

The Mask

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Here I collect some reflexions and several facts potentially useful for a phenomenology of the mask. I wish only to signal the adventurous character of the hypotheses that I propose. They offer an origin nevertheless, to the universal usage of the mask by men, which goes back beyond this species, to the insects who were the first to wear it.

1

The Importance of the Mask

All humanity wears or has worn a mask. This enigmatic accessory without useful end is more widespread than the lever, the bow, the harpoon or the plow. Some peoples remained entirely ignorant of more humble, or more precious tools. Yet, they knew of the mask. Some civilizations, among them the most remarkable, have prospered without having the idea of the wheel, or, worse, without knowing how to employ it. Yet they were familiar with the mask. Man in general abstract and hypothetical man, from the first eras and the first cultures—could not have embodied more accurately, more appropriately, Descartes' saying: "Je m'avance masqué." There is not a tool, an invention, a belief, a custom, or an institution, which brings about the unity of humanity to the same degree accomplished by the wearing of the mask.

The Mask maintains a mystery: the reasons that have driven man to cover his face with a second visage, instrument of metamorphosis and ecstasy, of possession by the gods--instrument, as well, of intimidation and of political power. All of ethnology is filled with masks, and with the vertigo, the trances, the, hypnoses, and the panics that are its nearly inevitable consequences. It's at this point that I have hazarded my first sprawling hypothesis: a people enters history and civilization the moment they reject the mask, when they repudiate it as an instrument of individual or collective panic, once they consign it to an institutional function. Even reduced to a simple carnival accessory or mundane festivity, it disquiets and fascinates. Its power of seduction has been completely appropriated, yet it does not disappear. I will come back to this. For the moment, though, I would like only to underline that the problem of the mask is neither episodic, nor local. It affects the entire species.

2

Men and Insects

Here I come to another of my wild hypotheses: the family resemblance between insects and men. For a while now I have tried to demonstrate how the behavior of the one corresponds to the mythologies of the other. I brought conduct and fiction, instinct and phantasm, face to face.

There was more to it though: the problem of a society that leads to castes, war, colonization and slavery; the problem of language and that of geometry (for bees)); that of drugs and of voluntary intoxication, death drives, and “vices” (for ants). Always—with the same opposition between automatism and liberty, between fixity, immutable repetition, and invention—the fluidity of history. On one side, the inscription of the body, valid for thousands of centuries, and, beyond that, the perfection of the organ, the antennae, the pupae, the faceted eyes, without even counting the quasi somnambulist infallibility of instinct. On the other side, the capacity to create crude and clumsy tools (external), insufficient weapons (external), and cumbersome clothing, that does not form part of the body, as do the carapaces or fleeces, which are armors or fur-coats one cannot leave behind. Then come machines for fabricating weapons, tools, or clothes; followed by complex machines for fabricating the more simple machines. This faculty, capable of developing itself without end, implies the blind search for error and the rectification of error. It inaugurates, at the same time, decisive freedom. It pre-supposes an imprecise and ambiguous language that encourages non-sense, not a system of unequivocal signals, with its limited code of swarming, and inexorable choreographies that people wrongly call the *language* of bees, due to a radical mis-recognition of the confused nature of language, and the unquestionable functional similitude between them. This sinister or happy fall from grace has as its precondition, still, class conflict in society, religious wars with hate and fanaticism—revindications, revolts and revolutions—not an inalterable order, not a perfect economy and physiology corroborating or dictating the social regime. It supports mathematical speculations which invent hyper-spaces, abstract volumes, unimaginable, if not inconceivable, amusements in the refined, free play of arbitrary signs, not the implacable and exclusively hexagonal geometry of the honeycomb.

I stop myself here, but the analogies abound. They follow any customary contrast, even the strict parallelism of a term for term opposition: the insect created in itself, thus at the level of space; man outside of himself, thus at the level of the individual.

