

GRINGO IRACUNDO

Roque Dalton and His Father

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Abstract: In prose and poetry and throughout his career, Roque Dalton used the life story of his U.S. émigré father to explore the themes of power, dependency, and identity that interested him and other Salvadoran intellectuals of his era. Yet it was a theatrical image of Winnall Dalton, that of a marauding, gunslinging cowboy, that other writers took as fact and that became part of the poet's posthumous reputation. I show here that the image of a western outlaw is wrong and that Winnall Dalton came from a comfortable, Mexican American family in Tucson that had fallen on hard times just before he migrated to Central America around 1916. Dalton delved into the paradoxes of his own upbringing—raised in a working-class neighborhood as the illegitimate offspring of a millionaire, a Marxist revolutionary who was the son of pure capitalism—almost until his death in 1975. Taken together, the shifting depictions of his father all point to a fuller, more nuanced understanding of Dalton's views on power and the nature of identity than previously understood in the context of the revolutionary struggle that ultimately consumed him.

Roque Dalton—poet, journalist, essayist, and legendary literary flame-out—wrote often about his U.S.-born father Winnall Dalton and his migration to El Salvador. Through the figure of his father, and through an image of his father that evolved from that of a distant, deep-pocketed patriarch to a caricatured cowboy figure, Dalton developed his ideas about oppression, identity, and the relationship of the excluded to the powerful. The father often personified the unquestioned class hierarchy that Dalton and other writers of his generation sought to expose and bring down in their revolutionary critique of Salvadoran society. The depiction of Dalton's father thus linked the personal and the political in ways that were unusual for Latin American writers of the day, although the depiction

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Twenty-eighth International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, in June 2009. I conducted the research for this article as a visiting researcher at Georgetown University's Center for Latin American Studies. I am grateful to Angelo Rivero-Santos, Gwen Kirkpatrick, and Arturo Valenzuela at Georgetown for their support. I am grateful also to Erik Ching of Furman College and to the *LARR* editors and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. Also, my thanks go to the Dalton family in San Salvador and Havana for granting me interviews and access to Roque Dalton's papers.

itself was in many ways quite subtle and nuanced, as this article shows. Along with violence and cruelty, Dalton ascribed also to his father a certain tenderness.

His father's domineering presence was one of many autobiographical elements in Roque Dalton's work from which he tried to sift meaning and humor almost until his death in 1975 at the age of thirty-nine. Dalton never settled on one image of his father, going back and forth between several contradictory portrayals in ways that reflected the contradictions of his own feelings at different junctures in his life. After Roque Dalton's death, the image of his father morphed into the violent, threatening gunman of the American West that has appeared in numerous books and essays and at least one film about the life of the poet. The notion that Dalton was descended from a band of frontier bank robbers has been widely disseminated and has become, in fact, an ingrained part of the poet's reputation.

In this article, I show first that Roque Dalton's descent from American outlaws is entirely fanciful, with as much historical accuracy as a spaghetti western, and that Dalton's father hailed from a conventional, Mexican American family that was prominent in the civic and cultural life of his native Arizona. The fact that Roque Dalton seems to have promoted this legend during the last years of his life does not make it any more true, or rather any less untrue. Then I show how his father, Winnall Dalton, did indeed become something of a gunslinger, but only after he left the world of bourgeois respectability in which he had been raised in Tucson and established himself in El Salvador. Throughout the article, I touch on how Roque Dalton's portrayal of his father reflected his evolving views on imperialism and the exercising of power on the personal and political levels. I propose a new understanding of Dalton's relationship with his father based on biographical data and that, in turn, raises the possibility of a new reading of some of his works.

The elusive nature of identity and the intentional blurring of boundaries between myth and fact in Dalton's own construction of his life story have been consistent themes of the interpretive literature about his work. Rafael Lara Martínez (2000, 60) maintains that, in his prose, Dalton "shows the need to fictionalize himself and turn himself into a novelesque character. Roque Dalton reinvents his past by 'remembering,' years after declaring them forgotten, significant details that could no longer be concealed." His interpreters have viewed skeptically specific events attributed to Dalton's life in both popular and scholarly writing, and sometimes in his own works, including his miraculous escape from jail in 1964 (Alvarenga 2002) and his descent from Texas gunslingers. Stories of the poet's cowboy lineage, noted one essayist, were unproven, "but with them, Dalton constructed for himself an aura of troublemaker that would follow him til the end of his days" (Huezo Mixco 2005, 94).

Considering the importance of his father as a theme in Roque Dalton's work and in later biographical treatments, it is surprising how little research has been conducted into the elder Dalton, the circumstances of his migration from Arizona, and his relationship with his illegitimate son. This article, part of a larger biographical project on the life of Roque Dalton, is based in part on the results of research into Winnall Dalton (1894–1962) at the Arizona State Library, the Arizona Historical Society, and the University of Arizona Library Special Collections in Tucson, as well as at archives in El Salvador, and on interviews with Dalton's friends and family members, including with the poet's widow and two surviving sons and Winnall Dalton's sole known surviving son.

The poet Roque Dalton was a key figure in the cultural avant-garde that developed in El Salvador in the late 1950s around a loose circle of writers and artists that become known as the *generación comprometida*. The group's political leanings ranged from center-left to Marxist, but its members shared a critical view of El Salvador's established order and a desire to modernize its modes of cultural and social expression and to break with its repressive traditions. Led by Dalton, the novelist Manlio Argueta, the essayist Italo López Vallecillos, and the playwright Álvaro Menéndez Leal, among others, the group developed a stark and unflinching vision of El Salvador's past that rejected the conventional view of a happy amalgam of the indigenous and Hispanic and posited instead a history of class violence, exclusion, and elite mediocrity (Hernández-Aguirre 1961). Although trained as a lawyer in Chile and El Salvador, Dalton worked as a news reporter and editor in San Salvador until the early 1960s. He was arrested no fewer than four times for left-wing political activity. Waves of antileftist political repression forced him into exile in Mexico and Cuba from 1961 to 1964, in Czechoslovakia from 1965 to 1968, and finally in Cuba from 1968 until 1973. He began publishing poetry in his late teens. Early poems showed the influence of Pablo Neruda, but later work achieved an extraordinary clarity and originality of language that incorporated common speech and urban slang and left a deep mark on Salvadoran literature (Vásquez Olivera 2005). A continual innovator, he was never content to pen poetry alone and wrote one of the seminal texts of the Latin American testimonial, *Miguel Marmol*, and two popular histories of El Salvador in a "collage" style that was influenced by his friend Eduardo Galeano. Although a dedicated communist, he grew deeply disenchanted with the bureaucratic inertia and cynicism that he had seen in Soviet-bloc countries while, like many Salvadoran intellectuals of his generation, giving up on the possibility of peaceful change in his own country (Alas 1999; Arias Gómez 1999). He returned to El Salvador to join its nascent guerrilla struggle in December 1973 and died eighteen months later at the hands of his own comrades in a vicious power struggle inside an urban guerrilla group.

