"Never Truly Members": Andre Dubus’s Patriarchal Catholicism

Lucy Ferriss


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0277-335X%28199721%2962%3A2%3C39%3A%22TMADP%22%20CO%3B2-A

South Atlantic Review is currently published by South Atlantic Modern Language Association.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/sahtml.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
"Never Truly Members": Andre Dubus's Patriarchal Catholicism

LUCY FERRISS

“They were never truly members of that faith, and so could not have left it.” — “Rose” (213)

With Andre Dubus’s writing life still in its summertime, we, his readers, seem already to have planted him in the patch of ground we most wanted to fill—that fertile place, looking out on the human condition, that was being shunned by the metafictionists and minimalists of the 1970s and 1980s. Critics have praised Dubus’s keen realism, his craftsmanship, the care he takes to remove the scaffolding that obscures our suspension of disbelief. According to the one book-length study of his work, by Thomas Kennedy, Dubus’s fiction is “consistently concerned with an existential Christian vision of a real world in which real human beings must live” (ix). Connected to this realist label is the other that has always attached to Dubus: that he is a writer’s writer. Had he not existed, we might venture, the literary community would have invented him.

Without denying the evident truth of some characteristic observations of Dubus—his classic opening lines, his attention to tangible physical detail—I would like to draw forth his connection to Roman Catholic sexual politics and to the Church’s so-called “theological anthropology,” a way of denoting the sacramental life in terms of male-female relations and conversely of denoting male-female relations in terms of the relation of a spiritual God to a physical humankind. “I see the whole world as a Catholic,” Dubus has said, “so I can’t help but see my characters
through the eyes of a Catholic....I think it pervades my writing” (Kennedy xx). That his religious viewpoint penetrates the bedroom implies not prudishness or censorship but a heightening of the power of sexual love: “To love,” Dubus says, “one must almost live like a saint....Love doesn’t fail us. We fail it. We are defeated by our pain” (Kennedy xx).

Thus love of God and love of another human being are continually equated in Dubus’s fiction, with one significant difference: in the human realm, lover and beloved are erotic beings and the definition of human love contains some erotic element. Moreover, just as Catholicism and sexual love are the abiding concerns of the texts, each has its dark, destructive side. According to Dubus, the Catholic Church in its rigid, moralizing manifestation (“If They Knew Yvonne”) represses and warps the human psyche, just as shallow, egoistic sex (“Voices from the Moon”) destroys the very love it purports to express. But Dubus’s careful, conscious balancing contains a flaw. In the relationship of lover to beloved represented in the Catholic Church, the lover is God, denoted as “He” and embodied in a male Son; the beloved is God’s Church, denoted as “she” and figured by the Virgin mother. In his recent Apostolic Letter—a solid contemporary source of Church doctrine, and one that expresses those mainstream Church attitudes most likely to have influenced Dubus—John Paul II reminds his congregation that the spousal love figured in God’s relationship to the Church is invariably that of a male bridegroom to a female bride rather than vice versa, and that “precisely because Christ’s divine love is the love of a Bridegroom, it is the model and pattern of all human love, men’s love in particular” (Mulieris Dignitatem, par. 25; my emphasis). Returned to its nonmetaphoric, human origins, this relationship cannot help but retain its gendered character. But what happens to the interweaving of erotic and sacramental love when the lover in the human realm is female? This is a question that bothers Dubus deeply, and he sets forth in several of his stories either to explore or to finesse it.

