

Who killed Augustus Bourbaki?

A short story

by Aditya Dwarkesh

It takes courage to put up a happy front, but even more to be able to openly acknowledge one's sadness. Only when an awareness of my great despair was *forced* upon me did I gain the courage to be miserable.

I remember well those sleepless nights after it first overwhelmed me, when I would stare at the moon with senseless desperation, unable to arrive at an understanding of what the matter was.

That was when I gave up my career in mathematics. It had been nothing more than an activity to distract me from my depression. I resolved to no longer be an escapist. As it so happened, however, mathematics wasn't done with me.

When I was fresh into the field, I had heard faint whispers of the existence of a cult in the far Eastern corners of India, the sole purpose of which was to indulge in a bizarre and esoteric variant of mathematical discourse. Of course, it is often said—only half in jest—that mathematicians in general form a cult of sorts, thanks to how alien the language game they play is to natural language. However, *this* mathematical cult set itself apart by the fact that its obsession—for any cult is defined by a singular obsession it concerns itself with—happens to be a *person*.

And yet, it so happens that nobody—not even those in the innermost circles of this cult—has ever been able to actually meet Augustus Bourbaki. No more than suggestive whispers of shadows glanced at exist, and till date, the only manner in which he communicates with the world is by the written word: Publications of conjectures, of resolutions to long-standing hypothesis, and of other mathematical results with varying importance.

Another problem exacerbating the whole situation surrounding his identity was a frustratingly mundane set of book-keeping mistakes: The dates attributed to his articles are most certainly terribly mistaken.

Take, for example, the two-part proof he produced on the validity of the Kakuro conjecture. The second article is dated to have been published in the year 2006—whereas the first article,

written by the same man, has been archived by all libraries as a publication produced in the year 1926! An eighty-year gap is not impossible, perhaps, but must almost certainly be erroneous.

To begin with, I dismissed the whole affair as not worth much of my time or attention. I had never heard anyone else in academia ever referring to this whole business of the cult and the unseen mathematician it centers its discourse around, and I concluded that the whole affair was just a series of unlikely errors and misunderstandings which merely appear to have the form of a coherent picture (as they seem to do surprisingly often). The cult did not exist, and the mysterious mathematician was a clerical error.

But this changed two nights before I abandoned the pretense of joy forever, when I stepped into my institute's library with an uneasy feeling at the pit of my stomach. Where it came from, I do not know; it was a fatality, this feeling, which made me stray off into a hitherto unexplored corner of the fairly massive library.

But to call it merely unexplored does not quite do it justice. I had not even known of the *possibility* of the existence of this cranny until that night. For its structure seemed to be quite impossible to reconcile with the overall spatiality of the library: My visualization skills are not too bad, and it seemed to me that where this small opening took me was right where a wall should form a barrier to the corridor. I would probably never have found it had my foot not, by pure chance, struck against the side of the wall and found a turning appear—almost magically—where there should have been none.

I half-fell into the opening and saw two bookshelves huddled together in it. It looked as if they were cowering from me.

There was a sharp clash between the visual and the olfactory experience of the opening. While the appearance of the books led me to expect the overabundant emanation of a musty smell, what I actually received was a combination of old rubber and fresh paper.

I moved closer to the shelf on the left and reached out to a text, half-expecting another surprise in its tactility—but the impressions that its surfaces imparted upon my hands was nothing out of the ordinary.

The binding was in tatters, falling apart in my hands; its title was nearly unreadable. All I could make out from its remains was "*Ma—matical Pri—ples of Ze—gogy*", with the number

1816 identifying its publication year. The author—and this was a name I recognized, a mathematician of the early 19th century—was Axel Engset.

I had a fair idea as to what the first two words were, but the third was entirely alien to me. No branch or discipline I had ever heard of held even a vague resemblance to it.

I opened it gingerly. Half the pages promptly fell down to the ground, and I jumped in a moment of fright at this sudden spike in movement in my environment.

I left the book back on the shelf, scrambling to gather all the loose sheets in whatever order I could grab them in, observing that none of the sheets had any page numberings on them.

It was then that a particular sheet happened to catch my attention, by pure chance. It was one of those academic artifacts which look more like some exotic artwork than a mathematical proof; for when I picked it up, I saw no recognizable symbols, not even any English alphabets, except for a single digit number somewhere in the middle of this mathematical artwork—left to indicated a footnote—and the footnote itself, which was written in English, and read thus:

“We owe the proof of the same to Augustus Bourbaki, as presented in 1806.”

