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# Voltaire's *Candide*

## *Lessons of Enlightenment and the Search for Truth*

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The appearance of *Candide* in early 1759 was a publishing sensation, what we would now call a “media event.” Following the first edition in Geneva, others instantly sprang up all over Europe, in Paris, London, Liège. Would-be censors protested in vain; the book was everywhere and unstoppable. Voltaire’s short novel, never since out of print, has gone through countless editions and been translated into every imaginable language. In what is the sure sign of a classic, the book has left a mark on the language we speak. One celebrated rejoinder, “Let’s eat some Jesuit!” (mangeons du Jésuite!) became an instant catchphrase in French, while other expressions from the book, such as “Panglossian” and “pour encourager les autres” (to encourage the others), have entered English usage. The book continues to have a vital place in English-speaking culture. In 1932, Bernard Shaw published an imitation of *Candide* titled *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God*; the short novel was instantly banned in the Irish Free State on account of its criticism of the Church. Leonard Bernstein’s musical *Candide*, composed to a libretto by Lilian Hellman, opened on Broadway in 1956 and continues to be widely performed on both sides of the Atlantic. Mark Ravenhill’s *Candide* (2013), written for the Royal Shakespeare Company, is a modern response to Voltaire’s novel, exploring our contemporary obsession with positive (Panglossian?) thinking that encourages us to rationalize evil out of existence. In preparation for the play’s opening, the playwright “translated” Voltaire’s entire novel into a series of 140-character episodes, which were tweeted eight times a day over a period of two months. There are many ways for modern readers to discover *Candide*.

If we look at the title page of an early edition, we can see how early readers came to know the novel (see fig. 1). *Candide, ou l'optimisme*: the term *optimisme*, as we shall see, refers to a particular philosophical view, but the word itself, an import from German, was then a new coinage in the French language, so its presence in the title of a novel was potentially pretentious or comic. The work is said to be “translated from the German of Dr. Ralph,” an old device that would have deceived no one, especially as the alleged German translator has an incongruously English name. Voltaire’s name appears nowhere—and of course, his celebrity was such that everyone knew the book was by him. The year of publication, 1759, is correctly stated on the title page, but no place of publication is given, and no publisher is named—these are the hallmarks of a clandestine printing. In fact, in the course of 1759, there were no fewer than seventeen different printings: the one illustrated here was published in London by John Nourse, and it appeared very shortly after the first edition in Geneva, so quickly in fact, that it seems that Voltaire must have slipped Nourse the manuscript even before the Genevan edition had appeared, no doubt as a precaution, should the Swiss edition be seized by police.

The eighteenth-century book market was an international one, and French editions published in London found their way to the Continent; but this London edition also reminds us that in mid-eighteenth-century London, there were educated printers able to publish books in French, and educated Englishmen wanting to read novels in French—and in the case of the copy illustrated here, we can see, from his signature on the title page, that one later eighteenth-century reader was George Canning (1770–1827), the future prime minister. And for those English readers who could not read French, there were translations galore: no fewer than three different English versions, one of them published by Nourse, appeared in London in the course of 1759; and all three had to be reprinted in the course of that same year: the public appetite for *Candide* was insatiable.

*Candide* remains one of the most widely read novels of the eighteenth century, and for many readers it provides an introduction not just to the writing of Voltaire but to the thought of the age of the Enlightenment. Voltaire (1694–1778) was born and died in Paris, but spent most of his long and restless life away from the capital. He trav-

