THE ADVENTURES 
AND MISADVENTURES 
OF MAQROLL

ÁLVARO MUTIS was born in 1923 in Bogotá, Colombia. As a child he lived in Brussels, returning to Bogotá to complete his education. He has lived in Mexico since 1956. Mutis is the author of poetry, short stories, and novels. His first poems were published in 1948, his first short stories in 1978, and his first novella, The Snow of the Admiral—the initial volume of the Maqroll series—in 1986. He has received many literary awards, including the Prix Medicis in 1989 and, most recently, the 2002 Neustadt Prize for Literature.

EDITH GROSSMAN is an award-winning translator of poetry and prose by leading contemporary Spanish-language writers, including Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Mayra Montero, Augusto Monterroso, Jaime Manrique, Julián Ríos, and, of course, Álvaro Mutis. Her most recent translation is Vargas Llosa’s The Feast of the Goat and she is currently at work on Miguel de Cervantes’s Don Quixote of La Mancha.

FRANCISCO GOLDMAN is the author of two novels, The Long Night of White Chickens and The Ordinary Seaman. He divides his time between Mexico City and New York City.
THE ADVENTURES AND MISADVENTURES OF MAQROLL

ÁLVARO MUTIS

Translated from the Spanish by

EDITH GROSSMAN

Introduction by

FRANCISCO GOLDMAN

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS

New York
LAST YEAR in his home in Mexico City, the Colombian writer Álvaro Mutis told me how, back in 1986, at the age of sixty, when he was best known as a poet, he started to edit the French translation of a prose poem he’d written titled “The Snow of the Admiral,” and realized that it wasn’t a poem but a piece of a novel. “And with a great sense of fatigue, I said, ‘I’m going to finish this story.’ And I sat down to write, and began to tell more, and more, and more, and when I had nearly three hundred pages, I edited it. I sent it to Carmen Balcells, my literary agent. I said, ‘Carmen, I don’t know what the devil this is.’” Balcells—the legendary Barcelona-based agent of such writers as Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, and many others—answered him three days later, telling him that she thought it was quite simply a wonderful novel, and that she had a publisher for it. Mutis said that he didn’t believe it was a novel. Balcells replied that that was no longer for him to decide. Now it was up to her and his readers.

So began an extraordinary run: over approximately the next five years, Mutis published another six books, relating the adventures of a nomadic and somewhat enigmatic sometime-seaman known as Maqroll “el Gaviero,” or the Lookout, and his colorful circle of friends, lovers, and co-conspirators. This revolving cast of characters included Mutis himself in the usually discreet role of Marlow-like narrator, receiver of confidences, archivist of rumors, of fragments of information, surviving letters, and diaries.

The seven tales are often described as one grand work, and in 1997 they were gathered together in Spain under the title Empresas
y Tribulaciones de Maqroll el Gaviero, published here in English as The Adventures and Misadventures of Maqroll. Taken as a group the Maqroll stories belong, I think, to that class of literary books whose whole presence seems colored by the improbable, their genesis and composition so outside the usual manner of assembling a body of work that we realize that there was nothing inevitable or foreseeable about our having them to read, and that we just as easily might never have had them at all. (One thinks of Stendhal, as if under an electrifying spell, dictating his Charterhouse of Parma in a mere fifty-three days; of Lampedusa devoting nearly his entire adult lifetime to one book, The Leopard, which might well have vanished completely.) The almost fortuitous fact of the stories’ very existence seems related to their content: the transient, contingent, eventful, but always meditative wanderings of Maqroll.

The landscapes that Maqroll travels through—remote and seedy ports, deserts and jungles, rivers and seas, wild New World terrains and ancient Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cities—are ominously full of traps and danger. But each place also seems to cast an inevitable spell on Maqroll, ensnaring him in one eccentric, usually life-threatening and doomed moneymaking scheme after another. Becoming rich is not really the goal, though, as is made clear when Maqroll, in one of the stories, finally scores, and gives all the money away to his friend Abdul Bashur so that he can buy the tramp steamer of his dreams. Maqroll’s various adventures and misadventures are instead investigations into the nature of fate, his true obsession. Decisive crossroads are reached, wrong choices made, accidents absorbed and opportunities squandered, catastrophes barely averted, but Maqroll is essentially unmoved, philosophically and emotionally resigned to his destiny, no matter how disastrous, and no less convinced that the world is “a splendid spectacle,” with love and friendship always waiting around the next bend, along with the next fruitless, and possibly fatal, intrigue.

