

Álvaro Mutis's Critical Regionalism: An Architectural Reading

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Abstract

This paper analyzes two texts by Álvaro Mutis: the poem, ““Un bel morir...””, and the novel, *Un bel morir*. It focuses on different relationships between literature and space, primarily: literature and particular places; and literary texts as spatially positioned. Juxtaposing Mutis's texts suggests an architecturally based analytical method, wherein texts are exposed to and connected with one another as buildings are with landscapes. The paper aims to elucidate how Mutis's texts develop a critical-regionalist aesthetic in response to phenomena that have shaped Latin America and Latin American literature: primarily, tensions between universality and particularity; and secondarily, natural resource extraction. It concludes that an architectural reading of Mutis both positions his texts in a space defined by neither sameness nor difference and resists the exhaustion associated with resource extraction by emphasizing possibilities of return and renewal, these latter also associated with erotic union.

Keywords: Álvaro Mutis, literature, architecture, critical regionalism, eroticism.

Resumen

Este trabajo considera dos textos de Álvaro Mutis: el poema, ““Un bel morir...””, y la novela, *Un bel morir*. Se concentra en varias relaciones entre la literatura y el espacio, con énfasis particular en: la literatura y lugares específicos; y la posición espacial del texto literario en términos generales. La yuxtaposición de estos textos de Mutis sugiere una metodología analítica que se basa en la arquitectura, y en la que los textos se exponen y se conectan de un modo similar a la relación entre un edificio y el paisaje en que se sitúa. El trabajo propone aclarar el modo en que los textos de Mutis desarrollan una estética regionalista-crítica como respuesta ante fenómenos que han contribuido a la formación de América Latina y su literatura: principalmente, las tensiones entre lo universal y lo particular; y de modo secundario, la extracción de recursos naturales. El trabajo también propone que una lectura arquitectónica de la obra de Mutis ayude a ubicar sus textos en un espacio que se define ni por la identidad ni por la diferencia, y resista el agotamiento asociado con la extracción de recursos al destacar posibilidades de vueltas y renovaciones, éstas últimas asociadas con la unión erótica.

Palabras clave: Álvaro Mutis, literatura, arquitectura, regionalismo crítico, erotismo.

In 1965, Álvaro Mutis published ““Un bel morir...””, a poem in the collection titled *Los trabajos perdidos*. Nearly 25 years later, he published the novel, *Un bel morir* (1989). Mutis’s return to the title suggests that death also returns, and that therefore it is not a final moment of departure. The title’s repetition also indicates that each text it names is incomplete, as if one needed the other. Even though the poem came first, the novel’s appearance creates a relationship of tension between the texts that may illuminate both, in which the first begins to rely upon the second for unfolding its meaning. Adding to the sense of incompleteness that emerges from Mutis’s intertextual return is the fact that neither the poem’s narrator nor the text’s protagonist meets his end in definitive terms. The poem’s narrator’s apparently imminent death does not arrive, and the circumstances surrounding the novel’s protagonist’s demise are less than clear. The sources that recount them are also not wholly reliable. One thing that does distinguish the texts clearly is that while the novel features Mutis’s long-sustained character, Maqroll el Gaviero, the poem’s narrator has no name.

In addition to their marked incompleteness, both iterations of “Un bel morir” share a tropical Latin American setting defined in large part as the site of various forms of domination and exploitation. In the poem, a missionary baptizes an indigenous leader’s family from a boat in a jungle river whose banks feature rubber trees already tapped. In the novel, Mutis’s constant protagonist, Maqroll el Gaviero, walks a path that begins in a town by a river much like the one in the poem, and which leads to high mountains through a series of regions characterized by the natural resources extracted there, such as sugar, coffee, and metals. Unwittingly caught up in a gun-running scheme, Maqroll helps set in motion an armed conflict that results in the deaths of several local inhabitants, including his lover and others who trusted and guided him. Both texts also establish outside spaces in relation to the primary tropical setting, in the poem an unnamed city and in the novel the locations of Maqroll’s past travels and of his uncertain future. The most important outside space in both texts, however, is not a physical one, but instead an interior, mental space whose raw materials are memories, the extraction of which aids the production of stories to be consumed elsewhere and by others, as is also almost always the case with the products produced from sugar cane, coffee beans, and ore. In what follows I begin with a reading of the poem. Then I consider critical regionalism and its relation to architecture, textual structure, and movement. I conclude with a reading of the novel.

