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## The Mask of the Prophet: Napoleon, Borges, Verne

**I**T 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 Périvier 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

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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,<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> 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 I, 320-23.

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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").<sup>3</sup>

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

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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

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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.\*

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

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

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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-phētiēs* 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."<sup>6</sup> 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

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<sup>6</sup> These examples are taken from Aune 197, 225.

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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).<sup>7</sup> 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'ānic 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

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<sup>7</sup> The numbers in parentheses give the chapter and page numbers in *Voyages extraordinaires*.

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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.



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**Record: 1**

**Title:** The Mask of the Prophet: Napoleon, Borges, Verne.

**Subject(s):** VERNE, Jules; BORGES, Jorge Luis; BONAPARTE, Napoleon; PROPHETS in literature

**Author(s):** Martin, Andrew

**Source:** Comparative Literature, Fall88, Vol. 40 Issue 4, p318, 17p

**Abstract:** Compares the prophet characters in the written works of Napoleon Bonaparte, Jorge Luis Borges and Jules Verne. Characteristics of the prophet and false prophet characters of Bonaparte and Borges; Information on the physical fitness affecting the prophet; Qualities of the heroes in Verne's novels.

**AN:** 7071706

**ISSN:** 0010-4124

**Database:** Academic Search Elite