

# RITUAL AND REENACTMENT IN ANDRE DUBUS'S SHORT FICTION

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It has become a commonplace of Andre Dubus criticism to characterize his aesthetic vision as “sacramental.” Such a description seems almost too easy, for Dubus emphasizes in both his essays and stories what Luke Ripley, the protagonist of “A Father’s Story,” calls the “necessity and wonder of ritual” (*Selected Stories* 460). For example, Dubus frequently remarks on his devotion to taking daily Communion for his spiritual and emotional health. He seems to have approached other daily activities – conversation, preparing and eating meals, watching or playing baseball – just as ritualistically. Not all rituals need be, for Dubus, communal; he uses the term to refer both to social ceremonies and to what Roy Rappaport, in his general definition of ritual, calls private “sequences of formal acts or utterances” (Rappaport 24). Indeed, Dubus’s essay entitled “Breathing” suggests that even awaiting an injection can be performed as a palliative rite. Usually, however, according to Dubus, such habits not only sharpen and focus one’s consciousness; they also create intimacy and community. Hence for him the sacramental vision is ultimately a matter of sharing, of giving gifts: as he writes in the essay “On Charon’s Wharf,” “what I want to give, more than the intimacy of words, is shared ritual, the sacraments” (*Broken Vessels* 81).

It is no surprise, then, that he approached writing similarly, as a “vocation,” a calling that he had to heed even when he didn’t wish to (“Passion is Better” 147; “The Habit of Writing,” *passim*). Writing figures as a means of transcendence that “connects us . . . with some mystery that’s floating above us, like pollen or snow, something a lot more eternal than one person’s subconscious.” At its best, inspired writing engenders a state in which one is “in harmony with eternal astonishments and visions of truth” (*Meditations* 162). According to Rappaport (who bases his interpretation on that of William James), such a condition of internal and external harmony is the definition of grace (383). The writer receives grace from some mysterious place within or without; this bounty cannot be merely willed or earned. Simply stated, then, writing for Dubus is a spiritual exercise, a blend of mental discipline and consoling ritual.

Given this aesthetic, one might expect to find rituals in the foreground of Dubus’s fiction. Indeed, not only does one find them, but one finds

them so repeatedly – so ritualistically, as it were – that one might declare ritual to be *the* essential structural pattern in all his fiction. I am calling the behavior of his characters rituals because they are designed and performed as such: methodically, meticulously, with a spiritual or psychological purpose that is “not entirely encoded [that is, consciously understood] by the performers” (Rappaport 24). These rituals take a particular form, however. Again and again Dubus’s characters recoil from or reflect upon a traumatic experience and then engage in a rite of reenactment through which they hope to convert the experience and gain control over it. These rituals thus aim not (or not only) to redo, but to undo the original action, and thereby to expiate or transfer the guilt adhering to it. Sometimes, as in “The Fat Girl” and “Graduation,” a character rewrites her identity by engineering new rites of passage; in others, such as “Delivering” or “The Pitcher,” rituals help a character to block or blot out a traumatic event. In many cases the ritual behavior acquires an autonomy that reverses the valence of control: the character is not performing the rite so much as the rite is creating the character. Through these rites of reperformance, purgation, and consolation, the characters lose their former identities and emerge anew. Unfortunately, however, these new selves are often inchoate, crippled, or alienated.

This latter condition is especially true of the stories involving adult males. In the two stories I’ll discuss, “The Curse” and “Killings,” a male protagonist reenacts a crime in order to stand in for the victims *and* for the perpetrators. In these stories – which I would argue contain the essential kernel of Dubus’s art – his vision is less *sacramental* than it is *sacrificial*. The two terms are, of course, related. For example, Dubus writes that Marine training enables soldiers to practice a love of neighbor so pure that each one is willing to give his life for his buddy. A “Marine crawling under fire to reach a wounded Marine is performing a sacrament, an action whose essence is love, and the giving and receiving of grace” (*Broken Vessels* 174); the act acquires its meaning and power from the soldier’s displacement of self-interest for a larger good. Yet the sacrament exists only insofar as the Marine is willing to sacrifice himself for another. Grace can also be achieved through sacrifice, which exists, according to Hubert and Mauss’s classic definition, primarily to establish a “means of communication between the sacred and profane worlds through the mediation of a victim” (Hubert and Mauss 97). However, this communication is possible only through violence or death. Hence, sacrifice remains ambivalently related to sociability: the victim is at once honorable and abject, and the ceremony both promotes solidarity and permits antisocial behavior. Unfortunately, the sacrificial rites enacted by

Dubus's adult males do not yield grace; they fail to absolve, elevate or transcend the original crime. These men's rituals of expiation – secularized versions of communion, crucifixion, or confession that involve or react to an act of violence – merely replicate the original trauma in a different register. Guilt is transferred but not purged.

