

Educating the State:
Civil Disobedience by
Dumas' Musketeers

Brent Ranalli

Little more than a year after Henry David Thoreau spent a night in the Concord jail, a new serialized novel by Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870) began to appear in French newspapers. *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne, ou Dix ans plus tard*, a sprawling historical novel, was to be the last of the so-called “D’Artagnan romances” that traced the destinies of the brave and clever D’Artagnan and his friends the Three Musketeers.¹ This final novel in the series was set in the early 1660s, at the beginning of the reign of King Louis XIV, and it can be read as an “origins” story, a tale about the education of a young man who went on to rule for over 70 years and become one of France’s most beloved monarchs. Louis was also one of history’s great autocrats. He was styled the “Sun King” after his philosophy of government, according to which he was the fixed point around which the court, the nobility, and the nation all revolved. If it is true, as is widely reported, that he declared, *l’état, c’est moi* (“I am the state”), it was hardly an exaggeration. But if Louis XIV embodied the state, he was obviously not born fit for the task—he had to be educated to it. In Dumas’ imagination, the Musketeers play a role in that education. Curiously, one of the key episodes in that education is a story of civil disobedience, complete with an evening spent in jail.

Civil disobedience is often seen in one of two ways: as an effort to maintain one’s integrity in spite of the state, and as a tactical attempt to induce changes in policy (Engler and Engler, 2016). It can also be understood in a third way, as an effort to serve the state unconventionally. This last sense is what Thoreau had in mind when he wrote that “the mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies....

The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies, N.S. Vol. 26, 2018

Others...serve the state chiefly with their heads.... A very few—as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men—serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part” (66).

This third understanding—serving the state by resisting it, teaching the unwilling state its own proper interests—is not particularly prominent in the literature on civil disobedience. We catch glimpses of it in Gandhi’s thought and practice: for instance, in Gandhi’s description of non-violent resistance as an exercise in *ahimsa* or active love (Bondurant 24). Theorist Gene Sharp recognizes “conversion” as one possible goal of nonviolent struggle, in cases where activists aim not only to overcome opposition but “also to free the opponents who are thought to be imprisoned by their own system and policies” (416). Sharp notes that many practitioners of non-violence reject conversion as a goal, considering it impractical or impossible (417). The possibility of conversion might not even occur to such practitioners when the opposition is the state itself.

If we so rarely think of civil disobedience in terms of serving or instructing the state, one contributing factor may be that in modern times the state is an impersonal, faceless bureaucracy. But at other times and places, the state took other forms: as, in the case we are examining, embodied in an impetuous young king. Thinking in terms of those other forms can help us better imagine and understand what teaching the state its proper interests might mean.

The civil disobedience episode in Dumas’s novel is precipitated by the young King Louis IV coveting the fiancée of one of his gentleman. The King sends Raoul de Bragelonne on a diplomatic mission to England to get him out of the way, and then woos the guileless Louise de La Vallière. Warned by friends at court, Raoul returns to Paris and discovers the truth, and is crushed by the double weight of Louise’s apparent infidelity and the insult to his honor. The normal course in matters of honor is to challenge the offending part to a duel. But a duel with the King is out of the question. And even a duel with Saint-Aignan, the courtier who had

facilitated the King's amorous encounters with Louise, is not easily arranged, for duels are forbidden by royal decree. Raoul's position is untenable.

Into the breach steps Raoul's father, the Comte de la Fère, the former famous Musketeer, elderly but still the soul of nobility, honesty, courage, generosity, and fidelity. The Comte confronts the King to learn if he has really behaved so dishonorably, and to seek amends: specifically, the King's belated blessing to the long-delayed marriage of Raoul and Louise, and a pledge to check his own desire for the girl. The King flatly refuses. The Comte responds:

Son of Louis XIII, you begin your reign badly, for you begin it by abduction and disloyalty! My race—myself too—are now freed from all that affection and respect toward you, which I made my son swear to observe in the vaults of Saint-Denis, in the presence of the relics of your noble forefathers.... You lose two servants; for you have destroyed faith in the heart of the father, and love in the heart of the son. (386)²