The idea that Roque Dalton, the doomed intellectual-turned-guerrilla, had a father who hailed from a family of American outlaws, and specifically a band of notorious Kansas bank robbers known as the Dalton brothers, has worked its way into many accounts of Dalton's life. Some writers sensibly add a note of skepticism to the story; others do not. Julio Cortázar, in a eulogy to his friend Dalton, wrote, "None of his friends will forget the perhaps mythical stories of his ancestors, the prodigious vision of the pirate Dalton, the adventures of his family members" (Cortázar 1986, 556). In *Days and Nights of Love and War*, Galeano (2000, 95) recounted how Dalton told him about "the famous Dalton brothers, movie screen gunslingers, who had been his ancestors." Accounts published in El Salvador enlarged the story of the Dalton family's life of crime on the prairies. The Salvadoran critic Luis Alvarenga (2002), in probably the most widely read and incisive critical study on Dalton's work, recounts over three pages the story of the Dalton brothers of Coffeyville, Kansas, and their criminal exploits in dramatic detail. This version may be the source of another account, written by the Salvadoran artist and poet Armando Solís (2005, 14–15), who recounted how the "prolific Dalton family was born in the state of Kansas, and the four brothers, who would later devote themselves to robbing their peers of their property, found work as representatives of the law. This overlapping of the forces of order and bandits happened frequently throughout the history of the conquest of the Far West."

Whatever the history of the West, the story of Roque Dalton's descent from the Dalton brothers of Kansas is complete fiction. They are of no relation whatsoever. The father of Roque Dalton, Winnall Dalton Jr. (or Winnall Dalton Vásquez, as he sometimes called himself) was born in Tucson in 1894. His father, Winnall A. Dalton, was a successful horse-carriage maker and blacksmith, the eldest son of a British shipping entrepreneur named Henry Dalton who had emigrated to Peru, where he served as British consular agent and then moved north to Los Angeles, arriving in 1843, shortly before the Mexican-American War. Henry Dalton was a British citizen (not Irish, French, or Austrian, as some writers have claimed) and must have been successful at his trade, because he quickly bought an enormous amount of land—one descendant described it as seventy square miles—in what is now eastern Los Angeles County but was then still under Mexican authority. Dalton lost title to his holdings during the war for reasons that are not entirely clear; contemporary accounts are contradictory. What is clear is that after the fighting, the new U.S. authorities did not recognize his ownership, and he watched helplessly as people he considered squatters occupied the land. Dalton waged a demoralizing and mostly fruitless legal battle against the U.S. and Mexican governments for compensation for the loss of his land. In 1915, in an unpublished account of Henry Dalton's life, his son wrote that his British émigré father "lost his vast land holdings, through debts incurred in the defense of his property against

a horde of squatters after nearly 30 years litigation."¹ Henry Dalton died poor in 1884, still a British subject. As late as 1937, the Dalton family was still writing letters and newspaper articles about what they considered the unjust taking of their land in the Mexican-American War.²

Thus, the Dalton clan's life in the United States began with a deep-seated and multigenerational grievance against the U.S. government over its expansionism into Mexico. According to his descendants, the North Americans suspected Henry Dalton of sympathizing with the Mexican side in the war and therefore dragged their feet in compensating him.³ Indeed, he did win a small amount of compensation from the Mexican government in a separate case involving other lands in northern Mexico, according to the 1915 document written by his son that gives the terms of the settlement in detail.⁴

The claim over Henry Dalton's land was the first of several lengthy legal battles, usually over property rights, that the Daltons enjoined in California and Arizona. They seem to have been a litigious bunch, again in contrast to the outlaw image. In one court case, Winnall Dalton Sr. filed suit against a neighbor by the name of Samuel Hughes, whom Dalton had accused of siphoning off water to which Dalton felt he was entitled to irrigate crops on his ranch. The case meandered through the Arizona legal system until the territorial supreme court ruled that the statute of limitations had run out on Dalton's claim and sent it back to local court, which, in 1889, finally dismissed it.⁵ All these legal wrangles, occurring as Arizona was quickly losing its frontier character and bringing its political and legal systems in line with U.S. norms, must have drained Winnall Dalton Sr.'s finances and likely contributed to his decline in Tucson society. They may have eventually contributed to his namesake son's emigration to El Salvador.

By 1890, Winnall Dalton Sr. had sold his half share in his horse-carriage business to a longtime family friend named Fred Ronstadt and embarked on a series of unsuccessful farming ventures, followed by a disastrous mining investment in northern Mexico in which he was said to have

1. "Henry Dalton. From a book of original letters by Winnall Augustin [sic] Dalton of Tucson, Arizona, to C. C. Baker of Azusa, California, regarding his father, Henry Dalton," unpublished document, Ronstadt Family Papers, University of Arizona Library Special Collections (henceforth RFP-UA), Box 2, File "Family Histories."

2. A family history described as written by grandson Roger Dalton, published in the *Azusa Herald* in October 1937 and transcribed by Lupe Dalton Ronstadt; RFP-UA, Box 2.

3. "F. Ronstadt, Autbio.," unpublished document, RFP-UA, Box 2. *Borderman*, cited herein, seems to be a distillation of this document; personal interview with Winnall Dalton Ulloa, San Salvador, January 17, 2006.

4. "Henry Dalton."

5. *W. A. Dalton v. Samuel Hughes et al.* (Territory of Arizona, Pima County Civil Court, Case No. 1687, 1888–1889).

lost about \$20,000 (Sherman and Ronstadt 1975). His fortunes stood in sharp contrast to those of Ronstadt, who embraced change and turned the horse-carriage business he had bought from Dalton into a downtown automobile and hardware venture, the first of its kind in Tucson. Ronstadt was the Mexican-born son of a German immigrant, a canny businessman and prominent bandleader who strived to raise Tucson's cultural standards and was patriarch to a long line of figures in the arts. He later wrote a vivid, affectionate portrait of his brother-in-law and business associate Winnall Dalton Sr., in his memoir *Borderman*. Ronstadt (2003, 78) wrote that Dalton was a "a fine specimen of manhood"—photographs show a tall, handsome chap with smoldering dark eyes and a fashionably bushy moustache—and his "Spanish was pure, without a trace of an accent."

The Ronstadts and the Daltons were extremely close and intermarried on at least three occasions. Fred Ronstadt's second wife was Lupe Dalton, the daughter of Winnall Dalton Sr. and his Mexican wife, María Jesús Vásquez. Despite their Anglo-sounding names, both families were considered part of the Mexican-blooded elite of Tucson and felt strongly about preserving their Mexican traditions (Sheridan 1986). Prominent and intermarried Mexican families like the Daltons and Ronstadts "admired the technological progress of the United States, [yet] many of them despised the more crassly materialistic aspects of U.S. society and culture. They were also deeply disturbed by the rising tide of discrimination against Mexicans in the Southwest. More than anything else, these influential individuals strove to nourish a sense of Mexican identity in cities like Tucson, to offer Mexicans an alternative to either subordination or assimilation in the southwestern United States" (Sheridan 1986, 99–100).