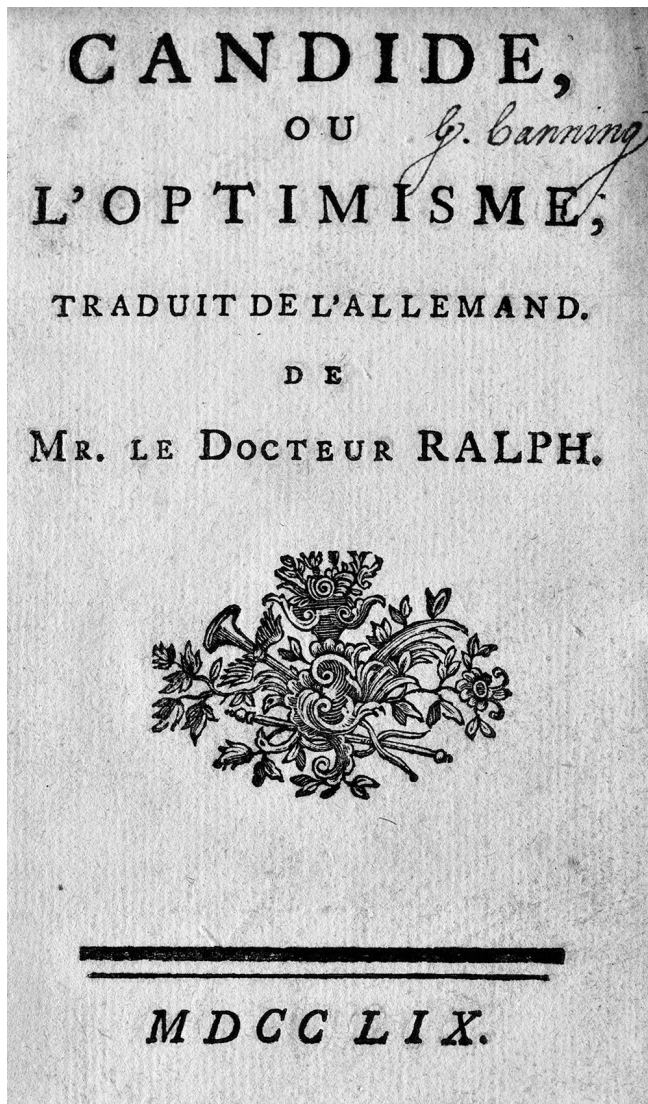


Figure 1. *Candide, ou l'optimisme* [London: John Nourse], 1759. Private collection.

eled to England in the 1720s, where he was an enthusiastic student of English culture, and to Berlin in the early 1750s, where he was the guest of Frederick the Great. He moved to a house, Les Délices, on the outskirts of Geneva in 1755, and finally settled, in the late 1750s, at the Château de Ferney, a grand residence situated near Geneva, but on French soil. Voltaire, now the most famous living author in Europe, was dubbed “the patriarch of Ferney,” and works continued to pour from his pen until his death at the age of eighty-four. Today, Voltaire is remembered for *Candide* and a handful of other short fictions, like *Micromégas*, *Zadig*, or *L'ingénu*, and for the *Lettres philosophiques*, published after his visit to England.

In fact these works represent only a tiny fraction of his writings: the *Complete Works of Voltaire* currently being published by the Voltaire Foundation in Oxford will number well more than two hundred volumes when it is completed, in a few years' time. Voltaire was prolific and wrote in every known genre, from the most prestigious, like epic poetry and classical tragedy, down to the most ephemeral, like articles for the press or occasional verse. The other *philosophes*, Montesquieu, Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, are remembered for important individual works; Voltaire is remembered for being Voltaire. In whatever genre he was writing, he used his trademark irony to express skepticism about dogmatic belief, in particular about entrenched religious belief. The name Voltaire is itself an invention (he was born François-Marie Arouet), and in some ways it is his greatest literary creation: more a label than a name, it has come to represent a way of looking at the world. And *Candide* expresses that Voltairean take on the world perhaps better than any of his other books.

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When the English novelist Aldous Huxley reread *Candide* in the years after the First World War, his first response was to remark on how modern the book seemed: “Read the book today; you feel yourself entirely at home in its pages. It is like reading a record of the facts and opinions of 1922; nothing was ever more applicable, more completely to the point. The world in which we live is recognizably the world of *Candide* and Cunégonde, of Martin and the Old Woman who was a

Pope's daughter and the betrothed of the sovereign Prince of Massa-Carrara. The only difference is that the horrors crowd rather more thickly on the world of 1922 than they did on *Candide's* world."

