

chapter 1

Ludere Est Contemplari: *On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs*

I

On April 3, 1776, James Boswell and Samuel Johnson dined at the Mitre Tavern, where they engaged in discussion with John Murray, the solicitor general of Scotland. Murray, it seems, had “praised the ancient philosophers for the candor and good humor with which those of different sects disputed with each other.” To this observation, Johnson responded:

Sir, they disputed with great humor because they were not in earnest with regard to religion. Had the ancients been serious in their belief, we should not have had their Gods exhibited in the manner we find them represented in the Poets. The people would not have suffered it. They dispute with good humor on their fanciful theories, because they are not interested in the truth of them.¹

What is “serious,” Johnson intimated, is our relation to the gods, “the truth of them.” About what is not serious, evidently, we can have a certain lightsome, genteel discussion, but this does not include the gods. Many Greek philosophers, on the other hand, thought that religion merely supplied a kind of civic quietness to people who could not understand the seriousness of philosophy, of contemplation.

Let me begin these reflections with two further statements, one from St. Paul on running, the second of my own composition. The first reads: “Brothers, I do not think of myself as having reached the finish line. I give no thought to what lies behind but push on to what is ahead. My entire attention is on the finish line as I run toward the prize to which God calls me—life on high in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12–15). The second, in Latin, reads simply, *Ludere est contemplari*—“to play is to contemplate”—or perhaps what I mean is, “to watch play is to contemplate.” The two passages are connected in my mind because, in his *Politics*, Aristotle suggests that oftentimes the closest we come to contemplation in our lives is when we play. And neither play nor contemplation can be, strictly speaking, necessary.

We are familiar with St. Paul’s analogy about running and attaining our ultimate goal. But such a sentence—“to play is to contemplate”—is not, as we might expect on first hearing it, a famous statement from a classical author, say Cicero or Aristotle. Rather it is, as it were, a “play” on the great Benedictine motto, *Laborare est orare*—“to work is to pray.” No doubt, at first sight, it is much easier to associate work with prayer than it is to associate play with contemplation. I believe, however, it is only in modern times and

because of certain modern intellectual assumptions about human autonomy that we prefer to associate prayer with work, not play. We have the *illusion*—a word itself connected with the Latin word, *ludere*, meaning “to play”—that what we are about is to make a world and not to receive a salvation. We think work obviously to be serious but play and the deeds of leisure to be frivolous, or at least unnecessary.

However, for Aristotle the most interesting and fascinating thing about play was precisely that it was “unnecessary.” More than anything else, this freedom is what made play noble, what made it like contemplation, which Aristotle considered to be the highest act we could engage in and to which we should devote all the time and energy we can. And both play and prayer are important to the degree that they are unnecessary, to the degree that we are not constrained to do them. It is of some interest, I suggest, to think through why this might be so.

As Aristotle hinted in his discussion of art, this mysterious “unnecessity” is also characteristic of beautiful things, things to be made not for use, or not only for use, but to be seen or to be heard—just seen or heard. Beauty, as such, is not useful; yet, without it, we would not be what we are. This is why a religion indifferent to beauty is a religion indifferent to the real end for which we are made. And yet, as St. Augustine told us, we can find in the beautiful things that God made a reason not to seek, not to “run after,” as St. Paul put it, God Himself. It is as possible for us to avoid beauty by beauty as it is for us to find intimations of divine beauty through finite beauty, something most memorably spelled out for us in Plato’s *Symposium*. In the highest things, we are free. This is why we can miss the suggestions of divine beauty in the finite things of this world, why we can lose the race, why we might think that something finite is enough for us.

To a great extent, modernity has dedicated itself to the laudable task of redeeming work, allowing the things that slaves used to do to become ways to civil dignity and eternal salvation. We should remember that in the ancient world a person was a slave not so much because of his birth or his legal status but because of the servile nature of his work. The oppressive nature of much of this work is why Aristotle could propose that with the invention of machines most of the slavery that did not involve complete lack of intelligence would be eliminated. No doubt, the very fact that St. Joseph was a carpenter and Christ his Son was enough for Christianity to reverse the ancient understanding of work as such, or better, its understanding of the worker. We are still in danger, however, of identifying humanity with its work rather than its highest activities.

