

Interview with Richard Rodríguez

JOSÉ ANTONIO GURPEGUI

Richard Rodríguez is a writer, known principally for his personal essays, as well as an international journalist for newspapers and for television in United Kingdom and the United States. He appeared for nearly twenty years in the United States as an essayist on the PBS “NewsHour.” His books include *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1981); *Days of Obligation: An Argument with my Mexican Father* (1992); and *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (2002) His essays have also been published in magazines ranging from *Harper’s*, *The New Republic*, to *Time*. For many years, he wrote for the “Opinion” page of the *Los Angeles Times*. He is best known for his first book, *Hunger of Memory*, wherein he describes the journey he took from being “a socially disadvantaged child” to become a middle-class American man. Presently, he is finishing a book about the “desert religions” — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — and the impact of the desert ecology for the experience of God. A chapter of this book appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* in January, 2008. In the essay, “The God of the Desert,” Rodríguez showed the desert to be a paradoxical temple and its emptiness a necessary feature for the difficult presence and absence of God.

José Antonio Gurpegui: Thank you very much for this interview with *Camino Real*, an academic journal concerned with the *Estudios de las Hispanidades Norteamericanas*. Would you feel comfortable with that subtitle?

Richard Rodríguez: Yes, I feel comfortable with the notion of being a North American and a Hispanic. I just don’t know exactly what those terms mean. As a “North American”,

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I have written about Canada, especially about Canada's relationship to Mexico and the United States. Both Canada and Mexico are tested by their proximity to the U.S. I have a chapter in *Brown* that examines this dilemma of our proximity. Octavio Paz, as a Mexican, dealt at length with the meaning of the U.S.-Mexico border. Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian, also dealt with the border — the electronic border, and how Canada was overwhelmed by the bombast and noise from Hollywood and Madison Avenue. Octavio Paz is always interested in the dialectical tension between Mexico and the United States. The daring of Marshall McLuhan's analysis of the new media could have never have been produced by a U.S. writer. His analysis benefited from proximity and difference.

J.A.G.: And on the term “Hispanidades”, the latino population in the United States? There are different approaches...

R.R.: The politically correct position is to resist the word “Hispano”. There are many Hispanics who loathe that word because, they feel, it gives too much of our identity in the Americas to colonial Spain. I don't resist the term Hispanic, but I have never understood, as a writer or a thinker, exactly how I am related to Spain. After all, my primary language is English, not Spanish, and my most vivid literary culture is Anglo-American.

J.A.G.: Yes, but by *Hispanidades* what we mean is that the Hispanic origin Latino population in the United States is very heterogeneous. Do you agree?

R.R.: Of course, I agree. You are right — the differences between Mexicans and Cubans and Dominicans in the United States are real and deep. But, so too, are some similarities, especially among native-born American Hispanics who have more in common with other U.S. Hispanics than with their parents' home cultures.

J.A.G.: Somehow you don't dedicate your cause to literature, but more to sociology. How do you feel about that? How do you describe your work?

R.R.: I am ambivalent about much of my work as “literature”. After all, I don't write fiction or poetry -- normally the highest of the literary arts. But obviously I get noticed and I am published at a time when other writers of equal talent do not get published or noticed. In many of my essays, I am deliberately politically provocative; I am eager for

debate; I like to toy with my critics — I enjoy keeping them off-balance. But I remind you: Some of the greatest writers of Latin America were also political figures — ambassadors, diplomats and public figures all over the world — as much as they were literary figures. As a writer I believe that one should be able to balance a concern for the elegance of a line with a sense of responsibility for the public debate. Right now in the United States there is much discussion about illegal immigration (mainly from Latin America), about bilingual education, and about the impact of non-European immigrants populations on American identity. These are political concerns. But they are concerns that should and can engage a writer — someone concerned with the elegancies of the line of prose. When I write, I try to break down the line separating fiction and non-fiction.

J.A.G.: Richard, would you allow me to be provocative?

R.R.: Yes, please...

J.A.G.: Okey so if I call you a “Chicano author”, what would you do? Would you leave the room?

