

La colina and the Theatre of Daniel Gallegos

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Daniel Gallegos stands out as one of the leading figures of the contemporary Costa Rican stage. As a professor, playwright, and director, Gallegos has played a prominent role in stimulating the budding theatrical movement of his country. To date he has written four major plays: *Los profanos* (1959), *Ese algo de Dávalos* (1960), "La casa" (1964), and *La colina* (1968).¹ Gallegos' drama, *La colina*, constitutes his most ambitious and complex work; it represents a synthesis of the dominant themes of his earlier plays and a blend of modern and traditional devices. It is this mixture which probably explains the diverse reactions to the piece. Anita Herzfeld and Teresa Cajiao Salas contend that Gallegos has structured *La colina* "dentro de los marcos de referencia del teatro del absurdo."² On the other hand, Abelardo Bonilla terms the play "una obra típicamente clásica: unidad de acción, unidad de tiempo, unidad de lugar, y sobre todo, perfecta unidad medular."³ This essay intends to study *La colina* more closely in order to determine the nature of its dramatic world and its place in Gallegos' total work.

Gallegos' previous dramas already give us useful background for the understanding of his last play and furnish an orientation to his thematic concerns and artistic techniques. *Los profanos* considers problems of self-awareness, religious belief, and the evils of technology. The play contrasts the guileless world of four aspiring artists with that of the hypocritical bourgeoisie. Patricia Andre links these two worlds and serves as the catalyst for the drama's action. Fleeing from a socially acceptable but loveless marriage, she encounters refuge and love in the unconventional, bohemian world of her brother. This new life style leads Patricia to realize that she cannot hide indefinitely in the "paraíso prestado" of her new-found friends. She concludes that her process of self-examination can only be completed in the environment from which she has fled.

The issue of religious belief finds expression in the characterization of Mauro. Tormented by his sexual impotence and incapable of believing in God, only drink consoles him. Although the play does not center on Mauro's dilemma, Patricia's

advice to him does foreshadow one of the principal themes of *La colina*: the reaching out to other human beings:

Mauro en todo esto debe de haber algo y si no lo encontramos en Dios ha de hallarse en nosotros mismos. Sí; tal vez es ahí donde está Dios, por lo menos mientras vivimos [sic], mientras tengamos conciencia de que existimos. Nos tenemos a nosotros mismos podemos darnos la mano (tomádosela) Mauro, somos nosotros nada más y sólo nos tenemos a nosotros mismos.⁴

Los profanos also raises the question of technology's influence on man. Robert explicitly and in the form of mocking parodies blames scientific discoveries for the loss of human emotions:

Lo que quiero es despertar un poco la conciencia de la gente que lo pueda leer. Son ellos los que deben volver a sufrir, querer, odiar lo negativo y lo mediocre. . . . Que sean capaces de volver a tener los sentimientos que esta era tecnológica les ha atrofiado. (p. 81)

Mauro bitterly complains that in this scientific age his personal hell of sexual impotence can only be explained by impersonal statistics:

El hecho de que yo sea impotente, sólo puede explicarse con el hecho estadístico que, en cierto número de personas una tenía que resultar así. (p. 93)

Yet, in the face of these dehumanizing effects on man the play offers possible alternatives. Donaldo echoes his sister Patricia's advice on the significance of contact between fellow human beings: "No estamos solos. . . . Nos hallamos en este mundo para darnos la mano" (p. 87).

The characters also stress the importance of verbal communication:

Patricia—Dispense, hace tanto tiempo que sólo hablo conmigo misma, que perdí el hábito de que me respondan. Por eso quería conversar con Donaldo. . . . A veces se tiene necesidad de hablar y hablar hasta cansarnos. (p. 85)

Donaldo—Eran cosas que algún día teníamos que decirnos. Se hacía necesario si es que esperábamos llegar a comprender el uno al otro. (p. 91)

Patricia's talk with Mauro assists him in solving his drinking problem. In short, whether the conflict be one of personal identity (Patricia), societal priorities (Roberto), or religious faith (Mauro), the play emphasizes the need for human understanding and communication.

Although *Los profanos* does not represent the author's most polished dramatic piece, it does reveal characteristic traits of his work. As in all of Gallegos' plays, careful construction marks *Los profanos*. Scenes and acts are miniature dramas as tensions rise to a peak, then are alleviated only to have the action shift to another conflict which then begins to intensify. Despite the presence of certain non-literary devices (music, setting, sound effects), cerebral dialogue comprises the primary theatrical means for advancing the action and portraying characters.

