

Literature vs. Propaganda

BY STEWART JUSTMAN

Bakhtin's magnum opus, *The Dialogic Imagination*, opens with a dazzling exposition of the differences between Epic and Novel, the former a world where things are known and shown in full, and which therefore contains no further possibilities, the latter a world in the process of unfolding, like the present moment itself. All of Bakhtin's sympathies lie with the Novel side of this antithesis. Indeed, when he portrays epic discourse as absolute and authoritarian, "demanding a pious attitude toward itself," it is hard not to suppose that he had in mind Soviet propaganda with its epic grandiosity and brute fantasy of a paradise that lay at the end of time, the consummation of history. The Bakhtinian novel is everything propaganda is not: a world of verbal richness, free air, and skeptical irreverence toward prescriptive or final truths. While Bakhtin's understanding of Epic isn't really useful as a tool for the study of Homer, the evocative power of his opposition between Epic and Novel does get us thinking about the differences between propaganda and literature. Perhaps if this remarkable thinker had been able to speak more freely (and even so, it is a wonder he survived Stalin), he would have addressed himself to that question. The reader of Bakhtin has the impression that modern novelistic prose got its start sometime in the later Middle Ages. If so, then it developed in counterpoint with propaganda—specifically, the propaganda of the Crusades.

All regimes exalt themselves, but not all regimes seek to spread, to propagate, a supposedly universal message. Among the original enterprises of that kind was the concerted effort to defeat and convert, by the force of argument, the Islamic empire that so embarrassed, threatened, and outraged the Latin West in the era of the Crusades. The West waged a war of rhetoric and caricature against Islam, as it also waged war on the ground. (As in the Cold War, Western military force might harass its redoubtable opponent at the edges of his empire, but could not really touch the citadel of his power.) As if militarized in response to this adversary, the propaganda of the West was both aggressive and defensive, and by branding Islam a religion of lies it implied that nothing said by Islam could be believed. These were indeed ideal conditions for propaganda: a civilization ideologically armed with trained clerics, and convinced that its religion was the one true faith, confronted the disturbing fact of another civilization, by no means its inferior, committed to *its* faith, recognizing Jesus, but not as savior, and claiming as its own the city of Jerusalem envisaged by Christendom as the center of the world. Crusade and jihad were themselves mirror images. Perhaps if Islam didn't share quite so much with Christianity, including the latter's universalism, it would not have appeared to medieval Christendom a kind of distorting mirror in which the truth was bent into falsehood (the Trinity, for example, being parodied in a fanciful trio of Saracen idols, Termagant or Tervagant, Apollo, and Muhammad himself, as in the *Song of Roland*). According to Christian propaganda, Islam, the arch-enemy of Christendom, was a creed of sensual license as well as violence, founded by a practitioner of deceit. All three of the categories of sin in Dante's *Inferno*—incontinence, violence, fraud—have a share in this propaganda-image, making Islam appear the very summation of wickedness.

If the literature of Europe in the later Middle Ages had been claimed by propaganda, it might have served up at every opportunity such caricatures of the Saracen as figure in the romances parodied by Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*—romances like *King Horn*, where the newly knighted hero suddenly encounters a crew of "hethene honde" (hounds):

The Sarazins he smatte [smote]
That his blod hatte [heated];

At evereche dunte [dint]
 The heved [head] of [off] wente. . .
 He slogh [slew] ther on haste
 On hundred bi the laste,
 Ne mighte noman telle
 That folc that he gan [did] quelle [kill]. . . .
 Horn tok the maisteres heved,
 That he hadde him bireved [cut off],
 And sette hit on his swerde. . .

No higher power intervenes to preserve the body of the slain enemy from dismemberment and violation, as in the *Iliad*. The identification of Muslims with pagans (as apparently in this case); stories of Muhammad as a confidence artist; Dante's portrayal of lower Hell as a city of mosques ("meschite") and obscene depiction of Muhammad reaping the punishment of a sower of discord; his meeting in Paradise with his own ancestor Cacciaguida, killed in the Second Crusade and translated directly from earth to Paradise as a martyr—such things suggest how deep the poisoned well of hatred was, and how potent the propaganda concocted of its waters could be.

And yet concurrently with the circulation of propaganda stories about Muhammad, the mobilization of military and intellectual power against Islam, and the attempt to argue the rival religion out of existence by the force of superior dialectic, Latin Europe engaged in commerce and cultural commerce with its adversary. In Chaucer's burlesque of romance the hero, Sir Thopas, or at least his horse, is menaced by a giant who swears by the presumed idol of the Saracens, "Termagaunt." Sir Thopas vows to engage the giant the next day, once properly armed, but before donning his armor he indulges his palate:

They fette [fetched] hym first the sweete wyn,
 And mede eek in a mazelyn [wooden bowl],
 And roial spicerye
 Of gyngbreed that was ful fyn,
 And lycorys, and eek comyn [cumin],
 With sugre that is trye [fine].

