

# Maqroll and Sinbad: Death and the Time of the Nomad in Álvaro Mutis's Maqroll Novels

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If only I had been drowned at sea or perished in the mountains!  
It would be better than dying this miserable death!

“Sinbad the Seaman and Sinbad the Landsman”

Abdul –Ya que nos hemos internado por los vericuetos del arte de morir, se me ocurre algo que jamás antes había pensado: es muy improbable, casi imposible, que el mar nos brinde una muerte distinta de la que, como usted dice, nos toca desde siempre. Pienso que sólo en el mar estamos a salvo de la infamia que nos amenazó a usted en Mindanao y a mí en la pretensiosa villa del río Mira.

Maqroll –Eso sería tanto como pensar que el mar siempre estará revestido de una esencial dignidad. Tal vez sea mejor creerlo así. La verdad, no estoy tan seguro de ello, pero la tesis es atractiva y sirve de precario consuelo, pero de consuelo al fin.

“Diálogo en Belem do Pará”

## Abstract

This article examines the intertextuality between Álvaro Mutis's novels about Maqroll el Gaviero and the tales of Sinbad the Seaman from the *Arabian Nights*. After a discussion of the resistance in Mutis criticism to any comparison of the Maqroll novels to adventure stories, the study poses the question of how the Maqroll novels breathe life into the tales of Sinbad, reinvigorating for modern readers the ancient adventure tales. Through a Bakhtinian analysis of the chronotope of adventure time, the study demonstrates how Mutis employs and modifies traditional folk chronotopes. A direct parallel between the Maqroll and Sinbad narratives is drawn in the books' focus on fatalism and the art of dying. Whereas Sinbad as adventurer ultimately affirms law and religion, especially with respect to the taboos around death in Islam, Maqroll does not. Sinbad in this sense is not a true nomad whereas Maqroll is. Deleuze and Guattari's theory of nomadology is used to define Maqroll's nomadism. The difference between Maqroll's permanent uprootedness and Sinbad's conventional returns to his homeland is directly related to Mutis's use and modification of the adventure time chronotope. In this sense Maqroll's agonic nomadism ties Maqroll to and separates him from Sinbad.

**Keywords:** Mutis, Maqroll, Sinbad, nomadism, death.

## Resumen

Este artículo examina la intertextualidad entre las novelas sobre Maqroll el Gaviero de Álvaro Mutis y Sinbad el marino de *Las mil y una noches*. Después de ocuparse de la resistencia en la

crítica a la comparación entre las novelas de Maqroll y las historias de aventuras, se pregunta cómo la lectura de las novelas de Maqroll les otorga una nueva vigencia a las historias de aventuras. Por medio de un análisis bajtiniano del cronotopo del tiempo de aventuras se demuestra como Mutis emplea y modifica los cronotopos tradicionales. Se traza también un paralelo directo que señala la forma en que estas obras comparten una visión sobre el fatalismo y una obsesión con el arte de morir. Mientras Sinbad afirma la ley y la religión al final de sus aventuras, en particular con respecto a los tabúes sobre la muerte en el Islam, Maqroll no lo hace, por eso Sinbad no es nómada, mientras que Maqroll sí lo es. El estudio usa la teoría de la nomadología en Deleuze y Guattari para definir el nomadismo del personaje de Mutis. La diferencia entre el desarraigo permanente de Maqroll y el convencional regreso de Sinbad a su país se relaciona con la transformación del cronotopo de aventuras. El nomadismo agónico de Maqroll a la vez lo vincula y lo separa de Sinbad.

**Palabras clave:** Mutis, Maqroll, Sinbad, nomadismo, muerte.

## Introduction:

### The Vicissitudes of a Comparative Study

The comparison of Maqroll el Gaviero to Sinbad the Seaman has been only tentatively suggested in the criticism on Alvaro Mutis' saga about the character Maqroll and his friends. I have yet to find an in-depth study of the possible correlation of the two literary characters. Indeed, such a task is daunting considering that not a few critics have argued that Maqroll is not an adventurer, that the novels are not really adventure stories.<sup>1</sup> One of the most recognized critics of Mutis's writing, Fabio Rodríguez Amaya, even warns of the difficulty of any comparison to classical travelers: “Sólo con enormes dificultades el vagabundeo de Maqroll se podría paragonar a una tipología entre la de muchos viajeros, que encuentran en el Hebreo errante, en Ulises y en los *Völkerwanderungen* de memoria romana, auténticos arquetipos” (46). Another critic, Jon Juaristi, points out that the sea in Mutis's works is only an excuse to talk about something else, about desperation, and this puts Maqroll in direct relation to more modern novels that also treat the sea in this way, Conrad in particular:

Es cierto que en la narrativa de Alvaro Mutis abundan piezas que podrían considerarse en una primera aproximación como novelas de aventuras marinas. Pero en rigor se trata de algo distinto. No son novelas de aventuras, sino novelas sobre el concepto mismo de aventura, que en Mutis tiene mucho que ver con el concepto de desventura o, como reza el título de uno de sus ensayos más conocidos, con la desesperanza. . . . las novelas de Mutis no son novelas de género, es decir,

no son novelas de aventuras marinas. En las novelas de Mutis, la aventura es un pretexto para hablar de otra cosa, para hablar de la vida como pérdida, para hablar de lo irremediable. . . . Es decir, para hablar de las condiciones de lo desesperado. (180-181)

What Juaristi declares rings true: in the Maqroll novels despair and hopelessness are crucial themes, and there is indeed a meditation on the meaning of adventure and misadventure. Most critics would also agree that the novels do not fit comfortably in any particular genre, such as the adventure tales or maritime novels. But this does not mean that Mutis does not use the techniques, literary devices and styles of such novels, and while a complete repertory is beyond the scope of this study, I would like to suggest some parallels.<sup>2</sup> That said, the objections and warnings are reasonable; after all, Mutis is a writer of modern novels, perhaps even postmodern ones. What possible relationship could a character as rich and psychologically complex as El Gaviero have with the two dimensional, archetypical Sinbad?<sup>3</sup> The suggestion of a comparison almost seems preposterous, even though Maqroll el Gaviero's name suggest a parentage or even inspiration in 'Simbad el marino.'