R.R.: (He laughs). I would repeat what I have been saying to many people since I have come to Spain — I don’t hear that word “Chicano” very much in the United States anymore. The more general term — “Latino” and/or “Hispanic” -- has replaced it. The word, Chicano, seems to me more and more a term belonging to the generation of Mexican-American college students in the ‘60s and ‘70s. So if you call me a Chicano, you are being old-fashioned.

J.A.G.: So, which term do you prefer — Hispanic, Latino, Mexican American, or just American?

R.R.: *Chino*. (He laughs). People are always asking me if I consider myself a “gay” writer and I always respond, “No, I am a morose writer.” I hate the various terms that people use to try and pin down the writer. I live in a city (San Francisco) that has become increasingly Chinese, I am becoming part of that Asian-American culture. I am *filipino*, *japones*, *chino*. When you ask if I regard myself as a Hispanic writer, I say, yes. But in truth, I think of myself increasingly in relationship to the Pacific — to China and to Asia, rather than to Latin America. *Soy chino*.

J.A.G.: How did you feel when you were described by some of your critics as a “coconut” (brown on the outside, white on the inside)? Did that affect you?

R.R.: No, it didn’t and doesn’t. It’s true, I do avoid certain international conferences because I know that a dark legend precedes me and there will be the usual gaggle of tiresome critics. And I don’t want to have to justify my work — not at my age. But I do see myself — in some more complicated way — as truly being a traitor to memory, if not exactly a traitor to Mexico or to Latin America. I do think I betrayed my family, betrayed my mother and father by becoming someone new — a “gringo”. On the other hand, I think also that Mexico betrayed my parents by forcing them to emigrate. If someone tells me that I “lost” my culture by becoming a coconut, I always respond that my parents were forced to lose their Mexican culture because of the corruption and incompetence of Mexico.

J.A.G.: Let’ try more academic questions. Why did you write *Hunger of Memory*? Was that a necessity?

R.R.: Yes, there was a psychological necessity that prompted my writing. I began writing the memoir in England, at a time when I was very lonely. I had moved away from my family and my working class origins. I lived within a different linguistic world — a high British academic culture. But the most important change was social or sociological. Education had transported me away from my family’s class.

The English, unlike Americans, understand the dynamics of social class. The English academic, Richard Hoggart, has coined the very helpful term “scholarship boy.” That’s what I was. The Americans, in many ways, because they or we are so middle class, we tend to discount the drama of social class. The American obsession is with race.

In the U.S., there is even a popular romance in mass culture with playing at being black and a member of the underclass. I am thinking of the middle class romance with hip-hop.

For myself, I needed to figure out how and what had changed in my life, as a result of education. That’s what I wondered about: What does it mean to leave your social class behind and become a member of the middle class? When I was writing *Hunger of Memory*, I would have told you that I was writing a working-class memoir — in the English tradition of D.H. Lawrence or Richard Hoggart or Raymond Williams.

Ironically, when my memoir was published and got lots of attention in the United States, *Hunger of Memory* became a Hispanic memoir. I ended up on the bookshelf or on the reading list as a Mexican–American writer, rather than a working-class writer.

J.A.G.: Do you know *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* by Oscar Z. Acosta?

R.R.: Yes I do.

J.A.G.: How would you compare both?

R.R.: It is hard for me to compare myself to other writer. But, of course, I do and have always done. When I write I think of myself within an American tradition. I compare myself to Henry Adams. I compare myself to Henry David Thoreau. It is not because I think of myself as their equal. But I think of myself as writing within “the Tradition.” As a young reader, I remember being enormously attracted to the biography of Benjamin Franklin — the drama of his childhood in Philadelphia, the poverty of his parents, the fact that he was denied an early education. My situation was never so dire. Still, I was moved by the drama of Franklin, moving through education, to a radical self-invention. Franklin has remained for me a kind of guardian angel in my writing life.

J.A.G.: How have you evolved from *Hunger of Memory* to *Brown*?

R.R.: At the very least, I am no longer the author of *Hunger of Memory* because I wrote *Hunger of Memory*. The act of writing a book so painful and personal allowed me — as a sort of exorcism — to transcend its dilemmas. I remember my mother writing to me and her plea that I not write about our family “*por los gringos*”. I ended up precisely violating my mother’s request by rehearsing my life for a reader whom I did not know. By writing so publicly about a life so private I was freed from my early life. Thus I am no longer the person I describe in the book.