Often the speeches are excessively discursive, unduly slowing the play's tempo. At times the audience/reader feels he is listening to a ponderous lecture on one of Robert's favorite topics: "Sobre el Nihilismo Político, síntesis final del Materialismo Dialéctico y del Sistema de Libre Empresa." Finally, Gallegos leaves too little to the audience's imagination, preferring to explain in detail the characters' motivation and background. Even with such weaknesses, *Los profanos* along with *La colina* project most directly the playwright's major preoccupations.

Ese algo de Dávalos focuses on the cosmopolitan world of successful painter Ricardo Dávalos.⁵ The play provides a vivid contrast to *Los profanos* and an illustration of one of its basic themes. While the artists in *Los profanos* mirror idealism and human compassion, Dávalos and Cassandra display ruthlessness and contempt for others. Exploitation rather than mutual assistance distinguishes the majority of human relationships in *Ese algo de Dávalos*. The protagonist's attitude stems in part from his arduous climb to the top of the art world but even more so from his conception of the artist:

Eso es lo que se llama creación, muchacho. Hay técnica, es cierto, pero conseguirás algo más, el toque divino. La luz del inmortal.

Te encontrarás atado a una serie de responsabilidades domésticas que irán carcomiéndote el espíritu y malográndote la inspiración.

Por otro lado, el artista tiene que ser egoísta, es su naturaleza. Por eso hay que prescindir de todos esos sentimientos.⁶

Perhaps the artist must forsake the mundane feelings of "amor y deber" in the pursuit of his divine calling but *Ese algo de Dávalos* concludes that the human costs are too high to pay.

With respect to dramatic techniques, *Ese algo de Dávalos* avoids the main shortcomings of *Los profanos*. A witty, fast-paced dialogue carries the dramatic action and more attention is paid to the visual impact of scenes than to verbal explanations. Gallegos refrains from supplying too much information about the characters; Dávalos, for example, remains all the more intriguing because we do not know how he has suffered at the hands of others. The playwright continues to plan his scenes and acts painstakingly, for each ends leaving the audience with additional questions to be answered. The dramatic action consistently pulls the audience forward, giving the impression that the future scenes hold the key to the solution of the conflict. Although *Ese algo de Dávalos* does not contain the range of themes treated in *Los profanos*, it does demonstrate a technical mastery absent in the earlier work.

Comment on Gallegos' following play, "La casa," will be limited since at the time of this writing it has not been published and a manuscript is unavailable for study. Reviews of the performances do mention certain aspects worthy of note. For the first time, Gallegos' drama takes place in an unmistakable Costa Rican setting as he recreates "una visión apenas distorsionada de la sociedad costarricense de mil novecientos."⁷ In addition, the author again exhibits his preference for a traditionally structured piece, so much so that one commentator remarks:

"La casa" es un drama doméstico, concebido y ejecutado dentro de la

más clara tradición de la 'piece bien-faite,' en el más estricto realismo . . . con una notable perfección técnica.⁸

Despite the Costa Rican emphasis, Gallegos once more chooses a conflict or situation which can transcend national boundaries: a domineering woman controls and strives to suffocate the freedom of her children.

La colina, staged amid a censorship controversy, attacks frontally the problem of religious belief first broached in *Los profanos*.⁹ The author endeavors to create a contemporary *auto sacramental* which proposes an alternative to the dehumanized, godless world. Devastated by an announcement from the United Nations that God is dead, characters engage in an often cruel game of mutual self-revelation and purification. As mentioned above, some consider *La colina* to be patterned after absurdist theatre; nevertheless, Ionesco's definition of the absurd as "that which is devoid of purpose," a world in which man "cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots . . . is lost," where "all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless," may fit the first act, but the movement of *La colina* goes in a different direction.¹⁰ Characters and audience learn that a revitalized commitment to the values of love and compassion converts chaos into order.

La colina presents a group of people adrift who discover guiding principles for their lives by the end of the play. Tomás, the atheist-artist, loses faith in the immortality of his creative art, since a fatal illness prevents him from realizing his potential.¹¹ After the *juicio de liberación*, Tomás emerges from his shell of egoism to discover God through his platonic love for Marta: "Y mientras pueda recordarte estaré lleno de Dios, íntimamente, como una flor que guardará en el hueco de mi mano."¹² Novicia Marta, at first crushed by the announcement of God's death, replaces her institutionalized concept of God with a more humanized version: "Gracias por devolverme a Dios. Lo sentiré siempre, en las montañas, en las valles; en cada niño, en cada enfermo que cuide, en todo aquel a quien yo pueda tender mi mano" (p. 190). Familial love and service to others is the foundation on which Gregorio and Mercedes rebuild their shattered marriage: "Puede que venga gente aquí que quiera sanar . . . como nosotros. . . . Aquí estaremos para ayudarles. . ." (p. 189). In contrast, Padre José and Madre Superiora, freed from their guilt-ridden vocations, decide that wealth and pleasure compose the new ideal in life. As a result, *La colina* resembles a morality play, at least in its purpose, as it dramatizes the best way for man to live.¹³ A more thorough examination of the structure of the play, the handling of religious motifs, and the major theatrical images will point out the rightness of the choices made by Tomás, Marta, Gregorio, and Mercedes.

