

Richard Rodriguez: Reluctant Romantic

For over five years now, I have been haphazardly corresponding with Richard Rodriguez. Yes, *the* Richard Rodriguez. While I would never sabotage the privilege of that electronic communication, I can say that, with the aid of his books as confirmation, Rodriguez is a sensitive soul hidden behind a prickly structure of purposeful confusion. Indeed, the wall of conundrum that Rodriguez builds around his *ethos* is likely more the work of defensive strategizing than of true ideological contradiction. Yet, he loves the paradox that he projects. Rodriguez' thought process, as expressed by his writing, is labyrinthine, punitive, reconciliatory, and simply pensive. However, his greatest inner conflict is not over his race or cline or ethnicity, but rather over something more arcane: the legacy of English Puritanism, against which he jabs and spars with the agility of my little dog Holly, a Setter mix, when she attempts to provoke my big dog, Buddy, a Chow mix, into play fighting.¹ Consider this passage:

I was studying Puritanism and that, too, interested me; not least for its prohibition of impersonation. At about this time, Malcolm X, an American puritan, discouraged African-American adolescents from hair straighteners and skin lighteners. At about this time, ethnic studies departments were forming on some [college] campuses. Such quorums would produce the great puritans of my age. The puritans would eventually form opinions about me, and I about them. (49)

Those of us who are used to reading Rodriguezian sentences, with their stylistic range and intellectual rigor, will just nod and provide the gratuitous, "ah, yes." As if we understand the connections that Rodriguez posits. But upon more careful reading,

¹ A huge compliment.

especially of this particular passage which begins a lengthy section in *Brown* on Puritanism, itself a bizarre topic for an Hispanic writer² to address, is actually an expression of pain. Clearly, Rodriguez' feelings were hurt by his treatment at the hands of the academic Puritan elites, an utterly reasonable response, albeit a romantic response. Note the titles and subtitles of his last three books:

Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez (1982)

Days of Obligation: An Argument with my Mexican Father (1992)

Brown: The Last Discovery of America (2002)

These titles are Edwardian in their empire-building ambition, and prosaic enough to look vaguely familiar. Yet, in terms of American literary provenance, Rodriguez is the apotheosis of Gatsby, as he follows the trope of his “novel” – his life, with a glassy self-consciousness. He compares himself to various canonical narrators, such as “Poor Richard” or the autobiographical persona that Ben Franklin develops for himself in the 18th century; and the “tricky Dick” political persona of Richard Nixon, whose pedestrian spin on the Faustian quest for ever more power, prestige, and paranoia, intrigues Rodriguez for its irony. Both Franklin and Nixon are work-ethic propagandists, self-improvement gurus, public sphere Puritans.

But Rodriguez is really Jay Gatsby, in that moment when he awaits Daisy for luncheon on East Egg – except that Rodriguez-Gatsby would cancel this fateful meeting, somehow flashing a bloody red light across the noon waters of Long Island Sound: *Stop, do not come. You will meet your disaster, and will cause my demise. Too much work, planning, subterfuge, bribery, and stacks of clean, pastel shirts have gone into this moment. I must be alone.* Wanting to retain his closet romanticism, Rodriguez-Gatsby

² He is cringing now; I have categorized him by racial genre.

would rather bank-roll his high-strung unrequited love, than squander it, again, on the Puritan vanguard, regardless of how lovely and unattainable they had become. H.L. Mencken, infamously once stated that Puritanism was “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy,” a sentiment which seems at odds with my impeachment of Rodriguez. Yet, as with Rodriguez, things are more complicated. Indeed, Mencken also wrote:

My whole life, once I get free from my present engagements, will be devoted to combating Puritanism. But in the meantime, I see clearly that the Puritans have nearly all the cards. They drew up the laws now on the statute books, and they cunningly contrived them to serve their own purposes. The only attack that will ever get anywhere will be directed - not at the Puritan heroes but at the laws they hide behind. In this attack, I am full of hope that shrapnel will play a part.

