



Magroll versus Macondo

The Exceptionality of Álvaro Mutis

GERALD MARTIN

THE TWO MOST SUCCESSFUL NOVELISTS in the history of Colombian literature, both in terms of critical acclaim and in terms of prizes won, are two old friends, Álvaro Mutis and Gabriel García Márquez, who have known each other for more than half a century. Mutis was born in Bogotá and spent his early years in Belgium, so that in a way Colombia has always been in some sense foreign, in some sense exotic to him. Indeed, most of his life has been lived outside the country. García Márquez, on the other hand, was born in a small tropical town with a funny name situated right in the middle of nowhere—as we tend, dismissively, to say—and he did not visit Europe until the age of twenty-eight, when he was already fully formed artistically and ideologically. Physically, the two men could hardly be more different, and they appear to be at absolutely opposite poles of the political spectrum. Mutis's

pre-1453 obsessions are well known (“Look, I have a complete lack of interest in all political phenomena later than the fall of Byzantium into the hands of the infidels”),¹ and so are García Márquez's post-1917 predilections; while never a communist, García Márquez has been closer to that worldview in the broadest sense than to any other ideology in a long life of practical commitments. One might think that this is why, as Mutis has frequently remarked, they never talk politics or literature but only about “la vaina, viejo” (life and its implications, large and small), because otherwise they might have little in common—except, perhaps, the lack of a higher education, for Mutis left formal studies even earlier than García Márquez did.

Above: Mutis and García Márquez, Bogotá, 1990



Álvaro Mutis (1963)

Mutis has spent most of his life involved in one form of business activity or another and has written in his spare time, even if “spare time” must be defined as all the time when he has not been actually working for pay, including time waiting for planes in some distant airport or waiting for bedtime in some anonymous hotel. García Márquez has spent all his life writing, and his business activities

have been transitory and reluctant in his early years as well as in his part-time hobbies in more recent decades; he is one of the most professionalized of all Latin American writers, Mutis one of the least. García Márquez took to computers like a fish to water; Mutis, perhaps predictably, did not. Mutis is a poet who also writes prose; García Márquez is a writer of prose who loves poetry but practices not. Mutis was a good friend of such well-known right-wing icons as Octavio Paz; García Márquez was . . . not—his well-known best friend is Paz’s ideological enemy, Fidel Castro.

Literarily speaking, both writers share a devotion to some important literary precursors: Conrad, Faulkner, Neruda, even Hemingway. But no one, at first sight, would link the two of them in terms of literary style, literary movements, literary aesthetics, or literary philosophy. Counterfactualities are always absurd, but let me play a game by saying it is impossible to imagine the name García Márquez under the title of the novel *Un bel morir*, just as it is ludicrous to imagine that of Álvaro Mutis under the title of a story like “Big Mama’s Funeral.” García Márquez has been writing novels and stories since he was eighteen; Mutis started in his mid-sixties, at an age when García Márquez’s fictional oeuvre was reaching its conclusion. Even so, the two men have been friends for well over half a century. After two decades of writing novels, García Márquez became, with *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), the unchallenged star of the so-called *Boom*, the most glittering landmark in the history of Latin American narrative and one of the undoubted stellar “moments” in world literature; whereas Mutis belongs, incredibly, to the so-called *post-Boom*,² a typically anticlimactic phenomenon of our current postmodern, poststructuralist, and, for some, posthistorical era of economic and cultural globalization and intellectual and ideological deconstruction.

So there is more to the contrasts than the merely anecdotal conceits essayed above. One could say that the whole history of Latin American literature separates these two colossal Colombians, these two old friends, these two virtuosi of the *vaina*. Critics and literary historians, within Latin America or without, have always separated two quite vast, quite evident strands in Latin American literature that correspond to two quite separate—though obviously always interrelated—impulses. I am referring to the time-honored distinction between a literature that is about Latin America itself, a literature that may be either national or continental in focus but can be construed in some way or another as a literature reflecting the realities of Latin America or searching, exploring, questing for Latin American identity; and, on the other hand, a literature that is only called Latin American because of the birthplace of its author, a literature that is either “Europeanized” (usually an accusatory term) or at the least only incidentally Latin American in the sense that its objective seems to be some form of universality—which again, very often in Latin American literary criticism, is seen as a camouflage for a lackeylike Europeanism. A definition this broad of the “Americanist” tradition would encompass nineteenth-century *costumbrismo* and most Latin American romanticism—forgive us our labels—as well as the regionalist novel of the land or social novel of the 1920s and even the novels of the Latin American *Boom* of the 1960s and the “magical realism” with which some of them are associated; while the “non-Americanist” tradition would include nineteenth-century *modernismo*, twentieth-century *vanguardismo*, and a range of writers of whom the most emblematic is of course Jorge Luis Borges—with whom Mutis is often, usually rather superficially, associated.