As is quite obvious, the play's chronology reflects a steady movement toward order: afternoon-exposition, night-search, morning-resolution.¹⁴ More importantly, the action of *La colina* parallels the ritual process (seasonal fertility rites) which gave birth to Greek drama: withering/struggle/renewal.¹⁵ The play traces the characters' rites of passage from an existence marked by guilt and selfishness to one defined by love and faith.¹⁶ In brief, the overall ritual structure reaffirms basic principles (love, compassion, understanding, communication) rather than discrediting them as an absurdist play would do.

The first *jornada* sets the drama in motion with a jolting spectacle of a society

in crisis. Conflict, resentment, and cynicism produce an atmosphere charged with tension. Parodies of religious beliefs and liturgy ridicule the Church's internal decay. God's death does not occasion mourning for a loved one but the revelation of man's hypocritical spiritual faith. The characters' mocking of God's death shakes the audience's complacent religious beliefs, thereby generating in the spectator some of the anguish felt by other characters such as Novicia Marta.¹⁷ This satiric treatment of religion underlines the hollowness of man's traditional values and represents a call to rethink them. A final scene of great theatrical impact pinpoints the play's conflict.¹⁸ A drunken nun, dressed in a provocative negligee, dances erotically to the up-tempo version of a psalm sung distortedly by a retarded young man. It is a perfect, grotesque image of a world gone mad. In a visual and auditory manner the spectator confronts a world which has lost its integrating religious principles. This image receives special emphasis when Tomás attempts to convince Marta not to flee. For a moment, the action is held in suspended animation:

Tomás la detiene tomando su mano en la balastrada. Los ruidos cesan en ese momento. . . . Marta queda inmóvil en la escalera. Vuelve la algarabía y la escena oscurece. (p. 157)

The spectator perceives a sensorial image which states the play's conflict: desire for order amidst chaos. Trust and meaning have vanished from this dramatic world and only the *juicio de liberación* in the next two *jornadas* will restore them.

The *juicio de liberación* dominates the action of the succeeding *jornadas*. Analogous to the transitional nature of a *juicio final*, the ritual game of liberation depicts the transition from an inauthentic to an authentic existence.¹⁹ Paradoxically, the *juicio de liberación* proposed in jest by Madre Superiora is precisely the instrument by which the characters breathe life into worn-out convictions and by which they rebuild the fragmented society of the first *jornada*. Intended to free the participants from the last oppressive vestiges of religion, the collective confession purges the characters of misplaced guilt while directing them to a more vital faith in God and a real concern for man. Thus, a religious ritual begun as a farce serves its original purpose of uniting people in their efforts to communicate with a higher being.

As before, a theatrical image concludes this stage in the drama's development. In one last futile attempt to convince Novicia Marta of God's death, Padre José smashes the convent's crucifix and savagely beats off Tomás who tries to stop him. In general terms, the scene releases the pent-up frustrations evident in some of the dialogue. More specifically, the image calls attention to Padre José and Madre Superiora's purely physical approach to their future without God. Gone are the trappings of spiritual leader that José still wears in the first *jornada*. His lust for Marta drives him to rely on force to win his prize. The scene also visually confirms Tomás' inability to ward off the physical deterioration of his body. José, model of healthy virility, easily crushes the infirm novelist. Finally, this theatrical image points to the demise of the wooden, lifeless belief in God that has prevailed for too long. As in the primitive ritual process, we witness a symbolic dismemberment of the god and in this case a scapegoat: the crucifix and Tomás.²⁰ Now the stage is set for the moment of rebirth.

