

LITERARY CONVENTION AND REVOLUTION IN ROQUE DALTON'S *TABERNA Y OTROS LUGARES*

Resumen

Este artículo explora la disyunción entre estética e ideología política en la producción literaria de Roque Dalton, particularmente en Taberna y otros lugares (Premio Casa de las Américas, 1969). Utilizando ensayos sobre el compromiso político y la poesía de Theodor Adorno y Dalton, argumento que la problemática dominante de esta poesía es la interacción tensa entre la convención poética y la intención política. En mucha poesía de crítica sociopolítica, Dalton mezcla convenciones poéticas y, por ejemplo, coloquialismo salvadoreño y un sentido de humor mordaz. Con Taberna... como ejemplo, este artículo interpreta la relación de amor/odio que el hablante tiene con la nación como ilustración de las dificultades estéticas y políticas que el artista (burgués) revolucionario enfrenta. Este ensayo muestra que al combinar lenguaje de distintos registros con una visión crítica de la ideología política hegemónica y de la propia, Dalton efectivamente produce poesía que desafía las expectativas de textos político-literarios.

Palabras clave: *Roque Dalton, literatura salvadoreña, poesía política, estética, compromiso político*

Abstract

This article explores the disjunction between aesthetics and political ideology in Roque Dalton's literary production, specifically in his award-winning (Casas de las Américas Poetry Prize) Taberna y otros lugares (1969). It argues that the dominant problematic of this poetry is the tense interplay between poetic convention and political intent and illuminates this relation using Theodor Adorno's and Dalton's own meditations on poetry and commitment. In much of his poetry, Dalton plays with poetic convention along with Salvadoran colloquialism and an acerbic sense of humor, for example, in order to produce sociopolitical critiques. Using examples from Taberna..., this article reads the poetic speaker's love/hate relationship with the nation as an illustration of the aesthetic and ideological difficulties the (bourgeois) revolutionary artist confronts. This article shows how by combining varied types of language with a critical view of his own and hegemonic political ideology, Dalton effectively challenges expectations of political literary texts.

Keywords: *Roque Dalton, Salvadoran literature, political poetry, aesthetics, political commitment*

Salvadoran Roque Dalton (1935-1975) stands out as representative of Central American writers' commitment to radical sociopolitical and aesthetic transformation. He produced several poetry collections, political and cultural

essays, an autobiographical novel, *Pobrecito poeta que era yo* (1976), a collage, *Las historias prohibidas del Pulgarcito* (1974), and the testimony *Miguel Mármol: los sucesos de 1932 de El Salvador* (1971). As both writer and polemicist, Dalton was a major cultural force in 1960s and 1970s Leftist circles. And since the end of the Salvadoran civil war (1980-1992) former allies on the Left and former enemies on the Right have appropriated the figure of Roque Dalton as an icon of national culture and of postwar reconciliation. In 1998, for example, the Salvadoran legislature voted him a national hero, calling him 'a poet of great merit'.¹ In his own lifetime, however, Dalton was a controversial artist-intellectual and militant: his death itself, at the hands of his own political faction, and the international outrage² it awakened reveals the significance of Dalton's work in contemporary political and literary circles.

Jesuit-educated, middle-class, Dalton was a founding member of the so-called Committed Generation,³ a group of young writers who, like counterparts *Frente Ventana* and the Committed Generation in Nicaragua and Guatemala,⁴ intended to radicalize national literature. In El Salvador, Dalton and his cohort strove to produce socially relevant literature and shared the tendency of writing "conversationally," colloquially. In an editorial, attributed to Dalton, of an ephemeral literary magazine, the "Generation," declared its split with, or break from, those writing "literatura," "Para nosotros la literatura es esencialmente una función social [. . .] la obra de arte tiene necesariamente que servir, que ser útil a la sociedad, al hombre de hoy."⁵ But in this declaration, Dalton and his peers did not attempt a total break with earlier Salvadoran literature, "no echaremos polvo sobre los valores [...] salvadoreños de otras épocas sino que venimos a tratar de aprender de ellos todo lo bueno que tengan."⁶ In fact, as Beverley and Zimmerman note, the Committed Generation succeeded not only in renovating the country's literature but also in becoming the dominant line

¹ Lynn V. Foster, *A Brief History of Central America*, New York, Facts on File, Inc., 2000; p. 238.

² For a selection of reactions to Dalton's death, see Casa de las Américas's *Recopilación de textos sobre Roque Dalton*, comp. Horacio García Verzi, Havana, Casa de las Américas, 1986.