(Qtd. from Webb, in Edgar Kelmer's *The Irreverent Mr. Mencken* [1950]:79)

Earlier, in a letter to Percy Marks, (3 Feb 1925), Mencken again took aim at Puritanism:

The Puritan is simply one who, because of physical cowardice, lack of imagination or religious superstition, is unable to get any joy out of the satisfaction of his natural appetites. Taking a drink, he fears that he is headed for the gutter. Grabbing a gal, he is staggered by thoughts of hell and syphilis. Observing that other men do such things innocently, he hates them.

(Qtd. from Webb, in Edgar Kelmer's *The Irreverent Mr. Mencken* [1950]:278)

For Mencken, who was likely more caught up in the WASP-ish ancestors of true religious puritans, his obvious hatred of these folks was based more on a combination of class-envy and his fabled “omnibibulous” statement—that he would drink anything and

enjoy it, a slap in the face of teetotaling Prohibitionists. Mencken also lived the era of Perry Miller and the “New England Mind,” a major elitist academic force, if not a body of criticism and an artificially crafted canon that touted the pious contributions of religious white men, pre-dating the more populous founding fathers of the 18th century.

Rodriguez, then, agrees with Mencken, almost inherits his anger, but there is a contradiction. If Mencken hated the Puritans because they were habitual downers, Rodriguez, who favors a more reserved view toward joy, hates Puritans in their new apotheosis, that of friendly academic autocrat. In an interview with Scoot London, Rodriguez remarked that he was also estranged from the gay community: “I’ve recently gotten in trouble with certain gay activists because I’m not gay enough! I am a morose homosexual. I’m melancholy. *Gay* is the last adjective I’d use to describe myself” (qtd. in London par. 31). Rodriguez rejects Puritanism not because they might have stomped on his gay or scholarly buzz, as would have Mencken; no, Rodriguez rejects institutionalized Puritanism, of any form, academic, social, political, or religious.

I reflect on Rodriguez’ explication of Puritanism as I experience a New England weekend in early November, unseasonably warm, on the campuses of Harvard University, Salem State College Endicott College, and Phillip’s Academy of Andover, Massachusetts, this last a prep school so supersonically aristocratic that even a Ph.D. academic such as myself can feel disenfranchised – finding out that terminal degree education, even at an institution devoted to higher learning, is irrelevant to his band of latter-day Puritans, the keepers of the affirmative pedigree. I am second generation American, Midwestern, an average Catholic, unmarried, three kids; you know, the normal hybrid of trash and baggage. These same levels of exclusivity taunt and haunt Rodriguez,

who is forever in a push-pull with his own cultural heritage, let alone his sexual orientation and his educational status. Here is a portion of his account of his own New England weekend in Sharon, Connecticut: “We turned through the gate [of Hotchkiss]. A vast lawn, strewn leaves, conformed to every novel of New England prep school life I had ever read. On cue, two golden boys dressed for lacrosse began to cross the green. I watched them with such concentration, I feared my tongue might dart from my mouth” (*Brown*, 97). Such bitterness, so much affectation, the specter of *Young Werther*, of Victor Frankenstein, and the memory of himself in the ubiquitous “black suit,” wanting to fit in, but not knowing, or recognizing, into just what club.

But Rodriguez discovers that the West Coast academic club wasn't the right one to rush, either. “I was glad to get away from those students when I was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to study in London. I found myself at the British Museum, as first content, reading English Renaissance literature. But then came the crisis: the doomed silence; the dusty pages of books all around me; the days accumulating lists of obsequious footnotes; the wandering doubts about the value of scholarship” (*Hunger*, 160). I recently had my own London epiphany, again thinking about Rodriguez and his tanned skin, this time moving through the heavy pedestrian traffic on High Holburn Street, trekking east toward Cheapside, above St. Paul's, as he calls it, “that Christopher Wren Church.” My impression of London was that the new English Puritans had made the sensible and fateful decision to leave when they did; the largest migration was carried out mostly between 1629-1640, before the English Civil War, the mess of the Cromwell regime, the Plague, and the Great Fire. All of London public history seems to be packaged toward the gory torture chamber and the gruesome *gaol*, a kind of lust for self-destruction and

theocratic fratricide, where the immense misfortunes of the early to mid-17th century are eventually replaced by the white dome of a cathedral that is neither Catholic nor Puritan. St. Paul's was rebuilt by Wren under the aegis of Charles II, after the fire that totaled the city in 1666, and as such is a thrusting, over-achieving monument to healthy Anglican excess and royalty restored.

