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Hill, A Sketch-Map of Alvaro Mutis' "Reseña de los Hospitales de Ultramar"

# A SKETCH-MAP OF ALVARO MUTIS' "RESEÑA DE LOS HOSPITALES DE ULTRAMAR"

by W. Nick Hill  
For Barbara X.

John Felstiner's experience of Macchu Picchu, gained through the process of translating Neruda, should be instructive for North American readers not familiar with the most recent Spanish American writing.<sup>1</sup> Felstiner claims to have been radically reoriented (North-South instead of East-West) by his encounter with Neruda, who fixed the ruins of the Incan fortress in the linguistic and imaginary landscape of all Americans. In a different way—as Enrico Mario Santi shows—Neruda managed to radically re-write the history of Latin America through his contact with Macchu Picchu.<sup>2</sup> Alvaro Mutis and writers such as Enrique Lihn, Carlos Germán Belli, Alejandra Pizarnik, José Emilio Pacheco, and Oscar Hahn have established themselves in Spanish America, and they have been doing some radical rewriting of their own. As I hope to show with respect to Mutis, they are each worthy of being "discovered" by North American readers. Like his fellow poets, Mutis occupies places that are not indicated on conventional maps of reference although one needs those maps to locate them. The enigmatic nature of a *terra incognita* defined by a known world is characteristic of Mutis' work and links it to the puzzle of language and modernity.

Literary modernity is like nothing so much as it is like metaphor, one that puzzles over itself. Except for episodic, historical, and therefore problematic delimitations, modernity cannot be defined precisely save in functional terms, for instance, the definitions in the negative that Hugo Friedrich uses (taking from the Keatsian "negative capability"), or Octavio Paz' "modern literature negates itself and in so doing, affirms-confirms its modernity."<sup>3</sup>

A riddle or enigma is a complex metaphor constructed to obscure the object of its signification (meaning). That sense of design is linked directly to the meaning embedded within it, and is only fully appreciated when its signified becomes meaningful. To oversimplify somewhat, I would say that a "classical" enigma is one in which there is merely an object of meaning. But a "modern" enigma is one in which the object of meaning may be nothing more than the form of its own construction or the process itself of determining what that construction is. In any case, an enigma is a metaphorical device which controls meanings, privileging only the correct, conventional one in the "classical" sense and not only one in the "modern," since by virtue of its self-referentiality, any number of meanings can fit so long as they function.

Somewhat of an enigma himself, Mutis was born in Bogotá in 1923, but has lived in political exile in Mexico for some 30 years. He is a business man who spent much of his youth in Brussels and can be asked if it bothers him to be Latin American, implying that to some extent he had a choice about it. Nevertheless, like his good friend Garcia Márquez, he is rooted, imaginatively at least, in a remote Colombian

childhood home. Mutis has stated that he is apolitical, that the best form of government would be enlightened monarchy, that the last historical event of interest for him was the fall of Byzantium in 1453, although more recently, he has also admitted to an intense interest in 18th century France.<sup>4</sup>

Poet and narrator, he has published steadily over the years, five books of poetry, two of which are anthologies of past works (*Summa de Maqroll el Gaviero* and *Maqroll el Gaviero*) (1975) and two books of narrative. His latest publications are *Caravansary* (1981) and *Los emisarios* (1984).<sup>5</sup> In an interview with J. G. Cobo Borda, Mutis says that the “Reseña” is continued and ended in *Caravansary*, and like it, in my opinion, the “Reseña” begs the question of its own generic nature, whether poetry, prose, or both. Although Mutis’ work is frequently reviewed and anthologized, no one has yet explained what its generic experimentation might mean as regards literary modernity.

The pieces in translation which follow this introduction were selected from the *Summa de Maqroll el Gaviero*, Mutis’ best known book of poems. A few texts from other books are included to give some idea of the background and development of the “Review of the Overseas Hospitals (Resña de los Hospitales de Ultramar)” (1959).<sup>6</sup> The “Resña” embodies a mingling of narrative and poetic aspects which occupy a curious space related to poetic prose and narrative poetry, a space not quite equivalent to either of those. Somewhat curious as well is the solitary persona of Maqroll el Gaviero who appears in that space and who would seem to have more affinity to the Nordic cultures that attracted Guillermo Valencia or León de Greiff than to Arturo Cova or the Buendia clan.<sup>7</sup> In such latitudes, one of the constant preoccupations is to find one’s way. Indeed, toward the end of the “Reseña,” there is a *mapa mundi* which refers to these overseas Hospitals.

“The Map (El mapa)” consists of nine scenes which share with the 18th century charts of the New World the cartographer’s esthetic sense of the scale of man and the world: the disproportionately large figure of a wounded warrior emphatically signals a spot where buried weapons mark the birth of a great river and beyond to a desert, while his feet rest on a city of sunny plazas. The other scenes appear to be spatially unrelated, except to list clear physical and emotional images: jungles over which a seaplane flies, its droning intermingled with the smell of cinnamon, sailors setting out for the beaches of the Doleful Islands after their ship has tranquilly sunk, a stage coach driver drinking a glass of cider while leaning against a marble torso. While there appears to be a referential function set out here, it is not evident after all what the scenes refer to since they also have the intransitive feel of surrealistic images.

I will try to trace a map of the “Reseña,” not because the landmarks are hidden, but rather, because like riddles, they are misleadingly obvious. My purpose will be to suggest what Mutis’ peculiar melange—I do not mean here a mere stylistic identity—might imply for at least one significant aspect of writing in Spanish America in this second half of a century nearing its terminus.