*Candide* tells the story of a journey, albeit in a surreal and comic vein. In the eighteenth century, fictional writers increasingly used the idea of travel as a metaphor: travelers (usually men, but sometimes women) no longer simply discover the delights of new lands, they look abroad to learn more about themselves and their own culture, so that travel becomes a means for acquiring understanding. The English philosopher Locke is a key figure here. In his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke argued for an empirical theory of knowledge, against those who believed in a priori reasoning or in revelation. The human mind, said Locke, is a *tabula rasa*, a blank tablet, on which are written in the course of a human life the experiences derived from sense impressions. The key tenet of scientific method is that truth is discovered through experiment and observation of the natural world, and not by reliance on innate ideas and assumptions. Voltaire wrote about these ideas in *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), first published in London, in English, as *Letters concerning the English nation* (1733), and this work played a key role in the 1730s in beginning to popularize Locke's ideas in France and the rest of Europe.

The principles of empirical thinking came increasingly to shape novel writing in the Enlightenment. The French word *expérience* means both "experience" and "experiment," so that the experiences of a fictional hero or heroine became, quite literally, experiments in how to acquire knowledge. *Candide's* name—*candidus* means "white" in Latin—is a deliberate nod to Locke's blank tablet. Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721) describe the reactions of two ingenuous Persian visitors who struggle to learn from their experiences, while Françoise de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une péruvienne* (1747) give a feminist twist to the model, describing the struggles of a Peruvian woman to come to terms with French culture (and men). This use of a foreign culture to relativize one's own could easily become mechanical, but Diderot gives the device sophisticated treatment in his *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (written in 1772): in this encounter between the very different sexual mores of France and Tahiti, we are no longer quite sure who is learning what from whom.

*Candide*, like other novels of the period, presents us then with a hero traveling in search of truth. But this is a comic novel, and in his hectic journeys to so many different countries, Candide is confronted by extraordinary events that flash by at bewildering and implausible speed: for the reader, it is like watching the speeded-up action of an old black-and-white film, with predictably comic results. How can we be expected to learn from our experiences, when there are just so many of them? And what is particular about this story is the way in which Candide is subjected to a crash course in evil: moral evil, the evil that humans inflict on their fellows (war, cruelty, violence); and metaphysical evil, those inexplicable and seemingly random events that God inflicts on humanity (earthquakes, plagues).

So the central philosophical question raised by the novel is this problem of evil: if, as Christians believe, God exists and he is good, why does he permit evil to exist on earth? This is hardly a new problem—think of the Book of Job—but each age has come up with a different way of approaching it. The eighteenth century explored a new answer: what seems evil to human beings appears so only because of their limited perspective; from God’s point of view, the world we inhabit is actually the “best of all possible worlds”—in other words, evil does not really exist, when viewed in the larger context. This response to the problem of evil—which in the eighteenth century goes under the misleading name of “optimism”—derives from the German philosopher Leibniz, and a somewhat simplified version of the philosophy is associated with the English poet Alexander Pope, whose *Essay on Man* (1734) was widely read across Europe:

All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;  
 All chance, direction, which thou canst not see  
 All discord, harmony not understood,  
 All partial evil, universal good:  
 And, spite of pride, in erring reason’s spite,  
 One truth is clear, whatever is, is right.

In other words, there is nothing random or accidental in God’s creation: it is up to each of us to discern the underlying order of divine Providence. It was common in the eighteenth century to suggest that

this latent sense of structure was proof of God's existence. In the spirit of this so-called argument from design, Voltaire liked to refer to "God the watchmaker": when you look inside a watch, you know that the machinery was designed and assembled by the intelligence of a watchmaker. Thus the design or harmonious shape of the universe is "proof" of a divine designer or creator. This idea (refuted robustly by David Hume in the mid-eighteenth century) lingers on, and "intelligent design" is a phrase much in circulation since a key US Supreme Court ruling of 1987 concerning the teaching of "creationism" in American schools. According to the static worldview of Leibnizian optimism (which has no place for any notion of change or evolution), there is a providential order in the universe, God is in his place, and, conveniently, evil seems not to exist.