³ The "Committed Generation" included some of El Salvador's best-known writers: Italo López Vallecillos, Roberto Armijo, Alfonso Quijada Urías (Kijaduras), Manlio Argueta and José Roberto Cea. See John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman, *Literatura and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1990; p. 124.

⁴ *Frente Ventana* was made up of intellectuals and cultural workers, including Sergio Ramírez, Fernando Gordillo and Michelle Najlis; they published the important journal, *Ventana*. This Nicaraguan group preceded the development of the first Sandinista poetry, notably that of Leonel Rugama (1950-1970) and the cultural brigade, "Gradas." Otto René Castillo (1936-1967) and playwright, José Manuel Arce (1935-1985) formed part of Guatemala's Committed Generation. *op.cit.*, p. 72-76, 88, 155.

⁵ Cited in Hernández-Aguirre, Mario, "La nueva poesía salvadoreña: 'La generación comprometida,'" *Revista Cultura*, 20 (Apr.-June 1961), 77-99; p. 87. The editorial was originally published in *Hoja*, Año III, no. 2, April 1956.

⁶ *Op. cit.* p. 95. Dalton's comment, in reference to the "Círculo Literario Universitario," the "Generación Comprometida"'s previous incarnation, was published in *Diario Latino*, 28 January, 1956.

of literary production of the 1960s and 1970s.⁷ Arguably, Roque Dalton in particular can be credited with continued literary influence in his country and Central America as a whole; in fact, his poetics are only now being challenged by texts that turn away from his commitment to political change.

Dalton's life, as well as the politicalization of his poetic works, which this article focuses on, emblemizes the urban guerrilla poet of 1960s Spanish America. Further, Dalton's way of turning poetry into a critical, mocking and ironic instrument in the struggle against social inequities remains pivotal to the understanding of Spanish-American political literary texts. In addition to fulfilling the expectations of political literature—political commitment and clarity of expression, for example—Dalton's poetry shows tension between his bourgeois education and upbringing, and his politics.

In his poetry this disjunction between aesthetics and political ideology creates texts that contain multiple voices, histories, and politics, and that are written with an "acidic," but paradoxically tender, sense of irony and humor. Sarcasm, Salvadoran colloquialism, "vulgarity," and direct expression of Marxist ideology increasingly preoccupy Dalton's poetic speakers. While his early poetry collections—1961's *La ventana en el rostro*, for example—demonstrate the influence of Nerudian poetics, in later collections he edges toward more obviously propagandistic poetry. A prime example is the posthumously published *Poemas clandestinos* (1980). Roque Dalton's critical acceptance as a model guerrilla poet is founded on the power of the political commitment expressed in his texts. But this critical concentration on Dalton's work as an apt Leftist poetics overlooks Dalton's varied perspectives on revolution, the social role of the poet, and poetry itself. The complexity of his constant self-criticism and reappraisal of his roles as artist and militant has been little explored in readings of his work.

The majority of literary essays written about Dalton universally praise the confluence of political commitment and artistry in his life and work, generally only critiquing the conventionality of some of his early poems.⁸ Only in the last few years more systematic literary criticism of Dalton has been written. One such example is Rafael Lara Martínez's introduction to his compilation of Dalton's poetry. His point of departure is the critique of previous studies that he considers lacking in rigor and suffering from excessive adulation of the poet.⁹ And although Lara Martínez suggests that Dalton studies commence with the contradictory nature of Dalton's own thoughts on poetry, his introduction offers

⁷ *Op. cit.* p. 125.

⁸ See Casa de las Américas' *Recopilación de textos sobre Roque Dalton*, the only volume of texts about the poet (including literary criticism and a substantial number of personal meditations) published until the more recent compilation by Rafael Lara Martínez and Dennis Seager, *Otros Roques: La poética múltiple de Roque Dalton*, New Orleans, LA, University Press of the South, 1999.

⁹ Rafael Lara Martínez, "Introducción," *En la humedad secreta (Antología poética de Roque Dalton)*, San Salvador, Dirección de Publicaciones e Impresos & CONCULTURA, 1994; p. XI.

few examples of the heterogeneity of Dalton's poetic production. Instead, his study aims to prove, via detailed listings of poems' publication histories,¹⁰ that the figuration of Dalton's as paradigmatic poet-guerrilla is the product of the poet himself and his critics (particularly anthology editors). Lara Martínez's examples suggest how criticism's construction of an idealized image of Roque Dalton has successfully subsumed his doubts about the role of the intellectual and of literature in revolutionary culture.

