

## Thomas Merton and Richard Rodriguez: A Conversation at the Edge of a Desert

By David Joseph Belcastro

### A Found Conversation

In this essay I intend to introduce a conversation *found* in the pages of several books by Thomas Merton and Richard Rodriguez. By *found* I mean as in *found* poetry – a genre that cuts and arranges lines from various works into a new composition. So, I must confess at the outset that the conversation never happened. It is, however, my habit to *imagine* Merton in conversation. I can think of no better way to connect these two American writers. This is, in my thinking, also justified by the fact that Merton was a monk with a vow of conversation that led him to the intersections of the postmodern world. His experience at Fourth and Walnut<sup>1</sup> sowed the seeds of *contemplative conversation* – what Sufis refer to as *sohbet*. His voice rose from the remote knobs of Kentucky, a voice that eventually disturbed both our government and the Church. Thereafter, silenced by the Church yet committed to his vow, he *silently* mimeographed the Cold War Letters.<sup>2</sup> With all this and more in mind, Dr. Gregory Zilboorg, a psychiatrist, opined that this talking Trappist gone public was a misguided hermit with aspirations for fame in Times Square.<sup>3</sup> He was right to see Merton as a cosmopolitan hermit. *This* was, however, Merton's religious vocation. He was and remains a monk in the world, speaking to the world about worldly matters, awakening the world to a new horizon for humanity.<sup>4</sup> While this way of going about being a monk struck Zilboorg and others as inappropriate for a Cistercian, his vocation was not unprecedented. Merton had earlier discovered in Clement of Alexandria, whom he greatly admired, a model for discussing the meaning of the Gospel with philosophers in public places. His essay on Clement<sup>5</sup> provides insights into a theology of conversation that was at the center of his life and work.

I have always sensed that there is something important about Merton's interest in conversation. It is not just the content of those conversations but also the way in which he engaged and continues to engage people from various cultures, religions and philosophical perspectives in a conversation that goes beneath the surface of things, to what we might consider our common ground of Being. I am of the opinion that Merton is a mentor, perhaps *the* mentor, for us who live face to face with diversity. He shows us how to address the challenges of diversity and, perhaps more importantly, to recognize that from *there* will rise a new horizon for humanity. This short diversion from the focus of this essay hopefully clarifies why I tend to read Merton as if he were in conversation.

I believe that the following *found conversation* is worth sharing with you the reader. For one reason, Richard Rodriguez will be speaking at the June General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society. I met Mr. Rodriguez a few years ago when he spoke at the university where I



David Belcastro

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David Joseph Belcastro is professor emeritus at Capital University, Bexley, OH and former president of the International Thomas Merton Society and former co-editor of *The Merton Annual*.

have been a professor. The faculty had assigned his first book for our incoming students to read. *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*<sup>6</sup> is a poetic reflection on his intellectual and spiritual journey from the home of Mexican-American immigrants and the classrooms of Irish nuns to the halls of Columbia and Berkeley. While reading *Hunger of Memory*, Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*<sup>7</sup> came to mind more than once – the reasons for which I will explain in a moment. It was this convergence of books that led me to ask Mr. Rodriguez at dinner if he had read anything by Merton. He had. We briefly discussed our shared interest in Merton. Last year, recalling this meeting, I thought, why not suggest him as a speaker at the upcoming gathering of the ITMS in Santa Clara?



**Richard Rodriguez**

*Photo by Barbara Falconer Newhall*

### **Two American Writers**

There is another reason for inviting Mr. Rodriguez to speak, and one that runs deeper than his interest in Merton. This something other becomes apparent when we compare the two writers. There are three significant similarities: the interplay of silence and writing, the creation of autobiographies of ideas, and the sharing of private lives and personal reflections as contributions to civic discourse.

We are well aware of the importance of silence for Merton. The monastery, the hermitage and the woods were places of silence that he noted in words, drawings and photography. It was a silence that allowed him to hear the world and from which he addressed the needs of the world. Silence is also an essential part of Rodriguez's life and work. As a child he was attentive to the silence and voices around him. As an adult, his apartment in San Francisco became a writer's enclosure where the disciplines of solitude and silence challenge and nurture (Rodriguez, *Hunger* 190), an awareness of the *word*, spoken and written, as surfacing from an interior silence that engages the imagination and the intellect.