3

Fulgora Laternaria

Certain insects, such as the *Cyphonia*, the *Heterontus*, and the *Sphongophorus*, grow giant shades above them like tortured umbrellas, superstructures in disconcerting forms. These branching, encumbering appendages have no apparent utility. They are purely ornamental, airy excrescences, which bifurcate spontaneously, in a granular and absurd fashion, completely in the service of

equilibrium and symmetry. They cannot but recall the jagged and skillfully corrected cross-outs in Rabindranath Tagore's manuscripts, the indentations of the most exceptionally crafted mediaeval keys, or the zigzagging sinuosities of Scythian animal art. More than anything they resemble the scaffolding mounted atop certain Oceanic and American ceremonial masks.

Additionally, very large scarabs grow certain pointed appendages certain of which have been named after the rhinoceros or nasicorn. The lucane lumbers a big articulated deer antler before him, which functions like a jaw, except it has no function. Similarly the sorcerer's masks are frequently adorned with horns and antlers. I will raise no argument against it.

There are a type of Hemiptera named fulgoras that the dictionary temerously defines as "luminous insects from hot countries." The naturalists distinguish or rather would have distinguished in the year X (classifications are ephemeral): the lantern-carrying fulgora (from Brazil and from Guyana);¹ the candle-carrying fulgora (from China); the tenebrous fulgora (from Guinea); the phosphorescent fulgora and the nyctalopic fulgora (from Surinam); the gleaming fulgora (from Cayenne); and, finally, European fulgora (from Mediterranean Italy and from Sicily). With the exception of the last one, which is strictly geographic, all these adjectives make allusion to the presumed relations between these insects and light. This conclusion is arrived at through a deeply rooted belief about the leader of the fulgora: the Fulgora laternaria, or lantern fly. In the 18th century Mlle de Merian² attributed to them the legend of radiating such a considerable light that she could read the newspaper by their brightness. The head of this variety of fulgora extends before it as an empty protuberance nearly as voluminous as its body.³ One imagines that it was a lantern from which this insect took its name, yet we have to move past that: the fulgora is not luminous. It's the emptiness in the protuberance that creates doubts: the lantern lacks a candle. These naïvetés are no longer accepted. Some scientists would concede however that the protuberance has a faint luminosity: it glows with infra-red rays. They admit that it produces photogenic bacteria.

In any case, there was no question of the intense light which, according to Maria Sibylla Merian, allowed her to read easily "a book similar in typeface to that of the Gazette de Hallande."⁴ An art critic, a perspicuous one in my opinion, has remarked that the enigmatic character of the smile of the Mona Lisa does not come from the rendering of her lips, but the fact that she was painted perfectly depilated, with neither lashes or eyebrows. By a sort of transference its the

¹The "common" French name for this uncommon creature designated in Latin as *Fulgora laternaria* is *La Porte Lanterne*, literally: Lantern Carrier]

² Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717) German born naturalist and artist. See her astonishing *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium*, of 1705, a natural history of the insects of Surnam to which Caillois makes reference here.

³I take this opportunity here to thank M. Éugène Seguy, professor at the Muséum [of natural history, Paris], to whom I owe my presentation of the photographs included here.

⁴*Dissertation sur la Génération et la Transformation des Insectes de Surinam*, La Haye, chez Pierre Gosse [in the collection of Peter the Great], 1726.



smile that attracts the attention. I believe that the observation is applicable quite generally. When something surprises us we are led to discover the cause not in the true reason, which we close our eyes to, but in a trait that preconception has designated in advance or that, for all sorts of reasons, we are expected to notice. The bizarreness of the fulgora is not its presumed

phosphorescence. I suppose that Mlle de Merian, shocked by the fulgora, spontaneously attributed to it what astonished her about lightning bugs.

With perfect precision the cephalic protuberance of the fulgora portrays the head of an alligator. On it a false jaw is drawn, an enormous arc protects a semblance of a globular eye. Behind this at once dwarfish and giant face, on which all the traits have been exaggerated, nearly caricatured but perfectly modeled, with great effort one discovers the minuscule head of the insect and two shining black, nearly microscopic, dots: its eyes. This hollow pocket is superfluous. One should not even think of it as a form of mimicry. A Hemiptera that lives on trees, flying from branch to branch, decked out with the head of centimeter-and-a-half long reptile head? To frighten whom? What enemy of the fulgora can be frightened by a real crocodile, at the same time as being afraid of its miniaturization to such a small scale? Nothing is more absurd.