It is in character with the absurdity of "Sir Thopas" that a hero likened to such legendary Saracen-slayers as Bevis and Horn should sit down to a table of Arabian delicacies before going into battle. In Europe in Chaucer's time, the "spicery" of the east, including ginger and sugar, was much sought after. Cumin, like "sugar" a word of Arabic derivation, figures wonderfully in "The Steward's Tale" of the *Arabian Nights*. Feasting on such delights before strapping on his armor to battle the exotically named "sire Olifaunt," Thopas might be read as a caricature of a Europe that did a thriving trade with its own bitterest theological enemy—a traffic that included cultural goods as well.

In the very age of the Crusades stories from the Islamic world flowed in waves into Latin Europe. The first great transfusion of oriental story-lore into the Christian world was by way of the Spaniard Petrus Alfonsi's collection entitled the *Disciplina Clericalis*, which, poetically enough, was committed to Latin not long after the capture of Jerusalem in the First Crusade in 1099. The fables of the *Disciplina Clericalis* themselves captured the imagination of Latin Europe with their wit, Aesopian blend of subtlety and simplicity, and bold invention. Reworkings of Arabic tales deriving from Persian, Hebrew, and other sources, they spread like seed through the vernaculars of Europe, told and retold so abundantly that to list all of their offspring would require a virtual epic catalog. One wildly popular tale, that of a chaste wife threatened with transformation into a weeping puppy, entered English as "Dame Sirith," the earliest known fabliau in the language, and re-appeared centuries later in Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. The tales of the *Disciplina Clericalis* are written in a prose worlds apart from the language of militant polemic. Following his repudiation of Judaism (along with his given name of Moses) and conversion to the Christian faith, Petrus Alfonsi himself composed a strenuous defense of Christianity against the impostures of the Muslims and, especially, his former people the Jews. So dissimilar are the *Disciplina Clericalis*, with its serio-comic tenor and memorable fables, and the *Dialogue Against the Jews*, with its relentless dialectics and vitriolic assault on fabulous beliefs, that they seem the issue of two pens. That no one really knows whether Petrus Alfonsi composed the *Disciplina Clericalis* before or after his conversion is one more measure of the profound gap between its prose and the rhetoric of religious invective and doctrinal controversy.

The fables of the *Disciplina Clericalis* contradict in every respect the propaganda of clashing civilizations. In the *Disciplina Clericalis* there is no sign of clashing civilizations. The Crusades are nowhere to be found. Stories tell of Greeks and Arabs, and mention Mecca and Rome, indifferently. The generic moral precepts they uphold, such as "test your friends" or "beware of women," belong to no civilization exclusively and have no specifically Christian hue or content. As a scholar of Petrus Alfonsi puts it, "Were we to expunge the brief invocations to Christ in the prologue and epilogue, the *Disciplina* could be the work of a Muslim or a Jew." So too, where victories and defeats in the Crusades were thought to be sent from above (the stakes in the clash of civilizations being too great for things to be decided by mortal hands alone), people in the *Disciplina Clericalis* succeed or fail on their own mettle and merits. And where propaganda painted Islam as a religion of lies, ruses are often celebrated in the *Disciplina Clericalis*, as they had long been in folk tales, and would continue to be in works indebted to the *Disciplina Clericalis* itself. Not only did Petrus Alfonsi's anthology contain stories originating outside the Christian world, it held forth a vision of life at ground level at variance with the charged abstractions of propaganda. And these tales that surged into Latin Europe during the age of the Crusades from the stores of its own adversary helped charter a fiction of prosaic tests and contests quite unlike the heroic poetry inspired by the Crusades themselves. The *Disciplina Clericalis* was among the sources consulted by Boccaccio a quarter millennium later in the *Decameron*, a work often considered the very point of origin of modern prose fiction.

