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Author(s): Andrew Martin

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The Mask of the Prophet: Napoleon, Borges, Verne

IT MAY SEEM merely incredible to equate three such disparate figures as Napoleon Bonaparte, Jorge Luis Borges, and Jules Verne. By way of diminishing disbelief, I propose to postpone Verne and to equate initially entities no more dissimilar than the first two members of this triad.

Asked to “compare and contrast the works of Napoleon and Borges,” most of us would probably tend to stress the contrast. It seems as if the relation between Napoleon and Borges is all contrast and no comparison. Napoleon, a hypothetical examinee might suggest, while no doubt a formidable and perhaps over-enthusiastic soldier, was never a writer. Borges, on the other hand, if we exclude his career as librarian and occasional academic, is hardly anything but a writer. I don’t intend to contest this view of Borges, except perhaps by adding that a recurrent military theme runs through his writings and his ancestry. But the conception of Napoleon as atextual or even illiterate stands in need of serious readjustment.

Napoleon was not just a part of history, he was also a historian: at once the author and the hero of his texts. He was never just a general, a first consul, an emperor, but continuously a writer. “Napoléon est le plus grand homme de son siècle, on en convient,” remarked Thiers, “mais il est aussi le plus grand écrivain” (cited in Périevier 7). He was certainly the greatest writer of the age in terms of sheer quantity: his works run to around fifty volumes. Many have written as much, but few can lay claim to such a diverse *oeuvre*, comprising not just histories, letters, memoirs, articles, proclamations, orders, and bulletins, but also short stories, a novel (unfinished), Socratic dialogues, and a Rousseauist *discours*.

How, one may wonder, did he manage to fit it all in? To combine the time-consuming task of running an empire with the scarcely less

arduous business of writing? One answer is that he didn't. Strictly speaking, he was less a writer than a dictator, in the verbal sense of the word: he usually had secretaries attend to the mundane duty of recording (or rectifying) his words for posterity, and, occasionally, of composing them too. The other answer is that Napoleon had a considerable amount of free time at either end of his career: notably, in exile on Saint Helena, but also much earlier, while still a young soldier, in the midst of the French Revolution.

Both of the stories I want to consider—by way of answering the hypothetical “compare and contrast” question—“Le Masque prophète” by Napoleon, and “The Masked Dyer, Hakim of Merv” by Borges, belong to what can loosely be termed their authors' early periods.¹ Both tell essentially the same story: that of a prophet, or false prophet, in the reign of the Caliph Mahadi, who wore a silver mask or veil. He utters variously recorded prophetic utterances, acquires a big following, but comes to a bad end. The main difference is that the one by Borges is manifestly better.

Napoleon begins, characteristically, by depicting an extremely altruistic government hard at work on improving the lives of its citizens. “Dans l'an 160 de l'hégire,” he writes, “Mahadi régnait à Bagdad; ce prince, grand, généreux, éclairé, magnanime, voyait prospérer l'Empire arabe dans le sein de la paix.” Napoleon's Caliph has everything: he is *grand*: politically, a statesman; *généreux*: economically, a liberal distributionist; *éclairé*: intellectually, progressive; *magnanime*: personally, all heart, and not, it seems, a monetarist, in spite of which the Empire is prosperous and at peace. It sounds almost too good to be true—and of course it is, as the next sentence reveals:

Craint et respecté de ses voisins il s'occupait à faire fleurir les sciences et en accélérât les progrès lorsque la tranquillité fut troublée par Hakem qui, du fond du Korassan, commençait à se faire des sectateurs dans toutes les parties de l'Empire.

The Abbé Marigny's *Histoire des arabes sous les califes*, Napoleon's immediate source, tells us that Mahadi is indeed just and generous, but omits all mention of his devotion to peace and science. *Peace and science*: respectful neighbors and accelerating progress: the shrewd reader may surmise that there is a strong defense component in the Caliph's scientific expenditure. The introduction of Hakem, the Masked Prophet, the militant disturber of the peace and opponent of imperial science, is also the first acknowledgement that the Empire actually has parts, that it

¹ Napoleon's story can be found in Masson and Biagi 2, 17-19, while Borges's, first published in 1934, is collected in *A Universal History of Infamy* (77-85). Because di Giovanni's translations were done in close collaboration with Borges himself, it seems unnecessary to give the Spanish text.

is not an utterly homogeneous entity, thus foreshadowing Hakem's schismatic career.

