LIVING ON THE INVISIBLE PALM OF GOD: ANDRE DUBUS AND THE ETHICS OF FORCEFUL RESISTANCE

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The world of Andre Dubus’s fiction is a familiar one: people work, marry, raise children, and live in families recognizable to most Americans. His particular genius lies in delineating how very ordinary people face ethical problems of exceptional consequence. Foremost among them is the problem of how we respond to loss, especially that which violently forces its way into our lives. Given contemporary fears of violence and concern over the ethical status of retributive forms of justice as an answer to it, his stories present an opportunity to think through the religious dimensions of living in a world in which anyone at any time is subject to lethal violation. From the 1969 short story “The Doctor” to the essay “Giving Up the Gun,” published in The New Yorker only two years before his death in 1999, Dubus remained concerned with the ways human beings are changed by sudden intrusions into our sense of safety and well-being.¹

Taken as a whole, Dubus’s writings expose the kinship between acts of retribution and acts of defensive violence – what the law might call justifiable assault or homicide – and, in the process, construe both as failures to live in accordance with a difficult but irrefutable code of Christian ethics. Admittedly, much in his life and work would lead toward a different conclusion. For many years, he carried weapons and developed a reputation as a volatile personality who enjoyed a fight; a former Marine Corps captain, he believed that the military had trained him to intervene effectively on behalf of others.² He has also written of the necessity of using force to protect those unable to protect themselves. In “The Judge and Other Snakes,” composed in 1985 and published first in 1988, Dubus represents himself as a man who, because of his own struggle with physical weakness as an adolescent – and, he adds, “I hope a sense of justice as well” – becomes “enraged whenever I see the strong bullying the weak” (Broken Vessels 64). The essay makes a strong case for preparing to resist potential threats through forceful means. Without directly referencing the religious beliefs that often contextualize his arguments, Dubus participates in the long tradition of Christian

apologetics for warfare by establishing criteria under which certain kinds of defensive actions are acceptable. He would carry a weapon to protect not himself but others, particularly those unprepared to fight back; he must intervene to halt the attack rather than to punish or seek retribution; and his weapon must be one capable of stopping a perpetrator without producing unnecessary harm to anyone.

The subordination of nonviolence to the higher demand of justice parallels the argument given in the 1983 pastoral of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response: “In the kingdom of God, peace and justice will be fully realized. Justice is always the foundation of peace. In history, efforts to pursue both peace and justice are at times in tension, and the struggle for justice may threaten certain forms of peace.” Theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill comments: “To make justice prior to peace is, evidently, to make peace provisional in relation to the use of coercion, violent if necessary, in order to create the just or properly balanced human relationships that are the conditions of peace as harmony. Whether any genuine or profound harmony can be established coercively is a further question, not addressed in the pastoral but certainly posed by its critics and those of just war thinking in general” (5). In one sense, Dubus is able to stop an unjust act; the axe handle purchased for just such occasions helps him intimidate a young man whom he sees slamming an adolescent girl against the brick wall of a local drugstore. But the charges she makes against the young man are summarily dismissed by an inept court, the girl is hurt physically and emotionally, the young man remains remorseless, and the incident could easily happen again. “Just or properly balanced relationships that are the conditions of peace as harmony” are not achieved. Although Dubus trains his disgust on the failures of the court, the practical shortcomings of using force as a response to injustice paradoxically emerge at the conclusion of an essay that ostensibly argues for the necessity of doing just that.

The ethical shortcomings of forceful resistance present a different set of problems, and for many years they surfaced only in his short fiction. Even during the period when Dubus carried weapons of various kinds, including guns, and was prepared and watchful for a confrontation, his short stories consistently testify not only to the inefficacy but also to the disturbing moral consequences of attempting to establish justice through violent means. The stories do not address the problem in the more familiar theological terms of a conflict between the Christian obligation to care for one’s neighbor and the equally firm edict that one “resist not evil” and refrain from the use of force. Instead, his