Shamed and incensed, the King orders the arrest of the Comte, and the task is assigned to his chief lieutenant, none other than D'Artagnan himself. The Comte had been expecting the arrest, and willingly gets into the carriage of his old friend. In a scene reminiscent of Constable Sam Staples offering to put up the money for Thoreau's poll tax, D'Artagnan seeks to shield the Comte from the impending punishment. He offers to take the Comte in any direction he likes, and encourages him to flee the country and take refuge at a friend's estate in Scotland. But the Comte is adamant: he wishes to go nowhere but the Bastille. "My dear friend," he says, "I should like to persuade you of one thing; namely, that I wish to be arrested; that I desire above all things that my arrest should take place." As Thoreau indignantly resisted ejection from the jail when the poll tax was paid by an anonymous sponsor, and declared it his right to stay, the Comte avers that "if

you were to let me escape, it would be only to return of my own accord, and constitute myself a prisoner.” He explains his reasoning:

I wish to prove to this young man, who is dazzled by the power and splendor of his crown, that he can be regarded as the first and chiefest among men only on the one condition of his proving himself to be the most generous and the wisest. He may punish me, imprison, torture me, it matters not. He abuses his opportunities, and I wish him to learn the bitterness of remorse, while Heaven teaches him what chastisement is. (405)³

In other words, even in opposition the Comte wishes to remain useful to the King by allowing his imprisonment, and possibly his death, to serve someday as a source of remorse. He had told the King, among his parting words, “[God] knows that for the safety and honor of your crown I would even yet shed every drop of blood twenty years of civil and foreign warfare have left in my veins” (386).⁴ In the event, he can serve the safety and honor of the crown best not as a warrior, but as a martyr to prick the King’s conscience.

The Comte only stays in the Bastille for a few short hours, during which time D’Artagnan returns to the Louvre to confront the King himself in even stronger terms. He demands that he be permitted to arrest himself, so he can accompany his honorable friend in prison. At the end of this harsh, frank speech D’Artagnan proffers his sword in resignation. The King, incensed, knocks the sword to the ground. Now personally insulted on his own account, D’Artagnan declares that the disgraced sword can find no rest but in either the King’s breast or his own, and he attempts to fall on it. At this moment, affection and respect for his most loyal and trusted advisor softens the King’s heart, and D’Artagnan is prevented from shedding his own blood. Setting aside his pride and wrath, Louis signs an order for the Comte’s release. And more

importantly, he accepts and takes to heart the moral lesson offered him.

What is the lesson? In the first place, it is the importance of self-mastery. On nearly every page of Dumas' novel, honorable people show their mettle by exercising control over their emotions in word and action, in their facial expressions and their posture. For the King to be so consumed by infatuation for a mistress as to trample rights and neglect duties is not only to ruin lives and invite scandal, it demonstrates want of character—as does ordering the arrest of an honest man in a mere fit of pique. Merely to qualify as a gentleman, Louis must get the upper hand over his appetites and passions; he must learn to delay and in some cases even abandon hope of gratification. And to be worthy of the title of King, he must be the most virtuous of all. As the Comte said, to command allegiance he must prove himself “the most generous and the wisest.”

The conflicting imperatives of honor and obedience are a major theme in the moral universe of the D'Artagnan romances. The royal ban on dueling had been in place for decades (it was instituted by Louis's father), and Dumas' novel reflects the historical reality that the custom died hard. Honor was paramount to a gentleman of the era, and it had to be defended. The royal decree made it more difficult to arrange a duel, and almost as dangerous to win as to lose, but gentlemen still preferred to settle their quarrels in this way. The reasoning behind the royal ban was that if Frenchmen were cutting one another to pieces they were robbing the state of valuable military personnel, and robbing the King personally of subjects. As the Queen Mother puts it in the novel, “there is but one master in France, and to him every instinct of the mind, every pulse of the body are due. I will not allow my son to be deprived of any single one of his servants” (151).⁵ And the king himself, forbidding Saint-Aignan to fight with Raoul, says “The first honor and duty of a gentleman is obedience to his sovereign” (378). But by forbidding gentlemen to defend their own honor, the sovereign incurs an obligation to defend and protect

that honor himself. That is what the Comte means when he complains to the King of the dishonor done to his son:

[It] is a matter of astonishment to every one who regards your majesty's honor with sincere affection.... The king's honor, sire, is made up of the honor of his whole nobility. Whenever the king offends one of his gentleman, that is, whenever he deprives him of the smallest piece of his honor, it is from him, from the king himself, that that portion of honor is stolen. (385)⁷

These aspects of the moral lesson learned by the king—the necessity of self-mastery and being a moral exemplar, the necessity of looking after and defending his subjects' honor—savor of the seventeenth century, and they do not easily translate into terms Thoreau would recognize as applicable to the democratic state in the nineteenth century, or we in the twenty-first. But Dumas puts in D'Artagnan's speech one final bit of exhortation: "Sire, it is for you to choose. Do you wish to have friends or lackeys—soldiers or slaves—great men or mere puppets?" This language brings us back to Thoreau's contrast between the passive obedience of the "mass of men" and that irritating but valuable services rendered by heroes, martyrs, reformers, and "men." D'Artagnan continues: "Do you wish men to serve you, or to bend and crouch before you? Do you wish men to love you, or to be afraid of you?" If Louis can be deaf to this advice, his chief lieutenant warns, "you are a bad king, and to-morrow will be a poor king. And learn from me, sire, that bad kings are hated by their people, and poor kings are driven ignominiously away" (416).⁸

The gist of this speech is that the prosperity and even the survival of a regime depend on legitimacy, and legitimacy requires justice. (No peace without justice.) This final lesson applies in any age. And in Dumas' novel, young Louis takes the lesson to heart. Full of remorse, the King restores the Comte's liberty. And he becomes teachable: "I am not a bad king," he murmurs to himself

at the close of the scene, “nor am I poor king; I am but still a child, when all is said and done” (417).⁹

Thoreau did not, like a seventeenth-century D’Artagnan or Comte de la Fère, see service to the state as his highest duty. He would contentedly have as little to do with the state as possible. But in response to injustice committed by the state, he made essentially the same choice they did: not to rebel, but to withdraw consent and suffer punishment as a way of making a moral argument. To put the contrast clearly: state injustice demands withdrawal of support, delegitimization. The withdrawal of support can take the form of rebellion (as D’Artagnan briefly, if rhetorically, contemplates tyrannicide, and John Brown took up arms to raid Harpers Ferry), or flight (to Scotland, as D’Artagnan proposes to the Comte, or to Canada, like so many runaway slaves and later protesters against the Vietnam War), or a subversive submission, the jujitsu of playing strictly by the rules to reach a moral *reductio ad absurdum*. Either the first or the third might produce a resolution that corrects the injustice, but neither offers guarantees. If successful, the third offers the possibility of incremental reform, while the first involves a gamble—what replaces the current regime might be better, or just as bad (meet the new boss, same as the old boss), or even worse. Clear-sighted recognition of the good aspects of a regime and belief that it is capable of improvement are reasons a dissident might prefer civil disobedience over rebellion. Having dedicated their lives to serving the French crown, D’Artagnan and the Comte would not stoop to injure it. Thoreau has no beef with the principles on which his nation was founded—on the contrary, he objects to policies that betray those principles.

During Thoreau’s lifetime, the democratic republic he lived under was still considered an experiment, and it was regarded by many as fragile. It is remarkable that during the Civil War, as Thoreau lay dying of tuberculosis, the Union succeeded in raising battalion after battalion of volunteer soldiers who saw the regime they lived under, flawed as it was, as something worth defending. In point of fact, as historians like James McPherson have shown,

relatively few of these volunteers were, like Thoreau and his family, principled abolitionists. Rather, they sought to serve the state, even if only “as machines, with their bodies.” They understood that if the South could secede, any discontented state or bloc could secede, and the states would be vulnerable to predation by European powers. They, like Thoreau (89), believed that a democratic republic was superior to European-style absolute or limited monarchy, and they were willing to fight to preserve the republican experiment.