It hardly needs stating that Gabriel García Márquez is one of the foremost examples of the former view of what Latin American literature is or should be. Indeed, as mentioned, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is in many respects the novel that brought this line of Latin American literature, for the moment, to its culmination, the novel that is most identified with Latin America as such, the novel in which Latin Americans learned to see themselves, the novel that may be to Latin American literature and its plowers of the sea what the *Quixote* is to Spanish literature and its pursuers of the impossible dream. Álvaro Mutis said as much in an interview with Elena Poniatowska in 1975: “I believe that only García Márquez sums up, achieves, and carries out with absolute effectiveness the translation of the Latin American world to literature. Only he has given a totalizing and precise vision.”³

Not only this. We may add that García Márquez has created his own world, Macondo, reminiscent of Faulkner’s famous “postage stamp,” Yoknapatawpha, but one that has gone even more times round the globe than Faulkner’s version, despite the fact—what sleight of hand!—that Macondo appears in only two of García Márquez’s nine novels and three of his fifty-plus short stories. Macondo has now become a sort of shorthand for Latin

America's curses of underdevelopment or, simultaneously, for its picturesque "Third World" eccentricities. When a blind and deaf man almost one hundred years of age in the Dominican Republic is reelected president for what seems like the hundredth time, people in Latin America shrug their shoulders and say, "Macondo." García Márquez's 1982 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "The Solitude of Latin America," was all about that Latin America, the Latin America where magical realism and social realism are indistinguishable, where words are inadequate to express

the hyperbolic nature of everyday experience; whereas his "Toast to Poetry" (Brindis a la poesía), produced for the same occasion, is so universal in intention that it might almost have been written by Álvaro Mutis himself.

Which brings me back to the subject of my reflections. If Macondo is Latin America, seen in two different literary modes, like two different mirrors, straight and distorted (*In Evil Hour* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*), what of Álvaro Mutis's "hero" (I use the word diffidently), Maqroll? Can we see Maqroll chatting to Melquíades? Can we imagine Maqroll in Macondo? At first sight, "no" seems much the more persuasive of the two possible answers. Maqroll, born as a literary personage in the mid-1940s, even before Macondo was born as a literary place, appears in most of Mutis's novels and stories and many of his poems. He is the "lookout," Maqroll el Gaviero, a seafarer, adventurer, and all-round drifter or "extraterritorial" ("Maqroll never belonged to any place on earth" [*Abdul Bashur*]) whose nickname makes one think inevitably of the sailor from Triana who first saw land in the New World in 1492. That mariner, like his master Columbus, misperceived what he saw and began the series of fantasies, misinterpretations, frustrations, and failures that writers have been recording for five hundred years and that we now call Latin American literature.

MAQROLL IS A CHARACTER unique in Latin American narrative, albeit with some not-too-distant antecedents in the work of Juan Carlos Onetti, especially *The Shipyard* (1961). Elsewhere, one thinks above all of Conrad's antiheroes, Lowry's consul, Goytisoló's Juan Sin Tierra (Juan, the Landless), and other real or metaphorical drifters. Mutis himself often mentions Malraux's clear-sighted characters and Pessoa's four poetic personae as points of reference. What separates Maqroll from them all is the uniquely radical nature of his skepticism—closer to Nietzsche than to Schopenhauer, to Baudrillard than to Foucault—and his absolute determination both to try and, since failure is not in doubt, to fail. Maqroll is of indeterminate origin, nationality,

Recipe for a "Maqroll,"

by Álvaro Mutis

Ingredientes:

Un vaso de Carpano
Tres pedazos de hielo
Un vaso de Jack Daniels
Media tajada de naranja

Nota bene: "Hay que rezar el padre nuestro, porque la borrachera no la quita nadie."