In a broad sense, a map is a metaphor for spatial orientation but when that orientation is itself metaphorical, as in these texts, or as in a memory, the map becomes self-referring, introspective, a map of “mapness.” The present “Map” refers

enigmatic. A sketch-map of Alvaro Mutis' "Reseña de los Hospitales de Ultramar" company stories like Robinson Crusoe, or, as suggested, it might refer to another map. Just as plausible, the scenes the map depicts might outline a "kasmus": "a brief story which implies a questioning about the pertinence, scope and validity of different social, religious or moral standards."<sup>8</sup> The fact that Irene Bessiere defines the fantastic tale as one in which the enigma and the "kasmus" overlap, suggests one (though unlikely) avenue to approach the sort of considerations stirred up by Mutis' writing.

Ironically, Mutis looks East-West but from a Southern perspective and even then, he looks askance, through history, as if trying to recover something lost in the interstices and lacunae of human experience, which means he looks across the expanse of time timelessly and to places that, by implication, lie to the East: Rome, Spain, North Africa, Central Europe; the central passageway across the world until interest focused on the vertical passageway, not to God but to the moon. As a result or as a condition, the colors and shapes of history infuse his vision of a world that necessarily leaves off being historical, but is also not mythical, allegorical, symbolic and yet admits nuances of all of these.

Critics have pointed out the many literary influences on Mutis' work, some of which Mutis has acknowledged in interviews: the adolescent adventure stories of Jules Verne and Emilio Salgari; Baudelaire, Dickens, Conrad, Proust, Breton, Eluard, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Antonio Machado, Pablo Neruda, Jorge Isaacs and so on.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, all of these many and varied influences including an interest in medieval times, 18th Century France, etc., are some of the same influences that have affected most modern writers active in the contemporary period. The question as to the modernity of Mutis' writing is an open one however, in part precisely because such readings amount to a willing acceptance of the whole of the modern tradition, that is, they are not put into the service of recreating that tradition.

*Los elementos del desastre* (The Elements of Disaster) (1953) and *Trabajos perdidos* (Wasted Efforts) (1965),—which already included the bulk of the "Reseña"—seen in the retrospective selection of the *Summa*, might connote something on the order of a "Big Bang" theory of a poetical universe. That is, a significant, determinative, yet unknown first cause (so simple perhaps as the break with the idyll of childhood) which sets in motion the simultaneous dynamics of growth and entropy, wherein the latter is always on the increase. These abstractions are manifested in some early poems or in straightforward incursions into the tradition of the prose poem. They take advantage of spaces of isolation, coffee plantations, hotel rooms, military posts, and through glimpses of the human isolation thereby implied: military men, hussars, prostitutes, traveling peddlers of herbs and drugs. Also included are the remote presence of the seas or memories of them and of voyages; travels downriver or to secluded places, on foot or in trains subject to no schedule but that permitted by the vicissitudes of nature.

And nature is there too, an unmistakable sensual, physical presence that, akin to the language itself, serves as a grounding device. In "Nocturno" for example, the language is so concretely sensual that it copulates with night and water to engender a child, the memory of childhood. Part of the disquiet that accompanies such texts has to do with the solitary loneliness of rain at night and the solitude of the hussar

in a boy's dream, or by the texts, a world that may be Latin America but at the same time one that floats, unfixed in time and space. Perhaps it is the memory of Latin America or places like it, that are perceived as marginal to another world; seen in a way analogous to that of North Americans looking South, i. e., looking through a world to see another.

These elements of disaster and the wasted efforts to put them together can only suggest a consciousness to link them. A kind of story unfolds, although it is so fragmentary that nothing but a connectedness insinuates itself. In these poems an epic dimension embodied in the solitary functionality of the *húsar* serves as an heroic archetype embedded in the psyche of a people cross-bred between the masters of European civilization and the actors in a drama in which space, people and animals intermingle, as in "Three Images (Tres Imágenes)" where an assassin, a "family of acrobats with blue clouds in their eyes, / this delicate apparatus that fabricates gardenias," a moth, a herd of elk, all "have traveled together for a long time / and have never been friends." The voice then wonders: "Perhaps they form the retinue of an unspeakable dream / or serve to conjure over me the glossy peace that dissolves the dead."<sup>10</sup>

The hussar dies in these spaces and now lies between two tranquil seas. His voice, his presence colors all human endeavor in this world so like Latin America. This archetype is not the ghost of Caesar, but rather the ghost of Caesar's imperial trooper, the functionary soldier, mercenary. He is surely a sign of past glory, a relic who lives on in another way in García Márquez' *The Autumn of the Patriarch*.

Nature and character conspire to provide a network of associations that outline the contours of a world whose "history" of events is unknown. And yet that context is meaningful as regards the heritage of its principal inhabitant. The selected texts from the "Reseña" reflect the elaboration of a "narrative core" which comes to focus on the figure and life of Maqroll El Gaviero. He is introduced in "Maqroll's Prayer (Oración de Maqroll)" where the modulation of tones, from supplication, to frustration and anger, establishes the basis for a complex expressive nucleus. As Sucre correctly points out, the *Summa* of Maqroll is the compendium of all the previous characters in Mutis' vision and, therefore, some of the constituent elements of what will be recognized as Maqroll's world are given elsewhere, in pieces often easily characterized as sensually lyrical, or as prose poems that only hint at a strange, disquieting undercurrent.<sup>11</sup> As the title also implies, the *Summa* attempts to *perfect* what had previously been incomplete, tentative, or dispersed. It is by means of the figure of Maqroll, that the *Summa* can bring forth the definitive character of its perfection, which is that of a ruin.

