

# The Transculturized Self

## Charles O'Neill Conroy's Peruvian Education

Albert Braz

Volume 31, numéro 1, fall 2016

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds31\\_1art01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds31_1art01)

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1719-1726 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Braz, A. (2016). **The Transculturized Self**: Charles O'Neill Conroy's Peruvian Education. *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 31(1), 9–36.

## The Transculturized Self:

Charles O'Neill Conroy's Peruvian Education

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*Albert Braz*

..... *This planet is flawed,  
along with its people. The apple has worms.  
But living [in South America], I was italicized. Some  
curious alchemy altered my font.*

— P.K. Page

Excluding business people and missionaries, Canadians have always been largely disengaged from the continental land mass below the United States–Mexico border. The extent to which they have not identified with the whole of the Americas is most conspicuously evident in Canada's failure to join what is now the Organization of American States for a full century after that international body was founded. This lack of inter-American identity is also reflected in the dearth of important books about Latin America by Canadians. One of the notable exceptions is *Peruvian Journal: Letters of a Gringo Priest*, by the St. John's Catholic clergyman Charles O'Neill Conroy. Published posthumously in 1966, *Peruvian Journal* is composed of letters that Conroy wrote in the early part of the 1960s detailing his work in a parish in the northern Peruvian town of Monsefú. What makes the book most remarkable, as I will argue in this essay, is that it not only documents Conroy's encounter with a foreign culture but also shows how that transcultural exchange transforms the author as much as it does the hitherto strangers with whom he comes to live. That is, in the process

of gaining access to a new culture, Conroy must efface part of his own, becoming a different individual, what he terms a transculturized self.

Charles O'Neill Conroy was born in 1928 in St. John's, Newfoundland, to a budding lawyer named James Conroy and his wife, Elizabeth McGrath. When Conroy was three years old, his father died and he and his younger sister, Margie, were raised by their mother, who would emerge as a pivotal influence in his life. After receiving his early education in St. John's and Montreal, Conroy attended St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia and the Theological College of the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. Following his ordination in 1954, he served as an assistant priest in St. John's, where he performed a multitude of tasks ("Tragedy" 1). Because of his extensive travels and his "natural flair for languages," he was assigned to minister to the spiritual needs of foreign sailors, notably the members of the large Portuguese White Fleet (O'Hearn xvii). Just as significant, he became involved with the archdiocese's monthly newspaper, *The Monitor*, being made its associate editor in 1956 and editor in 1959. This was an experience that would serve Conroy extremely well after "his appointment as the first priest in charge of the newly opened Newfoundland Mission at Monsefu, Peru, in 1960" ("Tragedy" 1), as he would keep the archdiocese apprised of his activities in South America through a monthly dispatch called "Letter Home." Indeed, it was largely the texts that he sent to *The Monitor* that would comprise his book.

The appeal of epistolary writing is often attributed to its apparent transparency, "the fact that it is written by someone for someone else. The letter does not disguise that it is an act of communication that involves . . . a *sender* who is writing in the first person from a personal perspective . . . and a *receiver or recipient*" (Haase 539). Yet it is also widely acknowledged that "editors and collectors have a shaping, authorial role in the construction of the texts they are transmitting" (541). This would certainly appear to be true of *Peruvian Journal*, which was assembled after the untimely death of its author in a car accident early in 1966. As we are informed in a footnote to the last entry: "Before this letter arrived, news had been received of the fatal accident of March

ist" (Conroy, *Peruvian* 188; see also 168). The book's (uncredited) editing was done primarily by Walter O'Hearn, the managing editor of the now defunct *Montreal Star*, and Conroy's mother, by then known as Elizabeth McGrath Conroy Mennie. A distinguished figure in her own right — who, after being left a widow with two young children, "enrolled first as a solicitor and then as a barrister, replacing her husband in the law firm" of which he was partner (McGrath 12) — Mennie co-ordinated "the family letters with the Monitor letters in such a way as to maintain continuity" (Mennie, Letter 1). Actually, she had begun editing her son's texts even while he was alive. During his years in Peru, Conroy corresponded avidly with his mother, who had remarried and relocated to Montreal. So whenever it looked like he might miss a deadline, usually because of postal delays, Mennie would compile parts of the missives he had sent her and forward them to *The Monitor* as the next "Letter Home." In other words, although all indications are that Conroy is the sole author of the letters that make up *Peruvian Journal*, he is not necessarily always responsible for their particular shape. He of course would have no say in the choice of title for his book, or even in its publication. Mennie indicates that it was the long-time family friend O'Hearn who suggested to her husband and her that "Charlie's letters might prove of general interest if they were edited and published in a book" and "offered to do the editing himself" (Letter 1). O'Hearn reportedly also submitted the manuscript to Montreal's Palm Publishers, whose president was "enthusiastic about the material" (Mennie, Letter 1; see also Keyserlingk), but it was Mennie who assembled and typed the whole text.

The status of *Peruvian Journal* is complicated by the fact that O'Hearn and Mennie elected to include both the letters Conroy sent to *The Monitor* and those he wrote to his mother and other family members or friends. As well, while O'Hearn and Mennie provided the dates for all the letters, they did not identify any of their recipients, and only the "Letter[s] Home" are accessible to scholars — that is, except for the letters from *The Monitor*, Conroy's original letters cannot be accessed outside the book so the recipients remain unidentified. In any

case, most of Conroy's letters were always public texts, since they were addressed to the readers of *The Monitor*. Moreover, they were designed not only to keep the archdiocese informed about its Peruvian mission but also to raise funds for it. No less germane, the aims of the mission, which was run in conjunction with the Catholic Diocese of London, Ontario, were not exclusively religious.