Who is Maqroll the Gaviero? One of his lovers and partners in crime, “the incomparable Ilona from Trieste,” gets him just right
when she says, “You’ll never learn, you with your air of a sailor who’s been thrown off his ship.” Elsewhere, Ilona is herself described in relation to the Gaviero as “the wise, vigilant friend so steadfast in her affections, the only woman to perceive his penchant for vague undertakings that always caused trouble and always bordered on illegality.” Maqroll says of himself, “There is no cure for my reckless wandering, forever misguided and destructive, forever alien to my true vocation.”

In “Un Bel Morir” a military officer in the South American jungles who has picked the Gaviero up for interrogation observes:

Well, to begin with, we have some identity problems with you. . . . You’re traveling with a Cypriot passport. The most recent visa, dated Marseilles, expired a year and a half ago. Earlier ones were obtained in Panama City, Glasgow, and Antwerp. Your stated profession is sailor. Place of birth, unknown. . . . And we’ve collected reports about your past: arms smuggling in Cyprus, tampering with single flags in Marseilles, trafficking in gold and rugs in Alicante, prostitutes in Panama City—it would take hours to read the entire list.

The reader familiar with the Maqroll saga will remember those incidents, and is likely to chuckle appreciatively—and to nod in assent with the following:

“With all due respect, Captain,” the Gaviero replied in the calmest, most civil voice he could muster, “you can’t imagine how it happened simply because you don’t know me. All those activities you mentioned from my past are true, but there are hidden aspects in all of them that can’t show up in the kind of summary catalogue you’ve just read.”

In “The Snow of the Admiral,” the first book in the series, the Gaviero reflects, “I think I’ve exaggerated the true significance of the death of the Duc of Orléans. . . . There’s a monotony in crime, and it’s not advisable to have too much to do with it in books or in life,” a conclusion drawn from his reading of a history of the Duke.
of Orléans’s assassination by order of John the Fearless, Duke of
Burgundy. Maqroll often consoles or amuses himself by reading
obscure historical texts, escaping into these books at moments
of tension or danger, meditating on their centuries’ old lessons at
moments of imminent decision. They rarely prove of much help to
him, but for readers one of the particular entertainments the
stories offer is finding out what historical figures and books
Maqroll will be absorbed in next.

What the stories do not really aspire to is realism—though they
certainly do not belong to the “magical” kingdom of Latin
American literature (more the lazy hallucination of North Ameri-
can and European critics than an actual “Latin American literary
style” anyway). Rather they are the extension of a poet’s language
and vision into a narrative one. The novellas might seem outfitted
as Robert Louis Stevenson–like or even Conradian tales of adven-
ture, written for adults who also enjoy their echoes of the erudi-
tion and ironies that are found in Borges, but they dramatize
another kind of metaphorical journey than, say, Marlow’s up the
Congo—a long, complex journey, overtly literary and highly per-
sonal. The truths and pleasures of Mutis’s novellas, so melancholy
and shimmering and lush, belong to a vision as intensely interior
as it is outward-looking, filled with both celebration and lament.
And in their metaphorical manner, through the seemingly para-
doxical device of his protagonist’s unconventional and perilous
nomadic life, they also narrate the journey and trials of adulthood
and failure and risk and growing old, in a way meant to reach both
the world-weary adult and the “eternal boy” inside of us at once.

“My poems, the same as my stories, all come out really sad,” the
narrator “Mutis” confides to his beautiful and superficial Costa
Rican host on her yacht in the introduction to “The Tramp
Steamer’s Last Port of Call”—undeniably sad, yet the word I most
associate with reading Mutis is pleasure.

The two most masterful stories, I think, are the most explicit
in addressing the proverbial, usually melancholy, consequences of
the passage of time: the summing-up of “Un Bel Morir,” which
leaves us with the nearly explicit suggestion that Maqroll has died,
and the extraordinarily moving “The Tramp Steamer’s Last Port
of Call,” a perfect story, in which Jon Iturri, an aging sea captain,
finally realizes his dream of becoming part-owner of his own 
freighter, a dilapidated, aging tramp steamer. In his calls around 
some of the seedier ports of Europe and the Mediterranean, Iturri 
conducts a passionate, elegiac love affair with the ship’s land- 
bound owner, a beautiful Lebanese woman [connected by family to 
Maqroll’s late and greatest friend, Abdul Bashur] who flies from 
city to city to meet him. A late-blooming love, aboard a tramp 
steamer soon destined for the inevitable oblivion of the scrapheap.

