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Damned with Their Own Words:

Fantastic Confessions and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*

“We possess boundless ambitions, *devouring greed, merciless revenge and intense hatred*. . . .We have befooled and corrupted the rising generation of the Gentiles by educating them in principles and theories known to us to be thoroughly false, but which we ourselves have inculcated [emphasis in original].”

Among the wonders of literary history is Mandeville’s *Travels*, a sensation in its time, a fount of pleasure and a mine of information and misinformation well after, and a precedent for *Gulliver’s Travels*. Who exactly was Mandeville? No one knows. It is not a certainty that he existed. What is known is that the purported chronicle of his adventures in remote regions, written in French and framed in the first person, made its appearance in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and so caught the imagination of readers that it was soon translated into the several tongues of Europe. Over three hundred manuscripts survive, an extraordinary figure.<sup>1</sup>

The most fundamental convention of Mandeville’s *Travels*—first-person narrative—goes back to the *Odyssey*, in which the hero, not Homer, narrates his adventures from his departure from Troy to his arrival on Calypso’s island. The poet

*might* have related on his own authority in the third person all the yarns that Odysseus tells in the first person about himself to the Phaeacians. But Homer will not venture so far into pure fiction as to do that. . . . [Therefore] he makes Odysseus himself responsible for the telling of them. Nobody could refute what Odysseus had said about himself and his own experiences.<sup>2</sup>

Narrating his own odyssey, the mysterious Mandeville exploits in full the privileges of the first person, citing in one case a report he received from another's lips that would be fabulous indeed if only it were not irrefutable.

Unique among the exotica reported by Mandeville is the story of the Jews of the Ten Lost Tribes dwelling beyond Cathay, penned in by hills established by an act of God. "Folk in the country nearby say that in the time of Antichrist those Jews will sally out and do much harm to Christian men." The same expectation warms Jews at large in the world—that with the coming of Antichrist "the Jews enclosed among the hills will issue out and the Christians will be under their sway, just as they have been under Christian domination." But as Mandeville learned from a certain informant whose word cannot be questioned, so vindictive are the Jews that they are not content to wait for their time to come. It happens that there grows a certain poisonous tree near Java

against which there is only one antidote; that is to take the leaves of the same tree, crush them, soak them in water and drink it, or else a man will die very quickly, for neither treacle nor any other medicine will help. With this

preparation the Jews once thought to have poisoned all Christendom, *as one of them confessed to me*; but, blessed be Almighty God, they failed in their purpose [my emphasis].<sup>3</sup>

Accusations of Jewish well-poisoning, also dating to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, challenge reason in that such a lethal act would endanger any and all Jews who use the common wells and any and all Jews who survive even as their neighbors perish.<sup>4</sup> What then of a plan to poison Christendom in its entirety? Exactly how was this metaphysical feat to be accomplished? But assuming such a plot credible, what could possibly possess Mandeville's informant to damn himself by disclosing it? Yet damn himself he does—we have Mandeville's word for that. It's said that juries find nothing more persuasive than a confession. Before, during and long after Mandeville's time, when the Jews all too often found their very existence on trial, prosecutors of the case against them cited confessions scarcely less fabulous than that received by Mandeville somewhere beyond Cathay.

The fantasy of Jews plotting to put Christendom "under their sway, just as they have been under Christian domination" animates the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a tract that became a force in history despite being only superficially less outlandish than Mandeville's account of people with the heads of dogs and animals growing on trees like fruit. In this tract which serves anti-Semitism as a Book of Revelation, the secret designs of the Jewish people are expounded before an assembly of Jews themselves. Just as Mandeville authenticates his report of a Judaic plot by

telling us that he got it straight from a Jew—thereby powering the convention of the Jew damned by his own words—so does the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* present itself as a sort of transcript of the proceedings of this congress (though where Mandeville has the Jews plotting to murder the Christian world with the help of a certain deadly poison, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* has them insinuating “the poison of liberalism” into the body politic as well as employing “the inoculation of diseases” to sow chaos and despair). Strangely, the proclaimed designs of the elders confirm to the letter the allegations of anti-Semitism. As with Mandeville’s *Travels*, the history of the tract is both obscure and tortuous and versions sprang up in many languages, albeit on a scale commensurate with the mass production and reproduction of ideas in the machine age.<sup>5</sup> The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* remains in circulation to this day, long after it might have been expected to perish of its own absurdity. Not even the cataclysm of a world war launched in its name, leaving tens of millions dead, was able to lay it to rest.