Outside of this, the fulgora is truly a mimetic insect, but in another fashion. Its upper wings are covered with drawings tinted in camouflage that allow them to blend in with the trunk of the Simarouba tree, which they take to by preference. From their abdomen there are released large waxy fleeces that work to render them invisible among the mosses, lichens, and irregularities of the bark. Why, if they take such care to dissimulate, do they attract at the same time attention with a monstrous mask?

I perceive two answers to this question. The first consists of denying that the frontal protuberance of the fulgora truly resembles the head of a crocodile. It could be the result of a simple illusion, due to the complacency of the human imagination. Some details, without a doubt strange, could encourage the mania of interpretation, but their purely fortuitous coming-together here—objectively—represents nothing. I bring everyone's attention back to the photograph of the fulgora. It seems to me that in fact anthropomorphism plays a considerable part. The elements of the resemblance are as such only by virtue of their reciprocal distribution. Isolated, or differently disposed, someone could rightly become a fantasist, recognizing eyes or teeth there, like one pleases oneself discovering forms in clouds. But, in this particular case, everything fits and composes itself like pieces of a puzzle. I agree that the resemblance is scandalous, but I can no longer, just to avoid a scandal, deny the evidence.

I arrive at the second answer. Resting under the dissimulation of the mimetic wings, large ocelli round out the lower wings of the fulgora. Now we know what purpose the ocelli of the sphinx and of the caterpillar serve⁵: to stupefy their prey or adversary. The insect unmasks them as its body vibrates convulsively.

Certain insects display circles, simulacra of enormous eyes. They use them to fascinate their eventual predator or victim because imposed and prolonged contemplation of a fixed circle provokes paralysis and hypnosis. This display used by the weak to overpower the strong, or of the slow to immobilize the quick, is accompanied by a frenzy, the rhythm of which possesses a spellbinding power. Men and animals are equally susceptible to these purely optical and rhythmic effects. On one side there are insects whose upper wings dissimulate and assimilate them to their surroundings, and whom suddenly reveal in a spasmodic tremor relatively enormous

⁵ *Smerinthus cerisyi*

circles the lifelike colors of which stand-in for a sort of absence, or, at least, a neutral presence, difficult to discern. On the other side: masked men, who no longer appear as men, sneaking up and conducting themselves as ferocious animals or demons, as specters emerging from another world. They feel possessed by strange and sovereign forces. Their gestures and their cries are dictated by the being who possesses them or whom they incarnate. Thus transformed they terrify and haunt duped people who cannot identify them and who lose all power to defend



themselves and to react. In their panic, they are not capable of recognizing the obvious truth: the presence of the man behind the Apparition.

If not for the ocelli, I would doubtlessly hesitate and I myself could adhere to the thesis, unsatisfying as it is, of a caprice of human nature. But there is also the perfectly judicious use of the ocelli. There is the faux and the usage of the faux. The insect comports itself as a man of sorts, wearing a mask and knowing how to make use of it.

From this point on I cease to believe in chance and convergence. I have decided. I distance myself from the scientists to whom these ocelli and other astonishing anomalies appear as simple *ornament*. As I can see this word only constitutes a weak metaphor compared to that of the *mask*, which I adopt here by preference. Once again, it's necessary to restate the opposition between the world of insects and that of man: the immobile "mask," sculpted forever in the morphology of the species, and the fragile simulacrum, exterior and mobile, with which the

officiant covers the face in the moment of deception. But the sought-after effect is the same and the means of obtaining it symmetrical.

The protuberance of the fulgora is a mask. From this point on it is less important that it portrays or does not portray an alligator's head. A mask is not made to faithfully represent another visage. It is not destined to bring change but to terrify. I would like to see entomologists research the mask of the fulgora, to know if it really is terrifying, if it truly frightens the animals it would be in the interest of the fulgora to frighten; put differently: if this insect makes use of the mask to complete the action of its ocelli.