By giving many of the stories of the *Decameron* specific local settings (in contrast to the purely abstract settings of the *Disciplina Clericalis*), Boccaccio seems to say that these people identify themselves by and large as being of a given city or region, not as members of the theoretically universal community of Christendom. More important, anyway, than this or that borrowing from Petrus Alfonsi is the notable absence of animus against non-Christians, especially Muslims, in the *Decameron*. The stories of the *Decameron* share with those of the *Disciplina Clericalis* a complete lack of sectarian content and sentiment. Among the tales of the first day of the *Decameron* is one telling of a king of France who, while a certain Marquis is away on a Crusade to the Holy Land, pays court to the man's wife. The King is less interested in the conquest of Jerusalem

than in the conquest of the Marchioness. More ironically yet, the tale itself is of eastern origin. In the next tale a Florentine is arrested by a corrupt inquisitor much like Chaucer's Summoner, who after a suitable bribe reduces the sinner's punishment from execution to the wearing of a cross that makes him look "as if he were about to set off on a Crusade." By a trick of irony, Crusade thus comes to signify not religious zeal but the corruption of religion. The shortest tale of the *Decameron*, also told on the first day, tells of a reproach received at the hands of a nameless gentlewoman by the disgracefully inept king of Cyprus "after the conquest of the Holy Land by Godfrey of Bouillon," one of the Nine Worthies. About the glory of conquest and the fate of Jerusalem the tale has nothing to say.

The *Decameron's* relaxed attitude to questions of faith, and sympathetic portrayal of non-Christian faiths, are emblemized in the story told on the first day of the wealthy Jew Melchizedek's encounter with the Sultan of Egypt and conqueror of Jerusalem, Saladin. Short of funds as a result of his own prodigality, Saladin summons the money-lender in an attempt to outwit him of his wealth by setting him a trick question: which of the three laws, Jewish, "Saracen," or Christian, is the true one. Whichever of the three Melchizedek should choose, Saladin will be able to refute him and, as a penalty, impound his fortune. Melchizedek knows Saladin's game, however, and so, like one who answers a question with a question, he replies with a story that explains why the Sultan's riddle is unanswerable. It seems that once there was a great man who possessed a ring that he bequeathed to one of his sons, who in turn left it to one of his own sons, and so on until it came into the possession of a man with three sons he loved equally. Unable to leave the ring to one of his heirs to the exclusion of the other two, the man commissioned a craftsman to fashion two rings identical to the original, or as nearly identical as human ingenuity permits. It was done, and upon the man's death his sons found themselves with rings so virtually indistinguishable that none of the three could claim to be the sole heir. And those three rings (says Melchizedek to Saladin) symbolize the three laws, Judaism, Islam, Christianity. "As with the rings, the question as to which of them is right remains in abeyance"—an answer even Saladin cannot deny. The story continues:

Saladin perceived that the fellow had ingeniously side-stepped the trap he had set before him, and he therefore decided to make clean breast of his needs, and see if the Jew would come to his assistance. This he did, freely admitting what he had intended to do, but for the fact that the Jew had answered him so discreetly.

Melchizedek gladly provided the Sultan with the money he required. The Sultan later paid him back in full, in addition to which he showered magnificent gifts upon him, made him his lifelong friend, and maintained him at his court in a state of importance and honour. (Tr. G. H. McWilliam)

Much as Melchizedek side-steps a trap, so do the tales of the *Decameron*, including this one, ingeniously evade the absolutes of Christian doctrine and the coercions of propaganda that “demands a pious attitude towards itself.”

According to Marco Polo's reports on the sect known as Assassins, a certain Sheikh (or Old Man of the Mountain) removes the youths under his control to a garden of delights with the aid of a certain unspecified sleeping-draught, giving them a foretaste of the paradise that awaits them when, as Assassins, they meet their death. Boccaccio knew something of the Assassins, and if he wanted to inflame or simply play on anti-Muslim sentiment he had a royal opportunity in this story of a master of mind-control who transforms young men into suicidal killers. Instead he uses the story of the Sheikh and his potion for purely comical purposes. In *Decameron* 3.8 the Sheikh becomes a lusty abbot, and the sleeping-drug, rather than transporting a youth to a simulated paradise, transports the hapless Ferondo to a sham Purgatory where he is lashed every day while the abbot enjoys his wife. We are told that the sleeping drug came into the possession of the abbot “in the East,” at the hands of “a mighty prince, who maintained that it was the one used by the Old Man of the Mountain whenever he wanted to send people to his paradise in their sleep and bring them back again” — an unmistakable reference to the story of the Assassins, here cited in jest and placed at several removes from Boccaccio himself. It is as if Boccaccio mined the narrative potential of Petrus Alfonsi's tales of sexual trickery even as he radicalized

the freedom from religious animosities of the *Disciplina Clericalis* as a whole. If Boccaccio had intended to use the tales of the *Decameron* for anti-Muslim propaganda, he might not have transplanted some of them from the Islamic world in the first place, as could also be said of Petrus Alfonsi.

Of eastern origin is the tale inserted by the author at the start of the Fourth Day in defense of the *Decameron* itself, and read by some as the “hundred and first” of the collection (recalling the “thousand and one” *Arabian Nights*). It tells of a boy reared by his father in a remote cave lest he be corrupted by the world. When at the age of eighteen the youth sets eyes on women for the first time—they happen to be returning from a wedding—and inquires of his father what these creatures are called, he is told, “Goslings,” as if they were another species and he were not to concern himself with them. Still, he finds himself drawn to these goslings.