Napoleon doesn't cite his source, but it is nonetheless unmistakable. Borges, in contrast, cites four sources, omitting Napoleon, and renders his actual source irretrievable. Whereas Napoleon sketches in the political background, Borges concentrates on the intertextual history of his material. "If I am not mistaken," Borges begins,

the chief sources of information concerning Mokanna, the Veiled (or, literally, Masked) Prophet of Khurasan, are only four in number: (a) those passages from the *History of the Caliphs* culled by Baladhuri; (b) the *Giant's Handbook or Book of Precision and Revision* by the official historian of the Abbasids, Ibn abi Tahir Taifur; (c) the Arabic codex entitled *The Annihilation of the Rose*, wherein we find a refutation of the abominable heresies of the *Dark Rose*, or *Hidden Rose*, which was the Prophet's holy book; and (d) some barely legible coins unearthed by the engineer Andrusov during excavations for the Trans-Caspian Railway. These coins, now on deposit in the numismatic collection at Teheran, preserve certain Persian distichs which abridge or emend key passages of the *Annihilation*.

Borges adds that "the original *Rose* is lost, for the manuscript found in 1899 and published all too hastily by the *Morgenländisches Archiv* has been pronounced a forgery—first by Horn, and afterward by Sir Percy Sykes."

I once had the opportunity of asking Borges about these supposed sources. He candidly admitted that they were, perhaps, bogus. He was even less clear about his true sources, but referred obliquely to an encyclopedia. He did not deny having read Napoleon's story. The conspicuous feature of the sources cited, whether or not they are genuine,² is that none of them gives a reliable testimony to an actual event. All we have is excerpts from one book (author unnamed), a history which qualifies "Precision" with "Revision," a polemical text that only refutes the missing original work of the prophet—and a few coins which further modify that refutation. For Borges, history is above all a textual phenomenon, embedded in layers of untrustworthy cross-references. Napoleon has essentially the same view: historical truth, he observes to Las Cases, is mostly just "une fable convenue" (2,373).

Borges considerably extends and elaborates Napoleon's version of events by sketching in the hero's premonitory youth, the formative moments of his early career. According to Borges, Hakim, the Masked

² The sources contain elements of authenticity: for example, one Ahmad ibn Yahya, *al-Baladhuri*, did write *The Origin of the Islamic State*. Moreover, at the back of *A Universal History of Infamy*, Borges is helpful enough to indicate two supposedly genuine sources: *A History of Persia* by Sir Percy Sykes and *Die Vernichtung der Rose*, translated from the Arabic by Alexander Schulz (Leipzig, 1927). The first really exists but offers only a slim paragraph on the Masked Prophet which has little in common with Borges's story; I can find no hard evidence for the existence of the second. Further alternative narratives concerning the Masked Prophet are recorded in Sadighi, Chapter 5, and Browne 1, 320-23.

Prophet, is apprenticed to the trade of dyer, which is condemned as “that art of the ungodly, the counterfeiter and the shifty, which was to inspire him to the first imprecations of his unbridled career” (78). Thus Hakim, ultimately a distortion of historical truth, begins his life as a distortionist: to dye something is (according to Borges’s austere narrator) illicit, impious, criminal: deforming the original, it provides an inauthentic gloss on the real, brings an excess into the world—as will Hakim in his subsequent career, described as “*pródiga*”: overproductive and overly liberal in distribution. The penitent Hakim, who forsakes his vats and cauldrons, is quoted as saying:

Thus did I sin in the days of my youth, tampering with the true colours of God’s creation. The Angel told me that rams were not the colour of tigers, the Satan told me that the Almighty wanted them to be, and that he was availing himself of my skill and my dyestuffs. Now I know that the Angel and the Satan both strayed from the truth, and that all colours are abominable. (78-79)

The prophet, then, repents of dyeing by propounding an extreme form of the pro-authenticity thesis: not only are dyes a deviation from truth, but even the untreated original, by its sheer abundance, can be misleading: color somehow conceals the quiddity of things.

Napoleon makes no mention of dyeing. The diminutive author notes, however, perhaps with a hint of jealousy, that Hakem is “*d’une haute stature*.” Tallness, in Napoleon, is a sort of hubris: the hero is doomed to be cut down to size. Hakem—craftily flattering the over-ambitious masses, in Napoleon’s view—preaches egalitarianism. He is a masterly rhetorician—“*d’une éloquence mâle et emportée*”; but his oral proselytizing is supported by a text: “*le texte ordinaire de ses sermons*.” Thus the underlying conflict becomes clear: Mahadi is a science man, a devotee of high technology, while Hakem is on the arts side, a speaker and a writer.

Just as Napoleon’s Hakem is a textualist, so Borges’s Hakim is a skilled semiotician. He tells a group of converts that while they merely await the sign of a month of penance—the moon of Ramadan—he is “the preacher of a greater sign—that of a lifetime of penance and a death of martyrdom.” The mask is another sign. According to Hakim, the Angel Gabriel cut off his (Hakim’s) head and took it to heaven where it was entrusted with the mission of prophesying and endowed with a radiance intolerable to mortal eyes. Thus the mask is there to prevent his followers being blinded by the face beneath it. Hakim claims that “when all men on earth professed the new law, the Face would be revealed to them and they could worship it openly—as the angels already worshipped it.” The mask is actually the sign of a forthcoming revelation.