4

Reasons Behind the Mask's Destitution

Man has relinquished his claim on the mask. The sacrifice is considerable, when we recall that the mask remained for a longtime the sign of his superiority, *par excellence*. In effect, in primitive societies, the question is always whether to be masked (and to inspire fear) or to not be (and to have fear)—or, in a more complex organization—to fear a few and to inspire fear in others, according one's the degree of initiation. Passing to a higher level is to be instructed in the mystery of a more secret mask. This is to learn that the frightening supernatural apparition is but a man disguised, masking himself to terrify the profane or those initiated at a lower level.

Certainly there is the problem of of the decline of the mask. How and for what reason has mankind been led to renounce it? The question does not appear to have preoccupied ethnographers. As such, it is of extreme importance. I advance the following hypothesis. It does not exclude anything; on the contrary it calls on the existence of multiple, diverse, and incompatible strains of thought, corresponding to each culture and particular situation. But it does propose a collective spirit [ressort commun]. The mask's system of initiation only functions if there is a constant overlap between the revelation of the secret of the mask and, in turn, the right to use it to terrify novices and to access the divinatory trance. Knowledge and use are in this way strictly linked. Only one who knows the true nature of the mask and of the masked can put on appearances convincingly. Above all, it is impossible to submit oneself to a leader—or at least to submit oneself to the same degree, with the same feeling of sacred panic—if one knows that he is simply wearing a disguise. This is practically impossible to ignore, or, in any case, to ignore for a long time. This is where a permanent fissure emerges in the system, which must defend itself against the curiosity of the uninitiated by a complete series of prohibitions and punishments—those latter being the most real. In fact, only death is effective against a kept secret. It follows that, in spite of seeming to prove itself by bringing about ecstasy and possession, the mechanism remains fragile. It's necessary, at every instant, to protect against accidental discovery, indiscrete questions, hypotheses, or explanations. It is inevitable that, little by little, the

fabrication of masks or the wearing of disguises, without losing their sacred character as such, could no longer be protected by the threat of death. Then, by unnoticed transformations, they become liturgical ornaments, ceremonial accessories for dance or theater.

5

The Ultimate Fascination

Perhaps the most recent attempt at political domination by the mask was that of Hakim Al-Muqanna, the Veiled Prophet of Khorassan⁶, who, during the final years of the 8th century (from 160 to 163 of the Hegira), held the armies of Caliph in check. Over his face he wore a green colored mask, (according to some it was golden) which he never removed. He pretended to be God and stated that he covered his face because no mortal could behold him without going blind.

Immediately his adversaries bitterly discussed his pretensions. The chroniclers—it is true, all historians of the Caliph—write that he acted in this way because he was bald, one-eyed, and repulsively ugly. His disciples summoned him to prove that what he claimed was true, insisting upon seeing his face. He showed it to them. Some were actually burned, others were persuaded. The official history explains the miracle, uncovering (or inventing) the stratagem. Here is the account of the episode, as it is found in one of the oldest sources, *Description topographique et historique de Boukhara par Abou-Bak Mohammad ibn Dja' far Narshkakhi*, completed in 332.⁷

Fifty thousand of Al-Muqanna's soldiers protested at the door of the castle demanding to see him. They implored and insisted, saying they would move only if they could see the face of their god. Al-Muqanna had a servant called Hadjeb to whom he said: "go tell my creatures Moses asked to let him see my face but I did not agree to show him because he would not have been able to bear my gaze—and if someone were to see me he would die instantly..." But the soldiers continued to implore him. Al-Muqanna then told them: return on such a day and I will show you my face".