The pattern of ritual reenactment (though not necessarily of sacrifice) appears in vestigial form even in the early story "If They Knew Yvonne," in which the adolescent protagonist Harry is tormented by guilt over his masturbatory habits. Each onanistic session is followed by confession, as if he needs to perform the entire rite – the "uncleanness" followed by the penance and the absolution – to feel complete. Indeed, at times he seems to masturbate almost as a pretext for confession, which becomes a way to relive the transgressive moment safely. Indeed, even Harry's sins are less sexual than verbal: as Yvonne tells him later, "I believe it's a sin to talk about a girl, but I don't think what you do with her is bad" (*Selected Stories* 184). Likewise, in adolescence he uses confession not to expiate his perceived sin but as a way to continue to perform it. Later, after he and Yvonne have sex, he profanely reenacts the sacrament by boasting to his friends of his prowess (189). Nonetheless, by the end of the story Harry seems to have forgiven himself, in part because he has confessed in a more authentic way to a more enlightened priest.

The motif of ritual and reenactment is more fully present in two sister stories (both from *Adultery and Other Choices*) about female empowerment. In each case, a young woman gains apparent control over her life by replacing one rite of passage with another. To some degree, both stories fit the classic pattern described over a century ago by Arnold Van Gennep, who wrote that rites of passage involve three stages: separation from community, transition, and incorporation back into the community in a new guise (11). In both stories, however, the women pass through the first two stages, but their reincorporation remains problematic, and at the end each seems suspended in a liminal condition between childhood and adolescence, between isolation and sociability.

In "The Fat Girl" the young Louise creates a secret world of sensual gratification, a "ritual of deceit and pleasure," as a "furtive eater of sweets" (*Selected Stories* 234). The ritual – not a social ceremony but a guilty secret – allows her to cultivate the erotic pleasure from which she is otherwise barred. As with many of the other characters, her private habit is masked by public "normality": Louise eats lightly when others are present. The problem, then, is not that she is fat, but that "her existence in the world [is] so divided" (237): she lives in what Jean-Paul Sartre would term "bad faith," inasmuch as she is both lying to herself and at

least partially aware of the lie (Sartre 87, 89). Her self-division is also embodied by the contrast between her slender mother, who withholds love from Louise in order to encourage her to diet, and her father, who loves her unconditionally, whether she is obese or thin.

When Carrie, her college roommate, encourages her to lose weight so that others will love her as much as Carrie loves her (238), Louise is able, with Carrie's help, to replace the ritual of eating with the ritual of dieting. This quasi-ascetic routine becomes ingrained in Louise's self-image, and she is duly gratified by the praise and attention she receives from her friends and especially from her mother. Even "conditioned to her ritual" as she is, however, she is sporadically overtaken by hunger (240). Indeed, Louise's internal division has not dissipated; it has simply gone further underground. Thus she feels that during her diet she has "lost more than pounds of fat," that somewhere along the way she has "lost herself too" (240). Secretly she hopes that she'll fail to lose more weight so she'll have an excuse to stop dieting.

After she marries a slim lawyer named Richard, she begins to understand that her new self was engendered largely to lose her virginity and gain a man. More broadly (no pun intended), she comprehends that by creating a slender self she has forsaken private rituals for community approbation and the "pleasures of the nation" (242-3). This routine is self-denying, then, in more ways than one: through dieting she overcomes her separation from others and from the ideal feminine body image, and she thereby achieves a "sense of certainty" possible only by turning off her mind (243). She has, in other words, sacrificed herself for the good opinion of others. But during her pregnancy she begins to gain weight, and once she resumes her secret eating, Richard's growing animosity confirms her suspicion that she has married a male version of her mother who loves her not for herself but for the way she embodies his own conventional aspirations. He cannot thrive without the approval of others; beneath his concern for her weight lies "the question of who Richard was" (246). Louise's triumph, if that's what it is, occurs when she reveals her eating habits to Richard. She can do so because she no longer needs him: she and her infant son now constitute a perfect little society of two. Louise has been literally "incorporated" into a body that fits her former identity. And yet, even as she seems to accept her heavy self, we are left with the haunting sense that her consuming rituals will never nourish her spirit as they do her flesh. Dubus suggests here, as elsewhere, the ultimate ineffectuality of his characters' secular rites. Louise will remain hungry, not just for candy, but for a more deeply satisfying form of succor that even her child can never fully provide.

