SEASON 1/Episode 4
Listening to Álvaro Mutis

Introduction

Talia Guzmán-González: ¡Hola! and welcome to “La biblioteca” the podcast series from the Hispanic Division at the Library of Congress. I am Talia Guzmán González, reference librarian in the Hispanic Reading Room.

Catalina Gómez: And I am Catalina Gómez, also reference librarian in the Hispanic Reading Room. Hi Talia!

TGG: Hi Catalina. I have to say, producing this podcast has been a great learning opportunity in more than one sense: we have learned some technical aspects, but also I have been introduced to some authors that I did not know well like the Colombian Álvaro Mutis, who will be listening to today. Many years ago I saw a movie based on one of his books: “Ilona vuelve con la lluvia”, but I started reading Mutis for this podcast series and I am enjoying his work a lot.

CG: I have to say, Mutis is one of the most exciting authors for me, not only because I am Colombian like Mutis, but mostly because I can relate to many themes that he explores in his work such as love and nostalgia for the Colombian landscape, and his thirst for adventure and transcendence.

TGG: Also his life story is pretty amazing, right?

CG: It is! He was born in Colombia in 1923, but he moved to Brussels when he was two. His father was a Colombian diplomat, and he lived there until he was nine. During those years, Mutis travelled frequently to Colombia to visit his family, he spent a lot of time in his grandfather's coffee plantation, which plays an important role in his work. He was really inspired by these visits to his grandfather’s farm. The tropics, the exuberant nature of Colombia, is part of his poetry and prose. In fact, he many times mentioned that his poetry was born in this place. Also, the sea, and his journeys by ship from Europe to Colombia really fascinated the young Mutis.

TGG: Yes... Europe and America are contrasted in many of his works. Europe was culture and Colombia was the exuberant nature of the Americas that for him meant a return “home”. Eventually he had to leave Brussels when his father died abruptly at age 33. And he returned to Colombia, but he had to move to Bogota to attend school. He was a bright man, a voracious reader, but a terrible student. He
never finished High School because, as he said, he couldn’t waste time studying, since there was so much to be read.

**CG:** And eventually he worked in the most unlikely places for a writer: an insurance company, an airline company, and later he worked for Standard Oil. These jobs gave him the opportunity for him to travel again, not only around Colombia, but also around the world.

**TGG:** Didn’t he call this period of his life “la gran vida”?

**CG:** He did, because I think for him travel was so special and important.

**TGG:** But it had an abrupt ending of sorts. The turning point is 1966 when he had to leave Colombia because he accused by his employer of embezzlement, a charge for which he spent sixteen months in jail in Mexico; a period which surprisingly was also a very productive one, as we will discuss shortly.

**CG:** Indeed, but before that, while in Colombia, Mutis got the chance to live the life of a Bohemian. He had these jobs where he was making a living, but he was really part of the the bohemian scene in Bogota, he made friends with famous poets, artists, journalists, and writers. Some of his friends were the poets León de Greiff, also the poet Eduardo Caballero Calderón, and Eduardo Zalamera Borda, for example. But it is actually his friendship with Gabriel García Márquez, the Colombian Nobel Laureate, whom he met later in Mexico City when they were both living in Mexico City that is one of the most significant moments in Mutis’ personal and literary career. There is actually a beautiful text that Gabriel García Márquez read in celebration of Mutis’ 70th birthday where he says the following (I will be reading it in Spanish):

*Basta leer una sola página de cualquiera de ellos para entenderlo todo: la obra completa de Álvaro Mutis, su vida misma, son las de un vidente que sabe a ciencia cierta que nunca volveremos a encontrar el paraíso perdido. Es decir: Maqroll no es sólo él, como con tanta facilidad se dice. Maqroll somos todos.*

...do you want to read the English translation?

**TGG:** Of course!

*To read just one page of his work is enough to understand it all: Álvaro Mutis’ ouvre, just as his life, are those of a seer who knows with complete certainty that we will never again find paradise. In other words: Maqroll wasn’t him, like many would claim. Maqroll is all of us.*

**CG:** So Maqroll is actually the name of one of his characters. We will talk about him later.

**TGG:** He was an adventurer who appeared in a lot of Mutis’ poetry and prose. And today we are going to listen to a recording of him, of Álvaro Mutis, reading of one of his poems, right?

**CG:** Yes we are! And I had the pleasure of talking with Professor Charlotte Rogers from the University of Virginia about Mutis and the recording that he did for our Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape on January 27, 1976. Let’s listen.
Interview with Charlotte Rogers

Dr. Rogers received her PhD in Spanish from Yale University and her book *Jungle Fever: Exploring Madness and Medicine in Twentieth-Century Tropical Narratives* was published by Vanderbilt University Press in 2012. Thank you for being here with us, Charlotte!

Charlotte Rogers: Thank you, Catalina. It’s a pleasure.

CG: To begin, what can you tell us about Álvaro Mutis?