"Then, to the one hundred women who he kept with him in the castle in addition to the servant Hadjeb (and these were largely the daughters of peasants from Soghd, Kesh, and Nakshab) he gave the order to each take a mirror and to go up to the roof of the castle. He showed them how to hold the mirror in such a manner that when one faced another the mirrors all reflected

⁶ Al-Muqanna, in arabic, literally The Masked One

⁷ I reproduce the literal translation here, which Mr Mohammed Achenah has kindly brought to my attention, from an abridged collection taken from the work of Narshakî (written in 574 of the Hegira). An exhaustive critical account of these sources feature in Gholam Hossein Sadighi's thesis, *Les Mouvements religieux iraniens au IIe et IIIe siècle de l'Hégire*, Paris, 1938, p. 163-186.

the sun on each other's surfaces at the moment when its rays were brightest. At this point the men had gathered again. When the sun reflected upon the mirrors, the area and all of its surroundings were submerged by the effect of this reflection of light. He then said to his servant: "Say to my creatures: here is your god presenting himself to you. Behold him! Behold him!" The men, seeing the square submerged in light were terrified. They prostrated themselves."

Following this, Al-Muqanna backed up his divinity with other feats: for two months in Nakshap he erected out of a pit a luminous body resembling a moon whose light shined the distance of several miles. A text even describes this entity returning into the pit after having risen to a certain height.⁸ The ancient chroniclers of this story remain mute on the mechanism of the miracle and on the nature of its luminous globe, which was perhaps an ancestor, modest and distant, of future hot air balloons.

Al-Muqanna justified his divine nature and his human superiority according to this unobvious theology: "God was himself incarnated several times in the form of the prophets and each prophet was superior to those who preceded him. The preceding incarnation was effectuated in the form of d'Abu Moslim, who thus came to be considered superior to the other prophets. He himself constituted the most recent incarnation of the divinity." The Caliph had only to surrender.

But the incredulous (or impious) Caliph sent armies against Al-Muqanna all the same. To recruit the greatest number of followers, he constructed his own theology with a seductive ethic: "he gave permission to the adherents of his sect to kill those who did not share their beliefs, to take their women and children into captivity, to regard their belongings as fair game. He accorded them an absolute liberty in sexual relations, considered as licit all the acts declared illicit by the muslim religion and advised them to take no account of religious prescription or prohibition."⁹

Victory changed sides multiple times. In the end, Badgad was conquered. In 163 of the Hegira, Al-Muqanna was confined to his stronghold. The attackers had brought with them two thousand buffalo hides from India which they used to cover the ground to traverse the moats. The Prophet's generals defected. Seeing he had lost Al-Muqanna employed an artifice that would assure his posthumous prestige by making his followers believe that he had ascended directly to the heavens. In the language of Narshaki, who is said to take his account from Mohammad ibn Daafar (the illustrious Abou Djafar Mohammad ben Djarir ben Yesid Tabari), who takes his own account from Abou Ali Mohammad ibn Haroun, cultivator of Kesh:

"My grandmother was among the women that Muqanna had engaged and kept with him in the castle. She recounted that one day Muqanna invited all the women to drink at his table, as he had the habit of doing. But, on this day, he put poison in the wine destined for the women. He had prepared a personal cup for each woman. He said to them: "By the time I drink from my cup you will have to have drunk yours entirely." When all the women had emptied their cups, save

⁸ Tadjaraib-us-Salaf, p. 121 from the persian translation by Al-Fakhri, 724 from Hegira— 1136 AD, published by A Eghbal

⁹ (Ibid, p.180)

for me who had kept the wine in my throat. And so all the women died and I laid down next to them, pretending to be dead too. Muqanna did not notice. He got up, looked around and found all the women dead. Then he approached his own servant and killed him by severing his head from his body.

“He had already ordered the oven be kept lit three days prior. He approached the oven, undressed himself, and threw himself in. Smoke emanated from the oven. I approached, but I found no trace of Muqanna. Then there was no one in the castle...”¹⁰

The chroniclers differ a little in their manner of recounting this end. According to one Al-Muqanna threw himself into a pit of quicklime; according to another it was a vat of vitriol; according to a third (Awfi) it was a cauldron of mercury; and according to others still, it was a copper foundry, or a vat of tar or sugar. Barthélemy d’Herbelot de Molainville relates the episode in the following manner:

“Seeing in the end he had no choice but to perish or surrender, he resolved to poison everyone in his circle. One of his concubines who discovered his plan hid herself in a corner of the castle to escape this danger and saw that, after everyone’s death, Al-Muqanna took their bodies and burned them, after which he through himself into a vat full of nitric-acid that he had prepared. They found nothing of his body but his hair, which remained floating on the water.”¹¹

The subterfuge succeeded nevertheless. The prophet's followers were persuaded that their master had ascended into the sky for a time, and would redescend to earth once more. Khorassan did not find peace again for a longtime. This only kept the annalists from denouncing Hakim’s fraud unanimously. Later, the reign of the mask appeared as that of an imposture and jester. Long after being conquered he continues to act upon the imagination.

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I have not mentioned when and to whom the story of Al-Muqanna was known in the occident. In 1697, Herbelot included it in the entry that he dedicated to the prophet in his encyclopedia, but it is possible that other orientalists had made allusions to it elsewhere. The work was reedited in 1777, with some additions by Galland. In 1787, in Ajaccio, a 17 year old Napoléon Bonaparte wrote a short biography of Al-Muqanna. He titled it: *Le Masque Prophète* [The Masked Prophet]. It was his first literary essay. Published in 1821, it seems that some pages had been taken for a work of imagination. They ended—quite prophetically—with the following reflection: “This example is incredible. How far the mania of illustration can be pushed!” The author would show this in practice.

¹⁰ Tarîkh-i-Bokhara, p.72 de la version persane. I'm obliged once again to thank Mr Mohammed Achena for the translation of this passage.

¹¹ Bibliothèque orientale (the edition of 1777, t. II, p. 185)

In 1914, in the *Psychologische Abhandlungen*, published in Vienna by C.G. Jung, J. Votoz has deduced from this supposed tale the character and destiny of Napoleon. I cannot procure this monograph, about which a phrase by Kuhn, in his work *Le Masque*, warrants my conjecture.¹²

Jorge Luis Borges has devoted a short chapter to Al-Muqanna in his *Historia Universal de la Infamia*.¹³ This is an entirely original work as the cited sources are not known to the author, who, in return utilizes none of those known to Sadighi and the other Iranists. At the same time, the events of the life of Al-Muqanna found in his essay are peculiar to Borges, who leaves out to the contrary the three episodes well accounted for by the chroniclers: the burning mirrors, the artificial moon, and the suicide in the oven. The *Historia Universal de la Infamia* includes a bibliography by subject. For Hakim, only two works are mentioned: the enigmatic and inaccessible *Vernichtung der Rose* and the vast, summary, and very accessible *History of Persia* by Sir Percy Sykes. However this last work only dedicates a dozen or so lines to the Veiled Prophet, in which the only point in common with the biography composed by J.L. Borges remains the allusion to the poem by Moore.

6

The Cycle is Closed

In France around 1700 the mask is a courtly diversion. But simple occurrence suddenly demonstrated the permanence of the anguish it provokes. It took place in such an unexpected fashion that, the description of Saint Simon the realist, takes on a fantastical tone such as one finds in Hoffman or Edgar Allan Poe.

“Lieutenant General Bouligneux and Field Marshal Wartigny were killed at the Siege of Verue; two totally singular men of great valor. The previous winter we had made several very naturalistic wax masks of court, which we wore under other masks so that, in unmasking, people were tricked into mistaking the second mask for a face, while the true one, completely different, was below. We heartily amused ourselves with this game. This winter, we wanted to entertain ourselves with this again. To our great surprise we found all the masks arranged as we had after the carnival, fresh and natural, except those of Bouligneux and of Wartigny, which, conserving their perfect resemblance, had the pallor and the dignity of those who have just died. They made an appearance at the ball and inspired such horror that we tried to touch them up with rouge, but the rouge wore off instantly, and the impression could not be altered. What is most extraordinary to me was that I needed to recount it; I could have kept it secret too, if only the

¹² Trad. franç., Paris, 1957, p.38

¹³ Universal History of Infamy

entire court had not been, like me, a witness, extremely surprised, and several times over, by this strange singularity. In the end we threw out the two masks."¹⁴