In the summer of 1960 the Catholic Archdiocese of St. John's decided to send priests to South America in response to an appeal made the previous year by Pope John xxiii "to the Bishops of North America to do everything possible to assist the Church in Latin America, which is in such extreme need [of priests] at the present time" (Skinner, "Letter" 4). In 1958, some 972 Canadian Catholic missionaries were working in Latin America, a contribution that would peak at 1,894 by 1971 (Goudreault 368; see also Garneau 669, 686), but this was not deemed enough. As Archbishop Patrick J. Skinner explained in a pastoral letter, "at no time in the history of the Church has the occasion been given to us all to show forth our Catholic solidarity" and to demonstrate that "we are members of the Mystical Body of Christ; and that Body is the Church, but it is the whole Church throughout the entire universe" ("Pastoral" 4). To that end, he implored his congregants to "show forth our Christian and Catholic conscience, first by our fervent prayers, and secondly by our cooperation in the appeal which goes out in favour of Latin America" (4). However, an unsigned editorial in the same issue of *The Monitor* hints that other factors were at play beyond ecclesiastical fraternity. Entitled "Communism in Latin America," the text opens with the statement that "because of its close proximity to the United States, Latin America receives unusual attention from the gentlemen who rule Russia" (4). The editorial does not state so directly, but a recent Soviet-linked development on the continent that "sent shock waves" through the Catholic world was the Cuban Revolution of 1959, in which "a Catholic nation had fallen to a communist regime, one declared atheist and hostile to the Church" (Smith 90). Already troubled by Protestant evangelizing in the region (Garneau 678-80), the Church's hierarchy concluded that "heroic efforts"

were required by Canada and the United States to counter the “spread [of] Soviet propaganda” (“Communism” 4). One crucial component of those efforts would be the eventual operation headed by Conroy. This is made explicit in another unsigned editorial in *The Monitor*, “Our Priests in Peru,” in October 1962. As the archdiocese’s parishioners are reminded, “Monsefu’ is our contribution to the great effort now being made to stem the tide of communism in Peru” (4). Again, the mission’s spiritual aims are not impervious to earthly concerns.

*Peruvian Journal* opens in November 1960, with a letter in which Conroy recounts his journey from New York City to Lima, along with his “companion in arms,” Richard Morse, a priest from London, Ontario. The flight stopped in Panama, and Conroy contrasts the climate. It was raining in the tropics, as it had been in the north, “but with a difference. There were pleasant, rich, growing smells. It was like going into a greenhouse” (1). But after they cross the equator, they seem to be in more recognizable territory. They come in for a landing in the Peruvian capital over the Pacific Ocean and are “greeted by a familiar smell from a nearby fish-meal plant. It was like caplin on the gardens in the Spring in Newfoundland” (1). That said, Conroy notes that he has not been quite able to adjust to the difference in seasons. “Spring is well advanced in Lima,” he writes, “and already roses are beginning to bloom. People at home set their watches ahead or back when they travel across Canada, but it is difficult to accept the idea that one can leave the watch alone and push the calendar ahead or back six months” (1). This is a natural phenomenon that continues to fascinate him over a year later, when he remarks that “the inversion of the seasons here below the equator is still a matter of wonder to me” (51).

In his first letter, Conroy also points out that he and Morse are going to be in Lima only for a few days, since they will be travelling to Cochabamba, Bolivia, “where we are to train for our work in Latin America” (1), including receiving instruction in the Spanish language. Indeed, it is in Bolivia that both his stylistic dexterity and his political acuity begin to become apparent. The two priests fly to Cochabamba via La Paz, which Conroy characterizes as “the city named for the

peace it has never known" (4). He then explains that a forthcoming visit by Archbishop Skinner and another religious dignitary "should be interesting and enjoyable," even though "the government has announced a state of emergency because of political trouble in the Cochabamba Valley." He adds that "Bolivia has many growing pains and, as in many other Latin American countries, emergencies — even revolutions — are normal" (6). In a subsequent letter, he expands that the municipality of Cochabamba contains both a modern city, then the second largest in Bolivia, and villages that have seen "little change between the Inca conquest and the land reform of about eight years ago. The present government came to power at that time by distributing arms throughout the countryside and weakening the army. A real reversal of power was thus created, but also a Frankenstein monster that is no longer a dutiful servant" (10). Needless to say, he has become aware that he is not in Canada any more, and that things may be done differently in that part of world.

The extent to which life differs in Latin America becomes evident when Conroy and Morse return to Lima the following February, in 1961, and learn the name of their new parish. This is Monsefú, a predominantly Indigenous town of about 18,000 people, over 750 kilometres north of Lima. In particular, they discover that the reason Monsefú needs foreign priests is not because of "the terrible shortage" of Peruvian clergy (55; see also Clark 156 and Garneau 671) but rather because the local people had expelled their religious leader four years earlier. In what became known as "the Monsefú Parish Incident which had attracted the attention of all Peru," the residents "ran a priest out of town, reputedly because he was too fond of money, and they haven't had a resident pastor since" (Conroy, *Peruvian* 12, 13). John Maddigan, a St. John's priest who later joined Conroy, provides a somewhat different perspective. He contends that the reason Monsefú was garnering so much attention in the press at the time was that "there was evidence of Communist influences here that underlay the defiance of the Church," and that "the newspapers often referred to Monsefu as 'Moscu', the Spanish name for Moscow" ("Letter 11" 5). The situation,

however, appears to have been more complex than Maddigan implies, being no less shaped by internal factors than by external ones.