On a personal level, in *Brown*, Rodriguez experiments with the plot line of the "child of fortune" narration; romantic and laughably hopeful, as a possible *typos* for his life-novel: "I felt young Ben's disappointment [Franklin's, about not being able to be formally educated] as keenly as I'd felt Charles Dickens's horror of the blacking factory into which he'd been apprenticed by his family. . . . The Dickensian hero was tossed by fate, must rely on a benefactor, some long-lost uncle. . . . Myself as a child of fortune? Lyndon Johnson might do for [a] Victorian benefactor; [he] was mine, in any case" (97-98). The romantic and admirable story of Rodriguez's life, from a lower-middle class, first generation California-Mexican family, educated by Irish-Catholic nuns in grade school, to his meteoric rise into the stratosphere of humanities education at Stanford and Berkeley, then on to graduate studies which included a fellowship in London, is the story of a "child of fortune." And that child was surely a dreamer. But governmental Puritanism, Puritan community-building, and the secular theocracy of Affirmative Action dulled and stunted his romantic yearnings. No one can hold on to a dream when bludgeoned by Puritan do-gooders, who insist upon helping because they insist upon controlling the arc, and the trajectory, and the vectors of the dream. Hence, a wounded romantic, Rodriguez simply dropped out of London, New England, and the academy, and now writes what he wants to for a private news agency.

What about the truth of Puritanism? Original Puritans were beer drinkers in the morning, sex-partakers at all times (as they typically married young and had huge families)³; they were not afraid to argue with a minister⁴, banish their own⁵, censor and extradite the jolly⁶, and commit genocide⁷ against the Natives. I too have studied them. I like them. My dream is to get into their history so deeply that I can pull a *Loyolan* epiphany⁸ and actually “image” scenes from their lives so as to reconstruct the context of their literature. Here’s where Rodriguez has them wrong: yes, the Puritans who remained in England during the Interregnum (1642-49) closed the theatres. But the Puritans of New England at the same time were circulating in manuscript form the poetry of Anne Bradstreet. They were growing Harvard College (circa 1635), and “removing” themselves from already congested areas around Boston and Cambridge (Newtown) out to Ipswich (Aggawam) and Andover, and sites west of the Connecticut River where they could again begin again in their fierce pursuit of autonomous Congregationalism. These were not the witch burners of 1692, yet they committed adultery, animal buggery, sodomy, and murder⁹ on each other. The Puritans who napalmed Rodriguez were largely figments of his livid (yes, angry) imagination, and his unfortunate good fortune.

In “Late Victorians” in *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez argues that Puritanical America

[d]ismissed gay camp followers as yuppies; the term means to suggest
infantility. Yuppies were obsessive and awkward in their materialism.

³ See Edmund Morgan’s famous piece “Puritans and Sex.” (1942)

⁴ Roger Williams’ experience in Salem and Plymouth.

⁵ Anne Hutchinson’s experience in Boston.

⁶ Thomas Morton’s experience with Bradford and Wollaston and Maremount.

⁷ Pequot “War” 1635-6.

⁸ Ignatius Loyola’s prayer life included the contemplation of the Crucifixion, so as to imagine being there.

⁹ See Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Winthrop’s *Journal*, and Wigglesworth’s *Diary*.