This story of binational identity on the border is important to understanding Winnall Dalton Jr., Roque Dalton's father, because it suggests that when he left Tucson for Mexico and then Central America, the world he entered was considerably less foreign than the image of a marauding American cowboy looking for adventure would suggest. Although a U.S. citizen, he had a Mexican mother, was raised in a household where both he and his parents spoke fluent Spanish, and came from a city in which he was considered Mexican. Both sides of his family had quite literally seen the border cross them and, at least on his father's side, had a deep and personal sense of grievance against the U.S. government because of it.

As the Ronstadts rose in wealth and prominence in Tucson society, the Daltons declined. Winnall Dalton Sr. had endured such bad luck in his farming and mining ventures that he asked his son-in-law Fred Ronstadt for a job at the hardware store that Dalton had once co-owned (Sherman and Ronstadt 1975). In 1913, the first full year of Arizona statehood, Dalton appeared in the Tucson City directory as a wagon maker, a profession fast fading into obsolescence as Oldsmobiles and Studebakers arrived en

masse.⁶ The next year he was listed as a woodworker in Ronstadt's shop. He died in 1917 at the age of sixty-seven, of what his death certificate described as acute gastritis.

All this suggests that young Winnall Dalton Jr. had good reasons to leave Tucson. His father, embittered to the end by the loss of the family estate in the Mexican-American War, as shown in a series of letters he wrote in his last years of life, had himself lost a successful business and then been reduced to the status of shop employee.⁷ Evidence survives to suggest that his son Winnall was a restless and quarrelsome young man who, very early on, wanted out of humdrum Tucson society. In 1912, at the age of eighteen, he was working as a railroad clerk.⁸ Neither he nor his father had any criminal record. Around this time, he started a cattle-raising business near Tucson with his older sister Hortense and her husband, Pepe Ronstadt. The business failed, and young Winnall took the blame.⁹ The details are lost, but the experience contributed to his permanent estrangement from Tucson, which he left around 1916, apparently never to return. He does not seem to have been much missed; his name barely appears in the reams of letters, documents, and other archival materials that the Dalton and Ronstadt families accumulated over decades. He went first to Mexico, then embroiled in revolution, but did not take long to reach Central America.

The first documentary evidence we have of Winnall Dalton in Central America dates from July 17, 1917. This piece of evidence is a U.S. World War I draft registration card (now at the National Archives western office in Laguna Niguel, California) in which Dalton, age twenty-three, lists himself as a self-employed miner in Yoro Department, Honduras. Dalton and a U.S. consular agent signed the card. Under previous military service, he lists that he served for one year as a major in the cavalry division of the Mexican army of Venustiano Carranza. We need not take this particular claim at face value, although he did make it on a sworn and witnessed U.S. government document. Still, it is not the only indication that Dalton participated in the fighting in Mexico. He and his older brother Henry (who stayed in Tucson and later was elected to its city council) were involved in

6. Ronstadt Family Papers, Arizona Historical Society, Tucson (henceforth RFP-AHS), Box 2, File 17.

7. See correspondence between Winnall Dalton Sr. and historian C. C. Baker of San Pedro, California, whom Dalton seems to have hired to write a history of Henry Dalton's life in California and legal struggles. Dalton died before the project could be finished. RFP-AHS, Box 2, File 13; "Henry Dalton."

8. *Tucson City Directory* (1912), Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records, Phoenix.

9. Personal interview with Winnall Dalton Ulloa interview, San Salvador, January 9, 2007.

shipping small aircraft from the United States to the Mexican Army at the behest of Carranza loyalists, according to Winnall's son.¹⁰

Dalton's connection to the Carranza army might, in part, account for one of the more enduring stories about Roque Dalton, that his father and two uncles had smuggled weapons to Pancho Villa during the revolution and then cheated the revolutionary leader of a large sum of money. In Roque Dalton's (1994, 115) posthumously published autobiographical novel *Pobrecito poeta que era yo*, the narrator says:

This is the way Pancho Villa must have died, bullet after bullet, that's right, *compadre*, and there goes the next shot, not just for him but one or the other of my desperate uncles who robbed him of the money for the weapons, peso after peso; not to mention my father, since a son shouldn't judge the actions of his bosses, and they split, each one with ten thousand bucks in his pocket, quicker than a Chihuahua rooster can crow.

This passage comes in the middle of a rambling, fifty-page stream of consciousness narrated by the character Roberto del Monte, who is loosely modeled on Roque Dalton himself, as he awaits the start of a press conference in about 1960. Who will speak at the press conference? We are never told, but the writer-journalist's own imagination becomes the key voice as he ruminates on everything from W. B. Yeats to Frank Sinatra and whether he should drink less to be a better communist. Voices of people around him drift into the mix now and then, but the central voice of this chapter involves the mental meanderings of the narrator himself, who is a public figure (Dalton was a news reporter at the time) who ironically must conceal a key activity in his life, his involvement with a semiclandestine political group.

The preceding passage thus opens a window into how Dalton regarded and might have discussed the subject of his parentage with other people, including the other reporters around him as they wait for the press conference to start. The passage shows that he saw his father as a daring and intrepid gangster, an outlaw who was not intimidated by the famously violent leader of the División del Norte Army and able to make off with \$10,000 in his pocket through deceit. With pop culture references including John Wayne, Red Skelton, and Gregory Peck, the passage also gives Winnall Dalton's life a certain cinematic quality.

Dalton referred later to his father's purported relationship with Pancho Villa in much greater detail in the work "Dalton y Cía.," which straddles the boundary between novel and personal essay, a fragment of which was printed in *El Salvador* in 2005 but that remains otherwise unpublished. Dalton wrote this work toward the end of his residency in Cuba, which

10. *Ibid.*

lasted from 1968 to 1973 (although he had visited on numerous earlier occasions). In this work, he writes that his father and his father's two older brothers Frank and Garand ran a large arms-smuggling business on the U.S.-Mexico border, selling hundreds of Springfield and Remington rifles, Colt revolvers, and thousands of bullets to Villa's army until finally they swindled Villa out of \$30,000 and, fearing reprisal, fled south. The tale recounts the passage of Winnall and Frank (by then Garand had gone his own way) through dingy Mexican towns and raucous cantinas as they tried to stay one step ahead of Villa's vengeful henchmen. Frank, the account says, had a punch like the kick of a mule, whereas Winnall was adept at shooting out lightbulbs whenever he needed sudden darkness. They are the archetypal ugly Americans, never paying their bills, deflowering girls whose fathers then come chasing after the Americans with a shotgun, and punching out people so hard that the victims' faces become unrecognizable. They do have a more circumspect side, however. Both brothers can recite Shakespeare sonnets, although they do not completely understand them, and they both know that "life without an ordering principle is pointless" (Dalton 2005b, 31)—except that, in their case, the ordering principle is to make money at the expense of everyone around them. They head south and reach Chiapas before slipping across the border into Guatemala, where, it says, they make the acquaintance of the dictator-to-be Jorge Ubico (Dalton 2005b).

