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Abstract

Part of the confusion of the current literary and critical moment, in Latin America and elsewhere, involves a debate as to whether the most characteristic forms of contemporary writing are the more apparently transparent (in contrast to current critical practice) or the more impenetrable and indecipherable of literary texts. This debate is of particular relevance to Latin American discussions about the so-called "Post-Boom," and the work of the Colombian Alvaro Mutis, a writer who came late to narrative fiction and to critical attention, offers several insights into the links between writing, criticism and ideology at this moment close to the end of the century and even, so some thinkers have said, to the end of history.

Keywords

Colombian literature, Alvaro Mutis, literary analysis, literary criticism, power-boom, writing, criticism, ideology, labyrinth, end of history, history

Alvaro Mutis and the Ends of History

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I must have been 20, or 22, when I first came across Maqroll. From that time to this my peculiar esteem for him has grown. He almost never tells me what I want or expect, which may be why I understand and esteem him more.

Francisco Cervantes, 1988¹

He died in exile; like all men, he was born at the wrong time.

Jorge Luis Borges (on Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur, in "New Refutation of Time," 1946)

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, which 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, we might say today, of "exposure" (to reality, perhaps).

Borges's allegory is especially apposite in thinking about Alvaro Mutis, a writer whose most frequently used terms would include the words "intricate" and "labyrinth," yet whose fiction is among the most

accessible and apparently transparent in contemporary Latin American narrative. Mutis is a particularly fascinating phenomenon, because he is at once a fairly characteristic “Post-Boom” novelist as this concept is commonly understood—direct, accessible, monolinear, “reader-friendly,” “narrative” and “classical” rather than “structural” or “baroque”—yet he is a writer whose values and vision of the world stretch back beyond the beginnings of modernity and into the medieval, feudal and chivalresque period. In that sense he may prove particularly instructive as to the possible meaning of the Post-Boom’s narrative, stylistic and intellectual turn in this disconcerting postmodern era.

I like to think about Borges’s brief allegory more generally when I am pondering the great unsolved—and perhaps unsolvable—questions of the past three decades confronting those of us interested in contemporary Latin American narrative. It suggests a contrast between artifice and simplicity, between theory and reality. The message seems to be that life is already sufficiently complex and anxiety-ridden without men adding their own theories and structures for no reason other than personal vanity or self-aggrandisement. My reading of the work of Alvaro Mutis would lead to the conclusion that beneath the surface multiplicity and relativity of Postmodernity, this writer, like many others, perceives a nothingness, an absence of meaning more baleful than any of the anguished speculations undertaken by variably romantic (that is, “humanist”) philosophers and writers since the Enlightenment.

Given that the Latin American Post-Boom is the thematic frame of this essay and Alvaro Mutis its central focus, and that Mutis is notable for his incisive and elemental view of the world and therefore confronts us with the very largest questions, it would seem appropriate to follow Borges’s indication and to seek clarity here rather than complication. Space precludes a detailed analysis of the issues involved, but I would like to mention in outline the grand overarching questions that must form the conceptual frame for any discussion of literature and culture these days, even if our treatment of them must remain partly implicit. When was Modernity and what is the relation between Modernity and Postmodernity? What is literary Modernism and what is its relation to Postmodernism? What is the relation between Latin American narrative and world narrative as a whole since World War I? What was Structuralism and what is its relation to Poststructuralism? And, finally, the composite question that draws on all the others: what is the relation between Post-Boom, Poststructuralism and Postmodernism (a

theoretical question) and what is the relation of all of these to Postmodernity (a theoretical question, which is also a historical question)?

There exists at present a fundamental lack of consensus about such issues which makes it more difficult than ever for critics to communicate with one another. Some of us are hoping that the current confusion will be clarified and that we shall return—say, early in the new millennium—to a more “normal” level of theoretical debate and philosophical perplexity. Borges spoke to this instinct more than half a century ago:

It is hazardous to think that a coordination of words (philosophies are nothing else) can have much resemblance to the universe. It is also hazardous to think that one of those famous coordinations does not resemble it a little more than others.²

We have to recognize, however, that there is little reason to think that even such a skeptical normality will be regained in the near future. There is little agreement about the issues outlined above, even among the minority of critics remaining these days who believe that it is possible to construct meaningful histories of culture in general and of literature in particular or who assume that texts can be related in coherent and persuasive ways to broad social and historical trends and patterns.