Like Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography*, we associate work with serious purpose. The New Testament also related working to a serious purpose—he who will not work, neither let him eat. Even “recreation,” which for Aristotle means a respite to go back to work more efficiently, is an academic “major” in many universities; that is, it is a preparation for a certain kind of work. And we do not have to reduce work to the status of slavery to deny that, however worthy, it is not the highest thing we can do. On the other hand, something abiding is found in Aristotle’s remark that recreation is related to work, while sport or play is closer to contemplation than is business or labor or even politics.

II

There are many ways to illustrate the contrast between modernity's notion of the autonomy and primacy of worldly affairs and the older, classical, Judeo-Christian view of the primacy of the higher things. For instance, my sister-in-law, in reading Barbara Tuchman's book *A Distant Mirror*, noted a passage that I think is pertinent in light of a monastic tradition that dates back to the sixth century. This Benedictine tradition has stood for precisely the primacy of contemplation, even when the very words *peace* and *work* and *beauty* were most directly associated with its self-description and of the atmosphere it created within itself.

"Difficulty of empathy, of genuinely entering into the mental and emotional values of the Middle Ages, is the final obstacle (to understanding them)," writes Tuchman:

The main barrier, I believe, is the Christian religion as it then was: the matrix and law of medieval life, omnipresent, indeed compulsory. Its insistent principle that the life of the spirit and of the afterworld was superior to the here and now, to material life on earth, is one that the modern world does not share, no matter how devout some present day Christians may be. The rupture of this principle and its replacement by belief in the worth of the individual and of the active life not necessarily focused on God is, in fact, what created the modern world and ended the Middle Ages.²

Christianity does, of course, hold that "the life of the spirit and of the afterworld" is superior to our life on earth. Tuchman implies that if this priority were taken seriously, we would not have the advantages of modernity.

Stanley Jaki, on the other hand, argues that without this particular Christian concept of God, the modern world's scientific basis would not be possible at all.³ Likewise, defenders of Christianity hold that the Greek doctrine of the immortality of the soul and the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection of the body are really the positions that have contributed most to the notion of "the worth of the individual." In any case, the issue is joined. Christianity and modern civilization are here placed in apparent opposition at their most essential points, even though Christianity is the one system that joins, through its doctrine of the Incarnation, both the life of the spirit and the life of this world in one coherent whole. In this sense, I think, the implications of Barbara Tuchman's re-mark are, to some degree, anti-Christian. To be Christian is not to emphasize the life of the spirit in such a way that the world does not exist, nor to exalt the worldly enterprise in such a way that higher concerns are inimical to what it means to live on earth. Medieval people *did* hold that individuals have ultimate worth and that their daily lives are intended to include the admonitions of the faith.

In times of wars and rumors of war, which I suppose may be any time in some part of the world, I know it will seem strange, even a bit improper, to talk of play and not of peace or victory or protest. Perhaps this very impropriety itself is a good reason to speak about play and leisure, lest we become too absorbed in what we must admit is the

fascination of war. We are frequently told that “the drama of war is inescapable.” This is the same fascination, as we shall see, of which Plato himself was aware. It is a fascination that indeed seems to make human things more important than they really are. Yet, in the Christian tradition, peace is never really something we set out to accomplish or obtain as if it were something we could have independently of other virtues or activities. We set out to accomplish order and dignity and fairness and productivity. We think these are real attributes of existence and not figments of our imaginations. The abstract crying out for peace and more peace is not a way to achieve it but a way mostly not to find it. Peace is not a *thing* alongside other things but a result, a “tranquility of order,” as Saint Augustine called it. If we have no order, especially inner order, we have no peace.

A man or woman joins the Benedictine Order, as I take it, not in order to achieve some thing or some good called “peace.” Rather, each one enters into a place where order exists, the order of the day, where the virtues and the sacrifices are practiced. These exercises and duties are the things that everyone “works” at, the things that each does. Peace is a kind of result, almost an afterthought. Peace is the result of doing the right things, of attending to the highest things. But again, both the worst and the best human orders produce “peace,” so it makes a difference on what basis the order of things is established. Beelzebub’s kingdom is not divided against itself. The devil has his own order, as does the land of the tyrant, an order that produces a kind of “peace.” It is for this reason that “war colleges” often make more sense than “peace academies.”