It is hard to tell whether Dalton intended this colorful account to be interpreted as literal fact. Despite the racy subject matter, much of this novel-cum-essay is written in an opaque, convoluted style. He wrote it in late-night sessions at a time of great turmoil in his life, in 1973, when he had recently divorced, had severed his relations with Casa de las Américas over a personal disagreement with its director Roberto Fernández Retamar, and was only a few months from returning to El Salvador for his ill-fated turn in the guerrilla movement. He was, as the essay says, drinking "más de la cuenta" (Dalton 2005b, 29). In any case, I find no documentary evidence that Winnall Dalton had any relationship with Pancho Villa, and he certainly had no brother named Garand (actually the name of a brand of rifle). He did have a younger brother named Frank, who indeed lived as an adult in Guatemala, but Frank Dalton was still living in Tucson in September 1917, long after he had supposedly hightailed it to Central America fleeing Pancho Villa's heavies and at least three months after his brother was established in Honduras.¹¹ In 1920, Frank Dalton was still living in Tucson, according to U.S. census data. Any account of Winnall Dalton's involvement with Pancho Villa would presumably have to have been re-

11. *Arizona Daily Star*, "Mortuary: Winnall A. Dalton," September 1, 1917. The obituary lists Dalton's seven surviving children, including Frank and Ronstadt's wife Lupe Dalton, both listed as living in Tucson, and "W. A. Dalton Jr., of Honduras, Central America."

layed personally by Winnall for Roque Dalton to know about it, yet none of Winnall's other family members mentioned it in their abundant correspondence or in later interviews. Winnall Dalton's surviving son told me he had never heard it.

This story might be rooted in a well-publicized case involving Winnall's nephew Fred Ronstadt Jr. and three other people who were indicted for attempting to smuggle arms to Mexico in August 1917. The case involved a fairly small amount of hardware—two pistols and 750 rounds of ammunition, discovered by a U.S. customs agent in Nogales—and was later dismissed in federal court. There is no indication the conspiracy involved Winnall, who by then was living in Honduras, but it is possible that the case was the ounce of truth on which the story of his involvement with Pancho Villa was built, possibly even through Winnall's own retelling of it to his son Roque.¹²

Bearing in mind all this evidence, one is tempted to regard the story of Winnall Dalton's swindling of Pancho Villa as confabulation or at least exaggeration. Still, Roque Dalton told the story in so many different media—in a novel, an essay, and a play as I discuss later, and in personal conversations—and in such consistent detail that one is reluctant to dismiss it entirely. Anglos in the U.S. Southwest loathed and feared Pancho Villa following the attack on Columbus, New Mexico, in 1916, whereas Carranza was recognized by the U.S. government and admired by much of the educated U.S. public, so one might expect Winnall Dalton to keep quiet about any connection to the former while freely admitting and even exaggerating his involvement in the army of the latter. In the previously mentioned essay, Roque Dalton refers somewhat cryptically to "intimate letters" his father wrote about his journey from Mexico to Central America; I have been unable to find any such letters or other references to them. But the larger subject of Winnall Dalton's involvement in the Mexican Revolution merits further research, in particular his involvement with Carranza's forces.

Also worth further inquiry is the possibility, which the draft card I mentioned earlier suggests, that Winnall Dalton stayed outside the United States to avoid military conscription in World War I. The United States instituted the draft in 1917, and although Winnall Dalton was in Honduras by then, he might have been subject to obligatory military service had he gone home. The possibility that he stayed in Central America to avoid the draft is, thus, a distinct possibility supported by the fact that

12. District Court of the United States, District of Arizona, *United States v. Enrique Leiva et al.*, warrant of arrest, August 27, 1917, National Archives and Records Administration, Pacific Region, Record Group 21, District of Arizona, Tucson Division, Folder Title 557, Box 2; see also a letter from Fred Ronstadt recounting the case to the *Arizona Agriculturalist*, dated April 16, 1925: RFP-AHS, Box 2, File 15.

he returned to the United States shortly after the war ended. After working for the Cuyamel banana company in Honduras, severe illness struck him, possibly yellow fever, and he migrated to El Salvador, where he met and married Aída Ulloa Main, who hailed from a prominent Salvadoran family, and then by steamer to the United States. The 1920 U.S. census lists them as married and living together in San Francisco. By July 1923, Winnall Dalton was back in El Salvador and well established, as attested by a letter in *La Prensa* in which he offered \$3,000 to the winner of an aviation acrobatics contest (Cornejo 2002). Wealthy and socially prominent, he and his first wife had five children who survived to adulthood.

Winnall Dalton bought his first tract of land in El Salvador around 1930 near the village of Colón in the Zapotitán Valley west of San Salvador. He began growing cotton and was successful from the first year, branching later into sugarcane and coffee. He got along well with the Salvadoran rural oligarchy, but he had the spirit of innovation and flexibility of a more modern, dynamic style of capitalism than wealthy Salvadorans were accustomed to seeing. At a farm he had co-owned with a Salvadoran businessman on the coast of Usulután some years earlier, Dalton had used a small plane he imported from the United States to dust crops with pesticides, supposedly the first time anyone had performed such a feat in El Salvador.¹³ This may have been the same plane he donated in 1925 to the embryonic Salvadoran Air Force, which crashed the next year, killing one of the country's aviation pioneers, Ricardo Aberle (Cornejo 2002). Although most of the rural elite raised coffee almost exclusively, Dalton prided himself on experimenting with different cash crops, depending on soil and market conditions.

A businessman of Winnall Dalton's savvy must certainly have known that he had bought his estate at a time and place of fast-brewing anger over labor conditions and land-tenure patterns among farmworkers. The explosive resentment that led to La Matanza, as Gould and Lauria-Santiago (2008) show, was widely known and reported by 1930. Its roots could be traced to the gradual elimination of communal peasant agricultural lands, a sharp decline in wages and living conditions for the rural working class after 1929, violent repression of political dissent through the 1920s, and sympathy for utopian communism among much of the rural poor. Gould and Lauria-Santiago document the merging of ethnic, class, and gender conflicts that contributed to the anger, and they argue that one factor was the sexual exploitation of indigenous and Ladina women by landlords, a practice that humiliated and radicalized rural families. Some of the militants who led the later rebellion were the products of such forced unions (Gould and Lauria-Santiago 2008). In January 1932, workers armed with machetes, sticks, and a few pistols attacked police stations, army garrisons,

13. Dalton Ulloa interview, January 17, 2006.

and government offices in seven towns across southwestern El Salvador, killing several dozen people. The reaction from the recently installed military dictator, Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, was swift and pitiless. His army troops killed “thousands and perhaps tens of thousands of people” in the space of about three weeks, effectively crushing the rebellion and leaving a deep and permanent scar on the national psyche of El Salvador (Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara Martínez 2007, 23).