The present writer counts himself among these optimistic critics—though which of us does not *understand* the poststructuralist problematic (one vast aporia)?—and would include among them Donald Shaw and Philip Swanson. Shaw’s views can be consulted in his *Nueva narrativa hispanoamericana*, “Towards a definition of the Post-Boom,” and “On the New Novel in Spanish America.”³ Swanson’s views are expounded in *Landmarks in Modern Latin American Fiction*, which he edited, and “Boom or bust? Latin America, and the not so new novel.”⁴ Mine appear in *Journeys through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century*.⁵

In essence, Shaw believes that the Boom is really (or ought to be), synonymous and co-terminous with the New Novel, that the New Novel emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, and, more tentatively, that there really does appear to be a Post-Boom, which is separate from the Boom both chronologically and theoretically. Swanson, by contrast, is more generally skeptical and believes that the New Novel is “just as

... ideologically inconsistent as it is ambiguous” (“Boom or bust?,” 79) and that any apparent coherence is “largely an invention of literary criticism” (90).

I agree with Swanson about one thing, and this one thing separates us both from Shaw: that there is no entirely persuasive definition of the shift between the Boom and the supposed “Post-Boom.” But I disagree with Swanson when he suggests that there is really no such thing as the “New Novel” and therefore no way of separating it from a previous, “regional” fiction. This probably means that even my agreement with him is deceptive: he is able to say that there is no great difference between the Boom and the Post-Boom because, at bottom, he does not appear to believe in history, or at least, in literary history. In that respect I agree with Shaw: there *is* a Latin American New Novel. But for me it begins earlier than he suggests and it continues today. What he calls Boom and Post-Boom are for me dominant phases within what I take to be a long, “Modern” (and not yet entirely Postmodern) period. Swanson sees the difference between Shaw and myself as an “eternal” one between an emphasis upon “universals” in the one case (Shaw) and Latin American “specificities” in the other (Martin). I see this as a false distinction, which caricatures both standpoints as a strategy to allow Swanson to produce a—still sceptical—synthesis, namely that the New Novel’s “novelty and fascination lie in an impossible combination of Americanist referentiality and literary self-referentiality” (“Boom or bust?,” 90).

This probably suffices to give a sense of the critical distinctions at stake in these debates, whose full importance may become a little clearer below. But readers are urged to consult the texts quoted, since no critic can be relied upon to summarize fairly the difference between his or her own views and those of others. At any rate I would make a final comment that the kind of fiction that Latin America has been producing since the 1960s has coincided with a brand of international literary theory—poststructuralism—designed to outflank almost everybody by producing a criticism more apparently radical and more fearfully complex than any of the literary texts published during the period. Is it not more easy to read *Hopscotch*, *Paradiso* or even *I the Supreme*, all famously difficult novels, than, say, Derrida or Lacan, or their Latin Americanist disciples? Is it any wonder that fiction has since turned from those models to an apparently more transparent mode, now that criticism is so illegible and inaccessible? (Compare the situation in the 1930s and 1940s, when most literary criticism in Britain and the

United States was relatively clearer and more popular—facilitatory—than works like *Ulysses*, *The Wasteland* and *The Waves*).⁶

Briefly, the following are the presuppositions on which this essay is based. The New Latin American Novel and the Boom are not synonymous. The New Latin American Novel is best seen as a regional variant of European and North American Modernism, whose shape became increasingly visible in the 1940s and 1950s but whose origins lie in the avant-garde movements of the 1920s and in the early works of, above all, Mário de Andrade, Miguel Angel Asturias, Jorge Luis Borges and Alejo Carpentier. The Boom is the name that was given—at the time—to the intensification and climax of this literary phenomenon in the 1960s. This climax coincided, ironically enough, with another substantial shift in literary taste, so that the Boom itself also included elements of what would later be called the Post-Boom. But because the Post-Boom coincides with the perception of something more general called Postmodernism we have made the mistake of thinking that the “Post” in “Post-Boom” is the same kind of “Post” as the “Post” in “Postmodernism” or “Poststructuralism.” I believe that many facets ascribed to the Post-Boom are merely signs of the “normalization” (bourgeoisification?) of Latin American literature, which is why it is now possible for Latin Americans again to write simply—Mutis is a classic case in point, another would be Giardinelli—or to turn to detective fiction, science fiction or other popular genres, whether presented “straight” or parodically. In the end, however, I believe that the Post-Boom is merely that which comes after the Boom and in no sense that which goes “beyond” the Boom.