It is from within a San Francisco apartment and a Kentucky hermitage that these two writers explore their interior lives and encounters with the postmodern world. In the same way that *The Seven Storey Mountain* was the first in a series of journal books, *Hunger of Memory* was the first in a trilogy of autobiographical books: *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*<sup>8</sup> contrasts the mental landscapes of Mexico and the United States and *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*<sup>9</sup> reconfigures preconceived notions of race. More recently Rodriguez added *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography*,<sup>10</sup> where he turned his imagination to the desert, the God of the desert and the three Abrahamic desert religions. Here he explores the ecology of emptiness where he discovers spiritual formation and liberation are possible for a man with a hyphenated cultural identity (Mexican-American) and a conjunctional religious identity (gay & Roman Catholic) in an age of social and global conflict (us vs. them). Those three signs are indicators of intersections in his life that he explores. Rodriguez describes his work as *biographies of ideas* that trace the way ideas work through and form our lives.<sup>11</sup> This seems an apt description of Merton's journal books where his recording of personal experience seeks to clarify

a developing awareness that eventually emerges in carefully crafted essays of ideas. The opening paragraph of *The Seven Storey Mountain* pens lines of a thought that he will explore in multiple ways through and throughout his life:

On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the border of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers. (*SSM* 3)

While both writers create biographies of ideas from personal reflections, we become aware that their reflections mirror images specific to and about our times, our history and our culture. What began as private inquiries inevitably become public concerns. Note how Rodriguez describes his work: “The loneliness I have felt many mornings, however, has not made me forget that I am engaged in a highly public activity. I sit here in silence writing this small volume of words, and it seems to me the most public thing I ever have done” (Rodriguez, *Hunger* 191).

Merton could just as well have written these words. In his preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he integrates his vows as a monk with his vocation as a writer into that of a public voice:

By my monastic life and vows I am saying NO to all the concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the racial injustices, the economic tyrannies, and the whole socio-economic apparatus which seems geared for nothing but global destruction in spite of all its fair words in favor of peace.<sup>12</sup>

Inevitably both writers were identified as American social critics<sup>13</sup> who view society from the margin with the perspective of immigrants,<sup>14</sup> seeing America from both the inside and the outside. It is also important to note that they address similar issues: the experience of being a Roman Catholic, interfaith dialogue, cultural diversity, human sexuality, civil rights movements, technology, education, language and the future of America.

There is something else that contributes to their work as social critics. Both writers are working from the inside out with regarding to diversity that is at the center of all the issues noted above. By “inside out” I refer to Merton’s intention to *unite within himself* East and West (see *SS* 87; *CGB* 12) that resonates with a comment by Rodriguez in his first autobiographic work: “The resolution of my spiritual dilemma, if there is to be one before death, will have to take place where it began, among persons who do not share my religious convictions” (Rodriguez, *Hunger* 118). That was written in 1982. By 2013, in the shadow of 9/11, he identifies as “Judeo-Christian-Muslim” in his fourth and most recent autobiographical work (Rodriguez, *Darling* 223). Aware or not, they both appear, at least to me, to be engaged in what is commonly known as a Theology of Encounter.<sup>15</sup> This approach focuses on two theological principles: we are called to be one and we are called to love. The primary concern of this approach is to explore diversity as a place from which we may discover a new horizon for humanity. It is an approach to theology that draws our attention to the dynamics of God’s creative and redemptive movement within our lives and within history.

Setting aside the common areas of interest noted above, I turn our attention to their interest in the desert that is, in my opinion, the most important point of comparison. The desert is an essential metaphor for understanding both writers. It signifies for Rodriguez and Merton an interior landscape, a spiritual ecology, a place of emptiness and curiosity where spiritual formation and liberation are possible provided one is willing to enter it.

### **Conversation at the Edge of a Desert<sup>16</sup>**

*Both men have delayed flights. Richard sees Merton at a distance staring at a sign: "WELCOME TO LAS VEGAS: What Happens Here, Stays Here." Richard, approaching Merton, says: "Sounds like a Confessional." Laughing, Merton responds: "Suitable place for one." The conversation continues in the Confluence Lounge at Las Vegas' McCarran International Airport with view of the Pyramid at the Luxor Hotel with the Desert in the background. They watch crowds rushing to their various destinations.*

### **The Desert**

Richard: They move along unaware of each other except as obstacles to be avoided.