Whereas gays arranged a decorative life against a barren [i.e. Puritan] state, . . .[but] Yuppies, trained to careerism from the cradle, wavered in their pursuit of the [work] ethic, . . . in favor of the Mediterranean the Latin, the Catholic, the Castro, the Gay. (37)

So Puritans are then nothing more than those who are anti-gay, as would be expected? Herein lies the rub with Rodriguez's romanticism, as I have previously stated; his feelings were hurt, he felt excluded, or maybe even ostracized, this time by his sexual orientation. Whereas the Puritans of academia had formerly embraced him for his minority ethnicity, Rodriguez wanted loose from their embrace, and leading a "decorative life" was the way. He continues, "This nation was formed from a fear of the crowd. Those early Puritans trusted only the solitary life. Puritans advised fences" (163). This is not entirely true, as the early settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony certainly did establish towns, assembly halls, and schools. Fences as a metaphor is quite another issue, but one can never quite be sure on which level Rodriguez is writing, his own brand of esoterica.

In "The Prince and I" in *Brown*, Rodriguez perambulates Puritan ideology in a prejudiced albeit heuristic attempt at convincing the reader to agree that the Puritan was bad, and that he made Rodriguez his victim: "Americans are in the habit of dressing the noun, 'puritan,' in the pejorative – puritan gray – meaning sexual repression. I think America's deeper puritanical strain is evident in our fear of the stage, of all things theatrical:

In England, Puritans were famous for their objection to the confusion of the playhouse and to its seduction: The kettledrums and face powders and the actors

lewdly strutting – boys playing women, rabble playing at kingship, . . . Some historians believe that Puritans of Shakespeare’s time were scandalized less by what transpired onstage than by the prostitutes and thieves. The sordid groundlings who frequented the plays. . . . Puritans had their day in England in the seventeenth century. . . . They severed the stalk of divine right. They dissolved all sham, dumb show, liturgy. Playhouses were shuttered and locked. (49-51)

Who could disagree that the mean, old, fun-hating Puritans had ruined London by closing the Globe, the Rose, the Blackfriars, and other Elizabethan theaters? When the restoration was established, the mood in London toward the “Reformers” who had been defeated, and those who had sailed away thirty years before, was something along the lines of, *Good riddance to them*. Let them suffer in “their poor cottages in the wilderness.”¹⁰ So, sexual repression and suppression of the theatrical arts, those were the Puritan legacies.

In “Profession” in *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez states his bibliographic preferences: “Minority student – that was the label I bore in college at Stanford, then in graduate school at Columbia and Berkeley: a non-white reader of Spenser and Milton and Austen” (143). This statement interests me immensely, as it reveals not only the literature he read, but also that he was reading across time in a discrete language tradition: from so-called Renaissance British, through Interregnum texts, to the 19th c Victorian novel: British Literature. The font of Puritanism dwells in its writings, and these people were prolific. While he does not mention actual texts or editions, one can assume that of Edmund Spenser, Rodriguez surely read *The Faerie Queene*, and possibly the *Shepherds’ Calendar*; of John Milton, of course *Paradise Lost*, and possibly his occasional poems. But what of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, or Sir Philip Sidney’s sonnet sequences

¹⁰ From “A Humble Request” (1630) winthropsociety.org/texts

and poems, or as mentioned earlier, Anne Bradstreet's poems in *The Tenth Muse* published in London in 1650, sixteen years prior to the restoration of Charles II? I would like to see from Rodriguez more than an almost dilettante dismissal of the sources, and thus, more than an adversarial response to English or transatlantic Puritan culture.

Bradstreet is actually a fine example of the sophistication and range available in Puritan letters. The poems in the *Tenth Muse* are public sphere verse, occasional poems, and didactic or pedagogical poems ("the quaternions"). They aren't particularly religious, and they are not personal. The later, lyric poems on her husband, her children and grandchildren, her mother, and her house were published posthumously in 1678, and in 1867. How could Rodriguez quarrel with Bradstreet's early poems? What is "puritan" about them? Indeed, even the long quaternion or "four by four" poems hold sumptuous imagery, and classical, not biblical, allusion. Of "Water" in "The Four Elements," Bradstreet writes

But what's the wealth my rich ocean brings?
 Fishes so numberless I there do hold
 If thou shouldst buy, it would exhaust thy gold.
 There lives the oily whale, whom all men know,
 Such wealth but not such like, earth may'st show,
 [. . .] my pearls that dangle at thy darling's ears
 Not thou, but shellfish yield, as Pliny clears,
 Was ever gem so rich found in thy trunk
 As Egypt's wanton Cleopatra drunk?