Advertising itself as a translation of a copy of a mysterious original, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* first saw the light of print in Russia around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though its materials were brewed some time before, apparently in France. The history of the text, an involved tale, centers on the transcription of an original that does not exist and the plagiarism of a work of some brilliance: the *Dialogue aux Enfers entre Montesquieu et Machiavel*, a veiled critique of the despotism of Napoleon III by Maurice Joly (1864). It seems poetically fitting that a work as fantastic, indeed hallucinogenic, as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* should be founded on the words of a “Machiavelli,” for although Machiavelli existed his name was as legendary as Mandeville’s Prester

John. (The only character in Shakespeare to speak the human Devil's name is Richard of Gloucester, soon to be Richard III, a figure who came to Shakespeare from the troves of propaganda; glorying in his villainy, he vows to "set the murtherous Machevil to school.") Instead of constructing a conspiracy theory on the words of a fictitious Machiavelli, the fabricators of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* would have done well to review what the actual one said about the difficulty of sustaining even an ordinary conspiracy:

Experience teaches us that of many conspiracies attempted, few turn out successfully; because a man who conspires can hardly do so alone, and can take as co-conspirators only those whom he judges to be discontented. Yet as soon as you explain your plot to a malcontent, you have furnished him with a means to be very content indeed.<sup>6</sup>

Evidently the perfect unanimity of the Jews exempts them from the dangers besetting other conspiracies. Being of one mind, they can also keep their conspiracy secret, despite its magnitude, by communicating mentally. At the Jews-only meeting reported in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* the rule of secrecy is off, and those in attendance can express in full expository detail what they say telepathically elsewhere.

The device of the congress or national assembly allows the framers of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to hold all Jews responsible for the secret plot announced there (for such a congress acts in the name of those it represents), and by the same

token it establishes the seditious nature of a people that has its own representatives instead of accepting its anointed rulers. The work of czarists in Russian and monarchists in France, the *Protocols* associates the Jews with everything subversive of royalty, if only because their boundless cynicism makes a mockery of elevated ideals and their collective identity and voice parody the royal “we.” The use of impersonation to damn the enemies of royalty with their own words is deeply unoriginal, predating the *Protocols* by over two hundred years. In a rudimentary dialogue of the dead published in 1659, the shade of Oliver Cromwell confesses to the slain Charles I,

It was I that laid the Plot to draw your Subjects obedience from you, under pretence of Religion and Liberty. It was I that after we had Routed your Army . . . by my dam’d Policy and Power, broke off the Treaty, and all to get the Government my self.<sup>7</sup>

The placement of this abject confession in some imaginary land of shadows makes sense because it’s certainly not the kind of thing likely to be said in the real world.

Cromwell’s confession anticipates the *Protocols* and its fictitious use of the first person to expose an infernal plot to spread notions of liberty, seduce the millions from their rightful rulers, and seize the reins of the states. Or more precisely, the French source of the *Protocols* belongs to the same genre as Cromwell’s confession, which in turn authorizes the practice of speaking with a candor unheard of in the world as we know it: the practice that gives the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* its semblance of

revelatory power. However, Cromwell was one and the Jews many who think and act as one, and Cromwell expresses remorse while the elders of Zion are remorseless and thus all the more to be feared. The prominence of Jews in the liberal movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave what came to be called anti-Semitism just enough of a foothold in reality to support the delusion that the Jews constituted a single universal enemy. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the partisans of reaction in France, Russia, and Germany, among other nations, came to imagine and speak of the Jews as a subversive brotherhood, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* began to acquire the authority of repetition, with one edition following another. But it was following the double devastation of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Great War that the work really took off. *Mein Kampf* appeared during the heyday of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, citing it as an authoritative exposé of the “final aims” of the Jews.

Fittingly, the textual history of a work of second-hand ideas seems populated with intermediaries. As recorded by Norman Cohn in his study of the spurious document, a decade after the Russian Revolution a former court chamberlain attested in an affidavit that

In 1895 my neighbour in the government of Tula, the retired major Alexey Sukhotin, gave me a manuscript copy of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. He told me that a lady of his acquaintance, whom he did not name, when residing in Paris had found this copy at the home of a Jewish friend; and that before leaving

Paris she had secretly translated the manuscript and had brought it with her to Russia, where she gave it to Sukhotin.<sup>8</sup>

In the absence of an identifiable author, the *Protocols* traces back to a mysterious Jewish acquaintance of the unnamed acquaintance of an acquaintance of the good chamberlain of a defunct court. The document's authenticity is certified by a lineage as ludicrous as a chain of attribution in the *Thousand and One Nights*. "I heard, O happy king, that the tailor told the king of China that the barber told the guests that he said to the caliph . . ." On this sort of authority rests the claim of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to have captured the secret word of the Jews.