The Peruvian theologian and Dominican priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the founders of liberation theology, has written that “[p]overty continues to be the great challenge of Christian witness in our continent” (20). He believes that we are on “the threshold” of a new era in which “the poor begin to see themselves as subjects of their own history, as being able to take their destiny in their own hands” (21), thus transitioning from “non-persons” to individuals who are “recognised as people by the existing social order” (28). But this was clearly not the case in the Latin America of the 1960s, as was underscored in the November 1959 meeting of Canadian, US, and Latin American Catholic bishops at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. The central purpose of the First Inter-American Episcopal Conference was “the mobilization and coordination of efforts from Canada and the United States for the strengthening of the Church in Latin America” (Garneau 664). But the Auxiliary Bishop of Rio de Janeiro, Hélder Câmara, did not seem to share the prevailing assumption that the greatest threats to Catholicism were “the advance of Communism and the spread of Protestantism” (663). Câmara, who would become known as the Bishop of the Slums and whose vision inspired Conroy (Conroy, *Peruvian* 79–80), informed his confrères that he believed the Catholic Church’s foremost obligation was to strive “to put an end to the scandal of the 20th century: two-thirds of humanity remains in a state of want and hunger.” As he elaborated, “Our object . . . is to lead public opinion to understand that raising the underdeveloped world is a much more serious and urgent problem than the East–West conflict itself” (quoted in Quigley par. 4; see also Garneau 672, 680–81). The Conference’s chair, Boston’s Cardinal Richard J. Cushing, attempted to defuse Câmara’s critique by offering to give away “25,000 copies” of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s 1958 book, *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It*, which Cushing “had had translated into Spanish” (Garneau 681). But even some members of the US Catholic hierarchy had come to accept that there was “a



direct connection” between the appeal of communism in the southern half of the continent and the “deplorable socio-economic conditions” in which most people lived (Garneau 671).

If poverty was the overriding social and ethical issue in 1960s Latin America as a whole, this was especially so in Peru, a country with a sizable Indigenous population, “where vertical inequality between whites and non-whites manifested itself in a sort of informal apartheid analogous to that of South Africa” (Ugarteche 59). The Peruvian economist Oscar Ugarteche contends that anti-Indigenous prejudice was so widespread in the country that “broad parts of society looked upon the native Indios as a hindrance to development,” and consequently “the latter barely participated in the social life of Peru” (57). This exclusion encompassed the religious realm, which was dominated by non-Indigenous clergy. For example, in *The Coming Explosion in Latin America*, a book that Conroy praises effusively and whose analysis he calls “disturbing” (*Peruvian* 110), the Montreal journalist Gerald Clark states that in his travels through the Andes he encountered a new “type of parish priest. Indians complained bitterly that they saw him only once every few weeks, for important funerals, and he would not conduct the service unless he was paid. The priest chanted the Requiem with one hand outstretched. As soon as the flow of coins ceased, so did the service” (146). In fact, the trope of the rapacious priest has such resonance in Peruvian life and culture that by the time he published his first novel, *La serpiente de oro* (*The Golden Serpent*), in 1935, Ciro Alegría turned one such individual into an object of ridicule. Alegría, who remains one of the most beloved of Peruvian writers (Lobigs 139), portrays a priest who not only refuses to say individual Masses for his poor Amazon parishioners unless he is paid but even consumes beforehand the sacramental wine that he is supposed to use during the ceremony (91–102).

At any rate, the choice of parish for Conroy and Morse probably was not accidental, given the number of reports that “the people were hollering for Canadian priests” (Conroy, *Peruvian* 13). Following the imbroglio with their curate, the citizens of Monsefú had their spiritual

needs looked after by visiting priests from the neighbouring diocesan city of Chiclayo. But before long they started “to demand Canadian priests from a religious Order, preferably Franciscans,” since various groups of Canadian priests and nuns were operating in the area and “were doing very good work” (13; see also Goudreault 372). However, when their requests were ignored, “they became so pernickety about it that they locked up the Church and gave the keys to the local Mayor, instructing him to hold them and to refuse to give them to the Bishop of Chiclayo until their demands were met.” The Bishop, in turn, “excommunicated the mayor and the officers of the various societies and placed the town itself under an interdict” (Conroy, 13). Conroy characteristically responds to the situation by writing that the people of Monsefú “wanted nothing more than a good pastor,” but “if every parish in Peru with legitimate grievances made similar demands there would be chaos” (13). Yet he cannot help but realize that, if he is to succeed in his religious mission, he will first have to learn how to be a diplomat.

Before he and Morse travel to Monsefú, Conroy is relieved to learn that the local people have repeatedly insisted that they want “their Canadians,” which he hopes “may lead to a royal reception for us” (14). His optimism is reinforced when he is informed that the individuals who had taken possession of the church’s keys had “returned [them] indirectly” and that they all would be “absolved from censure before our arrival, so that we can make a fresh start” (14). Aware of the community’s categorical opposition to diocesan priests, Conroy and Morse decide to temporarily pretend to be members of an order. As Conroy relates, they name themselves “*La Sociedad de San Juan de Terra Nova y de Londres*’ and, as an ace in the sleeve, we have even had a rubber stamp made — in the best Peruvian tradition” (16). Still, he appears to have some apprehensions about the sort of welcome “the two young *gringo* priests” are going to receive. When the Bishop of Chiclayo delays their debut by three days, Conroy jests that perhaps it is “to avoid the processions and the unnecessary chances of being shot at” (16).

Moreover, evidently Conroy was not alone in fearing that they might not get a friendly salute. He writes that he, Morse, and the

accompanying contingent travelled in their Toyota Land Cruiser and “felt like a military expedition because the seminarians who came along to serve Mass half-expected to be met with a shower of rocks” (18). But all those anxieties prove to be unfounded. They actually have “to abandon the jeep to become part of a procession which swallowed us up. . . . There were two brass bands and untold thousands of people. Every now and again a member of one of the committees would shout ‘*Viven los Padres Canadienses!*’ while a huge Canadian flag was waved, or ‘*Viva Monsefú Católico!*’, to which everyone shouted back, ‘*Viva!*’, while rockets roared” (18). When Conroy finally has a chance to address his parishioners, he tells them that “we had to bury the past — I almost said ‘the hatchet’ — and concentrate on being one family” (19). Judging by the euphoric manner in which he and Morse are received, this is a feeling that appears to have been widely shared.