Much more confusing than any of this, I believe that Postmodernity is a profoundly damaging misnomer: that the great new age we see all around us—the “New Times” (Stuart Hall), at the “End of History” (Francis Fukuyama), in which we are thought to live—has been misconceived due to the shock brought about by the generalization of all the trends and phenomena created by the process of modernity itself. No doubt superstitious terrors relating to the imminent end of the millennium and thus of the world are adding to the sense of intellectual and moral crisis. This Postmodernity, this end of history, coinciding conveniently with the end of “actually existing socialism,” is perhaps better viewed as the globalization of the capitalist system, the perfection of the market and the beginning of the last stage of refinement of that age of rationality, science, industrialism and liberal individualism whose origins we associate with the process from the Renaissance

through the Enlightenment and, not merely incidentally, with the discovery of America and the growth of colonialism.

Thus the current period involves both the totalization of capitalism and the abolition of colonialism (whose *manifest* injustice fuelled widespread conflicts and the illusion that the proletariat could soon overthrow the capitalist and imperialist bourgeoisie). It is, accordingly, the period that has taken us from steam and gasoline to jets and cybernetics and whose effects now pervade the furthest reaches of the planet (we are all bourgeois now, because we are all “after the orgy”! See the works of Baudrillard).⁷

Thus if Postmodernism is to have any meaning, it is as the cultural style corresponding to the early period of what Ernest Mandel and Fredric Jameson optimistically called Late Capitalism, but which I, somewhat reluctantly, would call High Capitalism. Capitalism is triumphant and so, too, is individualism. The kind of complex textuality demanded by poststructuralist criticism, the unceasing “suspicion” with which cultural texts are currently “interrogated,” seem to me rather futile in the face of the wave of movements, works and styles from all times and places which can be permuted and kaleidoscoped according to—apparently—individual taste. It seems to escape most observers’ notice, however, that we are more free to consume than to produce—but presumably that is just the nature of reality: endless, incomprehensible, unsystematizable. Postmodernity, then, is more the name of a problem than of a solution: it is, we might say, a word—the word—which deconstructs itself.

Hence my reference to Borges’s two kings and their two different labyrinths. The current, global oneness, singularity—capitalism triumphant, New World Order—has produced a situation that we might have expected to be simpler but that is possibly more confusing and perplexing than at any other time in history. Multiplicity still exists, superficially it rules, but it is being systematically processed out of existence. Postmodernism, far from tolerating diversity, is the cultural mechanism for detecting and removing it. Hence also my attempt to step back—like Borges, like Mutis—and take the long view. This in a sense is the direction that Seymour Menton indicates to us in his *Latin America’s New Historical Novel*, when he remarks:

While some critics have prematurely hailed the demise of the “Boom” novelists and have touted the emergence of a new generation of “post-Boom” novelists, the empirical evidence

suggests that since 1979 the dominant trend in Latin American fiction has been the proliferation of New Historical Novels, the most canonical of which share with the Boom novels of the 1960s muralistic scope, exuberant eroticism, and complex, neobaroque (albeit less hermetic) structural and linguistic experimentation.⁸

If I had to sum up Menton's checklist of defining features I would say that his new, postmodern historical novels are rewritings of history which exude skepticism of their own activity but which nonetheless consider that activity inevitable. Ironically enough, put like this, the whole postmodern new wave may sound less radical than it sometimes seems to claim. What new generation is not more skeptical about its predecessors than about itself, whatever its own apparently candid claims to self-awareness? Despite everything, the works of Derrida and Foucault, the great deconstructors, simply resound with absolute certainty about the correctness of their own distinctive postures of skepticism and "suspicion." But if we turn, finally, to the work of Alvaro Mutis, we will see a still more radical twist to the process of redefinition. Quite properly, Menton does not include him in his list of "new historical novelists," yet there is a profound sense in which Mutis's whole world view is based on a *revision of history* both as theory and practice—one, ironically enough, that prevents him from writing anything as concretely overdetermined as a historical novel. For Mutis has a radical perspective both on man's relation to history in general and to the actual history that we have collectively experienced since the fifteenth century. He would not deign to write the more characteristic kind of New Historical Novel because he would argue that the satirical or parodic modes that this requires are in themselves grounded on some belief in some ultimate meaning, some critical myth of origin which can—might—ultimately put things to rights.