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From a hostile point of view, the Jews are the people of the self-damning declaration. The pattern was set, and their fate sealed, by elders who demanded the killing of Christ with the words, "His blood be on us, and on our children."<sup>9</sup> And just as hereditary guilt for the killing of Christ lives on in every Jew, so too, it seems, does the potential for self-incrimination. Like Mandeville, many authorities on Hebraic iniquity profess to have acquired their information straight from a Jew who tells all. How better to prove guilt? Writes Anthony Julius, "The more extravagant the allegations against the Jews, the greater the dependence on forms of confession"<sup>10</sup>— fictive confession, that is.



We all but witness the construction of such a confession in the 12<sup>th</sup>-century narrative that stands as the textual source of the blood libel.

In Thomas of Monmouth's account of the murder in 1144 of young William of Norwich (for whose death no Jew ever actually stood trial), immediately after a gang of Jews torture the boy to death in mockery of the crucifixion, one of their number, suddenly realizing that the crime will be detected, makes an exceptionally damning admission. "Because of our lack of foresight, and not undeservedly, our people will . . . be totally eliminated from the realm of England. Indeed, and what is extremely terrifying to us, we and our wives and little ones will be handed over to the Gentiles as victims, be carried off to death, be given to utter destruction, and our names will be as a reproach to all peoples to eternity."<sup>11</sup> In the tradition of the elders of Jerusalem laying a curse on their descendants, this nameless Jew brings death and destruction upon his people with his deeds and envisions that fate carried out with his words. Note, though, that we are asked to believe that the elaborately ritualistic torture of a boy in parody of the killing of Christ was improvised on the spot—carried out with a "lack of foresight." A ritual being a deliberate, not an impulsive, performance, the confession of a ritual murder committed on impulse defies reality, yet the speaker's admission that he and his fellows deserve extinction for what they did is reported by Thomas, without explanation, as if he had been present when it was uttered. For that matter, Thomas describes the crime itself as if he had witnessed it, and this even though he arrived in Norwich at least two years after the event. Fictional details, including a most

incriminating confession, so charge Thomas's account that "it is easy to forget that Thomas wove it together out of hearsay five or six years later."<sup>12</sup>

In a work obsessed with proving both the sanctity of William and the iniquity of the Jews, the words of the Jews emanate in their own way something like the revelatory power of the miracles performed by the martyred boy. Significantly, it is the report of a former Jew, a certain Theobald, that explains what is otherwise a complete mystery: exactly why the Jews of the world chose to manifest their depravity in Norwich. Theobald, who became a monk,

told us that in the ancient writings of their ancestors it was written that Jews could not achieve their freedom or ever return to the lands of their fathers without the shedding of human blood. Hence it was decided by them a long time ago that every year, to the shame and affront of Christ, a Christian somewhere on earth be sacrificed to the highest God . . . Therefore, the leaders and rabbis of the Jews who dwell in Spain . . . meet together, and cast lots of all the regions where the Jews lived. Whichever region was chosen by lot, its capital city had to apply that lot to the other cities and towns, and the one whose name comes up will carry out that business, as decreed. In that year, however, when William, the glorious martyr of God, was killed, it so happened that the lot fell on the men of Norwich, and all the communities of the Jews of England offered their consent by letters or by messengers for the crime to be performed at Norwich.<sup>13</sup>

Theobald “told us.” This, then, is the foundation on which the edifice of the blood libel stands: the report of an obscure source who somehow knows all about a diabolical congress conducted in the deepest secrecy. The legislated nature of the murder of the boy William makes all the more incredible the claim by one of the guilty that they forgot to plan their actions.

