

The Existential Christian Vision In The Fiction of André Dubus

- Thomas E. Kennedy

I reject any set of rules that keeps people off the dance floor.
- André Dubus

André Dubus published his first story in *The Sewanee Review* in 1963, the last he wrote before his untimely death in 1999 in a 1996 issue of *Epoch*. Both were later reprinted in his final story collection, *Dancing After Hours* (New York: Knopf, 1996). A study of the stories he published in the course of those thirty-six years shows the development of an existential Christian vision whose aim was, I believe, to elucidate the unity and harmony of spirit and body — to explore humanity's power to define itself within the context of a faith in Christ's teachings.

At a time when, for better or worse, American fiction showed a tendency to focus on the navel of its own technique, the fiction of Andre Dubus distinguished itself as indefatigably realistic, consistently concerned with this existential Christian vision of a world which human beings must live in, a temporal span which, being alive, they must traverse, and within which they must act.

Dubus began to publish in a decade whose fictional spearhead declared war on realism. Overloaded perhaps with the sociopolitical gore being spewed out daily from newspapers, TV screens, and radios, many fiction writers began to retreat to more purely imaginative realms, to a contemplation of the technical implements of their craft: Latin American magic realism, the Donald Barthelme jump-cut collage, the Cooverian infinite replay, the John Hawkes time shuffle, the William Burroughs page shuffle, the John Barthian anti-illusionist illusion.

It was a decade whose best-selling literary novels depicted American society as a madhouse run by a madwoman or fluked by a catch clause, whose heroes were a wild nihilistic gingerman, an epic onanist, a computer-assisted goatboy; when William H. Gass issued intriguing theories that fiction is a realm which houses neither people nor events but words and words only; when novels took the form of psychiatric rants, of cold-blooded facts fleshed into bloody fiction that followed real-life killers to the gallows, of subjectivized journalism parading as instant historical-political novels; when

even an established realist like Bernard Malamud was publishing stories with a bird whose vocabulary made Poe's Raven look dumb and novels whose artist protagonist conversed with the devil over the artistic form and content of a hole in the ground.

Those were marvelous times for fiction, and one might trace the rebellion back to Beckett, to Joyce, to Gertrude Stein, to many another European or transplanted American modernist anti-novelist or new-novelist or neo-new-innovator.

A 'new fiction' was proclaimed by theorists like Joe David Bellamy which in retrospect might seem less 'new' than reactionary, in a non-pejorative sense of the word – a rejection of the form which had evolved in the immediate past century to hearken back to techniques closer to those of subjective romantics like Hawthorne and Poe or to the absurdist strategies of Gogol or the earlier experiments of Sterne. The story of manners — developed into fine subtleties and nuances by Flaubert (sometimes), Chekhov, and James, who used the intricacies of human behavior as metaphor for the drift of movement of the spirit, making their abstractions from the mystery in which human beings daily live — seemed largely rejected as insufficient to deal with the immediate political pressures seen to be stifling the spirit of humanism.

In this environment, ex-Marine Corps Captain Andre Dubus, pursuing a master of fine arts degree in the heart of the heart of the country's university writing programs, was working out an arrestingly original story dramatizing a line in St. John, in which Christ prays to the Father, "I do not ask that you keep them out of the world, but that you keep them from evil."

The story, "If They Knew Yvonne," published in the *The North American Review* in 1969, selected by Martha Foley as one of the Best American Short Stories of that year, later collected in Dubus's *Separate Flights* and to be frequently anthologized elsewhere, might in many ways be viewed as a key to the eleven collections of fiction to follow from Dubus over the next three decades.

How to live out one's part in a material world with spirit intact, if not unscathed, by evil? How to grow well — as the protagonist of Yvonne puts it referring to his young nephews, thinking of their "strong little bodies" and kind hearts.

Dubus left the problem of solving his technical writing problems on his desk; the only problems addressed by his stories are human, moral ones. The world of Dubus's fiction is one in which the word 'sin' again became valid, for it is a world in which men and women are responsible for their actions, capable of wrong and perhaps also therefore of right, capable at least of seeking to avoid evil, at the very least of regretting the evil for which they are responsible and, in their commitment to this, of approaching love, communion with the God who gave us the new command: To love one another.

What other way do we have out of despair, out of the depression of moral vacuum?: "...for years he hasn't thought about sin," Dubus wrote in his story "Going Under," "hasn't believed in sin, hasn't used the word sin, but now he is thinking depression is a sin, perhaps the only sin that many people can commit."

This "rediscovery" of sin and, perhaps more important, the identification of sin as an affront against our own spirit as well as the human beings for whom we are responsible, to whom we must commit ourselves if we are to tap our souls on the "march to death" (same story), is, I believe, a vital part of Dubus's fiction: How have we not lived right? In what way are we adulterating ourselves and our love? I do not mean to imply that a visit to Dubus's world is like entering a revival tent; on the contrary, these fictions occur in a world of moral complexity. We meet few black-and-whites here. We witness human beings, turning on the spit of their humanity. But we also witness moments of moral epiphany, recognitions for the character, or at least for the reader, which give sometimes the liberation, sometimes the burden of comprehension.