The epicenter of the rebellion and brutal repression, or La Matanza, that followed was fewer than twenty miles west of the Dalton estate, in the town of Izalco. A significant outbreak of violence occurred in Colón, less than a mile east of his farm. Fighting also briefly reached the outskirts of Santa Tecla, the town in the cool, luxuriantly green hills above the valley where Dalton’s family lived. Dalton’s son, eight years old at the time, recalls how his father turned the estate into a virtual armed camp: “He fortified the farm. I don’t know where he got all those guns, but he fortified the place, and he was not afraid.”¹⁴ With the repression still under way, Dalton ventured from his farm and traveled to a nearby barracks to fetch “his” peasants among the hundreds who had been detained in army sweeps. His son described the scene: “Other landowners were there too, identifying which ones they knew, which ones they did not know. . . . So he went down the lines, saying ‘This one’s mine, this one, that one.’ He took about 100 of them and brought them back to the farm and put them back to work. But he warned them, you cannot pass that fence because if you do, you’ll be picked up by the army or killed. The army was liable to pick up anybody on the road.”¹⁵

It should be noted here that the recollections of Winnall Dalton’s son about these events, though plausible and consistent, are not firsthand and would be difficult to corroborate independently at this distant remove. They belong to a family’s memory bank, the body of stories that descendants tell mostly to one another and occasionally to outsiders, about the lives of their parents and grandparents. At certain points, such as his father’s relationship with Roque Dalton’s mother, María García, the younger Winnall Dalton’s accounts of his father’s life do corroborate and coincide with those of other sources. Still, memories can bend and be embroidered with age, and some skepticism is in order when considering them as part of the historical record.

Given Roque Dalton’s critical engagement with the history of La Matanza through *Miguel Marmol*, it is surprising that he never explored his own father’s role in the events of 1932. Dalton believed class, rather than race, was the driving force behind El Salvador’s history (Lindo-Fuentes et al. 2007). Given that view, one would think that the image of a land

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

baron going down a line of cowed campesinos inside an army base and picking out his own as if they were stray farm animals while outside thousands more were being slaughtered would have had a powerful hold on Roque Dalton's poetic imagination and his revolutionary consciousness. Maybe he did not know about his father's role. Yet Dalton definitely knew that his father had a large estate in the region affected by the violence of La Matanza and, according to the poet's widow, even visited the farm with his father as an adult. Dalton never mentions his father in his celebrated book about the insurrection of 1932, *Miguel Marmol*, a searing testimonial based on extensive interviews with the communist organizer and survivor of the book's title.

A restless, adaptable man, Winnall Dalton had spent his life trying out different businesses and different countries. By the mid-1930s, his first wife, Aída Ulloa, had died; he had sent their five children to school in the United States; and he had remarried. He was, by then, an unusually successful farmer at a time of economic malaise in El Salvador, buying tracts that bordered his original estate near Colón until he had amassed about 3,500 *manzanas*, or about 5,000 acres, in some of the country's best farmland. He liked to gamble, and his nickname was "Gana Todo"—that is, "Win All," or literally "Winnall" in Spanish—but friends called him Jack. "He learned the *negocio*," his son said. "He was very quick-witted. He was sharp. And he had a terrible temper. It was like—" and he snapped his fingers. "And he always had a gun. He was good with a gun."¹⁶

It was well known that Winnall Dalton regularly carried a firearm. He must have had enemies, and people seem to have genuinely feared him and his red-hot temper. In fact, only in this period does the image of Roque Dalton as the son of a gunslinger attain a measure of historical accuracy. Some might find a certain poetic justice, a satisfying historical symmetry, in the fact that this man who always carried a pistol tucked under his belt engendered someone who also took up a gun but in the name of what he and many others believed to be the liberation of the Salvadoran people. Maybe this continuity of violence is what attracts people to the image of Roque Dalton as the progeny of a violent outlaw. Yet their relationship with firepower was starkly different. Roque Dalton was useless with a weapon, a "total klutz" ("era todo tatarata") with a rifle, as one of his comrades in training in Cuba said (Alvarenga 2002). As an armed guerrilla, Dalton played a minor role and was reported to have taken part in only one military action, the seizure of a radio station and the broadcast of a guerrilla manifesto in March 1974. Whatever Roque Dalton inherited from his father, it was not ability with a gun. As Gabriel Zaid (1982, 22) pointed out, "this impatience with talk, this glorification of guns as the

16. *Ibid.*

continuation of debate by other means" was actually more characteristic of Roque Dalton's eventual assassins than of the poet himself.

Roque Dalton, the ferocious voice of revolution in Latin America, was literally born of the violence of his father. Winnall Dalton had bought land from one of El Salvador's ruling families, the Dueñas clan, in part with a loan from the Banco Occidental, owned by Benjamin Bloom, another American transplant. At some point, Dalton and Bloom quarreled so violently over the loan's repayment terms that one of Bloom's bodyguards fired three bullets into Dalton, who survived the attack and was taken to a hospital for several weeks of recovery. One of his nurses there was María García Medrano, a woman of about thirty from a humble, rural background, a devout Roman Catholic who put herself through nursing school and was so well regarded as a nurse that elite Salvadoran families sought her out for medical services. She was not married, and wanted to have a child, as she told acquaintances years later. One day, the rich American patient pulled the sheet off his stitched-up body and made love on the hospital bed with María García. The fruit of their (by all accounts consensual) hospital tryst was Roque Dalton García, born May 14, 1935.¹⁷

So far, I have discussed works by Roque Dalton that concern his father's life before Roque Dalton's birth, or at least as Roque imagined it. Yet Dalton's most important works regarding his father actually refer to their own interactions during the poet's youth and to the paradox of being raised by a humble nurse as the son of a rich foreigner. Roque Dalton inhabited this contradiction for his entire life—poor but privileged, Salvadoran but foreign, revolutionary but the offspring of pure capitalism—and turned it into the thematic motor of some of his best work. Raised by his mother in a working-class neighborhood of San Salvador, he was known as Roque García until the age of seventeen, because up to that time, his father refused to recognize him publicly. His status as the son of an American *terrateniente* was well known, however, in his neighborhood of workshops, bars, and auto-repair shops. His father would drop by his former paramour's house now and then to leave an envelope full of money for their son's upbringing or would send his driver around to drop off cash. The Salvadoran essayist and poet David Escobar Galindo lived in the same neighborhood and, though a few years younger than Dalton, recalls the neighborhood chatter about Dalton's rich father and how local boys would hit him up for money because of it.¹⁸ Over the years, Winnall Dalton and María García exchanged streams of notes (some of

17. This account of the Dalton-García encounter is based on interviews with Roque Dalton's son Juan José Dalton, San Salvador, November 11, 2005, and widow, Aida Cañas, San Salvador, January 5, 2006, and Havana, August 9, 2006.