What is known of Maqroll's circumstances must be surmised from his sobriquet "el Gaviero," or Ship's Lookout, a trade that privileges sight and communication of new vistas. Maqroll is, anachronistically, the last of a line of medieval men who can only survive through propagating their age old seed in the virgin soil of a New World.<sup>12</sup> His mere presence in that world is a sign of his functionality, personal and institutional, a connotation implicit in the world he inhabits. His is an exile by virtue of the "new" to which he has been allied; an exile from his own society and from the new society, so meaning and identity are prime concerns for his solitary reflections.

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The "Reseña" outlines the remnants of Maqroll's simple, even common story. While pausing at those moments of rest or recuperation which imply the action absent in the present of narration, Maqroll recounts or remembers episodes that make up the infrastructure of human history, tales that don't quite achieve the level of history nor the breadth of novels and are not folklore although are perhaps closest to it. He worked in a mine, spent time visiting brothels, recuperated from wounds in a hospital, sought refuge in an abandoned railroad car, prayed for succor.

In the bare functionality of this life, the denuded tasks and objects take on symbolic, even mythical overtones whose only object is a common man, any man, or the writer alone. Symbolic profiles, "The Waterfall (La cascada)," "The Wagon (La carreta)," "The Map (El mapa)," organize themselves around a single motif: travel, "The Trip (El viaje)." It is travel, the propulsion of an object through space, that explains the story, that becomes the history. But as this world is circumscribed, in its immensity like a ray of light in a mine shaft, these elements reappear and seem predetermined.

The force of the narrative impulse doesn't propel itself toward some future but rather backwards toward a determinative history, which is unstated. The future here is only death. So that every move is overshadowed by an ominous possibility and, in effect, is never taken but remembered, as the step of another. Nothing happens, which is to say that whatever happens, happens subtly, inside something else, as if nothing happened after all. Some of De Chirico's urban images come to mind, although Mutis' images are only remnants of an urbanizing force.

In one sense, this sketch echoes that of the decadent, or modernist hero, passive and overcome with *tedium vitae*, save for the fact that he finds himself, not in the drawing room of a Parisian apartment, but rather suffering from malaria in a "Second Class Coach (El coche de segunda)" abandoned at the end of tracks that lead nowhere. Trains, or as here the remnants of them, are recurrent images in Mutis. Remnants, like the man Maqroll, are all equalized in a virile, sensual celebration of decay. Here death struggles to overcome life and human perspectives are reversed and are brought, with all others, to a common denominator.

The reader is led to make narrative connections in an attempt to clarify a confusing sense of chronology wherein some episodes would appear to precede others in a causal sequence. They do not, however, because the antecedents are textual, not chronological. An example is "The Trip" where the motif of the train, the rhyme of the shout of waters and the undercurrent of disaster establish a basis for an ideal vision of the world and for a narrative mode that, as we shall see, is not completely separable from poetic techniques. It is possible to connect fragments of the history of Maqroll's existential situation ("On the River") and his perception of ruin ("The Waterfall") and link them to "The Trip," to trains and thus find, among the abandoned coaches of a train, the "Second Class Coach."

The train and the reality evoked by "The Trip" bear a strong resemblance to the atmosphere of Juan José Arreola's "El Guardaguayas (The Switchman)."<sup>13</sup> The strange little switchman tells a would-be passenger that the train may or may not arrive according to the company's carefully printed schedule and that, supposing the passenger were able to board, once underway, he would have to abandon himself and his destination to the fates.

The narrator of Mutis' "The Trip" is the conductor of a train drawn by a "small pink colored locomotive" that travels from the high country to the coastal lowlands.<sup>14</sup> The details of the trip itself, the multicolored train, its timetable, the passengers, time itself, the washed out bridge, all register the same tonality. Because he narrates, the conductor is the only object unaffected by time on the train. On one of the trips, he falls in love with a young woman, who has become a widow during the passage, and runs away with her to live the rest of his life as a tax collector of the tariff placed on the purple fish abundant in the Great River. He learns that the train has been abandoned and is used by the birds and summer lovers. But time here is an all-encompassing illusion. Only the desire to respond to the narrative dimension provides a sense of time, a chronology. If "The Trip" represents an ideal world, the "Second Class Coach" is its decadent phase, a march backward that aides in spawning an avatar. No matter whether we identify the abandoned train of "The Trip" with the "Second Class Coach," Maqroll, an ancestor of the tax collector, lives after him in the inverse of time which this nature provides.