The texts’ shared title invites comparison, of course, and in my reading of the poem and the novel, I imagine the texts related to one another in spatial terms, as if they were walking at the same time, sometimes together and sometimes separately, through the landscapes of Mutis’s oeuvre and the distinctly Latin American places to which his writing often returns. The texts’ interrelation produces a rhythmic alternation of union and divergence that also occurs within each work, indicating incompleteness and incoherency more than finality and totality. For example, consider the poem’s name. Whereas the novel’s name is simply *Un bel morir*, the poem’s is ““Un bel morir...””. A tension between speaking and writing appears only in the title’s

written form, since the differences between the titles are based on punctuation marks that are easily concealed when saying the title out loud. The ellipses create tension between the text and something that comes next. The quotation marks indicate citation, as if whatever the poem's author could say is not an independent creation, but instead something that has already been said and which is part of something bigger, like a network of related texts and themes.

A first look at the poem finds at least two aspects of "something bigger" of which "'Un bel morir...'" is a part. They take the form of complex, long-standing literary themes: Latin America's history as site of evangelization and natural resource extraction; and erotic union. These themes begin to appear in the juxtaposition between tropical and urban settings in the first half of the poem, which describes two disparate scenes. The first occurs in a jungle: "De pie en una barca detenida en medio del río/ cuyas aguas pasan en lento remolino/ de lodos y raíces,/ el misionero bendice la familia del cacique" ("Un bel morir...": 71). The second takes place in a city: "Cuando [el misionero] descienda la mano/ habré muerto en mi alcoba/ cuyas ventanas vibran al paso del tranvía/ y el lechero acudirá en vano por sus botellas vacías" ("Un bel morir...": 71). The second scene is conditioned temporally by the first, since the actions that take place within it only begin once the presumably far away missionary lowers his hand. Before that happens, the narrator finds time to introduce a love story that is not encapsulated as neatly as the story of his apparently imminent death or of the missionary in the jungle. Like the jungle scene and the city scene, the love story also unfolds over four lines: "Para entonces quedará bien poco de nuestra historia,/ algunos retratos en desorden,/ unas cartas guardadas no sé dónde,/ lo dicho aquel día al desnudarte en el campo" ("Un bel morir...": 71). These four lines comprise the beginning of the second part of Mutis's 20-line poem, a formal fact that reinforces their thematic development of temporal and spatial expansion. By breaking the poem in half these lines expand its chronotope beyond what at first appeared to be its most important places, unified by the single moment of the missionary's gesture. The jumbled photographs and lost letters are fragments of a whole the text cites but does not attempt to contain. In contrast to these forms of inscription stands at least one voice that speaks at the onset of a pastoral erotic encounter, and which is given the last word in this brief story. Before the poem ends, however, it returns to the jungle, from which a number of sights and sounds (described in the poem's longest sentence, at six lines) threaten to efface and drown out the lovers' words: "Todo irá desvaneciéndose en el olvido/ y el grito de un mono,/ el manar blancuzco de la savia/ por la herida corteza del caucho,/ el chapoteo de las aguas contra la quilla en viaje,/ serán asunto más memorable que nuestros largos abrazos" ("Un bel morir...": 71). Just as the missionary's hand never descends, oblivion awaits but never arrives. The lovers' long embraces remain, remembered still by the narrator who remains suspended, waiting for death.

The difference between writing and speaking that the punctuation of the poem's title highlights appears condensed within the poem in the reference to the voice or voices, associated with "lo dicho". The referent of "lo dicho", or that which was said,

