do not love their mother at all. But they really do. In fact, there are children who are not demonstrative of their love for their mother but who explicitly attribute their success to a woman behind them. And this woman is no other than the mother (without of course, disregarding the positive influence fathers have on their children).

The women referred to above are simple people, and yet they are great since greatness is not measured only by success, wealth and fame.

There are also women, whose greatness cannot be hidden under a bushel, for whom the silent play is no stranger. One of these women is Edith Stein, a Jewish philosopher, who was alienated from God when she

was in college but after whose conversion in 1922 (occasioned by her reading of the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila), entered the convent in 1933 and became known as Sister Teresa Benedicta a Cruce. In 1942, when she was gassed by the Nazis, her life seemed to be a failure; but it was not. "In Auschwitz Edith Stein's life was not wasted but fulfilled. Found by chance in her convent cell in Echt (in the Netherlands) was a little paper on which she had written her oblation of her life for her people, praying that many might come to know the Glory of Israel, the Light of the nations; that, as she had, her kinsmen might discover Christ."⁴⁴

A woman who is beyond compare is the Virgin Mary Herself. In Her life the play of absence and presence was a constant companion. She started to feel the pain of Jesus' absence when He was only twelve years old. And yet throughout His life during His mission on earth, in His absence, He was present to Her all the way for She is His Mother.

Known or unknown, there is a fascinating thread that unites all the great women that I mean in this paper. And this thread is *Gelassenheit*. This thread is their living and loving without why. Their life does have meaning but this meaning is their living and loving without why. Their love for the other—whether husband, children, parents, sisters, brothers, friends, students—does not expect any return. It is living for the other for this other's sake. It is a life which only those who have journeyed into the innermost recess of their soul and have met God there can live, for it is a participation in that mystery that erupts now and then into the humdrum of our everyday and seeks through the human person to overflow into the world.

And they are at it without the "big bang." Theirs is a silent play of pain and elation, of failure and success, of tears and laughter, untiringly supporting, inspiring, understanding. It is no wonder these women can endure through life's darkest hour. She may weep in silence because of the hurt, but after a while she can smile and laugh again. "Nothing heals like laughter. It is the power to laugh at oneself, one's fears, one's beliefs that liberates and keeps the flux in play... laughter ennobles, strengthens, sees one through a bad time".⁴⁵

Conclusion

Although this paper is focused on the feminine "adventure," it cannot be denied that the play of absence and presence runs through the whole gamut of human experience—in a man and a woman's life.

The point of this paper is not to exalt women at the expense of men. Rather it is an attempt to make women (who could be reached by this

paper), who have not realized their true worth, discover their indispensable role in social transformation in order to be true to this role; and to awaken unconcerned men to the dignity of womanhood.

In one of the philosophical lectures that Edith Stein gave, she said that only "a feminist, in the fever of the extreme, will deny that woman's calling differs from man's, that for all their common human nature, the souls of men and women have each their own design."⁴⁶ She said further it is the woman's overflowing wealth of heart, her almost limitless ability to devote herself, her patience--while man may be able to do more, she can endure more--that helps her partake in man's life, a partaking which awakens his strength and multiplies his achievements."⁴⁷

That woman's role in social transformation is indispensable goes without saying. Is it not said that "the youth is the hope of the nation?" Where do the youth get their first training, their love of country, their responsiveness? What is their first school? The "University" of Home. Who is their first teacher? The mother, supplemented and complemented by father (if they have not repudiated this role). When they shall have grown up, the daughters will become mothers too or they will remain single. In their state of singleness, they too contribute to a change-for-the-better of individuals or of society, like what St. Teresa de Avila and Edith Stein have been to the world. A great woman in our time is Mother Teresa of Calcutta who works for the poorest of God's poor.

Among the rank of mothers is St. Monica whose persevering prayer resulted in the conversion of her son St. Augustine; and a timeless mother, our very own Mother Mary whose humble unconditional *Fiat*, gave us a Redeemer who transformed broken human nature into being healed human person.

To be a catalyst for social transformation, a woman need not make it to global fame. There are many women at the "backstage" of life who plod on, each in her silent way, through a play of tears and laughter, anxiety and assurance, helplessness and happiness, to bring up, in a manner only a woman can do and, in many instances, only a mother can make possible, children who will one day make the world a better place to live in.

NOTES

1. John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987). Henceforth, this work will simply be referred to as RH.

2. RH, 108.

3. RH, 103.

4. RH, 198.

5. RH, 6.

6. RH, 17.

7. RH, 32.

8. RH, 17-18.

9. RH, 226.

10. RH, 211.

11. RH, 211.

12. RH, 211.

13. RH, 257.

14. RH, 257.

15. RH, 258.

16. RH, 260.

17. RH, 260.

18. RH, 260.

19. RH, 262.

20. RH, 262.

21. RH, 262.

22. RH, 263.
23. RH, 263.
24. RH, 264.
25. RH, 269.
26. Rh, 270.
27. RH, 270.
28. RH, 270.
29. RH, 271.
30. RH, 290.
31. RH, 268.
32. RH, 269.
33. RH, 265.
34. RH, 276-77.
35. RH, 264.
36. RH, 266.
37. RH, 272.
38. RH, 277.
39. RH, 274.
40. RH, 273.
41. RH, 273-74.
42. RH, 274.
43. RH, 274.

44. Oesterreicher, John M., *Walls are Crumbling: Seven Jewish Philosophers Discover Christ* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1953), 329.

In 1958, 1000 delegates to the convention of the German Catholic Women Teachers League voted to petition Pope Pious XII to beatify her. In a September 7, 1962 issue of *The New World* (Chicago, Illinois), Joseph Cardinal Frings, Archbishop of Cologne, announced the start of the process of her canonization.

45. RH, 292-93.
46. Oesterreicher, 288.
47. Ibid., 289.