In one of Dubus’s major works of short fiction, “A Father’s Story,” the main character Luke Ripley observes of his daughter’s friends that “it was womanhood they were entering, the deep forest of it, and no matter how many women and men too are saying these days that there is little difference between us, the truth is
that men find their way into that forest only on clearly marked trails, while women move about in it like birds" (462). The image is central to both Dubus's view of gender relations and his representation of a certain branch of Catholic thought. Initially, the forest figures womanhood. But as such it soon devolves to metaphoric nonsense, since women would naturally be more comfortable in womanhood (as men in manhood), and its forest would not be one a man would find his way into except as a voyeur—hardly a blow struck for an advocate of la différence. Rather, the forest quickly broadens to figure sexually aware adult life. Following Dubus's metaphor in this sense we find that women do not encounter that life but are part of it, just as they enjoy freedom of movement but no control over their destiny; whereas the men marking trails appear to envy those who “move about in it like birds,” without expressing any desire to trade places with them. Recent Catholic apologists create similar figurations. In George Tavard’s interpretation of Catholic doctrine, woman “is created as the perfecting element . . . the ‘being-in-relation’” (8). Pius XI’s 1930 encyclical offers a hierarchical structure for marriage based on St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians: “For if the man is the head, the woman is the heart, and as he occupies the chief place in ruling, so she may and ought to claim for herself the chief place in love” (15). John Paul II’s encyclical refers to the “anthropological base” of the Church’s reasoning that women, meant to “receive love,” shall find their “vocation” in motherhood. And the investigations of Catholic psychologist F.J.J. Buytendijk have produced theories of male and female movement that read like echoes of Luke Ripley; finding that men emphasize the concluding phase of each step while walking whereas women’s steps are less accentuated, he writes that “the movements of males consist of countless endings; the movements of females are endlessly continuous” (Hauke 89).

Closely entwined with such gender-based imagery is a pattern at first startling to find in Dubus but consistent with his presentation of Church doctrine: no woman in the stories ever attempts to construct a dialogue with the divine or to carry on a spiritual life outside the symbolic dimensions of sexual or maternal love. For men, Dubus has pointed out the need to transcend the sexual relation; the idea of a woman’s satisfying “all [a man’s] spiritual yearning is, I think, damned near impossible” (Kennedy 99). Thus
the male characters who show promise in the stories either reject false religion for true or are able, as in “Voices from the Moon” and “A Father’s Story,” to cut straight to the notion of communion with God. Conversely, religion (meaning Catholicism) exists for female characters only as the superficial, outworn strictures—as when the tragic Rose’s “Catholic beliefs” cause her to “practice rhythm” or when Polly in “The Pretty Girl” thinks of Mass mostly as a masquerade where “she did not pray with concentration, but she did not think either, and her mind wandered from the Mass to the faces of people around her” (88).

In the patristic tradition, of course, virgins and other female religious figures have privileged access to God. Great female mystics like the medieval Margery Kempe, who bore fourteen children before turning to a life of pilgrimage, took vows of chastity in order to carry forward a dialogue with Jesus. None of Dubus’s women, however, is inclined toward abstinence, and so it is the Church’s figuration of noncelibate women we need to evoke. That traditional figuration has “tended to separate . . . the liturgical service of the Lord from contact with women” (Tavard 119)—nowhere more notably than in recent encyclicals refusing ordination to women. The basic presumption behind these official pronouncements is that anyone offering the Eucharist in persona Christi must be male, as Christ and his chosen followers were male. Embedded in this decision, however, is the Bridegroom/Br”ide relationship of God to Church in which “being the bride, and thus the ‘feminine’ element, becomes a symbol of all that is ‘human’” (Mulieris, par. 25). Men, then, take on an androgynous role in the Church—embodiments of the Bridegroom in human marriage, participants in the Bride role of the Church—whereas women, as Bride only, represent what John Paul II refers to as “the feminine ideal” exemplified by Mary, who never gives love before she has received it and who “is measured by the order of love . . . based on the very fact of her being a woman within all the interpersonal relationships which, in the most varied ways, shape society and structure the interaction between all persons” (Mulieris, par. 29). This “feminine genius” loads women with particular responsibility for other human beings, while denying them that degree of participation in the divine most forcefully symbolized by the priest’s initiation of the sacrament.

Dubus has been lauded for his deeply felt characterizations of
women and his ability to tell stories from a female point of view. “Thus, in Dubus’s fiction about women,” writes Thomas Kennedy, “we find central questions of identity and intimate human communication” (22). My focusing attention on the absence of female dialogue with God may seem either an attempt to qualify that praise or a new and cynical questioning of the inherent value of religious transcendence in Dubus’s work. I mean it as neither. Remarkably, the two stories that Dubus himself has named as his strongest pieces of fiction, “Adultery” and “Molly,” also contain the strongest expression of his hierarchical faith and the place of gender within that faith.