The Monsefú mission’s objectives, as might be expected, were predominantly spiritual; Conroy and Morse were to devote most of their “energies . . . towards instruction in the faith and increasing the sacramental life of the people” (21). Although both priests soon developed serious reservations about many local religious practices, particularly an “excessive devotion . . . to images” and a predilection for “feasting” over praying (14, 93), they conclude that “for a while we must go along with customs, good or bad, because any brusque change will be disastrous” (21). Some of those practices were simply too physically and mentally taxing for outsiders who did not grow up with them. For instance, Conroy observes that Peru had a tradition of calling on “famous preachers to give the ‘Three Hours’ Agony’ on Good Friday” (29). Despite his initial resistance, he was persuaded to do it, and discovered that “it *was* three hours, and it *was* agony. My mind was full when I started, but there were very few [people] in the church. By the time the church was full, my mind was completely empty” (29; emphasis in the text). The customs that really trouble Conroy, though, reflect the fact that most of his parishioners are only nominally Catholic, being “sleeping Christians” oblivious to even some of the faith’s rudimentary tenets (107; see also Garneau 680, n. 80). He describes a visit that he

pays to the house of an elderly woman to give her the last rites. After the sacrament, he learns that “the old lady had never been married by the Church” and wishes to do so, as does her “eighty-year-old groom” (20). Thus, outlines Conroy, “Juliana Chafloque, at the age of ninety, with the last of her strength made her first confession, received Viaticum as her first Holy Communion, was confirmed, married and anointed, all in less than an hour” (20). In short, he not only has to adjust to another country but also to another form of Catholicism, one that he at times barely recognizes.

Conroy’s challenges are exacerbated by the fact that, within weeks of their arrival in Monsefú, Morse suffers “a severe attack of hepatitis” (26), which forces him to return to Canada for treatment. Thanks to the assistance of guest priests, mostly from Lima, Conroy is able to carry on with his work. Indeed, he appears to make an immediate impression on the community. By July of that year, during the town’s *Fiestas Patrias*, or National Holidays, he is “honoured ‘for settling the religious problem’” and returning civility to Monsefú. These are laurels that he shares with “the excommunicated former mayor, now back in the arms of the Church” (41–42), and, indirectly, with the Church’s hierarchy. As he amplifies, the following day “Bishop [Daniel] Figueroa came to preside at the Solemn Pontifical Mass” and “it was a joy to him to be warmly received by the very people he had been forced to excommunicate less than a year before” (47). But, seemingly against his will, Conroy starts to realize that his parishioners are facing not only a multitude of spiritual trials but also social ones, some of them quite basic. The most acute of the problems confronting the people of Monsefú is a lack of sanitation, which perhaps explains both why Morse contracted his illness so soon after his arrival and the long history of “epidemics [that] have devastated our town many times since its founding” in the 1530s (25). Conroy is especially concerned about the “fetid irrigation ditch” that runs along the southern end of town, which he considers “a hazard to health . . . . Dead animals, human waste, garbage from the homes float in it. Yet the kids swim in it and nearly everyone drinks it” (74, 128). Other problems are cultural, but no less entrenched. Even

before reaching Monsefú, Conroy expresses relief that the local people “are independent of the hacienda system which keeps many Peruvian workers on land that does not belong to them” (15). Later, he becomes overtly critical of the mammoth plantations, those states-within-the-state “which provide so much luxury for the few and so much less than subsistence for the many in this land of ancient privilege and oppression” (54), charging that the “little totalitarian states” generate “the sort of misery that is breeding Communism” (134, 106). Conroy goes as far as to allege that “in the hacienda system . . . human dignity has no place. Even the best administrators of these huge organizations often satisfy their obligations to society by giving charity without justice while the worst sometimes give piety without either” (83). In the process of replying to queries from Canada about “the possibility of revolution” in Peru, he affirms that he and the other priests “are not worried about any such development, although the country seems to be asking for it in many ways” (65). Once more, he may have to address social issues before he can confront the religious ones.

The main reason Conroy becomes so antagonistic towards the hacienda system is that he believes it is designed to keep the majority of the populace ignorant, and therefore apathetic. More specifically, he suspects that the industrial landowners withhold education from Peruvian workers and their families because they are convinced that education is the best weapon for raising social consciousness, an assumption that, incidentally, they share with Conroy. “The longer I am in this country,” he writes, “the more I am struck by the sadness of the social set-up. In talking with rich people one can be charmed by the courtesy, the culture and the genuine humanity they exhibit but, whether they realise it or not, the well-to-do Peruvians, as a class, are exploiters. Many haciendas provide no schools for the thousands of families that are employed on them because, with even a little education, the people become restless” (49). Conroy paraphrases another foreign priest to the effect that “he didn’t come to South America to make things easier for the wealthy” (68), and one senses that he feels the same way.

The conflicting perceptions of the ramifications of educating the

general populace are exposed after a concert by the students of Monsefú's parish school — run by Newfoundland's Sisters of Mercy, several of whom had meanwhile joined Conroy. The concert, which involved 120 children between the ages of five and eight, who had been in school for only one year, was "so good that it was given again in Chiclayo" (91). Following that, the students were asked to appear on a television show on Christmas Eve, which, too, was such a triumph that long afterwards the whole of Chiclayo was "talking about the transformation of the Indians of Monsefú into cultured little ladies and gentlemen" (91). Not everyone, however, was elated that Indigenous youngsters were being taught not only to read and write but also to sing and play musical instruments. Conroy quotes the manager of Chiclayo's power company, who tells him that "it was a great pity that all this good education was being wasted on the *cholos* [mixed-race people] of Monsefú. 'Educate a *cholo*,' he said, and you educate another thief!' Then, as an afterthought, he added, 'or a revolutionary'" (91). Conroy admits to the reader that his hope is precisely that "these small people will eventually revolutionise things in their native Monsefú," but by being model citizens who will help to make it possible for all children across Peru to have access to "the good schools" that are being supported by their North American neighbours (91–92).