Hakim increases his following and his power. His military successes against the Caliph's armies are only reluctantly and obliquely conceded by *The Book of Precision and Revision*. According to this unreliable document, says Borges, "the armies of the Caliph are everywhere victorious; but as the invariable result of these victories is the removal of generals or the withdrawal from impregnable fortresses, the chary reader can surmise actual truth." (The Caliph has good reason to fear prophets: according to Marigny, his father was the original man who saw the writing on the wall: specifically, verses prophesying his death. The father eventually died of anxiety over the prophecy, which thus became self-fulfilling.)

The story of Hakim is longer than that of Hakem, more richly detailed, more humorous. Borges enunciates the basic tenets of Hakim's heretical creed—a philosophy omitted by the briefer Napoleon. The cosmogony boasts a spectral god, "as majestically devoid of origin as of name or face," who creates a series of 999 heavens, each succeeding one the image of the one preceding, the first presided over by nine shadows of the Creator, the last by a shadow of shadows of still other shadows, whose "fraction of divinity approaches zero" (83), and who rules this world. Thus according to Hakim, "the world we live in is a mistake, a clumsy parody. Mirrors and fatherhood, because they multiply and confirm the parody, are abominations." Hell, for those who deny the Veil and the Face, is roughly similar, but with flames, consisting of interlocking zones of fire, their number being a power of 999. Heaven seems scarcely more appealing: "Its darkness is never-ending. There are fountains and pools made of stone, and the happiness of this heaven is the happiness of leave-taking, of self-denial, and of those who know they are asleep" (84). Earth, in short, consists of reflection and reproduction, Hell of incandescent multiplicity, Heaven of total negation.

Both Hakim's and Hakem's periods of supremacy are short-lived. Both men are bottled up, besieged by the forces of the Caliph, and hopelessly outnumbered. The Napoleon text switches to the present tense at this point, and adopts the prophetic mode. The Napoleonic narrator bluntly apostrophizes his protagonist: "Hakem, il faut périr ou tes ennemis vont s'emparer de ta personne!" Napoleon at last gives us, by way of response to this ultimatum, an example of one of the Prophet's persuasive speeches—his last: he tells his disciples of a conversation with God in which God advises him to dig wide trenches around the fortress to trap their enemies. The trenches are duly dug and filled with lime. Hakem's own men then partake of poisoned wine and are dumped in the trenches, while Hakem himself commits suicide by plunging into a vat of flaming acid (Sykes calls it "a tank of vitriol").³

³ 1, 563. According to more than one source, the Prophet ends his life in an oven (see Sadighi 178).

Only a solitary mistress of Hakem survives to greet the Caliph's troops. Hakem's motive is connected with another con-trick: by appearing to disappear so completely, his remaining followers in the country will believe that he and his company have been removed safely to heaven—and that he will return. Thus, even in death, Hakem has the last word.

Borges alters the Napoleonic dénouement decisively. Hakim's end seems to be entirely Borges's invention (unless there is some mention of these events on the barely legible coins unearthed by the Trans-Caspian Railway). According to the later version of the tale, all is well in the fortress and "the arrival of a host of golden angels was imminent," when a rumor (emanating from an adultress in the harem on the brink of execution) spreads among the faithful that the Prophet's right hand is deformed. As he is publicly praying for a sign, two captains tear away the Veil. The Face beneath, the "promised face," is indeed white—but with the whiteness of leprosy. The gruesome description runs as follows: "There were no brows; the lower lid of the right eye hung over the shrivelled cheek; a heavy cluster of tubercles ate away the lips; the flattened, inhuman nose was like a lion's" (85). Hakim, now as merely cunning as Hakem, attempts a last desperate strategem: "Your unforgivable sins do not permit you to see my splendour," he argues (85); but his argument is cut short as the captains run him through with spears.