One of the most remarkable things about Mutis, who was born in 1923, is that he had reached the age of retirement when, in 1988, he began to produce a series of novels which have within a few years turned him into one of Latin America's most widely read authors. He was born in Bogotá, but his family took him to live in Brussels at the age of two. "Europe did not have a particular prestige because it was Europe," Mutis has told Fernando Quiroz. "It was my world. Colombia enchanted me, it is true. Above all, Coello, our estate in Tolima. But Colombia was an adventure, a journey from which I always returned."⁹ Mutis's father died when he was seven and the family went back to

Coello when he was nine. "When I say I've already known paradise I am telling the truth. No one can tell me about it. It is called Coello" (Quiroz, 24).

Mutis was permanently traumatized by the loss of his father and the departure from Europe: "There is a beautiful line in Rubén Darío, which José Bianco took as the title of one of his novels: *The Loss of the Kingdom*. The complete verse reads: 'The loss of that kingdom meant for me.' That was it. I lost my kingdom, which was Europe" (Quiroz, 20). Thus in one fell swoop Mutis was robbed of his father, a privileged and supposedly superior cultural experience which they had shared, and with it an aristocratic vision which he has nonetheless clung fast to throughout the rest of his life.

As a child, in compensation, Mutis became both an obsessive reader and an inveterate traveler, like his literary creation, Maqroll: "I was always profoundly attracted by the idea of climbing to the highest part of the prow to look down. It is something that still gives me great pleasure: to watch the boat going in and out, in and out, and moving on" (Quiroz, 21). Mutis left school before completing his *bachillerato* and turned to a number of different careers: in aviation (Lansa, Colombia), public relations (Esso, Colombia; Stanton, Mexico), and film distribution (for 20th Century Fox, in Mexico). The time with Esso ended in disaster when he had to flee to Mexico in 1956 for mismanaging expenses—mainly to treat his friends to opulent dinners—and he ended up in jail in 1959 for that offense. His *Diario de Lecumberri* (1960) communicates some of that experience. It was also in prison where he wrote a number of his most decisive early stories. After his release he stayed on in Mexico, where, like his close friend Gabriel García Márquez, he has lived ever since.

Mutis's political stance makes most other conservatives seem liberal. He is a monarchist and a belated devotee of the Holy Roman Empire. If García Márquez, an occasional supporter of Communist regimes, says that nothing of importance happened to him after the death of his grandfather when he was eight years old, the reactionary Mutis—who, as noted, lost his father at a similar age—insists that nothing of interest has happened in history since the Ottoman Turks took Byzantium and its Eastern Roman Empire in 1453. He is also opposed to the independence of Latin America because it was based on rationalism and liberalism, and, when asked about his political ideas during a visit to Puerto Rico, he urged that the island be liberated—and returned to the king of Spain!¹⁰

The single-mindedness—even the apparent simple-mindedness—of his endeavor is unusual in Latin American fiction. In the works of García Márquez, for example, there is an unmistakable continuity of atmosphere and setting—the world of “Macondo”—but characters and plots vary substantially. In Mutis’s oeuvre, however, one central character has been overwhelmingly dominant since 1986, and in reality since the beginning, in 1947. This is the “look-out” Maqroll el Gaviero, a seafarer, adventurer and all-round drifter or “extra-territorial” (“Maqroll never belonged to any place on earth,” *Abdul Bashur*, 52), whose nickname makes one think inevitably of the sailor from Triana who first saw the land of 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 which we now call Latin American literature.

One of Mutis’s earliest works, prophetically, was called “The Journey” (1948). Maqroll is a great traveler, though one who never gets anywhere, nor, it seems, really wants to get anywhere, at least deep down. He first appeared in Mutis’s poems (many of them prose poems), in the 1940s. The first book in which he plays an important role is *Los elementos del desastre* (poetry, 1953). After this his voice reappears in other collections and, in due course, in the novels *La Nieve del Almirante* (1986), *Ilona llega con la lluvia* (1987), *La última escala del tramp steamer* (1988), *Un bel morir* (1989), *Amirbar* (1990), *Abdul Bashur, soñador de navíos* (1991), and the stories of *Triptico de mar y tierra* (1993).