18. David Escobar Galindo personal interview, San Salvador, 2004.

which survive in the Dalton family archive in San Salvador) in which María hankered and cajoled for more money for the upbringing of their son; Winnall usually answered in terse little notes written with a fountain pen under the letterhead of the Casino Salvadoreño, begging her to be patient.

María García, the dowdy nurse, comes across in this and other correspondence as absolutely devoted to the interests of her son. She seems to have been the only person capable of intimidating Winnall Dalton, extracting money from him to pay for their son's upbringing during all of Roque's childhood and even into his early adulthood. They had no other children together or apparently any further romantic involvement. María García's constant companion throughout those years and during most of Roque Dalton's life was Fidelia Martínez, a woman of indigenous features who "wore patiently her face of a man" (Dalton 1996, 134) and who was also a single mother. She, María García, and young Roque lived together in a rented row house that had a small variety shop and bar facing the busy corner of Segunda Avenida Norte and Calle 5 de Noviembre. This small establishment, connected to the house, acted as a combination general store and watering hole, a place where taxi drivers would drop in for a cold drink, maids would catch up on the neighborhood gossip, and local men would drop by for a beer or buy supplies. This was the place, in a scruffy neighborhood of San Salvador a few blocks from the cathedral, where Roque Dalton developed the witty, urban tone of his best poetry and prose.

In this neighborhood, the adored son Roque Dalton was one of the very few boys to attend the elite Jesuit high school, the Externado San José, thanks to María García's success in persuading Winnall Dalton to pay the tuition. The school ordinarily did not accept children born out of wedlock, but, according to family lore, María enlisted Winnall to persuade the school to make an exception for this promising boy. Roque Dalton refers to this uncomfortable fact of his childhood, the ever-widening financial dependence on his reluctant father, in an unpublished poem dating from the mid-1960s, which reads:

My father, since
 He was an angry gringo,
 Mister Dalton [. . .]
 I waited for him
 Licking an ice cream cone
 Because someone had to pay the rent
 School fees were so expensive
 Nursing work (this is my mother)
 Wasn't enough to make ends meet.¹⁹

19. Roque Dalton, untitled poetry fragment, Roque Dalton Archive, unnumbered box, Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, San Salvador.

He graduated from Externado San José at the end of 1952, now as Roque Dalton, and for at least a few years developed a cordial if not close relationship with his father, who offered to send him to university in the United States. When Roque Dalton averred that he wanted to study law in Chile instead, his father paid for that, thinking his son would receive a conservative Catholic education. Instead, Dalton returned from Chile in late 1953 with socialist leanings that would harden into a terminal commitment to Marxist revolution through the 1950s. Roque introduced his new bride, Aída Cañas, to his father when they married in 1955, and Winnall sent around presents when their children were born. The relationship was correct and civil, but it grew more estranged after Roque Dalton journeyed to the Soviet Union in 1957 for a youth festival that was reported in Salvadoran newspapers.²⁰ When, in 1959, Dalton suffered the first of his many arrests for political activities, the military president of El Salvador, Colonel José Lemus, told a news conference that he would do nothing to win the release of the now-famous writer and journalist, adding petulantly, "He is a spoiled brat, so spoiled that he has lost all manners."²¹ This obvious reference to Dalton's wealthy father suggests not only that Dalton's status as a rich man's son was known to the whole country but also that, even while enduring jail for political activities, he was caught in the strange predicament of having to prove himself as a genuine dissident because of his lineage, a lineage that his father had not recognized for most of the writer's life.

Still, Roque Dalton and his father never completely cut their ties. In his first major book, *La ventana en el rostro*, published in Mexico where he was living in 1961, the poet referred to his absent father with the resigned tone of someone who expects little or nothing. In the poem "La ducha," he writes: "My father, or rather, a father, without the possessive, / taught me to tame furious stallions. The campesinas / taught me to love" (Dalton 2005a, 241). His father might have left him a disposition to violence, he says, but he derived the fundamental lesson of learning how to love from ordinary people and, above all, from the women of his upbringing. *La ventana en el rostro* was one of two major books Dalton published while his father was alive; he sent copies to his mother with a request to ensure that Winnall received one.²² Indeed some poems in this volume seem

20. Cañas interview, 2006.

21. *El Diario de Hoy*, December 24, 1959. "Un universitario tiene suficiente discernimiento para distinguir el bien y el mal. Lo que pasa es que el compañero de ustedes es un niño consentido, tan consentido que se ha vuelto malcriado."

22. Roque Dalton to María García, March 8, 1962. Dalton Family Archive, San Salvador. Dalton writes: "El libro mío, aquel empastado para mi papá, . . . hágaselo llegar Ud. a mi papá." It's unclear from this letter or its date whether Dalton is referring to *La ventana en el rostro* or his second major book, *El turno del ofendido*, published in Cuba in 1962. Winnall Dalton died on March 24, 1962.

almost directed at Winnall, or at least would be easily understood by ill-tempered, impulsive men like him. In “La poesía,” Dalton writes:

The man of angry eyes asked, What is poetry?
The man of clean eyes

Looked deeply into his, without offering a word.

In his look there was poetry. (Dalton 2005a, 244)

Dalton delved deeper into the paradoxes of his upbringing in his most artistically accomplished book, *Taberna y otros lugares*, of 1969. *Taberna* is, in many ways, Dalton’s definitive statement as a writer, a book both experimental and grounded, lyrical and imploring, a book that demolishes traditional boundaries of genre and form. Written mostly in Prague, *Taberna* was his first book to have a truly international impact, winning the Casa de las Américas Prize in 1969 and positive reviews in newspapers and journals throughout Latin America. *El Nacional* in Caracas called it “a book that opens Latin American poetry to any stylistic or thematic possibility.”²³ *Taberna* is, as Alvarenga (2002) points out, a revolutionary book, both in its subject matter and its radical experimentation with poetic forms and styles that were new to Dalton’s own record and, in some cases, to the whole body of Salvadoran literature.

The book includes six prose poems, including one titled “La mañana que conocí a mi padre,” which narrates one of Winnall Dalton’s fleeting visits to the home of María García to see his son and leave funds. Roque Dalton tells us he is about three years old when the action takes place. His mother is not present, he tells us, because she has been called away to the hospital to assist in emergency brain surgery. So, when Winnall Dalton’s big car rolls up to the house, he knocks on the door and is greeted by her companion Fidelia Martínez, who goes by the nickname “La Pille.” The scene is almost comic in its awkwardness as La Pille ushers in the visitor, nervously laughing while asking him to excuse the mess and offering him coffee, to which Winnall barely answers at all. She picks up the toddler Roque and holds him up for Winnall to inspect him “as they would a chicken that’s on sale or a suckling pig.” Winnall kisses the baby, rubbing his razor stubble against his cheek. The text, in James Graham’s translation, reads in part:

I feel a man slap my rear end gently, he runs a hand through my hair, the pretty blond hair I had at that age and that my mother hoped would distinguish me as a superior being in the midst of the great mass of Salvadorans . . . and then he takes off my right sock, stripping my foot and holding it between his enormous strong hands, he squeezes it without hurting me, actually I feel warm tickles that tell me that this gentleman isn’t as grouchy as all the other grown-ups who aren’t

23. “Roque Dalton y su brindis,” *El Nacional*, July 27, 1969.

my mama or La Pille. . . . La Pille puts me on the sofa and I sit there quietly with a long face. He smokes and thinks, spilling the ash from his cigarette onto the floor. He comes over to me again, stroking his fingers over my face before he heads back to the street. (Dalton 1996, 134)

The encounter ends with the laconic father leaving off a “very white envelope” (“un sobre blanquísimo”) full of banknotes, for which La Pille thanks him profusely and, with repeated God-bless-yous, bids him goodbye. As we hear Winnall’s car roar off, La Pille licks her finger and starts to count the money.