This article tackles the dominant problematic of Dalton's poetry: the interplay of poetic convention and political intent. By juxtaposing Dalton's writings on aesthetics with those of Theodor Adorno, this study proposes readings of poems from *Taberna y otros lugares* (1969); that consider the aesthetics and politics of the poetry collection Dalton dubbed his "most Communist."¹¹

In some of his studies of the relationship between art and politics, Adorno postulates that mass culture is opposed by the "autonomous," or uncommodified, works of art whose coherency is determined by their own specific components and forms without relying on empirical reality. "Autonomous" art distances itself from empirical reality to achieve realization as "both work of art and valid consciousness."¹² According to Adorno, although such works may be purveyors of "consciousness," they should not advertise their political positions; they should not be representational. Autonomous works, though, are not void of critical capacity; in fact this art challenges the products of the culture industry by committing only to its own rules.¹³ In an earlier essay (1957), "Lyric Poetry and Society," Adorno argues that, due precisely to its distance from the everyday, lyric poetry and its "unrestrained individuation" remains linked to the "collective substratum," allowing it to rise above its own subjectivity to provide a critical social vision.¹⁴

¹⁰ One of *La humedad secreta*'s most compelling examples is of the omission in *Poesía escogida* (1983) of the dedications to "Heberto [Padilla] y Pablo Armando [Fernández]" and the epigraphs (Saint John Perse and Henri Michaux's) of "El hijo pródigo" (published in 1970's *Los pequeños infiernos*). According to Lara Martínez both omissions intend to distance Dalton from the ideological opposition (Padilla) and from particular (undesirable) literary influences (p. XXXIV). Dwight García presents a related example of Roque Dalton's self-figuration in an article on Dalton's rejection of Neruda and embrace of Vallejo as poetic forefather, "A partir de la imagen de la ruptura, la escritura se desplaza hacia la figuración de un origen alterno, y el Neruda devaluado es literalmente borrado de la historia, gesto que, años más tarde, se reitera en la selección de textos de *Poesía escogida*, antología en la que Dalton suprime los poemas más explícitamente nerudianos" (p. 251). See García's "De la poesía a la política: el origen de la originalidad," *La Torre: Revista de la Universidad de Puerto Rico*, 9 34 (Apr.-June 1995), 243-260.

¹¹ "La vida escogida: entrevista-collage," in *op. cit. Recopilación de textos sobre Roque Dalton*, 35-68; p. 47.

¹² Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation Under Duress," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, London, NLB, 1977; p. 160. Essay originally published in 1961.

¹³ Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," in *op. cit.*; p. 190. Essay originally published in 1965.

¹⁴ Theodor Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, edited by Stephen E. Bronner & Douglas M. Kellner, New York & London, Routledge, 1989; p. 156, 163.

Roque Dalton's work is an example of the complicated relationship that exists between an art that revels in its artistic, or "autonomous," nature and its expression of political commitment. In an important 1963 essay, "Poesía y militancia en América Latina," Dalton posits art as a personal, subjective endeavor that, nevertheless, is a representation of social experience. And he attempts to further delimit his own poetic production by emphasizing his nationality and his works' place in El Salvador's revolutionary experience and in its literary canon. Perhaps unexpectedly, this essay's analysis is not class-based. Dalton identifies the oppressed as all those who have been subjugated by "la opresión oligárquica-imperialista," thereby demonstrating a broader view of the functioning of power and of the role of an educated, bourgeois individual, such as himself, in the revolution.¹⁵ Dalton asserts that, rather than bourgeois art being destroyed, it should form part of a new revolutionary art, one that has a role in the nation's social transformation. A social role, however, does not prevent it from also being a thing of beauty.

¿También el poeta es comunista? [. . .] el gran deber del poeta —comunista o no— se refiere a la esencia misma de la poesía, a la belleza [. . .] todo lo que cabe en la vida cabe en la poesía.¹⁶ El poeta —y por lo tanto el poeta comunista— deberá expresar toda la vida: la lucha del proletariado, la belleza de las catedrales que nos dejó la Colonia española, la maravilla del acto sexual, los cuentos tenebrosos que llenaron nuestra niñez, las profecías sobre el futuro feraz que nos anuncian los grandes símbolos del día.¹⁷

Dalton is rather aware of the ease with which his expressed belief in the essential beauty of poetry can be misconstrued.¹⁸ He later nuances this assertion by denominating beauty and the beautiful "cultural realities" and by extolling the virtues of a timely purely political poetry.¹⁹

While in his 1963 text Dalton espouses an important cultural role for the revolutionary artist as cultural educator of comrades,²⁰ in 1969's *El intelectual*

¹⁵ Dalton's omission of class analysis has been criticized by other Marxist writers. For example, James Scully, in the preface to the English version of "Poesía y militancia..." faults the poet's contention that the Salvadoran nation, rather than the proletariat, can be an agent of change. See "Afterword on Dalton's Essay," *Poetry and Militancy in Latin America*, by Roque Dalton, Willamantic, CT, Curbstone Press, 1981, 45-53.