The physical illness affecting the Prophet confirms his metaphysical doctrines; retrospectively, it can be seen to inspire them. Not only is the face not god-like, it is scarcely human: the face, like the world according to Hakim, is a clumsy parody, a distortion of the original. Napoleon, with clumsy prematureness, makes this point about halfway through his story; whereas in Borges we do not know until the very end what the mask masks, in Napoleon we learn early on the true motivation of the Prophet's act of self-concealment: "une maladie cruelle, suite des fatigues de la guerre, vint défigurer le visage du prophète. Ce ne fut plus le plus beau des Arabes; ces traits nobles et fiers, ces yeux grands et pleins de feu étaient défigurés. Hakem devint aveugle" (17). The very *défigurer* occurs twice in successive sentences to stress (perhaps overstress) the corruption of the original *figure*. Both Hakem and Hakim are the embodiments of disfiguration, of distortion and deception. Hakem, beginning as a subversive, an antiscientific word-spinner, becomes a full-time deceiver of the gullible masses. Hakim, in turn, never stops being a dyer, a colorer of the facts: his craft is the pervasive symbol of his career: an illusionist, he blinds people to the truth. His ostensible attachment to invisible verities is just a cover.

There is considerable convergence between the dual fates of Hakem and Hakim. Napoleon's last sentence asks: "Jusqu'où peut porter la fureur de l'illustration?" (19). *La fureur de l'illustration*: the lust for celebrity? Surely an inadequate reason for diving into a tub of acid. Borges's rewriting enables us to make better sense of the phrase: *illustration* is, after all, illustration, perhaps an allusion to the art of dyeing and related arts. The context reminds us of the word's etymological origin: the art of making lustrous, brightening an image, enlightening. Hakem, the deceiver, whose mask conceals radiance, remains an artist to the last. But Napoleon's penultimate sentence states: "Cet exemple est incroyable." Borges gives both more substance and a more allegorical charge to Napoleon's point: the key sentence in the conclusion of Hakim's story states that his face appears "so bloated and unbelievable that to the onlookers it seemed a mask" (85). Hakim has, in a sense, proven his case. His followers are not yet able to see the truth. All they see, behind the mask, is yet another mask. The revelation has been a disappointment; but the Prophet warned that secular things are necessarily deceptive, that "revulsion is the cardinal virtue" (83). So, like Hakem, even in failure Hakim achieves a kind of success, a confirmation, a redemption. Perhaps his fate should not be reckoned an entirely unhappy one.

So much for convergence. But the divergence between the two texts is no less self-evident. Hakem keeps up his deception; Hakim is revealed as a leper. A couple of questions follow from this. First: why do Hakim's own men kill him? Second: why has Borges altered the received outline of the story quite so radically? Numerous answers to the first question present themselves. One is sheer revulsion: Hakim seen in the flesh, maskless, is too monstrous to be allowed to live. Alternatively, his followers might reasonably object to having a leper in their midst (the mystery, indeed, is only how he has managed to get away with it for so long). Again, they may be incensed at the fraud practiced upon them: they kill Hakim not for his ugliness or his disease, but for deceiving them. Probably all these considerations are more or less relevant. As for the second question (why does the story end this way and not another?), further data may facilitate an answer—and perhaps improve the answer to the first.

The story of the masked prophet recurs elsewhere. One of its avatars, referred to by Borges, makes up part of Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*, published in the dying years of the Napoleonic era. Borges denounces Moore's work as "a long-winded poem . . . laden with all the sentimentality of an Irish patriot" (78). That judgment is not incomprehensible, but there are aspects of the poem which would surely appeal to Borges. The text, borrowing from the *Arabian Nights* the device of incorporating

stories within a story, comprises a number of Orient-inspired poems set within the framework of a prose narrative. In the outer story Lalla Rookh is an Indian princess on her way to meet her appointed and unknown husband-to-be, the King of Bucharia, attended by Fadladeen, the Great Nazir, and an immense cortege. The tedium of the long journey is relieved by a young poet, a rather Byronic youth, who recites poems, the first of which concerns "The Veiled Prophet of Khorasan." In this version, the lone survivor of the massacre, the mistress mentioned by Napoleon, and who in Borges is perhaps the origin of the rumor about Hakim's hand, plays a more prominent part. Omitted by both Napoleon and Borges, a young hero joins the followers of the Prophet and turns out to be an old flame of the heroine. The poem is conveniently summed up for us by Fadladeen, who is not just the Great Nazir but also chief critic:

The chief personages of the story were, if he rightly remembered them, an ill-favoured gentleman with a veil over his face; a young lady, whose reason went and came, according as it suited the poet's convenience to be sensible or otherwise; and a youth . . . who took the aforesaid gentleman in a veil for a Divinity. "From such materials," said he, "what can be expected?" After rivalling each other in long speeches and absurdities, through some thousands of lines as indigestible as the filberts of Berdaa, our friend in the veil jumps into a tub of aquafortis; the young lady dies in a set speech, whose only recommendation is that it is her last; and the lover lives on to a good old age, for the laudable purpose of seeing her ghost, which he at last happily accomplishes, and expires. This you will allow is a fair summary of the story, and if Nasser, the Arabian merchant, told no better, our Holy Prophet (to whom be all honour and glory!) had no need to be jealous of his abilities for story-telling. (230)