When I compare the form or structures of the stories with the tradition, I find interesting parallels. What is more, the assumption that maritime adventures do not deal with loss and despair might be overstated, though importantly Juaristi does recognize the development of "speaking" of the irremediable, of the condition of knowing that suffering will not be compensated. And although this does raise an important distinction between a modern novel, such as *La Nieve del Almirante*, and adventure stories, what interests me is what Mutis does with such stories: Sinbad also suffers despair, but he is rewarded in the end, and while this is very conventional, it is also very important for understanding what Mutis does with the conventions of more ancient genres. For Juaristi, the novels of *Empresas y tribulaciones* should be compared to Joseph Conrad and Herman Melville's work, for these too break with classical adventure tales, but to compare Maqroll and his novels to 'sea adventure stories' would be almost sacrilegious:

Considerar a Alvaro Mutis como a un autor de novelas de aventuras marinas sería empobrecer, mutilar el verdadero valor literario de su obra. Hay novelas suyas en las que el mar no aparece o aparece en muy contadas páginas. El trópico, como se ha dicho, puede jugar un papel análogo al del mar como territorio de la desesperanza; el río, el Xurandó, en *La Nieve del Almirante*, por ejemplo, es un trasunto todavía reconocible del mar de Conrad. (193)

Juaristi explains this further, commenting on one of the key topics in Mutis's fiction—nature: "Pero la selva de árboles tropicales puede cumplir también una función semejante, como lo puede cumplir el desierto en el que se cruzan las caravanas que creen ir hacia algún destino seguro. Todos estos espacios son avatares de la misma naturaleza ciega, indiferente a los sueños y a las esperanzas de los hombres" (193). He then quotes the famous essay by Mutis on the idea of despair, which I will reproduce below because his interpretation represents a problem in Mutis criticism. According to Mutis, such territories of despair are

los lugares en donde anida, en donde crece, como un hongo sabio de complicadas y hondas descomposiciones, la desesperanza. La semilla ha sido puesta mucho antes que estos seres llegaran al trópico, sería ingenuo pensar que ella pueda producirse en tan desolados lugares; la semilla viene de las grandes ciudades, de los usados caminos de una civilización milenaria, de los claustros de las viejas universidades, de los frescos ámbitos de las catedrales góticas, o de las empedradas y discretas calles de las capitales de la antigua colonia, en donde los generales con alma de notarios y los notarios enfermos de mal del siglo forman interminables y retóricas guerras civiles. Pero es en el trópico donde la desesperanza logra la más pura, la más rica, la más absoluta expresión de su desolada materia. (Quoted in Juaristi, 193-4)

Mutis emphasizes the social origin of this despair, but Juaristi interprets this passage in the following way:

Y quizás sea esta palabra con la que concluye este admirable párrafo la que nos proporcione una clave de esta concepción lúcida y profundamente pesimista que Álvaro Mutis tiene de la vanidad humana. Acostumbrados a pensar en la materia como algo inerte, moldeable a nuestra voluntad, no la sospechamos provista de voluntades o designios distintos a los nuestros y aun opuestos a ellos. Sin embargo, la materia, la naturaleza material, posee una fuerza capaz de frustrar todo proyecto de humanización del cosmos, todo proyecto de convertir el mundo en una vivienda a nuestra medida. (194)

While Juaristi elaborates on a theme that has been studied extensively in Mutis criticism, namely the almost religious conceptualization of nature and materialism implied in the Maqroll novels, he avoids the idea of nature as a social construct: "la semilla viene de las grandes ciudades, de los usados caminos de una civilización milenaria, de los claustros de las viejas universidades." While Mutis condemns the modern materialist view of nature, he elaborates a very complex conceptual interplay of the complementarity of nature and society as coefficients of adversity. In Mutis's essay he goes on to discuss Gabriel García Márquez's *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* as an example of this notion, and yet the idea calls to mind another Colombian novel: *La vorágine*, by José Eustasio Rivera. Indeed, the passage from Mutis suggests a possible intertextuality with the Novels of the Land; many of Mutis's contemporaries, like García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes were deconstructing/reconstructing this important genre. What is horrifying in *La Nieve del Almirante*, and this is reminiscent of both *La vorágine* and *The Heart of Darkness*, is precisely that social hell that Maqroll encounters: the deaths around him are both natural and social.

### **A New Time for Adventure: What Maqroll Gives to Sinbad**

I bring this up because Mutis's work inspires comparison. Much of the criticism on Mutis, however, seems a little too focused on the intertextuality within his corpus—essays, poetry, interviews and novels. Mutis's writings are indeed assemblages

of texts that demand an intertextual reading within the corpus, but they also trace relationships outward as well. This recalls what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari wrote about the book as assemblage:

There is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made. Therefore a book also has no object. As an assemblage, a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages. . . . We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge. A book exists only through the outside and on the outside. (4)