Interestingly, before long, Conroy himself would get directly involved in local politics, becoming "the biggest noise around here" (111). Again, his motivation is both social and religious. In 1963, Peru elected a new president, Fernando Belaúnde Terry. One of Belaúnde's main campaign promises was "a firm undertaking to restore democracy to the country on all levels," including municipalities (111), something that had not occurred in "forty-five year[s]" (Fleet and Smith 92). Once he took office, Belaúnde immediately "called for municipal elections by acclamation for a term that would only last for six months — until the machinery for voting by ballot would be set up" (Conroy, *Peruvian* 111). In response to the new president's initiative, a "committee of citizens" approached Conroy to inquire if he would allow them to nominate him to be the mayor of Monsefú. Conroy concedes that

this was “a startling and novel idea as I had never heard of a priest-mayor, but the chance of getting something done in our town tempted me” (111). He mentions a much-needed water tower and other infrastructure projects, but it is apparent that his concerns are not purely civic. Neither are those of his Peruvian bishop, as we can discern from Conroy’s account of their discussion:

I went to Chiclayo to see Bishop Figueroa and found him enthusiastic. He felt it would make good propaganda to have one of his gringo priests as mayor of a town that had formerly been known throughout the country as bitterly anti-clerical, and we both agreed that the six months’ term of office would not be long enough to be too heavy a burden on me or on the other priests who would have to take over some of my routine duties during the period. And so, at a town meeting held on August 4th, I was acclaimed mayor of Monsefú. (112; see also Maddigan, “Letter 1”)

The Cardinal of Lima was not as thrilled about Conroy becoming involved in municipal politics, informing Bishop Figueroa that “he doesn’t like this idea of a priest-mayor,” but Figueroa reminds him that “Monsefú is unique” (113). Evidently, whatever else Conroy’s acclamation as the mayor of Monsefú may be, for Figueroa, it is very much a religious victory.

Conroy’s work as a mayor not only enables him to help his constituents build urgently needed infrastructure, notably the “Project DIG (Diversion of the Irrigation Germ factory — I mean canal)” (138), but it also exposes him to aspects of their culture to which he otherwise would not have been privy, thus contributing in no insignificant degree to his Peruvian education. From the beginning of his Monsefú sojourn, Conroy recognizes that, while radical transformations are needed, he must proceed cautiously if he is to have any chance of succeeding. He writes that Bishop Figueroa counsels him and Morse that, “if we accept the people as they are and make changes only slowly, he is sure we

can do very good work” (14). The complication for Conroy is that he is not certain which local traditions ought to be preserved and which should be jettisoned. At the same time, he has become positive that “a knowledge of what has shaped the past of our people helps us to a better understanding of them and of the problems that confront us in separating the living faith from the almost pagan practices which have become associated with it” (26). As he tells himself, in order to be able to influence the thinking of “the people here I just have to find the tides of their own traditions, ride them carefully and guide situations slowly and with what wisdom I may acquire through experience and observation” (39), which is what he proceeds to do.

In addition to impelling Conroy to discover a pivotal but moribund Indigenous cultural tradition, his position as mayor forces him to interact with a spiritual leader of the pre-Columbian religion that he has been so determined to neutralize, if not eradicate. Through a local medical doctor and friend, Conroy learns that the government will provide the materials for the sewage project, so long as the town “could get free labour to lighten the cost for the federal authorities” (112). Conroy is also aware that President Belaúnde — who would be deposed in a 1968 military coup that has been described as marking “the irrevocable end of serfdom” in Peru (Ugarteche 61) — is “very interested in reviving old community customs of the Indian culture” (Conroy, *Peruvian* 115). Convinced that “there is still strength in the old customs” (117), Conroy comes to believe that the key to getting the people of Monsefú to embrace civic projects is by linking those undertakings to their cultural past. So he attempts to persuade them of the vitality of “the ancient *Minga* tradition” (115), in which “men would gather in groups to work for a day” on some collective endeavour (117). “The day selected would usually be Monday, or ‘little Sunday’ which is regarded as a holiday,” and most of the men would donate their labour (117). While the *minga* idea has been “dying out” (115), Conroy thinks that “we may be able to revive it” (117) in order to revitalize the town.

Ironically, the success of the *minga* owes much to the intervention of Conroy’s nemesis, Tomas Tullume, “Monsefú’s most noted *brujo*”



(116). The Canadian cleric's disdain for the traditional "medicine-man" is transparent. Conroy often underlines that neither Tullume nor any other member of his "family has ever learned to read or write, although that impediment does not prevent a *brujo* from making a better living than a qualified doctor" (82). He further contends that the proof that "the devil still walks abroad" in Peru is that the "old-established profession of the *brujo* (pronounced broo-ho) or witch-doctor still flourishes" (97). As he reiterates, witch doctors "are among the most prosperous of our citizens. Indeed we have found to our astonishment, that a *brujo* commands higher fees than a genuine medical man" (97). Conroy discloses that Tullume was "Public Enemy Number One in my book, and no one knew it better than he," adding that he had "refused to let [Tullume] be god-father to a child or best man at a wedding unless he would first publish in our local paper a renunciation of witch-craft, his main source of income" (116). This is a condition that Tullume does not accept, not even after Conroy declines "to celebrate Mass for a fiesta of which he was the chief organizer," a rebuff that Tullume takes as "an almost mortal blow to his self-esteem, for capital punishment would seem more sweet than that all religious significance should be removed from a feast celebration" (116). Following that, the two men do not so much as acknowledge each other in public.