In looking, first, at “Adultery,” we do well to remind ourselves that not only official Church doctrine but popular interpretation of that doctrine has not always been consistent. Flannery O’Connor’s Catholicism, for instance, with its reliance on the notion of Grace, can be seen as a partial and even warped expression of the Church’s views; the sexual behavior of the Catholic women in Mary Gordon’s novels, and the consequences for them, are markedly different from what we find in Dubus. Novelists, in other words, are not theologians, and are obliged neither to voice Church dogma nor to account for discrepancies between their representation of Catholic views and that of the official Church. Dubus’s fictional women generally partake of Christian womanliness as conceptualized by fairly extremist Catholic theologians like Manfred Hauke, who engages in not only theological but physical anthropology: “Because of the nature of the female reproductive organs,” Hauke writes, “women are, to a greater extent than men, ‘sexual beings.’ . . . The body’s bone structure tends . . . to be weaker in women than in men. . . . A woman’s skin is softer. . . . The female figure appears to converge more toward the center of the trunk. . . . The male, accordingly, is more strongly directed toward the ‘outside,’ and the female, toward the ‘inside’” (87–88). Edith, of “Adultery,” who is “conscious of her size . . . small and slender” (428), is no exception to Hauke’s model. She is having a affair with an ex-priest, Joe Ritchie, who embodies Dubus’s idea of the sacrament of human love. As Dubus said in an interview,

I guess Joe Ritchie and I are set in that line—the lover must look outward toward the beloved. . . . To love, one must almost
live like a saint, as one must live like a saint to perform really well in everything else; by that I mean the focus, the commitment, the control of self that a saint must have. . . What Joe Ritchie wants and does get is the spiritual love merged with physical. He wants the love which is in harmony with his love for God, for the deity, in harmony with his spiritual love, not a substitute for it, but a movement toward it; a commitment as total as his commitment to Christ. (Kennedy 99)

The spirituality of Joe's secular love is inconceivable without his religious devotion, which is both free and deeply felt, unbound by institutional caveats; like St. Paul's ideal of the male who plays the role of "Bride" to Christ (Letter to the Ephesians), he is most completely fulfilled when he has a female role in regard to God and a male role in regard to human sexual contact. Of course, Joe's brand of Catholicism—like Dubus's—is no longer threatened by, say, the controversy over birth control or the stigma of masturbation. Further, the story of his priesthood and his decision to leave it, which follows and parallels Edith's story of her marriage to Hank and its corruption, contains within it the story of the women confessants who provide the window through which he can envision his future life. These women sin (as Edith will sin, with him), but their sins are "instinctual," having "nothing to do with God"; they are also exclusively sexual, as opposed to the "calculated" and multivalent sins of men. Women thereby become "their own temples," their confessions "a distant and dutiful salute to the rules and patterns of men" (443); in effect, they are either sinful by nature or are free of the sort of sin a priest might absolve. It is this inward-dwelling nature of women that provides Joe the "female reception he had to have" (442). And it is this same analysis of female nature that leads Hauke to write, "The fact that women are guided more strongly by intuition and feeling also means that they are more open to concrete experience, whereas men always behave more critically" (93); this unreservedness leads in turn to "a greater readiness for devotedness," which both places higher stakes on a woman's capacity for sin and denies women the more "decisive" action of turning toward God "if doing so clashes with some current mood or feeling" (94). John Paul II's encyclical couches the difference more guardedly but just as decisively when he describes virginity in
terms of “the naturally spousal predisposition of the feminine personality” *Mulieris*, par. 20) and speaks of the “greatest event in human history” as having happened, not by any exercise of Mary’s will, but simply “in and through her” *Mulieris*, par. 31). Hauke and the Pope are preparing an argument for women’s “vocation” and a male priesthood; Dubus is laying the ground for Edith's literal and figurative epiphany with the dying Joe.

Edith is not unaware of sin and redemption. When she has her first extramarital affair, before Joe, she immediately categorizes it as a sin, one to which she has “committed herself” and in which she takes a certain pride (“She was able to sin and love at the same time” [429]). By considering her pride, not in its late-twentieth-century translation as self-esteem, but with its original connotation of sin, we can drive a wedge into the self-deception of Edith’s pose. Heady with her own triumph, she considers words like *sin* and *cleansing* without ascribing value to them; her psychological gesture is “a distant and dutiful salute to the rules and patterns of men.” Although she is sinning, she does not yet understand in what way. The difference between Edith and Joe at this early stage finds its correlative in the ways they each frame fear. Edith’s fear, akin to that of the lonely farm-woman whose story she hears, is everywhere and nowhere, “the house enclosing and caressing her with some fear she could not name” (437). Joe’s fear is specific and exhilarating; it lies in his repeated thought, “I must have a woman” and engenders not loneliness but kinship “with all those alive and dead who ... suddenly made the statement whose result they had both feared and hoped for” (441).