J.A.G.: What do you know about what is going on with Chicano or Latino literature?

R.R.: Not much. I probably know much more about African-American or Black literature than I do Latino literature. (I was early on very influenced by James Baldwin and Richard Wright.)

Today, I keep up with some Latin American — though not Spanish — literature. I've been enormously inspired by Octavio Paz. But I'll tell you a story that is embarrassing but true. Some years ago, I received an invitation to have dinner with Paz in Los Angeles, at an art gallery, along with some wealthy people from Beverly Hills. I was so embarrassed by my meager command of Spanish, in the presence of a man who wrote such beautiful Spanish, a cosmopolite who had lived and studied the civilizations from India to France to Japan, I turned afraid. I declined the invitation. I forget what excuse I gave.

Years later, I heard from Enrique Krauze, that Octavio Paz had come into their offices at Vuelta in Mexico City with copies of my book, *Days of Obligation*, under his arm. "At last a Mexican-American has understood Mexico," Paz said. I was so flattered by this story because I had no idea that anyone — least of all Paz, my sultan father — even read my work in Mexico. It turned out that Vuelta wanted to translate and publish *Days*, but then the peso got devalued and nothing happened. There was no translation of *Days*. Paz died. We never met.

J.A.G.: You've just mentioned that you felt embarrassed about speaking Spanish but your mother tongue was Spanish?

R.R.: But my mother tongue was rural and lower-class Spanish! My mother and father had been raised in Mexican villages. I remember when my mother used to listen to Spanish-language radio or television, she would often marvel at the diction — the "big words" she heard. Her Spanish was very limited, animated, very emotive but very domestic — *español de la cocina*. I grew up having little imagination of a metropolitan Spanish. The prospect of speaking to you — an academic and an intellectual — in Spanish would be daunting, to say the least.

J.A.G.: I see. But you never even spoke Spanish, even the *español de la cocina*?

R.R.: Oh yes, in fact there is a documentary I did for the BBC in Mexico, where I am seated with some old men in a little village in the state of Michoacán. The *viejitos* reminded me of my father. I felt very easy with them. (You can see it on tape.) The old words came flooding back. There was no problem. But if I had been sitting in Mexico City with a group of writers — that would have been different. Impossible!

J.A.G.: I was thinking if that was a psychological defense.

R.R.: You see, when I come to Spain *y no puedo hablar español muy bien*, Spain does not seem to make very much of my incapacity. When I go to Mexico and speak Spanish badly I feel exposed as a traitor to Mexico — and judged accordingly. In Mexico’s eyes, I am the *pocho*. I have become wedded to Mexico’s rival — the United States. I have become the nephew to Uncle Sam, betraying mother and fatherland. Sometimes in Mexico I face incomprehension or even laughter at my bad Spanish. The hotel clerk or the taxi driver is not pleased. Here in Spain, people are curious about this strange man named Rodriguez who doesn’t speak Spanish, but no one seems to take offence.

J.A.G.: What is the United States, a “melting pot”, a “salad bowl”, or neither?

R.R.: I don’t use these metaphors, because I am not a piece of lettuce. (He laughs). But I suppose of the two the U.S. is probably closer to a “melting pot,” in the sense that there is something fierce and fiery about the process of becoming an American — the skin on your soul burns. I think of it as an alchemical process: You fall into the pot and you come out changed — a different metal — than when you went in. My Americanization made me exactly different from the Mexican boy that I once was. I owe my new culture to Elvis Presley and to Walt Disney. I owe my American culture to African Americans and to Chinese Americans.

My uncle was from India. My earliest teachers were Irish Catholic nuns. I always lived within a round world. I remember talking with one of my cousins whose father was Indian (from India) and whose mother was Mexican. What name should we give her? We decided with much laughter that she was an Indian-Indian.

I think of the golfer, Tiger Woods. His mother is from Thailand; his father was African-Americans. He also is Scots Irish and American Indian. So he invented a word for himself. He calls himself a “*Cablinasian*.” That is very clever coinage and wise. It is a melting pot term — a melded word, forged in the melting pot.