Before the success of *Maqroll*—translations all over the world, too 
many prestigious literary prizes and honors to name, movie ver-
sions of some of the novellas, extraordinarily devoted readers 
everywhere, especially in Latin America and Europe—Mutis was 
something of a cult figure in Latin American cultural circles, and 
certainly in Mexico, where he had been living since 1956: Octavio 
Paz had lavished extraordinary praise on his poetry; Borges had 
done the same in response to an earlier short story. Mexico City, 
fed by decades of immigration by those fleeing or exiled from the 
wars and politics of Europe and Latin America, was a glamorous 
place in those days, with the generation of Diego Rivera and the 
muralists, Frida Kahlo, Juan Rulfo, making way for younger tal-
ents. Mutis’s friendships there included not only Paz, but the 
young Carlos Fuentes, the Colombian painter Fernando Botero, 
the Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel, the beautiful young Polish 
aristocrat and writer Elena Poniatowska, whose family had immi-
grated to Mexico, and then his storied relationship with his “best 
friend” and compatriot Gabriel García Márquez, whom he had 
known since their youth in Colombia. Mutis and García Márquez 
are to this day among the very first and most trusted readers of 
each other’s new work.

Of course it is the life of a cultural star that is unusual, not the 
daily pressures and, often, monotony of holding down a job, which 
was Mutis’s actual lot. In Colombia, among similar occupations, 
Mutis had worked as head of public relations for Standard Oil, 
which also provided him with the opportunity to travel regu-
larly on oil tankers, whose various captains provided him with a 
gallery of characters to draw on later in his Maqroll stories. But
even his childhood was peripatetic: between the ages of two and eleven, Mutis lived in Brussels, where his father was in the diplomatic service, and for their summer vacations they returned to Colombia by ship. For twenty-three years in Mexico City, until his retirement, Mutis worked for Twentieth Century Fox and then Columbia Pictures as sales manager for their television division in Latin America, selling television series and sitcoms and specials, a job which required him to travel constantly from capital to capital, pitching his merchandise. The younger Mexican writer Juan Villoro jokes that his generation grew up listening to Mutis, who recorded the voice-overs of “Eliot Ness” in the television series The Untouchables.

But the most crucial event of Mutis’s younger years was the one that brought him to Mexico in the first place, and its repercussions there. In Colombia, as Standard Oil’s head of public relations, Mutis managed a sum of money destined for charity and social programs, which he used, as he told me in an interview last year, to help friends who were in danger from Colombia’s Rojas Pinilla military dictatorship. But he also spent money on parties for journalists and friends. One day a lawyer friend told him, “You have to leave now, right now, if possible today or tomorrow.” Once he was in Mexico, the Colombian military government asked for his extradition. The Mexican government, in accordance with an international agreement to monitor people whose extradition had been requested, jailed Mutis in the Lecumberri prison for fifteen months. When the Rojas Pinilla government fell, Mutis’s pending trial was dropped, and he was freed.

“That experience was truly an influence, much more than Conrad or anyone else they care to name,” Mutis told me. “Because, of course, in a place like that, one experiences situations which are extreme and absolute. In there the density of human relations is absolute. And there is one thing you learn in prison, and I passed it on to Maqroll, and that is that you don’t judge, you don’t say, that guy committed a terrible crime against his family, so I can’t be his friend. No, in a place like that one coexists. The judging is done by the judges on the outside.”

Perhaps because Mutis has written about tropical river journeys, critics frequently compare him to Conrad, a writer he ad-
mires, but whom he does not consider an influence. Dickens and Proust are the writers he always cites as his most important and reliable influences. “A real influence is an author who communicates an energy and a great desire to tell a story,” he told me. “And it isn’t that you want to write like Dickens, but rather that when you read Dickens, you feel an imaginative energy which you use to your own ends. Dickens has an extraordinary imagination for situations, characters, places, corners. There are corners of *Dombey and Son* that I swear I’ve been to.”

A friend of mine in Mexico City has a lovely boyhood memory of Álvaro Mutis. His family and the Mutises were sharing a vacation house in Cuernavaca. Mutis didn’t leave his seat in the garden for the entire two weeks, reading one Dickens novel after another from morning until night.

Maqroll the Gaviero has accompanied Mutis since he first introduced him into poems he was writing at the age of nineteen. Then he was a character for whom the inexperienced young man could imagine a rich adult life. Maqroll’s presence carries such collections as *Summa de Maqroll el Gaviero, Caravansary*, and the wonderfully titled *A Report on Overseas Hospitals*—books in which one also hears Mutis’s own voice maturing. Then, after forty years, Mutis decided that Maqroll should, so to speak, leave the sleek poetry vessel and sign on to the chugging freighter of prose. His conscious intention was to continue writing about the same themes which he’d developed in his poetry, “to talk about the landscapes of sensation and about my notion of man and of the world.”