“You can say what you like, father, but I don’t see anything evil about them. As far as I am concerned, I don’t think I have ever in my whole life seen anything so pretty or attractive. They are more beautiful than the painted angels you have taken me to see so often. O alas! if you have any concern for my welfare, do make it possible for us to take one of these goslings back with us, and I will pop things into its bill.”

The son is infected with the very influence the father sought to shut out: the love of something other than God. The Old Man of the Mountain may be able to seclude his disciples in a remote stronghold, but the exclusion of foreign influences generally is scarcely possible in the world as we know it: so at least the meta-tale of the goslings implies. The very plague that drives Boccaccio’s party of nobles into the countryside is said to have “originated some years earlier in the East, where it had claimed countless lives before it unhappily spread westward,” although, significantly, Boccaccio does not blame the devastation of Florence on the East.

I have mentioned Chaucer’s ridicule of romances celebrating Christian victories over Saracen foes. We might have expected such a narrative from the Knight, portrayed in the General Prologue as a war-

rior who "foughten for oure feith," but perhaps in compliance with the Host's call for stories of "aventures that whilom [long ago] han bifalle," the Knight places his tale not in the modern world but ancient Greece. Instead of clashes between Christian and heathen decked in the rhetoric of holy war, the Knight tells of the rivalry between two noble kinsmen difficult to distinguish. What Chaucer himself thought of romances gloating over the defeat of the Saracen we may guess from his burlesque of the genre in his tale of Sir Thopas, where as we know a giant threatens "by Termagant" to slay the hero's steed unless he removes himself from the giant's domain. When Sir Oliphant slings a volley of rocks his way, Sir Thopas escapes, so we are told, by God's grace. So inane is the tale of Sir Thopas that the Host puts a stop to it.

Parodied in "Sir Thopas" is a romance like *King Horn*, where within a few dozen lines of the poem's opening a band of Saracens descends on English territory and sets to murdering the people and destroying their churches. Chaucer's England did not stand in dread of conquest by anti-Christian invaders. If we can judge by the sketch of the Knight's adventures given in the General Prologue, contemporaries knew the borders and frontiers of Christendom to be hot spots, but by the same token the Knight's career has taken him far from England—as far as Russia. Surely those who first read or heard the *Canterbury Tales* didn't imagine themselves living on the front lines of a war of civilizations. Chaucer for his part continued to draw indirectly on Arabic sources despite the border wars and religious hatred that engaged the two civilizations, as the Shipman plies his trade in Spain despite the warfare in "Gernade" (Granada) cited in the portrait of the Knight. The exemplary Parson admonishes the pilgrims to search their souls, not take up the cross, as he shows them the way to "Jerusalem celestial," not the earthly Jerusalem that was the prize of the Crusades.

From Hamlet's instruction to the player not to rant lest he outdo Termagant it would seem that the blustering Saracen of "Sir Thopas" was still a recognizable type on the Elizabethan stage some two centuries later. Because he was not a novelist Shakespeare doesn't figure in Bakhtin's thinking, but it is worth noting that like Boccaccio and Chaucer before him, he too had an opening to romanticize the Crusades if he wished, but declined. The nominal hero of what is chronologically the earliest of the

histories, King John, younger brother of the legendary Richard the Lion-hearted, assumed the throne a dozen years after the event that inspired the Third Crusade—the conquest of Jerusalem by Saladin. However glorious the exploits of “Cordelion” may be in the eyes of romance, *King John* simply ignores them, the deceased hero living on in the play not as the performer of feats and foe of Saladin, but as the father of Philip the Bastard and the absent source of his astonishing vitality. To judge from his pen, Shakespeare found less to interest him in Richard than in his inglorious brother and his exuberant illegitimate son. In effect, Shakespeare turned down the opportunity to celebrate the Crusades, perhaps sensing that that way the madness of propaganda lies. The man who had Richard’s namesake murdered—an act that eventually unleashes a civil war—does, however, think of making an expiatory pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Exhorting his countrymen to cease their “civil butchery” and concert their forces against a common foe, the King in the opening scene of *1 Henry IV* vows to march to the Holy Land with an army of Englishmen

To chase these pagans in those holy fields
 Over whose acres walked those blessed feet
 Which fourteen hundred years ago were nailed
 For our advantage on the bitter cross.

According to one report, just so did Urban II exhort his fellow Christians in proclaiming the First Crusade:

Let those who in the past have been accustomed to spread private war so vilely among the faithful advance against the infidels. . . . Let those who were formerly brigands now become soldiers of Christ; those who once waged war against their brothers and blood-relatives fight lawfully against barbarians.

