

has as a publisher tried to redress this situation as far as he could, basing editorial decisions on "my sense that readers have lacked certain crucial resources" (102). The writing of this book represents his attempt to exert a broader influence on the reading of poetry, to help foster a generation of great readers.

Who is the greatest reader of our century? Schmidt's choice might surprise a North American who had trouble seeing past the book's quirky British tone and manner to its humane breadth of spirit. Ezra Pound, Schmidt proposes, embodies—and demands—the most exemplary reading: "Pound insists on reading—on hearing—the past and the alien in its own terms, and he refuses to acclimatize or assimilate them into a false contemporary coherence" (120). In the end, then, *Reading Modern Poetry* impresses because it is informed with that quality that it aims to cultivate in contemporary readers of poetry: an "exertion toward the other," in the apt words of Christopher Middleton that Schmidt cites (107). The craft of his little book carries us to a renewed awareness of the dimensions of that other vessel, both contemporary and timeless: "And then went down to the ship, / Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea."

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Richard Rodriguez. *Days of Obligation: An Argument with my Mexican Father*. New York: Viking, 1992. \$25.99

To begin to intervene in the rigid mental geographies that shape us as national subjects, imagine for a moment the map of the Americas as it might appear in a schoolroom in Argentina, stretching from Tierra del Fuego at the top to Ellesmere Island at the bottom. Inverting the hourglass of the continents opens the play of ironic recognition: Canadians, for example, may no longer see ourselves as the snowy roof of the western hemisphere; we become something other as the tropes of national identity are exposed as arbitrary. Such occidental tourism has the uncanny effect of rescripting geography as history, reframing cartography as colonial text, the gravitational trickle of the sand through this figurative hourglass coming to figure the Spanish conception of what became the southwestern United States. The historical palimpsest of California is both Richard Rodriguez's subject and the ideological space in which *Days of Obligation* is written: "living Californians—such was the genius of Spain—must yet compose a litany of sorts to get from one end of town to the other. 'Take the San Bernardino to the San Gabriel turnoff,' for example" (121). Reading the United States against the grain of its linear, progressive, amnesiac narratives, Rodriguez summons the angels, makes revenant the dead, exhorts memory to uncover how *La Ciudad de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciuncula* became, in one hundred years, L.A.

Readers who are familiar with Rodriguez's first book, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982)—in which he argued that multiculturalism is a strategy for keeping minorities in the margins of American culture—will recognize the relentless irony of *Days of Obligation*, a mode that is at once troubled and pleased. While both books are driven by an autobiographical imperative, *Days of Obligation* is more meditative than insistent; the ironies of contemporary American culture are charted in a series of exquisitely crafted fragments rather than in a continuous narrative. Rodriguez's project is to grapple with the convenient habits of seeing by which we orient our beliefs and make sense of our daily experience, and ever so delicately to turn them inside out, to juxtapose them with other perspectives, to invert the hemisphere. Repeatedly, he repositions "the West"—the ideological space in which America has historically reinvented itself—as *el Norte*. "To speak of San Francisco as land's end," he writes, "is to read the map from one direction only—as Europeans would read it or as the East Coast has always read...My parents came here from Mexico. They saw San Francisco as the North. The West was not west for them. They did not share the Eastern traveller's sense of running before the past—the darkening time zone, the lowering curtain" (28).

A consequence of Rodriguez's sustained ironies is an habitual doubleness of perspective, for irony is invariably committed to duality, a kind of double-talk that, oddly, is scrupulous in its avoidance of guile. It is precisely this rhetorical mode that dissolves geographical categories into historical "time zones," and prompts the reader's fascination with the voice that *speaks* this book, at once intimate and yet queerly disembodied, the voice that haunts the idea of America, attached—to borrow one of Rodriguez's favourite images—to no particular time zone. Rodriguez observes, for example, that "Tijuana and San Diego are not in the same historical time zone. Tijuana is poised at the beginning of an industrial age, a Dickensian city with palm trees. San Diego is a postindustrial city of high-impact plastic and despair diets. . . . San Diego faces west, looks resolutely out to sea. Tijuana stares north, as toward the future" (84). The aesthetic pleasure of this text, as well as its political urgency, lies not in the juxtaposition of the doubles of San Diego and Tijuana, but rather in the voice that haunts the space between them. In this book, margins and borders dissolve into interstices, which themselves are the space of writing. Less a cultural critique than a ghost story, *Days of Obligation* is inhabited by a voice suspended in some Hawthornian neutral territory between America and *América*, between Catholic Mexico and the Protestant idea of the United States, between straight and gay, between past and future. If, as I continue to suggest, the genius of this book lies in its multiple queernesses—by which I mean the ironies that accrue at the interstices—then queerness itself is performed at the level of the metonymic image, the perfect phrase by which Rodriguez undoes America. Politics without dogma,

queerness without camp: such are the cumulative effects, the integrities, of Rodriguez's irony.

Lucid, articulate, and playful, *Days of Obligation* is currently enjoying popular success, perhaps because two of its most brilliant chapters (which focus on the contradictions of *mestizo* culture and the "urban gothic" strain of gay life in San Francisco) earned the book a wide readership when they appeared as cover essays in *Harper's*; predictably, Rodriguez's subtle points are missed by both the narrowly essentialist, politically-correct left and the always-already-obtuse right. While this is not an academic book, I believe that both its argument and its liminally-situated, double-voiced strategies of exploration make powerfully original contributions to two urgent academic projects: postcolonial cultural studies and queer theory. The postcolonial and the queer are distinct foci of this book, yet they continually haunt each other, resonantly shaping the configurations of Rodriguez's prose. I shall comment briefly on each of these in turn.