Tom: Alone. With their phones.

Richard: It's the newest novelty. Novelties are an American neurosis.

Tom: The sign should read: "Welcome to Las Vegas – A Mirage of Novelties."

Richard: A mirage that *appears* as an oasis in the American landscape.

Tom: Compared with the Desert in the background, it's a very small oasis.

Richard: Beyond the muddy edges of that town, there's no question about the desert's meaning. It is the encroaching wilderness, an unmaking. Remember those old cowboy movies where the barely inhabited West roamed with sociopaths and where Gabby Hayes minced around in an apron, and mountain men bedded doe-eyed Indian maidens who had hearts of wampum, but would never live to wear-um gingham? The desert in my imagination is at once extraordinary – the locus of revelation. But also ordinary. A vast plain. A disheartening expanse of time. The image of all our days. The confrontation with wildness was and is once again the coming attraction.

Tom: The coming attraction?

### **The God of the Desert**

Richard: Yes, for me, at least. It was in the weeks following the terrorist attacks of September 11 that I came to the realization that the God I worship is a desert God. It was to the same desert God the terrorists prayed. At the dawn of a worldwide religious war that Americans prefer to name a war against terror, I feel myself drawn to Islam, drawn to read the Koran, even to kiss the Koran – melodramatically, but sincerely – as I did one evening recently in front of a university audience. I meant to honor Islam. I meant to convey that, as a Christian, I consider myself a loving brother to the Muslims, as I am to the Jew, by the favor of Father Abraham.

Tom: A terrorist attack sent you wandering in the Desert? The Desert was the place where the Hebrews wandered for forty years. Cared for by God alone. There they were to learn to love Him in the wilderness. And to look back on their years in the desert as an idyllic time of grace and

mercy. The Desert is the place for those of us who seek to be nothing but ourselves. That is to say, solitary, poor and dependent on God with no great project standing between us and our Creator. I hear something like that in what you are saying about your experience. Moved by the God of Abraham as a Christian to embrace both Muslims and Jews?

Richard: Well, yes . . . but the violence that was and *is* there. That's troublesome. There is something in the leveling jealousy of the desert God that summons a possessive response in us. *We are His people* becomes *He is our God*. The blasphemy of certainty. If God is on our side, we must be right. We are right because we believe in God. We must defend God against the godless. Certitude clears a way for violence. And so the monk's dictum – the desert creates warriors – can represent centuries of holy war and sordid prayer and an umbilicus that whips like a whirlwind.

### **Folly in the Desert**

Tom: You are right. The Desert is also the country of madness. It is the refuge of the devil, thrown out into the wilderness to wander in dry places. Thirst drives a man mad. The devil himself is mad with a kind of thirst for his own excellence. He is lost because he has immured himself in it and closed out everything else. Here he constructs a sterile paradise of emptiness and rage.

Richard: Hopefully our delayed flights won't require us to spend the night. (Both laugh.)

Tom: The Desert Fathers believed that the wilderness had been created as valuable in the eyes of God precisely because it had no value to men. The wasteland was the land that could never be wasted by men because it offered them nothing. There was nothing to attract them. There was nothing to exploit. The desert was created to be itself, not to be transformed into something else. Yet look at the desert today.

Richard: Over millennia, rulers of desert kingdoms, and not only rulers but prophets, not only prophets but shepherds, but slaves, but women, have brooded on impermanence. There is not another ecology that so bewilders human vanity. Thus must palace engineers and the slaves from foreign lands be pressed into raising Pharaoh's pyramid over and against all, withstanding dynasties of sand and wind. It is a testament to the leveling humor of Las Vegas that Pharaoh's dream of eternity is mocked by the pyramid of the Luxor Hotel.

Tom: This Desert is also the birthplace of a new and terrible creation, the testing ground of the power by which man seeks to un-create what God has blessed. Today, in the century of man's greatest technological achievement, the wilderness at last comes into its own. Man no longer needs God, and he can live in the desert on his own resources. He can build there his fantastic, protected cities of withdrawal and experimentation and vice. The glittering towns that spring up overnight in the desert are no longer images of the City of God, coming down from heaven to enlighten the world with the vision of peace.

