

A SPIT IN THE FACE

The Rage and the Pride

Oriana Fallaci

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Reviewed by Derek Turner

Oriana Fallaci once said that behind each of her books is “a great emotion, both a psychological or political and [an] intellectual emotion” (www.giselle.com/oriana.html). Books like *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* (published in the U.S. in 1976 as *Letter to a Child Never Born*) and *Un uomo: Romanzo* (published in the U.S. in 1980 as *A Man*) are driven by her (very) personal experiences. *The Rage and the Pride*—which is a blistering attack not just on those responsible for 9/11 but on Islam as a whole—is, she told one interviewer, “a scream rather than an essay” (George Gurely, *New York Observer*, 27 January 2003). It certainly is an extraordinary book.

Fallaci was born in 1930, the daughter of a Florentine cabinet-maker who became a radical politician and Italian resistance fighter. After being inspired by reading Jack London, she began writing short stories at an early age. Now, she is one of continental Europe’s best-known journalists, noted for her war correspondence and her no-prisoners-taken interviewing techniques. Her books and articles have been translated into twenty-one languages, and published in thirty countries. She has written for many journals, including the *New Republic*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Life*, *La Nouvelle Observateur*, the *Washington Post*, *Look*, *Der Stern*, and *Corriere della Sera*, won various literary prizes, and lectured at the University of Chicago, Columbia, Harvard, and Yale. She covered the war in Vietnam, the 1956 Hungarian uprising, various conflicts in Latin America (she was badly wounded in a massacre in Mexico City in 1968), and the first Gulf War.

During her long career, as well as making useful friends like Orson Welles, Ingrid Bergman, and Ariel Sharon, she has famously fallen out with many people—quarrels she assiduously maintains to this day. Jane Fonda and Yasser

Arafat are two such eternal enemies. In the 1970s, Fonda said that Fallaci was an American spy for criticising the Viet Cong. In the present book, Fallaci takes enjoyably bitchy revenge on Fonda (whose name she refuses to use), saying that “I was always engaged in the too serious matters [*sic*], mainly some war, and she was always engaged in some marriage or movie or video that teached [*sic*] how to stay in good shape...I spit in her face” (p.160). She also remembers Yasser Arafat’s “weak intelligence and strong ignorance” and “spitting in my face his smelly saliva” as they argued about whether Arabs or Europeans had invented mathematics (p. 93). “I wish him all the worst,” she says elsewhere, somewhat superfluously (p. 64). Henry Kissinger said that his 1972 interview with her was “the most disastrous conversation I ever had with any member of the press” (Gurely, *ibid.*). Other subjects include Willy Brandt, the Ayatollah Khomeini, the Shah of Iran, and Pakistan’s Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, whose remarks about Indira Gandhi were so critical that a 1972 peace treaty between India and Pakistan was nearly torn up. When an interviewee refuses to cooperate with her, he becomes “a bastard, a fascist, an idiot,” *Esquire’s* David Sanford once observed (www.giselle.com/oriana.html).

There is never any attempt at fairness or balance. “She writes not to convince or to persuade but to overwhelm, to storm the barriers, to sweep us into a state of transcendent rage” (Charles Taylor, *Salon.com*, 16 November 2002). She disbelieves in both the possibility and desirability of objectivity, which she has called “a hypocrisy which has been invented in the West which means nothing.... Our weakness in the West is born of the fact of so-called ‘objectivity.’ Objectivity does not exist – it cannot exist!” (Gurely, *ibid.*).

Her combative style makes her books peculiarly readable. Even though you know she is being grossly unfair and simplistic, and may dislike her occasional scatological outbreaks and constant “spitting-in-the-face,” you cannot help but be dragged along with her – at least for a while. It is very rare, and exhilarating, to read such a courageous, eloquent book by a public figure – especially when you agree anyway with a great deal of what she is saying. Fallaci is undoubtedly an iconoclast, and therefore something of a cultural treasure in an age of sneaking cowardice and hypocrisy. Her books are worth buying for that reason alone – and also because she outrages the numerous class of “cicadas” (as she calls them) – those whose sole contribution to political discourse is the creaky insect-cry, “racist-racist-racist.”