For these reasons, perhaps, no phrase in modern spirituality or politics is more ironic or more dangerous than that of “working for peace.” Strictly speaking, such a “work” is what we do not and cannot do. When the Lord said, “Be at peace, I have conquered the world,” things about Him were from all external signs in chaos. If God’s will among men cannot be accomplished until men have achieved peace, then it must simply follow that God’s will is never done. Yet, we must maintain that God’s will is being upheld even amidst our own social and personal disorder. His peace, as it were, exists in spite of all external chaos. This is another way of saying, I suppose, that what God is about and what men are about may not be the same thing.

In his question on the “Governance of Things,” Saint Thomas observed: “For as ‘it belongs to the best to produce the best,’ it is not fitting that the supreme goodness of God should produce things without giving them their perfection. Now a thing’s ultimate perfection consists in the attainment of its end. Therefore, it belongs to the Divine goodness, as it brought things into existence, so to lead them to their end...” (st, I, 103, 1). If this passage means anything, it means that no external condition can ultimately interfere with our freely reaching our end. We are the only thing that can prevent it. The governance of God over His creation, His ability to bring it to its end, does not depend on the affairs of men, though it does include them. He is as present in our tragedies as in our elations. The Cross is, as à Kempis said, a way, a “royal road.”

In the terms of political philosophy, I can put this point about God's power over good and evil situations in this way: men can be saved in the worst of regimes and damned in the best. Not only must human and divine freedom imply this consequence, but the criterion we choose for understanding one another must include this possibility. In titling this chapter "On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs," I mean to emphasize that the purpose of God in creation—that we might reach our end, that we might run to win the prize—is achieved in each of us, even if we choose ourselves over God. Our affairs do not determine our ends as if something outside of ourselves ruled our fate, let alone ruled God's governance of His creation. This truth does not mean that our affairs stand for nothing, or that our own salvation is not bound up with what we do or believe. But it does indicate that what is really "serious" lies behind the surface of human affairs and has to do with our achieving our divine purpose. If God has any problem with us, it has to do with our wills, not with our world, for it is in the human will where things go wrong.

The point is best illustrated in the conversation between the soldier Michael Williams and the disguised King Henry on the night before Agincourt. Ordinary soldiers are sitting around waiting for the battle at dawn. They think the king quietly sitting beside them is just another soldier. Williams reflects that if "the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all, 'We died at such a place,' some swearing, some crying for a surgeon.... I am afeared there are few die well that die in a battle..." (IV, i). Initially, Williams seeks to make someone else, preferably the king, responsible for his own internal status before God. The gore of battle is a good excuse for shunting this blame from oneself.

Henry, pretending to be just another soldier, challenges the position that he is responsible for the moral condition of his individual soldiers. Rather, he thinks, each soldier is responsible for his own faults. "Every subject's duty is the king's, but every subject's soul is his own," Henry affirms. To this, Williams, in the name of all common soldiers in all the armies of mankind, agrees, "'Tis certain, every man that dies ill, the ill is upon his own head—the king is not to answer it." The will of God is achieved for each individual in war no less than in peace. There are no external solutions to our relationship with God.

It is true that the end of war was always conceived to be peace, a tradition from Plato himself, and certainly from Saint Augustine. The most serious question we can confront, the most dangerous one, however, is not what we would do in war, but what we would do in peace. The real "war" only begins when the wars of battle are over. It is not without amusement and fascination that Plato began the discussion in the *Laws* with an account of how much old and young men could drink. Plato was not an advocate of Alcoholics Anonymous or a lush, and Socrates apparently could drink anyone under the table and show no signs of being out of control. But Plato would have understood the conversation of Henry and Williams. Plato was almost the first to realize that the activities of joy are more profound and more potentially dangerous than any war. The virtue of courage is the one that has to do with our staying alive or dying honorably. But

it is prudence and the contemplative and supernatural virtues that have to do with our living well.

IV

When we are young, we begin to read war stories, adventure stories, and mystery stories; we are caught up in the world's failures, which we are sure we can correct. And therefore we are genuinely perplexed by what life has in store after the war is over, the adventure ended, and the mystery solved. It all seems so boring without the adventure of battle. We are told in romances that "they lived happily ever after," but this strikes us as meaning that the heroes and heroines had nothing left to do. What indeed is there left to do when all else, when all the serious things are done? Plato, in the seventh book of the *Laws*, gives a hint of what is in store for us.