During the same period, in Venice, the mask is accessory to amorous intrigue and political conspiracy. Etiquette and institutions govern it, nevertheless, it becomes a somewhat official resource, as described in the collection by Giovanni Comisso, *Les Agents secrets de Venise au XVIIIe siècle*.¹⁵

"The *bautta* was a kind of mantelet comprised of black cap and mask. The origin of this name is the cry: bau, bau, with which one inspires fear in children. Everyone wore it in Venice, starting with the Doge when he wanted to come and go freely in the city. It was donned by the nobles, both men and women, in public places to place them at a luxurious distance from the people there to protect what the patrician class believed was their dignity. In the theaters the porters came to allow entry to nobles wearing a *bautta* over their face, but once inside the hall, they kept them on or took them off according to their own pleasure. When the patricians came to confer with ambassadors about affairs of the State they came wearing the *bautta*, requiring the ambassadors on such occasions to do so as well.

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Soon all that remained were the wolves of masked balls and the cardboard heads of carnivals. In 1900, Jean Lorrain spoke once more of the mask with sensibility. In 1948, Georges Buraud spoke of it with science and nostalgia. The cycle is closed.

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Appendix

Napoleon Bonaparte: The Mask of the Prophet

Story

In the year 160 of the Hegira, Mikadi ruled Badgad. This grand, generous, enlightened, and magnanimous prince, saw the arab empire prosper in the bosom of peace. Feared and respected by his neighbors, he understood the task of making the sciences flourish and accelerating progress. Yet the tranquility was troubled by Hakem Al-Muqanna, who, deep in the land of Korassan, began to divide the parties comprising the empire into sectarians. Hakem, of a high stature, masculine and convincing, referred to himself as the envoy of God. He preached a strict morality that pleased the multitude; the equality of rank and fortune were the regular content of his sermons. The public fell in line with his teachings. Hakem had an army.

The Caliph and his elders felt it necessary to snuff out such a dangerous insurrection in its embryonic stage; but their troops were beaten several times, and Hakem attained greater superiority each day.

¹⁴ *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, t. II, ch XXIV (1704), 1949, pp. 414-415

¹⁵ (Paris, 1944, p.37., note I)

A cruel illness and battle fatigue took their toll on the face of the prophet. It was no longer the most handsome of all arabs. His noble and severe traits, his eyes, big and full of fire, were disfigured; Hakem became blind. This transformation could have lessened the enthusiasm of his adherents. But he had the idea of wearing a silver mask.

He appeared before his followers; Hakem had lost nothing of his eloquence. His speech had the same force; he spoke to them and convinced them that he only wore the mask to keep men from being blinded by the light emanating from his face.

Now more than ever he placed his hopes in the delirium of the people that had exalted him, when the loss of a battle had ruined his affairs, diminished his followers and weakened their faith; he was besieged in one of his few remaining garrisons. Hakem had to die or his enemies would come to take hold of his body! He assembled all of his followers and said to them: Faithful ones, we who God and Mohamed have chosen to restore the empire and reclaim our nature, why should the number of our enemies discourage us? Listen: last night, as you were deep in sleep, I bowed and prayed to God: "My father, you have protected me for so many years"—what could my followers or I have done to offend you so that you abandon us?" A moment later, I heard a voice say to me: "Hakem, those alone who have not abandoned you are your true friends, and they alone are the chosen ones. They will share with you in the riches of your illustrious enemies. Wait for the new moon, dig large pits and, precipitously, your enemies will go there, like flies, distracted by the smoke. The pits were soon dug, and they filled them with coal, and placed vats filled with alcohol around the edges.

All that finished, they took a meal in common, drinking the same wine, and all died with the same symptoms. Hakem dragged their bodies into the cole, which consumed them, brought the fire up to the alcohol and threw himself in. The next day, Caliph's troops advanced but stopped upon seeing all of the doors open. They entered with caution but they only found a woman, Hakem's mistress, who had survived him. Such was the end of Hakem, whose followers believed had been taken up to heaven along with his faithful.

This example is incredible. How far the mania of illustration can be pushed!