is not made available to the reader; it is a secret, presumably shared by the narrator and the anonymous lover he addresses. In her analysis of the relationship between Mutis's poetry and prose fiction, which includes a specific discussion of the two texts I analyze here, Gina Ponce de León writes, "cada poema es el potencial de una narrativa de ficción. Al leer un poema de Álvaro Mutis, tenemos la sensación de querer saber algo más a partir del poema, de que hay una historia que no sabemos y de que esa historia tiene para nosotros el secreto de algo que queremos descubrir" (Ponce de León, 1999: 101). In his reading of Mutis's prose, Severo Sarduy also emphasizes the importance of discovery: "el lector se ve como desafiado, obligado por las leyes del relato a realizar una verdadera *anagnóresis*: un reconocimiento del personaje que le habla, o de quien le hablan desde hace un rato [...] y que bruscamente identifica" (Sarduy, 1992: 70). Sarduy writes of characters whose meaning and symbolic significance are surprisingly revealed to readers. Ponce de León argues, with reason, that some of Mutis's secrets are revealed by understanding his oeuvre "como una totalidad que incluye la poesía y la narrativa" (Ponce de León, 1999: 102). I find fairly persuasive Ponce de León's argument that the narrator of the poem is in fact Maqroll, his presence "notada sólo después de la lectura de la novela, el círculo irremediable que marca el Gaviero al pasar del poema a la novela o de la novela al poema, es sólo entendible desde una perspectiva mucho más amplia, una perspectiva que ha tomado forma absoluta en las novelas" (Ponce de León, 1999: 99-100). On the other hand, I propose that insisting upon the anonymity of the narrator within the poem, and noting the paradoxical allusion to "lo dicho" in a text that emphasizes a difference between writing and speaking in its title, are critical operations that present an alternative reading of these two texts, one that emphasizes exposure over discovery and the path over the circle. First, I focus on how "'Un bel morir...'" enacts delay and thus resists conclusion.

Abejance reigns in this poem about death which does not once employ a past-tense verb. Over the course of its 20 lines, the present triumphs miraculously over the impending future in Mutis's romantic attempt to preserve voice and erotic union. The poem's use of the present tense imbues its content with an ironically presented sense of permanence, since the "largos abrazos", the poem's last words, refer also to something lasting. This sense of permanence results from at least three operations that could be likened to or associated with exposure: the narrator's undressing his lover; the narrator's exposition of his own moment of dying; and the poem's exposure of the lovers' shared past as if it were a photograph, to be admired at some future date. The portraits, the letters, and what was said "aquel día", refer to moments in the past; but as objects that give evidence of the narrator's love, their home awaits them in the future.

In *Relating Narratives* (2000), Adriana Cavarero argues that sharing histories of the self with others corresponds to a constant state of exposure, whose onset occurs whenever anyone is born, and which also reveals – through encounters of exposure with the self and others made visible by sharing one's story with others – one's

uniqueness as an existent being. In her rebuttal of the idea that erotic union is similar to the dissolution of the self and even death, Cavarero writes,

The joy of love lies indeed in the nakedness of a shared appearance [*comparizione*] that does not tolerate qualifications but simply exposes two uniquenesses to each other. It is then possible that the lovers will *remember* the twofold moment of the relation with the mother, at once passive and active: the originary impulse toward self-exposure. All the fragility of finitude is here again, in the entirety of the human existence, which refuses, or mocks, every internal distinction between its flesh and its spirit; since the only active distinction [*distinzione in atto*] is now rather that of two unrepeatable uniquenesses, who distinguish themselves by mutually appearing together [*comparando insieme*]. There is therefore no fusion into unity, despite the myth that we have heard told to us for millennia. The myth is false – because it is false to celebrate existence in rites of dissolution, turning the impulse of love into a desire for death. (Cavarero, 2000: 111)

Cavarero is writing about life stories told by actual people, something different from what an author does when inventing encounters among fictional characters. Given that distinction, it still seems viable to propose that literary texts present us with encounters similar to those that Cavarero theorizes. In the case of Mutis's texts whose titles allude to deaths that never fully arrive, encounters, with others and the self, emphasize vitality over a desire for death, especially within the character of Maqroll himself, who is constantly reminded of his own "fragile finitude", to paraphrase Cavarero, as he extracts stories from his own past in order to withstand the present. Cavarero's analysis also suggests the possibility of considering texts themselves as exposed to one another, their distinctions maintained in the face of efforts to fuse them into unities, even though their traits, including their singularities, only become apparent through a comparison figured as mutual exposure.

