

Benagissal, the Prophet



Alfons Maseras

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Introductory Note by Mariano Martín Rodríguez

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Alfons Maseras (1884-1939) was one of the leading Catalan storytellers of the first half of the 20th century. In addition to historical novels with an ancient Roman setting, such as *Ildaríbal* (1915), he wrote several volumes encompassing a wide range of short stories, both in the realistic and the fantastic and fantasy modes. Among the latter, “Benagissal, the Prophet” (“Benagissal, el profeta”), the definitive version of which was published in Catalan in the volume entitled *Figures d’argila* (*Figures of Clay*) in 1927, is particularly noteworthy. It is a literal translation made by the author himself of a story originally written in Spanish by him and published in that language in 1924 under the same title “Benagissal el profeta,” first in the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Nación* (23 March 1924, p. 5), which had commissioned the story from him, and then in the Barcelona magazine *Lecturas* (vol. 4, number 38, 1924, p. 727-732). The beautiful illustrations by Joan Llaverias (1865-1938) that accompany this latter publication suggest an Orientalist setting for the story, as the characters depicted have long beards and ancient Jewish-style clothing, while the architecture and decoration are reminiscent of Babylon and Achaemenid Persia. This underlines the eclectic geographical and historical exoticism that the text displays, albeit in a much less specific way.

Although the names of some of the characters such as King Otoniel or Judge Darconiah sound Hebrew, they are invented words, as is the case with Jaralad, the kingdom with a Persian or Hindu name in which the fate of the prophet Benagissal (an imaginary name, as well) is played out. These names are onomastic and toponymical inventions that follow a linguistic procedure which is usual in secondary world/high fantasy, thus contributing to set the whole story in a fictional universe outside the one documented by history in our world. Maseras underlines this fact by indicating from the outset that there is no memory of the geography of that kingdom, although he later attributes the knowledge of those names to chronicles of remote times, with the intention of adding a certain effect of historical plausibility to the narration.

“Benagissal, the Prophet” is a political parable written in elegant language, usually simpler (and less poetic) than the prose used by fantasists related to the Aesthetic Movement such as Lord Dunsany and Kenneth Morris, or to French Symbolism. The everyday realism of scenes such as that of the children who, in their games, discover the dungeon in which Benagissal has been forgotten fits a tale without any supernatural occurrences. The story eschews, indeed, magic and any non-human characters



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that we have grown to consider necessary in high fantasy, while other features tell of an ancient, legendary and more heroic times of fable. Benagissal himself heroically addresses his king in the manner of the Hebrew prophets, which seems rather fabulous both then and now. The same can be said of the king's decision of letting him live, albeit imprisoned and hidden, after having pronounced a public death sentence against him. This mercy shows, however, that a despotic rule is not always worse than a regime pretending to be accountable to the people, as Benagissal tragically discovers at the end. After all, such an incorruptible prophet could stir up the people again against the new rulers, who seem not to care too much about ethics or truth. What the course of this new regime will be is for readers to imagine, even if the fact that Benagissal's

treatment at their hands reminds readers of the so many triumphant revolutions where the new government had less scruples to execute dissidents than the old tyrannical ones had. This sad and recurring tragedy of modern politics is suggested by Maseras through this fantasy parable, thus showing that that genre is not averse to political criticism. It could be argued that science fiction is about politics, while fantasy is rather about ethics. "Benagissal, the prophet" is an original story that conflates both ethics and politics to warn us that they should not be separated. The narrative also shows, however, that both of them rarely come together. The legendary secondary world depicted (and subcreated) in "Benagissal, the Prophet" acquires thus a deeper dimension and becomes cognitively estranging, as engaging high fantasy often is.

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King Otoniel dwelled in the city of Jaralad. Men today have no longer memory of where the city of Jaralad was built, nor of the land the realm of Otoniel encompassed. However, we know their names and that of the prophet Benagissal, upright man without sin, because they are written in the chronicles of old.

The king lived in the castle his father had built, which stood in the very middle of the city of Jaralad. There lived with him the queen, the princes of the royal house, the ministers, the foremen and the armed sentries guarding the castle. Around the fortress lay the city, proud to protect Otoniel's dwelling.