In effect, Shakespeare demolishes this, the original rhetoric of the Crusades, by placing it in the mouth of a political adventurer who seized the throne of England and now seeks to consolidate his political position. Nothing further is heard of the King’s pious intention in *1 Henry IV*, and though in time he dies in Jerusalem, it is a room, not the city, of that name.

Shakespeare draws on the *Decameron* in *All's Well* and *Cymbeline*, takes the plot for *Othello* from a story-compendium in the tradition of Boccaccio, and in the enigmatic *Measure for Measure* offers a sort of oriental tale with a Biblical title (the only such title among his works). In the clash of civilizations he seems to take little interest. On the other hand, his *Merchant of Venice*—a work inscribed with strong traces of the folktale—is the locus classicus of anti-Semitism. Setting the action in motion is Antonio's offer to borrow money for his friend's wooing, a generous deed that leads to his still more generous way of abiding the forfeit of a pound of flesh when he cannot meet the debt. Antonio is a friend of the rarest order, and his great generosity is strongly associated with his *not* being a Jew, or positively, his being a Christian. "Let me have judgment and the Jew his will." Is it not ironic, then, that stories of perfect friends, even of friends who offer their lives, were popular in the Arabic world? The famous Arabic tale of "The Surety" tells of one man who holds another's place at the execution block, reminding us of Antonio giving his bond for his friend and standing in for him even to the point of enduring torture for his sake. *Decameron* 10.8, said to be one of the best-known of all the tales of the collection, tells of a young Roman who yields his wife to his friend, who in turn eventually offers himself in the former's place when the man is condemned to death: a story rooted in that of "The Perfect [or Whole] Friend" in the *Disciplina Clericalis*. And while the stories of the *Disciplina Clericalis* burst into Europe with the force of a discovery, the fact is that they derived in turn from age-old sources more difficult to resolve than the riddles of *The Merchant of Venice*, sources Indian, Persian, Greek, Arabic, Hebrew. That a play steeped in anti-Semitism might itself owe something to Hebrew sources is a peculiar tribute to the diffusive power of stories in the later Middle Ages.

As with legends of poisoned wells and ritual murder, religious hatred itself inspired flights of invention. Consider Marco Polo's apocryphal account of the Caliph of Baghdad threatening the Christians of his realm with death unless they move a certain mountain. As the tale goes, in the year 1265 "there lived a Caliph at Baghdad who was very ill-disposed toward the Christians. Day and night he was forever thinking how he could convert all the Christians in his country into Saracens or, failing that, have them all put to death." When he comes upon a Gospel passage to

the effect that "if there were a Christian who had faith as great as a grain of mustard seed, then by praying to the Lord his God he could make two mountains join together," he has his answer. The Caliph thereupon serves notice on the Christians that unless they move a mountain, all one hundred thousand of them will "die an evil death." The Christians of Baghdad are saved by a certain pious one-eyed shoemaker, one-eyed because his other eye offended him and he put it out as Christ advised.

And when all these people, Christians and Saracens, were in this plain, then the shoe-maker fell on his knees . . . and lifted his hands to heaven and besought his Saviour that the mountain might move and that such a multitude of Christians as were there assembled might not be put to a cruel death. When he had finished his prayer, he cried: "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I command thee, mountain, by the virtue of the Holy Ghost, to depart hence." He had barely ceased speaking when the mountain began to crumble and to move.

And so impressed is the Caliph that he converts to Christianity.

While with one hand readers might accept such apocrypha as Marco Polo's, with the other they accepted fictions originating in the Islamic world itself, illustrating by their own actions, as it were, the distinction between literature and propaganda. Significantly, when a variant of the story of the mustard-seed was used for literary as opposed to propaganda purposes by Bakhtin's favorite author in *The Brothers Karamazov*, it underwent a profound change. In Book Three of the novel table-talk in the Karamazov household turns to a newspaper account of a Russian soldier captured by "Asians" and threatened with torture and death unless he abjures Christianity and accepts Islam. Smerdyakov, the cook, provokes the orthodox Grigory by arguing that under the circumstances the soldier would have been fully justified in renouncing the Christian faith.

