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The revolutionary poetry and life of Roque Dalton

By Travis Wilkerson | May 11, 2007

"Yes, anguish exists.

*Like despair
crime
or hate.*

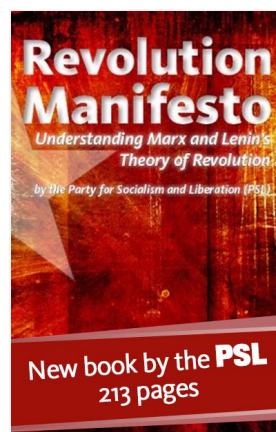
*"Who should the poet's voice be
for?"*

From "The Art of Poetry"



Roque Dalton, 1935-1975

Roque Dalton was a great poet, a Salvadoran, and a revolutionary Marxist. He spent his short lifetime in a profound engagement between the theory and practice



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of art and revolution. The facts of his life—which ended 32 years ago today—remain the stuff of legend and myth.

Dalton was born in the capital city of El Salvador in 1935. He was the son of a member of the Dalton gang, a legendary bank-robbing gang from Kansas, who had fled the country with a suitcase full of money.

Though he carried his father's name, he was raised by his mother, a registered nurse. Her salary earned him relative privilege, most importantly a Jesuit education. From the very beginning, he was deeply political. Chosen valedictorian of his elite high school, Dalton delivered his address in the form of a withering critique of his instructors for their prejudice and elitism.

Dalton studied at the University of Santiago, Chile, but returned to El Salvador in 1956. Shortly after he helped found the University Literary Circle, the Salvadoran military burned down the building. The following year, he traveled to the World Youth Festival in Moscow and soon joined the Communist party.

In 1960, he was arrested and charged with forming “red cells among workers, students and peasants, especially inciting these last to protest and employ violence against the landowners.” Dalton was sentenced to death by firing squad. But the night before the execution, then-dictator Colonel Jose Maria Lemus was overthrown in a coup. Dalton's life was saved and he was forced into exile.

During a year spent in Mexico, Dalton wrote the bulk of his first two major works, “The Window in My Face” and “The Injured Party’s Turn.”

In December 1961, Dalton moved to Havana, Cuba. Cuba was the epicenter of revolutionary change in Latin America. Its rapid and awe-inspiring transformation must have been breathtaking and deeply inspiring—to the young Salvadoran. In turn, the Cubans offered material support to Dalton, in the form of work, room and board. They also published his work. Starting with “The Injured Party’s Turn,” Cuba published the whole of his literary and critical output.

During his stay in Cuba, Dalton began formal military training in anticipation of the armed struggle that surely lay in his future. By 1965, he decided to return to El Salvador clandestinely, and to resume his interrupted role in the revolutionary struggle. Less than two months after his return, he was arrested, held incommunicado, tortured and interrogated by the CIA, and again sentenced to death.

But astonishingly, an event outside his control saved him yet again. The 1965 earthquake struck, fracturing the prison in half, and Dalton simply walked out into the streets and freedom.

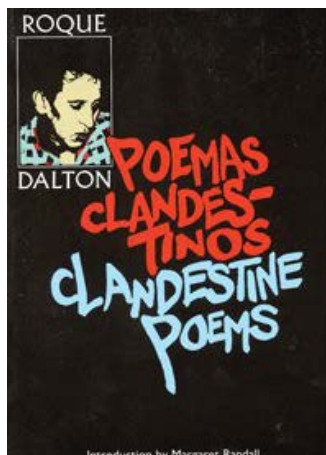
Dalton was smuggled out of El Salvador and returned to Cuba. A few months later, the party sent him to Prague where he lived and worked from 1965-1967 as a correspondent for The International Review. During this time, he authored major theoretical works on the

relationship between poetry and militancy, and on the culture of North Korea. He also composed the bulk of one of his most important works, “Tavern and Other Places.”

He returned to Cuba for several years. All the while, he wrote and published prolifically, winning growing recognition and numerous accolades.

At this time, Dalton resumed his guerilla training. By the early 1970s, he was itching to return to the struggle at home. He approached the leadership of the clandestine Popular Liberation Forces “Farabundo Marti” (FPL) in El Salvador. But Commander Marcial—the leader of the FPL—rejected Dalton’s application on the grounds that his role was as a revolutionary poet, not a guerrilla.

But Roque Dalton refused to stay on the sidelines of the armed struggle. His offer to join the People’s Revolutionary Army —another guerrilla organization known as the ERP—was accepted and he prepared to return to El Salvador. After extensive plastic surgery to alter his appearance, Dalton disappeared into the guerilla movement forever.



His artistic self-effacement was as astonishing as his political commitment. Roque Dalton dissolved his known creative

Roque Dalton's last collection

identity and created five distinct others: these five voices would author his final collection, "Clandestine Poems," published in 1974.

If a crystallizing slogan is to be found amidst the book's pages, perhaps it comes from a piece called "Poetic Art":

"Poetry

Forgive me for having helped you understand

You're not made of words alone."

On May 10, 1975, Roque Dalton was tortured and murdered by an ultra-left faction of his own organization, the ERP. This uncomfortable fact shouldn't be denied. But more importantly, his terrible death should not obscure the enormity of his life, his political commitment, and his artistic accomplishments.

Friend and fellow Salvadoran poet Claribel Alegria offered a powerful assessment of Dalton's life: "His prolific artistic production, cut off at the age of forty, remains a monumental artifact: testimony to his tortuous journey through the twentieth century, revealing his contradictory, dialectical, love-hate relationship with the country of his birth—El Salvador—both in and out of exile, and illustrating his profound conviction that the poet can and must, in his life as well as his work, serve as the finely-honed scalpel of change, both in word and deed, when he lives in a profoundly unjust, and stagnant society."

Translations of Roque Dalton's work are available by

Hardie St. Martin and Jack Hirschman.

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