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Christopher Conway. *The Cult of Bolívar in Latin American Literature* (Gainesville, FL: UP of Florida, 2003). 192pp.

(Re)Imagining Bolívar

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Benedict Anderson begins his seminal work on the origin of nationalism by reflecting on the nature of a certain type of monument, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, as a way of explaining how nationalism should be understood not in terms of political ideologies but in relation to religious community and the dynastic realm, two “cultural systems” that preceded it and in opposition to which it was born (12). Nationalism holds a dialectical relationship with these two systems, simultaneously incorporating and transforming them into a new one. It could be said, then, that like religion nationalism needs its own saints and martyrs and its sacred text; like theocratic dynastic systems, it needs a central authority figure beyond historical contingency to embody the national principles. In his book *The Cult of Bolívar in Latin American Literature* Christopher Conway studies how Simón Bolívar came to occupy that space in the national imaginary of Latin America in general and Venezuela in particular. Like the

Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the all too well known heroic figure of Bolívar is also a monument. How this monumental icon of the nation is both constructed and contested from the Wars of Independence to the present day is the focus of Conway's excellent study.

Conway begins his book with a wonderful visual metaphor, a painting by Chilean artist Juan(a) Dávila of Simón Bolívar as a transexual on a half fading horse, obscenely giving the finger to the viewer. The painting caused a major uproar in Chile in 1994 and even strained diplomatic tensions with Venezuela, whose embassy issued a formal complaint against the circulation of Dávila's work. The Chilean Foreign Ministry itself formally apologized to the governments of Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador. It is through the delightful analysis of Dávila's portrait of "El Libertador Simón Bolívar" and its "iconoclastic challenge to all the absolutes represented by Bolívar" (2) that Conway approaches his object of study, defines his theoretical framework, and presents his central argument. Following Russ Castronovo's definition of "monumentalist narratives," Conway argues that "the monumentalist definition of Bolívar is not limited to nationalist statuary, but extends to any representation that seeks to define the hero as an unmovable idol that stands for eternal and inviolable values" (3). It is this officially constructed body of Bolívar, the object of the "cult of Bolívar" of the title, and not necessarily Bolívar himself—although how to distinguish between both is one of the tasks that Conway's book problematizes—that Dávila's painting ultimately mocks, exposing it as a constructed farce.

The "monumentalist definition" of Bolívar is formed by what Conway calls three main "monumental poses," different but interconnected expressions of the ideology

behind the cult. The first pose is “progress” by which Bolívar has become a never-ending source of myths of identity, at once an embodiment of the shared past of the community and of all the promises of modernity that the future will fulfill. The second pose is the “patriarchal principle”: not only is Bolívar the hero of independence, but also the symbolic father of all present and future citizens who must look up to him for guidance and meaning. Finally, and directly related to this phallic father figure, is the third and last monumental pose, that of Bolívar as a sacred text, ultimate source of meaning and truth, whose words are to be believed as a matter of faith and transcend historical determinations: “As a script of identity, Bolívar stands for a timeless alphabet that may be utilized to respond to ever-changing social and historical realities. Bolívar represents the continuity and coherence of key terms and concepts, such as *independence*, *liberty*, and the *nation*” (4). The body of “El Libertador” is erected by the careful staging of these three poses. Simón Bolívar is simultaneously father, signification, and redeemer who will deliver his children into the paradise of modernity. Thus, masculinity, the authority of fixed language, and progress are all at the core of the cult of Bolívar in Latin America.

Conway’s study is not so much concerned with the manifestations, literary or otherwise, of the “cult of Bolívar” as with the opposite representational move, as in the case of Dávila’s irreverent painting, the counter-cult of Bolívar as it were. This oppositional move may not seek to bring his monument down but to reinscribe it, to recast it in order to show its artificiality, the constructedness of his body, the emptiness behind the pose. Conway very aptly calls these alternative representations “iconoclastic gestures,” aimed at tearing apart and reassembling his monumentalized body in order to

expose it as an ideological construct of official culture, challenging its assumptions and ultimately questioning the unmovable truths of Latin American modernity that the monumental Bolívar has been forced to embody. Gender, body, and modernity are, then, the three main analytical categories employed throughout Conway's study.

It should be noted that, despite the title of the book, the bulk of Conway's study focuses on only one country, Venezuela, and much of his argument is built on Bolívar as an icon of the [Venezuelan] nation. Bolívar as a monument to continental identity, to Latin America as an imagined community beyond the borders of its nations plays an insignificant part in this book and surfaces only in those texts that are *not* from Venezuela, like those by Martí, Rodó and, especially, García Márquez. This *other* body of Bolívar, both the same and a different statue from the one at the center of the book, is dealt with in passing but never quite fully addressed. Conway's work, then, is mainly concerned with the construction of the *nationalist* cult of Bolívar in Venezuela. Yet, it is also important to note that much of his argument and theoretical framework will be useful and, indeed, necessary for exploring that other and, to some degree, competing Bolivarian icon of Pan-Americanism.