The relevance of an unceasing poetic exploration of eroticism and its communicability takes on additional dimensions upon considering the context established by the poem's initial two scenes, the differences between which set in motion two more processes, both of which are inextricably linked with discourses of civilization and modernization, the region of Latin America, and Latin American regionalism: the evangelization of indigenous peoples and the economies of extraction (represented in the poem by the rubber tree) that enabled the industrialization of cities like the one in which the narrator feels the vibration of the streetcar. When Alberto Moreiras proposes that modernization be understood as, "the empty signifier for a certain kind of imperial hegemony at the planetary level", he proposes that such an understanding of modernization is also, "a condition of emergence of what I am calling *critical regionalism*" (Moreiras, 2001: 50). For Moreiras, critical regionalism enables a thinking of and about Latin America that avoids the trap of opposing identity to difference. He continues:

[Critical regionalism] does not point to the production of any kind of counteridentity; rather, it moves beyond identity as well as difference in order to interrogate the processes of their constitution. It dwells at the border of hegemony, in order to break its circle for the sake of attaining, not a new identification, not even a disidentification, but rather a recalcitrant

production of subjectivity as something other than subjection to history: not what obtains at the intersection of historical time-space, but what exceeds it. (Moreiras, 2001: 67)

I find that combining Moreiras's description of critical regionalism, Cavarero's discussion of exposure, and a consideration of death's non-finality in Mutis, establishes a way of reading that works together with the relationship between writing and space already so evident in Mutis's texts. I propose that this way of reading can be part of a broader critical practice that connects architecture and literature in their respective capacities of defining and opening spaces, and representing lived experience as always in tension with its symbolic interpretations. Two texts of architectural theory inform my analysis: Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre's "The Grid and the Pathway" (1981); and Kenneth Frampton's "Towards a Critical Regionalism" (1983). My reading of Mutis's texts aims to explain how the potential relations between architecture and literature can create a practice of reading that resists the preconceived taxonomies and teleologies that accompany the hegemonic discourses of universalism and modernization, today most intensely configured in the phenomenon of neoliberal global capitalism.

In "The Grid and the Pathway" Tzonis and Lefaivre describe regionalist architecture in Greece as functioning along a line of tension similar to Moreiras's dialectic of identity and difference:

On the one hand, [regionalism] has been associated with movements of reform and liberation, it has helped to foster a new sense of identity among groups and to cement new unities; on the other, it has proved a powerful tool of repression and chauvinism, splitting people into separate enclaves and enclosing them behind walls of prejudice and intolerance. (Tzonis and Lefaivre, 1981: 164)

Tzonis and Lefaivre focus on the work of Dimitris and Susana Antonakakis in order to contextualize this tension, and identify two "major distinctive architectonic patterns [...]: the *grid* – the discipline which is imposed on every space element – and the *pathway* – the location of place elements in relation to a movement" (Tzonis and Lefaivre, 1981: 164). In relation to Mutis's poem, the dynamic nature of the pathway can be read as the movement among spaces and times established by the grid of the poem's organization, most notably its division into two halves and the sameness of the line lengths of the sections that introduce those spaces and times. Tzonis and Lefaivre write:

The pathway is the backbone from which each place grows and to which each place leads. As in the case of the grid, it may control also aspects of microclimate, the flow of air, the view or the course of service lines; but its primary role is to be a catalyst of social life. Every time its circuit is laid down and every time one passes through it, it can be seen as the reenactment of a ritual, the confirmation of the human community and a criticism of the alienating effects of contemporary life. (Tzonis and Lefaivre, 1981: 178)

The specific architectural concerns that form the substance of Tzonis and Lefaivre's discussion of the path and the grid are helpful as well for understanding

literary structure, language, thematic content, and reception, all of which can be related to one another in spatial terms.

By avoiding past-tense verbs and by insisting on an abeyance of complete processes, Mutis's poem invites continual rereadings, continual new paths, very similar to the way in which his poetry and novels also relate to one another and invite rereadings, or even oblige them, as is the exemplary case with the novel also titled *Un bel morir*, which never really ends up describing Maqroll's death but instead only points to a previously published text, the prose poem, "En los esteros", which originally appeared in the collection titled *Caravansary* (1981), and whose title refers to an in-between space, in this case the estuary; an in-between space not unlike the love story that opens up the poem.