I stared at it. It was quite impossible, of course. Augustus Bourbaki had published the second part of his proof of the Kakuro conjecture in 2006. Two-hundred years: Certainly, it follows that Augustus Bourbaki could not possibly have made any contribution to mathematics in the year 1806.

But, even more impossibility, *this very text claims to have been written by Engset in the year 1816.*

I was then seized by a terrible suspicion. Carelessly shoving the sheaf onto the shelf, I picked up another book at random. The title was once again distorted beyond recognition, but I could see that it was written by Leibniz. I began flipping through the pages and opening them at random.

I came across his expressions of many now-familiar ideas, and I was just beginning to feel at ease until I once again was struck by an anomaly:

Page 74, footnote 6: *“Similar work has been advanced by Augustus Bourbaki, a few decades previously, and I here borrow partially from his results.”*

A few decades previously—placing Bourbaki in the 17th century.

Slowly, I put Leibniz’s treatise back in its place. I was still busy rationalizing the whole thing as some sort of hoax, but my discomfort began increasing in intensity.

It was then that I saw the small, yellowing booklet half-hidden at the top corner of the second bookshelf, quite possibly entirely untouched ever since it had first been put there by someone (or—what, *something*?).

The whole place had an ominous stillness; a silence so loud that I could hear my heartbeat throbbing in my own ears. Had someone else turned into the opening just about then, I would have fainted in a dead fright.

I grasped the booklet and nearly dropped it immediately. It was burning cold. Holding it with only my fingertips to minimize surface contact, I turned it around gingerly. On the first page was only an intriguing-looking emblem of sorts, a small diagram representing the concatenation of a book and a clock.

I opened it and looked through the table of contents.

Chapter I: Collected papers from Bourbaki’s tenure at Calcutta University. Found in Bourbaki’s “Mutationes in libro.” (21st century)

Chapter III: Bourbaki’s predecessor to the Riemann hypothesis. Found in Bourbaki’s “Mutationes in libro”. (19th century)

Chapter V: Selected Dialogues between Descartes & Bourbaki. Found in Bourbaki’s “Mutationes in libro”. (17th century)

Chapter VIII: Augustus Bourbaki & Roger Bacon: A little-known friendship. Found in Bourbaki’s “Mutationes in libro”. (13th century)

Chapter XV: Euclid’s commentaries on Bourbaki’s geometric ontology. Found in Bourbaki’s “Mutationes in libro”. (300 BC)

I thought to myself with some amazement that this was certainly an elaborate piece of forgery, if nothing else.

How does the creator of a falsity introduce it to the world? By openly declaring its untruthfulness? But then it would cease to be untruthful. By playing along entirely? But that would mean the creator has hoodwinked his own self into believing his lies. What, then?

It was at this stage that my eye made the vile decision of glancing upwards and showing me something that could not possibly be. Where there should have been only the back of the bookshelf, I saw for a moment a mirror—and in this mirror I saw the reflection of a figure crouching silently behind me.

But the figure was my own self.

It was I, but terribly disfigured: I was naked, and my skin had everywhere an awful black colour of bile, and hellishly red eyes stared out of a devilish, vulture-like face.

I screamed. My vision blurred, and in a moment, the creature and the mirror disappeared. I threw the booklet back and ran out of that otherworldly corner, now reeking of filth. Fleeting footsteps approach me, and in my madness, I took it to be the creature returning to do as it would with me; a wave of dizziness hit me, and the world flickered momentarily.

Of course, it was only the librarian.

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The librarian had a good laugh when she saw the scare she'd given me. I did not ask her about the books I found hidden in the turning. The vision, apparition, phantom I saw behind me must, of course, have been some trick of the eye; but I was still feeling terribly anxious as I hurriedly walked back to my rented apartment.

It was bitingly cold; there was a full moon on that night. An irrational fear gripped me every time I looked up at it. I was afraid that I would see upon it the face of the disfigured demon that so resembled me. Somewhere in the distance, dogs howled up at it.

I did not know it then, but my fate had already been sealed. The obsession with Bourbaki—something I myself did not know I possessed, at that stage—was to become the final straw. Something deep within me was already telling me that I must, I must, I absolutely must find out everything I could about this man. I began getting the altogether incoherent idea that he might be mathematics itself.

Two nights later, I booked a ticket to Calcutta. One never knows what ultimate aim one's life is driving one towards until it finally blows up on one's face.