And Joe, a Catholic man, surmounts his fear through transcendence, through a “leap of the heart of man toward the heart of God” (444)—a movement echoed in the Catholic notion, described by Hauke, of a “thrust outward” from the “center of the subject ... the essence of the masculine qualities” (142). Moreover, Joe equates his connection to God with his sexual connection to Edith:

He believed that faith had no more to do with intellect than love did; that touching her he knew he loved her and loving her he touched her; and that his flesh knew God through touch as
it had to [in] a leap caused by the awareness of death. Like us, he had said. . . . When we make love, he said. We do it in the face of death. . . . Our bodies aren't just meat then; they become statement too; they become spirit. (444)

When Joe speaks to Edith of this sacramental union, he pushes the parallel of Eucharist and lovemaking to the point where it seems to demand an equivalent notion of transcendence from her. To a reader whose frame of reference lies outside Catholic constructions of gender, her lack of response is disappointing: when Joe asks, “If we can do that with each other then why can’t we do it with God, and he with us?” she replies, “I don’t know. . . . I’ve never thought about it” (444). But Joe is not disappointed: “Don’t,” he tells her, “it’s too simple” (444). And when he later pushes the question further he makes clear what form her transcendence can take, how she can escape being “just meat”:

He maintained and was committed to the belief that making love could parallel and even merge with the impetus and completion of the Eucharist. Else why make love at all, he said. . . . But if she were free to love him, each act between then would become a sacrament, each act a sign of their growing union in the face of God and death. (445)

In other words, although it is necessary for Joe to commune with God to experience Bridehood, it is not similarly necessary for Edith. So long as she communes with Joe—lovingly and freely, free of Hank—the act of sexual love in which they are engaged becomes Eucharistic: the two of them united together form the Bride. Hank becomes, as it were, Edith’s false Church, Joe her true, so that at the end “she is telling Hank goodbye, feeling that goodbye in her womb and heart” (453)—her movement from false to true occasioned, like Joe’s, by a sudden recognition of death.

Edith’s ability to locate transcendence in love for Joe accords with a theological view of women’s immanence, whereby “women are more strongly embedded in the near world” (Hauke 141); this same doctrine houses “the central idea that womanhood is essentially receptive” (Tavard 132). At one time, Dubus writes, Edith “wanted to fall in love with God” (428); now, having been
through the fire of adultery and love for a dying Joe, it is Joe she encounters instead. Making love, her pleasure comes when Joe "kisses her and enters with a thrust she receives . . . [and] she knows she holds his entire history in her body" (413). As Joe himself receives the Eucharist in the last rites, she parallels that sacrament's desire for union with the holy as she "has the urge to fleshless insert her ribs within his, mesh them" (453). If Joe must feel an "earth-rooted love for God in order to live with certainty as a man," Edith must feel an earth-rooted love for a man in order to live as a woman. In Joe, and not beyond, lies her salvation.

"Adultery" might be considered realistic in the movement of its narrative—the characters' small, clumsy gestures and half-finished sentences represent life as most of us know it—although its concern with thematic parallels and with words like "receive," "know," "touch," "body," lifts the story beyond realism to symbolism. But "Molly," Dubus's most profound experiment in female perspective, denies him the label of realist almost from the start. When Molly is nine, Dubus writes, her divorced mother, Claire, talks to her during their "cocktail hour." And not only talks but discourses in long monologues about things like sex and the Vietnam war:

"And there I was with my little life. Working with real-estate agents, and lawyers, and banks—Jesus: banks—and architects and building contractors. And I think everything would have been blurred. For me, anyway, if it weren't for the war. I think I would have figured this is the way the world is. And maybe that's how these people got that way when they were young. Maybe they just figured this was it: lying and fucking over people. . . . I was pregnant with you. And I sat there and knew we did not live alone anymore, me and you inside of me. I was part of the war." (121)