All these works are variations on a few themes, with a few simple changes in technique. Thus in *La Nieve* the narrator’s knowledge is based on discovery of a manuscript, the protagonist’s diary. In both *Ilona* and *Amirbar* the narrative is founded on the memory of an experience directly related by the protagonist to the narrator, who therefore participates marginally in the text. *Un bel morir* is a traditional relation about a third-person protagonist by an implied and privileged narrator. *Abdul Bashur* is the most complex of the narrations and uses all the devices developed in the earlier novels. In each work, at any rate, some things are constant: all are centred on Maqroll and in each he has a close relationship with at least one woman and one male friend (above all, Abdul Bashur); in each he travels, reads great works of history as he goes, meditates about fate and chance, dreams dark dreams at night, embarks on some hopeless and usually intranscendent

scheme, though without optimism, and fails lamentably. Only two things keep him going: “my sympathetic disposition toward the beings who inhabit history and toward the world which offers itself up to my senses” (*Ilona*, 36).

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 anti-heroes, Lowry’s consul, Goytisolo’s Juan Sin Tierra and other real or metaphorical drifters. What separates him from all of them is the uniquely radical nature of his skepticism—closer to Nietzsche than to Schopenhauer, closer to Baudrillard than to Foucault—and his absolute determination both to try and to fail. Maqroll is of indeterminate origin, nationality, age and physiognomy. He is not a Latin American and does not—at first sight—represent anything particularly Latin American. Like postmodern fiction as a whole, he is thoroughly deterritorialized. Although, to satisfy the conventions of fiction, he speaks in Spanish, 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. At first sight they correspond most closely to the “real,” but a reality not like that of nineteenth-century writing or twentieth-century social realist fiction, but like some new variant in which the real and the emblematic or the allegorical are fused together:

When we reached the open sea and the boat began to rock gently against the waves, I felt I was returning to what I had always been: Maqroll the Lookout, without country or law, giving myself over to the word of those ancient dice that roll to entertain the gods and to mock mankind. (*Amirbar*, 125)

Our lives are the rivers that flow into the sea which is death. Innumerable Hispanic writers have seen the world this way, but what separates them is how they conceive this process. Mutis’s vision is at once curiously familiar and yet wholly individual. The last lines of *Un bel morir* give the flavor:

The Lookout, without turning round, waved goodbye. Leaning against the wheel, he looked like some weary Charon, overcome by the weight of his memories, setting off in search of that repose

for which he had searched so long and for which there would be nothing to pay. (158)

Neither Maqroll nor Mutis has any political aspirations or illusions of any sort, so the kind of bitter demonic disillusionment to be found in so many writers from Arlt to Vargas Llosa does not apply; nor do even García Márquez's literary versions of Gramsci's "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." Borges believes the human condition to be fundamentally absurd, but he also believes that there is no point in lamenting it. To that extent Mutis's protagonist is Borgesian, only with real political opinions, real sex, real places and realistic adventures. Cortázar's characters are always dreaming about something, some utopia that must exist somewhere, and even Onetti's collection of hopeless cases are men who manage to fantasize from time to time. But Maqroll—unlike his literary friend and comrade Abdul Bashur—seems almost to want things to go wrong, as if it were his duty to live the balefulness of the human condition to the limits, no matter how much pain he has to suffer:

Maqroll began with the conviction that everything was always lost in advance and without remedy. We are born, he would say, with a vocation for defeat. Bashur believed that everything always remained to be done and that those who really ended up losing were always the others. . . . (*Abdul Bashur*, 51)

Alberto Ruy Sánchez has said that Maqroll's endeavor "consists in living profoundly each one of his acts in the full knowledge that they lead to nothing."¹¹ This is why Mutis is against all "what ifs" in history or in the lives of individuals. There are no ifs, he insists: life is as it is, and history is what happened:

The "what ifs" in the life of men are like the "what ifs" in history: they lead nowhere. What is the use of wondering "what if" Napoleon had won the battle of Waterloo? The fact is that he didn't. And history, like life, does not allow this kind of hypothesis. It is so absurd, so senseless, so brutal. . . . Maqroll has spent a lifetime explaining in his own way the futility of working out what he never did, what he could have done. . . . It makes no difference.¹²

Thus Maqroll is repeatedly castigated by the philosophy of his creator, which is his own. Mutis takes a harsh view of the human condition at all times and in all places—we are sentenced to life—but believes that modern culture, post-1453, is wholly without transcendence. This is why he frequently wonders aloud if his books will be of concern to anyone in this world after the fall (of Byzantium):

I confess to some doubt as to whether this sequence of wanderings will be of interest to my readers, aware as I am that many of them are anachronistic in these drab present times which are our lot. (*Abdul Bashur*, 53)

This is also why we see a “curious inversion of implicit values in everything related to Maqroll: the true state of grace is to be in disgrace” (Ruy Sánchez, 74). Thus Mutis’s poetry is reactionary in the most literal sense, structured by the absence of the absolutist vision of the middle ages, dominated as it was by the sacred symbolic power of monarchy. His collections of poetry have titles like *Los elementos del desastre* (1953), *Memoria de los hospitales de Ultramar* (1959) and *Los trabajos perdidos* (1965), and he once gave a now famous lecture on the theme “Despair.”