Consider for yourself: in the Scriptures it is said that if you have faith even as little as the smallest seed and then say unto this mountain that it should go down into the sea, it would go, without the slightest delay, at your first order. . . . And then, again, taken

also the fact that no one in our time, not only you, sir, but decidedly no one, starting even from the highest persons down to the very last peasant, sir, can shove a mountain into the sea, except maybe one person on the whole earth, two at the most . . . and if that's so, if all the rest come out as unbelievers, can it be that all the rest, that is, the population of the whole earth, sir, except for those two desert hermits, will be cursed by the Lord? . . . And so, why should I come out looking so specially to blame, if, seeing no profit or reward either here or there, I at least keep my skin on [and convert]? (Tr. Pevear and Volokhonsky)

Marco Polo's propaganda story of the Caliph and the Christians is intended to unite Christians against the infidel. In the scene in *The Brothers Karamazov* the "infidel" is not a Muslim or an Asiatic but Smerdyakov himself, the denied son who scoffs at the mysteries of the Christian faith even while claiming to speak for all the Christians unable to move mountains.

Norman Cohn has made the argument that when tales of Jews murdering Christian children sprang up in the later Middle Ages, "the lower clergy continued to propagate them" even when such libels were censured by the church authorities. Whatever her pretensions, Chaucer's Prioress is one of that sort, and as she delivers her tale of the martyrdom of a Christian boy at the hands of a band of Asiatic Jews, a solemn hush descends momentarily on the Canterbury pilgrimage. Identified in the General Prologue as a peculiarly anxious social being, the Prioress succeeds in preventing anyone from questioning her tale — no Jews are in attendance, after all — and secures herself against the mockery and contradiction that greet others on the pilgrimage when they address their fellows. In *The Brothers Karamazov* mockery and contradiction abound, everything and everyone is questioned, and when the old lie of ritual murder (so old that it was already well established when the Prioress recited it) comes up, it is not endorsed like some editorial stand, so much as posed. "Is it true," asks the disturbed Liza Khokhlakov, not a reliable source, "that Jews steal children on Passover and kill them?" Uncertain of the answer unlike his more bigoted creator, Alyosha answers with both the honesty and indecisiveness he displays elsewhere in the novel: "I don't know." Almost as if written in some latter Middle Ages, *The Brothers Karamazov* is aware, in

the corners of consciousness, of Jews and Muslims outside the community of Christian believers; and where it was once said that Jews and Muslims reserved themselves the right to kill anyone not of their faith (hence the murder of the schoolboy in the Prioress's Tale), *The Brothers Karamazov* investigates the thesis that unbelief in God leads to and authorizes murder. On its own terms Dostoevsky's novel recreates something like the charged atmosphere of conflicting ideas that existed in medieval Christendom, engaged as it was in conflict with a civilization whose holy book, the Qur'an, was said to correct the Bible. In his summation to the jury, the prosecutor objects indignantly that Dmitri Karamazov's lawyer has "corrected" the Gospels with the new religion of reason. However, the prosecutor, far from speaking for Dostoevsky, misreads Dmitri completely and convicts an innocent man. Alyosha Karamazov is not the Prioress; Dostoevsky is not Peter the Venerable waging war against infidelism; literature is not propaganda.

* * *

If Bakhtin had considered the entry of oriental tales into the literature and imagination of Latin Europe in the age of the Crusades, he would have found some of his thinking about literature confirmed. In "Epic and Novel" the decisive moment in the history of prose seems to be the discovery of everyday life—"the world of practice and familiar contact." The very titles of the prose tales of the *Disciplina Clericalis* refer us to true and false friends, drinkers, linens, swords, wells, chests, barrels, villagers, fords, thieves: the inhabitants and practical furnishings of everyday life. But for Bakhtin the depiction of prosaic reality requires something more than everyday settings and scenes. It is one of Bakhtin's cardinal insights that reality cannot be reduced to unity: hence his emphasis on "heteroglossia" or the mingling of languages. Deriving as they do from Indian, Hebrew, and other originals, the tales of the *Disciplina Clericalis* surely qualify as heteroglot. In the fusion of these stories with the waters of European culture we discern beginnings of the "heteroglossia" of the modern novel. At the end of a novel that is multilingual like no other, Molly Bloom, recalling her youth in Gibraltar, envisions "the auctions in

the morning the Greeks and the Jews and the Arabs and the devil knows who else from all the ends of Europe"—a memory-image that picks up the very history of the novel as a linguistic marketplace and a meeting point for stories from East and West. Molly and Leopold Bloom themselves, the unfaithful wife and her acquiescent husband, descend however improbably from the dishonest women and foolish husbands who populate the stories of the Middle Ages, both western and eastern, notably including the *Decameron* and before that the *Disciplina Clericalis*.