¹⁶ Note the similarity between Dalton's "todo lo que cabe en la vida cabe en la poesía" and Ernesto Cardenal's definition of *exteriorismo*: "Pound pues abrió los límites de la poesía, de manera que en ella cabe todo lo que se puede expresar con el lenguaje." See "Ernesto Cardenal: evangelio y revolución," *Casa de las Américas*, 63 (Nov.-Dec. 1970), 174-183; p. 176.

¹⁷ Roque Dalton, "Poesía y militancia en América Latina," *Casa de las Américas*, 20-21, (Sept.-Dec. 1963), 12-20; p. 16.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 16-17. In a 1969 interview with Mario Benedetti, Dalton talks about the need to "arrebatarle a la burguesía, el privilegio de la belleza, como lo sostiene Régis Debray" (p. 148). See "Una hora con Roque Dalton" *Casa de las Américas*, 54 (May-June 1969), 145-153; p. 148.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

y la sociedad he criticizes current artistic practices. In what is essentially an essayistic dialogue with other well-known leftist writers, Dalton chastises them, as well as himself, for failing, despite their good intentions, to communicate with the masses,

Hasta la fecha, la inmensa mayoría, la casi totalidad de nosotros hemos sido burgueses y hemos escrito para la burguesía. Cuando hemos *llegado* a sectores amplios del pueblo ha sido generalmente por medio del populismo, o sea que hemos llegado al pueblo, históricamente, mal.²¹

Dalton's concern with the perceived distance between his and others' texts and their projected audience is testament to his belief in an art grounded in everyday life²² with the potential for revolution. And his recognition of his works' default elitism²³ and of the need for beauty in art is an example of the political-aesthetic tension found in his poetic production.

This tension makes Dalton's work an experiment in political poetry.²⁴ He does not dismiss the lessons he has garnered from his canonic readings. Yet his poems also ape "high art" and the bourgeoisie's appreciation of it. For example, Dalton believes the literary language of the bourgeoisie must be preserved not just in service of mocking the bourgeoisie but also in hopes of integrating this language into the new world he and other revolutionaries aspire to create.

Hints of canonic, poetic rhetoric (metaphor, figures of speech, etc.) exist alongside his ever-growing commitment to the advancement of a revolutionary ideology through armed struggle. *Taberna y otros lugares*, from 1969, synthesizes many of his poetic and political preoccupations. In this multifaceted poetry collection, the poetic speakers, who hold multiple contradictory perspectives, search for means of survival in a staid world. Central to this award-winning poetry collection (*Casa de las Américas*) is Dalton's contention that political and aesthetic commitment can coexist in the poet and revolutionary. The apparent conflict between this dichotomy, revolution or art, is evident even before the reader reads the opening poem, for, in the dedication, Dalton declares: "Yo llegué a la revolución por la vía de la poesía. Tú podrás llegar (si lo deseas, si sientes que lo necesitas) a la poesía por la vía de la revolución. Tienes por lo tanto una ventaja".²⁵ Importantly, the dedication makes plain his personal

²¹ Roque Dalton, et. al, *El intelectual y la sociedad*, México, Siglo XXI Editores, 1969; p. 15.

²² "Poesía y militancia en América Latina" p. 15, 19.

²³ In *El intelectual y la sociedad*, Dalton urges his literary comrades to accept the fact that due to Latin America's rampant illiteracy, their texts are elitist by default (p. 15).

²⁴ See "Poesía política e interpretación populista: dos poemarios salvadoreños," *Textos críticos*, 10 29 (May-Aug. 1984), p. 75-89. In this article, Hugo Achugar argues, via poetic examples of Dalton and David Escobar Galindo (1943), that so-called political poetry is an ideological discourse because of the ideological effect of its aesthetics rather than due to its content (p. 75). By focusing on the ideological effects of poetic works, Achugar indirectly parallels Adorno's and Dalton's views.