All too often, the castle gave in to merrymaking and squandering, radiant in its best finery and lively as a hive, for the king was fond of feasts. He was also fond of opulence and riches, which he hoarded in his chambers and the princes' and gave out amongst his minions. In order to gratify his greed for pleasure and his lust for gold, he taxed heavily his subjects, who withstood this burden with patience. However, the more opulence the court blazoned, the more misery there was in Jaralad, and this misery, which grew more awful by the day, begot quarrels, injustices and crimes. Otoniel's subjects were hapless, until one day they mutinied and set out to take the castle to beg the king for mercy. Yet the guards kept the populace at bay, barring them entrance to castle.

In the meantime, Benagissal, the prophet, in hearing the people's clamour, wept deep in his heart because of the injustices they suffered. At night, when nobody could see him, he went to the castle to speak with the king. They took

him to the king and, as he entered the royal chamber, Otoniel lamented the people's insolence.

"This is your doing," said Benagissal.

"How would I have desired this? I, who have always strived for living in peace with my subjects."

Then Benagissal addressed Otoniel thus:

"For a wise and sensible king, the love of his people has to be preferable to the flattery of his courtiers, and the wellbeing of his subjects preferable to the riches of his court. Neither you nor your ministers have acted according to justice. It is why the people is claiming against you. Woe betide you if you keep oppressing them as you have, for sooner or later they will take revenge!"

Otoniel's ministers had listened to Benagissal's words and now pleaded with the king for a hearing. The minister in charge of justice said to Otoniel:

"Have this man taken away, for he is as insolent as your enemies. Believe not in his righteousness, nor in his gift for prophecy – he is but an impostor."

"And how shall I take him away from me?" asked the king.

All the ministers replied:

"Take his life."

Otoniel called for the captain of his guard and, in front of the ministers, ordered him to lock Benagissal in the castle's gloomiest pit and to slit his throat ere break of day.

The ministers stayed all night by their king's side, counselling him to suppress the people's violence harshly, to take up arms to re-establish his absolute authority, and to punish the rebels and suspects with penalties and taxes. Otoniel promised to do so and so he did the next day.



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Yet before going to bed, the king had pity of Benagissal and, in secret, ordered the captain of the guard not to execute the prophet, but rather incarcerate him in the most out-of-the-way, underground cell in the fortress and, as of the next morning, to call out Benagissal's death by order of the king all over Jaralad. And he threatened the captain with death should he reveal what he had been commanded to do.

The gaoler knew not whom his prisoner was, but he had him well locked up. For the sake of precaution, he had bound his feet with heavy chains. Benagissal slept on a straw cot and fed on the bread and water he was handed every morning. He withstood patiently the incarceration and the misery the king had reduced him to, believing dungeon and death to be preferable to adulation and lie, content with being able to sacrifice himself for the just cause of his brethren.

And so the years passed on. Benagissal was still locked and chained up, sleeping on black straw and feeding on bread and water. Only the king and the captain of the guard knew he was not dead. However, Otoniel, who had felt pity for the prophet, being afraid his foretelling might become true, never had the courage to follow his counsel and refuse that of his ministers.

Misery ravaged the kingdom of Jaralad, and the people, deep in their hearts, cursed their king, until chieftains began to appear among the people. These, followed by the revengeful and furious mob, took the home of the king and dealt death upon Otoniel and his close ones, his ministers and courtiers, and disarmed and disbanded the guard of the castle. The people looted and plundered the fortress, leaving no trace of the riches that once were the king's pride.

In the commotion of the revolt, Benagissal's gaoler fled by leaping over the body of the captain of the royal guard, who had died in the skirmish between his soldiers and the people. However, the gaoler also found death. Benagissal remained in the dungeon, by all ignored, without anybody to bring him a chunk of bread, without anybody to fill the jar with water when thirst tormented him.

Once the king was dead and ruin came upon his house, the rage of the people dwindled away. The city resolved not to have another king and chose amongst the chieftains of the people three supreme judges to govern them. The eldest of them all, by the name of Darconias, held the highest authority.

Meanwhile, the castle was empty, deserted, doors wide open, so that everybody entered and left at will. Whereas at night there used to be the din of revelry, now a deathly silence prevailed. Whereas there used to be on the main bailey the clamour of kettledrums and trumpets in the daytime, now only the sweet and subtle voices of children were to be heard, for all children in Jaralad went to the castle's bailey to play.

That day the children had played on the bailey all morning and there they returned in the afternoon, mischievous and jubilant. Carried away by the game's thrill they left the castle and headed for a nearby forest, in the hope of hunting some sparrows. Not everyone left: Ananiel, son of a weaver who lived near the castle, and his younger siblings did not feel like following the others, afraid their mother might see them and bring them to the house. And so when the three siblings found themselves alone in the big bailey, without their every day's companions, they no longer knew how to play. Then



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the youngest of the three, being the most mischievous, went into the castle's chambers, which had remained unlocked after the spoliation.