Though damning, the account of a Jewish congress in Spain lacks a certain semblance of immediacy because it is reported indirectly. In narrative, “the purest form of showing is . . . quoted speech,”<sup>14</sup> and perhaps to capitalize on this illusion of presence, Thomas then quotes Theobald’s very words: “I was at the time in Cambridge, a Jew among Jews, and the crime of the action performed was not hidden from me. With the passage of time, when I learned of the glorious greatness of the miracles which by divine virtue happened through the merits of the blessed martyr William, I was greatly afraid and, consulting my conscience, I left Judaism and converted to the faith of Christ.”<sup>15</sup> Effectively certified by the very existence of the monk Theobald, the story behind the story of the murder of young William offers a foretaste of the *Protocols* device of direct speech as well as the *Protocols* fiction of the Jewish assembly.

No great gap separates a congress of iniquity where the Jews concert the murder of a child from a gathering of elders who proclaim their unholy secrets. In an instance of the latter, a close precursor of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* known as “The Rabbi’s Speech,” which enjoyed an international career of its own and became tangled up with the other text, purports to be the transcript of an oration expounding a Jewish plan for

world domination; the diabolism of the Jews is proven with their own words. In the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* the attribution of words to the Jews is worked up into a enormous impersonation. But if the tract authorizes the anti-Semitic worldview by having an elder of the Jews declare their arcana, a production like this is not only a forgery but secondarily a forgery of literature, because the device of orating secrets and otherwise saying the unsayable belongs to literature. Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor expounds a plot to rule the world, pouring out the secret he has kept, so we learn, for ninety years. He too says the unsayable. If the authors of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* plagiarize a literary source, they also exploit and debase the power of fiction as such, projecting an impossibility that can appear more convincing than reality itself because it discloses what reality conceals.

The heightened reality of fiction is familiar enough to us. Around the time the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* were cooked up, readers sent letters to Sherlock Holmes at his Baker Street address, so real did the detective seem to them.<sup>16</sup> (Watson even uses the device of false documentation, citing at one point certain secret notes containing “an almost *verbatim* report of the interview in which [Holmes] demonstrated the true facts of the case to Monsieur Dubugue of the Paris police, and Fritz von Waldbaum, the well-known specialist of Dantzig”—a canard, of course.)<sup>17</sup> As contrived as his exploits may be, Sherlock Holmes is improbable, not impossible. A detective with superior powers of inference is not an offense to reality like the notion of a wizard proclaiming in all sobriety a secret formula for the mastery of the human race. And yet

it seems that for many the sheer impossibility of the *Protocols* makes it all the more persuasive, as if its defiance of reality proved it deeply true.

Hannah Arendt, who found the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* “a very curious and noteworthy document in many respects,”<sup>18</sup> concluded her study of totalitarianism with reflections on ideology’s power to displace the sense of reality. The ability of the pamphlet in question to make the fabulous seem not only believable but indisputable exemplifies this process. While Arendt accounted for this kind of weird irrefutability by claiming that ideology exploits the power of logic itself, such doctrines also prove their own truth when enemies confess their wickedness aloud, as in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. It is an indicator of the pamphlet’s resistance to refutation that those who suspected or more than suspected it to be a hoax could still find it deeply true. Reportedly, the mystic who provided the world with its basic text (one Sergey Nilus) entertained the suspicion that it was counterfeit.<sup>19</sup> The czar and czarina funded its publication “even after they learned that the tract was a fraud.”<sup>20</sup> The ruling of a Swiss court in 1934 that the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* had been forged seems not to have damaged the tract’s credibility appreciably.<sup>21</sup> Ezra Pound declared of the *Protocols*, “Certainly they are a forgery, and that is the one proof we have of their authenticity.”<sup>22</sup> Would the infamous tract have had such mesmeric power if, like ten thousand other leaflets, it consisted merely of preposterous ravings *about* the Jews rather than a preposterous diatribe *by* a Jew? So great is the revelatory power of confession that it matters not that the act itself never took place.

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The centuries-old libel of ritual murder and the modern fabrication, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, spring from the same root (as indeed a highly publicized trial on charges of ritual murder took place in Russia between editions of the *Protocols*, in 1913). When in 1879 nine Georgian Jews were tried for the murder of a Christian girl on the eve of Passover—the witching hour for ritual murder according to the lore of anti-Semitism—Dostoevsky was certain of their guilt despite their acquittal in court. “They are beyond doubt guilty,” he wrote an acquaintance.<sup>23</sup> Yet when the topic of ritual murder comes up in *The Brothers Karamazov*, which was being published at the same time, the legend is not put beyond doubt but expressly subjected to doubt. Asks young Lise, “Alyosha, is it true that at Easter the Jews steal a child and kill it?” Notably sincere and well-meaning if naïve, Alyosha does not answer as his creator would. Instead he says simply, “I don’t know”—not as inspiring as a resounding negative, but at least well short of credulous fanaticism, and in character.<sup>24</sup> Dramatic propriety and fidelity to a genre in which all is “contested, contestable and contesting”<sup>25</sup> deterred Dostoevsky from using his novel’s identified hero-to-be to promote a pet hatred. It may be a case of a composition wiser than its creator.