In a study that also emphasizes in-between spaces, including conceptual spaces, Kenneth Frampton proposes that critical regionalism can be an architecture of resistance as long as it does not reduce itself to a mere rejection of the universal, which would spring the identity/difference trap Moreiras warns against: "Architecture can only be sustained today as a critical practice if it assumes an *arrière-garde* position, that is to say, one which distances itself equally from the Enlightenment myth of progress and from a reactionary, unrealistic impulse to return to the architectonic forms of the preindustrial past" (Frampton, 1983: 20). Frampton continues:

[critical regionalism] has to "deconstruct" the overall spectrum of world culture which it inevitably inherits; [and] it has to achieve, through synthetic contradiction, a manifest critique of universal civilization. To deconstruct world culture is to remove oneself from that eclecticism of the fin de siècle which appropriated alien, exotic forms in order to revitalize the expressivity of an enervated society. (Frampton, 1983: 21)

Mutis's regionalist-universalist tension is one of the driving forces that shapes his Maqroll stories, which are centered around a character in relation to whom, "No existía el país en donde terminar sus pasos" (*Un bel morir*: 323). Many of the distinctions that stem from Maqroll's distance from his tropical past revert, in Mutis's worst moments, to elitism and two-dimensional portrayals of women and indigenous people. These troubling traits of Mutis's work sometimes correspond with the melancholic nature of the Maqroll novels (which characterizes the novel *Un bel morir* more than the eponymous poem, I venture) which, in turn, adds an important element to the melancholy that Roger Bartra describes when he writes, "En la reflexión occidental hallamos una curiosa identificación: al salvaje que vive supuestamente sin conciencia precisa del fluir del tiempo se le atribuye esa peculiar melancolía que en realidad es una emanación del hombre occidental" (Bartra, 1987: 66), an emanation that propagates the "mito del hombre primigenio, que fecunda la cultura nacional y al mismo tiempo sirve de contraste para estimular la conciencia de la modernidad y el progreso nacionales" (Bartra, 1987: 67). Mutis's texts tend to project melancholy onto Maqroll's others who are marked by ethnicity and gender, but the texts do not project melancholy onto anyone more than they do his universalizing voyager with regional roots and a desire to return to the time and space of his childhood, whose attempts at

engaging in economic development fail and for whom modernization and civilizing missions, if he ever considers them as such, would be the object of disdain.

It is not difficult to find evidence that Mutis's texts rely on the exploitation of symbolic raw materials and traffic in exoticism in order to produce a final product for export, if not to foreign lands (Mutis is not as well known outside of Latin America as many other writers of his era), then certainly to readers of a social and ethnic position distinct from many of the locals who populate Mutis's poems and novels. This distinction is of course a common topic in Latin American literary studies and practice, as in Antonio Cornejo Polar's theorization of heterogeneity and José María Arguedas's attempt to overcome it through his own writing; or in Ángel Rama's efforts to connect rural and urban spaces and sites of literary production in his work on transculturation; or in celebrations of the Boom as a successful expression of privileged, male, white writers' abilities to express something essential about the diverse region and nations to which they lay claim, or whose representative power critics extol; or, of course, in the phenomenon of *testimonio* and its seemingly more direct connection with historically marginalized collectivities, one that appears to elide the structures of power and privilege which enable writing, publishing, book distribution, and critical reception. Overcoming the distinction between the marginalized and the privileged does not seem to interest Mutis, nor does expressing anything definitive, let alone essential, about Latin America. The troubling portrayals of women and indigenous people that Mutis's texts sometimes reproduce (combined, for example, in the horrendous description of the woman Maqroll has sex with in the opening pages of *La nieve del Almirante* [*La nieve*: 24-25]) tend to turn them and other marginalized groups into backdrops for meditations on allegedly universal themes or devices of plot and setting necessary to elaborate the texts' compelling and often very well-crafted adventure stories. The primary interest in Mutis's texts, and one thing that makes them critically productive, is the way in which their approach to the distinctions mentioned here, which often fall along the much broader distinction between universal and particular, attests to a deliberate, sustained investigation of not the attributes of the local or the particular, but instead the limits of the universal, explored most thoroughly, if not obsessively, in the character of Maqroll.

