**Review Essay**

**ANAMNESIS: ANDRE DUBUS’S CATHOLIC IMAGINATION**

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Few writers in our age have explored the distracted loves and marriages of ordinary Americans as well as Andre Dubus did over a career spanning three decades and eight collections of short stories and novellas. Fewer still bring to that tragic spectacle such a vigorous compassion, centered as it is in his Catholic vision of life as simultaneously wracked by guilt and sin, yet suffused with grace. It is the business of the writer, Dubus suggests, to make transparent the sacramental character of our stubbornly quotidian life — in the kitchen, the bedroom, the nursery, the supermarket — as we wait together “On Charon’s Wharf” (an essay title from his 1991 collection of essays, *Broken Vessels* 77). Salvation beckons Dubus’s characters not from ideology or analysis or therapy but from their deeper imaginative entry into the rituals of our mortality. “Making love can be a sacrament,” he writes in *Meditations from a Movable Chair* (his second autobiographical collection), “if our souls are as naked as our bodies, if our souls are in harmony with our bodies, and through our bodies are embracing each other in fear and trembling, knowing that this act could be the beginning of a third human being . . . knowing that the roots and trunk of death are within each of us . . . and . . . may . . . rupture as we kiss” (*Meditations* 91).

*Meditations* is the last book Dubus published before his death in the spring of 1999 at age 62. The “movable chair” refers to the wheel chair he had occupied since the summer of 1986, when he lost one leg and the use of the other while assisting stranded motorists on the Interstate north of
Boston. Once again, as in *Broken Vessels*, Dubus seeks out the space of remembrance to exorcise the demons of resentment and regret, and to wrest some measure of spiritual mobility from that awful diminishment. Overall, the spiritual temper of this collection is more serene than that of its predecessor. The immediate torment has receded; its lessons have been twice distilled by time and reflection. To be sure, the loss remains starkly irremediable, as the actress Liv Ullmann reminds the author at a fund-raising dinner (recounted here in “Liv Ullmann in the Spring”). But even her sober caution that he “cannot compensate” with moral earnestness for what has been so brutally taken provokes in him an overflowing sense of joy, love, and gratitude. More self-consciously than in the earlier book, Dubus adopts the visionary charge, seeking out the spiritual contexts of his suffering, and of his processes as an artist as well. The wheel chair becomes, like the hermit’s anchor-hold, the site of inner transformation – intensifying the awareness of bodily limits, disciplining the writer to surrender illusions of self-control over his destiny, and compelling him to rest (as he puts it in “Giving Up the Gun”) on “the frighteningly invisible palm of God” (Meditations 193).

At first glance, the collection appears decidedly miscellaneous. Nostalgic evocations of the writer’s Louisiana boyhood and family, of his first marriage and his early career as a Marine captain, and of his early struggles for visibility as a short story writer, alternate with sketches of his family and personal life since the accident. These in turn are punctuated by prose-poetic epiphanies celebrating the gracious dimension of everyday life to which his suffering has paradoxically granted him access. Interspersed through the volume as well are occasional pieces, like his eulogy of his friend, the writer Richard Yates; a cautionary “Letter to a Writer’s Workshop” which met in his home in recent years; and the more polemical “Song of Pity” and “Letter to Amtrak,” both of which publicize the psychic and physical indignities visited upon him and his fellow “cripples” (Dubus’s preferred term for his condition) in America. Several of the pieces, targeted originally for popular newspapers and magazines like the *Boston Globe* and *Yankee*, sound attenuated in the ampler context of a book. Their peremptory affirmations – the authenticity of Dubus’s religious convictions notwithstanding – slip too readily into the idiom of Sunday Supplement inspiration. In some ways the earlier *Broken Vessels* might prove more satisfying for the uninitiated reader looking to sample Dubus’s non-fictional art at its best. The individual autobiographical essays there, less declamatory, and poised closer to the tension of despair and hope, evidence a richer complexity of tone.