Yet Tullume soon complicates matters for Conroy, forcing him to differentiate between his role as priest and as mayor. When the community organizes the first of its work parties, Tullume seizes the opportunity to become involved. "Of the hundred and twenty men who turned up for the *minga*," writes Conroy, Tullume "supplied thirty — and a pair of oxen dragging a steel plough to boot" (116–17). So, even though as a priest Conroy "had no hesitation in refusing [the medicine man's] participation in things religious . . . , as mayor, I felt I had no right to refuse his contribution to our civic works program" (117). Spiritually and intellectually, Conroy appears to simultaneously resent and feel threatened by Tullume. Theirs is a conflict between rivals, with each party begrudging the fact that the other does not accept his moral superiority. Not surprisingly perhaps, they are not quite able to escape

each other. Towards the end of the book, Conroy describes a curious encounter that he has with a man from high in the mountains who asks if Conroy will “say a Mass of Envy” for him (147). The man, whose “eyes glowed with fever,” then explains that “he had never heard of a Mass of Envy before, but the *brujo* who was curing him had sent him to me to have two Masses offered, one for the intention of restoring him to health, the other to bring misfortune on the friend who was putting poison in his soup” (147–48). Conroy tells the man that he is “not sure” that he will be “able to counteract the diagnosis.” But he notes that he responds with “a certain wry amusement” when he learns that the *brujo* “in charge of his curing was Tomas Tullume,” who apparently was “anxious to establish a mutual benefit society, sharing profits with us” (148). It seems as if Tullume has as much difficulty grasping Conroy’s moral universe as Conroy has fathoming his.

After six months in office, Conroy assumed that he was finished with his job as mayor. The choice had been partly made for him, because, “as a priest,” he was “automatically excluded by a law recently passed which excludes also military men and civil servants” (122). Yet, as Conroy must have sensed, he would not likely be able to walk away from civic politics. For one, the new mayor depended on his “opinion in many things,” to the point that he became “a Grey Eminence” (128). More important, Conroy felt that he had to continue to be involved “in the material side of things” if he did not “want to drop the *mingas*” (128). He had come to perceive the collective work parties as essential to the social and psychological welfare of Monsefú, which, without them, would “go back to its eternal sleep” (122). Thus, he had no choice but to remain a priest-politician, someone who is as involved with organizing *mingas* to detour an unsanitary irrigation canal and then to build a boulevard over the old ditch as he is with baptisms and confessions.

Whatever else Conroy might have accomplished in Monsefú will never be known, since he would die soon after. He was driving a group of six Newfoundland and US nuns in a minibus when they were hit head-on by a pickup truck that “suddenly pulled over to the wrong side in an attempt to pass the car ahead” (Doody 7). Conroy and three of the

nuns perished because of the impact of the collision and the remaining nuns suffered severe injuries — two of the dead nuns were Newfoundlanders, Sister Mary Dorothy Carroll and Sister Mary Aquin English; the third was American, Sister Mary De Chantal Krysinski (Conroy, *Peruvian* vi). Conroy's death would obviously mark the end of his Peruvian mission. Unexpectedly, though, it also cemented his reputation in ways that he could not have envisaged. The people of Monsefú had been so pleased with the new thoroughfare that had replaced the irrigation canal that they started contemplating names for it. Two of their favourites were "Avenue of the Republic of Canada" and "Avenue of Archbishop Skinner" (164), the latter after the Archbishop of St. John's. Conroy opposed both names, telling the residents that "our motive in fostering the project [was] based on our desire to show them what they can do by their own efforts." Instead, he proposed that the artery "be called 'Avenida El Pueblo' to remind them always that the people had done this themselves out of their own good will. Besides, 'El Pueblo' was the name of the former irrigation ditch" (164). He further quips that he is "sure His Grace won't object, nor will 'The Republic of Canada'" (164). However, his demise rendered the debate moot. "By decree of the [Town] Council," a footnote informs us, "the avenue was given the name, '*Avenida Carlos O'N Conroy*'" (164). Actually, Conroy would not only have the new thoroughfare named after him but also the future "Parish High School [that] had always been his desire" (Maddigan, "Letter 11" 5), names that are retained to this day.

The life-writing theorist Philippe Lejeune posits that one of the defining characteristics of the diary is that "the diary writer is often not the author of the diary's end and doesn't even know that 'this' page would be the last" (187). "All journal writing," he asserts, "assumes the intention to write at least one more time, an entry that will call yet another one, and so on without end" (188–89). But it is evident the same can also be true of letters, notably serial ones. Two of Conroy's "Letter[s] Home" appeared in *The Monitor* after his death. The first bears an editorial note saying that it was "**received two days before the tragic news**" and its last paragraph begins with the unintentionally

ominous comment, "Time is running out on me and I must bring my letter to a close" ("Letter III" 9; emphasis in the text). The second letter, which describes a trip to "the farthestmost part of the Parish of Monsefu," is prefaced by a heading indicating that it was **"written the week of Father Conroy's death and arrived just recently."** It ends with the remark that "now I am back again in Monsefu with a backlog of things waiting for attention" ("Letter IV" 6; emphasis in the text). Needless to say, he never anticipated that this would be his last letter.

Moreover, the serial "Letter Home" itself did not end with the death of Conroy. Starting with the May 1966 issue, *The Monitor* began publishing a new installment of the monthly dispatch under the byline of John Maddigan, the aforementioned Newfoundland priest who had already written about Conroy's election as mayor of Monsefú "by popular acclaim" ("Letter I" 14). Maddigan's first letter after Conroy's death, in fact, is devoted to showing how strange it is that "life goes on even after the greatest upheaval" ("Letter II" 5). Maddigan is apprehensive about trying "to take over the 'Letter Home', under that name or another" (6). Yet he feels that it is crucial to convey to the Archdiocese of St. John's what its best-known missionary had achieved in "the town that he loved." As he underlines, "your money provided the means, but Father Conroy provided the impetus" (5). Then, at Maddigan's invitation, the "Letter Home" of June 1970 is authored by none other than Conroy's mother. Writing as Betty Mennie, she chronicles a memorable week that she and her husband spend in Monsefú, during which she learns that her son, who is "known affectionately to the people as 'Padre Carlos,'" continues to be a living presence in the town (1). Upon noting that "his picture is to be found in every school and in almost every home" (1), she concludes that "it was a revelation to us . . . to see how my son's dreams have been made to live by the devoted efforts of his associates and his friends" (13). In other words, Conroy remains alive because his work is being carried on by others, and this includes "Letter Home."