Octavio Paz had said of the poetry that it was “not so much a physical world as a moral landscape... the wondrous created in an abrupt shower of images that are gratuitous, meaningless, yet unexplainably spellbinding.” Perhaps when Mutis decided to shift his hero out of poetry’s “abrupt shower of images” and into the more methodical plenitude of his prose, it was because he was ready to be more explicit about the content of that moral landscape. For the Mutis of the Maqroll stories is the kind of writer who can begin a paragraph with the portentous “Life is,” and then
actually surprise or console. In “Un Bel Morir,” the blind Doña Empera, owner of the house in the riverside jungle town of La Plata from whom the Gaviero rents a room, tells him, with a fatalistic gravity that no doubt warms our hero’s heart on this particularly death-haunted journey, “Life is like the water in this river: it levels everything, what it carries and what it leaves behind, until it reaches the sea.” And when, in response to her words, Maqroll contemplates those “cracks through which he sometimes thought his soul might escape,” we do not doubt that he knows what the cracks are. The old woman also tells Maqroll that she’s heard women speak of him before: “What intrigues me is that if women mention you, they never show rancor, but in their voices I can detect something like a fear of saying more than they should.” We realize that what she is reflecting on is that discretion which is a natural outcome of the sense of “complicity” which Maqroll most seeks in his marvelous loves, that complicity at the heart of his magnanimous but exacting “philosophy” of relations between men and women.

“Un Bel Morir” opens: “It all began when Maqroll decided to remain in the port of La Plata and postpone indefinitely the continuation of his journey upriver. In his voyage to the headwaters of the great river, he had wanted to find some trace of those who had taken part in certain of his extraordinary adventures years before.” This is the book that holds out keys to the moral universe of Maqroll. In this story, the character is carrying two historical books with him. One is a volume of the letters of the Prince of Ligne, and Maqroll draws reassurance from the prince’s “serene skepticism and cynical judgment of the changes imposed by politics.” The other is a Life of Saint Francis of Assisi, which propels Maqroll into gentle, though not explicitly religious, meditations, superimposing El Poverello’s landscape of miracles, the Umbrian hills, over the strife-torn and horrifyingly violent South American landscape and reality closing in around him and his doomed friends and lover, Amparo María.

The overwhelming richness and marvelous precision of Mutis’s writing and observation do delineate a moral stance. That “shower of images,” his unrivaled evocations of settings, transitory land-
scapes, oceans, port towns, human faces, his minute and moving
descriptions of nature and work—in “Un Bel Morir,” for example,
of the treatment and ways of mules (coconut oil rubbed into their
cracked hoofs after a hard day of trekking through the barrens)
—expresses a reverence for all forms of life. And this essentially
celebratory stance is also perfectly in tune with Maqroll’s deep
skepticism and “hopelessness,” his self-avowed freedom from illu-
sions and fatalistic vulnerability to risky schemes, those involve-
ments into which he is also driven by a paradoxical streak of
boyish optimism, as well as by his fiercely loyal friendships and
tender, complicit loves.

I should mention that Álvaro Mutis is my friend; I’ve benefited,
when living in Mexico, from the extraordinary generosity of
Álvaro and his wife, Carmen. All of Álvaro’s friends know that he
speaks of Maqroll the Gaviero as of a living person, whom he
sometimes has news of, sometimes not. “He accompanies me,”
Mutis told me last year, “but we are no longer side by side, but face
to face. So Maqroll doesn’t surprise me too much, but he does
torment me and keep me company. He is more and more himself,
and less my creation, because of course, as I write novels, I load
him up with experiences and actions and places which I don’t
know but which he of course does. And so he has become a person
with whom I must be cautious. I’ll give you an example: the other
day, in the novel that I’m working on now, I thought, ‘I’ll have him
board a ship carrying phosphates, which are highly explosive and
very dangerous, in Morocco.’ Would you believe I could actually
hear Maqroll’s saying to me, ‘Hold on! Don’t be a fool! I can’t be in
Morocco! In Morocco, I’m wanted by the police for that business
with the rugs in “Abdul Bashur, Dreamer of Ships.”’ ‘So, where
should he board the ship then . . . ?’ ‘In Tunisia . . . ’ ‘All right then,
Tunisia.’”

Before long, when you become a friend of Mutis’s, you begin to
speak of Maqroll like that too. We all plead with Álvaro to write
another novel; and make him promise not to kill off his protago-
nist, at least not unambiguously, but to leave the book of his life
eternally open. I hope that he will finish that new novel soon,
which I know is supposed to bring the Gaviero, at least for the first
time in print, to a Mexican port of call. But even if he doesn’t, I
know that in The Adventures and Misadventures of Maqroll I’ve
found a friend and guide for life, one that I am sure I’ll revisit again
and again, as I head deeper into the forest of years.

—Francisco Goldman