These ideas acquired new urgency in November 1755, as news spread of a calamitous earthquake in Lisbon that killed many tens of thousands. The beautiful city lay in ruins, and public opinion across Europe became preoccupied with this flagrant example of gratuitous evil so close to home. Of course, there were theologians aplenty prepared to argue that this was God's divine judgment on the good citizens of Lisbon; and these theologians in turn became the target of Enlightened rationalist philosophers who were quick to ridicule such notions of providential intervention. Voltaire's response was predictable and immediate: his long philosophical poem rejecting belief in Providence, "Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne" ("Poem on the Lisbon Disaster," 1756), was circulating widely within a matter of weeks. *Candide*, a few years later, is an eye-witness to the earthquake and a victim of the vicious theological intolerance it unleashed (chapters 4–6): eighteenth-century readers of the novel would certainly have linked this episode to the controversy aroused by the earlier "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster."

The Leibnizian worldview might seem a somewhat simplistic view of creation, or at least an overoptimistic one (to use the word "optimism" in its modern sense)—that was certainly what Voltaire thought. Dr. Pangloss—his name means "all tongues"—is a German philosopher who has a simple, one-size-fits-all solution to the problem of evil: "Everything is for the best." Whatever disaster befalls him, to the very end of the novel, he repeats endlessly the same mantra. The idea

that this work should be read as a satirical attack on the philosophy of Leibniz and his solution to the age-old problem of evil seems evident, and this is certainly how the book was understood in the eighteenth century.

Here is James Boswell, in his *Life of Samuel Johnson*: “Voltaire’s *Candide*, written to refute the system of Optimism, which it has accomplished with brilliant success, is wonderfully similar in its plan and conduct to Johnson’s *Rasselas*; insomuch, that I have heard Johnson say, that if they had not been published so closely one after the other that there was not time for imitation, it would have been in vain to deny that the scheme of that which came latest was taken from the other.” A case, then, of great minds thinking alike—except that Boswell is clearly uncomfortable with Voltaire’s famously secular view of the world: “Though the proposition illustrated by both these works was the same, namely, that in our present state there is more evil than good, the intention of the writers was very different. Voltaire, I am afraid, meant only by wanton profaneness to obtain a sportive victory over religion, and to discredit the belief of a superintending Providence: Johnson meant, by showing the unsatisfactory nature of things temporal, to direct the hopes of man to things eternal.” So in Boswell’s view, Voltaire’s prime aim, beyond discrediting Leibnizian optimism, was to destabilize blind belief in Providence, to make us suspicious of the metaphysical. As the historian Daniel Roche writes, “The appeal of *Candide* lay in its representation of a key idea of the Enlightenment: the embrace of the concrete, the idea that the spiritual does not exist apart from its manifestations.”

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The characters in this novel mostly accept Providence with a shrug and submit to whatever befalls them, but their attitude is not exactly one of simple resignation. The narrative conveys a strong sense of anxiety, and in this topsy-turvy world, nothing is comfortably in its right place. The traditional reading of *Candide* as a satire on Leibnizian optimism is not altogether wrong, but it is insufficient. The narrative is not preoccupied solely with the problem of evil, and the

novel, even though its action is anything but realistic, does also reflect aspects of the “real” world.

In chapter 26, Candide and Martin dine with six dispossessed kings who compare their respective tales of woe: the tone might be that of a fairy tale, but the characters and their stories are all real. War is depicted with particular brutality in chapter 3, a forceful example of gratuitous evil in general. At the same time, this description also reflects a contemporary political situation: in the mid-eighteenth century, a series of wars was fought in Europe, North America, West Africa, and India, which collectively we now call the Seven Years' War (1756–63). This was a world conflict, more extensive by far than anything that had been seen in Europe during the previous century, and the casualties were well in excess of one million. In 1761, when Voltaire revised *Candide*, he extended the title to make the reference to this war explicit: *Candide . . . Together with the Addenda Which Were Found in the Doctor's Pocket When He Died at Minden in the Year of Grace 1759*. Minden is in Westphalia, precisely the province where Candide's journey begins, and in 1759 it was the scene of a bloody battle in which sixty thousand French troops were defeated by the Hanoverians, allies of the British. The scenes of brutal carnage depicted in chapter 3 are more than just a generalized exemplification of evil; they document precisely the slaughter then taking place on battlefields in Germany.