In studies of cultural relations between people from the North and the South, there is a tendency to portray those encounters as "site[s] of

imperial intervention" (Pratt, *Imperial* 2). The implicit assumption is that they are tainted by asymmetrical power structures, which inevitably favour the North. Such a framework, though, may not always reveal the true nature of those relations, not the least because its inherent binarism leads it to homogenize societies that are anything but uniform. This is particularly true of the so-called global South, including Latin America, a region often marked by "immense inequalities" (Vargas Llosa 4), what George Woodcock felicitously terms "the gulf between the pointlessly rich and the unnecessarily poor" (30). Southern elites may have far less in common with the rest of their societies than they do with their northern counterparts. After all, while the "gap between the rich and poor nations" has continued to grow, the "same is the case within each Latin American country" (Gutiérrez 23). As Woodcock cites one "Lima man" in his Andes travelogue, "If one of the market women up here tries to cheat you, do not think it is because you are a foreigner. She would do the same to me. In her eyes we are of the same class" (33). What is more, it is not at all apparent that she is wrong.

In addition to minimizing the conflicts between the oligarchies that run the countries and the overwhelming majority of the populace that struggles to eke out a living, the reason that oppositional frameworks often fail to capture the complexity of the relations between North and South is the belief that such contacts are invariably determined by Darwinian competition. But as thinkers like Peter Kropotkin and Stephen Jay Gould have attested, "cooperation among members of a species" can be "the best pathway to advantage for individuals" (Gould 338). Without denying that "there is an immense amount of warfare" among groups, they claim that there is no less "mutual support, mutual aid, and mutual defence" (Kropotkin 5). As Kropotkin propounds in his classic *Mutual Aid*, "Sociability is as much a law of nature as mutual struggle" (5; Gould 336). Or, to echo Gould, "communion" is perhaps more likely to ensure "reproductive success," either genetically or discursively, than is "combat" (Gould 329).

Conroy's actions in Peru certainly seem to be better explained by co-operation than by ever-lasting competition. To begin with, Conroy

is not only wanted by the people of Monsefú almost from the outset but ends up being apotheosized as a champion of the community. To be sure, along with his companion Richard Morse, he initially deceives the populace by professing to be a member of a religious order, rather than a diocesan priest. Also, when Conroy first travels to South America, he is bent on leading Peruvians to embrace true Catholicism — i.e., Catholicism as defined by the Vatican, and as interpreted by him and his superiors. Yet, as he becomes familiar with the world inhabited by his parishioners, he discerns that the only way he will be able to change them is by immersing himself in their culture. One cannot help but notice the irony in Conroy's realization that, if he is to succeed in his spiritual mission in Monsefú, he will have to lead his parishioners to re-embrace their largely abandoned cultural practices, especially the *minga*. Conroy's subsequent recognition that it is impossible to address people's spiritual lives without attending to their material circumstances is nothing short of an epiphany. Furthermore, Conroy not only comes to deduce that in order to be able to influence the people of Monsefú he needs to be familiar with their culture but also that "the best way to revive a parish" in Peru is not directly through religion but "through schools conducted by nuns" (74) — like the one run by the Mercy Sisters, which he says has become the town's "chief source of pride" (156). That is, perhaps what is most urgently needed in places like Latin America is not priests but teachers (see also Minaya 498).

It is, of course, hard to dispute the historian J.C.M. Ogelsby's contention that Conroy is more at home with other foreign priests than he is with his Peruvian parishioners, a charge that has been levelled at Catholic priests in general, not just foreign ones (Minaya 499). Ogelsby considers *Peruvian Journal* "one of the most remarkable books to have come out of the Canadian Catholic experience in Latin America" (214). Yet, for him, Conroy and other Canadian missionaries remain outsiders who "bring their own views and experience to bear on societies not yet prepared to accept them wholeheartedly" (218). Indeed, one could go beyond Ogelsby and argue that the reason Conroy is so receptive to traditional Andean concepts like the *minga* may have less

to do with his openness to other cultures than with his own background. Besides being a Newfoundlander and a Canadian, Conroy is very much part of the Irish diaspora. He exhibits limitless interest in all things Irish, even lamenting that Peruvians “do not accept the Church’s ruling as a matter of duty and discipline as we do in our Irish way at home” (*Peruvian* 176). So it is possible that, by the time he arrived in Peru, he was already familiar with the Irish idea of *meitheal*, the “traditional rural practice of people coming together to work . . . as the need arises” (Robinson 132). Although Conroy does not refer directly to *meitheal*, it has numerous commonalities with the *minga*. Something that he does mention frequently in his letters is the Antigonish [Co-operative] Movement. Fashioned at his alma mater, St. Francis Xavier University, in the late 1920s, the Antigonish Movement strived to help “people develop themselves and become, to a greater extent, the masters of their own destiny,” something that they could achieve mainly “through education” (Connor 132, 133). The Antigonish ideal spread out around the world, and there is little doubt that it influenced Conroy’s work in Peru, particularly the conviction that it is imperative “to develop local leadership over a broad area,” for “without local leadership there will be no progress in the economy, no schools, no basis for vocations later” (Conroy, *Peruvian* 145). Nevertheless, while there is truth in the claim that Conroy was shaped by his time and place, one can also easily discern his profound commitment to the town he adopts and to its people, not the least by aiming to make himself redundant. Conroy often stresses that the “ultimate hope here in Latin America” for him and his colleagues is “to reach a stage where we ourselves are no longer necessary” (110). As he elaborates, “Our aim is to develop a strong group of young people among whom vocations may be found and who, in any case, should contribute a stimulus of ideas to the rest of the diocese” (144), underscoring the degree to which he changes after he arrives in South America. In the portion of the stanza that serves as the epigraph to this essay, the poet P.K. Page writes that she was “italicized,” her “font” altered, during the years she lived in Brazil (70). Conroy, likewise, appears to have been transformed

by his experience in Peru, undergoing some sort of transculturation, or perhaps rather transculturization.