²⁵ Roque Dalton, *Taberna y otros lugares*, 7th. ed., San Salvador, UCA Editores, 1995; p. 19.

struggle with artistic and revolutionary practices; and implicitly presents his art as apart from the revolution, but with revolutionary capacity.²⁶

The volume's first poem, *Américalatina* can be read as a dramatization of the I of the dedication, someone who is led to revolutionary acts through poetry. In this poem, Dalton speaks ironically of the Latin American poet who lives a bohemian life until the day he ends up in military/police custody for nothing more than writing poetry. The poem also succinctly expresses the political awakening of the poet and comments on the state of poetry production and its reception by society,

El poeta cara a cara con la luna
fuma su margarita emocionante
bebe su dosis de palabras ajenas
vuela con sus pinceles de rocío
rasca su violincito pederasta.
Hasta que se destroza los hocicos
en el áspero muro de un cuartel.

The description of the poet centers on his relationship with stereotypically poetic objects (the moon, dew, violins) as well as on the popular image of the artist smoking, in this case not a cigarette but a dainty flower de-graded as opposed to a rose, for example. Poetic production is demeaned, if one considers the idea of artistic originality, for the poetic voice defines poetic creation as the appropriation of others' enunciations.²⁷ Significantly, the poet's idealistic existence is confronted with reality not from within, but rather through the power of the military. The poet described in the first stanza is not outwardly political. To the authorities, however, he is a subversive social element. The inevitable fact of the authorities' violence against the poet is grammatically shown by the conjugation of the verb "destrozar" following the adverbial conjunction "hasta que"; had the subjunctive been used, the action would have been hypothetical. Dalton's poem questions the effectiveness of the poet's traditional role and posits that the poet is seen as dangerous by the society's hegemonic power even before he has become politically or socially active. In addition, *Américalatina* raises questions about the changing social status and image of literati as well as about their preparation for political roles.²⁸

²⁶ In "En lealtad a la poesía," Lara Martínez argues for a reading of this epigraph that recognizes Dalton's assertion that in poetry "lo político no agota el terreno de lo humano". See this essay in *El Salvador: poesía escogida*, San José, EDUCA, 1998, 7-23; p. 23.

²⁷ This evaluation of poetry writing functions as a self-deprecating comment: the basis of the title poem's, "Taberna," construction as a poetic object is the appropriation of seemingly random comments heard in a Prague bar. *op .cit.*, p. 123.

²⁸ A rude awakening to social realities is echoed in "27 años" where the poetic I extols the virtues of youth while relating that he has already become intimately and tragically conscious of death's proximity. As in *Américalatina*, the I is at a crossroads and must choose whether to accept the status quo, and his position within it, or to challenge it, thus consciously courting death.

In "El capitán" Dalton shifts his attention from the "subversive" and toward the military. "El capitán" portrays the nature of political repression from the perspective of the victimizer without falling into crude dichotomies of good and evil,²⁹

El capitán en su hamaca el capitán
dormido bajo los chirridos de la noche
la guitarra ahorcada en la pared
su pistola depuesta su botella
esperando la furia como una cita de amor
el capitán el capitán
—debe saberlo—
bajo la misma oscuridad de sus perseguidos.

The poem's first line puts the captain in a place of tranquility, an image of quick and easy relaxation. Despite the night's shrieks and the strangled guitar,³⁰ the captain is able to put his gun aside while he reposes with his bottle, presumably of liquor. By describing the captain as drunk, or drinking, the poetic speaker invites a more "understanding" reading of the captain and his role in persecuting fellow countrymen. The poem suggests that only through his alcohol consumption is the captain able to fulfill his love/hate relationship with the nation, with those who, likewise, lie waiting for the "love" fury he will unleash upon waking (8). Further, the poem asserts that the captain must realize his "prey" exists in the same darkness he inhabits. It affords the poem's ferocious encounter-to-come a sense of destiny. Thus both the military man and his victims seem to be at the mercy of a social reality that places them at each other's throats.

In "Temores," Dalton expands on the fear and fury that underline *América-latina* and "El capitán." Fear is communicated through an extended description of a moment yet to happen, an image of El Salvador that is at the same time terrifying and endearing. The poetic I exalts and defends the autochthonous in the face of future national transformations.

Cuando la nieve caiga en mi país
Doña Ana no estará más en su vergel
canas de coco verde arrugas dulces del maíz
cerrada estará la rosa abierto estará el clavel.
Cuando el otoño conquistador lleve sus manos a mi país
el General Beteta habrá regresado del Petén
oh deshielo sin hielo oh vidrios de fuego feliz
con mil cuatrocientos hombres marchando bien.