The last line of this exegesis provides a clue to the meaning of the whole story. Nasser, the Arabian merchant and trader in Arabian tales, is clearly a high-class storyteller, of whom the Holy Prophet—Muhammad—is, or should be, jealous. The comment reveals the hand of an infidel: the founder of Islam, inspired by Allah himself, was concerned to distinguish himself from mere storytellers, poets, and the like (with which his opponents attempted to identify him); so he has no grounds for jealousy of the merchant. But, in any case, he certainly would have no need to be jealous with respect to the story of the Veiled Prophet of Khorasan. Why not? Partly, no doubt, because of the quality of the writing: thus it offers no competition to the Qur'ān; but partly also, perhaps, because of the quality of the rival prophet. The key point about Moore's Masked Prophet is that he is, from the start, a full-time delinquent, an impostor, an evil man masquerading as an angel. He too promises a future revelation, in a time when Truth alone speaks, Mind reigns, and Man is holy:

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Then, too, your Prophet from his brow
Shall cast the veil that hides its splendour now.
(176)

More generally, he promises to reverse the process exemplified by Hakim and Hakem: to free

This fetter'd world from every bond and stain
And bring its primal glories back again.
(175)

But the reader is never intended to take him seriously. He is, quite explicitly, a False Prophet; he cannot be a rival to Muhammad. Gods, in general, are intolerant of rival gods; and the same principle seems to apply to prophets, the mouthpieces of gods.

Muhammad, in the Qur'ān, is generously accommodating towards prophets of the past, notably Moses and Jesus. They were true prophets but Christians and Jews have since strayed from the truth. This interpretation of history is succinctly outlined in a verse from the second chapter of the Qur'ān:

Mankind were one community, *then they differed among themselves*, so Allah raised prophets as bearers of good tidings and as warners, and sent down with them the Book containing the truth that he might judge between the people wherein they differed. *But then they began to differ about the book*, and none differed about it except those to whom it was given, after clear signs had come to them, out of envy towards one another.⁴

The function of *the* Prophet, Muhammad, and the Qur'ān, *the* Book, is (like that of Napoleon's egalitarian Hakem) to put an end to these differences once and for all, to provide a definitive text beyond interpretation, and thus misinterpretation and distortion.

The point about the Qur'ān (noted by Napoleon and Borges) is that the Mother of the Book is deposited in heaven: the Qur'ān is the transcript of a tablet revealed to the prophet by the Angel Gabriel. In "On the Cult of Books" Borges quotes Muhammad al-Ghazali, a commentator on the Qur'ān, as saying: "The Koran is copied in a book, is pronounced with the tongue, is remembered in the heart, and, even so, continues to persist in the centre of God and is not altered by its passage through written pages and human understanding" (118). The Book is or should be inalterable. Tinkering with the text amounts to blasphemy and heresy. This attitude leads to paranoia of the text.

Another prophetic and paranoid text is the Book of the Apocalypse. In Revelation 22:18-19, Saint John the Divine declares:

For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, if any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written

⁴ Farid's edition. The italicized passages are italicized in the translation.

in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city and from the things which are written in this book.

Authority derives from integrity. The Bible rests its claim to be the word of God on its claim to pronounce the first and the last word on everything, to describe both the beginning and the end of Creation, genesis and apocalypse. The fear of alteration, of being added to or subtracted from, may be occasioned not just by editorial adjustments but by alternative books. Hence perhaps the plague visited upon the Masked Prophet: the curse of some prior prophet. For Hakim al-Mokanna, like other prophets before him, also claims to be the final (and supreme) incarnation of the Divine Spirit.⁵

It is in this context that book-burning becomes commonplace and inevitable. Borges and Napoleon—and likewise Jules Verne—refer to the fate of the library at Alexandria. Napoleon, in his notes on Marigny, notes that the Caliph Omar, who presides over the canonical ordering of the Qur’ān, states that: “Ou ce que contiennent les livres [de la bibliothèque] s’accorde avec le livre de Dieu ou il ne s’y accorde pas. Dans l’un et l’autre cas, il faut les détruire” (Masson and Biagi 2,5). Thus the 700,000 volumes, Napoleon records, were distributed to the various city baths to serve as fuel for heating the water.