J.A.G.: So, this may have had to do with the “browning” of America?

R.R.: That’s right. Tiger Woods’ ex-wife and the mother of his two children is Swedish. So his children will be mixed one stage beyond their father. And the difficulty of naming will continue with the new generation.

For myself, I live with the notion that our racial identity is fluid and indeterminate. (I call “brown” the impure mixture of identities we, each of us, carry.) I am, after all, *mestizo* — the child of the violent and the erotic meeting of two civilizations -- Spain and the New World Mexica. From that mixed beginning, I see myself as “brown”.

I know that brown can be unsettling for some people — people who prefer purer sense of self. But as someone belonging to the *mestizaje* of the New World, I maneuver through the complicated world, knowing that the complexity of the world is already within me. I tell myself to be unafraid.

J.A.G.: From Spain, from a Spanish point of view, I haven't the feeling that Latinos, especially within the Mexican-American community are always fighting with one another. It may be the Spanish heritage...

R.R.: Well, there is a long tradition of *envidia* in our culture. Maybe that's because the civic structure of Mexico was never as strong as the family or village culture. (Mexican history is a history of turmoil and revolution.) So we are so easily in competition with one another, once we leave the intimate circle.

And intellectually Mexico, many historians agree, was formed by the Spanish Counter-Reformation. There is, in the culture, a very conservative suspicion of the individual — *el protestante* — who stands up and declares his difference. I don't think like the rest of you! After all, the Catholic intuition of Spain was communal. The city and the village were organized by orthodoxy rather than by the exercise of exception.

I remember in my own parents a suspicion regarding education. My mother used to say that too much learning is dangerous — your head will become “too big.” As her son — someone who has been, for many years, in the appraisal of many Mexican Americans, a traitor — my exception to the group orthodoxy on a number of issues is both my pride and my shame.

J.A.G.: What about bilingual education, do you still think that bilingual education may be bad for kids? Bilingualism nowadays is such an advantage, not a minus. When you were young, perhaps bilingualism was an obstacle to reach a higher position in society?

R.R.: I distinguish between two types of bilingualism. It seems to me that there is the bilingualism of the middle class. I am in favor of this kind of bilingualism. I don't have any children, but I do have nieces and nephews. They are middle class and they went to schools where they learned how to use public language. So they have learned, over the

years, any number of languages in addition to English. They learned Spanish and French and Chinese, even Arabic. I think that is wonderful!

But I think it is quite different for working-class children. Many times working-class children have difficulty learning a single language well.

Isn't it amazing how middle-class our pedagogy often is? We do not consider poverty when we talk about education. In fact, for most children of poverty the problem is not between two languages, like Spanish and English, but between public and private language. The child who grows up in poverty often doesn't hear his parents use or master public language. So often he grows up with a sense that public language is not his language to learn or to use.

For many children success requires breaking the spell of private language. For many children, for example, of black poverty who speak some version of "black English" at home, it is necessary when they go to school to learn a new language — even though it is another version of English.

D.H. Lawrence, the novelist and poet and short story writer, was an early hero of my reading life. He was the son of a coal miner and a school-teacher. Already in the house, there was a tension between his father's culture — its virility and coarseness — and his more gentrified mother. When Lawrence went to school, he learned a language different than his father's English that had been inflected with a broad Derbyshire accent. Biographers say that Lawrence stopped sounding like his father after he went to school. And yet he seems haunted by his father's language. Many years after, Lawrence wrote a novel called *Lady Chatterley's Lover* that is about two people — upper-class Lady Constance Chatterley and the groundskeeper on her estate, a robust man named Mellors.

Despite their attraction for each other, there are obvious problems of class. When she becomes too haughty with him and assumes too much that she controls him, he pulls out a working-class accent (the broad Derbyshire accent of Lawrence's father). She grows resentful when she hears the accent, because it reminds her of his difference. The way they reconcile is, finally, in their love for one another. This love becomes a linguistic solution, as well. The couple name their body parts with words that are private to them — a kind of third language, that is neither the upper-class English of Lady Chatterley or the working class accent of Mellors. As lovers, they become trilingual.

J.A.G.: With the years, have you changed in some way your thoughts about assimilation?

