

FIRST THINGS

ULTERIOR LIVES

A REVIEW OF *DARLING*

by
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Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography

BY RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

VIKING, 256 PAGES, \$26.95

Richard Rodriguez has been an occasional companion of mine for more than thirty years, since the publication of *Hunger of Memory* in 1982. I feel I know him well enough, in part because so much of his writing is autobiographical; but until last September, I'd known him only on the page. Then I heard and saw him give a talk in Dayton, Ohio, shortly before this book was published, which confirmed my admiration for this writer whose work is consistently intelligent, beautiful, and deeply Catholic. Writers who manage even one of these are rare enough; those who consistently combine all three are something close to a wonder.

A visual image remains with me from that talk: a handsome, animated, small, brown, not-young man (Rodriguez was born in 1944) adopting on stage the posture of the crucified one to show, with just enough self-mockery, what lies at the heart of Catholicism in general and of Catholic pain-piety in particular. He notes in *Darling* that you can't mock a crucifixion because it's already a mockery. In the talk I heard, he managed to show this, too, without saying it; and to show at the same time that no human representation of the crucifixion can altogether avoid self-mockery. Holding all that together gives some sense of the texture and temperature of how he thinks about and represents being Catholic.

The son of immigrants from Mexico, though himself born in the United States, Rodriguez is perhaps best known for his writing about race, ethnicity, and America. Some of this was, decades ago, controversial—especially his opposition to bilingual education, and his characterization of becoming American as inevitably deracinating. Controversial in a different way has been his public self-identification as a gay man, and his critical engagement with Catholic doctrine about homosexual acts and the loves that go with them. He writes often in magazines such as *Harper's* and the *New Republic* and was a frequent contributor to the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour on PBS. He is, I suppose, if the term has any real meaning, among America's public intellectuals, and he is temperamentally contrarian: He manages often enough to offend left and right, and seems to relish doing so. That's also something to love.

Darling bills itself as a spiritual autobiography, but that's a stretch. It would be more accurate to call it a collection of meditations on what it means to be Catholic in America since 9/11 (all the pieces in the book were written since then, and most have been published in various venues during the last seven or eight years), and especially on the significance of the relations between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. One of the essays, "Jerusalem and the Desert," stems from a visit to Israel, and is principally about the ecology of the desert, and what the three faiths' shared origin in the desert (desert does to landscape what age does to the body: dries, empties, withers, scarifies) means for thinking about the nature of the three Abrahamic religions and their relations one to another.

That essay, together with one called "The Three Ecologies of the Holy Desert" (the three are mountain, desert floor, and cave), are the most explicit in their treatment of the desert theme, but it runs through most of the rest of the essays in one way or another. *Darling* is, really, a Catholic book about violence, decay, death, prayer, friendship, and love. It's also a love song to the Church: It is dedicated to the Sisters of Mercy, who educated Rodriguez, and they, along with various priests and churches and devotions, are a substantial presence in the book.

Rodriguez is an artful, compressed, and often aphoristic writer. I frequently found myself noting especially compressed and suggestive sentences. “Flesh is a complicated medium for grace”—written in the context of a discussion of the fleshly flaws of Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez; “I had had an ulterior life as long as I could remember”—written as part of an analysis of what it is to live as a Catholic (this one I especially like: ulterior as hidden and excessive, as commentary on and critique of the cliché use of the word in “ulterior motive,” and, perhaps, I devoutly hope, as summary-echo of Colossians 3:3, “For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God”); “Atheism is wasted on the non-believer”—as part of a critique of Christopher Hitchens on Mother Teresa (the shiv right into the left ventricle); and in answer to a question about whether the world is better or worse for the presence of religion in it, “If you think the world is perfectible, then worse” (this response is very nearly perfect and so un-American that it makes me shiver). There are many more. The book’s worth reading for these alone: little word-jewels, pure gifts.