CR: Well Álvaro Mutis is a Colombian poet and novelist, who died in 2013. Mutis is a very unique writer because he had almost no official schooling. As a matter of fact, he enjoyed playing pool down at the local bar instead of going to school; but he also loved reading Charles Dickens and he’s one of the most widely read poets in the Spanish language tradition. Mutis also travelled very extensively, so that really comes through in his poetry and in his novels. You’re as likely to find him in Colombia as you are in Helsinki.

CG: Great, thank you so much. Okay so what excerpt from his recording that he did for our Archive did you choose?

CR: Okay, so we’re going to listen to one of Mutis’s poems called “Nocturno” or “Nocturne.” And in this poem the poetic voice listens as rain falls on coffee plants in the tropics, and the sound of the rain falling and filling the rivers and running through the forest, transports him back to people and times he has known in the past. So let’s listen to the clip.

CG: Great, here is the clip.


CG: So can you tell us why did you choose this particular poem?

CR: I chose this particular poem because it is at once tropical and universal. I think everyone has listened to the sound of rain falling and been transported to a different mental state. But here, in particular, the words that Mutis pronounces also sound like rain falling, they have a particular cascading rhythm that is very soothing to the reader. And here it’s particularly important to have that recording because if you were just reading the words on the page, you wouldn’t necessarily get the rhythm and the rain-like sound of the words themselves.

CG: Great because that was going to be one of my questions. What is the difference between listening to a literary piece or a poem or a piece of prose versus just reading it? Anything else about that that you would like to comment?

CR: Well I’d like to say that it’s particularly important to read poetry out loud. In fact I even sometimes recommend that people read it out loud perhaps with a glass of wine as Álvaro Mutis also
recommended, and the reason for that is poetry has its own rhythm and it is a spoken medium, more so than prose. I do frequently use recordings from the Archive of Hispanic Literature in the classroom, principally with poetry – especially by Gabriela Mistral or Álvaro Mutis. And the students in general find that the way that the poet reads the poem is very different from the way they read it as a student. So I think it’s an illuminating experience for the students because they hear the pauses, they hear the highs and lows of the poets own voice.

CG: What drew you to Álvaro Mutis, personally?

CR: I adore Álvaro Mutis, both for his poetry, but especially for his prose. He has written a series of novels that all feature a melancholy mariner whose name is Maqroll el Gaviero, or who they call in English simply Maqroll. This protagonist of his named Maqroll travels the world and gets into a whole series of misadventures. I adore that side of Mutis, where he really is an international writer just as much as he can perfectly distill the sound of rain falling in Colombia.

CG: What works from Mutis would you recommend to our readers? Actually which ones have also been translated to English?

CR: So the series about Maqroll that I just mentioned have been brilliantly translated by Edith Grossman, and the title of the translation is *The Adventures and Misadventures of Maqroll*. And I highly recommend that as a great place to start with Álvaro Mutis.

CG: Great! Thank you so much Charlotte for joining us.

CR: Thanks. It’s a pleasure to be with you, Catalina.

End of interview.

TGG: That was great. Maqroll el Gaviero is such a great character with probably one of the best names in literature. Maqroll el Gaviero.

CG: Isn’t it a great name!? Gaviero has been translated as the Lookout, who was the person who worked on a ship and his duty was to watch out for potential danger in the horizon. Maqroll is without a doubt, Mutis’ iconic character.

TGG: It is the character that is present in almost all of his work. As a character he is a wandering man always in search of the unknown. And he also crosses genres and is present in both Mutis’ poetry and prose. In poetry you will find Maqroll in poems like “Oracion de Maqroll” included in his complete works “Suma de Maqroll el Gaviero”. As for prose, Maqroll is the main character of seven novels published together as “Empresas y tribulaciones de Maqroll el Gaviero” (“The Adventures and Misadventures of Maqroll”).
CG: In 2016, just last year, Charlotte Rogers also delivered talk at the Library on the literary legacy of Álvaro Mutis. In her insightful research, she compares the Colombian author with the Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes. Let’s listen:


Charlotte Rogers: “I think the more important question is really: do they (Mutis and Miguel de Cervantes) share a literary vision? I argue that yes. And we can see their common aesthetic in two ways: the first one (and they’re related elements)... the first one is a very keen perception of the folly of human endeavors. The second is a profound sense of disillusionment or “desengaño” as it’s known in Spanish. These contrasting sentiments, a dark humor and an ironic wistful bitterness are really two sides of the same coin. So that underneath the traveling. So that underneath the traveling romps of their protagonists lies a harsh and biting critique of the era in which each author lived, and a reflection on the fleeting nature of human existence, both of them having suffered so much.”

TGG: This is it for today. Thank you for joining us in ‘La Biblioteca.’

Conclusion

Thank you for tuning in! To listen to this author’s entire recording visit our website at www.loc.gov. You can find the Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape by clicking on our “Digital Collections” and selecting “Audio Recording” collections category, or by going to the Library’s Hispanic Division’s website www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic. ¡Hasta pronto!