R.R.: I think assimilation happens, regardless of whether a person wants it or not. The moment you and I meet and sit side by side, I become like you in various ways. Most of

those ways are unconscious. But they are clear. After a while, we start sitting with the same slouch or erectness. Americans walk differently than other people in the world. You can hear us at airports and in hotel lobbies — we sound different from other people who use English. Americans even have a different body type. So Mexican Americans do not look like Mexicans. German Americans do not look like Germans, and so on. Just the fact that we live with a kind of unconscious dependency creates a national “type.” So your question is confusing to me. I am not in favor of assimilation. Or to put it differently: I didn’t decide to become an American. America devoured me, instead. I walked down the street and a car drove by with Elvis Presley sounding on the car radio. Elvis went into my ear. I couldn’t take him out. He is still there.

J.A.G.: What has Barack Obama meant for ethnic groups in the United States?

R.R.: I think Americans have responded to his presidency with both excitement and disappointment. When Obama was elected, I wrote a piece for *Newsweek* magazine in which I declared “at last we have our first brown President.” Well, I was wrong, as well as right. For one thing, most African Americans consider Obama a “black” president because African-Americans have suffered under the “one drop” theory — a racist theory concocted by whites — that denied the possibility of mixture between whites and blacks. The one-drop theory proposed that you are “black” if you have one drop of African blood.

And Obama’s abandoned his son, when he returned to Kenya. Obama grew up in some sense, a man who yearned for his father. After Indonesia, after Hawaii, he finally got to the Southside of Chicago — black Chicago — and found himself completed by the black culture that surrounded him.

But of course he was also a brown man — truly. His blond mother was from Kansas. He was raised in brown Indonesia, by a brown step-father. He grew up in brown Hawaii, raised by two white grandparents.

I would have thought — no hoped — that a man of such complexity would have proclaimed himself to be more than white or black. Could he have possibly imagined himself brown? No, on the census form of 2010, Barack Obama classified himself as being “black.” And it seemed to me a wasted opportunity. He didn’t acknowledge the way the golfer, Tiger Woods, recognized that one could be more than one thing. In that sense, he has not been as exciting a figure as I had hoped.

I saw him in Egypt giving a speech. I imagined such a great possibility for him then. But his critics in the U.S. made his bravery impossible. His critics kept saying that

he was not a Christian (because of his Muslim past). Obama, to prove them wrong, started going to church, carrying a Bible.

If he had been the transformational candidate that he had promised to be on his election, he would have forced the brown possibility on the nation. He would have said something like this: I am mixed. And I refuse to be separated from my white mother and my black father. I am of both. And in more ways than one. I am Christian, but I am also the son of Islam, respect Islam, admire my Muslim family members...

J.A.G.: In fact, many people insist in Chinese, Indonesian, India, Black or Mexican-American or Latin..., resisting to a new culture and a new world. However, this is not only different from a sociological point of view, but also even their appearance.

R.R.: I think we might be. But the suspicion and gossip against Obama by his critics proposed that he was not born in the United States and even illegal (thus all the controversy about his birth certificate).

About illegals, let me say this: There is a new population in the world that takes its identity from movement rather than settlement. There are people who cross and even re-cross borders in their lives. Obama's mother traveled and traveled. (Her son called her "reckless.") Obama's father traveled and traveled. Obama, for example, has a half-brother in China — half white, half African, but Chinese-speaking, a physicist and a pianist who lives in a kind of indeterminate existence.

This is where much of the world finds itself — "between". I was last month in Cape Town. Next week I will be in Germany. Today I am in Spain. My passport is tattooed with stamps from airports all over the world — they are like marks on my soul, marking my progress.

J.A.G.: Will we see a Hispanic President in the United States?

R.R.: Well, there is a man named Marco Rubio, a Cuban-American, with a blond wife and is himself light-skinned. He is a white Hispanic. He is a Republican, conservative, Catholic. He could end up our first Hispanic president. But I don't think we are going to see someone who looks like me in the White House anytime soon. I mean a dark-skinned, Indian looking Bolivian or Mexican or Central American.