The "Second Class Coach" sits abandoned between an escarpment and the swirling river below, where mules turn in concert with the trunks of trees, moving downriver toward the sea. In a poem not included here, "La muerte de Matias Aldecoa (The Death of Matias Aldecoa)," Maqroll's counterpart, that remnant of Aldecoa, "bloated and mildewed cadaver, / . . . / turning in the foamy eddies, / without eyes and without lips," spins downriver and discovers, suddenly, "the true, the essential / substance of his days in this world." It is an awareness that reaches back to the middle ages, to the *Danse Macabre*, to Jorge Manrique's famous lines about our lives that like rivers flow to the sea which is death, and it also signals an enigma, of life in death.<sup>15</sup> On a curve of the river where the "Second Class Coach" sits, the enigma is embodied in an old tin sign. It sticks out of the red clay embankment close beside the abandoned coach and still preserves the image of a boy in pajamas who holds a candle in one hand and a now unidentified object in the other. The enigma, like "The Map," is doubly referential, signalling itself and pointing to the space inside the coach, where Maqroll lies sweating with malaria amidst the buzzing of flies, a scene that conjures up afternoons of childhood when one was sick with fever.

It is here in this space precariously balanced that Maqroll exists for no apparent reason other than the tenacity of life clinging to itself. We see the image of a helpless man surrounded by devouring forces that would contend with the needs, desires and passions languishing in Maqroll's exhausted body; they are all as indifferent to him as the liberating flow of the current far below is to the mules. The women who cook for the miners working downriver occasionally come to sit, to dangle their feet and chat. Like the acute beauty of the natural surroundings, the women are also mostly indifferent to the man's predicament. They use Maqroll for sex much as life uses them, an equal exchange. The dynamics of this decadence are complex and deceiving.

What is reported remains the inner, lyrical sense of a man's exile and decay. That inner sense implies an old world expanded and made new by another world only recently discovered. And yet there is more than one way in which a doubt hovers over the question of which is the new and which the old world. "The Death of Captain Cook (La muerte del Capitan Cook)" tampers with the conventional order of

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things. Cook is asked by unknown interlocutors to describe France, Belgium, and Rome, but he claims to have cared for a woman who was blinded in Valparaiso, Chile by the light of the Annunciation. This may be a parody of New Worldism, as indeed there are other possible parodies of coetaneous esthetic/belief systems, i. e., *Moder-rismo*. New and old, innocence and maturity, male, female, life, death, modern and traditional values mingle in a puzzling melange that falls on either side of cliché. The assembled meanings of these juxtapositions point erroneously, but nevertheless point to commonplaces associated with Latin America.

Maqroll's world, lyrical though it may be, is presented by means of narrative devices. The texts of the "Reseña" have a frame, supplied in the "Prologue (Prólogo)" by an unknown recorder. In conjunction with factors such as the fragmentary nature of the corpus and the discontinuous or incomplete character of individual pieces, the "Prologue" brings to mind the conceit of the faithful copyist who has brought to light the words of the true author. Furthermore, the impulse to link the stories and tales is constantly reestablished by the "frame," thus providing an otherwise illusive continuity for the whole.

The unknown narrator claims that the "Hospitales de Ultramar" is the metaphorical name given by Maqroll to the range of evils and tribulations that hound a man as he labors toward death. The "Reseña" is a grouping of critical assessments, the "allusions" of a man at the end of life.<sup>16</sup> It is possible to surmise, as we have, that hospitals, troops, and the vital link between them, represent the underside of an imperial enterprise: an historical feat accomplished from the perspective of "Ultramar," whereby the known world becomes old by virtue of the new it recognizes. Institutions of charity, the hospitals treat the non-functioning members of the newly formed and forming society of European men who find themselves helplessly immersed in complex moments of reflection, illness, tranquility, and decay.

The perversely lyrical "Hospital by the Bay (El hospital de la bahia)" is, on the contrary, surely narrated by Maqroll. He recalls how the sea water, "the water of our voyages" would flood the place with a sound that, at first, was "confused with the murmuring of fever that rises and whirls inside the head." He also recounts how the orderly would "baptize our ills with the names of girls" and then ask about them as if they were "young maids who had lovingly accompanied us through our long, toiling trance-like nights." In the piece called "Fragment," what appears to be the same narrator tells of the train which carried sick men to the Saltflats Hospital. He compares the wind-blown sheets that wrapped the "injured bodies" of the passengers to "good fortune unscrolling its symbols." At night, after the train had completed its return trip, the sky would glow in the distance from the burning of the sheets. A doubt remains as to whether the ironic "good fortune" of those whose sheets were incinerated applies only to the sheets. We wonder, therefore, whether Maqroll could have narrated these events unless he were, incongruously in this case, a worker on the train.

The great majority of the "hospitals," though, are presented by the unknown narrator. Still, the inner reflections arise out of an individual's malaise or isolation such that they would seem to preclude any narrator other than Maqroll. Such uncertainty as to the identity of the narrator calls attention to itself by blurring the



matter of whether the focus of narration occupies a place within Maqroll's world or without it. For the moment then, there is no choice but to postulate that the "frame" does not dissipate. Certainly not unique or unusual, this manner of making the framed context problematic is reminiscent of Duchamp's "ready-mades" in that the mental set of the viewer pointedly becomes part of the contemplative experience. In Duchamp's case, all that complex of meanings and associations is brought to the scene of the "object" which is incorporated into the lived context. In a somewhat analogous manner, what is known of the person Maqroll is contextually given through these various framing devices and this is also true, then, of what is apprehended of his interiority, his lyrical being.

The Hospitals too serve a double metaphorical function, a double vector. They refer to the universe Maqroll inhabits and as such are a key to his inner state, ciphers to be read in the lyrical inwardness of decline and decay. The Hospitals are also metaphorical embodiments of concrete things in this world, remainders of civilization which therefore signal, by absence and ruin, all that those civilizing impulses wished for.