Fallaci has been campaigning against Islam for twenty years. At the time of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, she was denounced for saying that the Soviets, however awful, were infinitely preferable to the *mujahideen*; she movingly invoked the “armless and legless Ukrainian recruits” who were the victims of that especially pointless and vicious campaign. (From the perspective of 2004, this position seems prescient. American support of radical Islam, first in Afghanistan and later in Kosovo, was clearly a cataclysmic error

of judgment—for which the U.S. is continuing to pay.) *The Rage and the Pride* is merely a continuation of that decades-long detestation.

The book, which was first published in Italy in 2001 (*La Rabbia e l'Orgoglio*, Rome: Rizzoli), has performed well in the bookshops of Europe, with over a million copies sold in Italy and over 500,000 in the rest of Europe (the book has not been published in the UK). The U.S. figures, perhaps surprisingly, are much less impressive, despite generally favorable reviews in the conservative press.

Wherever it has been published, it has created a storm among Muslims and those who pander to Muslims. In Italy, the head of the Italian Islamic Party wrote a screed called *Islam Punishes Oriana Fallaci*, in which he called for his co-religionists to “go and die with Fallaci.” In France, the Movement against Racism took some time off from attacking Jean-Marie Le Pen and tried to get the book banned, or said that it should be issued with ideological “health warnings” on the cover, as if it were a packet of cigarettes.

Fallaci is an atheist—“all religions are difficult to accept for me” (Gurely, *ibid.*), but she does not vent similar spleen against the world’s other great religions—although she does say that the Bible or the Gospels and the Torah together have also “tormented humanity” (p. 94—statements like this may help to explain the relatively poor performance of her book in the U.S.). For her, Islam “is not even a religion, in my opinion. It is a tyranny, a dictatorship—the only religion on earth that has never committed a work of self-criticism.... It is immovable. It becomes worse and worse.... It is 1,400 years and these people never review themselves, and now they want to come impose it on me, on us (Gurely, *ibid.*). She calls Islam “that mountain which in one thousand and four hundred years has not moved, has not risen from the abyss of its blindness, has not opened its doors to the conquests of civilization, has never wanted to know about freedom and democracy and progress” (p. 30).

One can begin to understand why Muslims—a.k.a. “retrograde bigots” (p. 85)—don’t have an especially high opinion of her. She says imams are “pious throat-cutters” who have turned Genoa into “a filthy kasbah” (p. 36) and “spiritual guides of terrorism” (p. 37). And so it goes on—page after page of diatribe and denunciation, barbed, bilious sallies at everyone and everything, an unremitting volley of invective and scorn fired with a blunderbuss. As she admits, “I am very, very, very angry. Angry with a rage that is cold, lucid, rational. A rage that eliminates any detachment, any indulgence.” And, somewhat predictably if unhygienically, she wants to “spit in their face” too (p. 57).

It is not just Muslims who feel the sharp edge of her tongue. She criticizes feminists for being curiously silent when it comes to the treatment of Muslim women, calling them “phony Amazons” (p. 113) and “petulant chickens” (p. 114). She attacks homosexuals, “devoured...by the wrath of being half and half” (p. 113). She denounces Silvio Berlusconi for backtracking from his famous assertion that Western culture was superior to Islamic culture.

Berlusconi, she says, should “light a candle to the Holy Virgin [and] behave like a serious person” (p. 166). She criticizes the politicians whose policies, or lack of policies, have allowed Islam to “nest in the ganglia of our technology” and “live in the heart of a society that hosts them without questioning their differences, without checking their bad intentions, without penalizing their sullen fanaticism” (p. 97). The pope is assailed for having apologized for the Crusades, although she also gives him advice “respectfully” – one of probably very few cases in which “respectful advice” to the pontiff has contained the words “shitting in our pants” (p. 81). She tongue-lashes her own people for their disunity and their love of “petty glory” (p. 73).

As for today’s youth: “Instead of learned young people we have donkeys with university degrees. Instead of future leaders we have mollusks with expensive blue jeans and phony revolutionaries with ski-masks” (p. 176). She attacks communists, fascists, licentiousness, and even jokes – “God, do I hate jokes” (p. 166). Although a fervent Amerophile, she even lambasts America’s “childish cult of opulence...moral hypocrisies, her bullish arrogance.” It is small wonder that the book has discomfited so many people. Almost the only people who get off scot-free are Ariel Sharon, Rudy Giuliani, and the Dalai Lama. Oh yes, and Laura Bush – “Laura Bush has the face of my mother when my mother was young.... The first time I saw on TV Laura Bush, I got frozen because it was as if my mother was not dead. ‘Oh, Mama,’ I said, ‘Mama’” (Gurely, *ibid.*) – a curiously touching aperçu.