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My preliminary enquires upon reaching Calcutta consisted of going to the most well-known universities of the city and asking for a mathematician by the name of Augustus Bourbaki. In spite of how unfruitful these investigations began turning out to be, the way the city presented itself to me began bolstering my confidence about it being the home of Bourbaki.

The juxtaposition of people living on the streets a stone's throw away from urban dwellings blindsided me; the aggression with which every wall seemed to be plastered with various political posters and revolutionary slogans; the mundanity of how unreservedly and freely everyone spoke.

The people in the first university I paid a visit to gave me some furtive looks and declarations that they'd never heard of the name before. Their dispositions betrayed them, but I did not bother pressing anyone. I was under the impression that the need for insistence would never arise.

Outside the gates of the university, it struck me how the roads of the city were always filled with so many people; how none of them were ever standing around idly; the noise and crowds amplified by how the vehicles running and the people crossing the roads did so in a completely arbitrary manner, with utter disregard for typical traffic guidelines. All of it made me more prone to the disorientation of realizing how every other person I saw was living a life with as much depth as my own.

On the sidewalk, there stood a man who didn't seem to be in his right mind. He was holding a book in his hand and loudly making some proclamations. At a glance, it appeared to be the Bible; perhaps he was preaching. There was a small crowd around him, but it was clear that they weren't interested in what he had to say. They just wanted to see the show the madman was putting up for them. The whole thing felt vulgar and base.

The weather in the city was unbearably humid, but nobody seemed to care. I went a little closer to listen to what he was saying—and froze. The title of the book didn't have the word Bible in it; I had misread the fading print. It said Bourbaki.

I pushed through the crowd. The man saw me coming and read my intentions; he fell silent and gave me a terrible, angry stare. I began feeling the crowd's eyes on me. And before I could open my mouth to ask him about the book, he was gone.

The second institute I went to, I was told sternly and without explanation to leave the premises after I asked my questions. Just outside the gates of the complex, I had a knife

pulled out on me. I immediately put my hands in the air and asked him to take what he wanted. Unfortunately, what he wanted from me seemed to be something he could not simply take in such a manner. I was asked how I had stumbled upon the name. I explained that I had found a variety of “interesting” mathematical volumes to which he had contributed back in my own university. I did not mention anything else. The man with the knife gave a sardonic laugh.

It was only after I left that I realized why his face had looked so familiar to me: For he was none other than the madman on the sidewalk.

Strangely undaunted by the incident, I pressed on. I seemed to have lost any regard or value for my own life; and Bourbaki had become everything.

Nobody had seen Bourbaki; nobody had even heard of Bourbaki; and nobody knew anybody who may have seen or heard of Bourbaki. Over the course of the next week, I found myself facing an entire city united in a subconscious determination to deny the existence of one man.

And yet, in the shadows of the many dingy alleyways this city hosted, I sensed the insincerity of the denials. In the strange dustiness of all the roads and buildings in this city, I sensed the presence of that which I was seeking.

In my mind, he had taken up the form of a cloaked, nondescript figure who would roam the city clutching an aging and yellowing book under his arms. An entity invisible in plain sight, caught in a trance-like state, abruptly and violently producing brilliant results in the subject.

And so passed the days, largely fruitless, until, in the middle of the night after my tenth day of enquiries, the door of my room rattled wildly enough in its frame to wake me up. My instinctive fear was dulled by the unexpected nature of the situation and my own mounting excitement—for I knew that something must be afoot.

It was a strikingly ordinary sort of night for something so extraordinary to happen. There was neither some raging storm, nor had some otherworldly atmosphere settled in; just the usual imperfect and rather ugly silence of the average urban city.

I opened the door recklessly and found standing on the other side of it the man who had pulled a knife on me around a week back, the madman on the sidewalk. He seemed to have taken a bit of a beating on his face, but before I could enquire, he grabbed me by my collar. It was not hard enough that I be helplessly dragged along with him as he started walking off,

but hard enough nevertheless for resistance on my behalf to cause considerable damage to the shirt I was wearing. I briskly started walking along behind him, at least partly because it was a pretty nice shirt. Nevertheless, the violence of the act awakened some fear in me.

I expected him to say a word or to indicating some explanation, but he maintained his silence. Around ten steps in, I finally asked breathlessly, “What is it?”. His grip on me loosened, and I started resisting. “Who are you? What have you come for? What do you want from me?”

He stopped. We stood at the edge of the flight of descending stairs.

Then:

“You asked me for Bourbaki.”

A pause.