Weeks after the trial of the Georgian Jews, Dostoevsky sent the printer the text of another trial, that of the returned Christ at the hands of the Grand Inquisitor. Recall that in this most famous episode of *The Brothers Karamazov* the aged cardinal, speaking in the name of an obscure but mighty brotherhood—a conspiracy—that has somehow

held together and kept its secret for centuries, accuses and convicts Christ of heaping misery on humankind by refusing to rule. For the welfare of humanity the Grand Inquisitor and his brethren have therefore costumed themselves in the robes of sanctity and taken on the burdens of power. Less politely, they enslave humanity for its own good. The multitude, says the Grand Inquisitor,

will become timid and will look to us and huddle close to us in fear, as chicks to the hen. They will marvel at us and will be awe-stricken before us, and will be proud at our being so powerful and clever, that we have been able to subdue such a turbulent flock of thousands of millions. . . . Oh, we shall allow them even sin, they are weak and helpless, and they will love us like children because we allow them to sin.<sup>26</sup>

The impression is of a secret society who rule by deceit. The elders of Zion being just that, it seems almost fitting that at times they echo the elderly cardinal, in particular his grand thesis that the multitude will never be happy till they can lay their freedom at another's feet. "We will start such a feeling of disgust toward the former *régime* that the nations will prefer a state of peace in a condition of enslavement, to the rights of the much-lauded liberty, which has so cruelly tortured them and drained from them the very source of human existence." Where the Grand Inquisitor plays to humanity's yearning for miracle, mystery and authority, the elders of Zion will impose the "order in which lies peoples' happiness. The prestige of this power will bring to it mystic

adoration, as well as subjection of all nations.” One wishes more of the world said of the elders of Zion what Alyosha says to Ivan Karamazov of the Grand Inquisitor: “But there could not even be such a fantastic person.”

Both the Grand Inquisitor and the elders of Zion survey the human chronicle in vast, panoramic generalities, and both see history as terminating in themselves. Both boast of the imminent establishment of a world government. The elders strongly associated with Antichrist bear more than a little resemblance to the Inquisitor who arrests, tries, convicts and sentences Christ. Moreover, the Grand Inquisitor chapter is sprinkled with references to the Jesuits and the Freemasons, the former of whom, according to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, are “the only society known to us [Jews] which would be capable of competing with us,” while the latter in the anti-Semitic imagination were simply Jews by another name.<sup>27</sup> Yet by counterposing the saintly Zossima to the Grand Inquisitor and making the latter’s voice one among many in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and by framing his appearance in an episode in a tavern loud with the sound of organ music, billiard balls and popping corks, Dostoevsky keeps us from accepting his rhetoric on its own terms, or as the last word it purports to be. How could it be the last word if the novel in which it exists sends the message that “the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future”?<sup>28</sup> In effect, Dostoevsky deprives the Grand Inquisitor’s diatribe of the sort of power of revelation that many seem to find in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.<sup>29</sup>



Furthermore, unlike the fabulous Grand Inquisitor, flesh-and-blood human beings in *The Brothers Karamazov* do not simply pour their most deeply held secrets into speech. Even as Dmitri Karamazov opens his heart to Alyosha in a confession occupying three full chapters, he makes no mention of the sum of money he secretly wears around his neck like an amulet of shame—a sum which, if it had been disclosed, could have changed the course of his eventual trial. After we discover belatedly that Dmitri’s confession is incomplete (or is not his “ultimate word”), it remains entirely credible to us precisely *because* it is incomplete. A character who spoke in the declaratory manner of the elders of Zion would exist on a different plane from the living characters of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Notably secretive and enigmatic, Ivan Karamazov does not inundate us with his thoughts as his creation, the Grand Inquisitor, does; and even the Grand Inquisitor contradicts himself by releasing the condemned Christ after having spoken his last word—“Dixi.” Ironically too, while the Grand Inquisitor despises the millions who shun the burden of choice, Ivan enters into an arrangement to have his father murdered that he would certainly not consent to openly, his actions on ground level belying his Olympian abstractions. Only later does Ivan begin to understand this ominous compact; and when he confesses it unbidden in open court during Dmitri’s trial, he is on the brink of madness and does not even care to make himself understood—a confirming exception to the principle that people do not, as a rule, spontaneously rip the mask from their own face.<sup>30</sup>