After the theoretical introduction, *The Cult of Bolívar* is divided into five chapters and an afterword. The first chapter, "Bolívar and the Emergence of a National Religion," studies the constitution of the cult of Bolívar during the Wars of Independence and the early national period in Venezuela. Both enthroned and rejected in his lifetime, a glorious Augustus and a power hungry Caesar in need of a Brutus to sacrifice him, the body of Bolívar is resurrected twelve years after his death when his remains are brought back to Venezuela, and emerges as a Republican Christ figure from the pages of two

foundational texts of the early national period: Fermín Toro's "Honores a Bolívar," commissioned by the state to celebrate the return of Bolívar's body to Caracas in 1842; and Felipe Larrazábal's *Correspondencia general del Libertador Simón Bolívar* (1865), his first biography. As Conway explains, "While others in nineteenth-century Venezuela wrote celebrations of Bolívar, none were as thorough and programmatic as Toro and Larrazábal in their treatment of how the life and writings of Bolívar could be used for the creation of a civil religion" (20). This merging of Republicanism and Christianity that simultaneously founds the nation and maintains continuity with the theocratic discourse of the colonial period, sets the tone for the myriad of monumentalist narratives to come (future representations of *El Libertador* as father, logos, and savior) while delineating "the contours of the patriarchal and spiritual force that iconoclastic representations of Bolívar [will] target as a means of challenging the authority of the nation and the validity of its narratives of progress" (20). The remaining four chapters explore the development in the following two centuries of what, extending Conway's terminology, we may call Bolívar's "iconoclastic narratives." The analysis of four of these narratives stand out above the rest: *Ídolos rotos* (1901) by Manuel Díaz Rodríguez, *Memorias de la Mamá Blanca* (1929) by Teresa de la Parra, *La esposa del doctor Thorne* (1988) by Denzil Romero, and *El General en su laberinto* (1986) by Gabriel García Márquez.

Toro and Larrazábal's textual monuments soon became physical monuments to Bolívar, and Conway makes the equestrian statute erected at the heart of Caracas by Guzmán Blanco in 1874 a paradigmatic case. It is within this context that Conway centers his analysis of two texts in the second chapter "Monumentalism and the Erotics of National Degeneration." First, Conway shows how in Eduardo Blanco's "Las noches del

panteón” (1895) the link between the glories of the past and the promises of the future embodied in official monumentalism is broken by a pessimistic and disenchanted view of the present. Then, building on Aníbal González’s canonical reading of *Ídolos rotos*, Conway offers an new reading of this central piece of narrative *modernismo* that, less concerned with this literary movement, places the novel in the context of Bolivarian monumentalism. Under this light, *Ídolos rotos* becomes not only a reflection on the place of art and the intellectual in society, but also a critique of Venezuelan politics, responsible for bringing about the feminization of the nation and carrying out the homosexual rape of Bolívar’s body. According to Conway’s reading, the creation of the Plaza Bolívar and his physical monument paradoxically signals in Díaz Rodríguez’s novel the moment of his vexation: “This space is no longer the space of genealogical foundation, of an august, nationalist patrilineality, but of a bodily corruption associated with woman” (66). As the statues are being raped by violent soldiers, and the dreams of progress, modernity, and redemption are shattered, the protagonist’s cry “FINIS PATRIAE” implies a challenge to official national discourse. However, as Conway astutely points out, the iconoclasm of the title, *Ídolos rotos*, is ambiguous; the novel “is indeed iconoclastic, but only in the narrow sense of the destruction of representational idols. The spirit of Bolívar, which is mentioned fleetingly as the spirit overseeing the political designs of the inconformes, is not assailed in the novel” (67). The iconoclastic gesture of the *modernista* writer, then, seems questionable; if, on the one hand, by avoiding any programmatic concretization of this ideal “Díaz Rodríguez negates the very plausibility of sculpting the nation into an accurate simulacrum of ideal forms” (68), on the other, the end of the novel implies a longing for the masculine phallic figure of

Bolívar the Savior that modern Venezuelan politics has feminized. The iconoclastic gesture falls short and almost becomes an elegy for the monumental pose it meant to question in the first place. As Conway shows in the following chapters, it will not be the only instance.