Another critic, Javier Ruiz Portella, also warns against the pitfalls of comparison, and yet in his discussion of adventure tales and their readers, he reveals an important key to interpreting Mutis's possible relationship to more ancient genres and how the Maqroll novel transmits its intensities in their reading. In "La democracia en cuarentena" Ruiz Portella chastises the reader who merely enjoys the Maqroll tales and misses the raging critique of modernity: "Reconforta al lector que, sin saber bien por qué, se deleita leyendo las andanzas del Gaviero, mientras se niega a aceptar la demolición que de los valores de la modernidad emprende quien tan apasionantes historias nos cuenta." He goes on to describe a 'common reader' who allows himself to be carried away by "la belleza que envuelve a la novela, pero se queda en la superficie. Toma como meras aventuras lo que no es sino la expresión del 'itinerante e incierto destino del hombre en el mundo'" (100-101). While the warning is part of an argument about the profound relationship between Mutis's poetry, fiction and essays, Ruiz Portella seems to conflate the adventure genres with superficiality, though in reality he is criticizing the way they are read by modern readers. Nevertheless, this same critic gives a key to understand how Mutis resuscitates the adventure story. Speaking of the poem "Funeral en Viana," Ruiz Portella writes:

El poema nos hace revivir semejante héroe como si se tratara de nuestro más inmediato contemporáneo. Ahí está, por lo demás, el secreto de todos los textos en que Álvaro Mutis toca la historia con la fuerza milagrosa de la palabra: en todos ellos el pasado resurge como si fuera cosa viva. Porque en el fondo lo es. Porque sólo el infundio de los tiempos modernos puede pretender que los héroes y los villanos, las gestas y miserias del pasado han dejado de acompañarnos. Sólo el hombre moderno se relaciona con el pasado como si se tratara de un cadáver, sólo él lo asume como algo que ha dejado de marcar el presente. (102)

Ruiz Portella's observation about the revival of past heroes and adventure stories raises a crucial question: In what way do the Maqroll novels breathe life into the tales of Sinbad? As in Borges's reading of Kafka as precursor to his precursors, Mutis's novels have the power to reinvigorate for modern readers those ancient tales. The Victorian and Hollywood appropriations of the *Arabian Nights* stripped the tales of their at times sordid and

violent lessons in morality, reducing them to rather superficial entertainments.<sup>4</sup>

Through El Gaviero Mutis brings the Arab adventurer back to life much in the same way that Borges rekindled the vitality of European and Oriental literary traditions. My argument here is that there is at both superficial and deeper levels a strong intertextuality with the *Arabian Nights*, in particular the tales of Sinbad, which should not be taken as trivial or trivializing. The meditations on death and dying in the epigraphs to this article point to the importance of burial rituals and the manner of dying so very important to medieval Muslims. The dialogues about death between Maqroll and Abdul Bashur flesh out the intensity of Sinbad's experiences with death. (I will return to this below.)

Considering that Mutis has on many occasions declared his preferences for Byzantine culture and monarchy, it should also be of no surprise to anyone that there might be a dialogue in Mutis's novels with past genres and traditions, particularly of eastern Mediterranean origin. More important than denying such a relationship is to question what kind of relationship might there be. Critics have noted a preference for the Byzantine in Mutis.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this might be another bridge to defining/discovering a relationship between Maqroll and the Sinbad of *A Thousand and One Nights* who is definitely in the lineage of Homer's Ulysses. Here the question of how Mutis's novels reconfigure what Bakhtin called the chronotope of 'adventure time' becomes key, and points to an important development in the contamination of adventure time with everyday life in Greek and Byzantine romance; this, of course, carries over into the baroque novels—the picaresque and the Quixote in particular—laying the basis for modern novels.

Following Bakhtin's description, in epic adventure time the hero experiences danger and near death, not to mention wonders and peripeteias, but when he returns home life goes on as if nothing had ever happened (86-91). While this is true of epic adventure, and certainly it is true of Sinbad and his adventures, it was not always the case in ancient literature. In the Greek romances and the Menippean satires, such as Petronius's *Satiricon*, and Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, according to Bakhtin, the chronotope of adventure time changes as it becomes integrated with everyday life (111-121). In a way, this is also the case with Don Quixote and the picaresque tradition (165). Sinbad follows the classical epic adventure time in that after each adventure he returns home to Baghdad, where he has a house and friends, and everything returns to normal, almost as if he had never left. (Of course Sinbad the Landsman changes as a result of hearing the Seaman's tales.) And while everyday time does enter into some of Sinbad's tales, he is twice married, they always end with his return home. The integration of the everyday in the Maqroll novels is not uniform; in *Abdul Bashur, soñador de navíos*, for example, the story of the *empresa* of ferrying pilgrims to Mecca begins with the explanation: "En esa nueva etapa de sus actividades en el Medio Oriente, Abdul y Maqroll anduvieron juntos algunos años. Aunque poco digno de contar les sucedió durante dicho período, sí vale la pena consignar un hecho que pone en evidencia los cambios en el carácter de Bashur" (*Empresas* 593).<sup>6</sup> What is interesting here, and in the novel *Abdul Bashur, soñador de navíos*, is that there is an implied 'happy' time of friendship and solidarity which haunts the novel

as a backdrop. The adventure of the pilgrims occurs within an *empresa* or activity that sounds rather banal and quotidian for the two friends, and which is described as “alentador”: “las ganancias en esa clase de actividad son bastante alentadoras” (*Empresas* 593). It is one of the adventures that Maqroll shares with a friend, and that to a degree defines the friendship. It also blurs the line between the merchant and the adventurer.

In this regard, the moral and ethical ties between the novels of Maqroll and the tales of Sinbad can be compared as narratives of adventuring merchants. Alberto Ruy Sánchez has pointed out that, while Maqroll’s “tribulaciones” occupy much of the passion and contemplation of his poetry about Maqroll, his narrative is primarily concerned with the “empresas”:

Porque el Gaviero es un hombre de empresas, entendidas éstas en el sentido medieval de *hazañas*. De ahí todo el carácter de aventura que toman sus novelas, añadiendo a la aventura el trópico, la selva, el lugar de los riesgos naturales.