On its surface, this text could be read as a study of dependency and submission, seen in the woman’s extreme solicitousness to the visitor and her abject interest in the money that he has to offer. As Gould and Lauria-Santiago (2008) suggest, the association of big automobiles with rich and exploitative landowners ran deep in rural El Salvador, a link expressed also by the writer and artist Salvador Salazar Arrué (who wrote under the name Salarrué) in his account of La Matanza. The dependency of El Salvador on the United States, the forced submission of its poor to the rich, and the soul-destroying effects of underdevelopment were subjects that occupied Roque Dalton a great deal at the time that he wrote this essay. In *Pobrecito poeta que era yo*, Dalton’s alter-ego narrator attacks other Salvadoran writers both living and dead for what he considers their insufficient attention to class, including the popular romantic poet Alfredo Espino, whom the narrator faults for “forgetting the national problems, the real drama of the people, misery and injustice” (Dalton 1994, 201). Nonetheless, to view this text as simply or even mostly a denunciation of injustice, and Winnall Dalton as simply a stand-in for Yankee imperialism, would do it a disservice. There is genuine tenderness from the absent father toward his gifted son and an ineffable feeling of regret as he caresses his son’s face, cigarette ashes dropping to the floor. Yet there is also an acute awareness of the gulf between father and son, a feeling of alienation that shows the profound emotional cost of denying parenthood or only conditionally accepting it, to both child and parent.

The attitude of the son toward the father is also telling. Even for a three-year-old boy, the son seems oddly detached and indifferent to the presence of this intimidating figure. When La Pille tells him to kiss his father, the boy “instead act[s] dumb and decide[s] to hang there like a silkworm frightened by its first look at the world” (Dalton 1996, 135). He sits sullenly on a sofa and refuses to kiss the visitor, as if waiting for an intruder to leave. The child’s behavior reflects the fact that the father’s affection is very much on the father’s terms. He drops in unannounced, speaks little or simply grunts, and—though this fact does not appear in the essay—has refused even to give his surname to his son. But Winnall projects expectations on the son, sees in him the promise that was perhaps not realized in his legitimate children who were born in wedlock and then banished to

California. We see the father's confidence in the son in the handing over of money for his upbringing, a kind of down payment for Roque Dalton's elite secondary education at the Externado San José. Dalton expresses undeniable affection toward his father in this essay. But by combining the themes of revolutionary change and Dalton's personal role in it with the theme of his father in the same volume, Dalton demonstrates the depth of his rejection of his father's expectations and money. He offers a taste of the seething resentment of white patriarchy felt by rural Salvadorans, in particular toward fathers of illegitimate offspring, that contributed to La Matanza (Gould and Lauria-Santiago 2008). Dalton, in effect, throws that "very white envelope" full of cash back into Winnall Dalton's face.

Dalton was well aware by 1969 of how Freudian his commitment to communism might look to others, with his distant American father. People said as much to his face, and the Freudian implications have not been lost on later scholars (Lara Martínez 2005). Ever candid with himself and his readers, he referred to this irony later in *Taberna* in a long poem called "Los hongos" that he originally intended to be published as a separate book. In free-form verse, he writes about the emotional displacement of being the poor son of a rich man, from a working-class neighborhood, attending a rich boys' school, rejected by his father but subsidized by him:

In the neighborhood of hoodlums I was
 the son of the North American millionaire and went to the school
 for the sons of millionaires [. . .] I was
 the kid who escaped through some trapdoor from the neighborhood of hoodlums
 [. . .]
 My technical skill at football
 and the fact that I was an illegitimate son
 made my name in the uppermost social circles. "They say
 you joined the Communist Party because of your hangups,"
 Miguelito Regalado Dueñas told me
 One day in Mexico,
 After treating me to dinner and talking to me about Mr. Marx.

He then answers this charge, that he became a communist to spite his father, addressing the members of the Casa de las Américas jury to which he planned to submit the book, saying:

Hangups, members of the Jury, have nothing
 To do with a political consciousness: at most they're good
 For adding a tragic note. (Dalton 2008a, 462–463)

Roque Dalton's shaded and sympathetic portrayal of his father in *Taberna*, as well as the honest examination of his own motives, appeared almost simultaneously with a much less flattering depiction of his father, also in Cuba. The novel-cum-essay "Dalton y Cía.," which I discussed earlier, had a similar title and subject matter to a Brechtian play that Dalton and the San Francisco-based playwright and poet Nina Serrano jointly

wrote and produced for Cuban television in late 1968. The full title of the theater piece was *Dalton y Cía.: Donde se cuenta la vida y milagros, las aventuras económico-morales y las malandanzas de los nunca bien ponderados Hermanos Frank y Winnall Dalton en las hermosas (aunque inestables) tierras centroamericanas de Guatemala y El Salvador, pobladas como siempre de generales y mariposas*. Serrano gave it her own title in English: *The Daltons Ride South*. Serrano, who was married to the American sociologist Saul Landau, and Dalton met by chance at Casa de las Américas in Havana and quickly decided to collaborate on a project that they hoped would enliven what was, at the time, the crushingly dull and amateurish programming offered by Cuba's two television channels. Dalton mentioned that his father was an émigré from the western United States with a violent past, and he and Serrano worked feverishly in the Havana Hilton over several days on a script.

In the play that emerged from their collaboration, Winnall and Frank Dalton gallop across Mexico in cowboy drag, cheating almost everyone they meet, including Pancho Villa, and then marry into high-class Guatemalan families with girls who were described in an essay about the play as "hideous but very rich" (Azor Hernández 1986, 402). The plot, as a Cuban theater critic wrote, "dived into the family archive to show, amid jokes and laughter, a typical lunge by North American penetration and the birth of the creole oligarchy" (Azor Hernández 1986, 401–402). Winnall Dalton was played by the comic actor Carlos Ruiz de la Tejera. Other characters were modeled loosely on the playwrights' Cuban friends; for example, a character known as El Mago (the Wizard) was based on the Cuban poet Pablo Armando Fernández. It was "a cowboy drama . . . a play about imperialism," said Serrano in an interview in 2006, a theme alluded to in the title's double-entendre, *Dalton y Cía.*²⁴ Serrano remembers fondly those days working with the charming poet, but they had sharp disagreements as they wrote the play and during its ten days of rehearsals about its thematic direction. Serrano conceived it as a humorous, satirical exploration of the imperialist dynamic as expressed through the characters of the Dalton brothers, and Roque Dalton insisted it focus on the idea of underdevelopment, its effects on the mind, and the way it left the "beautiful yet unstable countries" mentioned in the title so vulnerable to exploitation, a theme he would develop in later works. A Cuban government censor or "adviser" was present for the entire production, telling Dalton and Serrano to modify or delete certain scenes for reasons understandable usually only to the censor.