“I will give you Bourbaki.”

I blinked in a show of vague astonishment—as if I was trying to remember what a Bourbaki is, as if I hadn’t guessed his purpose the moment I had awoken—and then nodded. My sense of healthy apprehension towards potentially dangerous situations had evaporated the moment I stepped into this city, anyway.

And so, he continued leading the way; and I followed, just like that, empty-handed and in my night clothes. There was a momentary sensation of vulnerability and nakedness which coursed through me, but before it could persist and intensify enough to make me visibly disconcerted, we burst out onto the road.

The yellow lampposts cast immutable shadows, strange deformations of the objects inducing them, illuminating the hard road soporifically. There was a taxi waiting for us. He got into the driver’s seat and gestured for me to take the adjacent seat. I did so.

I decided that I was going to have to simply wait and watch. The car started up, and after some five minutes of travel along the anonymous, yellow, deserted urban roads, in spite of my best efforts to follow the car’s path, I was completely lost.

Suddenly, a scream pierced the sky. I awoke with a start. I had half-drifted off. The man felt me jump and gave me a dead glance which betrayed nothing.

“We’re nearly there”, he said.

I looked around. There was virtually nothing but empty grasslands as far as the eye could see—with the exception of one small building situated in the middle of the field, a few minutes' walk away from the main road.

He stopped the car in the middle of the road and got out. I followed suit, and we started walking towards the building.

The moment my feet left the road, an unbearable chattering assaulted my ears. The grass was whispering, and it seemed to be relaying some great secrets to me about nature. I tried paying attention.

Of course, grass can't whisper; it must have been the wind, must have been some crickets, must have been an exaggeration of the mind.

My guide continued walking, unfazed. As we approached, however, the building seemed to be getting *smaller*, rather than bigger. I stopped trying to size it up. The grass had become too fearsome for me to be able to look down at my feet.

I looked up at the sky. It was a full moon. That was odd; I remembered seeing a full moon just about half a month ago.

And then, before I knew it, the building had crept upon us; we were right in front of it.

Now that I was closer to it, I could see that it had a dome-shaped structure. It wasn't very big, and could probably contain a 50-seater auditorium at the most, but it had a threatening aura disproportionate to this apparent size.

My guide opened the main door, a cold, iron slab. He gestured for me to enter. I swayed hesitantly. He grabbed my arm and tried pulled me in roughly. I took a deep breath and plunged out of the cold moonlight into the darkness behind the door. The air of the night stopped dancing upon my back, and I nearly fell down headfirst; a flight of stairs lay just inside.

The man closed the thick door. It became immediately clear that there was only one source of light; a small, white, evanescent glow coming from the bottom of this flight of stairs.

It looked distant, as if I stood at the top of an unbelievably long flight of stairs. I glanced behind to make sure the man was behind me. He wasn't. I looked at the door. Even without examining it, even in the dim light, I could tell that it was locked.

I started descending.

There was nothing to hold on to. For some reason, I dared not touch the wall. It was making me feel claustrophobic. I was afraid it might animate itself and swallow me into a sea of murderous insects.

I continued descending.

The soft, white glow at the bottom was shimmering; my journey was interminable and climactic. I was in limbo; in stasis; my whole life consisted of this singular journey. Endless liminality.

I continued descending.

And then it was all over; as abruptly as previously the building had rushed up to me did the bottom of the stairs do the same. The soft light was coming from somewhere ahead.

I looked up and found myself standing at the back of a large, dimly-lit auditorium.

Lots of silhouettes were shuffling into seats rather haphazardly. I sensed some muted whispers amongst certain of the silhouettes which were grouped together; I saw also the rest of them roaming around (or standing still like me) all by themselves, exuding an aura of fear and uncertainty by the shadow of their dispositions. Finally, they, too, began taking their seats.

An impressive-looking figure was striding up and down the slightly more illuminated stage (which, as it turned out, had been the source of the light), shuffling through some papers he was holding. I could make out only a ruddy face and the lack of any hair upon the head belonging to it. At any rate, it seemed clear that he was going to be offering a speech of sorts; an important one, by the look of things.

Without taking my eyes off him, I moved to the nearest empty seat and sat down. My peripheral vision told me that virtually everyone else was already seated. The speaker now looked up at his audience; there was a moment of perfect, crystalline stillness.

And then he began speaking.

“Good morning, everybody. My name is [unintelligible], and I will be answering a few questions in which some of you—no doubt esteemed mathematicians—might recently have

found an obsessive interest in. There is no beating around the bush in our convocations; let us arrive straight at the heart of the matter: Who is Augustus Bourbaki?