The language here is hardly that of a prude; there is gold, oil, wealth, pearls, shellfish, gems, and “Egypt’s wanton Cleopatra”! I would simply challenge Rodriguez to relax his strangle grip on the legacy of Puritanism, and on his manipulation of the word itself.

There are already enough words to denigrate, enough words misused, abused and ripped off. Bradstreet did not cause Rodriguez’s pain, his romanticism, or heady hoping that he could defy the gods of the academy and be left alone to study Renaissance Literature in London or Berkeley without always having to “represent.” Instead, in “Asians” in *Days of Obligation*, he fights back by the oldest of means: finding another scapegoat:

By eight o’clock that morning, . . . I stood as usual in a class room in Wheeler Hall, lecturing on tragedy and comedy. Asian kids at the back of the room studied biochemistry, as usual, behind propped up Shakespeares. I said nothing, made no attempt to recall them. At the end of the hour, I announced to the class that, henceforward, class participation would be considered in grading. Asian eyes peered over the blue rims of their Oxford Shakespeares. (173)

An unusual clarity marks this scene, one sees the young Rodriguez, possibly still in some variation of his black suit and tie, lecturing on *Macbeth*, and thinking: *Such a story! Witches, murder, power, corruption, exquisite justice! Surely all I have to do is present the characters and plot and assign a suitable paper prompt and all will be well. Everyone will be interested. So why aren’t the “Asians” listening? Are they the new Puritans, de facto closing the theaters by refusing to care about my lecture on tragedy? I’ll fix them:* henceforward, class participation will be considered in grading. The Asian has become the most straight-laced of new wave Puritans, straighter than even the cadre of Malcolm X, more tightly wound, with no time for theater or literature.

Finally, I must confess that I do love Richard Rodriguez, and do teach him and his books whenever possible. I feel proud of myself as a reader when I can get to the core of his sequenced, sequined [?] paradoxes and hearty non-conformity. Plus, his writing is unlike any other, still. Pieces of Garcia-Marquez float around just for atmosphere, while the indelible influences of British literary styles, genres, techniques, and cultural contextualization moor him to my own reading roots. In the end, I get along with him, with his “briefcase full of English novels” and his eyes on his own version of the prize.

Works Cited

- Bradstreet, Anne. "The Four Elements." *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*. Jeannine Hensley, ed. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard U P, 1967.
- London, Scott. "A View from the Melting Pot: An Interview with Richard Rodriguez." Aug. 1997: 72 Pars. 5 May 2007 <<http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/rodriguez.html>>.
- Rodriguez, Richard. *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*. New York: Penguin, 2002.
- . *Days of Obligation: An Argument with my Mexican Father*. New York: Viking, 1992.
- . *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. New York: Bantam, 1982.
- Webb, John. "H.L. Mencken Quotes." *Henry Louis Mencken (1880-1956)*. Gibbons Burke, ed. 8 Apr. 2006. 8 May 2007 <<http://www.io.com/~gibbonsb/mencken.html>>
Path: A large collection (111K) of Mencken quote bites.

Author: Elizabeth Ferszt

B.A. U-Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1983

M.A. U-South Carolina, Columbia, 1986

Ph.D. Wayne State U., Detroit, 2006

Current Position: Visiting Assistant Professor

Ferris State University

Big Rapids, Michigan

Contact: ferszte@ferris.edu

231-349-2624

115 W. Grand Traverse

Big Rapids, MI 49307

Key words: Puritan/-ism

Richard Rodriguez

London theaters

New England

Renaissance Literature

Dear Cal State Northridge:

This piece will soon be published in *Early American Literature*, 43.2. Please see my website for other writing samples, scholarship, and research interests.

<http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/colleges/artsands/langandlit/bradstreet/>

Thanks

--Liz Ferszt