The most interesting interpretation I have seen of Mutis’s philosophy is by Fernando Cruz Konfly, 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.¹³

I think that this is true and I think that there is still another point to add. In the 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. His own absurd, provocative, arbitrary choice of ideal time and place—Byzantium up to 1453—is only the other side of Maqroll’s profound conviction that no time or place is any better or any worse

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. (*Amirbar*, 52)

Maqroll ritually acts out the oft-repeated paradox that those who travel the roads and seas have a more eternal, static vision, despite all the changes in panorama, than those who live out the misleading specificities of their sedentary lives. In his literature Mutis shows that all roads lead to death, and there is no reason to choose one against another. In his own life Mutis has simply imposed a meaning on the narrative of history and inserted himself into it, and so he is not merely reactionary in the conventional sense of the word: he is not interested in any of the modern forms of conservatism, but is instead committed to a fantastic, idealized past.

Such is the paradoxical nature of so-called Postmodernism. Postmodernity itself, when all is said and done, may be nothing other than a modernity that has finally accepted its own presuppositions, dispelling all humanisms and romanticisms, fully secular and rational at last. A writer like Mutis, who would have been more than five hundred years out of date when everyone still believed in the Meaning-of-History (only a few Marxists persist), now turns out to be a distinctive voice within the Latin American Post-Boom, not least because he sees with such clear-eyed and determined certainty (one more illusion, no doubt) that postmodern man and woman must live radically contradictory lives, forever constructing and deconstructing their identities and philosophies as they zig-zag incoherently through life. Which is why Mutis also believes that all labyrinths are really meaningless: beyond them lies, always, the desert.

Notes

1. "Triunfo y desolación de Maqroll," in S. Mutis, ed., *Tras las rutas de Maqroll el Gaviero* (Cali: Proartes, 1988), 143-6 (143). This and all other translations in this essay are mine.
2. Jorge Luis Borges, "Avatars of the Tortoise" (1939), *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952* (London: Souvenir Press, 1973).
3. Donald Shaw: *Nueva narrativa hispanoamericana* (Madrid, Cátedra, 1981); "Towards a definition of the Post-Boom," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 66 (1989): 87-94; and "On the New Novel in Spanish America," *New Novel Review* 1.1 (1993): 59-73.
4. Philip Swanson: "Introduction: background to the Boom," 1-26, and "Conclusion: after the Boom," 222-45, in his *Landmarks in Modern Latin American Fiction*, ed. (London: Routledge, 1990); and "Boom or bust? Latin America and the not so new novel," *New Novel Review* 1:1 (1993): 75-92.
5. London: Verso, 1989.
6. This was not the case in Eastern Europe, where writing was supposed to be clear and accessible for the masses, whilst criticism was intensely difficult and complex, and it would be interesting to speculate why this discrepancy came about.
7. Especially *The Transparency of Evil* (London: Verso, 1993).
8. S. Menton, *Latin America's New Historical Novel* (Austin: Texas UP, 1993), 14.
9. Fernando Quiroz, *El reino que estaba para mí: conversaciones con Alvaro Mutis* (Bogotá: Norma, 1993), 19.
10. J.G. Cobo-Borda, "Soy Gibelino, Monárquico y Legitimista," in S. Mutis, *Tras las rutas*, 251-58. In another article in the same volume, Jaime Jaramillo Escobar remarks that Mutis "lives in a time entirely alien to his interests and tastes" (163).
11. Alberto Ruy Sánchez, "La obra de Alvaro Mutis como un edificio mágico y sus rituales góticos de tierra caliente," in S. Mutis, *Tras las rutas*, 63-76 (71).
12. Quoted by Quiroz, *El reino*, 79.
13. F. Cruz Kronfly, "La Nieve del Almirante o la agonía de la modernidad," in S. Mutis, *Tras las rutas*, 133-42.

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