But at least she has love. Love also seems to redeem Bobbie Huxford, in "Graduation." Saddled with the reputation in high school as a "good piece" (*Selected Stories* 122), Bobbie manages to achieve the impossible: to regain her lost virginity. Once again the parents play a pivotal role in defining the young woman's identity. They stand for a bland sinlessness, represented in their "immaculate" house that she finds unbearably "stifling" (123). This condition is also embodied (or rather, not embodied) by their Christmas decorations: a "Nativity" scene absurdly devoid of animals, populated solely by Bobbie's doll (127), which stands for a sexless holiness that Bobbie rejects so vehemently she wants to shout at them "WE SCREWED. *That's what we always do*" (123). It's therefore likely that her sexual escapades are aimed at spiting, or at least differentiating herself from, her parents' colorless and untested "goodness."

At her graduation party, she graduates in a different way: after having sex with a boy named Charlie Wright she realizes that sex can give her power over both men and women. She now learns to use it rather than allowing it to use her. More significantly yet, when she goes away to college she discovers that "you could become a virgin again"; since one's "dirtiness" really depends only upon a man's word (as we saw in "Yvonne") you can wipe the slate clean by replacing the man's words with your own. "Backing up and starting over" (127), Bobbie revises her past not by claiming that she has never had sex, but by converting verbal victimization into physical molestation. Thus she tells her naive boyfriend Frank that she was raped at twelve by an uncle (129). In admitting her loss of virginity, she manages to become experienced and innocent at once. In effect, she gives her "sin" to another – the imaginary uncle – thereby inventing a sacrificial narrative in which he is the scapegoat and she is washed clean of blame. Her narrative transfers the guilt imposed by men onto a single man and thereby absolves her of her male-generated reputation.

When she decides to have sex with Frank, she lets him believe that he is persuading her to give in. Ironically, then, she becomes guiltless not by refraining from sex but by having it: that is, only by having sex her way can she throw off the stigma of promiscuity. The new Bobbie, then, emerges through a kind of virgin birth as a self who is at once a fully sexual adult and a sinless child. In performing sex as if a virgin, she becomes one. She too is newly incorporated into an idealized, intact body. As for Frank, his credulity might seem implausible until we realize that Bobbie's "confession" also frees him from any guilt he might feel over taking her virginity. Bobbie's ingenious plan thus appears successful.

But her victory may be almost as pyrrhic as Louise's, since her later life with Frank is founded not upon trust but upon a carefully crafted lie. Bobbie's bad faith once again blooms from a false confession, a profane sacrament from which she seeks to gain benefits without having to pay for them. Nevertheless, Dubus refrains from condemning Bobbie, as should we, since to judge her too harshly would be to replicate the hypocritical censures of those who cast the first stones at her.

Despite their deceptions, hope remains for these women precisely because they are still young; their potential recovery is not complicated by obligations to grown children, nor have their identities ossified into unchangeability. The pattern is somewhat similar for the young male protagonists of "The Pitcher" and "Delivering." But in contrast to the female characters, whose rites of reenactment reforge their sexual identities, these males' consolatory rituals involve work – delivering papers, pitching a game – that protects them from the complexities of sexual betrayal. In one case the ritual of purgation merely postpones the inevitable, while in the other it permits an ambiguous transference of guilt. Once again, however, their rites of passage are incomplete, as each one's incorporation into the adult world seems ambiguous at best.

Fans of Dubus's fiction are familiar with his near-religious attitude towards baseball: how as a boy he practiced hitting with fanatical devotion; his adult addiction to Red Sox games on television; his astute attention to the rituals of the game; his admiration for what he describes in "Brothers" as those "moments of grace" (*Meditations* 76) when a player achieves harmony with larger forces.<sup>1</sup> Dubus's understanding of baseball is shared by many; indeed, with its mythic history, traditions and highly ritualized performances, baseball has long been freighted with quasi-sacred significance. His stories and essays confirm Deeanne Westbrook's insight that baseball – given its symbolic return to the pastoral and its absence of a clock – offers "a space and a structure . . . hospitable . . . to the sacred in whatever forms it appears" (53).