Voltaire attacks war in general, while also giving voice to specifically French fears about the war currently being fought. At the root of the Seven Years' War was the struggle between Britain and France to expand their trading empires in such places as Quebec and India. By the end of the war, in 1763, Britain would emerge as the dominant colonial power, and references in *Candide* speak to French anguish about the eventual outcome of this global conflict. One notable early British setback had been the loss of Minorca to the French in 1756, as a result of which the English Admiral Byng was court-martialed and executed. Voltaire has fun with this in chapter 23:

“And why kill this admiral?”

“Because he didn't kill enough people,” Candide was told.

“He gave battle to a French admiral, and it has been found that he wasn’t close enough.”

“But,” said Candide, “the French admiral was just as far away from the English admiral as he was from him!”

“Unquestionably,” came the reply. “But in this country it is considered a good thing to kill an admiral from time to time so as to encourage the others [pour encourager les autres].”

But this was a rare French victory, and in this same chapter, there is an overt reference to the war in North America between France and Britain: “As you know, the two countries are at war over a few acres of snow across in Canada, and they’re spending more on this war than the whole of Canada is worth” (a remark that the French-speaking population of Quebec has still not forgiven Voltaire). In the course of 1759, only months after the first appearance of *Candide*, the French planned to invade Great Britain, but two major defeats at sea left the British navy more dominant than before. This political context was difficult for Voltaire: he had made his name in the 1730s as an enthusiastic exponent of English philosophy and literature, holding up English culture as a model for the French. Now he felt obliged to nuance his position, so it is not surprising that when, in chapter 23, the Dutch ship in which Candide and Martin are traveling docks at Portsmouth, Candide refuses to step ashore: Candide travels across the world, yet still does not, quite, set foot in England. Even in a surreal comedy, there are limits.

Connected with this anxiety about colonial wars is a contemporary preoccupation with slavery. In 1758, Voltaire read in Helvétius’s *De l’esprit*, a stinging attack on the practice of slavery: “You must agree that every barrel of sugar that arrives in Europe is tainted with human blood.” Voltaire responded by adding a scene to chapter 19, in which Candide and Cacambo, as they are about to arrive in Surinam, meet a Negro slave with only one arm and one leg: “When we’re working at the sugar mill and catch our finger in the grinding-wheel, they cut off our hand. When we try to run away, they cut off a leg. I have been in both these situations. This is the price you pay for the sugar you eat in Europe.” It is often said that Candide is a puppetlike automaton

who shows no emotion, but this is not entirely true: the pathetic spectacle of the Negro slave prompts Candide to shed tears, and Voltaire to shed his irony. This, the only occasion in the novel when Candide weeps, is also the only time that the word “optimism” is uttered:

“O Pangloss!” cried Candide, “this is one abomination you never thought of. That does it. I shall finally have to renounce your Optimism.”

“What’s Optimism?” asked Cacambo.

“I’m afraid to say,” said Candide, “that it’s a mania for insisting that all is well when things are going badly.”

And he began to weep as he gazed at his Negro, and he entered Surinam in tears.

The trade in sugar referred to here is of course just a small part of the international trade fostered by the warring commercial empires of France and Britain, and this trade was supporting a boom in consumerism in western Europe, the like of which had never been seen. Eighteenth-century Parisian culture in particular attained in this period a level of exquisite refinement unequaled before or since: whether we are thinking of the quality and range of fare available, or the refinement of the porcelain on which it was served, or the beauty of the silk dresses worn by the ladies at table, French culture had reached a level of luxury that was a legitimate source of national pride but also a subject of concern. A debate simmered about the ethics of luxury, and Voltaire himself had previously contributed to this discussion, with his poem “The Man of the World” (“*Le mondain*,” 1736). The description of the German baron’s château in chapter 1—“his castle had a door and windows. His great hall was even adorned with a tapestry”—is of course a snobbish Parisian put-down of crude German taste; but the description of Eldorado, in the chapters placed at the heart of the novel, can equally be read as a parody (and potential critique) of Parisian hypersophistication. The roads in Eldorado are “covered, or rather adorned, with conveyances of the most lustrous form and substance, bearing men and women of singular beauty, and drawn at great speed” (chapter 17), clearly a reference to the