Ingredients:

One jigger of Carpano brand vermouth
Three ice cubes
One jigger of Jack Daniels brand whiskey
One half orange slice

Nota bene: "One should recite the Lord's Prayer [before imbibing], for drunkenness spares no one."



age, and physiognomy. He is not evidently a Latin American and does not—at first sight—represent anything particularly Latin American in character. Like postmodern fiction as a whole, he is thoroughly deterritorialized. Although he speaks in Spanish to satisfy the conventions of narrative, we do not normally know whether he is "really" doing so. Sometimes he travels in Latin America, sometimes not. The literary regions he journeys through, without ever staying for long, are not "telluric," fantastic, or magical. They are more reminiscent of

the atmosphere of Graham Greene's novels,

what some critics have called "Greeneland"; or, much better, of what might be called, albeit ironically, "Conradia." At first sight they correspond most closely to the "real," a reality not like that of nineteenth-century realist writing or twentieth-century social-realist fiction but rather some new variant in which the real and the emblematic or the allegorical are seamlessly fused together.⁴

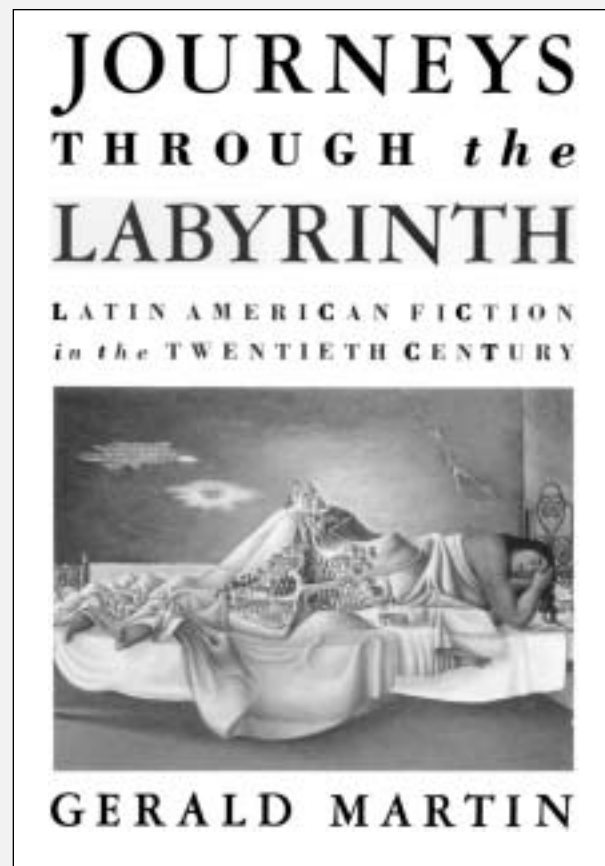
The most interesting interpretation I have ever seen of Mutis's philosophy is by Fernando Cruz Kronfly, who argues that the Colombian is one of the few truly modern writers of the twentieth century: that almost all others are still lamenting the loss of something or other, above all the loss of the greatest Grand Narrative of all, the implicitly sacred Meaning of History, through which Desire, repressed by Reason—which had killed God the Father—surged back, unconscious, to put Reason itself at its service.⁵ I believe that this is true, but I think there is still another point to add. In the so-called postmodern era, in which we deconstruct all received ideas and ideologies, all myths of origin, all master narratives, we are condemned—or liberated—to choose our identities in the full knowledge that meaning is something we ascribe rather than inherit. Mutis's deepest skepticism, and that of his character, is at the level of belief itself. His particular "postmodern" philosophy leads him to a nostalgia for old illusions but not to the illusion that illusions can ever again be sustained. Hence Maqroll's profound conviction that no time or place is ultimately any better or any worse than any other and his absolute skepticism about human systems of thought or searches for meaning, well expressed by Maqroll himself in *Amirbar*.

I have never been prey to fascination with any of the accustomed mysteries or esoteric systems. I believe that what we have inside us already provides far too many quandaries and vast indecipherable spaces to want to invent any more. God, until now, at least in my case, chooses the simplest and clearest paths to demonstrate his presence. And if at times we cannot see him, well, that is a different matter.⁶

One of Jorge Luis Borges's shortest pieces is "The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths." It tells how the king of Babylon built a labyrinth that he used to perplex and humiliate other monarchs, including a king of the Arabs. ("The labyrinth was a scandal, because confusions and marvels are operations proper to God and not to men.") With Allah's help, the king escaped from the labyrinth and immediately began a war against the king of Babylon, which ended in his defeat and capture. The Arab king then told his unhappy prisoner that he would now show him his own labyrinth, one without stairs, doors, or walls. He tied the Babylonian to a camel, took him out into the desert, and left him to die of hunger and thirst—and also, as we might say today, of "exposure" (to reality, perhaps).