Claire has been drinking; but these are not meant as alcoholic monologues, the sort of gibberish that sends a listening child the message your parent is out of control. Instead, "By the time Molly was nine she was a sensitive and eager listener who understood everything, it seemed, that Claire told her. . . . Molly was able to connect her own moral landscape with Claire's" (122). Dubus
has stepped out of the "real" world of mother-daughter relations—possibly because he does not understand those relations, but more likely in order to create a gendered point of view based, not on a particular female character, but on the ways that women use language to construct action. Likewise, "Molly" does not refer explicitly to religious faith but uses the narration of Claire's moral universe and Molly's rite of passage to realize the hollowness of life without transcendence, which is also the life these women lead.

In place of the references to sexual union as *sacrament or touch* in "Adultery," Dubus in "Molly" plays variants on the theme of carnal *knowing*. Claire has learned "that the desire to know another, and to be known by him, was futile" (122); but she can still describe the illusion of love to Molly as one of feeling "known." Why the experience should remain illusion, at least in regard to men, remains a mystery except in the unspoken Catholic grounding of the story. Turning again to contemporary Catholic theology, we find the idea that "women are more capable than men of paying attention to another person" (*Mulieris*, par. 18), whereas men "tend more to see the world in terms of obstacles and means" (Hauke, 92). Raymond, Claire’s ex-husband, is in these terms a monster of manhood, focused entirely on "obstacles and means" and relating more closely to potsherds than to his wife. But the project of knowledge fails with all men, Claire claims; and following the dichotomy above, she can be judged unwilling in her turn to understand the other choice—abandoning her own inherent "feminine genius" and construing knowledge as a tit-for-tat exchange rather than the fruit of union.

The question that is alive in "Molly" is whether Claire has passed her failure on to her daughter. Dubus dangles answers before us: after having oral sex with her best friend's brother Bruce, Molly tells her mother she wants to go out with him "to know things," and later Molly and Bruce talk:

"I don't even know you."
"Only for eight years."
"Belinda's big brother. You don't know me."
"I know you're a fox."
"For eight years?"
"Three."
"So what are we doing?"
"I don't know." (168)

The focus on knowing in this exchange, and its denial, imply that Molly and Bruce are treading the same ground that Claire has worn bare. The actual lovemaking between the young people is as painful in its super-realism as Claire's monologues are in their surrealism. As if to prove, not only the authenticity of Molly's point of view, but the raw factuality of the event, Dubus records everything from the car's gear shift in Molly’s back to the blood on her pants.

More important than the act itself, however, are two motifs preceding it that work to frame Molly's loss of virginity in terms of both the story itself and Dubus’s Catholicism. The first is Molly’s repeated intention not to make love with Bruce that night; to wait. Bruce has condoms but “won't need them,” she tells her mother; and to Bruce she announces, “I didn't come out here to make love.” Yet she does; and the change seems to come from the same awareness that prompts Edith’s decision to divorce Hank: the imminence of death.

It frightened her, that large black space that was not sea and sky at all, yet she stared at it, as though looking at the night of her death... All she saw was Molly Cousteau, not scattered ashes now, nor ashes drawn back and contained again by flesh and voice, and eyes with vision; but Molly as one tiny ash on the surface of the earth, looking into the depth of the universe, at the face of eternity. (170-71)

Concurrent with Molly’s gradually fading denial is her growing feeling concerning Bruce, that “she was his girl” (170). The naming of her status creates a new identity for Molly, much as Edith’s early desire, “to be a nice girl someone would want to marry” (413) creates her identity in her courtship and early marriage with Hank. In an earlier Dubus story, “Miranda Over the Valley,” Miranda states the desire baldly: “I want to be owned” (6). Love for these women involves the dissolution of the autonomous self, a dissolution that feels much the same whether it stems from a sudden awareness of the enormity of death or from
what Dubus has called the saintliness of the beloved, a figure he
takes from Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen:

Becoming the Beloved means letting the truth of our
Belovedness become enfleshed in everything we think, say, or
do... To become the Beloved we, first of all, have to claim that
we are taken. (39, 43)