²⁹ Dalton populates *Taberna y otros lugares* with "characters" who espouse views that contradict his own. For example, he includes poems in the voice of a once wealthy English family living in El Salvador. In his interview with Benedetti, Dalton explains that purpose of this strategy is to "establecer una contradicción dialéctica en el seno de la expresión poética" (p. 20).

³⁰ The hung guitar can represent artists' "hanging" under dictatorship.

Hostia por los deseos púrpura no te perderás
 el viento de las doradas playas corona tus miedos
 en cada tiro un conejo hasta la raza destruirás
 olor de yeso piel hecha para quemar aquí me quedo.
 Gracias a Dios y a la flor de Izote y
 a la exactitud de Varela
 heráldica gratísima sabiduría lentamente baladí
 oxidada por esta lejanía del alma en vela.
 País mío vení
 papaíto país a solas con tu sol
 todo el frío del mundo me ha tocado a mí
 y tú sudando amor amor amor.

Content in "Temores" is characteristically Daltonian in its emphasis on El Salvador's uniqueness, its need for social change, its absurdities, and on the love/hate relationship of its citizens. Its poetic expression is coiled into tightly-wound metaphors that recall *Modernismo* but that also require more "local" knowledge in order to be comprehended. The poem's five stanzas are predominantly written in *arte mayor* verses with irregular consonant rhyme and clear hemistiches in the longer lines. The juxtaposition of such colloquial and conventional poetics expresses the poetic speaker's anxiety over change. Further, this alternation between different poetic codes creates an air of aesthetic and political ambiguity.

The poem's first two stanzas foreshadow a future which will alter El Salvador's natural and political environment. The first stanza's snowfall, a climatic anomaly, a thing foreign to Central America,³¹ transforms that which the poet-speaker considers to be El Salvador: coconuts, maize, and Doña Ana, who is the subject of a popular Salvadoran children's song.³² This stanza tenderly imagines El Salvador as a beautiful, innocent rural place that will come to suffer.

While the second stanza's structure is similar to the first's, in it the natural disaster becomes a political one in the figure of the returning conquistador from

³¹ The images of coldness, foreign to Salvadoran climate, may allude to the cold of the former Soviet Union. In this case, this poem may also indicate the poetic speaker's fear of direct foreign influence in El Salvador. This view that connects the cold to the USSR instead of to the US, for example, is supported by the fact that the composition of *Taberna y otros lugares* precedes the Soviet bloc's "acontecimientos de agosto de 1968," as Dalton states in "Una hora con Roque Dalton" (*op. cit.*, p. 23). This poem would then demonstrate Dalton's critical ideological stance prior to witnessing the Soviet Union's 1968 actions.

³² The refrain reads: "Vamos a la huerta / de torontorojil / a ver a Doña Ana comiendo perejil." See Claudia Lars, *Poesía completa II*, comp. Carmen González Huguet, San Salvador, Dirección de Publicaciones e Impresos, 1999; p. 77. In addition to including original poems, renowned Salvadoran poet Claudia Lars renders versions of traditional children's songs in her popular *La escuela de pájaros* (1955). Claribel Alegría has also been attracted to these same verses; she dedicates her poetry anthology *Suma y sigue* to "Doña Ana en su vergel."

Petén.³³ Note that the Spaniards who conquered El Salvador came south from Guatemala.³⁴ Despite the historical resonance, references to Petén and “General Beteta” are vague in the way that a reference to, for example, Pedro de Alvarado (the founder of San Salvador) would not be.³⁵ Nevertheless, this stanza interlaces into the poem an empirical reality—constant military presence—with identifiably “poetic” images (7) of national change.

Line seven’s exclamatory “oh” reveals the speaker’s pain at the arrival of “el otoño conquistador” (5). It also reveals knowledge of poetic convention in the same manner in which line four highlights poetic meter. Unlike other Daltonian apostrophes, this “oh” does not seem to share the ironic tone that characterizes much of his work. Instead of using apostrophe to disparage the dominant class’ poetic discourse, as Hugo Achugar argues in his reading of “Poemita con foto simbólica”³⁶ in *Las historias prohibidas del Pulgarcito*, here the function of “oh” affirms Dalton’s ties to poetic tradition.³⁷ As Jonathan Culler asserts in his essay on apostrophe,

It is the pure embodiment of poetic pretension: of the subject’s claim in his verse he is not merely an empirical poet, a writer of verse, but the embodiment of poetic tradition and the spirit of poesy. Apostrophe is perhaps always an indirect invocation of the muse. Devoid of semantic reference, the *O* of apostrophe refers to other apostrophes and thus to the lineage and conventions of sublime poetry.³⁸