Como hombre que emprende hazañas el Gaviero es un desastre. Siempre quiere hacer negocios inverosímiles que lo orillan a la ruina, tanto económica como vital. . . . Porque la hazaña que ha emprendido es a la vez emblema del reto que es vivir. Su fracaso constante y en diferentes planos es el signo inequívoco de que su destino está por donde él no dirige sus pasos sino en la tierra movidiza que lo rodea y que lo llama. (246)

Ruy Sánchez’s description presents an interesting point with which a comparison with Sinbad can be drawn. Both are men who set out on *empresas* or ventures that ultimately face catastrophe, with a number of important differences: Sinbad is always compensated in the end for his faith and he is able to “forget” his trials and tribulations in the merry company of his friends. Maqroll, like Sinbad, makes friends and receives help on his journeys, but he never really has a home to return to and no country of origin. (In this sense, Maqroll is a true nomad, as I will discuss below.) While el Gaviero embarks on unlikely and implausible ventures, those of Sinbad begin as mundane merchant ventures and turn out fantastic. Both characters risk death and find themselves destitute and facing physical and spiritual ruin. In the Maqroll novels, however, the extraordinary tends to integrate with the everyday, much more so than in the Sinbad tales.

In the Maqroll novels there are some forms of adventure time and some traditional *functions*, to use Vladimir Propp’s term, that are also found in Sinbad’s stories, of course with different nuances. I will refer to two examples. In *La Nieve del Almirante*, Maqroll finds *helpers* and escapes death and disaster on the river. When he falls ill, the Major comes to his aid. The Major as a *helper* figure fills an interesting role: he is powerful and enigmatic, and though himself a subordinate to a more distant and obscure state, he is like a small king in a remote and dangerous realm. He helps Maqroll escape certain death on the river rapids with his archaic seaplane. The airplane is marvelous in a modern and banal sense: on the one hand, Maqroll is fascinated by the Junker as a heroic relic of a different era of the exploration and subjugation of a wild region. On the other hand, and most importantly, although the airplane has become banal

for modern travelers, the temporal effect of whisking Maqroll away from the river and the dangers of another prolonged journey down-river, is virtually the same as a flying carpet, a flying horse, or the Rucks of Sinbad’s tales: both the plane and the magic carpet condense time and space. What for Sinbad and other characters of the *Arabian Nights* was a fantastic condensation of space and time, for el Gaviero it is a banal stroke of luck that the Major flies him away from the river. The flight from the river condenses and disrupts the time of the river, and in this sense functions as *escape* and *rescue*, classical folk chronotopes. The banality of Maqroll’s escape on the seaplane, and the subsequent explanation that the riverboat sinks in the rapids killing the crew, represent another classic adventure time function: the *close call*. The arbitrariness of Maqroll’s rescue contrasts with his despair and exhaustion; he is truly a shipwreck and is fortunate to be saved by the Major, doña Empresa, and others in the series of novels. Indeed, the Major in particular is reflected in other officials in the later novels who are mid-level or regional military authorities, who step out of their bureaucratic roles as enforcers and act in solidarity with el Gaviero. This is also reflective of the friends Sinbad makes during his adventures; his saviors are usually powerful men as well who offer their hospitality and help him. But what distinguishes Maqroll’s peripeteia from those of Sinbad is largely how they end up; both characters face adversity and despair, but Sinbad is always compensated and therefore his rescues are highly formalized, whereas Maqroll’s do not appear to be, even though they have similar functions.

Perhaps the greatest difference is that Maqroll returns to an empty home; he finds the truck stop, La Nieve del Almirante, abandoned and his dream of a permanent home with Flor Estévez lost. In purely formalistic terms, the great differences are precisely that he has no compensation and no home to return to. In Sinbad, each adventure ends in a highly predictable way following the pattern of return and homeostasis, recalling Ulysses’ happy fate. In Maqroll, the resolution of the chronotope is blown out with an irresolution that extends Maqroll’s agonistic nomadism.

### “Su islámico fatalismo” and the Art of Dying

The sense of a fatalistic, itinerant and unending agony in the Maqroll novels is yet another important bridge with Sinbad; as the epigraphs to this essay show, there is urgency in the meditations on death and dying by both Maqroll and Sinbad. The art and manner of dying are extremely important in this regard and intimately linked to the idea of Maqroll and Abdul Bashur’s fatalism. There is a beautiful passage in *Un bel morir*; indeed one of the most beautiful in all of the novels, that describes a certain fatalistic peace Maqroll feels as he ascends the mountain passes on a venture that promises to fail; the contact with nature seems to dispel the bitterness of his realization that he is approaching disaster:

una paz antigua y bienhechora desalojaba el cansancio del camino y de la brega con las mulas. El sórdido engaño que se anunciaba en la incierta empresa perdía toda realidad e iba a caer al fondo de su resignada aceptación, de su islámico fatalismo. El canto de los pájaros, cada vez más numerosos y variados, y el paso intermitente de las bandadas de pericos que cruzaban

en desafortada algarabía por encima de las copas de los grandes cámbulos florecidos y llameantes y de las jacarandas adormecidas aún por el frío de la mañana, venían a confirmarle esa efímera certeza de una plenitud salvadora. . . .

De aquí que todos los Van Branden del mundo que se atravesaban en su camino sirvieran sólo para constatar su irremisible soledad, o su imbatible escepticismo ante la terca vanidad de toda empresa de los hombres, esos desventurados ciegos que entran en la muerte sin haber sospechado siquiera la maravilla del mundo. Ayunos del milagro de la pasión que atiza el saber que estamos vivos y que la muerte también entra en el juego, sin comienzo ni fin, porque es puro presente sin fronteras. (245-6)

The passage is a curious reflection on a cluster of ideas that both distinguish and link Maqroll's fatalism to that of Sinbad: adventure, impending disaster, but also death and the marvelous plenitude of the natural world and man's place in it. The peace Maqroll feels is part of the wavering he experiences between his skepticism regarding the vane world of men and the sense of a pre-destiny linked to nature's plenitude and expressed in manner of one's death. The "Islamic fatalism" is tied to the acknowledgement of death's relationship to time, and reflects "the dual concept of Time as devourer" and as the "near-apocalyptic revealer of 'truth'" that one finds in the *Arabian Nights* (Zipes xxiii). Zipes links this dual concept, moreover, to the act of narration as salvation and reconciliation.