On a day's walk to a religious shrine on Crete, the Athenian Stranger is speaking to Klinias, a local soldier and statesman. The Stranger had just told the old gentleman from Crete that only God is worthy of serious attention. Man is not the "measure of all things," as the Greek philosopher Pythagoras had maintained and much of modern thought has echoed. Rather, man has been devised by God as a "plaything," an affirmation that sounds to us, on first hearing it, as it did to the two men listening to the Athenian, insulting. We are not prepared to hear our wars, economies, and policies so denigrated. The Athenian Stranger goes on to affirm, as if to emphasize the point, that the fact that man is a mere plaything of God is indeed the "best" thing about him (803c).

Klinias does not quite understand this perplexing remark. Indeed, Klinias is very modern. The whole modern argument against God is that He has distracted us from the really important things—our own lot, our own making of a world that is ours alone to redeem, our efforts to make the world safe for democracy, our drive to alleviate poverty and sickness and even death. Anything devoted to the transcendent is so much distraction. Indeed, religion is not merely the opium of the people, but the rival of man. We are not free if we worship a God who has made us an image or a plaything. For if it is possible we might not have existed at all, then we cannot be so important. Freedom, for us, means not only having no golden strings attached to us guiding us to the right action but also not even having instructions as to what a human being *is*. The opposition to God is therefore presented to us as exhilarating, humanistic, confidence-giving, all-absorbing, and yes, serious. We can begin to be "serious" about ourselves, it seems, only when God is dead, and, as Nietzsche added, we are the ones who killed Him.

The Athenian's response to this worry about the downgrading of human importance contains the essence of what I want to emphasize here:

Nowadays, presumably, they [the people] suppose the serious things are for the sake of the playful things, for it is held that the affairs pertaining to war, being serious matters, should be run well for the sake of peace. But the fact is that in war there is not and will not be by nature either play or, again, an education that is at any time worthy of our discussion; yet this is what we assert is for us, at least, the most serious thing. Each

person should spend the greatest and best part of his life in peace. What then is the correct way? One should live out one's days playing at certain games—sacrificing, singing, and dancing.... (803 d–e)

Plato identifies sacrifice, song, and dance not only with play, but also with what a person should spend most of his life doing.

Sacrifice, song, and dance, then, are what we should be doing to honor God in times of peace. That is to say, at peace, we should be about ritual, about what is done that need not be done, about what is beautiful that need not be, about what exists that need not exist at all. This activity is what we should be about. Plato recalls that same teaching found in the early myths about the founding of the muses and the origins of the world. The gods had looked about after they had created everything perfectly to wonder if anything was left out. And they found, in a marvelous insight, that there was no one to praise what was created, and so we have the muses, the inspirations of song, poetry, dance, and the arts.

To this quite astonishing presentation of what is important in human affairs, the Spartan Megillus, the third participant in the conversation that took place on the way to Knossos that midsummer afternoon, protested to the Athenian, “Stranger, you are belittling our human race in every way.” Surely nothing is more important than human affairs, and of course war, business, and the affairs of the city are the real human affairs. For mankind longs to have something important to do that is its own, something not dependent on anything but itself.

The Athenian Stranger realized the perplexity of his two companions. He knew that to say that human affairs are really quite unserious, quite unimportant in the order of things, would seem so outlandish, so extreme, that what he was saying could not be understood. So he said to the Spartan gentleman: “Don't be amazed, Megillus, but forgive me! For I was looking away toward God and speaking under the influence of that experience when I said what I did just now. So let our race be something that is not lowly then, if that is what you cherish, but worthy of a certain seriousness” (804b). Notice what is said here. The Stranger realized that poor Megillus was a good politician, a soldier, from a good city. The Stranger had not meant that human affairs were of no seriousness at all, but compared to the “madness” of the divine breaking into each person's world, they were relatively insignificant. The Stranger did not intend to say that the affairs of the world were nothing. He meant something even more wondrous: that the affairs of God were infinitely greater than the most fascinating of human affairs.⁴

Plato had never forgotten that the politicians killed the philosopher. The philosopher finally had to set up a city in speech, if he were to live in harmony with those who had power, a city that Saint Augustine later on saw could only come from revelation. But the purpose of philosophy, at its best, was to teach something of the contemplative life to the politician who was so busy with worldly enterprises that he did not know what was really important in human affairs. Was there a way to do this? Both Plato and Aristotle thought that music and poetry would help. They both understood the importance of play, of something done for its own sake, something that was worth watching for itself.