*Both sit in silence staring at the city.*

Richard: Las Vegas has constructed an elaborate jest against the instinctive human fear of impermanence. Las Vegas cajoles its visitors to be amused at what the Romantic poet and the ancient prophet regard as the Desert's morbid conclusion. The Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building, Caesar's Palace – nothing in the world is rooted, nothing is permanent, nothing sacred, nothing authentic; architectural conceits are merely that.

Tom: Remind me to send you a copy of my poem “The Tower of Babel.”<sup>17</sup> There is a connection between the impermanence of the desert and the fear that drives men to violence.

Richard: All those people moving along in a crowd and alone with their phones. Are they prepared to wander out into the desert that surrounds this grand oasis of flashing illusions? How would they fare in the Desert?

### **The Modern World as Desert**

Tom: That’s not a hypothetical question. They, we, are in the Desert. When man and his money and machines move out into the Desert, and dwell there, not fighting the devil as Christ did, but believing in his promises of power and wealth, and adoring his angelic wisdom, then the Desert itself moves everywhere. Everywhere, Richard, is desert. Everywhere is solitude in which man must do penance and fight the adversary and purify his own heart in the grace of God. The Desert is the home of despair. And despair, now, is everywhere.

Richard: The purifying grace of God. The oasis in our Desert. Reminds me of a quote from *Persian Pictures* by Gertrude Bell that goes like this: “A little water and the desert breaks into flowers, bowers of cool shade spring up in the midst of dust and glare, radiant stretches of soft colour gleam in that grey expanse. Your heart leaps as you pass through the gateway in the mud wall; so sharp is the contrast, that you may stand with one foot in an arid wilderness and the other in a shadowy, flowery paradise.”<sup>18</sup>

Tom: Very good. So there is no reason to think that our interior solitude consists in the acceptance of defeat. We cannot escape anything by consenting tacitly to be defeated. Despair is an abyss without bottom. Do not think to close it by consenting to it and trying to forget you have consented. This, then, is our desert: to live facing despair, but not to consent. To trample it down under hope in the Cross. To wage war against despair unceasingly. That war is our wilderness. If we wage it courageously, we will find Christ at our side. If we cannot face it, we will never find Him.

φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ (John 1:23).<sup>19</sup>

1. See Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 181-82 (subsequent references will be cited as “SS” parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42 (subsequent references will be cited as “CGB” parenthetically in the text).
2. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).
3. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 290-99.
4. See David Joseph Belcastro, “Praying the Questions: Merton of Times Square, Last of the Urban Hermits,” *The Merton Annual* 20 (2007) 123-50.
5. See Thomas Merton, *Clement of Alexandria: Selections from The Proteptikos* (New York: New Directions, 1962).
6. Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez – An Autobiography* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1981; New York: Random House, 2005); subsequent references to the latter edition will be cited as “Rodriguez, *Hunger*” parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948); subsequent references will be cited as “SSM” parenthetically in the text.
8. Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (New York: Viking, 1992).

9. Richard Rodriguez, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (New York: Viking, 2002); subsequent references will be cited as “Rodriguez, *Brown*” parenthetically in the text.
10. Richard Rodriguez, *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography* (New York: Viking, 2013); subsequent references will be cited as “Rodriguez, *Darling*” parenthetically in the text.
11. See David Michael, “An Interview with Richard Rodriguez,” *The Paris Review* (September 9, 2014); available at: <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/09/09/regarding-mystery-an-interview-with-richard-rodriguez>.
12. Thomas Merton, “*Honorable Reader*”: *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 65-66.
13. See James T. Baker, *Thomas Merton, Social Critic* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971); Michael Nieto Garcia, *Autobiography in Black and Brown: Ethnic Identity in Richard Wright & Richard Rodriguez* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014).
14. While we have already noted that Rodriguez is from Mexico, we may need to recall that Merton too was an immigrant for all practical purposes to the U.S. from France and England.
15. On this topic see Christian Salenson, *Christian de Chergé: A Theology of Hope*, trans. Nada Conic (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2009).
16. The following “found conversation” was assembled for the most part from lines lifted and sometimes paraphrased from Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 18-21 and Rodriguez, *Darling* 3-4, 46, 52, 66-67, 218 and Rodriguez, *Brown* 151, 165, 186, 212.
17. Thomas Merton, *The Tower of Babel: A Morality* (New York: New Directions, 1957); Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York: New Directions, 1957) 43-78; Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 247-73.
18. Rodriguez, *Darling* 52.
19. “A voice crying in the wilderness.”