Mutis, with whom Borges has some positions and preconceptions in common, is not a man for labyrinths. The labyrinth is, obviously, a cipher, in the twentieth century, for modernism, the world as book; the problem of finding one's way through the text to ultimate meaning is like finding one's way through life, finding Henry James's pattern in the carpet. Borges always continued to enjoy playing with such games whose futility he came to understand only too well, whereas Mutis believed from the start that all labyrinths are really meaningless: beyond them lies, always, the desert. Hence his central theme of *desesperanza*, a word, like so many key Spanish words (one thinks of *soledad*, *sueño*), which is untranslatable into English, neither "desperation" nor "despair" but a non-hoping, a never-hoping, something like a combination of the weak meanings of each.⁷ And *la desesperanza*, Mutis has always said, is more visible in the tropics than anywhere else because, although life moves more quickly, decay is always present, always threatening, always visible on the very surface of experience.

Hence the connection, despite everything, with García Márquez. "I met Gabo twenty-eight years ago," Mutis said in a 1974 interview with Alfredo Barnechea and José Miguel Oviedo: "The night we discussed these themes for the first time, those obsessions were already present in both of us. Collapse, the uselessness of effort, the tropics, they were all already present in that first torrential conversation we had. . . . That first contact with Gabo was so instantaneous, so effective, so total, because we had a community of places and obsessions. And when we spoke of Faulkner, we spoke of a third common substance that was out there confronting both of us."⁸ In a 1975 interview, Mutis remarked that *Leafstorm*, García Márquez's first novel, is "a great novel about the tropics, about the loss of vitality, the loss of desire, of hope."⁹ In fact, he had already made this assertion ten years before in his essay on *la desesperanza* (February 1965), in which he places García Márquez in a tradition, mentioned above, that includes Conrad, Drieu La Rochelle, Malraux, and Pessoa. There he refers us to "Macondo, where an old colonel from the Colombian civil wars waits in vain, waits with lucid *desesperanza*, for a letter that he knows will never arrive but whose constant imminence allows him to go on living a life that



lost all possible sense, all probable essence, many years before." That novel (*No One Writes to the Colonel*), Mutis continues, is about "the development of the elemental and ever renewed tragedy of a man and his oldest and most personal phantoms."¹⁰ Its two final pages, he asserts, with their unforgettable faecal resolution, should go into any appropriate anthology as a classic of *desesperanza*.

So in this sense, Macondo really is not just a small place in Colombia; it really is, as so many critics have said, though not with Mutis's intentions, a "state of mind." Not Colombia, but the tropics, because the tropics are closer to the desert than most of us have ever dreamed; and the desert itself, in this conception, is only a somewhat less mobile and malleable conception than the greatest existential symbol of all, the ocean—always different, always the same. So we see that, in a quite obvious sense, Maqroll was always in Macondo. And so we could say that the relationship between Mutis and García Márquez is rather like the relationship that Mutis identifies between Heyst and Jones in Conrad's *Victory*, one the photographic negative of the other, two sides of the same self, akin to Borges's eponymous "Theologians." Mutis notes that the heartless villain Jones, to his astonishment, "realizes that he has before him another of the same ilk as himself who has nonetheless chosen the other end of the rope."¹¹ I would not like to push this parallel too far, because in the case of our Colombian personages we would need to

decide which is Heyst and which is Jones. We would almost certainly find that García Márquez is the good guy—always looking, however hopelessly, for the best in people and for the silver linings in life—and Mutis the bad guy. For Mutis, “good guys” are nearly always bad guys because they deceive themselves, and no life should be built on self-deception.