Maps and memorable objects that serve as landmarks are metaphors like everything else in Maqroll's universe. They supply, at the least, some hope of orientation, or of understanding the "impossible history" of the fragmented life of Maqroll. Even so, there is little hope in as much as there is only silence. No speech interrupts the silence of these narrations, a silence created by the collision of space and solitude.

Mentioned at the outset, "El Mapa" is another of the "framed" texts. In this case, the frame sets out the unknown recorder's assertions that Maqroll frequently referred to his map of the Hospitals but only once showed it to his friends and then neglected to explain the obscurity of some of the scenes and even failed to clarify which of the scenes were elucidated.

It is also apparent that a couple of logical problems attend a straightforward reading of this map. As it is given by the unknown recorder, the reader has to assume that the map itself was not written, but was an oral, memory map, for how else to chart emphasis, or the smell of cinnamon that accompanies the droning of the seaplane?<sup>17</sup> What we have is a double enigma: a map and its description both of which create the expectation of some "answer" or just a clue to guide us to it.

"The Wagon (La carreta)" could be said to be framed by multiple framing devices. In addition to the "Prologue," another frame appears at the end of the "Reseña" and introduces some of Gaviero's memorable visions, his experiences and some of the objects most familiar to him. Only three items are listed: "Solitude (Soledad)," "Litany (Letania)," and, curiously, the only object *per se*, "The Wagon." Maqroll's existential predicament which, in several ways, is also that of the unknown recorder who relates it, is itself framed and frames "The Wagon." This "framed" frame specifies that Maqroll is charged with delivering a wagon full of useless tools to an abandoned mine in the highlands for reasons that can only be surmised. The whole enterprise seems to be a tortuous condemnation, akin to the trials of Sisyphus. Nevertheless, Maqroll's toil and the wagon, which literally becomes the vehicle for the story that begins to dominate his attention, also signal an historical period of progress and exploitation, of mining, rudimentary transportation, and primitive

The object of Maqroll's obsession is depicted in the manner of a list;<sup>18</sup> four emblematic scenes of an "impossible history" we are told, are painted on the panels of the wagon, two on each side.<sup>19</sup> The vignettes that decorate "The Wagon" are reminiscent of folk art treatments of episodes in a history so well known that it can be reduced to such details.<sup>20</sup> Each self-contained scene is composed in antithetical statements which feature exotic saltimbanques, or strange juxtapositions such as a locomotive and a lead rider carrying the banner of Columbus.

At the same time the scenes exhibit a "narrative" movement. The notable woman who appears in each provides continuity of character which together with the narrator's comment that the history continued on the other side of the wagon, indicates that there is indeed a chronological sequence unfolding itself. Without fully understanding the story, we sense that the "history" is given in its proper order, in part because of the concrete physical reality of its conveyance which effectively divides the story into two distinct but continuous chapters.

The panels focus on the rather bizarre woman who occupies a position at the center of a circular history. Hers is a fable that repeats itself continually in that the battle of the well dressed soldiers and the ragged soldiers has no end. It is simply initiated again when a woman gives succor to a wounded warrior. We begin to recognize in this woman an archetypal Helen, or more apporriately, "la belle dame sans merci", especially as we are told that she writes of love while leaning against a mauve colored rock during the battle that rages down below.<sup>21</sup> The impossibility of the story is, I believe, related to the fact that it appears to be based on conflicting temporal orders. For instance, the Latin military maxims inscribed on the wounded warrior's armor can be linked to the locomotive by means of the advent of Columbus' image. The story alludes to both the discovery and conquest of the New World and to the forces of progress and scientific positivism, characteristic of late 19th century Latin America. Seen from another perspective, the timelessness of the Helen motif corresponds to the circularity of the "history" but, apart from that, the motif can also be readily associated with a fixed point in time, i. e., the *fin de siècle*. Such themes and their presentation in "The Wagon" can be viewed as broadly allusive of Spanish American *Modernismo* (ca. 1886-1916) particularly since distinctive, but subtle *Modernista* traits are caricatured: the mention of muted colors ("mauve," "silvery") or the hint of color ("snappy") accompany the common practice of transposing paintings into poems.

In spite of what seems to be a coherent allusion outlined above, the impossibility of the "history" remains rooted in temporal concerns. For instance, the chronology of the habitation of the New World may be altered, or reversed, by the wagon's story. In what the narrator identifies as the first panel, betrayal of the bleeding warrior is written in the woman's malicious smile as she nurses him, and then (in the second panel) welcomes the saltimbanques, whom I associate with an exotic, perhaps indigenous people, who have gained access to the other shore by the woman's stratagem. This paradoxical interpretation, similar to the sense of "The Death of Captain Cook," is echoed in the shameless behavior of the woman (depicted in the first panel on the other side of the wagon), a behavior which is, nonetheless, consonant with her willful independence. She would seem to be prostituting herself to the

Apart from whatever appropriateness inheres in this view of the wagon's message, there remains a question as to the identity or signification of this woman. My reading would suggest that she is an allegorical representation of Spanish America and her literature. Even so, her identity is immaterial save for one consideration. After this description/interpretation of the panels, no clear meaning is apparent and more importantly, none is accessible to Maqroll. No matter how we identify the woman, we remain uncertain which focus claims our attention: Maqroll and the wagon itself, or its message. The impossible history that underlies Maqroll's story and gives it one possible meaning, is still an enigma.