In "The Pitcher," protagonist Billy Wells sometimes attains a Zen-like condition in which he is "part of the ball" (*Selected Stories* 131).<sup>2</sup> But in contrast to those of the other stories, the pitcher's rituals do not reenact but rather pre-enact. For example, Billy practices a meticulous routine on the night before the game, first drinking a glass of buttermilk and then envisioning the ideal game he is going to pitch. By game day, he feels like "a shadow cast by the memory and the morning's light" (133); the game seems to be imagining him, rather than vice versa. This displacement allows him to forget the pain he brings to the park. In the story, the pain involves his wife's affair with a dentist; she informs him

the night before his final game that she is leaving him. But in some ways her leaving won't matter, since, she tells him, "you weren't there" even when he was physically present (138). Westbrook notes that in baseball "the laws of nature are suspended by the rules and acts of the game" (100); likewise, as he prepares to pitch the next day, Billy realizes that his carefully crafted concentration is "unnatural," yet he manages to push down thoughts of his wife's adultery throughout the game. By blocking out his marital problems, in effect he chooses a kid's game over adult responsibility, and as a result is "shut out forever from the mysteries of her heart" (139).

Yet Billy's rituals are not merely personal; rather, he represents all those young men whose discipline allows them to defy time and mortality. Like the other players, he realizes that the "other part" of himself (144) – the part that eats, marries, works and dies – will return when the game is over.<sup>3</sup> During the game, however, the ballpark produces a "holiday . . . from Time" (*Meditations* 74), from the bodily failure and mundane labor that will inevitably succeed it. Here, then, a character's internal division is a sign not of bad faith but of the division between sacred and profane; as Westbrook writes, baseball partakes of the timelessness of the sacred, holding "event, character, affect, word and symbol in achronic suspension" (97-8). Billy participates – indeed, produces – this timelessness through his pitching delivery, which reenacts his childhood and the history that "had begun with a baseball and a friend to throw it to, and had excluded all else." His delivery, in short, delivers *him*, "create[s] him," giving birth to a "world so singular that there was no other" (145). The complex world of doubt and fear beyond the diamond gives way to the orderly, structured arena of the playing field, where sacrifices count in the box score but little real violence takes place.<sup>4</sup> At the end of a well-pitched game, he takes his seat between Hap and Lucky – chance and fate, perhaps – in unconscious acknowledgment of his blessings. Although the blessed moment must end, the story suspends it as Billy begins his drive to San Antonio, because his gift, his secular sacrament, holds out the promise of an extended childhood and of his delivering a timeless, perfect and blameless self by means of devoted ritual and disciplined concentration.

The self that fifteen-year-old Jimmy seeks to create in "Delivering" is far less successfully protected by the walls he erects around it. The story also marks a change in the pattern I am treating: the violence in "Delivering" is no longer symbolic or implicit, but frighteningly overt. At the beginning of the story Jimmy awakens the morning after his parents' violent argument, still hearing in his mind the sound of his

father slapping his mother the night before. When he first heard it, he felt gratified – he wished to punish his adulterous mother – but now is ashamed of the feeling (*Selected Stories* 397). In fact he wants not only to hurt his mother for abandoning them but also to punish his father for allowing it to happen, for failing to be “man enough“ to hold onto her. If Jimmy is clearly aiming to take his father’s place, the position of his twelve-year-old brother Chris is more ambiguous. Jimmy persuades Chris to accompany him on his morning paper route, where he delivers both the newspapers and the news of his parents’ breakup. His stated purpose is to toughen Chris up by bluntly informing the scared kid that their mother was “fucking somebody” (399). Through Chris, Jimmy also seeks to deliver new identities: a stronger self for his babyish brother and a fatherly identity for himself. But he is only partly successful, and at the story’s end he remains, even more clearly than Dubus’s other youthful protagonists, suspended in a liminal state somewhere between childhood and adulthood.

Like Billy Wells, Jimmy seeks comfort in the rhythm of throwing, imagining as he tosses the newspapers that he is making the throw from second base to shortstop, or shortstop to second, thereby delivering himself out of the painful world of adult suffering he has witnessed and into the idealized, timeless space of the diamond. Unlike Billy Wells, however, he can’t hold at bay the suppressed rage that seeps into his aggressive challenges to a barking dog and his resentful pegs at the houses of complaining customers. The second rite he performs – an attempt at baptism, perhaps – is swimming in the ocean, which instead of releasing him evokes memories of fishing trips with his father and of the night before, when he witnessed his father crying (402). Partly to inure Chris to the pain that will surely ensue and partly to vent his anger on the nearest helpless party, Jimmy narrates to him the story of the previous night, sparing no details and eliciting, like a polished parish priest, the desired responses: “That’s when he slapped her,” he prompts, to which Chris replies, “Good” (403).