“Have we not all glimpsed upon the hand of this man extending itself across centuries after centuries, nudging and directing the course of mathematics itself with an almost insidious subtlety? It may be presumed that Bourbaki is not a man at all but an abstraction of sorts, concatenated out of the greatest mathematicians of all time. Let me make myself very clear, then: *Augustus Bourbaki is a real person*. The facts we have with us right now are too few and too vague in order for me to offer a very detailed biography, but we have reason to believe that he first stepped upon this planet in roughly the same geographical region as we are now, around three thousand years ago.

“How many of you are aware of the *I Ching*—often otherwise known as the ‘Book of Changes’? An ancient Chinese divination text which almost certainly fell into the hands of Bourbaki one day. It is a book with a singular, endlessly inventive principle: It offers imprinted a fixed set of signs, alongside which is outlined a set of instructions *indispensably dependent upon the transient nature of the present*, on the basis of which the signs are to be interpreted. It is the ever-changing *now* which gives the *I Ching* its infinitely many continued meanings. And what Augustus Bourbaki did was write his own *I Ching*, for the discipline of mathematics: *Mutationes in libro*. And as human society, civilization and culture evolve, so does that which we read out of it.

“And so it was that at around three hundred BC, Euclid found the predecessor which inspired his own fifth postulate; while also, nearly fifteen hundred years later, in the very same signs, Bernhard Riemann found a most curious and interesting question posed by the text. And why should we say that it was Euclid who put forth the fifth postulate? Why Riemann who proposed the hypothesis named after him? Is it not all Bourbaki? In the final analysis, was it not all found in the text? Is it not true that today, we can even find the proof of Gödel’s incompleteness theorems in the text? That is, of course, if we read the signs *correctly*, in the way Gödel himself did.

“And to wit, why must all this be dated back to a thousand BC? Referential inversion is what gives Bourbaki life: The proof is dated not in accordance to when it was published, but to when it was *found*. In which case, Bourbaki proved Gödel’s incompleteness theorem in the year 1921, when Gödel found it in the *Mutationes in libro*. This is the key to Bourbaki’s continued existence; the key to his everlasting soul. One may say that he is still with us,

locked up in a cupboard behind the stage. He speaks to us from the text; perhaps, one may suspect, *he is the text*.

“But something most peculiar seems to have been happening of late; something signaling the end of an epoch. A little over a month ago, the appearance of a sign almost apocalyptic in nature was reported. You see, out of necessity, we maintain a hierarchy of sorts. Four men alone lock themselves up in the innermost chambers of our labyrinthine library, dedicating their whole life to poring over Bourbaki’s text and uncovering the fleeting mathematical secrets lying within. The rebellion in 2002 was the first symptom of our downfall, but it is only now that the degeneration has really grabbed us by the scruff of our necks.

“The four practitioners of this highest form of art would typically follow a fixed path every day: They would fix their gaze upon a mote of dust and follow its trajectory for as long as they could, as it lay suspended in the air, wrested around by forces beyond its control. This tiny mote of dust is elevated to the supreme status of symbolizing the Present in its entirety, and its trajectory, which is seen as capturing this, is traced out and used to finally read the signs presented by Bourbaki in his Book of Changes.

“The method has begun failing. Last week, after a whole day’s labor, what was reported from the Book was nothing mathematical at all but, rather, an endlessly inventive and detailed description of copulation between two grotesquely designed creatures. And there are only two ways in which such a failure can occur: Either the dust mote has become corrupted as a symbol of the present, or the present itself has become treacherous. But the mote of dust is infallible, the *perfect* representation of the blindingly concrete, fleeting and unassuming Now! In other words, one may conclude nearly *mathematically*, pardon the pun, that it is the present itself of the mathematician, captured by those four servants of the world (who labor in their dungeons even now!), that has betrayed us.

“Plainly evident is the chain of causation which can lead to this degeneracy: It is nothing but the overabundant presence of an ignorant rabble. A fool may spit his buffoonery in quite a different place and context than this one, but the universe captures all; the spit of the fool may throw a small fly ever so slightly off its trajectory, which in turn causes an unseemly flutter of dust around it, which in turn represents itself in nothing but that very mote of dust which tells us how to read Bourbaki, ultimately leading to the skewed nonsense that we see in Bourbaki nowadays! Now you may understand our initial hostility towards you: *For Bourbaki cannot sustain more corruption*.

