IDENTITY, COMMUNITY AND CHOICE IN ANDRE DUBUS’S “MIRANDA OVER THE VALLEY”

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In “Miranda Over the Valley,” Andre Dubus opens an uncommon angle of vision on the public conversation about abortion. Eighteen-year-old Miranda Jones is pregnant with the child of the man she loves. She faces more than the usual “choice” made famous in the abortion debates, of whether or not to keep the baby. Miranda faces a critical moment of self-constitution: who will she become as she makes this decision? Miranda is not alone in her choice; in the name of freedom from restrictions, suffering, and sacrifice her parents argue against the child, while the child’s father passively accepts their bribe to allow the abortion. It is a freedom Miranda does not want; in the absence of any support, however, she gives over her will to her parents. When she does, Miranda’s precipitous decline is reflected in a confused identity, deterioration of her will, a loss of meaning in sex and language, and an inability to love.

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

We become by deciding. The achievement of personal identity, however, has a social dimension. Free choice is never purely private, not simply because choices have consequences, but also because they have antecedents. The Catholic tradition in which Dubus was formed and out of which he wrote stresses the communal influence on personality development; people rely on one another in their personal becoming. To be herself, Miranda needs her parents and her boyfriend Michaelis, all three of whom abandon her. The social support that she requires to think through and carry out her deepest desire is lacking. Miranda initially decides to have the child and is convinced that she “can do it” (Selected Stories 9). Once the abortion is accomplished, however, the reason for her strength and “resolve” disappears. What remains is a grim, loveless existence of broken relationships in which sex and language cannot attain their purpose.

The narrative spans four months, from September through December. The holidays of Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas serve to
punctuate key moments in the story. Miranda and Michaelis have sex once in early September, the night before she leaves for college in Boston. On Halloween, the day before the feast of All Saints, a visit to the gynecologist confirms that Miranda is pregnant. The masked children that she encounters that evening hint at the mysterious presence in her womb. After calling Michaelis to inform him, Miranda speaks to her parents, who convince her to come home right away to discuss the situation. Once home, the parents conquer her resolve to have the baby and she agrees to go with her mother to New York for the abortion. Back at college in Boston, she spends Thanksgiving break at a friend’s home in Maine and then returns to California at Christmas. Between Halloween and Christmas Miranda disintegrates into “many Mirandas,” so that by the time she sees Michaelis in December there is no hope of their relationship continuing. Like Michaelis, who failed to defend her decision to have their child, Miranda is “not there anymore” (16). Miranda herself has been aborted.

Choices regarding abortion entail more than a narrow act-centered calculus of consequences; at the heart of such decisions, and often unacknowledged, are basic beliefs about human life and destiny. Even Christian moral reasoning has been dominated, in the recent past, by an act-centered morality. Stanley Hauerwas has argued that in their preoccupation with particular decisions and universal principles, Christians “failed to show, for ourselves or others, why abortion is an affront to our most basic convictions about what makes life meaningful and worthwhile” (221). Christians live according to a narrative that trains them to be welcoming to the child, whereas the vision that informs the Jones family is one in which the goal of human life is to maximize comfort and minimize sacrifice. Several Dubus stories illuminate the quality of such basic convictions and the moral understanding resident in them. In “Sorrowful Mysteries,” for example, Gerry Fontenot’s revulsion at southern racism is grounded in his Catholic imagination, which spontaneously presents an association between the execution of Sonny Broussard, a black man convicted of raping a white woman, and Christ’s crucifixion (Selected Stories 391). Harry LeDuc, the title character in “The Captain,” is inclined to feed and care for an anonymous lance corporal at a campfire; the cooking of eggs reminds him of the Eucharist, the sacrament of Christ’s self-sacrificial love (Selected Stories 255-256). In these and other stories, Dubus’s characters are possessed of “basic convictions” that motivate the deeper drama of their lives.

The vision that Miranda’s parents have communicated to her, however, constitutes a sense of life as merely the context for self-