Returning home, Jimmy brings his inchoate fatherhood with him, tapping into baseball’s established mythology of father-son atonement to provide a ritual framework.<sup>5</sup> He tells Chris that they’ll have to “work on” getting rid of his baby fat, and then deliberately throws the baseball at his face, ostensibly to teach him not to fear the ball. Here is where “Delivering” begins to dramatize sacrificial patterns. According to Rene Girard, sacrifice is always inherently dual, because it involves violence that is at the same time socially sanctioned (1). Thus Jimmy can justify his cruelty to his brother by invoking conventional ideas of masculinity.

The essential feature of sacrifice, however, is displacement: a community (or family) expels antisocial tendencies by scapegoating (usually) a single figure who takes on the group's guilt.<sup>6</sup> For scapegoating to succeed, however, the victims must "bear a certain *resemblance* to the object they replace" (Girard 11; emphasis his). Thus, while functioning as a safety valve and a deflection, a sacrifice still draws attention to the identity of the original perpetrator. In the story, the narrator carefully notes that all three males look alike: thus in hitting Chris – who, as his name indicates serves as the designated scapegoat – Jimmy can simultaneously strike a blow at his father and punish himself for his unwanted knowledge of adult sexuality. The sacrificial pattern is played out when Chris "catches" the ball in the face and begins to cry, the boys' father emerging from the house just in time to witness it. "He's all right, Pop," Jimmy says, "He's all right." In one sense, he is reassuring the man: "I'm in charge, so everything is okay." But in another sense he is exposing his desperate need for his father's attention and reassurance, as if beseeching him to say, "you're doing a good job, Jimmy, but I'll take over now" (405). Jimmy craves his father's blessing on his incipient manhood, but he also wants to hurt him through Chris. Most of all, however, Jimmy needs Chris to suffer, to experience physically the pain he feels emotionally, to take the ball as his mother took the slap and his father took the news of her adultery.

Girard writes that sacrifice is dual, inasmuch as it appears "at times as a sacred obligation to be neglected at grave peril, at other times as a . . . criminal activity entailing perils of equal gravity" (1). Likewise, Jimmy's act is dual – at once guilty and necessary – just as Chris's resemblance to his parents permits him to assume both of their roles simultaneously, to "become a man" by learning toughness, but also to experience the slap of male aggression that his mother felt. In this regard, then, the story dramatizes what Suzan Mizruchi describes as the universal motive underlying sacrifice: "the intent to discover kin, to confirm the likeness" of the Other (64). Ironically and poignantly, this sacrificial action not only delivers Jimmy into an ambiguous adulthood, but also reenacts the very violence that has so damaged him. He too is at once his father's and his mother's son.

The final two stories I'll discuss dramatize the pattern of ritual and reenactment in its fullest and most deeply disturbing form, as adult men replay traumatic experiences in rituals that do not heal their emotional and spiritual illnesses. In contrast to the stories of adolescents, who have a chance to deliver new selves freed of the burdens of the past, these husbands and fathers, already molded into their adult identities, have

little hope of rediscovering innocence. One crippling constraint for these men is their definition of masculinity, which is bound up with the need to protect their loved ones or any weaker person, but especially females. Their rituals of reenactment fail to redeem them because their guilt is inextricably tied to their sense of self-worth. Not only, then, do their rituals fall short; more tragically, the characters find themselves repeating the same patterns of violence and recrimination they have sought to end.

Mitchell Hayes, protagonist of "The Curse," has been unable to halt a gang-rape in the bar where he works. Afterwards, he seems "shrunken and wrinkled" (*Selected Stories* 376): as Madonne Miner points out, his passivity has made him feel not just old but emasculated (Miner 398, 402). When he crouches near the ravaged woman on the floor, she lays "the clothes across her breasts and what Mitchell thought of now as her wound" (377). Her wound thus embodies Mitchell's own (Miner 402),<sup>7</sup> and he accepts that castration as punishment for the men who raped her. The narrator informs us that his wife's job consists of bathing invalid old ladies. As he tells her the story of the rape, Hayes suddenly wants to "lie in bed while she bathed him" (379): not only does he desire, as Miner notes, to become one of those little old ladies (401), but he also needs to undergo a ceremony of cleansing, to find forgiveness through a baptism that might wash away his and other males' guilt.