The apostrophe in line seven modifies the stanza’s tone by drawing attention to its metaphoric language. In one sense, the poetic speaker’s exaltation of melting which requires no ice and glass of happy fire is unbelievable, a poetic

³³ El Petén was one of the Mayans’ last strongholds against Spanish conquest; the Spaniards acquired short, tenuous control in 1697. This region also served a launching pad for Spanish attempts to conquer Belize. During the 36-year Guatemalan civil war, guerrillas brought the war to this isolated area (Foster, *op.cit.*, p. 250). Finally, el Petén was an area of contention between Guatemala and Britain and later between Guatemala and independent Belize (1981). See *Guatemala: A Country Study*, 2nd ed., edited by Richard F. Nyrop, Washington, D.C., American University Foreign Area Studies, 1983; p. 171.

³⁴ Foster, *op.cit.*, p. 59.

³⁵ This vagueness may be part and parcel of Dalton’s playfulness. For example, in the bibliography to *Las historias prohibidas del Pulgarcito*, he writes: “Fuera de los textos y poemas originales, tres textos han sido modificados para lograr los efectos perseguidos por el autor y dos textos aparentemente extraídos de otras publicaciones son apócrifos, escritos también originalmente por el autor. Corresponde a los lectores descubrirlos.” See Roque Dalton, *Las historias prohibidas del Pulgarcito*, 11th ed., México, Siglo XXI Editores, 1997; p. 232.

³⁶ Achugar, *op.cit.*, p. 80. The poem begins: “Oh / ligarquía / ma / drasta / con marido asesino / vestida de piqué / como una buitre / acechante en las ramas / del enredo en la Historia” (*op.cit.*, p. 197).

³⁷ In his article on Dalton and Escobar Galindo, Achugar remarks that in order for Dalton to interpellate the reader, he must choose his poetic “arsenal” from the dominant poetic rhetoric. In addition, since his poetry attempts to interpellate the people, Dalton must effect a “redefinition” of existing literary canons. Thus, his use of apostrophe is ironic and parodic.

³⁸ Jonathan Culler, “Apostrophe,” *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981, 135-154; p. 143.

invention; yet at the same time it insinuates the contradictory, conflicted relationship existent between the poetic speaker and the nation. Thus, Dalton's manipulation of the rhetorical figure of apostrophe, precisely in a stanza that reasserts social commentary, bridges the gap between the poem's social critique and the intellectual-reader's education.³⁹

The complexity of the poem's perspective is further exemplified in the following stanzas, where the poetic speaker's critique of the nation is attenuated through poeticized language. He begins by exhorting the nation to action (9, 11), thereby granting it agency. While the nation is still described through natural imagery, it becomes an actor rather than being only a backdrop before which action occurs. Accompanying the nation's transformation into a subject is an increase in violent imagery (11-12). In fact, the you-nation's actions against its people prove to be ravenous. In the third stanza, the representation of the people as rabbits functions as a synecdoche and portrays them as insignificant, and, more to the point, small prey.⁴⁰ Despite the you-nation's malice, the poetic speaker stays (12), taking the role, perhaps, of "host" as sacrificial offering to God. The poetic speaker goes even further in the fourth stanza, expressing his gratitude not only to God but to El Salvador's national flower, the edible *izote*. *Izote*, as does the maize of the first stanza, represents the love his "papaíto país" inspires in him (18). But the poetic speaker, who may be read as the "alma en vela" (16), also thanks "Varela" for prompt and faithful execution of unnamed actions. In the context of this reading, "Varela" seems to represent hegemonic power, a power that the poetic speaker mocks in line 15. The use in line 15's of sonorous, delicate, *modernista* language seems heavy-handed. Nevertheless, the poetic speaker laments its "oxidation" (15-16). As in the previous stanzas, here the poetic speaker combines images of love and disdain for an abusive country he will coddle in the end.

The conventional poetic language found throughout "Temores" almost disappears in the poem's concluding stanza. The poetic It's relationship with the nation is temporarily resolved through his tenderness and sacrifice. The nation, once poeticized as a destructive force, is now invoked, "país mío vení" (17), and indulged as "papaíto país" (18). The poetic speaker's use of the endearment "papaíto," much as "Oh" in line 7, positions the nation as a figure in need of affection and the poetic speaker as a refuge, a comfort, a defender. The love

³⁹ In *El intelectual y la sociedad*, Dalton perspicaciously notes that "...si escribimos poemas, escribimos para quien sabe leer poesía, y si escribimos ensayos filosóficos escribimos para (autodidactas o universitarios) filósofos" (*op. cit.*, p. 15). Years earlier, in a 1964 interview with Fayad Jamis, Dalton insisted "no te olvides poner ahí que también leía a los clásicos españoles, es decir, que los volvía a leer, porque ya los conocía desde los años escolares." See "Un testigo corroído por la pasión," *Unión: Revista de la unión de escritores y artistas de Cuba*, 3 3 (July-Sept. 1964), 125-129; p. 126.