Considering anew the entire text, the reader is faced with an interpretive dilemma. "The Wagon" presents a problem in reading, as has been suggested with respect to other pieces in the "Reseña," because it is, in fact, the description of a narration. For example, in the astonishment of the passengers watching the woman delouse her sex painted in the panel, or is it an interpretation that the narrator or Maqroll has added? The illustrations themselves represent the world Maqroll inhabits, and they claim the reader's attention. Conversely, the text ends with the narrator's comment that each panel hides a moral lesson Maqroll will never understand, and therefore, Maqroll as character makes a similar claim on the reader's attention.

The reader's dilemma and the vacillating focus of attention calls into question a related puzzle that touches upon a generic problem underlying the entirety of the "Reseña." Edgar O'Hara suggests that Mutis is "able to achieve a symbiosis of narration and description; for that reason his stories don't stop being poems, and vice versa."<sup>23</sup> If these texts are read conventionally, as prose poems, then it is to be expected that different strategies will be used and other perceptions result than is the case if they are read as narratives.<sup>24</sup>

For the most part, commentators have read Mutis' texts as conventional (prose) poems. Drawing on the nature of his *functional* presence in the space he occupies, such commentators understand Maqroll to be a fictional consciousness that organizes and links the various (textual) fragments of his memory. Maqroll is the seer, the man who has nothing to do but wait for death and so his trials serve as an allegory for the isolated struggle of the writer, or more starkly as a revelation of human finitude. Maqroll might be, then, some distant relative of a figure like Maldoror, surrounded by objects that are real because imaginable.<sup>25</sup> In this view, the problematic confluence of narrative and poetic features found in the "Reseña" are simply subsumed under the guise of the conventional prose poem.

Whatever the merits of this conventional description, it should not discount the fact that looking beyond the mere conventionality of things is the province of the seer. As has been pointed out, the *Summa* of Maqroll is the compendium of all the previous characters that people Mutis' conception of the world. There is therefore implicit in the project a result, an entity that incorporates and represents each item, thus becoming at the same time all of them and also different from any one. Recall too that a *Summa* makes implicit an attempt at perfecting its own project. The nature of what such a perfection alludes to links Mutis—he himself calls it a "dark underground"—to the poets and to one of the central concerns of the last 35 years

In his "Notas sobre la poesía hispanoamericana actual (Notes on Recent Hispanic American Poetry)," Pedro Lastra is the first to understand and outline in critical terms how this new poetry differs from the previously constituted "contemporary" verse, that of poets generally known in this country: Neruda, Octavio Paz, and Nicanor Parra. The new poetry first began to appear, precisely at the conventional demarcation of "contemporary" poetry, in the 50's, and is greatly indebted to Parra's conversational anti-poetry. "One of the salient aspects of anti-poetry"—says Lastra—"was a pointing toward events, which reappears in current poetry in the form of 'a new contact with reality,' as was proposed by Ezra Pound, Eliot and Hulme . . ." The inspiration for the new poets was not only to be found in the Imagists and Anglo-American Modernists however. A similar kind of practice was present in the Spanish-American *Modernistas*, José Martí, Rubén Darío, Leopoldo Lugones, as well as in the writing of the so-called *Postmodernistas*, Ramón López Velarde (Mexico, 1888-1921) and Carlos Pezoa Véliz (Chile, 1879-1908). But, all in all, there still existed a clear generic distinction for the *Modernistas* and *Postmodernistas* between the prose poem and poetic narrative.

Lastra points to three principal factors which illustrate a profound change in the understanding of literature and language in recent writing: (1) Enrique Lihn (Chilean poet and narrator, b. 1929) is credited with designating the process of depersonalizing and de-romanticizing the poet (a practice he uses following Baudelaire) as the "transformation of the poetic speaker." The poet, now a contemporary Anyman, occupies a "common place" and becomes the vehicle for any sort of language. Such a change in the configuration of the emissary denotes a like change in expressive strategies which can be summarized as (2) a "recourse to narrativity," where the narrative element in the poem "does not matter or signify in a representative dimension, since a poet does not intend to tell a story, but rather to produce an intensification" of effect. A related factor is (3) the use of "intertextualities," a tactic which illustrates a renewed understanding of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "This historical sense [. . .] is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity." The significant point about "intertextuality" is not its presence *per se*, which after all is ubiquitous in literature, but rather that it participates in the creation of a "global text."<sup>27</sup> The "global text," as I understand it, is a locus where tradition and modernity coexist openly, thus illustrating anew the means by which a new attitude toward poetry can come into being by questioning its own structure, its very nature.

Most of the factors outlined by Pedro Lastra have been noted in passing in this mapping of the "Reseña." Nevertheless, it remains to be seen what, in particular, these observations might imply as regards Mutis' role in the writing of new poetry in American Spanish. Using Lastra as a guide, the case could be made, and I think correctly, that the texts of the "Reseña" are poems, not narratives. However, since Mutis' work occupies a place on the threshold of the new awareness, I believe it forces the issue greatly to assert anything but that the "Reseña" vacillates between, or mixes the conventional and the new. Regardless of how this one (albeit important) point is resolved, the destinations of Mutis' excursion into unmapped areas can be tentatively plotted and they lead into the heart of the quiet struggle recent poetry

Mutis evokes and then criticizes an entity, a time and a perception that are present, viable and yet not clearly understood. It is only fitting that his art is dual, hybrid, neither one nor the other but both; neither exclusively or neatly poetry as opposed to prose but a mix or synthesis of the two; difficult to place in the unadulterated context of contemporaneity or the determinative orbit of historicity, whether of human affairs or literary ones. Mutis presents and at the same time criticizes the assumed, but never clearly stated canon of Spanish American literary modernity. His work is both modern and traditional in that it adheres to the traditional values that modernity abrogated and that now form part of the tradition of the modern. What Mutis strives to achieve goes beyond the modern, not to Postmodernism but to an unnamed place, a *terra incognita*.