Common to both the Maqroll novels and the Sinbad tales is this preoccupation with death and the manner of dying, reflected in the negative visions of death at the hands of evil men in Mutis, evil men and monsters in Sinbad, juxtaposed with the preferable death that coincides with the lived experience and revelation of the world's marvels and idyllic beauty, whether associated with the mountains or with the sea. In the epigraphs to this essay, Maqroll's fatalism, as expressed by Abdul Bashur, is tempered by the rational skepticism in Maqroll's response to his alter ego. In *Un bel morir*, both positions are integrated in the passage cited. The syntax of "su islámico fatalismo," moreover, seems to suggest a relationship to Islamic beliefs rather than to identify Maqroll as Muslim. Unlike Abdul, Maqroll never declares himself a Muslim, and yet to a degree he shares his friend's perception of fate.

Maqroll's indifference to the *empresas* when they drag on or begin to go awry, as expected, although psychologically richer, also reflects Sinbad's resignation and despair in catastrophic situations. In "The Fourth Voyage of Sinbad the Seaman," after being shipwrecked again, Sinbad is taken in by a people who practice the "most vile and lewd custom" of burying alive the husband of a deceased wife. He learns of this custom only after being obliged to marry. When his wife quickly dies and he finds himself buried alive in an underground cavern, surrounded by cadavers of other burial victims, he despairs at the manner of his death:

By Allah, I deserve all that has happened to me and everything that will happen to me! What curse compelled me to get married in that city? By Allah, I've often said, I tend to escape one catastrophe only to fall into a worse one. What an abominable death to die! If only heaven had granted me a decent death so I

could have been washed and shrouded like a man and a Muslim! If only I had been drowned at sea or perished in the mountains! It would be better than dying this miserable death! (*Arabian* 544)

The passage represents both despair and a fatalistic resignation. Indeed, his situation is so desperate it leads him to outright murder for self-preservation; to survive he kills the next husbands and wives who are buried alive to steal the few rations they are allowed to carry.<sup>7</sup> In a subsequent adventure Sinbad allows himself to be married off again, even though he suffered near death by marrying a woman belonging to a culture in which the widower is buried alive. Resigned to his fate when a second benefactor asks him to marry his daughter, Sinbad replies: "By Allah, . . . you have become like a father to me, and I am a stranger and have undergone many hardships. Because of all the stress, I have lost my capacity to judge and to think. Therefore, it is up to you to decide what I should do" (573). There are many passages in the Maqroll novels where el Gaviero expresses exhaustion in the face of his tribulations. A similar attitude can be found in *La Nieve del Almirante* when he responds to the Major who offers to fly him away from the river: "En verdad no me siento con fuerzas para volver a la selva, ni para pasar de nuevo por los rápidos" (91). What is more, both Sinbad and Maqroll scold themselves for undertaking unlikely adventures; in *Un bel morir*, Maqroll laments his lack of judgment when he is taken by a shallow ruse:

le torturaba la maligna condición de la empresa en que se estaba embarcando. Ahora era obvio que Van Branden lo había hecho víctima de un engaño tan torpe como evidente. ¿Cómo pudo caer en él y, en verdad, casi sin necesitarlo? Con el dinero que le enviaban de Trieste hubiera podido ir tirando hasta encontrar algo más sólido y menos turbio. Era claro que perdía facultades, que se estaba dejando llevar por la pendiente y que, de seguir así, acabaría mal en poco tiempo. (*Empresas* 254)

Both Sinbad and Maqroll scold themselves for undertaking deeds they were "not suited to do" (*Arabian* 574). The sense of being a foreigner, of not belonging, and of surpassing their limits permeates both series of narrations. And while Maqroll expresses a certain disdain for going on adventures for the sake of seeing exotic places, and Sinbad chastises himself for succumbing to his wanderlust which he associates with the sin of greed, both men are driven by this passion for adventure even though they are aware that it goes against their nature.

The horror of an unclean burial or messy death permeates both the Sinbad stories and the Maqroll novels. As Jack Zipes points out, the compilation of stories in the *Arabian Nights* represents a "compendium of the religious beliefs and superstitions of the time, and they also convey the aspirations and wishes of a strong middle class, for most of the tales concern merchants and artisans, who, like Sinbad and Judar, continually take risks to make their fortune" (588). With regard to religious belief and superstition, one of the most understated concerns of the Sinbad tales is the idea of an improper burial or death. Sinbad faces being drowned at sea or dying of starvation in the mountains, but what horrifies the most is the threat of being eaten alive by cannibals and monsters, or of being buried alive by a heathen