Precisely because they derive from distant, anonymous sources and concern persons anonymous themselves, fables like Petrus Alfonsi's solicit a response quite unlike a narrative that derives from an author of note or chronicles the deeds of figures of record. We take the former with a grain of salt, believing them as it were provisionally, and for the sake of the tale itself. In a word, we take them as we like. According to Bakhtin, the comic element in the serio-comic inspires the "free investigation" of the world and fortifies the "fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically." (A glance at Stalin's psychotic reign of terror?) A tale that doesn't have to be taken quite seriously, that allows us to believe or not believe, as we see fit—for who knows quite where the limits of the credible lie?—allows us freedom, too. The Prioress requires the audience to believe her miracle tale in full, likening the murder of her innocent to the "actual" murder of young Hugh of Lincoln by "cursed Jewes." Petrus Alfonsi's fables, in which almost no names are used, work differently. It is because such fictions do not ask to be taken religiously that they were able to cross from world to world, passing where doctrine and dogma could not. When the narrator of *Don Quixote*, having come across an Arabic manuscript of the knight-errant's adventures in the silk market of Toledo, defends himself by saying, "If any objection can be raised against the truth of this history, it can only be because its author was an Arab, for those of that nation are much inclined to lying," he plays ironically on the caricature of Islam as a system of deceit even as he appeals to the sort of relaxation of belief that made it possible for Christendom to embrace fables from as far away as India. (For what it's worth, one or two stories from the *Disciplina Clericalis* made their way into *Don Quixote* itself.)

As the fictions of the *Disciplina Clericalis* derive from anonymous sources, so do they tell of persons anonymous, and it is because these figures are strangers to us that we can never be sure in advance what generosity or folly or ingenuity they might be capable of. Only by attending to their stories in a spirit of discovery can we get our answer. Reading the fables of the *Disciplina Clericalis* is an exercise in surprise. According to Bakhtin in "Epic and Novel," the epic precludes surprise while the novel "speculates in what is unknown." Some of the great novels of the nineteenth century probe questions of knowledge and deepen and heighten the experience of surprise by subjecting us to the same ignorance and uncertainty as those of whom we are reading. The "heroes" of such works are persons unknown to history.

Having entered Latin, the language of Christendom, Petrus Alfonsi's retellings of Arabic tales were available to be retold in their turn. Freely quoted, "translated," reinvented (as Boccaccio fashioned Petrus Alfonsi's fable of "The Perfect [or Whole] Friend" into one of the most renowned tales of the *Decameron*), such stories feed into the history of novelistic prose in Bakhtin's sense of the term. As his chilling description of the epic world as "an utterly finished thing . . . completed, conclusive, and immutable" suggests, Bakhtin was averse to everything fixed and final. He attached particular importance to parody because of its unique power to break the spell of finality, to dethrone the last word, to renew. Parody is retelling with an irreverent difference, and from *Don Quixote* forward, the novel has felt a paradoxical attraction to romance as an object of parody. But the revolt against romance predates Cervantes.

* * *

Not only do the ordinary, nameless folk of the *Disciplina Clericalis* dwell poles apart from the heroes of romance, but the fable tradition to which they belong pictures a tricky world where, despite the wolves being wolves and the sheep sheep, characters are anything but the known quantities they are in a verse-tale of Christian confronting Saracen. Like propaganda itself, the chansons de geste are highly formulaic, as C. Meredith Jones pointed out some decades ago:

At bottom the songs are always accounts of the conflict between true and false gods. In practically every poem this struggle is presented directly in the form of a stereotyped duel, whose development is conventionalized and never varies. Preliminary insults are hurled by both sides, they plead with each other and propose conversion. The Saracen ridicules Christian beliefs. . . . He invites his enemy to abandon his foolish beliefs, some of which are enumerated, and when the two of them are properly excited they fight. When things are going hard with the Saracen, he reproaches his gods with their ineffectiveness and contrasts them unfavorably with the Christian God. [Etc.]

By contrast, the fable, for all its conventionalism, is ever-changing—so that in the *Disciplina Clericalis* a snake shows its gratitude to the man who untied it by attacking him (as if to say, a snake will act according to its nature), while in another well-known fable, one going back to the *Panchatantra*, a snake rescued from a well not only promises everlasting gratitude but proves true to his word, saving his deliverer's life and making his fortune. One crafty old woman in the *Disciplina Clericalis* corrupts a chaste wife by getting her to believe a tall tale about a woman transformed into a puppy, while an equally inventive crafty old woman in the same collection helps a Spaniard on his journey to Mecca recover his stolen wealth. Amid many tales of men who falsely trust their wife, the husband in the stunning *Arabian Nights* story of "The Three Apples" falsely mistrusts his wife. In the fable world a mind captivated by some idea as fixed as those of the chansons de geste would get into trouble, because success in the fables calls for a flexible, empirical approach to things, an ability to meet tests of wit and mettle (as Melchizedek does in his interview with Saladin) and to size up others on their merits and respond accordingly. Some friends are true, some false. Many women are false, but not all, as the *Disciplina Clericalis* pointedly reminds us. Over time this sort of empiricism fed into the literary form that appeals most directly to experience, the novel.