García Márquez’s lifetime motto would probably be taken from Gramsci, “Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” Mutis would also probably prefer to take it not from the Marxist Gramsci but from Romain Rolland, from whom Gramsci adopted and adapted the phrase—except that Mutis might want to modify it to “Pessimism of the intelligence, stoicism of the will,” or even to “Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the everyday.” At any rate, the truth is that if Álvaro Mutis and Gabriel García Márquez recognized one another all those years ago, it was despite each having chosen an opposite end of the political and literary rope; but both of them learned how, in the face of their conclusions and despite their ultimate view of the world (and here I paraphrase Mutis), to “love, work, chat interminably with their friends and lend themselves to all the ambushes of destiny, because they know that it is not by refusing these things that we can avoid the events that will give account of our lives; they know that only from a lucid participation in them can be derived something very close to a taste for life, a constancy of being, which makes possible the passage of the hours and the days without conscientiously blowing one’s brains out.”¹²

In a recent *New Yorker* review, John Updike wrote one of the most interesting appraisals, and perhaps the best evocation yet in print, of the narrative trajectory of the Colombian novelist. However, Updike ends an enthusiastic review with a complaint:

Lone rangers, from Don Quixote to Sam Spade and James Bond, are customarily engaged in combat against bad guys; they afford themselves the escapism of a virtuous quest, a perpetual cleanup. Maqroll instead presents himself as one of the bad guys, “on the periphery of laws and codes,” and proposes that bad guys aren’t so bad, as they smuggle and pimp and deal their way through the world. They are good guys. Maybe so, but it leaves the reader with no one much to cheer for, in adventures that aspire to the epic.¹³

This is a surprising and, at first sight, disappointing finale—indeed, one in which Updike’s conclusion seems not to accord with his previous argument about Mutis’s “footloose, offhandedly erudite, inexplicably attractive shady character.” It is like those Hollywood movies that set out to show us the world as (perhaps) it “really is,” and then let us down (or up) by tacking on some philosophically consoling or morally uplifting ending that has nothing to do with the foregoing entertainment. Still, there is also something profoundly satisfying about Updike’s response. If Updike, surely one of the most disenchanting of writers in his own fictional oeuvre, finds Mutis’s perspective—that of the real bad guys—dismaying, not to say unacceptable

(admittedly he tries, albeit unconvincingly, to demonstrate its incoherence), this only goes to demonstrate the extraordinary exceptionality of the Colombian writer’s absolutely but above all steadfastly disillusioned vision.¹⁴ **WLT**

University of Pittsburgh

¹ Quoted by Alfredo Barnechea and José Miguel Oviedo, “La historia como estética” (interview, Mexico 1974), reprinted in Álvaro Mutis, *Poesía y prosa* (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1982), 584.

² Which explains why Mutis, although four years older than his friend, won the Neustadt Prize exactly three decades after García Márquez.

³ Mutis, *Poesía y prosa*, 601.

⁴ The following two paragraphs are borrowed from my earlier essay, “Álvaro Mutis and the Ends of History,” *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 19, no. 1 (winter 1995), 117–31.

⁵ Fernando Cruz Kronfly, “La nieve del almirante o la agonía de la modernidad,” in *Tras las rutas de Maqroll*, Santiago Mutis Durán, ed. (Cali: Proartes, 1988), 133–42.

⁶ Álvaro Mutis, *Amirbar* (Bogotá: Norma, 1990), 52. Translation mine.

⁷ See Mutis, *Poesía y prosa*, 285–302.

⁸ Interview with Alfredo Barnechea and José Miguel Oviedo, in Mutis, *Poesía y prosa*, 582–83.

⁹ Interview with Guillermo Sheridan, in Mutis, *Poesía y prosa*, 636.

¹⁰ Mutis, *Poesía y prosa*, 300–301.

¹¹ Mutis, “La desesperanza,” in *Poesía y prosa*, 287.

¹² Mutis, “La desesperanza,” 287.

¹³ John Updike, “The Lone Sailor: Tales of a Colorful Voyage to Nowhere,” *New Yorker*, January 14, 2003, 81–84.

¹⁴ Again, I use a word in what may be called its weak sense. If the word *unillusioned* existed in English, that is the word we would have to use here.

GERALD MARTIN is Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Modern Languages in the Department of Hispanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Pittsburgh. His publications include critical editions of Miguel Ángel Asturias’s *Hombres de maíz* (1981) and *El Señor Presidente* (2000), *Journeys through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (1989), and several major essays on Latin American cultural history in the *Cambridge History of Latin America* (1985–95). He is currently writing a biography of Gabriel García Márquez, a history of the arts in Latin America, and a history of *post-Boom* narrative. A former departmental chair and editor of the Latin American Literature in Translation series (University of Pittsburgh Press), he is a longtime member of the Archive of Twentieth-Century Latin American Literature (Paris) and current president of the Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana (2000–2004).