His siblings imitated him out of curiosity. The three walked through all the rooms of the castle, admiring its richness and splendour, as if they were in a fairy tale's palace. They entered the Privy Council's room, then the Throne's room. They went across the king's and princes' chambers, over those of the household servants and down to the kitchens and cellars, where everything was in disarray and mice abounded. Ananiel and his siblings walked all over and, knowing they could get lost in that maze, they held hands to give each other courage. Yet none dared to speak – such was the awe they felt.

After going down a long and sombre underground corridor, the children heard a deep and ailing voice coming out of the dark. Ananiel stepped back aghast. One of his siblings said:

“Who's hidden in there?”

The youngest of the three added resolutely:

“Let's find out.”

The voice seemed ever nearer, but also more agonising. The children advanced gingerly. One of them found a massive lock. A clang of iron made them stop and then they heard more clearly the suffering voice:

“Open!... Open!...”

Ananiel fumbled with the lock and, aided by his siblings, opened a large, creaking door into a humid and dismal dungeon poorly lit by a narrow embrasure through which not even an arm could slide. The children found Benagissal there lying on straw. The prophet, still fettered by his ankles, had a pale face like a canvas, fevered eyes and shaking hands.

Hunger and thirst had him prostrate on the cot.

“Come, children, come!” said the prisoner.

The three siblings were taken aback by such a strange appearance, but they stepped closer to the prophet, charmed by the sweetness of his voice. Ananiel asked Benagissal with all his innocence:

“What are you doing here, good old man, locked in this dungeon so dark?”

Benagissal knew in his heart what had happened in Jaralad after his gaoler's departure, yet nobody had been there to confirm his suspicion. Now, in the presence of these children, his heart pounded cheerfully, for his mortal eyes had proof the people had exacted justice on Otoniel. The prophet answered the child's question thus:

“I have been expecting you.”

The children then told him the castle was empty, for the king and his entourage had been executed, and now they went there to play with many other children of Jaralad.

“And you said you were expecting us?” said Ananiel surprised.

“Long have I waited for you. Only you could come and make me free.”

Ananiel said:

“The door is open. Come with us.”

“How am I to come along,” replied Benagissal, “weakened as I am after many days of starvation and having my feet chained?”

The prisoner strove to sit up on the fetid and humid straw. The shackles on his feet made a muffled noise and with it came the sound of agitated mice in the room. However, none of the children noticed this, for they were bewildered by the prophet's spectral figure. After a long silence, Ananiel said:

“We'll look for a locksmith to free your



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ankles from the iron and you shall come with us.”

Benagissal made no reply and threw himself, exhausted, back again on the blackened straw.

The children ran down the long subterranean corridor and crossed for the second time the maze of castle’s chambers. They did not feel at ease until they were out of the fortress – so heavily had their find burdened their hearts. It was then they discussed in secret whom to tell their odd discovery.

It so happened that at such a time a man was passing by the door of the castle. This man was one of the new government’s henchmen, a captain of Darconias’ personal guard, the eldest of the triumvirs elected by the people of Jaralad. Ananiel and his siblings told him everything.

Astonished by what the children explained to him, the guard took them with him before Darconias, to whom the children repeated the tale of their discovery. Darconias listened to Ananiel carefully.

“Whom have you told already?” asked the judge.

“No one,” replied the child and then added: “We were looking for a locksmith to have him freed.”

Darconias held counsel forthwith with the other triumvirs. After long discussion, one of them said:

“This man is Benagissal. There is not a shade of doubt. He can only be Benagissal. Remember the odd way in which he disappeared. After his shy attempt to rebel against Otoniel, rumour had it the king had his throat slit. However and against well-established custom, his head was not hung from the castle’s highest tower. Some doubted he was dead and ventured that he had taken

up exile of his own volition in a faraway land. Those who so spoke expected him to return to free the people from the king’s tyranny. Yet you know what really happened: it was the people, that is, we, who managed to emancipate ourselves without him.

Darconias answered thus:

“We shall know how to rule ourselves without him, lest he rises up against our decisions the way he did once with the king. Since he has been in the dungeon hitherto, let him remain there. Since the people believed him dead, let the convict’s bones never leave the cell and the people will have believed what it will be true.”