The play was performed live on Cuban television for one night only and, to the best of Serrano's knowledge, was not taped because the videotaping machine was broken and could not be fixed. So our record of this

24. Nina Serrano interview, Oakland, California, September 27, 2006.

television event depends on still photographs, a few press articles about it, and the recollections of the many people who saw it and who, almost universally, raved about it. The play was a huge, if ephemeral, success. It featured bits of film, audio, and music performed live by Silvio Rodríguez and Noel Nicola, a multimedia theater experience that, in 1968, would have been ahead of its time almost anywhere and was completely revolutionary for Cuban television. Pablo Armando Fernández called later that evening to tell Serrano the work was “the liberation of Cuban television,” and even Fidel Castro sent word that he had enjoyed it after Dalton had personally asked him to watch.

The play *Dalton y Cía.*, was, most likely, the origin of the enduring myth of Roque Dalton’s descent from American cowboys.²⁵ Later writers took as fact a work intended as an amusing satire of imperialism worthy of Berthold Brecht, whether or not Dalton meant it that way. Serrano recalls asking Dalton in their first conversation whether he was descended from the Dalton brothers of Kansas. Dalton answered that he was, and, Serrano believes, the story of Roque Dalton as the son of frontier outlaws was born.²⁶ Dalton, however, may have had other reasons for denigrating his father. Dalton’s feelings toward his father and his father’s “official” family, never exactly warm, were particularly sour in 1968, as Dalton had recently failed in his lengthy efforts to gain a share of Winnall Dalton’s inheritance after his death in March 1962. With the help of his mother, who stayed in San Salvador while he and his wife and their three sons lived in Czechoslovakia, Roque Dalton had hired a lawyer to press his legitimate rights to a share of Winnall Dalton’s wealth. He was unsuccessful, and the case left a legacy of bitterness and mistrust between those two lineages of Winnall Dalton that persisted until very recently.

Few of those who happened to be watching Cuban television that night in 1968 would have known this personal history, of course. They would see only a Salvadoran playwright holding up his dead father to ridicule as the embodiment of a hated doctrine. Given this context, *Taberna*, published a few months later, gave Roque Dalton an opportunity to offer a more refined description of his father’s life and personality and his own feelings toward him, for the benefit of his many Cuban readers and for himself.

Roque Dalton wrestled with the legacy of privilege and shame left by his father until the end of his life. He was raised almost entirely by his mother, yet by contrast, his mother rarely appears in his voluminous output. Nor do Roque Dalton’s wife or sons appear more than a few times in his literary work, although anecdotes about his universe of friends, lovers, and associates fill his poems and prose. Clearly, Roque Dalton kept

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

his innermost personal circle out of his work, and his father was not in that circle. In the tale of *Dalton y Cía.* of 1973, he alluded to the vacuum of memory caused by his father's refusal to recognize him publicly as a child and by the hypocritical mores of Salvadoran society that allow, and even require, such cruelty. In a wounded tone, Dalton alludes to the fact that his father's background has been concealed from him:

My distant relationship with him, as well as his uncommunicative personality (I'm speaking of the personality he practiced with his innumerable bastard children and not the one I suppose he displayed to the gracile, deer-faced young ladies who accompanied him to his deathbed) kept me in the dark about everything related to the parents of my father. (Dalton 2005b, 28)

Later in the essay, he speculates on his own motives in writing so much about his father and about uncles whom he never met, and about whether presenting their story sympathetically somehow calls into question his commitment to communism. He suggests that a false image of his father, and therefore of himself, has begun to take hold in the public's mind (as indeed it had) and that, someday, historians would be needed to rectify this distortion. The task of separating myth from reality, he implies, would be beyond the resources of a poet, although he would ideally orient the team that would carry out such research. He writes:

So why does a communist take such a liberal attitude toward the evident dirty tricks of his progenitors? First of all, a bit more respect because respect is the better part of life. Second, a bit more seriousness and historical rigor, which can be demanded today (1973) of even the most simple and reluctant spectators of history. Don't come asking me to portray my father and my uncle as two American Robin Hoods, because they weren't. They were exactly the opposite, as you would expect of the pioneers of capitalism anywhere in the world. (Dalton 2005b, 39)

And yet, at the core, this dilemma is one of his own identity, not that of his father. At a time when Dalton was literally transforming his identity, about to take a new name, and undergoing light plastic surgery so he could join a guerrilla group in San Salvador without being recognized, he was wondering deeply about how the mysteries of his father's past had become his own mysteries. He was about to become a new person, Julio Delfos Marin, the nom de guerre he adopted during his disastrous spell with the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo. Writing almost on the eve of his departure for armed struggle, he expresses a sense of being unmoored from his own personhood. By writing about his father and uncles, even in ways that he knew were not strictly accurate, he was reminding himself of who he was and where he had come from. With his characteristic introspection, he writes:

The aim in creating my father's and uncle's climate is not to wallow in the traditional, cloying waters of bourgeois family history . . . but rather to shoot at my dead men a poetic arrow, I repeat, of the purest act of love. An act of love, by the

way, that helps me explain the mirror image I desperately ask every morning. . . . Am I the person that I seem to be? Do I have a right to be who I am? The roots of this ugly face, of this shameless caricature of a fighter who yesterday afternoon paid his taxes, where were they born and raised, and where did they go? (Dalton 2005b, 39)

Dalton never had an opportunity to answer these questions fully. He was dead within two years of asking them. By then, his own identity had become so "fictionalized," to use Lara Martínez's (2000, 60) term, that he was wondering who the real Roque Dalton was, as the preceding passage suggests. He erased his public persona further with his last book, widely known as *Poemas clandestinos*, written in the depths of clandestine life in 1974 under five different pseudonyms and published posthumously (Dalton 2008b). The reencounter with his father's family in Tucson did finally occur, but not until some thirty years after his death, when his son Juan José, a Salvadoran journalist, went to Tucson and was warmly received by Winnall Dalton's descendants, including Fred Ronstadt's granddaughter (and Roque Dalton's first cousin, once removed) the singer Linda Ronstadt, who gave him an old portrait of Winnall Dalton Sr. Although he did not live long enough to learn the real story of his parentage, Roque Dalton was asking the right questions. It fell to later generations to begin to answer them.

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