Mitchell's failures, in his mind, are twofold: he did not protect the young woman and then he did not console her. He fails, then, both to be "a man" and to be a father, who, he seems to believe, must always be prepared to die for his children. Hayes blames himself: each time he tells the story he is reassured that he could have done nothing without risking death, but each time he also insists that he should have acted. His stepdaughter Joyce comforts him by saying, "You'll be a good witness." He looks at her meaningfully; "at the trial," she finishes (381). The unspoken inference is that he was precisely and only a witness during the rape, and that his legal condition as witness falls far short of the moral and spiritual obligations that genuinely bearing witness – in the Christian sense – entails. More pointedly, Mitchell feels guilty not merely because he did not stop the rape, but because some part of him wanted it to occur, vicariously participated in it, and even enjoyed it. Hence he is at once witness and defendant, judge and jury, and he must fulfill these roles by sentencing himself to a punishment that fits the crime.

The next evening he has recovered enough of his will to shut off a customer who has had too much to drink. Yet the extravagant tip that the man places in Mitchell's brimming jar seems to smack of a bribe, a sign of complicity with the other males in the bar, a payment for Mitchell's

passivity. Thus as Mitchell places the man's tip in the jar he sees the rape all over again, and Dubus narrates the act for the first time. Hayes recalls the men "holding her down on the floor," and hears the "cheering voices and her screaming and groaning and finally weeping and weeping and weeping, until she was the siren crying then fading into the night." From across the room he feels her "pain and terror and grief, then her curse upon him. The curse moved into his back and spread down and up his spine, into his stomach and legs and arms and shoulders until he quivered with it. He wished he were alone so he could kneel to receive it" (381-2). The curse becomes a profane sacrament, as Mitchell yearns to kneel in preparation for a ceremony that will consecrate him as a sacrificial victim. Like those sacrificial subjects described by Girard, he must embody both the perpetrators and the victim, both criminal and savior: he desires to incarnate himself as a sacred being who is both morally superior to the rapists and at the same time one of them. In short, Mitchell longs to reenact the crime, to become the victim, to be penetrated, to become "an empty vessel" (Miner 404) inside of which the transference and expiation of guilt may occur. Indeed, in a sense he wants to be Christ: to absolve not just his own sin but those of all the men in the bar, and by extension all men everywhere.

Only through abjection, he seems to believe, can he ever be forgiven. The purgative ritual, alas, takes place only Mitchell's mind. Therefore, we may surmise, the burden will not be lifted. But there is probably no secular rite that could work this miracle, as is implied by the final story I'll discuss, the powerful and disturbing "Killings," which comprises perhaps the most detailed and complex example of this sacrificial pattern. In this story, Matt Fowler avenges Richard Strout's murder of Matt's son Frank by carefully carrying out Strout's execution. Strout murdered Frank out of jealousy, for Frank had been sleeping with his newly estranged wife. Matt is driven to murder partly from a similarly distorted sense of male chivalry and familial responsibility. Strout is out on bail, so that Matt's wife Ruth has seen him frequently around town, and the sight is "killing her" (*Selected Stories* 48). If Matt has failed to protect his son, he may still protect Ruth. Matt's meticulous preparations, however, involve more than mere vengeance: they are also sacrificial. Girard suggests that although sacrifice is usually defined as "an act of violence without risk of vengeance," vengeance is nonetheless often evoked, and the act being avenged is frequently committed "in revenge for some prior crime" (14). Likewise in "Killings" Matt Fowler undertakes a ritual reenactment of the original killing, replaying the sacrifice of his son that he both deeply

dreaded and secretly desired, and at the same time commits a form of spiritual suicide that permits him to take Frank's place.

Always a fearful father, Matt has lost Frank in an unexpected way that compels him to relive "all the fears he had borne while they were growing up," as if "all the grief he had been afraid of . . . had backed up like a huge wave and struck him on the beach and swept him out to sea" (54). This sense of paternal inadequacy is only amplified by the "withering" tenderness he receives from his neighbors (54). He recalls how he felt when his children would climb trees. He would imagine the fall and then picture himself catching them; meanwhile his "heart beat with the two words he wanted to call out but did not: *Don't fall*" (54). His memory indeed suggests that the dark side of his fear has always been desire: the repressed wish for these disasters to occur and unburden him of his vigilance. Similarly, Matt dismissed Ruth's misgivings about Frank's relationship with Mary Ann Strout, and when he saw Frank and Mary Ann together, he couldn't decide whether he was "envious of Frank or Mary Ann" (52). In other words, Matt now feels guilty because his desire to share or steal Mary Ann – to emulate or vicariously enact Frank's sexual relationship with an attractive young woman – interfered with his paternal responsibility. Like that of Mitchell Hayes, Matt Fowler's guilt derives not just from his failure to act but from the unconscious recognition of complicity with the crime, as if to say, "I failed to act because I too was attracted to Mary Ann [see 53], because I wanted you to have sex with her, to risk danger as I could not, and because a part of me yearned to be young enough to take her from you."<sup>8</sup>