What kind of Catholic is Rodriguez? He is, by the account of this book (a more detailed account of his raising and formation can be had from *Hunger of Memory* and *Days of Obligation*) a regular Mass-goer; a lover of the Church; one who intends to stay in and with the Church until death; one who rarely goes to confession (he notes a thirty-two-year span when he did not go at all); one who loves the Sisters of Mercy, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (a gay-transvestite group that performs corporal works of mercy while also publicly mocking the Church), and Mother Teresa; and one who has deep and principled disagreements with some of the Church’s doctrinal positions on the nature and place of women, and on the acceptability of homosexual acts and the loves that accompany them. More important than all this, informing and subtending all this, is that he is the kind of Catholic who understands, represents, and tries to respond to the love of the Lord in a devastated world of pain.

Rodriguez’s darling, in the centerpiece essay of the collection that also gives the book its name, is an unnamed woman whom he’s loved (it’s the right word, gay as he self-confessedly is) for much of his life. It’s a love-valediction: She’s dead now, and he remembers the help he gave her after a difficult divorce;

how he helped her choose a red Chanel cocktail dress; how he has, painfully, to explain to her that though he loves her he has no interest in sleeping with her; how, together, they learn what it means to “darling” one another (there’s a lovely disquisition on the word, with Cary Grant and Noel Coward as principal players); how he learns from his love of her that his place as a gay man in the Church depends on how the Church thinks of her particularly and women in general; and how, interwoven with all this, both the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence can be seen as serving the Lord’s purposes. The essay is a hymn of praise to women, and, by implication, to the Church as a certain sort of woman.

It’s in this essay, more clearly than anywhere else in the book, that the texture of Rodriguez’s attitude to the Church is displayed. She, like his fleshly darling, is the beloved, his darling. She is, Rodriguez writes, “a feminine act, intuition, and pronoun: The Christian Church is the sentimental branch of Christian theology. (I mean that as praise.)” But she can be tempted by despair and fear to damage herself, to try to deny herself by cleansing herself of what she takes to be impurities. She might do this by shrouding her beauty (old jeans and baggy sweaters rather than red Chanel), and when this begins to happen, love withers.

Among the impurities the Church might want to cleanse herself of is people like Rodriguez, he thinks, because he prefers to share his love and his bed and his life with a man rather than a woman. He takes the Church to be wrong doctrinally about homosexual acts, and often wrong, too, in what it teaches about women. He would like the Church to take instruction on these matters, as Jesus also did, from Mary, another darling in these pages. And he thinks that if it did, the Church’s self-shrouding fear might grow less and its loving embrace of pain might show itself more clearly.

I don’t agree with every position taken in *Darling*, or with every argument offered. On Islam, I suspect that what’s needed at the moment isn’t emphasis on the similarities among the three so-called Abrahamic religions as desert faiths, real though these are, but rather on difference and complementarity. The recent work of Rémi Brague on this, especially *On the God of the Christians (and on one or two others)*, is especially instructive. On homosexuality and homosexual acts, by contrast, I think Rodriguez much closer to being

right than not. Insofar as such acts are motivated by and evoke love, they are good and to be loved; insofar as they do not, not. In this, they are no different from heterosexual acts.

There are other interesting differences between the two kinds of act. But if you think, as Rodriguez seems to, and I do, and all Catholics should, that we live in a devastated world in which no sexual acts are undamaged, free from the taint of sin and death and the concomitant need for lament, then the fact that homosexual acts have their own characteristic disorder is no ground for blindness to the goods they enshrine. Gay men should, of course, darling one another; those of us whose darlings are of the opposite sex should be glad that they do, and glad of instruction in love by the ways in which they do. Love is hard enough to come by in a devastated world without encouraging blindness to its presence.

I thought, as I read *Darling*, of Caravaggio's *Madonna dei Palafrenieri*, a painting in which Mary's foot treads on the serpent's head with Jesus's boy-foot carefully placed on top of hers, guided by hers in the right way to overcome the evil one. Anne, Mary's mother, stands benevolently in the background, looking on (and looking old). I expect that this is a painting Rodriguez knows; it serves as an apt illustration of one of *Darling*'s central themes, which is, exactly, what it means to be Jesus's darling, and to darling him back.

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