“MYSTERIES OF LOVE AND MORTALITY” IN ANDRE DUBUS’S “ADULTERY” AND “ON CHARON’S WHARF”

BRENNAN O’DONNELL
Loyola College in Maryland

Reading Andre Dubus’s novella “Adultery” in tandem with the essay “On Charon’s Wharf” provides a good opportunity to investigate the sort of rich cross-fertilization that exists between Dubus’s fiction and non-fiction, a cross-fertilization that I think is crucial to the current and, I hope, sustained growth of his reputation as a major voice in American letters. Asked in a 1987 interview to name fictions of his own with which he was “most satisfied,” Dubus pointed to “Adultery.” “I don’t know if it’s the best,” he said, but it took enormous pains: “it threw me off the saddle so many times and hurt me, and I kept giving up.” By the end it took “four hundred typed pages, seven drafts, seventeen months of work spread over maybe two or three years. And I tried to put into there everything I knew about God, death, and women, and marriage” (Kennedy 116). “On Charon’s Wharf,” which was published the same year as “Adultery,” is obviously an offshoot of Dubus’s struggle to complete the novella. Ideas, images, situations, and even phrasings from “Adultery” appear in the essay. These provide fascinating glimpses into the workings of Dubus’s imagination at what he indicates in several interviews was a key moment of deepening and development in his career. In these works of the mid 1970s, Dubus begins to sound in ever more daring, more explicitly Christian, and more artistically assured ways one of the most profound, complex, and characteristically “Dubusian” strains in his later stories – the close, paradoxical alliance between the possibility for joy and a fully developed sense of the tragic dimension of love or, in short, the “mysteries of love and mortality” (Broken Vessels 78).

Both works were published in 1977. “On Charon’s Wharf” appeared in Boston Magazine; “Adultery” was published first in Sewanee Review (Volume 85, Winter 1977) and then as the title story in Dubus’s second collection of short fiction, Adultery and Other Choices (1977). In at least two interviews, Dubus provides hints of the genesis of both works, mentioning

that during the time that he was writing “Adultery,” a time when he says he “was very lonely,” he was reading the book Love and Will by the existentialist psychoanalyst Rollo May (“Passion” 151; Kennedy 100). Dubus says that he was “working with [the] theory” that he found in May that “it’s our awareness of our mortality that causes our passions to be so strong” (“Passion” 151). The epigraph to the novella – “love is a direction and not a state of the soul,” from Simone Weil’s “The Love of God and Affliction,” suggests that Dubus was also pondering these issues in more explicitly theological and mystical terms.

It’s not difficult to see why Dubus would be attracted to May’s work, not only because of its treatment of this particular theme, but also because of its overall assessment of the ills of contemporary society, especially as they manifest themselves in disorders of love and desire. In May’s basic diagnosis of contemporary alienation and moral stagnation, obsession with sex is the flip-side of fear and repression of the potential dangers and entanglements of Eros (and, by extension, of philia and agape). If the Victorians sought “to have love without falling into sex,” the modern wants “to have sex without falling in love” (46). In sanitizing, technologizing, and trivializing Eros, moderns have lost sight of the fact that Eros comes as a destroyer as well as a creator. It is Eros who, in Hesiod’s words, “breaks the limbs’ strength,” whose arrows are creative but also poisoned, whose power overwhelms “all [the] shrewd planning” of men and gods (Theogony ll. 120-122; quoted May 100). Immersed in a view of sex as an anxiety-relieving tool, a mechanism for the release of tension detached from the burden and risk of procreation, moderns have forgotten the ancient linkage, represented by Eros, between sexuality and the kinds of love that exist only in tension – that is, in the sort of love that is grounded and sustained by a deep awareness of our need for completion (the ultimate symbol of which is our mortality), and that expresses itself in a stretching toward the other (human or divine), in actions that signify – and indeed embody – both our radical vulnerability and our most powerful and creative response to that vulnerability. The result of this reduction of the erotic to the libidinous is a “love” that, in trying to flee death, actually becomes its embodied embrace, the dead-end expression that Joe Ritchie will call “meat in meat” in “Adultery” (Selected Stories 445). May argues that it is only in the risk of abandonment of self, in a love in tension with another self under the shadow of death, that the lover can exercise intention and indeed tenderness toward the beloved, in acts that rise to the level of statement, of meaning.

In the chapter from Love and Will most directly influential on the two works under consideration here, May focuses on the paradox that,