Maqroll observes and is observed, and is an image of modern man, not because he is exiled from the past, as Sucre claims,<sup>28</sup> but, on the contrary, because he is irremediably linked to the past by his words and his function. Maqroll is himself a sign of the past surrounded by a forest of signs. This tangle of signs reflects a purposeful reordering of modern and traditional codes so that a new, as yet enigmatic order of values can come into being.

Mutis brings into question the distance of the past and the form of the present—as Carlos Germán Belli does—a distance in which the ideology of modernity can reveal itself. Some of the strangeness that emanates from the “Reseña” is attributable to an effect similar to “distancing,” an equivalence of impersonality that characterizes these texts and allows, as Erhart Kastner shows in “The Rebellion of Things”: “The withdrawal of things and the approach of the abstract.”<sup>29</sup> Maqroll is a stranger and an anachronism, as is implied by the fact that he doesn’t understand the story of “The Wagon.” More correctly stated, he considers the wagon and does not comprehend it. For there are two: the wagon as sign of itself, a functional, yet useless remnant of mining; the wagon as bearer of the enigmatic history.

This double focus is built in, and reflects back on Maqroll’s enterprise in just the way he (or the reader) reflects on it. Maqroll is a sign to be considered and deciphered in that space that opens between the past and the form of the present. He is both the man, the undecipherable sign, and also the bearer of the enigmatic history. Maqroll could be called the image of a modernist, both mythological and existential. He ends his days in America as the *Modernista* began his days there. Though in many ways a very different kind of work from that of his fellow poets, Mutis’ “Reseña” likewise requires the reader to synthesize several codes. In his case, the codes evoke the past of heroic action, the discovery and colonization of the New World, high imperialism and the decadence of reflection and termination, to produce the possibility, at least, of a new expression of the relationship between the past and the form of the present.

History (narrative) and Identity (description) contend and collapse, the one on the other in “The Wagon,” but Maqroll cannot unravel the moral lesson of a history which he observes and in which he has participated. The fact that it can be identified as history, the history of Conquest and Colonization and most importantly, the modernization of the New World, is one step; the fact that it remains, even so, a puzzle, responds to the criticism of modernity. This work, read as conventional

poetry, can High Sketch Map of Alvaro Mutis' "Reseña de los Hospitales de Ultramar" about the allegorical nature of the objects presented, including Maqroll as object. But if it is read without *a priori* judgements, a necessary conflation of narration (history) and description (identity) leads to the confrontation of Latin American modernity with the image of its own enigmatic nature. Modernity as metaphor can be stated properly then for Mutis' "Reseña de los Hospitales de Ultramar" as the reverse of Susan Sontag's formulation, that is, Metaphor as Illness, where malaise, decay and ruin signal the modernity that has gone before. Alvaro Mutis does not escape from modernity, but he is one of a number of Spanish American writers who, rather than making literature modern, are using modernity itself to help poetry speak from its hospital bed.

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- 1 John Felstiner, *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980).
- 2 Enrico Mario Santi, *Pablo Neruda: The Poetics of Prophecy*. (Ithaca: Cornell, 1982).
- 3 Hugo Friedrich, *The Structure of Modern Poetry*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974); Octavio Paz, *Los hijos del limo*, (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1974), p. 55.
- 4 Guillermo Sheridan, "La vida, la vida verdaderamente vivida . . ." *Revista de la Universidad de Mexico*, 31:3 (Nov. 1976, 35.), Fernando Charry Lara, "Datos Biográficos de Alvaro Mutis" in *Maqroll el Gaviero*, (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano, 1975), pp. 9-10, and Cobo Borda, "Soy gibelino, monárquico y legitimista," *La otra literatura latinoamericana*, 1st. edition, (Bogotá: El Ancora, 1982), pp. 208-209.
- 5 Mutis authored five books of poetry before *Caravansary* and *Los emisarios* if *La Balanza*, written with Carlos Patiño in 1948, is included. The books of narrative and stories mentioned are: *Diario de Lecumberri* (1964), *Mansión de Araucaíma* (1978). For comments on *Caravansary*, see Cobo Borda, *ibid.*, p. 213. The most recent anthological selections of poems translated into English are: a presentation of texts from *Caravansary* (1981), *Review*, 33 (Sept.-Dec. 1984), pp. 11-17, and Octavio Armand's *Toward an Image of Latin American Poetry*, (Durango, Colo.: Logbridge-Rhodes, 1982), pp. 117-125. After completing this introduction I was made aware of a two volume collection of Mutis' writing: *Obra Literaria, Poesía (1947-1985)*, Tomo I; *Obra Literaria, Prosas*, Tomo II, (Bogotá: Procultura, 1985).
- 6 The selections are given as they appear in the *Summa de Maqroll el Gaviero*, (Barcelona: Barral, 1973). All my translations and references to Mutis' texts are based on this edition. J.G. Cobo Borda points out in "La poesia de Alvaro Mutis" (p. 34), the "Prologue" to this edition, that the texts of the "Reseña" first appeared in *Mito* between 1955 and 1959.
- 7 Mutis says that the sobriquet "Gaviero" comes from his reading of Conrad. He further states that the name of Maqroll came to him in 1946 or 1947 and though he was certain it was not to suggest any particular nationality, he does not know its origin, Sheridan, *ibid.*, pp. 26-30. I refer here to real and imaginary Colombians: the well known *Modernista*, Guillermo Valencia (1873-1943); the less known *Vanguardista* León de Greiff (1895-1976) (see note No. 15); Arturo Cova, the city dwelling protagonist of José Eustacio Rivera's *La Vorágine* (1924) who plunges into the vortex of the jungle to rescue his beloved; the Buendias of García Márquez' *100 Years of Solitude* (1970, originally published in 1967).
- 8 Oscar Hahn, *El cuento fantástico hispanoamericano en el siglo XIX*, 1st. edition, (México: Premiá, 1978), p. 16, my translation.
- 9 See note No. 4.
- 10 The epic dimension is readily associated with Mutis as in the somewhat anonymous figure of the hussar: "El húsar," "Batallas hubo," etc. See Guillermo Sucre, "El poema: Una fértil miseria" in *La máscara, la transparencia*, (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1975), p. 368. Hussars, originally the "free-lances," later the Hungarian light cavalry who, in their fine uniforms, were the kind of military men Baudelaire found fascinating. The term Black Hussar came to mean in English, the free lance writer, he who never gave nor recieved criticism. Later, it also came to signify one who had no fixed view. While difficult to attribute to Spanish, these meanings are not unrelated to connotations Mutis relies on.
- 11 Sucre, *ibid.*, pp. 371-372. And see Cobo Borda, "La poesia," p. 12.
- 12 Virgin: itself a myopic, old world term in the context of a New World; see Tzvetan Todorov,