I remember Henry Cisneros, the dynamic mayor of San Antonio, Texas. He was, in a sense, "created" by the white city leaders (actually German-Americans). They saw the future and saw that it was in their interest to develop a Hispanic candidate for

mayor. In Henry Cisneros they found a tall, elegant, Roman Catholic, and the son of an Air Force officer. So white San Antonio Democrats developed Henry Cisneros in something like the way that the white Republican Party is turning toward Rubio. In any case, I suspect, our first “Hispanic” president will turn out to be European looking (like those white men and women who run various countries, even Indian countries in Latin America). Our first female Hispanic president will probably look like Eva Perón.

J.A.G.: You have been referring in a very natural way to your cancer. How have you approached that? For example, you say, “since I have cancer I don’t travel all that much.”

R.R.: Well, two things have changed my life dramatically. The first was AIDS (*sida*). When the epidemic happened in the U.S., it killed twenty or thirty friends of mine — other gay men. I wrote an essay, “Late Victorians,” in which I describe the death of Cesar Albini, a close friend of mine. He was born in Uruguay, grew up in Paris (his parents were diplomats), before he made it to San Francisco. He was a most remarkable traveler and cosmopolite. And then he died of the disfiguring disease. And then there were so many other men — in their thirties, their forties, their fifties. I used to dread the phone ringing. Somebody had been diagnosed. Somebody was in the hospital. Somebody was near death. Often death came so quickly! The man who had been so robust, so attractive ended up like a skeleton. Thus it was that his death forced me to “come out” as a gay man — though I loathe the term “gay”.

In any case, helping people with AIDS became a part of my life — exposed me to the process of dying. So when, a few years ago, my parents died (she in her early nineties, he nearly a hundred), their deaths seemed completely “natural” by comparison to the young men dying.

And then I got diagnosed with cancer. I felt as though my life — my own real life — was suddenly changed. There is a scene in the movie, “Motorcycle Diaries” where Gael Garcia Bernal, playing the young Che Guevara, swims across a river to arrive at a leper colony run by some nuns. I felt like that — that cancer forced me to swim across the river. And suddenly I belonged to some new country or colony — the nation of the injured or the ill.

When my parents died, I was able to leave the hospital room. I went to the parking lot and drove away. When my friends died of AIDS, I was able to drive away. But what cancer did for me was to mark me as someone who was ill. I had crossed the river, crossed the line. There is literally a line running down my belly now, where the surgeon cut open my flesh. My lover says, “You should feel proud of that line. It is your mark of survival.”

But in some way, I do not want to give up my allegiance and membership in the society of the injured and ill. I do not want to forget the knowledge of death that the men with AIDS — my dear friends — gave me.

My landlord died in my building in San Francisco a few months ago. I noticed that the other people in the apartment building seemed to have little or no experience with death. They seemed like children. Whereas I knew how to deal with his dying — both before and after.

Susan Sontag has a book *Illness as Metaphor*, concerned particularly with the shame of cancer. Often people who get cancer are assumed by the healthy to have brought on their own illness. Your cancer was the result of your neurosis. It was the result of some misbehavior — something you did or didn't do. So, too, with AIDS, there is a shame of misbehavior that attached to the disease — perhaps the reason why many people refused to even touch it or talk about it.

I think of Crane's Red Badge of Courage when I look at my scar. There are things I know now, as someone who has experienced death. I regard the mark on my torso, not only as mark of my survival from death, but also of my familiarity with it. I am not ashamed to talk about any of it, because I am not shamed by my proximity to death. I am proud of this terrible knowledge.

J.A.G.: In other occasion you said that you regarded yourself as “ugly”.

R.R.: Yes, well there is this “problem” of my complexion. I have the face and the features and the color of the Mexica (Indian). (My brothers look more like you — more European.) As a child, I was conditioned by various Mexican relatives to regard my Indian part — this physical part — as unattractive.

It always surprises me when someone in Europe recognizes as being Spanish-speaking, rather than indigenous. A few months ago, in Bergen, Norway, a security officer at the airport spoke to me in Spanish. How odd, I thought. I don't think I have a Spanish face. I don't think I have a (European-looking) Latin American face.

When I go to Mexico, I see myself in the brown crowds — short of stature, thick lips, and long nose. None of us look like the romanticized white faces on Mexico's telenovelas.