After having the children brought before him again, the supreme judge of Jaralad told them:

“The one you saw in the castle, in the darkness of the dungeon, was no man, as you may have thought. He is no man, but a specter, an apparition. He may be a dead body that has risen from his tomb. Perhaps it was a ghost wishing to reach out to you. You say he spoke to you, and I want to believe it, but you must know that ghosts also speak. As for the fetters you heard, have no doubt he had chained himself so as to later use them upon you and trap you. Go back home, my children. Tell no one that you saw a man there, rather say, and you will be saying the truth, that you saw a frightful demon beckoning you and coaxing you into perdition.”

Neither Ananiel nor his siblings ever went back to the castle. Nor did the other children from Jaralad. Even if they had intended to, it would not have been possible, for Darconias ordered to have it shut down and placed guards on all its doors. Once again, armed guards were to be seen day and night atop the battlemented towers.



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The city's three supreme judges kept the finding in secret. And they were crueller than the very King Otoniel, for they let the prophet rot away slowly on

the cot's black straw, where the rats feasted within few days on his mortal remains.

The Immortals



Alexandre de Riquer

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Alexandre de Riquer (1856-1920) was one of the main writers of the Aesthetic Movement in Catalonia, known as *Modernisme* in the Catalan language, as well as being one of its great symbolist writers and painters. Among his main literary works, his *Poem of the Forest* (*Poema del bosc*, 1910) deserves special mention. It is an episodic epic poem about an unnamed symbolic forest. Each of its parts, all of them self-contained, is devoted to a particular epoch, from prehistory to modern times. Its approach is almost always fabulous, for supernatural events occur in almost every period, ancient, medieval or modern. Moreover, quite a few of its characters are preternatural beings such as fairies or undines. The other most significant literary work by Riquer is a collection of symbolist prose poems entitled *Chrysanthemums* (*Crisantemes*, 1899), of which none has a title. These poems are mostly lyrical descriptions of natural and mental scenes, but there are a couple of poetic tales as well. One of them is an allegoric fantasy about a theological Dragon, while the other is about a society of immortal human beings. This is the one translated below¹ with the title “The

Immortals,” which is based on its main concept.

“The Immortals” is a speculation on the future that is both science-fictional and symbolic, although it can be considered that this last dimension prevails in it. Indeed, the story opens and closes with the poetic image of Death personified as a female figure. She has been banished to a space that, while keeping its symbolic appearance and function, is presented with great descriptive clarity as a black lake surrounded by high walls. Death appears to be voluntarily asleep in it, as if she were resting. The result of this extraordinary occurrence, which could be understood both as something that really happened and as a metaphor for an implied scientific breakthrough, is the ensuing annulment of life. The latter is understood as a succession of lives compensating for the succession of deaths. Once Death retires, nothing is then renewed; everything remains unchanged as it was once immortality is attained everywhere. From then on, human beings, who are now both immortal and unable to reproduce, have enough time to expand knowledge and to build a utopian society, in which the

¹ The translation is based on the text edited by Maria Àngela Cerdà in the following anthology of Catalan symbolist prose poems: *Boires i crisantemes: El poema en prosa*

modernista, Barcelona, Edicions de la Magrana, 1990, p. 105-107.



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ideals of the Aesthetic Movement have come to fruition. In addition to having banished inequality among its members, this immortal superhumanity ends up knowing all that is knowable and exploring all that can be explored, both in matter and in spirit, for immortality also ends up allowing all people a perfect and reciprocal knowledge about their fellows. The result of this all-embracing science is the disappearance of literature and art, according to the author, who follows here a common idea among writers and artists of the Aesthetic Movement, that of the incompatibility between poetry and positive science. Indeed, following the disappearance of mystery through knowledge, poetry was left without matter to nourish it, having lost its meaning and its role, which is for Symbolist writers the intuitive expression of the mystery of things. At the same time, with the disappearance of reproduction, love also seems to have disappeared.

The survival of the curious mind, but not of love or art or other non-rational emotions, ultimately entails such despair that the immortals even cry out for the return not only of Death, but also of suffering, because this would make them

feel again. Unfortunately, the doom of immortality seems set to continue, for Death seems to be unable to wake up. Human despair appears, then, to be immortal as well. There is no way out: Life has come to an unending, closed circle, as it is masterly suggested by the reappearance of the image of dreaming Death at the end of the tale, although with a new and more specific detail: the gigantic black lilies that surround her, maybe even causing her slumber. These ominous flowers intensify the mysterious effect of “The Immortals” as both prose poetry and anticipation. Both elements are intertwined in the text, the symbolic nature of which helps to intuitively convey a bleak vision of humankind in future times. Thus, “The Immortals” is rather poetry than science fiction in the usual sense or, if we wish to be historically more accurate, it belongs to the poetic strand of Symbolist science fiction illustrated, among others, by Stéphane Mallarmé’s narrative prose poem “The Future Phenomenon” (“Le phénomène future,” 1875). Riquer’s “The Immortals” is a further masterful example of this particular variety of poetic (and pessimistic) speculation about the human destiny in times to come.