people. Sinbad also witnesses his travel companions being eaten alive by cannibals and an assortment of fantastic monsters. In the Maqroll novels there are also numerous instances of characters who perish and who are buried in unclean conditions. In *La Nieve del Almirante*, early in the journey one of two soldiers who join Maqroll and his crew dies and the second soldier allows him to be buried only after his body has swollen to grotesque proportions and has exuded its stench. The pilot and the Estonian/Slavic crewman,<sup>8</sup> who turn out to be wanted criminals, are arrested and subsequently thrown from an airplane, as a soldier explains it: “Las ejecuciones hacen ruido y hay que llenar muchos trámites. En cambio, así caen en la selva y el suelo es tan pantanoso que, con el impacto, ellos mismos cavan su tumba. Nadie pregunta más y la cosa se olvida pronto” (43). Later the Major explains that these were evil and dangerous men, and implies that they got the burial they deserved. After the Captain hangs himself and is buried in a shallow grave, the Major and his men find him because an animal had attempted to dig up his body, as the Major explains: “Algún animal había intentado desenterrarlo. Ordené cavar más hondo y llenamos la mitad de la fosa con guijarros. Los muertos no se pueden enterrar así en la selva” (90). Maqroll also reflects on the death of truck drivers who drive off of the sides of mountain gorges down to the river below, an image that is reminiscent of the 1953 French thriller *La Salaire de la peur*. In *Un bel morir*, Maqroll also hears of Don Anibal, another helper for whom he developed a respect and fondness, who was ambushed in a hail of machine gun fire. In each of these cases Mutis creates affection in Maqroll that transfers to the reader, for characters who help and feel solidarity for Maqroll, only to kill them off in ways that intensify the sense of tragedy and loss.

But perhaps the most spectacular and tragic deaths are those of Ilona in *Ilona llega con la lluvia* and Abdul Bashur. Just as she and Maqroll were about to rejoin their dearest friend Abdul Bashur on his tanker as he passes through the Panama Canal, she is lured into a trap by the suicidal Larissa, who apparently sets off an explosion taking Ilona with her. As Maqroll arrives at the scene he witnesses his worst nightmare: “Unos instantes después un bombero pasó frente a nosotros, cargando en una sábana agarrada por los cuatro extremos un bulto informe y carbonizado. De la sábana sucia de barro y ceniza, goteaba un líquido rosáceo que apenas manchaba el pavimento” (214). This is particularly tragic and horrific for Maqroll and Abdul considering that Ilona was their perfect lover and a fellow nomad; the erotic nature of their relationship is one of the high points of the entire Maqroll saga and the mutilation of her body intensifies the tragedy of her death. Moreover, the sudden and violent death very much goes against the vision that Maqroll and Bashur share of death as a long spiritual preparation. Abdul Bashur also suffers a similar death in a plane crash. These deaths, being dropped from an airplane, buried poorly in the jungle, blown to bits or burned alive (in *Amirbar* Antonia attempts to burn Maqroll alive with gasoline), are inextricably modern and produce a horror or nausea almost as violent as those felt by Sinbad. Clearly these negative images contrast with a more dignified death that Maqroll and Abdul desire.

Another important parallel between Maqroll and Sinbad, that is related to the art of living and dying, is their characteristic as word artists, as storytellers. Sinbad fits into a general pattern within the *Arabian Nights* that follows the Scheherazade mold:

narratives that save lives, or show one the meaning of his destiny. Here Sinbad the Landsman learns that he should be grateful for his station in life, as Sinbad the Seaman has earned his wealth through the trials and tribulations he suffered. What is more, Sinbad the Landsman is lifted out of poverty by listening to the Seaman’s tales and receiving his gifts. In the case of Maqroll I will mention two examples briefly: his conversations with the Captain in *La Nieve del Almirante* lead the latter to the epiphany that life no longer has any worth, that he has already stopped living and that he has strayed from his destiny, which in turn precipitates his suicide. This, following Miguel de Unamuno’s meditations on suicide, is ultimately an embrace of his true life in the past, albeit a lost happiness; Maqroll helps him to understand the worthlessness of continuing on as a living dead. The Captain commits suicide in front of Maqroll with the purpose of Maqroll remembering him, and therefore continuing his life in death through memory and narrative transmission –the Captain was aware of Maqroll’s journal writing and storytelling. This might suggest a larger inverted pattern: in the *Arabian Nights* storytelling saves lives and evades death, whereas in the Maqroll novels, narration meditates on agony and in a way brings about death. But this is not so clear-cut. At the end of *Un bel morir*, el Gaviero has unwittingly given doña Empresa a precious gift of life in the retelling of his books. She tells him, “Lástima que no terminamos los libros que me leía. Por las noches suelo conversar con [S]an Francisco. No sabe cómo me acompaña. Es un regalo y un recuerdo suyo que guardaré hasta que me muera” (325). What this implies is that doña Empresa will not die alone; Maqroll gives her a way to die, and live, well. Indeed, the telling of stories as a gift in return for hospitality is as old as Telemachus’ narrations of his search for his father. Another ancient trope that appears in Maqroll’s novels, but that I will only mention due to limited space, is the Orphic descent into subterranean spaces in *Amirbar* and in Sinbad’s subterranean adventures.<sup>9</sup>

### The Time and Space of the Nomad in the Maqroll Novels

One of the great differences between Sinbad and Maqroll is that Sinbad the Seaman is not a true nomad, whereas Maqroll is. As seen in the earlier discussion of adventure time, Sinbad has an origin and a home he always returns to, whereas Mutis very deliberately created in Maqroll a countryless character that lives a permanent uprootedness. But before I discuss in-depth just what constitutes a true nomad, some similarities between Sinbad and Maqroll will help to illuminate the differences. Jack Zipes points to an interesting aspect of the characters in the *Arabian Nights* that allows for a crucial point of comparison for any discussion of Maqroll as a nomad. In the *Arabian Nights*, “the characters have little faith in the temporal order, which is either unjust or breaks down. Despite the long period of gestation and the different authors/editors, the tales are consistent in the way they derive their force from the tension between individual desire and social law” (590). The *Nights*’ tales show sympathy for outsiders, such as “The Tale about the Thief of Alexandria and the Chief of Police.” According to Zipes, this tale

mocks the judicial system in Egypt and expresses sympathy with those who dare to break the law, especially when the law itself is ridiculous. . . . “Ali

Baba and the Forty Thieves,” “The Tale of Judar and his Brothers,” and “Sinbad the Seaman and Sinbad the Landsman” are much more serious in the themes centered on humility. . . . Interestingly, Sinbad vacillates between hubris and humility. Of course, it is his devotion to Allah that saves him in the end, and he becomes as wealthy as the caliph of Baghdad. (590)