The problem of contemplation was not to create God but to discover Him. And this discovery initially consisted in having at least some experience of freedom, of sheer fascination and delight that had no reward but itself.

“We have not made cricket and football professional because of any astonishing avarice or any new vulgarity,” G. K. Chesterton wrote on August 25, 1906.

We have made them professional because we would have them perfect. We have dedicated men to them as to some god of an inhuman excellence. We care more for football than for the fun of playing football. The modern Englishman cares more for cricket than for being a cricketer. And having taken the frivolous things seriously, we naturally take the serious things frivolously. Our Derby is the most important thing in England.^s

I do not often disagree with Chesterton, but in this I do. The watching of a good game is not merely frivolous. Without getting into the question of the abuse of sports, I think that Chesterton was right in his basic point. We do like our sports “perfect.” In caring more for watching a game of football than playing it, we attest, I think, to a kind of wonder, a kind of fascination about something taking place before us that absorbs our attention, if only for a moment.

Even Aristotle admitted that this moment of beholding was not “serious,” but he knew it was free, for its own sake. I suspect that the sophisticated critics of spectatorship miss the real point about them. Good games and sporting events are the normal and symbolic experiences most people have that might teach them to understand something of God, to understand how something could be for its own sake. This experience teaches us how it is possible that something we might contemplate is something we might contemplate forever if it were forever fascinating.

V

The Feast Day of Saint Elizabeth Seton is January 4. To conclude the Office of that day, there is a brief conference that she gave to her sisters. In it, she asks them,

What are our real trials? By what name shall we call them? One cuts herself out a cross of pride; another, one of causeless discontent; an-other, one of restless impatience or peevish fretfulness. But is the whole any better than children’s play if looked at with the common eye of faith? Yet we know that our God calls us to a holy life, that he gives us every grace, every abundant grace; and though we are so weak of our-selves, this grace is able to carry us through every obstacle and difficulty.

Plato compared our lives to “playthings,” while Mother Seton saw our sins and faults as mere “children’s play” before the mystery of God. If we are given “every grace, every abundant grace,” as she put it, does this not mean that human affairs cannot be “serious”

but frivolous until they are seen in their intention, until they are seen in the light of God's vision, his watching of our deeds and hearts—our response to what is not of our own making? Let me recall some basic themes of what I have been saying, themes that recall how our lives are noble precisely because, in Plato's sense, they are "unserious":

"Is the whole any better than children's play?"

"'Tis certain, every man that dies ill, the ill is upon his own head—the king is not to answer for it."

"It belongs to the divine goodness, as it brought things into existence, so to lead them to their end."

"Only God is worthy of serious attention."

"One should live out one's days playing at certain games—sacrificing, singing, and dancing."

"Stranger, you belittle the human race in every way."

"Don't be amazed, Megillus, but forgive me! For I was looking away toward God."

"I run to win the prize to which God calls me."

The unseriousness of human affairs is, to conclude, the consequence of understanding the primacy of God. Real things are not less because other real things are more. If the whole of what we do—if the whole world—is merely "child's play," as Plato also intimated, it is not because there is no drama among us. Rather, it is because we are already included in a drama of infinitely greater grandeur than anything we could possibly make or even imagine by ourselves.

Each of us has his own drama before God. God leads us—monks and soldiers, kings and paupers, the happy and the sad—to His own end. In this sense, we are equal. The secular world reduces our lives to the here and now or at best to a mere transcultural reality. It is true that we always must find ourselves in a here and now, in a place that is a particular place. But we reach forth for that which is transcendent. If "only God is worthy of serious attention," it is because no good less than He is worthy of us.

We respond to God best in the freest of our activities—Plato's sacrificing, singing, and dancing. We do not belittle our race when we acknowledge our real place in the order of things. We are important, yet God attracts and calls us. We seek the prize to which we are called, not the one we create for ourselves. When we find only ourselves, we find Hell. But when we find that we are made for a delight that already exists at the end of things, we find Joy.