St. Paul’s objective in his First Epistle to the Corinthians is somewhat similar. Corinth is an embarrassment because there are just too many prophets in that city. Every other Corinthian thinks he or she is a prophet, has a personal hot-line to God. By way of cutting down numbers, Paul draws a distinction between glossolalia, speaking in (or with) tongues, and prophecy (1 Cor. 14). Paul rates speaking in tongues rather low. The key thing about glossolalia is that no one can make head or tail of it, unless there is an “interpreter” on hand. Paul insists on the “clear signs,” similar to those mentioned in the Qur’ān and invoked by Hakim: words must be easily understood, *eusēmos*, literally, “well-signifying” (14:9). Speaking in tongues does not give an *eusēmos logos*, says Paul, but prophecy does. The Prophet has no need of an interpreter: his signs are already clear. And clarity is a sign of truth. But what happens when two or three prophets are gathered together, and they all produce the *eusēmos logos*, but happen to disagree? Say one prophet prophesies a plague of locusts if the people don’t mend their ways, and another forecasts frogs. Which is right? All well-signifying words are good, but some, clearly, are better than others. “God,” says

⁵ Sadighi points out an inconsistency in the doctrine which asserts the superiority of the latest incarnation: “L’esprit de Dieu restant toujours le même, on ne voit pas comment ni pourquoi son mérite pourrait varier” (181).

Paul, “is not the author of confusion [*dissensio* in the Vulgate], but of peace” (14:33). So what Paul seeks to achieve is a single coherent doctrine all can agree on. What Paul recommends is as follows: “Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge” (14:29).

What the other (whoever he may be) has to judge is whether or not the prophet is a true prophet. But how do you tell the difference between a true prophet and a false one? One way, of course, is to wait and see whether, if the people don’t mend their ways, they are afflicted by locusts or frogs. But matters are rarely this simple. Prophecy does not necessarily entail prediction. A *pro-phētēs* can be one who speaks forth, in front of, for (on behalf of), as well as one who speaks before, in advance of the event (as in *prognōsis*); a prophet is thus, more generally, a revealer of truth. One early Christian text, *Hermas the Shepherd*, argues that the true prophet is “full with the Spirit,” and the false prophet “empty.” A more practical formula is recommended by the *Didachē* (one of the early Christian texts that didn’t make it into the New Testament). Reflecting the practices of small, and presumably impecunious, rural communities of first century Syria-Palestine, it states that: “Any apostle that stays more than three days, or accepts anything more than bed and board, or asks for money, is a ‘false prophet.’” Or, similarly, “If a prophet order a meal in the Spirit, well and good; but if he eats the meal, he is a false prophet.”⁶ In the same spirit, *Hermas* depicts the false prophet as an exponent of free enterprise, supplying what the market demands, giving answers tailored to meet the desires of clients. The Veiled Prophet in Moore’s version of the tale eloquently defends this kind of entrepreneurial prophet:

That prophet ill sustains his holy call
Who finds not heav’ns to suit the tastes of all;
Houris for boys, omniscience for sages,
And wings and glories for all ranks and ages.
(186)

Paul himself, of course, is a prophet, and the first duty he assigns “the others” is to certify him as a true prophet, to “acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord” (14:37). Thus his second-order, meta-prophetic discourse is elevated into first-order Scripture. Paul’s implicit or sometimes explicit formula for differentiating the true prophet from the false prophet is whether or not he agrees with Paul. Such is the final implication of the *eusēmos logos*: conformity with the canon.

But although Paul is a prophet and relates prophecy to omniscience, it seems as if prophecy is doomed to be displaced. Paul looks forward

⁶ These examples are taken from Aune 197, 225.

to a time when prophecy, tongues, knowledge are no more: "Charity never faileth," he declares in 1 Cor 13:8-10:

but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

"That which is perfect" is shorter in the original Greek: *to teleion*, complete, finished, at an end: it already contains the idea of the abolition of its opposite, *to ek merous*, the partial, the incomplete. There is a compulsion, in prophecy, to seek the *teleion*, to fill in the gaps and complete the picture: to put an end to other prophecies. The eschatological character of prophecy reflects the desire to annihilate the competition.

This tension between the partial and the total enables me, at last, to consider the case of Jules Verne. Verne has been the hidden subject of most of my propositions so far, masked by the deceptive identities of Napoleon and Borges, Muhammad and St. Paul. But it seems only appropriate, in this context, to remove the mask.

Verne's heroes are typically preoccupied by the *teleion*, depressed with incompleteness and obsessed with completion. The same seems to be true of Verne himself, who observed in an interview in English that:

It is my intention to complete, before my working days are done, a series which shall include, in story form, my whole survey of the world's surface and heavens; there are still left corners of the world to which my thoughts have not yet penetrated. As you know, I have dealt with the moon, but a great deal remains to be done, and if health and strength permit me, I hope to finish the task. (Belloc 213)