Perversely, too, Matt needs to kill Strout as a way of becoming closer to the son he was losing to this woman. Thus as he executes the carefully planned abduction, he looks at Strout's hands and sees Frank's face, which Strout had bruised with his fists, and then envisions "[h]is own hand gently touching Frank's jaw" (61). He is touching it again in Strout, the second victim who resembles and replaces the first. The gentle touch blends with the clenched fist, each now an indistinguishable component of identical male rituals of aggression and protection. Ironically, then, in murdering Strout Matt both kills his son and gets him back for a moment. These are the unbearable recognitions that Matt tries to keep at bay throughout the murder: the awareness that Strout loves the same woman for whom Frank died; the understanding that Strout is a son like Frank and father like Matt; and the consciousness of "the circles of love he was touching with the hand that held the revolver so tightly" (59). His hand, indeed, dissolves into Strout's: far from ridding Matt of Strout's image, his sacrificial killing only confirms his kinship with him.

As he carries out his ritual revenge, Matt understands that he hasn't moved through his life but only wandered through it, "his spirit like a dazed body" (54). Similarly, after he deceives Strout with the lie that they are going to give him a second life elsewhere, his "body sag[s], going limp with his spirit and its new and false bond with Strout" (60). These passages pinpoint where Matt runs foul: he confuses body and spirit, mistaking material vengeance for the true comfort of forgiveness. The result of his murder is to sever the two for all time. When the gun kicks in Matt's hand, the "explosion of the shot surrounded him, isolated him in a nimbus of sound that cut him off from all his time, all his history, isolated him standing absolutely still on the dirt road with the gun in his hand" (62). After the shot, he walks to the squirming victim and executes him by firing into the back of his head. Driving back home he reenacts the shots, remembering that "when he walked to Strout, he still existed within the first shot, still trembled and breathed with it. The second shot and the burial seemed to be happening to somebody else, someone he was watching" (62). Cruelly, his vengeance has made him unable to identify himself as the perpetrator and therefore unable to enjoy its bitter taste.

Matt Fowler has doomed himself to a permanent condition of bad faith, to a division far deeper and more wounding than that of Louise in "The Fat Girl." For he hasn't merely killed Richard Strout; he has also killed Matt Fowler. The likeable family man, the well-respected citizen, the law-abiding public self – all lie in the grave with Strout. More horribly, even though he confesses his crime to Ruth, this second, confessional reenactment heals no more than did the first, because he cannot see himself doing what his words say he has done, and his heart remains "isolated still, beating on the road in that explosion like thunder" (64). In seeking to protect Ruth, he has instead estranged himself from her permanently. Envisioning "Frank and Strout, their faces alive" (64), he seems to understand that by murdering Strout he has also lost Frank all over again, this time more profoundly and irredeemably, because this time he has murdered him himself. He imagines "red and yellow leaves falling to the earth, then snow: falling and freezing and falling" (64). The allusion to the end of Joyce's "The Dead" confirms what Gabriel Conroy recognizes in that story: that we are all alike in our mortality.<sup>9</sup> Matt Fowler's death, like Gabriel's, has already occurred, is indeed implicit in his very humanity, in his fallen condition; but in trying to elevate himself above the law, to carry out God's own justice, he has sacrificed himself in an unholy and unhealing rite.

All of these characters seek to control experience through their ceremonies rather than understanding it or accepting it; they wish to bury a dead self and deliver an innocent one. But absent any belief in a reality beyond the flesh, the young women in “Graduation” and “The Fat Girl” have only their bodies to trade, and can never rise above them. The men, other than Billy Wells, merely replicate the crimes they aimed to avenge, avert or absolve. The result is to blur the lines between ritual and revenge, between ceremony and crime. Moreover, if all of these stories depict conditions of bereavement – losses of life, of reputation, of innocence, of familial happiness – the characters’ deepest emptiness seems to lie in their lack of any genuine spiritual substance. Devoted to no higher purpose than vindication, their ceremonies fail to redeem them.