Endowed with the power to surprise, the several protagonists of *The Brothers Karamazov* act like independent beings, not puppets, mouthpieces or abstractions. As

Bakhtin reminds us, with Dostoevsky it is a principle that “*in a human being there is always something that only he himself can reveal* [emphasis in original],”<sup>31</sup> which is also to say that putting words in the mouth of another is potentially an act of violation, of moral violence. For all his tangled and generally ugly feelings toward the Jews (or the Yids, as he called them in letters and elsewhere), Dostoevsky would have been in a good position to understand that by putting words in the mouths of the Jews the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* contributed to the silencing of millions of Jews forever.

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Writes Montaigne in his essay on repentance,

There is no vice that is truly a vice which is not odious and which a wholesome judgement does not condemn; for there is so much evident ugliness and impropriety in it that perhaps those philosophers are right who maintain that it is principally the product of stupidity and ignorance, so hard it is to imagine that anyone could recognize it without loathing it.<sup>32</sup>

The Jews of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* seem to defy this elementary principle of human nature. Obviously not lacking in intelligence, they nevertheless do not recoil in loathing from the sight of their own greed and hatred; indeed, they vaunt these vices by name. In effect, it falls to others to suffer the horror and disgust their moral deformities

fail to excite in themselves. Standing somehow both inside and outside the human race like Mandeville's informant, they themselves are an Odyssean marvel that "nobody could refute."<sup>33</sup>

The principle that vice reduces to ignorance goes back to Socrates, who appealed to Montaigne not so much as a dialectician as a man of flesh and blood who grounded his speech with references to carpenters and cobblers and wasn't above playing hobby-horse with children. To Bakhtin the Socratic dialogues are interesting not so much as abstract investigations or exercises of theory as realizations or at least sketchings of the principle that truth is dialogic, such that a person participates in dialogue "wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds."<sup>34</sup> According to Bakhtin, the potential bound up in the Socratic dialogues helped power the tradition of the dialogic imagination,<sup>35</sup> in which he singled out for special notice works where people express themselves with unheard-of freedom, as if testing the very limits of what can and cannot be said. If the fabricators of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* stole from Joly in the first instance (reducing his dialogue to a monologue), in a deeper sense they counterfeited the wealth of the dialogic imagination.

"The Gentiles are like a flock of sheep—we are the wolves." "We must extract the very conception of God from the minds of the Christians and replace it by arithmetical calculations and material needs." "In the so-considered leading countries, we have circulated an insane, dirty and disgusting literature." The idea of a human being declaring such perfidies as these mentioned incidentally in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—such an idea is not just logically difficult but morally impossible, as for

that matter is the very notion of millions who breathe as one. But however incredible it is in the way of the world that a congress of Jews would convene for the purpose of announcing their most unspeakable secrets, the saying of things unutterable was a convention in a line of imaginary dialogues and debates originating with Lucian, revived during the Enlightenment in France, England and Russia, and underwriting the clash of Machiavelli and Montesquieu in the *Dialogue aux Enfers*. As it happens, a number of passages in the latter work appropriated by the fabricators of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are cast in the first person. Thus, “My journalism will exercise its greatest influence in the provinces. . . . There I shall always arrange the climate of opinion which I need, and each of my blows will strike home. The provincial press will be entirely in my hands, for there no contradiction or discussion can be permitted.”<sup>36</sup> Such boasts become the still more aggressive ambitions of the elders of Zion, also cast in the first person. A tradition of impossible speech mutates into a revelation that purports to be impossible to deny.

It was an 18<sup>th</sup>-century dialogue of the dead devoted to economic matters that gave Joly the idea of circumventing the censors by framing his critique of Napoleon III in the same form. But if Joly disguises, at least nominally, the object of his criticism, no one has ever needed a code to understand the object of attack in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. With the speaker proclaiming aloud every one of the most treacherous designs supposedly nursed in secret by the world’s Jews, the only thing hidden in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is the hand or hands that composed it. By the same token, though, only in the realm of fiction do people speak in the comprehensively self-

damning manner of the elders in this text. The shades in dialogues of the dead “seem at times to compete with each in making surprising, even outrageous disclosures”;<sup>37</sup> the speech of the shadowy elder of Zion is outrageous to the last degree of outrage, as if the authors of the text had seized for their own uses the very tradition of fantastic disclosure. In their hands the liberty that allows shades to say things that cannot be said on earth becomes the shamelessness that allows a chieftain of the Jews to avow the unspeakable.