It seems, unfortunately, that Verne's *oeuvre*, though immense, neglected to include the story of the masked prophet. However, there is certainly no shortage of prophets in Verne. And what is true of several of them is that their identities are obscure. They hide behind implausible names. This is true of two in particular: most famously, Captain Nemo, inventor and commander of the submarine *Nautilus*, who figures in *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* and *L'Île mystérieuse*; and Robur, the master of heavier-than-air flying machines and protagonist of *Robur-le-Conquérant* and *Maître du monde*. Robur remains a permanent enigma, his origins and nationality obscure, while the biography of Nemo is only revealed at the very end of *L'Île mystérieuse*, where he turns out to be an Indian prince, hostile to British imperialism. And what is true of these characters is also true of their machines: they are shrouded in mystery. Hence this dialogue concerning the electrically-powered *Nautilus*: Question: how do you enhance the motive force of electricity enough to power a

full-scale submarine? Answer: a cunning system of levers. In *Robur-le-Conquérant*, the *Albatros* is kept aloft by batteries and mysterious “accumulators” designed to increase almost to infinity the available investment of energy. But how does it work? “C’est le secret de Robur” (vi, 73).⁷ Verne observes that Robur has cunningly declined to take out a patent on his device, thus leaving everyone in the dark. Both character and machine owe their power, in part, to their incognito, to their capacity for dissimulation. When the mask is dropped—as in the case of Nemo—the masked man dies.

Both Nemo and Robur are outlaws. Nemo is a self-professed misanthrope who goes about sinking ships; Robur kidnaps rival aeronauts, balloonists, to demonstrate the superiority of his vehicle over theirs. Both, like Hakem, are disturbers of the peace; both are considered subversives, and hunted by the forces of law and order. But the truth about these supposed rebels is that they are ultimately more conservative than their pursuers. Each foresees and seeks to bring about a future technologically more advanced than the present alluded to by Verne. But each, in the last analysis, champions technological stasis. Nemo, having invented the *Nautilus*, cuts himself off from landlubbing humanity, attempts to blow all other seagoing vehicles out of the water, and maroons himself within the precincts of his on-board library and museum. His Qur’anic fantasy is that his library is complete: “que l’Humanité n’a plus ni pensé ni écrit” (*Vingt mille lieues* I, xi, 98). The closing epitaph pronounced on the expiring Nemo by a passing savant condemns him for being an obstacle to progress. Similarly, Robur seeks to invent a machine which will be the last word in aeronautical engineering, a grand synthesis of all technical possibilities. Again, if he has his way, no more will be thought or written on the subject. The balloonist faction is naturally hostile to Robur because, as far as they are concerned, the balloon is already the last word—it’s just a question of building a better balloon. Both Nemo and Robur, then, seek to monopolize the future. In effect, they are hard-line realists; they want reality to correspond to their blueprints. We know that realism implies anteriority: something must already have existed for the text (image etc.) to record and correspond to. What Verne shows is that the dedicated realist also requires a firm grip on posteriority: you must keep an eye on the future if reality is not to step out of line with your descriptions.

The ideal of the superficially radical Vernian prophet is actually a condition of fixity which will permanently abolish the future in favor

⁷ The numbers in parentheses give the chapter and page numbers in *Voyages extraordinaires*.

of a protracted present, thus rendering prophecy redundant. Again the prophet abhors prophecy: he aspires to finality, to the annihilation of prophecy, to the creation of a canon which cannot be added to or subtracted from.

Vernian narrative, despite its proliferating prophets, is typically rather reticent about the future. Verne himself seems reluctant to add to the sum of the *déjà-vu*, to fear supplementary revelation. His texts try to go one better than their prophetic characters, who only look forward to bringing matters to a decisive end, sealing off the present from the future, eliminating prophets and bringing history to a stop. Prophets invariably come to a bad end.

Verne was not, contrary to popular belief, impatient for the future. One of his public speeches, for example, is devoted to a spirited denunciation of the bicycle. He contrasts his own and H. G. Wells's techniques for getting people to the moon—both highly improbable—and concludes: "I make use of physics. He invents" (Sherard 59). Invention for Verne is tantamount to mendacity. Imagination, fantasy must be rigorously suppressed. He anticipates the future anticipated by his prophets by confining himself strictly to commentary on existing texts, notably scientific ones. The slightly embarrassed introduction of any seemingly new-fangled machinery is invariably prefaced by a long-winded assurance that it is really only an updated version of a device known to the ancients, that it is preceded by an honorable tradition, and it is supported by scientific documentation—with references and footnotes supplied.

To the spectacular and doomed form of prophecy by inspiration and invention, the Vernian narrative thus opposes an alternative mode: the prophecy of interpretation. This seems to mark a reversion to the Greek concept of prophecy that Paul rejected: the prophet as an interpreter of another's words, prophecy as second-order discourse. But Verne takes the prophet out of the cave of oracular utterance, out of the laboratory, the modern Delphi, and installs him in the library. The prophet is no longer in touch with the gods but only a reader and writer. While the outlawed hi-tech prophet seeks to impose a rule-bound closed system, the interpretative prophet, the text-bound exponent of tradition, is actually more radical in that he leaves the future open. If there is no first word, the original *logos tou theou*, then neither is there any last word.