eighteenth-century French obsession with fine coaches; while the food offered at a simple inn—“four different soups, each garnished with a couple of parrots, . . . two excellent roast monkeys . . . another platter of six hundred humming-birds” (chapter 17) is an over-the-top parody of luxurious French gastronomy.

*Candide* creates a fictional world of pure comic fantasy, but this remains an uneasy and anguished world, and the anxieties of ancien régime France—war with England and the status of France as a world power, the questions of slavery and the colonies, the problem of luxury and consumerism—impinge on the narrative. In an essay introducing *Candide*, the French critic Roland Barthes famously wrote that Voltaire was “the last of the happy writers.” Like Aldous Huxley, he seems to think that the ills and misfortunes of the eighteenth century were minor in comparison with our own, and that Voltaire’s fast-moving, witty style would no longer be possible or appropriate for a modern writer in the post-Holocaust world. This underestimates the atrocities of eighteenth-century warfare, and more important, it misunderstands Voltaire’s polemical style, where the seemingly superficial treatment of profound horror is a deliberate shock tactic.

Modern readers will also find in Voltaire’s novel reflections of eighteenth-century society that disturb us, even if they do not seem to have troubled Voltaire’s contemporaries. The accusation is often made that Voltaire was anti-Semitic, and while that may be unjust, the passing remark that Candide “was swindled so many times by the Jews” (chapter 30) makes us uncomfortable. *Candide*’s comic world is a very macho one, and women occupy in it a prominent but distinctly limited role as the objects of male lust. In what seems to be the glorious conclusion of the final chapter, the women take responsibility for cooking, sewing, and washing—hardly a blow for women’s liberation. The best that can be said for the women in this novel is that they are at least given full rein to enjoy their sexual appetites, including those women in chapter 16 whose taste runs to monkeys rather than men. This remains a resolutely male-centred world, and the one gay character, Cunégonde’s brother, the young baron, is written off as a foolish, unfeeling snob. Although severely punished when he is discovered swimming naked with a handsome young Muslim (chapter

29)—he too gets to enjoy his sexual appetites—this experience fails to teach him tolerance toward others, and he remains implacably opposed to Candide's ambitions to marry his sister, because of what he perceives to be Candide's inferior social status. In the resolution of the final chapter, all the characters come together in some sort of harmony—all, that is, apart from the baron, whom the others collectively pack off in a galley. In its depictions of women and homosexuals, *Candide* reflects the opinions and literary stereotypes of its period more than it challenges them. Voltaire urges us in this novel to challenge received thinking, and in applying his lesson, it is right that modern readers will sometimes want to challenge Voltaire's own worldview.

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An understanding of the philosophical and historical context of the novel enriches our reading, but it is important to remember that many (most?) modern readers enjoy *Candide* without any of this background knowledge. The novel must clearly appeal to us at another level. Voltaire has written a novel, not a philosophical treatise, and a novel invites us not just to think about ideas in the abstract but to reflect on how characters deal with and live out those ideas; it is not uncommon, for example, for novels to show us characters who live their lives in contradiction with their stated beliefs. In a typical eighteenth-century bildungsroman, the hero learns empirically from the experiences of life, and the novel charts the hero's steadily growing maturity. But does Candide really learn anything from his experiences? As one disaster after another crashes about his head, he continues blithely repeating the lessons taught him by Pangloss. Arguably, he comes to learn something in the final chapter in the garden—a scene to which we shall return. But at the very least, one would have to say he is a slow learner. Candide starts off with Locke's tabula rasa but appears to defy Locke by learning next to nothing: so should we take him seriously? And if Candide is slow to learn, Pangloss appears to learn nothing at all:

“Now then, my dear Pangloss!” Candide said to him. “When you were being hanged, and dissected, and beaten, and made to

row in a galley, did you continue to think that things were turning out for the best?”