But before this moment of existential morality can be reached, clerical confusion must be surpassed, a faith in Christ based within existential parameters must be established.

In "Yvonne", we encounter the clerical misconception early in the story in the person of the eighth grade teacher, Brother Thomas, who informs his class of pubescent boys that sexual pleasure is reserved for marriage; "self-abuse" is a mortal sin which bars one from communion with God and could result in hell. Receiving Communion is a source of sanctifying grace; to die with the Eucharist on one's tongue guarantees immediate entrance into heaven. "In a way," the Brother says softly, looking strangely out the window, "you'd actually be doing someone a favor if you killed him when he had just received the Eucharist." (Hamlet in negative, refusing to kill his uncle at prayer.)

The protagonist of Dubus's story, Harry, soon finds his body torn by these metaphysical concepts — to the extent that he considers castrating himself. But he recognizes in his moment of agony the unimpeachability of the human body — it is there because it is meant to be there.

Over the years that follow Harry continues to confess his repeated sins of "self-abuse". Then he meets Yvonne and suddenly his private vice seems meaningless. He no longer is able to confess it as a sin, does not believe it be a sin and finally he tells this to the priest in confession and is refused forgiveness and he cannot bring himself to receive the sacrament of communion without the priest's absolution. Thus his courage to act against his own deceit, his refusal to confess something that he does

not believe to be a sin, cuts him off from the sacrament of love, from the ritual of union with Christ, and he suffers a period of limbo.

Finally, though, he tries again. He goes to another priest and tells the whole story, how he does not believe that masturbating is a sin or that making love is a sin, but that his sin with Yvonne was of using her for sex when he didn't love her and of bragging to some other boys about what he had done with her.

In response to this act of spiritual courage and insight by Harry, whose object clearly is to maintain a direct communion with his religion through which he has communed with the Divine and developed a moral sense strong enough to force him to stand up against even the religion itself, the priest shifts the focus for Harry (and the reader) by quoting John for him: "I do not pray that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from evil." For a penance, the priest tells Harry to say "Alleluia" three times.

It is interesting to compare Harry Dugal with another, more celebrated onanist of the 1960s, Alexander Portnoy. Both Harry and Portnoy are distressed by their compulsions, both are dealing with them via confession — one to a priest, the other to an analyst, but perhaps the main difference between them is that Harry — like Poe's sailor — responds to the maelstrom into which he is being drawn by studying its governing principles with a view to securing his deliverance from it. Portnoy dives into the whirlpool headlong, driven mad by his mother's unconsciousness of the unconscious. Harry, like most of Dubus's characters, is not concerned with the Freudian unconscious — the awareness he seeks to develop is one in which he is able to distinguish right from wrong in order to be able to find harmony with his own spirit. Harry's confession ends with a chant of joy, Portnoy's with a page-long primal scream.

There is a kind of sublime obstinacy in the character of Harry Dugal which is, I think, the kernel around which much of Dubus's fiction crystallizes. His people know their sins or at least sense them, look hard for some clue to where their moral knot has tangled — the little death of being a stranger between the thighs of a stranger, of lying to simulate love, of debasing love by tapping into the darkness of its underside — or for that matter — like Luke Ripley in "A Father's Story" — sinning to preserve and honor the love of his daughter and taking the consequences of a debate with God for the rest of his life.

Dubus's Christian vision is not confined to a chapel or a church or a confessional, but is expressed in his portrayal of couples, of people together, pairing, interacting, as an exploration of worldly existence and its reflection of and in the spirit.

In a *New Yorker* review of *Voice from the Moon*, John Updike suggests that one of the theological implications of the book is "that in seeking relief from solitude we sin

and fall inevitably into pain.” Thus, “with a distinct sense of loss,” Updike continues, “we see the Christly young Ritchie turn toward a human comforter at the end of the novel.” Perhaps seeking relief from solitude does inevitably lead to pain, but I believe that Dubus lead his characters to the avoidance of a fear of that pain. The Christianity in his fiction is existential, seeks to embrace both human existence and God. Pain awaits the movement from solitude; yes, but so does love, which exists only in community — in, as Dubus put it, “the series of gestures with escalating and enduring commitments” which was his definition of love.

In some of the later stories, toward the end of his life, most especially in the masterful “Dancing After Hours,” Dubus refined these concepts even further, but it seems to me they exist practically everywhere in his stories, in his books: Christianity is love. Not the love defined by an institution, but love in its daily expression between human beings, as defined by human beings.

Note: This essay has been adapted and expanded from a presentation to the 2002 Annual Conference of the Associated Writing Programs and draws upon material originally published in 'Revue Delta' (Université Paul Valère, 1987) and in 'Andre Dubus: A Study of the Short Fiction' (Boston: Twayne, 1988).