To surrender one’s original self in love, to find freedom in sub-
mission, is a Christian directive for all people, but especially for
women, whose guiding force, Jesus’ mother Mary, in giving her-
s elf over to the Holy Ghost and the motherhood of Christ, ex-
emplifies “a ‘sincere gift’ of self to the inexpressible gift of the
love of the Bridegroom” (Mulieris par. 27). Paul VI’s address to
the Second Vatican Council envisioned woman not just as man’s
companion but as the embodiment of self-gift, “the supreme gift
of love... the accustomed heroism of sacrifice.” The trouble, for
Molly and Edith and other Dubus women, starts either when no
one appears strong enough to take possession (as in “Miranda”),
or when the intersection of love and death is a falsely imagined
one, like Molly’s concatenation of herself and Bruce with
Hemingway’s nova-like lovers in For Whom the Bell Tolls:

[Later] she could not give words to what she had felt holding
Bruce under the trees. She only knew she would never feel it
again. Long after she had wept for Maria and Robert, reading
in bed on a summer night, she could only think: There is no
Madrid, but she could not say that to Belinda, or even to Bruce
as they lay on her bed after school. (175)

Contrary to James Yaffe’s assertion that “‘Molly’ opens up the
possibility for motherhood and family happiness in a young girl”
(150), the story seems one of closure. The callow, forgivable
mistaking of a fleeting notion of death for true awareness of death,
and of dating status ("his girl") for true possession by a lover,
together close off the possibility of sacramental love and replace
it with a series of love-encounters ("the others waiting, in high
school and college and afterward" [175]), bringing Molly back
in line with her mother Claire, who believes “there was nothing
harmful in living a lie if you knew you were... How else could
you live, except to will yourself into an alteration of the truth you were dealt at birth?” (123).

And yet Molly’s gesture toward Bruce, the gesture she will strive to hold onto in memory—“she stepped forward and tightly held him, her heart weeping but not with sorrow, her body quivering but without passion or fear” (175)—is actually maternal more than sexual. The nonprocreative nature of sex with Bruce (like sex with Joe, for Edith) denies Molly the divine role accorded women by Augustine, who could not envision “in what sense the woman was made as a helper for the man if not for the sake of bearing children” (75). But the intensity of Molly’s postcoital gesture invokes the other side of the doctrinal coin: Bishop Fulton Sheen’s injunction to women to “realize” some “form of motherhood,” whether physical or symbolic (Yezerns 202). It is Molly’s “self-gift” to Bruce, not to receive his seed, but to make him feel that what he has done is all right, for “he stood at the edge of remorse, and if she did not hold him, she would lightly push him over” (175). It is through her nurturing attention to Bruce’s adolescent need, rather than through her deflowering, that Molly achieves womanhood; just as woman, according to scholastic thought, achieves her “dignity and vocation” through motherhood, whether physical or “according to the Spirit” (Mulieris par 14, 21; cf. Rom 8:14).

Far from being a realistic coming–of–age story, “Molly” is an exemplum, its moral so closely woven into the fabric of its narrative as to be invisible without an accompanying sermon. To ask how Molly will fare, for instance, in the “real” future awaiting her is to ask the wrong question. More to the point is the vision of womanliness and love presented, first by Claire and later by Molly. Does the vision accord with the reader’s ideals?—no, despite that pure gesture toward Bruce. Where then, Dubus begs, have Claire and Molly gone wrong?

Dubus’s answer to this sort of question, like his answer to the question Joe Ritchie implicitly poses for Edith—“Else why make love at all?”—poses a challenge to late twentieth–century feminism. Women who are “their own temples,” women who move about like birds in the forest, quickly become women whose participation in the temple or forest of the larger world is iconographic and impressionistic: their interest lies in the ways that
world inscribes itself in them. Thus in Dubus they consistently receive, as Edith Milton puts it, “a sexual answer for a spiritual need” (137). Claire, and to a lesser extent Molly, fail to recognize the power of self-gift; as Molly drifts toward a future where she cannot envision “something new waiting for her, something she had not done,” she tries to recall the sanctified moment: “[But] she still could not see them holding each other, with the rubber and her bloody pants near their feet, her body quivering with his. Bruce’s voice gave her another image: a boy she did not even know . . . and she shivered and opened her eyes to the snow and the dark sky” (176).