The end of *Robur-le-Conquérant* presents an emblematic scene in which Robur at last reveals himself and his machine to the masses, but then departs without revealing the secret of its mysterious power: "Je pars donc," he declares, "et j'emporte mon secret avec moi" (xviii, 257). The world is not yet ready for the truth. Robur becomes a descendant,

or precursor, of Hakim: "Your unforgivable sins do not allow you to see my splendour." The exposé is only partial, masked by concealment. Although they advertise a doctrine of total revelation, an apocalyptic unveiling, Verne's novels nevertheless adhere to a principle of conservation of mystery.

We are now perhaps in a position to answer the two questions I posed earlier regarding the Borges story. Why is Hakim killed? Setting aside all possible psychological motives (as Borges recommends in the preface to *A Universal History of Infamy*), it is clear that the continued existence of the prophet depends on the preservation of mystery, of a secret: revelation is fatal, he cannot survive unveiling. So much for cause, but what of effect? The function of the prophet's demise is, in short, to put an end to the end. Hakim is a proponent of omniscience: the imminent state in which, as in his singular, monolithic and unchanging heaven, nothing is hidden. Its attainment is due to coincide with his unveiling; but the event only serves to postpone and betray the promise of enlightenment. This suggests an answer to the second question: why does Borges modify the story to include the Masked Prophet's unmasking and the disappointing revelation? The Masked Prophet dramatizes the Borgesian act par excellence: he provides an incarnation or analogue of the Borgesian—but also the Vernian—text. As Borges writes in "The Wall and the Books," "this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon" (*Labyrinths* 223). Napoleon, Borges, Verne: each in his own way promises more than he can deliver.

The theory espoused by the Masked Prophet entails the elimination of differences, the acquisition of perfect knowledge. He advocates and seeks to embody a Pauline ideal of prophecy: utterances of pure intelligibility, whose meaning or force (*dunamis*) (1 Cor 14:11) is irresistible, compulsory; coherent statements, emblems of an empire of apodictic truth—alluded to by Napoleon and Robur—safe from subversion, beyond contradiction. But his practice collapses into deceit and distortion: the mask is the symbol of duplicity, not the prelude to disclosure. His doctrines, after all, are not, as Borges notes, a privileged communication from God but only an adaptation of old Gnostic beliefs. The entire story, likewise, is an example of "falsifying and distorting . . . the ideas of others," as Borges confesses in the preface (*Infamy* 12). The text is always a potential or actual impostor. In Paul's terms, it is closer to glossolalia than to true prophecy. Speaking in tongues, says Paul, is a sign for unbelievers. And these stories invite disbelief; as Napoleon remarks: "cet exemple est incroyable." In none of them is the *logos* entirely *eusemos*: like the tongues, like any actual prophecy, like signs, they allow or encourage interpretation.

In the light of the foregoing analysis, I might hazard a provisional hypothesis: namely, that there is a secret affinity between prophecy (especially the masked variety) and literature. Certainly the Greeks acknowledged some kinship between the mantic and the bardic arts by referring to the poet as “the prophet of the Muses” (Socrates, for example, maintains in *The Apology* that poets, like prophets, rely on inspiration—not wisdom—for their work). Turning to prose, why, in Moore’s *Lalla Rookh*, should the holy prophet be jealous of Nasser the Arabian merchant’s stories unless narrative is prophetic, containing the promise to tell what happens next? In that same text, the Indian princess, still on her way to meet her appointed husband, the King of Bucharia, inevitably falls for the dashing young poet, Feramorz. Grieving and reluctant, she finally arrives at her destination, where the youthful King turns out to be none other than Feramorz himself, who had only been passing himself off as a lowly poet. Thus the poet too, like the subversive, prophetic, veiled subject of his opening poem, has been wearing a mask.

Perhaps this revelation is only accidental and trivial, but it also tells us something about criticism. The news that the poet is, after all, a king, causes a change of heart in the critic and Great Nazir, Fadladeen. His earlier critical assessment concludes:

Notwithstanding the observations which I have thought it my duty to make, it is by no means my wish to discourage the young man:—so far from it indeed, that if he will but totally alter his style of writing and thinking, I have very little doubt I shall be vastly pleased with him. (23)

Apprised of the true royal identity of the poet, the critic recants and is “seized with an admiration of the King’s verses as unbounded as, he begged him to believe, it was disinterested” (338). The critic, then, also wears a mask: perhaps he too only promises the imminence of a revelation which does not occur.

University of Cambridge

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