The concluding *jornada* treats religion with a boldly different attitude from that of the first act. For the majority of characters God's death is no longer at issue. They are now concerned with God's symbolic rebirth and their acceptance of him. Tomás best exemplifies this change in mood, for the bitter atheist is heard to utter sincerely such comments:

Ahora creo que podría estar sin comer cuarenta días. (p. 177)

Mirad las aves del cielo que no siembran ni siegan. . . . Contemplad los lirios del campo. (p. 180)

Estén en paz . . . gracias por todo. Dios los bendiga. (p. 191)

Theatrical or non-literary techniques once more frame an important stage in the drama. Immediately following the beating of Tomás, the audience observes this scene:

Marta corre hacia Tomás y le reclina la cara en su regazo, formando una perfecta imagen de la Pietá, imagen plástica que ha de plasmar en este instante el más profundo sentimiento de amor y compasión por la condición humana. (p. 188)

It becomes obvious through the Pietá image that Marta's former attraction to the almost naked body of the crucified Christ did not stem from repressed sexual drives as José maintains. Marta realizes that she has been drawn to the human side of Christ as she describes Tomás with the same words used to confess what she thought to be a sinful attraction to the naked figure of Christ: "(Con infinita ternura) Sus pómulos están lacerados" (p. 188). This realization motivates her to remain on the hill to help those who need her. At last Marta sheds the traditional notion of God and accepts the personal concept which she has intuitively felt for a long time:

Es cierto que las cosas bellas me acercaron a Dios. Aun las cosas tristes: la enfermedad, la muerte. La increíble capacidad con que el hombre soporta miserias, también me pareció obra de Dios. (p. 173)

The Pietá image, likewise, symbolizes the solution to Tomás' problem. Human understanding and love have been missing from his life and they will assist him in coping with his impending death:

Yo lo [God] he encontrado . . . En . . . mi amor por ti. Ya no me importa la muerte . . . No es motivo de rencor . . . La muerte misma puede ser bella. (p. 190)

Another theatrical image closes the play and accentuates the positive conclusion to the drama:

(Se acerca y rasguea la guitarra, se le da a Joselillo. Este la toma y comienza a cantar las primeras estrofas del Salmo.)

Joselillo—(Cantando), El Señor es mi Pastor y nada me faltará.

(Manuelito lo acompaña mientras Mercedes y su marido cambian una mirada de comprensión y reanudan sus ocupaciones habituales.) (p. 192)

Gone are the strident tones heard at the end of the first *jornada*. Gone is the cruel marital bickering; gone is the shame and guilt for a retarded offspring. The spectator views the tangible reintegration of a family whose members profess a commitment to each other and to those from outside its circle.

La colina has systematically marched from chaos to order with theatrical signposts identifying the significant stages along the way. The drama does not advocate the abolishment of religion. On the contrary, it recommends a return to the original message of its tenets. In this respect, the play repeats the advice of Roberto in *Los profanos*:

El hombre no puede vivir sin valores, admitido. Pero si esos valores no te satisfacen en determinado momento, debe tener la valentía de desecharlos y buscar nuevos o practicar los viejos en su verdadera esencia. (p. 97)²¹

Furthermore, the drama's underlying ritual structure (withering/struggle/re-birth) indicates that contemporary man might require a periodic examination of his beliefs in the face of the dehumanizing effects of the modern world.

In conclusion, the thematic concerns of Gallegos' earlier plays—faith in God, artist's concept of himself, need to rekindle human sentiments, and role of mutual help and compassion—find their most effective and concise statement in *La colina*. Technically, the play signals a further move away from a literary emphasis to a more balanced combination of literary and non-literary theatrical devices in order to maximize the work's impact. In *La colina*, Gallegos also creates a play of national, regional, and universal appeal. This *auto* challenges fundamental religious assumptions in Costa Rica and other Latin countries while addressing the dilemma of contemporary man who searches for ordering principles.²²

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Notes

1. All four of Gallegos' plays have been performed: *Los profanos* (1960), *Ese algo de Dávalos* (1964), *La colina* (1968), "La casa" (1972).

2. Anita Herzfeld and Teresa Cajiao Salas, *El teatro de hoy en Costa Rica: Perspectiva crítica y antología* (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1973), p. 126.

3. Abelardo Bonilla, "Una impresión de *La colina*," *La Nación* (26 abril 1968), p. 4.

4. *Los profanos*, *Repertorio Centroamericano*, No. 14 (junio 1969), p. 93. All further quotations will be taken from this source.

5. Ricardo Dávalos sets out to prove to Casandra Martin that she must dedicate herself totally to her art and reject familial responsibilities. Dávalos is unaware that Casandra plans to accelerate her career by her association with him. The central conflict arises when Casandra (helped by Dávalos' enemy, art critic, Alberto Osorio), openly challenges Dávalos for a prestigious mural commission. With the assistance of his ever-faithful friend, Angela Lester, Ricardo is able to withdraw from the competition without losing face by yielding to his young protegee Fabian Lorenzo.