Yet insofar as the power of Dubus’s writing lies in his Christian, Catholic view, his women—the most essential aspect of that writing—need to be understood within that Christian, Catholic framework. Ironically, it is because of that framework itself—that is, because of doctrines differentiating male from female in both quotidian and spiritual life—that the Catholicism in Dubus’s view of women is less apparent than in his view of men. The faith of men like Joe Ritchie, Luke Ripley, and Richie Stowe is expressed not only in the ways they live their lives but explicitly, in their religious creeds and doubts. When they equate love of God and love of another human being, they do so consciously and by comparison. For Dubus’s women, viewed as they are through the lens of his faith, sacramental love is achieved not along with but through secular love. Expression of love toward another human being, whether erotic or maternal, is itself a kind of prayer or communion with the holy. According to Thomistic thought, woman “sanctifies herself by making herself available to those in need”—often to a man “who associates with a woman and in love enters a realm which is far deeper and wider than the two persons concerned” (Tavard 132, 141). Dubus figures this ethic in his view of Edith, cleaning the house to which her lover Joe will never return:

She looks out at the bright snow and the woods beyond: the spread and reaching branches of elms and birches and maples and tamaracks are bare; there are pines and hemlocks green in the sun. She almost stops working. Her impulse is to throw herself against the window, cover it with her body, and scream in the impotent rage of grief. But she does not break the rhythm
of her work: she continues to push the vacuum cleaner over the carpet, while behind her [Joe] watches the push and pull of her arms, the bending of her body, the movement of her legs. (449-50)

Pope John Paul II, like many of his predecessors, attempts to find parity in the creation of woman as Adam's helper in Genesis, but he clings to the fundamental male-female difference as essential, not simply to the creation of humankind, but to the character of a Church whose relationship to the divine is spousal. Thus he writes that "women must not appropriate to themselves male characteristics contrary to their own feminine 'originality,'" which itself has object status: "The words of the first man at the sight of the woman who had been created are words of admiration and enchantment, words which fill the whole history of man on earth" (Mulieris, par. 10). Like Adam, Joe seems "enchanted" by the feminine movement of Edith's body, at the same time that he considers his secular love for her an aspect of his sacral love for the divine.

Tavard has written, in a spirit of conciliation, that "it is in her relationship to man that woman discovers herself as woman; and she does not exist as woman except in that relationship" (228). The difficulty for a deeply Catholic writer like Andre Dubus may be that it is not only in her relationship to man but also in her relationship to the godhead that woman discovers herself as woman. That divine relationship accomplished (as it was, say, in mystics like Margery Kempe), she is no longer available for definition through human heterosexuality. Conversely, the sexual relationships in which Dubus's women find themselves come to comprise the woman-definition, lessening both the need for a relationship to the divine and their access to it. Men, on the other hand, have the Church's approval to "appropriate unto themselves" female characteristics each time that they consider themselves as loved by God. "The analogy of spousal love," John Paul II writes, "links what is 'masculine' to what is 'feminine,' since, as member of the Church, men too are included in the concept of 'Bride'" (Mulieris, par. 25). A man's love for a woman, like Joe's for Edith, in no way conflicts with his being the beloved of God.

I have written above that Dubus's brand of Catholicism as reflected in his fiction derives both from his own eclectic views
and from the views of relatively extreme theologians. The source of those views, as I have tried to suggest, lies nonetheless with mainstream Catholic doctrine as it is expressed by the contemporary Vatican as well as by the Church fathers. Such views are debatable, and are being debated constantly by women and men both within and outside the Church. My purpose has been not to take part in that specific debate, but to illustrate how Dubus’s literary aesthetic stems from his particular religious faith. Dubus’s reputation as one of those rare male writers who can create sympathetic, fully rounded female characters rests, I think, not only on his remarkable aptitude for characterization, but also on his deep sympathy for the trap that women seem to find themselves in. What we as readers must bear in mind is that Dubus himself believes that trap to be not merely the result of a capitalist society or a repressive social system, but part of God’s eternal plan—sanctioned, immutable, and aimed at our happiness if only we may accept our place in it.

*Hamilton College*

**Works Cited**


Paul VI. “Address to the Second Vatican Council,” *La Documentation Catholique* no. 1482, col. 1923 (1966); my translation.


