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Martin Decoud in the Afterlife: A Dialogue with Latin American Writers

Jennifer L. French

Conradiana

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Martin Decoud in the Afterlife: A Dialogue with Latin American Writers

Jennifer L. French (bio)

Thus, in postponing our potential, diverting our energies with a shameful increase in commerce, production and population and a dizzying increase in the public debt, enamored of lofty ideals and reluctant to practice them, adoring force as the supreme arbiter, our credit ruined, our legal system, magistrates and democratic virtues all discredited, we have sat at the feast of life like children who resist nourishing foods only to gorge themselves on dessert. Willing to sacrifice ourselves in a holocaust over any cause, we forget all that concerns our own interests as a people and a race, and we go down our road singing and warring like the bohemians of the century and of history, making possible the severe judgments that European and Anglo-Saxon thinkers and propagandists offer about us.¹

So wrote César Zúñiga in 1899. At the time the Venezuelan was living in New York City, where he had spent much of the two previous decades because of his outspoken opposition to dictators Antonio Guzmán Blanco and Joaquín Crespo. Like fellow exile José Martí, who had died four years earlier in the struggle for Cuban independence, Zúñiga went to the United States seeking refuge from his own tyrannical government, only to become alarmed while there of the rising threat of neocolonialism. For Venezuela, even before the Anglo-German-French blockade of 1902, the danger was real: in that same year of 1899, Venezuela lost **[End Page 247]** 60,000 square miles of territory to British Guiana, having been forced to turn to the United States to arbitrate the Empire's claims. With the United States aggressively campaigning to establish its sovereignty throughout the Caribbean, appealing to Washington for protection against the old colonial powers was a risky recourse, but one Venezuela was forced to turn to repeatedly in those years.²

Zúñiga's essay "The Sick Continent," from which the above is excerpted, offers a frank assessment of the region's vulnerabilities and strategies for surviving the impending crisis. The title's implicit comparison between Latin America and the so-called "Dark Continent"

establishes an analogy that Zumeta will develop further in the body of the essay, where he warns that the Spanish American republics may be next to fall to the ever-expanding empires of Europe and the United States. To meet that threat, Zumeta advocates a new militancy on the part of Latin American governments, including the enlargement of militia, the construction of military and naval bases, and the importation of modern weapons technology. At the same time, he echoes Martí's call for a new unity among Latin American peoples: an end to the civil wars and revolutions that have left Latin American states vulnerable to the predations of foreign powers, and an end to the narrow nationalism that has prevented the Spanish American republics from cooperating for the common good. Zumeta is openly critical of what he sees as the errors of the creole elite who had governed Venezuela and Latin America since the time of their independence from Spain³: the enormous public debt that resulted from trade imbalance and public works projects like railroad and port facilities, often based on foreign capital and technology; the corruption of the legal system and government bureaucracy by bribery and graft; and the tragic willingness to resort to violence to settle political issues that results in "a holocaust over any cause" (Zumeta 24). Zumeta is a complex and fascinating figure, not least because the young intellectual was to return to his homeland a decade later and enter the service of Juan Vicente Gómez (1909–1935), the dictator who within a few years would be known north and south for his ruthless suppression of dissent and his willingness to cater to foreign interests. Zumeta died in 1955, having spent the last years of his long life in Paris, living in poverty, solitude and a silence brought on by what he referred to as "bankruptcy of character" (qtd. in Insausti 11, 15).

Surely Joseph Conrad would have appreciated the tragic irony of that fate, which might easily have worked...

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JENNIFER L. FRENCH

WILLIAMS COLLEGE

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2715 North Charles Street
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+1 (410) 516-6989



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Conrad's Nostromo: A Source and Its Use, the vortex inertly proves the cone of removal.

Conrad and Ambiguity: Social Commitment and Ideology in Heart of Darkness and

Nostromo, any outrage fades if the attitude towards modernity ends with a deep special

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