Europeans themselves were equally discontented with European regimes, and time and again saw the first option—rebellion—as the most felicitous. In only the twenty-seven months during which *Bragelonne* was serialized (October 1847 to January 1850), France saw two general insurrections in Paris (one successful, the other crushed), the forced abdication of a constitutional monarch (Louis-Philippe, Dumas’ one-time employer and patron), the declaration of a Republic, the establishment of rival governments, the drafting of a new Constitution so rigid as to be virtually impossible to amend, the emergence of an effective military dictatorship, and a plebiscite that installed as president a cipher with a famous name (Bonaparte, nephew of the conqueror of Europe). Subsequently, the younger Bonaparte was to tour the countryside to undermine support for the constitution, dismiss the Assembly, and declare himself president for life and then emperor. The instability of ordinary life in France during this period can hardly be imagined, and the outcome of all this political change was not any clear improvement. It can easily be imagined that Dumas (whose actual politics were ambivalent, but generally progressive/republican, according to Mike Phillips) had clearly in mind, as he composed his story, the dangers and tragic waste associated with open rebellion. He created heroes who rescued the state from its imperfections not by striking at it or even fleeing from it, but by showing their loyalty in unconventional ways that Thoreau would have recognized: raising the moral bar by word (speaking truth to power) and deed (shaming the state by compelling it to punish virtue and loyalty).

If the rebel is archetypally adolescent, one might say that the practitioner of principled nonviolence reverses metaphorical age roles with the state and becomes “the adult in the room.” In Dumas, the protesters against injustice were literally the adults in the room. The follower of the Gandhian program of *satyagraha* would reject the attribution of superior moral wisdom to either party, and insist that conflict be framed as a joint search for truth and justice (Bondurant 16ff). But whether the state is seen as petulant child or as cagey partner, civil disobedience provides an opportunity for the state to become more just and responsive, and thereby more legitimate and secure. Whether practitioners see or intend it that way or not, nonviolent protest holds the potential to educate the state.

Notes

For encouragement and helpful feedback the author wishes to thank Mark Engler, Kristin Case, John Kucich, and several anonymous reviewers.

1. This third novel in the series is several times longer than the others, and is traditionally divided into three or four or five parts bound as separate books. All quotations in this essay are from the part known as “Louise de La Vallière.” The edition selected for quotations and page citations is the widely published traditional one with no English translator credited. Chapter names are identified in footnotes, for easier identification of quotations in other editions.
2. From chapter LVIII, “King and Nobility.”
3. From chapter LXII, “What Raoul Had Guessed.”
4. From chapter LVIII.
5. From chapter XXIII, “Triumfeminate.”
6. From chapter LVII, “Rival Affections.”
7. From chapter LVIII.
8. From chapter LXIV, “What Took Place at the Louvre During the Supper at the Bastille.”
9. From chapter LXIV.

Works Cited

- Bondurant, Joan V. *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*. Princeton University Press, 1988.
- Dumas, Alexandre père. *Louise de La Valliere*. A.L. Burt, undated.
- Engler, Mark, and Paul Engler. *This is an uprising: How nonviolent revolt is shaping the twenty-first century*. Nation Books, 2016.
- McPherson, James M. "Volunteers in Blue and Gray: Why They Fought." Encyclopedia Britannica blog. 20 July 2011. <<http://blogs.britannica.com/2011/07/volunteers-blue-gray-fought/>>.
- Phillips, Mike. "Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870)." Black Europeans: A British Library Online Gallery feature. <<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/blackeuro/homepage.html>>.
- Sharp, Gene. *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential*. Porter Sargent Publishers, 2005.
- Thoreau, Henry David. "Resistance to Civil Government," in *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform*. Ed. Wendell Glick. Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Cafaro, Philip. *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue*. University of Georgia Press, 2004.