The tensions between the universal and the particular that are central to discussions of critical regionalism function clearly in the allusions to Maqroll's childhood that appear several times in the novel *Un bel morir*. These allusions represent moments of a permanent present, as if time were spatialized in a location, not necessarily to which one could return, but which returns, and intersects or interrupts the flow of linear time. The return of Maqroll's childhood is also associated with economies of extraction, especially sugar and coffee. The first reference to his early past takes place when Maqroll explains to the Belgian man who hires him to assist in whatever questionable enterprise the latter is undertaking (which turns out to be gun-running) why he is reluctant to work with mules, "Que, desde cuando era niño y ayudaba a los arrieros que traían la caña para el trapiche de la hacienda, no había vuelto a tener relación con estos animales. Además, no estaba seguro de que, a sus

años, contara aún con las fuerzas y la resistencia para una empresa semejante” (*Un bel morir*: 233). This juxtaposition of early youth and maturity is made actively by Maqroll. Later encounters of these two moments in time are involuntary. They overwhelm Maqroll’s present, as in the following description of Maqroll’s first ascent into the mountains on behalf of the Belgian, and about which the narrator even warns the reader: “Durante la primera hora caminó por entre sembrados de caña. Al borde del sendero corría una acequia. Sus aguas tranquilas y transparentes dieron al caminante una anticipada noticia del paisaje que le esperaba, que había sido el paisaje de su infancia” (*Un bel morir*: 236). As if observing Maqroll from above, the narrator emphasizes exteriority in his description of Maqroll’s location in relation to the landscape he traverses. Interiority approaches as Maqroll continues: “Al terminar la cuesta, el camino penetró de lleno en los cafetales. [...] El recuerdo de sus años mozos volvió, de repente, con un torrente de aromas, imágenes, rostros, ríos y dichas instantáneas” (*Un bel morir*: 236). Overwhelmed by the sensory experience of passing through coffee plantations, Maqroll feels childhood happiness return to him, and he saves it, as if money in a bank, for the near future when he will need to spend it:

Rodeado por todas partes de cafetales dispuestos en un orden casi versallesco, Maqroll sintió la invasión de una felicidad sin sombras y sin límites; la misma que había predominado en su niñez. Iba caminando, lentamente, para disfrutar con mayor plenitud ese regreso, intacto y certero, de lo que había sido su única e irrefutable dicha sobre la Tierra. Lo que allí estaba atesorando con su entusiasmo reparador, le serviría dentro de poco para emprender el escarpado ascenso hasta la cuchilla, inhóspita y traicionera. (*Un bel morir*: 236)

The contradiction of a reliable, certain, and intact pleasure, an “irrefutable dicha”, which is also part of an economy of exchange, reappears later in the novel in a passage that more explicitly juxtaposes youth and maturity in relation with expending oneself.

Danger already imbues the passage in question, since it takes place when Maqroll is returning up the mountain, this time with mules carrying boxes of explosives, and when the narrative is approaching decisive moments of its adventure-story plot, namely clashes between insurgents and the army which result in several deaths and Maqroll’s imprisonment. Maqroll takes a moment to rest after having to carry a box of TNT up a mountain path because one of the mules refused to continue with the burden on its back. Exhausted and frustrated about finding himself implicated in a business that can only cause trouble, his heart pounding and his head aching, Maqroll surmises that “la verdadera tragedia de envejecer consiste en que allá, dentro de nosotros, sigue un eterno muchacho que no registra el paso del tiempo” (*Un bel morir*: 296), someone who reserves the right to refuse aging, “ya que cargaba consigo la porción de sueños trancos, tercas esperanzas, empresas descabelladas y promisorias en las que el tiempo no cuenta, es más, no es concebible” (*Un bel morir*: 296). The process of an encounter between youth and maturity continues unabated, but its counterpoints become more clearly defined: “Un día, el cuerpo se encarga de dar el aviso y, por un momento, despertamos a la evidencia de nuestro deterioro:

alguien ha estado viviéndonos y gastando nuestras fuerzas. Pero, de inmediato, tornamos al espejismo de una juventud sin mácula y así hasta el despertar final, bien conocido” (*Un bel morir*: 296). Mutis’s narrator describes a cycle of exchange between youth and maturity which ends in death, a death that, in the case of the poem never comes, and, in the case of the novel, remains incompletely defined and is recounted in texts the narrator did not write. In the previously cited passage, Maqroll’s thoughts are universalized through the use of the word “nosotros”, and thus represent a moment in which Mutis’s text negotiates the relation between particularity and universality, a negotiation that does not function well in descriptions of local characters, as when one of the gun-runners mistakes Maqroll for “un arriero más de los que por allí pasaban” (*Un bel morir*: 252) before recognizing him as someone exceptional; or when El Zuro, the young boy who helps Maqroll up the mountain, fails to understand the biography of St. Francis that Maqroll reads in the same way the latter does: “Más [le] valía no averiguar demasiado sobre ellas, ni tratar de conocerlas de cerca” (*Un bel morir*: 256); or in the case of Maqroll’s lover in *Un bel morir*, with the rather clumsily allegorical name of Amparo María:

El Gaviero conocía la condición en extremo humilde de la muchacha, pero siempre le tomaba por sorpresa el contraste de aquélla con el altivo garbo de Amparo María y sus gestos de reina en el exilio. Esta disparidad le causaba una aguda excitación erótica. Era como si el efecto hubiera sido preparado por ella con un sentido refinado y decadente del que, desde luego, la joven carecía. (*Un bel morir*: 289)

As in the poem, the relation of exposure associated with eroticism in the novel is an unequal one. Amparo María is a sacred shelter whom Maqroll exposes. Her relation with him is instrumental, providing him pleasure and connecting him with lovers from his past, Flor Estévez and Ilona, whose stories continue exposing themselves to Maqroll, and leaving him alone, as in the dream he has of Ilona, who, “se quedó mirándole con extrañeza, como si estuviera frente a un desconocido que, de improviso, se dirigía a ella. Se volvió de espaldas bruscamente y se alejó con paso gimnástico y juvenil [...]. Lo despertaron los sollozos que sacudían su pecho” (*Un bel morir*: 250). The dream lasts throughout the following day, in which Maqroll, “Avanzaba inmerso en el recuerdo de su sueño” that takes over “zonas cada vez más profundas de su ser” (*Un bel morir*: 251). The dream is then associated with Amparo María, in this case in an instance in which it removes the shelter she symbolizes: “La visita de Ilona, la noche anterior, escondida tras unos vagos indicios de Amparo María, le había dejado un desasosiego, una vieja angustia que, de nuevo, venía a minar las pocas fuerzas que le quedaban y el escaso ánimo que le permitía seguir adelante” (*Un bel morir*: 254). Maqroll’s final exposure is also the clearest indication that he has extracted his own past in order to withstand the present. This ultimate exposure occurs in the description of his death in the novel’s “Apéndice”, which, formally and thematically, represents an in-between space like many of the others already apparent (past and present, particular and universal, self and other, life and death, childhood and maturity, etc.). An appendix establishes another in-between space because it is an

ending not proper to the text itself. Furthermore, the events described in the appendix take place in an estuary, a place between fresh and salt water, on the edge of land and sea.

The novel proper ends with Maqroll escaping the town of La Plata on a boat after being released from his captivity at the hands of soldiers. The “Apéndice” begins with the narrator’s evaluation of different accounts of Maqroll’s final days, all of which are also poems written by Mutis. The most reliable, according to the narrator, but not, the latter is careful to note, by Maqroll’s friends, is titled “En los esteros”, and it appears in the poetry collection, *Caravansary*, although the narrator does not mention Mutis by name in his reference to this or any other poem about Maqroll’s death in the “Apéndice” to *Un bel morir*. The narrator judges some of Maqroll’s experiences recounted in “En los esteros” to be “dignas de toda credibilidad”; but not the account of his death, which, the narrator notes, is disputed by Maqroll’s friends, “cuya autoridad estamos muy lejos de discutir” (*Un bel morir*: 327). Stories exposed to one another are also texts exposed to one another in *Un bel morir*, with its appendix compiled by a narrator who admits the limits of his authority. The figure of Amparo María suggests shelter, creating a relation of tension with its counterpart, exposure. This relation of shelter and exposure traces a mutually constitutive process analogous to that of investiture and extraction, which is embodied in the natural landscapes of the poem and the novel, and in the memories and the vitality of Maqroll himself.