I remember once having dinner with an executive from Televisa — the vast Mexican television empire. He was very wealthy, very upper class. For most of the meal he talked about France. (Mexicans of a certain class are obsessed with France, not Spain

— as their true spiritual home. And did you know? There are more French cultural ministries in Mexico than in any other country of the world?)

Anyway, he started in on French hotels there that he loved. He mentioned a hotel in Deauville where he and his wife had honeymooned. They go back every year. He remembered the quality of service in the hotel, and the luxurious linens. “Have you been?” he asked. I said no.

And then it was as though he awoke from a dream. There we were in the hotel dining room — with hundreds of journalists and writers. He suddenly wondered, “By the way, who are you?” And I said, I am a journalist from the United States in Mexico for a conference.

“So you’re a writer,” he said. “You know, in Mexico we don’t have writers who look like you.”

Wasn’t that an astonishing thing to say? Or maybe not. It is (in my experience) a very Mexican thing to say. In the United States, someone might say I look like a monkey. But no one in the United States would say, “You don’t look like a writer.”

J.A.G.: Have you been able to see Spain?

R.R.: This is my fourth visit, and the shortest. This trip is actually a bit of a distortion. I am in Spain but surrounded by people who are interested, as scholars, in the United States of America. On other trips to Spain, I have met Spaniards who told me that they think very little about Latin America. They are Europeans, they tell me. I also meet Spaniards who seem preoccupied by the proximity of North Africa for the future. The other day I met a young Moroccan man in Madrid who said he envisioned a coming *reconquista* — the return of Muslim Spain!

At the level at which Spain is interested in becoming European, it seems to me a very modern place, progressive, not very foreign because I live part of my year in London.

The curious thing, however, is that, since I have been working in the Middle East on a book about religion and the desert, I have been reading and thinking about the centuries of Muslim Spain.

I grew up a Mexican Catholic — with a sense of my religious connection to Catholic Spain. (After all, the “father” of California was a Spanish Franciscan friar.) I grew up, however, without a sense of Spain’s connection to Arabia. But lately, as I have ventured farther into the Middle East and deeper into Islam, my imagination has turned backwards — toward Valencia, toward Seville.

I remember in Sacramento there was a wonderful family down the street. I remember sitting in their kitchen. My mother and the women talked in Spanish. I was a little boy. I assumed these people were Mexicans. But on the way home my mother was clear: They were Spanish, she said to me, in Spanish. Not Mexican.

When, several years later, my family became middle class and more successful, people in America would ask us if we were “Spanish.” Again my mother would insist, no, we are Mexicans.

I suppose I grew up with a biological sense of connection with Spain. But I grew up with some information about Spain. I was ethnically Mexican. Period. I do remember hearing the men of the family one night arguing about Franco, and one uncle (who was Basque) insisting that Mexico needed a Franco. I remember the mention of Spain and the civil war in American literature. (What would Hemingway be without Spain?) But I do not remember anyone in my youth ever speaking of Muslim Spain. Now I come here — to Alcalá, beautiful Alcalá — and listen to professors lecture on American literature. But as I sit here, in these fine, old buildings, my thoughts turn to the desert, and the question of how Spain was and is related to the desert of Arabia.

J.A.G.: One last question, what are you working on right now?

R.R.: I am working on two books. One is a book for Yale on beauty, beauty of the human sort — a book about why beauty matters. Beauty is a most heavenly or spiritual quality, and yet it inhabits human flesh. It inspires us to thoughts of the eternal, but it is also subject to the ravages of time. Beauty ennobles and beauty decays. At the end of this book, I describe the actress and great beauty, Marlene Dietrich — hiding in her apartment on the Avenue Montaigne in Paris, having “lost” her beauty.

I’m also writing a book about the Abrahamic religions. Since September 11th, I have been interested in my American relationship to Islam. Judaism has always been a close part of my life as a Christian. I have studied Judaism. Moreover, as an American, I have felt close to the state of Israel and understood the necessity for Jews having a homeland after the Holocaust.

Increasingly of late, I have been drawn toward Arabic Islam and to the deserts of the Middle East. I have started thinking about Spain from the vantage point of Arabia — Muslim Spain — and thus to the Muslim within me, by virtue of my blood relationship to Spain.