Ambiguity in the iconoclastic gesture, if from a radically different perspective, can also be found in Conway's interpretation of Teresa de la Parra's *Memorias de la Mamá Blanca* (1929), the cornerstone of Chapter 3, "The Promise of Bolivarian Paternity." After a wonderful survey of the representation of Simón Bolívar in literature for and about children from the mid 19th century to the 1980's, Conway reads de la Parra's text as a gender critique of Bolivarian monumentalism, albeit one intertwined with a rejection of modernity and liberal progress and nostalgia for the colonial past. Conway summarizes well the quandary in which critics of de la Parra's novel find themselves: "The feminist rescue of the text might leave some readers concerned about the more reactionary dimensions of the novel, whereas simplistic, materialistic readings of the novel that present it as ideologically conservative run the risk of glossing over the text's very real contestatory voice in terms of gender and language" (84). Both in the novel, through the character of Papa, and in the lectures that de la Parra delivered in Colombia shortly after, the Venezuelan writer challenges the three poses that define the cult of Bolívar: virility, the authority of the written word, and progress. Instead, she reinserts Bolívar within a feminine genealogy, privileging affect over martial virtues and heroism, postulating the subjectivity of language, and valuing orality and dialogism against monological official discourses. As with Díaz Rodríguez, de la Parra's critique comes out of a disappointment with the present, but in her case rethinking Bolívar does not

mean a vision of the future but a looking back at the paradise lost of colonial times. Teresa de la Parra, one of whose unfinished projects was, in fact, a new biography of Simón Bolívar, carries out a critique of Bolivarian monumentalism that, radical as it is in many ways, cannot finally escape the pull of the icon of Bolívar who “remains a foundational figure around which the renewal of the present may be carried out. In other words, residues of Bolívar’s association with power and the nation remain, indicating that this version of the hero is not as iconoclastic as it might appear at first glance” (91).

Neither Díaz Rodríguez’s nor de la Parra’s novels are explicitly about Simón Bolívar but, as Conway shows, both can, and should, be read as reflections on his monumental presence, an icon that neither author quite succeeds in toppling and may even help prop up. Is it possible, then, to write about Bolívar without somehow perpetuating the myth? Is every iconoclastic narrative ultimately bound to become a monumentalist one? Although Conway never directly asks this question, I believe that these questions are at the core of the entire study, becoming even more central in the last two chapters, which are dedicated to two examples of what has been called the “new historical novel.” Both seem to make explicit what was only suggested before, that in order to talk about Bolívar, it may be best to *not* talk about Bolívar. In some way, both novels take the opposite approach to the earlier texts: they *are* about Bolívar but, as Conway shows, both try to displace him, as if to hide that fact or make us forget it.

In “‘A Whore in the Palace.’ The Poetics of Pornodetraktion,” Conway centers his analysis on *La esposa del doctor Thorne* (1988) by Venezuelan author Denzil Romero, a historical novel about Bolívar’s lover, Manuela Sáenz, that won the Sonrisa Vertical Prize (for erotic literature) causing a public outrage and becoming “the most controversial

historical novel written to date about Bolívar” (96). Although *La esposa del doctor Thorne* is a novel *about* Bolívar, his name, however, is thrice removed from the title: doctor Thorne is the husband of Manuela Sáenz, the lover of Bolívar. Furthermore, much of Romero’s literary production seems to follow this tactic, as in *La tragedia del Generalísimo* (1983), where the “main” referent is Francisco de Miranda, and in *La carujada* (1990), which is about Pedro Carujo, a possible assassin of Bolívar. As Conway puts it, “whereas in the cult of Bolívar the hero is always at the center of the frame, Bolívar is situated in the margins of Romero’s fiction” (109). Conway does an excellent job analyzing this novel, showing how the “unruly” and actively sexual body of Manuela enacts a dismantling of the liberal project that Bolívar has been made to embody; as Conway explains: “This unruly, Latin American body, [...] has broken that vision [of unity and progress] while pleasuring itself through the symbolic body of Bolívar. In other words, the relationship America-Bolívar, like Manuela-Bolívar, is bound together by contradictory impulses: the breakdown of Bolívar’s authority and its continual, seductive presence” (121). And yet, once again, this iconoclastic gesture turns out to be not so iconoclastic after all. One thing remains intact and it is no small thing: the prodigious symbolic phallus of Bolívar. It thus reminds us that however criticized the liberal project might be, the monumental body of Bolívar must keep its integrity: “Romero’s insistence on preserving Bolívar’s virility, and quite literally his symbolic phallic power, leads the novel back into the fold of the monumentalist definition of Bolivarian masculinity” (99). While Bolívar’s name may be in the margins of Romero’s fiction, his phallus is certainly not.