These contrapuntal relationships take on a poetic rhythm as Maqroll walks up the mountain toward the old miners’ hut near where he is meant to deliver the contraband the Belgian has commissioned:

Un cierto desánimo trabajaba el alma del Gaviero: esta prueba se repetiría quién sabe cuántas veces. [...] Una vieja amargura, familiar para él desde hacía muchos años, comenzaba a pesarle en el ánimo en tal forma, que cada paso de la frenética subida se la hacía más penoso. Pero, al mismo tiempo – y éste era uno de sus rasgos más personales y característicos –, a medida que se internaba en lo más abrupto de la cordillera y percibía el aroma de la vegetación siempre húmeda [...], una paz antigua y bienhechora desalojaba el cansancio del camino y de la brega con las mulas. [...] Esta alternancia de estados de ánimo conducía al Gaviero a meditaciones y balances que se alimentaban, por otra parte, de las pocas pero infalibles lecturas que, dondequiera que fuese, solían acompañarlo. (*Un bel morir*: 245)

The rhythm between bitterness and peace find balance in relation to the readings mentioned in this passage, and which provide Maqroll with reliable, if insufficient, companionship. The most notable text in *Un bel morir* is a biography of St. Francis of Assisi, an element of whose martyrdom involved blindness, which establishes a connection with Doña Empera, the blind woman who provides lodging for Maqroll in her hotel in La Plata. Doña Empera’s blindness obliges her to rely on other senses, including touch, a reliance that elucidates a relationship to space which is not limited to visibility.

Kenneth Frampton’s conclusions regarding critical regionalism bring him to value experience in relation to architecture as something tactile, something that “cannot be reduced to mere information, to representation or to the simple evocation

of a simulacrum substituting for absent presences” (Frampton, 1983: 28). Resistant architecture, according to Frampton, appeals to more than sight: “The tactile resilience of the place-form and the capacity of the body to read the environment in terms other than those of sight alone suggest a potential strategy for resisting the domination of universal technology” (Frampton, 1983: 28). In his discussion of organizing space and structures in relation to the poetic form of the Villanelle, architect Eric Ellingsen writes, “we experience both places and poems through our bodies. We are spatiotemporal; our body comes in handy in these moving places” (Ellingsen, 2011: 41); and continues, “Every poem, like every place, is a system of constraints, a choreography of contracts renegotiated in experiencing these constraints, like breathing, systems pulling and pushing that we punch at when we read the poem out loud or walk through the park city” (Ellingsen, 2011: 42). The bodily experience of combining poetry and place which Ellingsen describes is evident at the diegetic level in the tactility and aurality of Mutis’s poem, with its mud and roots, its vibrations, its rubber sap, cut bark and “el chapoteo de las aguas contra la quilla en viaje” (““Un bel morir...””: 71). Tactility defines the first page of the novel as well, which describes Maqroll’s room in the blind Doña Empera’s lodging house:

Para ganar espacio, la dueña había hecho construir dos habitaciones que avanzaban sobre la corriente del río y se sostenían sobre rieles de ferrocarril enterrados en la orilla en forma oblicua. La construcción se mantenía firme por uno de esos milagros de equilibrio que logran en esas tierras quienes saben aprovechar todas las posibilidades del grueso bambú, allí conocido como guadua, cuya ligereza y versatilidad para servir a los propósitos de la edificación llegan a ser insuperables. Las paredes, levantadas con el mismo material, se completan y afirman con una arcilla de color rojizo que se encuentra en los acantilados que cava el río en los trayectos donde su curso se estrecha. (*Un bel morir*. 223)

Local materials, endlessly versatile and comprised in part of the ruins of modernizing industry, form dwellings that blend in with the landscape while providing shelter and a place of temporary rest for Mutis’s peripatetic thinker, narrator, protagonist, and foil. Doña Empera cannot see her house, but readers know she can feel it, hear it, sense it in ways that go beyond sight and tell her more than sight ever could. Doña Empera’s care for and knowledge of her fixed, regional space is the tactilely experienced grid that sets the stage for Maqroll’s path. So, too, are Mutis’s texts, which enable multiple connections and rereadings in a continuing negotiation of Latin America and its position by developing ways of writing, reading, and thinking that are resistant to homogenizing discourses of sameness as well as to reductive, wholly anti-universalist discourses of difference.

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