For her, “the West” means mostly the Enlightenment. She says that “the idea of Liberty married to the idea of equality” is the “most sublime idea ever conceived in the West” (p. 76). One suspects she has never considered the contradictions between the two concepts. Indeed, she combines her abstract love of equality with a strange snobbishness, at one point saying that Americans “never had any familiarity with sophistication or refinement...most of them are so inelegant that, in comparison, the Queen of England looks as chic as a high-class model” (p. 80).

She is candid enough to see some of her own contradictory impulses, admitting that, atheist though she is, “I have a lot in common with the Roman Catholic Church. Damn, if I do! How couldn’t I? I was born in a landscape of domes, monasteries, Christs, Madonnas, Saints, crosses, bells” (p. 145). She is also something of a patriot, listing some of Italy’s great art treasures and avowing “Should the poor-little-things [Muslims] destroy one of those treasures, only one, I swear: it is I who would become a holy warrior. It is I who would become a murderer...war you wanted, war you want? Good. As far as I am concerned, war is and war will be. Until the last breath” (pps. 39 and 40).

The Rage and the Pride is also bombastic, in a way that will make many Anglo-Saxons squirm in vicarious embarrassment. Examples include: “I have more balls than your kamikazes who find the courage to die only when dying means killing thousands of people,” and “I do not play the role of the courageous one. I am courageous. I always have been,” and “I conduct a very severe and intellectually

rich life." These and similar sentiments undermine Fallaci's insistence that she is "a person who never praises anybody beginning with herself." The many typos and infelicities demonstrate the haste and passion that have gone into this book.

For her candor, and for her courage, Fallaci deserves considerable credit. Her eloquent defense of our common cultural heritage, and her denunciations of religious monomania, strike a chord. How could anyone who wishes the best for the West disagree with her when she says that: "In our culture there is no room for the muezzins, for the minarets, for the phony abstemious, for the humiliating *chador*, for the degrading *burkha*. And should that room exist, I wouldn't give it to them" (p. 148). And for someone from her leftist, atheist tradition to be able to write in such a way suggests that perhaps some means may yet be found of uniting the contradictory strands in Western civilization — right and left, conservative and radical, atheist, pagan and Christian, American and European, northern and southern European — in battle against a phenomenon that threatens us all equally.

Yet, ultimately, her approach is essentially unhelpful. In fact, it is genuine "Islamophobia." The very vividness of her prose renders the whole book essentially untrustworthy. Islam is one of the great religions, and is believed in by many millions of serious people across the globe. Accordingly, it deserves fair and measured treatment even by those who find the great religions intellectually unsatisfying. In any case, we have to share a globe (and even our countries — thank you, "responsible" politicians!) with Muslims, and so we need a little bit of give-and-take.

While the possibility of complete objectivity may be at least partly chimerical, sometimes the effort should be made. A *Time* reviewer cited by another writer complained of Fallaci "when the account needs historical analysis, she offers tantrums" (www.giselle.com/oriana.html). Such outbursts may gratify Fallaci's feelings. But it is the rest of us (she is dying of cancer — it reflects well on Fallaci's personality that she defiantly continues to smoke two packs of cigarettes a day) who will be living cheek by jowl with Muslims for the foreseeable future. While Westerners will never understand Muslims, and may even feel amused contempt for their belief system, attacking Islam so viciously and so publicly is unlikely to assist in that mutual accommodation that has become so urgently necessary.

Fallaci has just followed up *The Rage and the Pride* with what is apparently a more measured examination of the topics raised in this book, *La Forza della Ragione* ("The Force of Reason"), but this has not yet been translated into English. It may well be that this will prove a far more useful — if far less exciting — contribution to what may prove to be a long and dirty war of all against all. In the meantime, those who want to reinforce their prejudices, or who just enjoy lively writing, will find *The Rage and the Pride* ticks many of the right boxes.

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