“It is at its—*he* is at his tether’s end. The identity of the book was always a stress point, a paradox far exceeding that of the Ship of Theseus in intensity, and it is finally going to make the whole thing burst at the seams. For you see, this is the final punchline, our ace-in-the-hole: *There are virtually no empirical grounds upon which one can claim that the book that lies with us right now is the same one Bourbaki once wrote.* To paraphrase a certain someone, the signs and their interpretation do not form two sides of a monster Dedekind cut in the middle of which stands man. As we change the way in which we read Bourbaki, the physical signs constituting the book change themselves in a fatally real manner.

“And when we *pull* this ocular flexibility beyond its elastic point by reading all kinds of buffoonery into it, this book will explode into itself, and mankind’s greatest treasure will be lost once and for all.

“With this, it is at least time for me to arrive at the most important part of my speech, of your indoctrination—”

The microphone screamed for a moment, after which the lights ceased to illuminate the stage, and a deafening silence rang out in the pitch darkness, all of it converging to end the impassioned speech of the man in a horribly abrupt manner.

A few moments passed in a confused silence, after which I caught an exchange of anxiety-filled whispers by some individuals on the stage. And then, with a shocking violence of movement which completely broke the drowsy incomprehension of the room, a man took to his heels and began running.

He passed right by me just before I understood what was going on. But when I caught a glimpse in the pseudo-darkness of him clutching something tightly under his arm, I knew immediately: he was trying to steal Bourbaki for himself.

A moan of desperation issued from the stage. The crowd’s chattering increased to a climactic pitch, but nobody in it seemed to have any realization of what the situation was. Some higher power seized control of my body, and I leaped out of my chair and ran after the thief.

How does one describe the absence of temporality? Is it not a contradiction in terms to say, “For a few moments, the passage of time ceased to exist”? There it is: There is no real way to express that timelessness except by condensing the set of events to a single point, to the eternal Now; for that always lies beyond temporality. Much as when an object has ended up breeding too much mass for its own spatiality, it collapses into itself to form a black hole, it

was that the passage of time between my chasing the man and ultimately reaching him that was unsustainably high; it collapsed in on itself and transformed itself into a prolonged specious present.

There were the endless stairs again; he ran up them—they must have been the only way out. I chased him as hard as I could. I was gaining on him, but it wasn't enough. If the door was open, he would get away.

I trampled up the stairs taking three at a time. In the tone and tempo of the thief's footsteps, I could hear his desperation and terror getting the better of him. He nearly slipped a couple of times. My footing was sure; I gained on him some more.

But it wasn't enough. He'd nearly made it to the door. I screamed and made one final, desperate leap forward towards him; my hands missed him by a hair. He whimpered in fear, but in a few moments, I heard him clasp and jiggle the door-handle.

It didn't open.

He began banging wildly against the door, but it was too late. I caught up to him and smashed his head against it; for a moment, I was an animal bent on tearing my rival apart to pieces.

He immediately slumped down to the floor. Whether he fainted out of fear or because of the blow to the head, I was not sure.

Suddenly, the door opened. I saw my guide standing anxiously just outside, with one hand on the door. His eyes widened at the sight of me, and he fled.

It was then that I spotted a thin, yellowing, novella-sized booklet lying beside the body of the thief, illuminated by the pure sunlight of the dawn which was streaming in through the open entrance.

My heart began beating fast; I felt as if it was about to burst out of my rib cage. I knew what the book was. That timeless, eternal masterpiece containing all the secrets of the cosmos. I had found Bourbaki.

Vaguely, as if from some faraway place, I heard footsteps approaching from below. But they were still far underground. I had time. I had lots of time.

I touched it and blacked out momentarily because of the sheer excitement and adrenaline that my find was sending through me. But it felt just like any other old book to touch, and I fell to the ground just outside, opening its pages.

The grass was all around emanating a strange smell, one which I for some reason associated with the vapor of the repulsive decaying of something once alive. I found myself on page number 73 and started reading. For just one moment, the text appeared to be filled with disparate symbols belonging to some foreign script; the indescribable rays of the rising sun gave it an ethereal look.

However, as I continued looking at it, I saw the signs begin linking up with one another of their own accord; and to my horror, I saw that the structure it created was not any text at all but a *painting of me*—except I was terribly disfigured and naked, and my skin had everywhere the awful black colour of bile, and hellishly red eyes stared out of my devilish, vulture-like face.

5th November, 2020—18th November, 2020

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