In the *Arabian Nights* there is sympathy for the outsider, and even at times for those who operate outside of the law. But they always come back to the law as good Muslims should, just as Sinbad always returns home to friends and family who will make sure he has a dignified burial. More importantly, even when he is an outsider and a castaway, and even when he transgresses Koranic law, Sinbad ultimately defends his faith and eventually represents the State as an ambassador for the caliph. True nomads have no use for the State nor for its laws; they rather follow their own code and rules. In this respect, Maqroll stands out. In *Ilona llega con la lluvia*, for example, he explains the attitude he shared with Ilona that defines more the code of a nomadic band:

una imaginación, una desbocada fantasía que instauraba, en forma sucesiva, espontánea y por sorpresa, escenarios, horizontes siempre orientados hacia una radical sedición contra toda norma escrita y establecida. Se trataba de una subversión permanente, orgánica y rigurosa, que nunca permitía transitar caminos trillados, sendas gratas a la mayoría de las gentes, moldes tradicionales en los que se refugian los que Ilona llamaba, sin énfasis ni soberbia, pero también sin concesiones, “los otros.” (160)

This attitude on the part of Maqroll and his merry band defines a way of life that sets him outside of the State, of its ideology, and of modern conventions. Louis Panabière, commenting on this code between Maqroll and Ilona, describes them thus: “Son ‘Albatros’ y si sus ‘alas de gigante les impeden andar,’ tienen el distinguido placer de alzarse mediante la subversión de un orden mutilador.” He adds: “Este rechazo de lo permanente, del rumbo, ya que el único rumbo que se lleva a cabo es de los ‘cabos sueltos,’ constituye la regla de la vida, la de los destinos que oscilan entre los verbos recurrentes ‘anclar’ y ‘zarpar’” (169-70).

This condition of being an outsider and rebel defines the nomad. In their “1227: Treatise on Nomadology: –The War Machine” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 351-423), Deleuze and Guattari define one of the fundamental characteristics of the nomad as being in continuous opposition to the State and its forms of knowledge. From primitive times the nomad has always opposed the formation and stability of States, and has stood against or challenged the laws they represent (357-60). Maqroll, Abdul Bashur and Ilona share this standpoint with the nomads in that they distrust and subvert the laws of the State; unlike Sinbad they never defend it or uphold its laws. Indeed, one of the more profound counterbalances to Maqroll’s solitude is the improvised solidarity he finds on the road, along with the affective bonds he remembers and cherishes with Abdul Bashur and Ilona, among others. The primary loyalty he feels is to them, above any government, law, or family. His ethic, in this sense, is that of the pack or the band.

Nomadology, according to Deleuze and Guattari, represents an entire way of life and of thought, a kind of anti-epistemology based on permanent change and a peculiar vision of space and how one lives in it. In this sense, according to Dardo Scavino, “la nomadología implica una filosofía del movimiento y del devenir, de la aceleración y del cambio, de lo mutante y de lo efímero” (15). What is more, to be a nomad, according to Deleuze and Guattari, one has to produce and move in what they call smooth spaces. These are somewhat chaotic spaces that are not organized around a structure or a hierarchy; they are deserts, the oceans and plains in which there are infinite lines of flight, vortical energies and localized intensities (380-7). They are opposed to the striated spaces that are organized and delineated by the State. Cities are good examples of these; they often have a grid or net pattern organized around a political center. But one can be a nomad in the city by seeking or creating smooth spaces in it.

Maqroll, curiously, does this wherever he goes; he creates affective *ámbitos* and transforms the spaces he occupies, primarily through affective bonds he creates or recreates in memory. Sinbad mainly adapts to territories, moves through them, attaches himself to the foreign State through marriage or adoption, and when he rebels as an outsider, ultimately he crusades in favor of Islamic law. Even the Major and other authority figures who help Maqroll are distant from the State in spatial terms, or in behavior; they step out of their roles as enforcers to help him, for they recognize something prophetic in his journey, even though this is fuzzy and indeterminate. The most palpable intensity is precisely the solidarity they are inspired to feel for him.

In *El marinero y el río: dos ensayos de literatura colombiana*, Fabio Rodríguez Amaya discusses the difference between the land traveler and the sailor to reject the notion that Maqroll might be a nomad:

Mientras el primero, llegando a cualquier lugar, siempre se queda en un punto determinado de la tierra firme, el segundo no tiene, generalmente, una meta definida. Si el primero puede ser nómada, el segundo resulta mucho más itinerante: mientras el nómada sigue un camino, vuelve sobre el mismo sendero o se encuentra con etapas definidas de antemano, el itinerante aparece privo de connotaciones espaciales precisas y, para ubicarse, necesita elementos, naturales, como la estrella, o artificiales como el mapa, la brújula y el sextante (el radar o el satélite se diría hoy). Por consiguiente se produce en la itinerancia una amplificación del efecto del desplazamiento. (42)

While Rodríguez Amaya raises an interesting point regarding the intensification of the sense of displacement in the “itinerancia,” he misses the point with respect to the nomad; following Deleuze and Guattari, the nomad occupies and reorganizes a space between the points, or stages, of a journey: “The nomad is not at all the same as the migrant; for the migrant goes principally from one point to another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen, or not well localized. But the nomad goes from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity; in principle, points for him are relays along a trajectory” (380). This actually seems to align with Rodríguez Amaya’s itinerant Maqroll: “Los puertos, los ‘templos,’ los burdeles, las naves, los hospitales, las cavernas,

las minas, en suma, los lugares, las geografías o los territorios de Maqroll no indican entidades de travesía o de peregrinaje para ‘elegidos,’ es decir, umbrales, puertas, puertos o auténticas metas de peregrinación o de iniciación” (46). Rodríguez Amaya’s conceptualization of the nomad is limited, and perhaps too conflated with that of the pilgrim and land travelers he describes. Nevertheless, his notions of Maqroll’s itinerancy and the lack of sacred destinations of pilgrimage and initiation correspond to the nomadism Deleuze and Guattari describe.<sup>10</sup> (The Arab and Berber nomads of early Islam had to be won over to the idea of pilgrimage.) Panabièrre also points to the open ended quality of these destinations as merely relays: “Los puertos del Caribe dejan de ser el remanso del viaje, la meta en la que se echa el ancla. Se convierten, por el contrario, en la apertura de los caminos del mar; y puesto que el puerto de llegada se hace a su vez puerto de partida, resulta que ya no hay en el mundo punto final del trayecto” (168-9).