⁴⁰ In a different, perhaps harsher reading, the image of the rabbit could be seen as a sarcastic comment about the people's fertility, essentially calling it "breeder." Note that El Salvador is the smallest and most densely populated Central American country.

and heat the nation receives do not protect it from the disastrous cold promised earlier in the poem. The poetic speaker, though, sacrifices himself to the cold so that the nation will retain its heat, or life.⁴¹ Thus, finally, "Temores" functions as a love poem to a nation replete with contradictions.

Political purpose in this poem is obscured, or rather hidden, by its form. It is neither written in free verse nor in transparent language, both formal elements common to Dalton's, and Central America's, more direct political poetry. This poem is "aesthetic," using meter and rhyme and figures of speech. Yet it is also a political tool in the revolution. While the images of military men suggest a social reading, its use of "poetic" language attempts its insertion into a more conventional poetry canon. I argue that the use of traditional poetic language and images in "Temores" is, less an attempt at subverting the power of conventional poetics, and more an indication of the tension present in the revolutionary artist's voice. Reading the echoes between Dalton's texts and those that form part of the hegemonic system as mockery across the board seems to be a search for overt subversiveness.⁴² "Temores" formal complexity relies on Dalton's manipulation of different codes as it presents the contradictory relationship between the speaker and the nation, and between the poem as aesthetic object and political instrument.

The poems analyzed in this study demonstrate the artistic difficulties the revolutionary poet faces. Adorno's regard for "high art" and disdain for the art object of mass culture, as well as his opposition to political literature, illuminates a constant problematic in critiquing Dalton's work. In order to reach a wider spectrum of people, the artist-revolutionary must incorporate the common language of his compatriots (as in the use of the children's song). As a creator of aesthetic objects, however, the poet may heed literary tradition. Dalton's fear is that a dogmatic Marxism will appropriate artists' creative freedom and obliterate art of beauty, thus stagnating the revolution of culture. As Dalton's essays and work show, his conception of beauty allows for much innovation, but it coincides with aesthetic tradition. This is a serious dilemma for a poet of political commitment with a bourgeois education. As Yurkievich asserts, "Dalton se rebela contra la censura política que denigra todo tratamiento artístico de la palabra, todo manipuleo que no corresponda al valor de uso. Brega por un realismo que reconozca la realidad verbal, por un materialismo que aprecie la

⁴¹ This poem reiterates protest poetry's emphasis on the importance of revolutionaries' martyrdom. The love of the nation and acceptance of death on its behalf is present throughout Dalton's poetic oeuvre. See James Iffland on guerrilla martyrdom in "Ideologías de la muerte en la poesía de Otto René Castillo," *Ensayos sobre la poesía revolucionaria*, San José, EDUCA, 1994, 169-234.

⁴² A characteristic example of critics who predeterminedly search for political overtones is "La herencia de su ejemplo" by Fernando Martínez Heredia in *Recopilación de textos sobre Roque Dalton*; and to a lesser extent Beverley and Zimmerman.

materialidad de la lengua."⁴³ Dalton's acceptance of different linguistic registers as poetic language is the manifestation of his love of words.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Roque Dalton, as did many of his contemporaries in Central America, searched for literary modes by which to express the urgency for radical political change. His body of work illustrates many Central American literary tendencies of the last thirty to forty years: he wrote in colloquial, regional, sarcastic, cynical language; produced acute social critiques and re-visions of national history in testimonial, prose and poetic texts. Dalton, along with other politically committed writers, dedicated his life to the sociopolitical transformation of Central America, but he did not give up his love of words for it, "Hombre despalabrado no es sinónimo de mudo sino de zombie."⁴⁴

Yvette Aparicio
Grinnell College
Iowa

⁴³ Saúl Yurkievich, "Roque Dalton en las bocacalles de la historia," *La confabulación con la palabra*, Madrid, Taurus Ediciones, 1978, 134-143; p. 141.

⁴⁴ From "Con palabras," *op. cit. Taberna y otros lugares*, p. 93.