Days of Obligation is framed by a long introductory chapter, "India," which alternates between personal narrative and political exposition to juxtapose the American and the Mexican constructions of "the Indian." Rodriguez begins with an amusing and highly ironic story about his meeting with a Pakistani journalist who, during a visit to the United States, wanted to buy some American Indian handicrafts. "The Pakistani journalist looked incredulous. His dream of America had been shaped by American export-Westerns. Cowboys and Indians are yin and yang of America. He had seen men dressed like cowboys on this trip. But (turning to me): Where are the Indians? (Two Indians staring at one another. One asks where are all the Indians, the other shrugs)" (3). Invented as "Indians" by the histories of British and Spanish colonialism, but not seeing themselves as such: the gap between their mutually amazed stare implies much about the misrecognition of conceptual subjectivities, but as is often the case in Rodriguez's writing, the point is tacit.

Arguing that "America is an idea to which natives are inimical [because] the Indian represented permanence and continuity to Americans who were determined to call this country new" (4), Rodriguez uncovers the function of the aboriginal in the United States as a "stunned remnant" (4), and of "Indian memory" as "a measure against which America gauges corrupting history when it suits us" (5). In contrast to this history of erasure and absence, he insists, Mexico represents the Indian's triumphant absorption and transformation of the colonizing culture; he narrates the legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe to demonstrate that Spain had no idea of the "absorbent strength of Indian spirituality" (20). The assurance of Rodriguez's Catholicism enables him to expose a delicious irony: while "postcolonial Europe . . . pities the Indian the loss of her gods or her tongue," if the Indian were allowed to speak for herself, she would argue that "Spanish is now an

Indian language. Mexico City has become the metropolitan see of the Spanish-speaking world. In something like the way New York won English from London after World War I, Mexico City has captured Spanish" (23-24). Many postcolonialists will attempt to refute Rodriguez by pointing out that the history of such transformation required incredible loss, barbarism, genocide, and yet his central point stubbornly endures: the Indian in Hispanic America "refused to absent herself from the future" (24). What stands, finally, as irrefutable is the authenticity of Rodriguez's personal voice: "I take it as an Indian achievement," he concludes, "that I am alive, that I am Catholic, that I speak English, that I am an American. My life began, it did not end, in the sixteenth century" (24).

Rodriguez's assertion that "the Indian is forever implicated in the roundness of the world" (7), that "Mexico carries the idea of a round world to its biological conclusion" in *mestizo* culture, depends crucially upon his doubled catholicism (simultaneously particular and universal); it is the figure in the carpet, the core of sensibility that produced this book. Indeed, the title, *Days of Obligation*, refers to the Roman Catholic liturgical calendar, and becomes for Rodriguez, typically, a sophisticated, double-voiced strategy, poised between literal religious practice and profoundly political metaphor. Obligation, for Rodriguez, is the common ground between the theological and the ideological, the site of intervention where a revenant historicity refuses what Henry James called America's "commitment to the *provisional*." Its occasion, as always in this book, is California, where two world-views vied for primacy: "the northward, the communal, the Catholic impulse," and "the Protestant, the westward, the individual impulse [that] favored amnesia" (120-21). Rodriguez sees the Hispanic perspective as broadly tragic, the American as resolutely comic, and nowhere in California is their collision more troubled than in San Francisco, where the AIDS epidemic has brought terrible obligations. "Men who sought the aesthetic ordering of existence were *recalled* to nature" (45), he writes, and once again, the agent of recollection is irony. Citing gay America's obsession with interior design and bodybuilding as evidence of its "covenant against nature"—for "homosexual survival lay in artifice, in plumage, in lampshades, sonnets, musical comedy, couture, syntax, religious ceremony, opera, lacquer, irony" (32)—he argues that the perfection of artificiality has been undone by the ultimate irony of the body's helplessness. The biography of San Francisco is legible, finally, as hagiography: "They walked Death's dog. They washed his dishes. They bought his groceries. They massaged his poor back. They changed his bandages. They emptied his bedpan" (45). To live in the cities of gay America is to live with the ghosts of the dead, the spectres of the dying; in the prevailing atmosphere of urban gothic, "days of obligation" are immediate rather than a dimly imagined futurity, and they require a political commitment that is vocational rather than abstract.

Quite apart from its historicizing of gay America—in which a culture that does not believe in death has much to learn from Mexico's obsession with mortality—*Days of Obligation* demonstrates the potential of queer critical practice. Whereas gay writing has always been concerned with the transgression of borders and the empowerment of the margin, the queer project situates itself in the interstices between competing subjectivities. If the queer text is necessarily double-voiced, then its most prehensile rhetorical mode is irony. This queer inversion of America's ruthless, individualistic optimism—its ideological geography—requires the supplement of *latinoamérica's* attachment to distant memory, its historical hourglass. The voice that inverts is queerly unattached, haunting both sides of the border, accumulating catalogues of metonymy in its archaeological play. As a revisionist remapping of the connections between nationalisms and sexualities, *Days of Obligation* is enormously helpful in discovering America, negotiating as it does the connections between “the father's dark Latin skepticism and the naive cherry tree of Protestant imagining” (221). Richard Rodriguez is perhaps the American Roland Barthes, combining the perfectly crafted image with a re-membering, dis-membering of ideology.

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