6. *Ese algo de Dávalos* (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1967), pp. 35, 38, 55.

7. "La casa," San José, *La República* (30 noviembre 1972), p. 29.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

9. For more information on this controversy, see: "Apoyan a *La colina*," *La Nación* (15 abril 1968), p. 77; "Reflexiones desde *La colina*," *La Nación* (16 abril 1968), p. 4; "Sentí que había vuelto a un país subdesarrollado," *La Nación* (16 abril 1968), p. 46; "Contradictorios comentarios sobre *La colina*," *La Nación* (18 abril 1968), p. 12.

10. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1969), p. 5. Even Gallegos points out the note of resolution which he intended the play to communicate: "Yo pretendo comunicar ciertas ideas filosóficas o religiosas y plantear la alternativa de

un cristianismo primitivo." "Sentí que había vuelto a un país subdesarrollado," *La Nación* (16 abril 1968), p. 46.

11. When speaking of his art, Tomás sounds like Dávalos: "Pero cuando se llega a la cumbre, listo para comenzar, después de haber vencido en la lucha librada en medio de ese mar de imbéciles que tratan de ahogar al que se destaca, libre de la jauría de veinte mil envidias disfrazadas con otros nombres; . . . No, yo nunca tuve a Dios tan cerca como ustedes. Yo era Dios. . . . Ustedes no comprenden lo que es sentir el instinto creador dentro de uno mismo." *El teatro de hoy en Costa Rica*, pp. 167, 168.

12. *El teatro de hoy en Costa Rica*, p. 190. Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

13. Eugene Skinner comments on the ethical quality of morality works: "A este valor emotivo del 'misterio,' la 'moralidad' substituye el valor ético que predomina en los autos como el del Juicio Final, donde los personajes se juzgan según un sistema de valores éticos y absolutos." "Carballido: Temática y forma de tres autos," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 3/1 (Fall 1969), 38.

14. We cannot agree with Herzfeld and Cajiao Salas' interpretation of the use of time in *La colina*: "Consecuente con los postulados del teatro del absurdo el transcurrir del tiempo es sólo una noción vaga e incidental. No se percibe una línea de evolución ni de desarrollo de la acción . . ." *El teatro de hoy en Costa Rica*, p. 129. The characters constantly alert the audience to the passage of time: "En la madrugada emprendemos viaje . . ." (p. 137); "Esta noche estamos para ganar o perder . . ." (p. 156); "La hora de su juicio ha llegado . . ." (p. 168); "Bajemos la montaña, Marta; pronto amanecerá . . ." (p. 174); "Ya ha amanecido . . ." (p. 188); "La noche se acabó . . ." (p. 189); "Hace un lindo día, ya no hay niebla" (p. 191).

15. Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 27.

16. Fergusson remarks on several aspects of ritual which bear directly on *La colina*: ". . . the Festival of Dionysos . . . included 'rites of passage,' like that celebrating the assumption of adulthood—celebrations of the mystery of individual growth and development. At the same time, it was a prayer for the welfare of the whole City; and this welfare was understood not only as material prosperity, but also as the natural order of the family, the ancestors, the present members, and the generations still to come . . ." *The Idea of a Theater*, p. 27.

17. Gallegos definitely intended for some of the words and speeches to jar the audience: ". . . Las he escrito con la intención de causar incomodidad e irritación, para que el espectador tenga más conciencia de la situación que del relato." "Sentí que había vuelto a un país subdesarrollado," *La Nación* (16 abril 1968), p. 46.

18. By theatrical image I mean those scenes or portions of scenes in which sound, music, movement, and/or visual elements predominate over dialogue.

19. In written communication with Professor Eugene Skinner, he described the *juicio final* as taking place during the transition from profane to sacred existence. The characters in *La colina* become aware of the falseness of their existence and redefine their goals allowing them to accept an existence rooted in truly Christian convictions.

20. See Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater*, p. 27 for an explanation of this concept of dismemberment and the role of the scapegoat.

21. See Gallegos' comments as cited in Note 10.

22. L. H. Quackenbush describes the use of the *auto* form in Latin American drama: "Nevertheless, contemporary dramatists continue to employ traditional *auto* forms as a conveyance to express the social and metaphysical needs of modern man." "The *auto* Tradition in Brazilian Drama," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 5/2 (Spring 1972), 29. For additional information on this subject, consult: L. H. Quackenbush, "The *auto* in Contemporary Mexican Drama," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly*, 21, No. 1 (1974), 15-30.