Not only does this sense of infinite departure correspond to the blowing open of the adventure time chronotope, as discussed previously, but also to the idea of the nomad as an agent of deterritorialization, as Deleuze and Guattari describe it: “If the nomad can be called the Deterritorialized par excellence, it is precisely because there is no reterritorialization *afterward* as with the migrant, or upon *something else* as with the sedentary (the sedentary’s real relation with the earth is mediatized by something else, a property regime, a State apparatus)” (381). Maqroll never returns to a home, country or piece of property, and he fails to root his identity into any concrete space; he only reterritorializes onto other nomads through affection, sex and friendship. Deleuze and Guattari explain this phenomenon in slightly different terms: “With the nomad, on the contrary, it is deterritorialization that constitutes the relation to the earth, to such a degree that the nomad reterritorializes on deterritorialization itself. It is the earth that deterritorializes itself, in a way that provides the nomad with

a territory” (381). In each of the Maqroll novels geographic space organizes itself around Maqroll’s body and words as local intensities, hence the affective *ámbitos* that he creates wherever he goes; his ‘world,’ moreover, is his dispersed band of friends and the nostalgia of their loss. In the happier times he creates smooth spaces and affective *ámbitos* with them.

Maqroll’s journey towards death is also a deterritorialization. As with Abdul Bashur’s elusive tramp steamer, Maqroll attempts to reterritorialize on mobile and elusive memories of friends who are absent, or on a vision of death at sea or in the mountains. The ‘deterritorialized’ earth, here, is that elusive dream of a dignified death represented by the sea or the mountains: in the passage cited above, “El canto de los pájaros . . . venían a confirmarle esa efímera certeza de una plenitud salvadora. . . . Ayunos del milagro de la pasión que atiza el saber que estamos vivos y que la muerte también entra en el juego, sin comienzo ni fin, porque es puro presente sin fronteras” (*Empresas* 245-6), the representation of nature generating an ephemeral certainty of a “plenitud salvadora,” combined with the knowledge of death as part of a “puro presente sin fronteras,” attests to his consciousness of the elusiveness of a salvation in death, a good death at sea or in the mountains. The presence of migratory flocks of birds as a concrete image intensifies the elusive abstractions of death; this contemplation is a kind of evasion or line of flight from the very real and terrible deaths his friends have faced. The abstraction of death in this passage, and in the epigraph, –rare and peaceful images– nonetheless are haunted by the reader’s recollection of Maqroll’s shrivelled dead body in “En los esteros” in *Caravansary* (*Summa* 146), just as Maqroll is haunted by the horrific deaths of his friends. Indeed, his long, agonic journey can be read as a flight from a similar fate.

The blowing open of the adventure time chronotope, the obsession with the art of dying, and the nomadic flight toward and away from death tie Maqroll to and separate him from Sinbad.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In an interview Mutis also explains that Maqroll is not an adventurer: “Maqroll no busca aventuras, no quiere saber nada más de ellas. Lo que no quiere es estarse quieto” (Mutis, “Álvaro Mutis: ‘Maqroll no es un aventurero’” 19).

<sup>2</sup> See also Gabriele Bizarri.

<sup>3</sup> See Todorov 227 and Irwin 297 on Sinbad’s lack of depth and dependence on fate.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert Mack viii-xx.

<sup>5</sup> See in particular Aneta Ikonomova’s discussion of the rejection of modernity and the triptych in Mutis’s works (538-44).

<sup>6</sup> All quotations from Mutis’s Maqroll novels will be taken from the compilation *Empresas y tribulaciones de Maqroll el Gaviero*.

<sup>7</sup> In “Sinbad the Sailor: A Commentary on the Ethics of Violence,” Peter Molan interprets Sinbad’s use of violence as arbitrary. The article is useful in many respects, but exaggerates the arbitrariness of Sinbad’s use of violence, and interprets his giving of alms after the stories as a kind of self-justification or payment for sins. In fact, the giving of alms is required of every wealthy Muslim. Moreover, he does not taken into account that when Sinbad murders the victims of live burial, he does it out of self-preservation. For Molan, “Sinbad’s wealth and positions are, then, a material reward for a vicious determination to ‘get on’ in the world of commercial wheeling and dealing at the expense of anyone who happens to be in the way. They are clearly not a heavenly reward for patience, forbearance, and charity” (338). In both of the instances Molan refers to, the killings of the burial victims and of the Old Man of the Sea, a cannibal, Sinbad is in fact reaping vengeance on peoples who violate the most sacred taboos in Islam. In this sense, if Sinbad is rewarded for his violence, it could just as well be payment for serving as an instrument of divine retribution.

<sup>8</sup> Maqroll at first believes one of his fellow crewman is Slavic, but the Major later refers to him as Estonian.

<sup>9</sup> See Mária Dornbach for a discussion of Bakhtinian chronotopes in *Amirbar*.

<sup>10</sup> See also Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between the itinerant, the transhumant and the nomad (409-410).

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