My text of the *Protocols* begins, “We will be plainspoken.” Bakhtin excavates the tradition of fantastic candor, citing not only dialogues of the dead but speeches of “cynical frankness” characteristic of a certain strain of satire, and calling our attention to a Dostoevsky story where corpses speak “with *full*, absolutely unlimited *freedom*” as well as a scene in *The Idiot* where it’s proposed that those in attendance narrate the worst thing they have ever done. (Indeed, “the . . . theme of confession without repentance and of ‘shameless truth’ . . . runs through all of Dostoevsky’s work beginning with *Notes from Underground*.”)<sup>38</sup> Several lines of Bakhtin’s thinking seem to converge on Lucian, and if it were possible to put a finger on the beginning of the tradition of the impossible declaration, it might be Lucian’s assignment of his own *True History* (or *True Story*) to the same category of sheer mendacity as all the tales of “huge monsters, savage tribes, and strange ways of life” descended from the yarns of Odysseus<sup>39</sup>—a line of fiction still alive in Mandeville’s *Travels*.

As befits a tradition of great richness, the literature of impossible confessions works variations on impossibility itself. “When people make up their minds to keep

company with the likes of me,” says Rameau’s nephew, himself fantastic, “common sense should tell them to be ready for the blackest disloyalty.”<sup>40</sup> But we also have the incomparable insights of an avowed fool in *The Praise of Folly*, the Wife of Bath’s confession of her own deceits (making her that impossibility, the honest liar), and the Pardoner’s boasts of his own fraudulence and rapacity (a confession “without repentance”). Because the fabricators of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* appropriate a certain Machiavelli, honorable mention must also go the uncontrite confession of the proto-Machiavel Guido da Montefeltro (“the Fox”) in the *Inferno*:

If I thought that my answer were to one who might ever return to the world, this flame would shake [that is, speak] no more; but since from this depth none ever returned alive, if what I hear is true, I answer you without fear of infamy.

Only in the other-world of literature does the Machiavel document his own iniquity.

In the climactic torture scene of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Winston Smith is asked by his interrogator O’Brien why the Party has imposed a dictatorship on the population of Oceania. Hardly knowing what to say, Smith gives what he supposes the safe answer, that the Party does it for the people’s good (like the Grand Inquisitor). Wrong, he is told—the Party does it for its own gratification and no higher end whatever. “The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power.” It’s as if O’Brien, too, said, “We will be plainspoken.” Here then is cynical frankness in perfection—a declaration so cynical, so brutal it defies belief.

Human beings as we know them do not advertise their infamy in this way, do not strip their deeds of justification the better to parade them in nakedness. As Orwell, who once defined political language as the defense of the indefensible, well knew, in this world human beings do not talk like O'Brien.<sup>41</sup> However, in the tradition of the imagination that includes the Grand Inquisitor's unheard-of profession of an anti-faith, debating shades, honest liars, brilliant fools and other impossibilia, O'Brien is simply one among many. Avowing their own "*boundless ambitions, devouring greed, merciless revenge and intense hatred,*" the power-hungry elders of Zion belong to the same species as O'Brien and his brotherhood of power-lust, but unlike O'Brien they are alleged to be real. If Bakhtin had been familiar with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he might well have classified it as a Menippean satire, a genre so inexhaustible that "it continues to develop even now."<sup>42</sup> Orwell classified it as "in a sense a fantasy, but in the form of a naturalistic novel."<sup>43</sup> The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is fantasy retailed as a purloined document. Staking its claim to verity on its derivation from the Jews' own lips, it represents a counterfeiter's tribute to the power of literature. The corruption of the best is the worst.

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<sup>1</sup> C. W. R. D. Moseley, "New Things to Speak of: Money, Memory, and Mandeville's Travels in Early Modern England," *Yearbook of English Studies* 41 (2011): 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Edwin Perry, *The Ancient Romances: A Literary-Historical Account of Their Origins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 325-26.