Don Quixote is the prisoner of a fixed idea in a world that demands a more empirical approach. His beliefs are as "conventionalized"

as the romances from which they derive. He is on a crusade, but how different from those expeditions to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean in earlier centuries. His after all is an enterprise of one, undertaken not in the name of some common ideal of Christendom but a private mania: a crusade reduced to absurdity. He is like one who believes in "the land of Prester John of the Indies"—the mythical hero of the East who, it was hoped, would one day deliver the Muslim lands to Christendom—except that his Prester John is not a communal fantasy but a merely personal one. Just as Don Quixote heeded no call to arms and received no papal benediction, so too does his quest lack a Jerusalem. A crusader without a cross, Don Quixote is perhaps the most striking example known to the novel tradition of the man at variance with given definitions, positions and functions. "An individual cannot be completely incarnated into the flesh of existing sociohistorical categories," writes Bakhtin in "Epic and Novel."

Confusing his beloved romances for reality, Don Quixote misunderstands the nature of fiction. Fiction occupies a position outside the dichotomy of truth and falsehood, a position enriched with the inflow of oriental tales into the lore of the West in the age of the Crusades. Inasmuch as Arabic stories would never have been assimilable into foreign cultures unless they had been more or less independent of Islam to begin with, we can say that the very importation of tales into the West supported the category of fiction as a thing with a life and language of its own, independent of official dogmas and dictates. The category of fiction facilitated literary traffic with the enemy in the midst of a clash of civilizations extending over centuries and accompanied by a violent war of words. It allowed such tales as those of the *Disciplina Clericalis*, or later the *Decameron*, to flourish in the face of the disapproval that compositions not Christian in origin and not necessarily illustrating a moral or philosophical principle might be expected to excite. It offered a respite from the severities of clerical doctrine. Placing Boccaccio in the context of the rise of secular literature, Donald Howard once wrote of fictions that "they amused people, let them live in others' lives as a temporary alternative to living their own. They were not 'contempt' [that is, contemptus mundi] but escape: not legends dropping pellets of authentic history, or myths containing kernels of moral truth, but tales of interest for themselves because, unlike life

in the world, they were not real, did not need to be endured or believed, engaged people's hopes and fantasies as an alternate reality." We might add that stories or story-radicals imported from another civilization were perfect candidates for this status both because, coming from afar as they did, they transported people from their own lives, and because they existed quite outside the channels of authentic history or prescriptive truth. If, as Bakhtin claims in "Epic and Novel," reality in the novel is neither definitive nor final but "only one of many possible realities," the novel as we know it follows in the tradition of late medieval fiction; and if the prose of the novel was nourished by "cultural interanimation," as Bakhtin also claims, then the circulation of oriental tales through the languages of Europe—tales that passed through defended ideological borders almost as if they didn't exist—surely contributed to its making.

Notes On Contributors

ALEX DIMITROV's first book of poems, *Begging for It*, is forthcoming from Four Way Books in early 2013. He is founder of the Wilde Boys Salon in NYC and works at the American Academy ... BARRY GOLDENSOHN is the author of five collections of poetry, most recently *The Listener Aspires to the Condition of Music* ... BENJAMIN IVRY has published biographies of Maurice Ravel, Arthur Rimbaud, and Francis Poulenc and has translated from the French such authors as André Gide, Jules Verne, Balthus, and Witold Gombrowicz. His poetry collection, *Paradise for the Portuguese Queen*, appeared in 1998 ... STEWART JUSTMAN is author of *Seeds of Mortality* and *Fool's Paradise*. He teaches at the University of Montana, Missoula ... RUTH FRANKLIN is Senior Editor at *The New Republic* and author of *A Thousand Darkneses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction*. Her essays and reviews appear in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books* and elsewhere. Her first regular film column for this magazine appeared in the last issue ... HENRY HART is author of two books of poems, *Background Radiation* and *Ghost Ship* as well as critical and biographical works on James Dickey, Seamus Heaney and Geoffrey Hill ... SIRI HUSTVEDT's works of fiction and non-fiction include *What I Loved*, *The Sorrows of an American*, *The Shaking Woman* and, most recently, *The Summer Without Men* ... DREW MASSEY's review-essay on William Schuman appeared in this magazine last year. His book on the American music editor, John Kirkpatrick, is forthcoming from University of Rochester Press. He lives in Boston and is currently on an NEH Fellowship ... CHARLES MOLESWORTH's books of criticism and biography include *The Fierce Embrace*, *Marianne Moore*, *Donald*