## Hill: A Sketch-Map of Alvaro Mutis' "Reseña de los Hospitales de Ultramar"

The Conquest of America, (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 222.

- <sup>13</sup> See Arreola, *Confabulario and other inventions*, trans. George D. Schade, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), pp. 77-85.
- <sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly a recreation of those trains that carried Mutis as a child to and from the family hacienda. Sheridan, *ibid.*, p. 26.
- <sup>15</sup> I refer to Manrique's (1440?-1479) "Coplas por la muerte de su padre." In "La muerte de Matias Aldecoa" (*Summa*, p. 110), Mutis probably also alludes to an Aldecoa who appears in the work of León de Greiff: "Balada intrascendente de Aldecoa", Leo y Gaspar," *Tergiversaciones* (Distortions) (1925) and again in Relato de Aldecoa," *Variaciones alrededor de nada* (Variaciones about Nothing) (1936). De Greiff does not easily fit into standard categorizations, but was considered a vanguardist much influenced by Spanish American *Modernismo*.
- <sup>16</sup> Allusion is meant here rhetorically: metaphor, allegory or emblem.
- <sup>17</sup> The already mentioned disproportionately large warrior is clearly emphatic, but what does his size emphasize except itself? In any case, the emphasis that concerns us here is that of the warrior's indication of buried firearms.
- <sup>18</sup> Several pieces in the *Summa* present schematized descriptions of narration, what I am calling lists: "La muerte del Capitán Cook," "Dwelling (Morada)," "El Mapa."
- <sup>19</sup> There is a fruitful ambiguity in the factual/fictional dichotomy inherent in the Spanish word "historia." In English, the same connotations are present of course, but in practice, we adhere more closely to the factual/fictional distinction: history or story.
- <sup>20</sup> One is reminded here of the wide-spread practice in the Ibero-American world of ornamenting wagons and other work vehicles.
- <sup>21</sup> The sonnet "Elena" (Helen) by the Cuban Modernist Julián del Casal (1863-1893), itself a word painting after Gustave Moreau, comes to mind in this context.
- <sup>22</sup> An association between trains and Columbus is established early on, in "The Trip." I believe this association enhances a purposeful anachronism which is further elaborated in the present "history."
- <sup>23</sup> "Review of *Caravansary*," *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, 17 (1983), p. 246.
- <sup>24</sup> In *Poetas Hispanoamericanos contemporáneos*, (Madrid: Gredos, 1976, pp. 9-16), Andrew Debicki studies the best known Spanish American poets of the 20th century (José Martí, Vallejo, Neruda, Paz, Nicanor Parra) using narrative techniques because he finds that they explain the poetry more adequately than conventional poetic techniques.
- <sup>25</sup> *Sucre*, *ibid.*, pp. 367, 370 and 372.
- <sup>26</sup> Mutis has spoken of "el oscuro underground que nos liga" in private correspondence with Pedro Lastra who was kind enough to share it with me.
- <sup>27</sup> I am indebted to Pedro Lastra for discussing his ideas with me and for supplying a typescript of the "Notas." The material I cite appeared subsequently in a special issue of *Inti*, Nos. 18-19, (Autumn 1983-Spring 1984), pp. xi-xvii.
- <sup>28</sup> *Sucre*, *ibid.*, p. 376.
- <sup>29</sup> The idea of "distancing," which I mean in a Brechtian sense, comes initially from Cobo Borda, "La poesía," p. 13. I translate from Erhart Kastner's, "La rebelión de las cosas," *Eco*, 233 (marzo 1981), p. 503.