A similar strategy of not naming seems to be at work in the final text considered by Conway and possibly the best known of them all, *El General en su laberinto* by Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez. Displaced in the title and elsewhere by that of “General,” Bolívar’s name is only used once by the narrator, indicating that “to read, write, and utter the word ‘Bolívar’ is to enter into a repetitive and self-referential terrain of martial and political superlatives that has nothing to do with the man it is intended to represent, ultimately stripping him of his humanity and meaning” (128). Moreover, the only instance when the narrator names the name (the full name in typical García Márquez fashion) is to designate what he no longer is: “It was the end. General Simón José Antonio de la Santísima Trinidad Bolívar y Palacio was leaving forever” (130). As Conway explains: “With the phrase ‘It was the end’ García Márquez marks the end of Bolivarian narrative, defined as epic and nationalist, and the beginning of his own tale, which will distance itself from the conventions of that discourse” (130). Reading the Colombian novel against the backdrop of history, *Estudios Bolivarianos*, and García Márquez’s other fictions in this last chapter, “Solitude, Signs, and Power in *The General in his Labyrinth*”, Conway focuses on the dismantling of the third monumental pose: Bolívar as sacred text. The disconnections and misconnections between signifier and signified, so present in García Márquez’s novel, become the frame from within which to read the text’s representation of Bolívar: “Unlike the monumental Bolívar, the General is not an all powerful creator whose words and acts are full of mythological and disciplinary meaning but rather a broken body unable to attune itself to language in a meaningful way” (126). As in previous examples, though, Conway concludes by questioning the very iconoclastic gesture the narrative is meant to perform: García Márquez strips the

body of Bolívar of *nationalist* monumentalism but rebuilds his monument anew along continental lines. Thus, “the novel both negates and affirms the political potential of Bolívar, destroying his official symbolic body while trying to resuscitate it through the stripped-down, essential vision of the hero as a messenger of pan-Americanism” (127). As we approach the end of Conway’s study of the cult of Bolívar, it becomes quite clear that counter-cult narratives of *El libertador* end up, more often than not, as different manifestations of the cult itself.

The book ends with an afterword, “Bolivarian Self-Fashioning into the Twenty-First Century,” on Venezuela’s President Hugo Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution, which can be read as a final case study of the cult of Bolívar’s power to transform itself in order to remain the same. Conway’s analysis of Chávez’s Bolivarianism points out, as he has previously done, the contradictions and limitations of the iconoclastic gesture. Although he states that “[Chávez’s] Bolívar is not the monument, but the spirit of renewal in a age of crisis” (157) he then goes on to show how the three poses that define Bolivarian monumentalism remain intact in Chávez’s discourse: “Bolívar is more than a symbol of tomorrow, and of the authority of the father; he represents an authoritative horizon of meaning, the last word. For Chávez, the sign of Bolívar is univocal and irrevocable; it does not admit contradiction, interpretation, or challenge” (160). Indeed, Conway persuasively argues that “Chávez’s rhetoric may have a critical dimension to it, but in the end, he conjures up the tried and true icon of Bolívar as the embodiment of absolute power” (160).

After his brilliant analysis of the Bolivarian Revolution’s rhetoric and the genealogy of cultist and anti-cultist monumentalizing of Bolívar, it may seem puzzling

that Conway's study should conclude with a call to "honor Bolívar's memory" and to clean his equestrian statue of the patina of "monumentalism and the disillusionment that has accreted on his body of bronze" in order to "move the continent forward rather than backward in a remembrance of the unfinished nature of his journey, opening up history to the promise of answers that have yet to be found" (162). However, this may well be the only possible way to conclude if we accept Conway's own argument. In short, if writing about Bolívar without perpetuating his myth may well be an impossible task since every iconoclastic narrative may become in the end a monumentalizing act, what kind of monument, then, what kind of cult to Bolívar we choose to construct becomes a fundamental concern, an ethical and political decision. Despite their shortcomings and contradictions, the texts studied by Conway, as well as the study itself, share this common concern and show us the urgent need to question the act of monumentalizing even if, or perhaps because, it is impossible, and maybe even undesirable to avoid it. If this is, indeed, the case then, "[r]ather than an essential being with a providential, predetermined historical meaning, this Bolívar might be conceived as a metaphor for questions left unanswered across two centuries, and an invitation to dialogue about the unfinished business of modern Latin America in the twenty-first century" (162). The dialectic of monumental and iconoclastic gestures superbly explored by Conway in his book can offer us a new, more productive, and more ethical cult of Bolívar.

Conway's book is an essential contribution not only to the study of Bolívar and the field of *Estudios Bolivarianos*, but also to the corpus of research that, although inspired by Anderson, moves "beyond *Imagined Communities*," to use the term coined by Sara Castro-Klarén and John Chasteen in their recent collection. In his book, Conway

also moves beyond the 19th century, reminding us of its continuities in the present, of the multiple intersections between literature and other cultural artifacts in the construction of meaning, and even of our own role as scholars in the task of imagining communities.

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