The concept of transculturation is now most closely associated with the Canadian-born literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt, who defines it as comprising those “processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (“Arts” 36). The Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, however, has a more fluid view of the term. Ortiz, whom Pratt identifies as her model (36), proposes that any individual who migrates to another part of the world is “faced with the problem of disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation — in a word, of transculturation” (98). According to him, the idea of transculturation best captures “the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word *acculturation* really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as deculturation” (102). The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski agrees with Ortiz. In his introduction to the English edition of Ortiz’s seminal book, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, Malinowski contends that “[i]t would be as preposterous to suggest that the Spaniards who settled in Cuba became ‘acculturated’ — that is, assimilated — to the Indian cultures, as it would be to affirm that they did not receive from the natives very tangible and definite influences . . . . There was an exchange of important factors, a *transculturation*” (xi). In short, for Ortiz and Malinowski, it is not just members of subaltern groups who are affected by cultural exchanges, but everyone involved in the process.

Conroy clearly came to believe that North Americans, like himself, not only would be culturally transformed when they went to work in the southern part of the continent, but would have to be so in order for their missions to be successful. Early in 1965, he writes that, along with the problem of “placement,” or finding “the right place for the right person,” a major challenge for the priests and nuns coming to Peru from the North “concerns those who come to help. It is that of



‘transculturization’ or the need to feel at home in the way of thinking and living of the people of the country and to understand them, without constant comparison with the ways things are done at home” (“Letter 1” 14). Later that year, while discussing the plans for the construction of a gymnasium for the community, he comments on the training received by the US Peace Corps volunteers working in the area. Conroy observes that the trainees “learn to cope with the loneliness of separation from their own kind and culture and to be patient in dealing with prejudice against their nation and people,” which is pervasive in Peru and elsewhere (“Letter 11” 3). But he maintains that what the Peace Corps training cannot do for its members is “to give them an insight into the people they are to serve — nor can it provide them with a plan of work which will make them generally effective . . . . Two years, which is the term of their service, is too short a time for any deep understanding of a people whose way of thinking is centuries removed from them” (“Letter 11” 3). Presumably because of the amount of time he has lived in Monsefú, Conroy has been able to gain insight into the local ways of seeing, reflected in “his enthusiasm about what he called [the] marriage of the North American mentality with that of the South” (Carter ix). He definitely seems to feel that his Peruvian experience has transformed him in profound ways. In fact, Conroy intimates that his active engagement with the people of Peru has enabled him to recognize his true self. This discovery ultimately leads him to see both himself and his native land differently, but such a new awareness is preceded by prolonged bouts of self-questioning, if not depression.

In several of his letters, Conroy acknowledges that he feels unworthy of the task he has been assigned. Early on, he writes that “I think they’ve sent a boy on a man’s errand. I am reminded of the famous notice posted in a store window in St. John’s, ‘WANTED: a boy to do a man’s work.’ So, with me” (*Peruvian* 32). Such apprehensions lead him to undergo “period[s] of malaise of mind and body” (39), during which he becomes “down-hearted” and “wonder[s] sometimes if the component elements of physical malaise and spiritual discouragement are not the same” (34–35). Significantly, those feelings do not dissipate

as he becomes more integrated into Monsefú and more familiar with the challenges it faces. On the contrary, his deepest anxieties appear to be directly connected to his awareness that he lives in a part of the world with extremely high levels of “illiteracy and the kind of crushing poverty that can be matched nowhere on earth, except perhaps in India” (153). Just a year before his death, while attending a Pastoral Week conference high in the mountains of Cajamarca, he remarks on the cold temperatures and frequent rains and, especially, the fact that most people’s “faces are disfigured from malnutrition and hard conditions of living.” He further confides that, “Since I came up here I realise fully what I suppose I must always have known — that most human beings live, and always through the ages have lived, in captivity to poverty” (153). If this is true, it also means that he must fear that his work may be pointless — or, at best, will have little impact on the wider world.

Needless to say, as one reads Conroy’s letters, like any other letters, one should always guard against their rhetorical strategies, especially the genre’s inability to escape the “problem of fictiveness” (Spacks 49). Conroy’s writings about his Peruvian sojourn are inevitably subjective responses, which in most cases can neither be corroborated nor disproved. Also, considering that a central function of “Letter[s] Home” was to persuade their readers to support generously the Monsefú mission, it is logical to assume that Conroy would highlight those elements he believed would prompt donations. Yet, during one of those campaigns to raise funds back home, Conroy reveals the extent to which he has been transformed by his experience in South America. At first, he notes that his years of “living along the sandy coastal fringe of Peru which is lapped by the Pacific Ocean had made me almost forget what the sea off the coast of Newfoundland could be like” (141). He then adds that “part of the pleasure” of his visits to isolated communities throughout the province is discovering “the improvement is [*sic*] basic services” in recent years, such as “the increased mileage of hard-top road, rural electrification and telephone services, numerous new schools” (143). In the process, though, he also becomes aware of “the

fragility of the economy of Newfoundland,” with its dependence on natural resources and seasonal work (143). What he finds most “disturbing,” he writes, is “the casual attitude about unemployment insurance and relief — as if the good life should be had for the asking and as a personal, individual right. I would hope that we may never again see the hard old times, but I would pray that we never take abundance for granted” (143). At such moments, it becomes evident that Conroy’s letters capture not only his experience in Peru but also how that experience affects him and the way he comes to see the world that produced him.

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