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Tired of so many centuries working, Death, exhausted, decided to rest.

Her formidable army of diseases and grievances became stuck in the country of silence, near the endless black lagoons, walled in by the quiet rocks that the Moon colours silver; and the whole world lived on, without dying.

Since the new life was the complement of death and this had disappeared, life itself disappeared at the same time. Breasts sagged, the seed dried up, and all paternity stopped.

The *eternal man*, on pilgrimage, knew the most inaccessible places of the world, and neither on the ground, nor in the deep, not even in the heights were any mysterious secrets kept from him.

Experience and study revealed to him the *reason* for all things, until the day came when all the men, levelled up by the same rights and the same knowledge, became equal.

The trees kept forever their leaves, the immortal flowers oriented their wide corollas towards the Sun; an endless spring bloomed in the world with no flower withering; yet all perfumes had disappeared and the eternal buds were wasted.

No new leave or flower bloomed, the unbreakable regularity of existence proceeded with tiring immutability.

The woods spread enormous, enchanted; the birds plunged into the throat of the war bronzes and the deer that quenched their thirst in the lagoons where the panthers also drunk, as well as the women rolling around playing with the lions and tigers, were spectacles that had surprised all in the distant beginnings of this life without end.

Humankind had gone down the crater

of the volcanoes, checking the innards of Earth; at the bottom of the emerald sea, it had built palaces of porphyry and blocks of turquoises which shadowed the coral woods and the traveling algae, chasing unextinguishable dreams, evoked in the dim light of the liquid depths, and which always had as their supreme idea the memory of death or of a new life.

They felt the tiredness of the eternal walker who always sees the same lands, asleep under the branches stretched out like immense ships of the prodigious woods, without the appearance, the fresh laughter, the unexpected visit of an unknown companion being really able to surprise the nostalgia of life.

The reality of an endless existence had erased all mystery with its *omni scientiae*, And gone the mystery, the arts and poetry had been lost.

The ideals of an eternal beyond disappeared with the possession of eternity that they had been granted.

The hope for a tomorrow only composed of the life of the soul, with the exclusion of the beast, had died, and without Death being guilty at all, faith died, as love died, the sacred flame that nourishes the spirit.

Wandering caravans, chasers of an indefinable *I don't know what*, followed each other, silent and brooding; a group of errant beings like a vision in a dream, seeking in their unconscious profession what they needed, seeking an indefinite something that could free them from the emptiness they felt; and these silent wanderers came across other other wanderers who, frightened, carried the same emptiness inside.

The ageing world could beget not a single new idea. With only a look, the



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immortals could guess the thoughts that occupied the brains of the others, a tired thinking which could not hold an expression which had not been vulgarised centuries before.

Humankind carried with it the heaviness of existence, the nostalgia for life, the thirst of *not being*, of an always laughing beyond, eternally variable and eternally virginal, made of mysteries, ignorance, and unexpected sensations.

* * *

Suddenly, like a fresh wind coming from far away planets, a tremendous tremor spread as fast as lightning, and from one end of the Earth to the other a complaint rose calling for mercy.

Every single living being that possessed a soul, raised their fervent voices asking the God of battles to allow death to come to them, and the

formidable diseases, grievances, and mysteries; that the dormant loudspeakers of the mountains could again relay the sounds of war, and respond to the smell of powder, the bursts of dynamite, and the menacing sounds of the war horns, like to the deaf earthquake of the devastating armies and the evil people.

They wanted blood to cool outside the veins, that the whimpering of those affected by the plague could kill with fear, that the flowers withered, that the high sun shattered the plains, that the weight of ice buried the villages, and that Death triumphantly spread her black wings above the whole world and woke Earth from the lethargic dream that had her asleep, as if possessed by herself at the bottom of the impenetrable valley, by the foot of the stagnant waters of the pestilent lakes of the yellow water lilies, surrounded by black irises, gigantic, which opened their dreaming corollas over Death.