<sup>3</sup> *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, tr. C. W. R. D. Moseley (London: Penguin, 1983), 166, 132.

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<sup>4</sup> Tzafrir Barzilay, "Early Accusations of Well Poisoning against Jews: Medieval Reality or Historiographical Fiction?", *Medieval Encounters* 22 (2016): 533.

<sup>5</sup> Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

<sup>6</sup> *The Prince*, tr. Robert M. Adams (New York: Norton, 1977), 52.

<sup>7</sup> *A Dialogue Betwixt the Ghosts of Charls the I, Late King of England: and Oliver The late Usurping Protector*, cited in Frederick Keener, *English Dialogues of the Dead: A Critical History, an Anthology, and a Check List* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 32.

<sup>8</sup> Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, 99.

<sup>9</sup> On this improbable exclamation see Stephen Eric Bronner, *A Rumor About the Jews: Reflections on Antisemitism and the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* (New York: St. Martin's), 42-43.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 490, 493.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas of Monmouth, *The Life and Passion of William of Norwich*, tr. Miri Rubin (London: Penguin, 2015), 86.

<sup>12</sup> Gavin Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 218, 216.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas of Monmouth, *Life and Passion of William of Norwich*, 132-33.

<sup>14</sup> David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin, 1992), 122.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas of Monmouth, *Life and Passion of William of Norwich*, 133. Curiously, at one point Thomas uses admittedly invented speeches similar to rhetorical exercises, implying that they represent the sort of words that would have been spoken under the circumstances.

<sup>16</sup> For the argument that the original detective who investigates a murder in independence of the constituted authorities is none other than Thomas of Monmouth, see Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, 209.

<sup>17</sup> See "The Naval Treaty."

<sup>18</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism*; Part Three of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968; orig. pub. 1951), 56.



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- <sup>19</sup> Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, 93.
- <sup>20</sup> Bronner, *A Rumor About the Jews*, 93.
- <sup>21</sup> Bronner, *A Rumor About the Jews*, 122.
- <sup>22</sup> Cited in Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 239.
- <sup>23</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 423.
- <sup>24</sup> Fyodor Karamazov, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Constance Garnett (New York: Vintage, 1955), 710. For a contrary view see David Goldstein, *Dostoevsky and the Jews* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 156-58.
- <sup>25</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 332. Thomas of Monmouth's *Life and Passion of William of Norwich* "documents" one medical miracle after another performed by the martyr. Early on in *The Brothers Karamazov* the narrator reports of the sick healed by Fr. Zossima that "Whether they had really been healed or were simply better in the natural course of the disease was a question which did not exist for Alyosha."
- <sup>26</sup> *Brothers Karamazov*, 307.
- <sup>27</sup> Eichmann's first job in the SS was to gather information on the Freemasons. From there he moved on to the Jews. Deborah Lipstadt, *The Eichmann Trial* (New York: Schocken, 2011), 48.
- <sup>28</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, tr. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 166.
- <sup>29</sup> For a contrary view see Gary Adelman, "Disrobing Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor: The Hidden Legacy of Christian Anti-Semitism in *Brothers Karamazov*," *The Comparatist* 24 (2000): 83-98.
- <sup>30</sup> On the strange case of Stavrogin's confession in *The Possessed*, see Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 129-32.
- <sup>31</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 58.
- <sup>32</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, tr. and ed. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2003), 909.

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<sup>33</sup> Perry, *The Ancient Romances*, 326.

<sup>34</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 293.

<sup>35</sup> Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 60-61.

<sup>36</sup> An Appendix in Cohn's *Warrant for Genocide* gives side-by-side comparisons of passages in Joly and *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

<sup>37</sup> Keener, *English Dialogues of the Dead*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 118, 140f.

<sup>39</sup> *Selected Satires of Lucian*, ed. and tr. Lionel Casson (New York: Norton, 1968), 14.

<sup>40</sup> Denis Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew and Other Works*, tr. Jacques Barzun (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1956), 55.

<sup>41</sup> For the same reason, Swift's hoaxes do not compare with the world-historical forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. By impersonating another author, Swift opens "the real possibility that the reader will believe that a Puritan or hack writer is writing and unconsciously exposing his sinister motives." Ronald Paulson, *The Fictions of Satire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), 150-51. The spokesman of the Jews in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* does not unknowingly expose his sinister intentions but declares them in full.

<sup>42</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 113. This work was first published in 1929.

<sup>43</sup> Letter to F. J. Warburg, 31 May 1947.