In interviews Dubus repeatedly lamented the loss of those social and religious rites of passage that lend meaning to experience (see “Passion Is Better” 153, 157). By portraying how the absence of meaningful religious rituals compels his characters to engineer ineffectual rites of purgation and succor, Dubus reveals the profound hunger for custom and ceremony that drives human behavior. Implicitly, however, he embraces a different and potentially saving ritual: writing itself. Through art, he suggests, we may transform those “moments of grace,” those gifts of inspiration experienced by the writer, into communicable words. We can carry out this miracle, however, only by devotedly cultivating the habit of compassionate reception whereby we allow the story, as he writes in “Love in the Morning,” to “possess” us (*Meditations* 134). Ideally, in fact, he tells us, “when you are writing and when you are reading somebody who is really superb, you become like God, with that kind of compassion and love” (quoted in Kennedy 122). In reading Dubus in the proper spirit, then, we may briefly achieve quasi-divine sympathy and forgiveness, and by donning that mantle learn not only to refrain from judging the characters, but to earn a deeper sense of self-forgiveness as well. In so doing we ourselves carry out a sacrificial ritual, converting the lone, suffering individual into a medium for shared communion and the consolations of sympathy. In this sense, then, the stories both reenact the rites that sustained Dubus’s life and help us to sustain our own.

## NOTES

- 1 This condition of “grace,” we recall, is the same one to which Dubus aspired to achieve through writing. For another description of such

harmony in baseball see “Under the Lights” 26-7. In general, baseball is not merely a private habit for Dubus, but a means of creating and fostering a sense of community within a sacred space. Yet this space is fragile, insofar as even “an uninformed spectator, a drunk, a thirteen-year-old boy could, by simply saying the words *no-hitter*, destroy it.” In such instances, a member of the audience is “connected with everyone watching the game . . . for a man alone with his radio in his living room, a man who lacked belief, could say those two sacred words and break the spell” (“Under the Lights” 23).

- 2 It seems clear, too, that Billy is also a stand-in for the artist, and that “The Pitcher” is a disguised autobiography about “the conflict between a human being’s responsibility to his talent and to his family” (Dubus, quoted in Kennedy 111).
- 3 Dubus also provides examples in the story of players who failed to keep mortality at bay: Tommy Lyons, who never recovered from a broken leg (136), and Rick Stanley, whose beaning burdened him with permanent anxiety (141).
- 4 Even as baseball seems temporarily to defeat death, the game also “provides ample opportunity for ritual death in a variety of forms” (Westbrook 154): thus a double play is sometimes called a “twin killing,” making an out in a key situation is said to “kill a rally,” and being “out” is itself tantamount to being dead. It is thus no accident that “sacrifice” is a time-worn term in baseball’s lexicon. By converting mortality from a physical fact to a set of symbolic actions, baseball allows humans to “accomplish the difficult work of sacrifice, that is, of the artful defeat of death through death” (160).
- 5 For a detailed analysis of this mythos see Westbrook 244-65. According to Westbrook, in most baseball fiction father-son atonement occurs at the expense of the mother, who is usually depicted as cruel and sexually flawed (Westbrook 247). “Delivering” follows this pattern as well.
- 6 Girard argues that the relationship between potential and actual victim can’t be defined in terms of innocence or guilt, but only through deflection, because the aim of the rite is not to purge guilt but to provide a safety valve for violent impulses (4, 8). Here Dubus’s deployment of the pattern differs from Girard’s explication of it, for the nature and range of guilt is one of the essential questions in Dubus’s deeply Catholic work. For a critique of Girard, see Mizruchi, who argues that Girard overemphasizes the element of violence in sacrifice at the expense of its enaction of kinship and communal ties (63-4).
- 7 Miner’s otherwise acute analysis of Dubus’s style and of the psychosexual implications of the story is handicapped, in my view, by her insistence that the rape victim is replaying the role of the sirens of the *Odyssey* and has somehow enticed the males. She therefore argues that the raped

woman has emasculated Hayes. But it is the male perpetrators who have dramatized the version of masculinity for which Mitchell pays and to which he cannot measure up. In two senses, then, Miner's reading risks blaming the victim.

- 8 Implicit in their relationship, then, is the incestuous male rivalry explicitly dramatized in Dubus's novella *Voices From the Moon*, in which Greg Stowe begins a relationship with the ex-wife of his son Larry.
- 9 The final sentence of Joyce's story reads, "His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead" (Joyce 204).

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