“I still feel now as I did at the outset,” replied Pangloss. “I am a philosopher after all. It wouldn’t do for me to go back on what I said before.” (chapter 28)

By his own admission, Pangloss is unable to learn from experience. But Voltaire’s satire here seems less directed at Leibnizian optimism than at dogmatic and unbending philosophers, who are unable ever to change their way of thinking. Voltaire is giving us a practical lesson in skepticism and freethinking.

More than that, the experience of reading this novel reminds us how human beings reinvent the world to fit in with their preconceived ideas and prejudices. Here is how, in the opening chapter, Pangloss explains how all is right with the (or at least his) universe:

“It is demonstrably true,” he would say, “that things cannot be other than as they are. For, everything having been made for a purpose, everything is necessarily for the best purpose. Observe how noses were made to bear spectacles, and so we have spectacles. Legs are evidently devised to be clad in breeches, and breeches we have. Stones were formed in such a way that they can be hewn and made into castles, and so His Lordship has a very beautiful castle. The greatest baron in the province must be the best lodged. And since pigs were made to be eaten, we eat pork all the year round. Consequently, those who have argued that all is well have been talking nonsense. They should have said that all is for the best.”

Here is Voltaire making fun of the argument from design. To say that “the nose has been formed to bear spectacles” is funny because of the upside-down Alice-in-Wonderland logic. But does that mean that Voltaire is dismissing the argument from design? Not necessarily, since we know from other writings that he has a certain sympathy for the idea. As this example shows, Voltaire can poke fun at bad logic, even (perhaps especially) when it leads to a conclusion he agrees with. Pangloss may have persuaded himself that he is arguing from a gen-

eral and disinterested standpoint, but the reader can see otherwise. Look at the choice of examples here: spectacles, breeches, stones (for building a castle), and roast pork: this is a portrait of the baron sitting down to dinner at home. Pangloss's mental universe extends no further than his physical domain—and both are rather limited. No philosophical example is innocent, and the give-away here is “Pigs were made to be eaten.” The pork-eating German baron, wearing his spectacles and stockings and sitting complacently in his castle, doesn't seem to know about Jews or Muslims: why didn't God design the world for them too?

The argument from design is intended to prove the existence of God: here it proves only the existence of German barons. Is the satire really aimed at Leibnizian optimism? Or at dogmatic philosophers whose sole purpose is to prop up the status quo? Voltaire's writing in *Candide* is steeped in irony, and irony is a complex and corrosive tool. Textbooks explain that irony involves saying one thing while meaning something else: the baron's castle in chapter 1 is described as “the most beautiful of castles,” so we know it is not. But this is a slippery slope: once a writer begins to use irony repeatedly, the reader has to pay very close attention. Can we believe anything we read? And can the author even control the irony he has unleashed? *Candide* is so suffused with irony that it is sometimes hard to know quite where it stops, or what Voltaire really means.

*Candide* might seem an “easy” novel to read: it is funny, the sentences are concise, the action moves at lightning speed; but this is also a novel that makes the reader work. Let us take as an example the final chapter, titled, conveniently, “Conclusion.” If we are trying to understand the “meaning” of the work, then this would seem a good place to start—unless, of course, the title is ironic? Their crazy adventures at an end, the characters of the novel finally reassemble, and we experience something of that sense of resolution we enjoy at the end of a Shakespearean comedy. All the characters come together, except for the homosexual baron whom they drive out—already there is a slight shadow cast over the garden. They encounter a wise man, the dervish, “who passed for the greatest philosopher in Turkey,” and Candide and Pangloss quiz him about the existence of evil in the world. “What does it matter whether there's evil or there's good,” says

the dervish. “When His Highness sends a ship to Egypt, does he worry whether the mice on board are comfortable or not?” Pangloss presses on relentlessly with his Leibnizian jabber about “the best of all possible worlds” and “preestablished harmony,” to which the wise man responds decisively: “The dervish, at these words, slammed the door in their faces.” In other words, faced by apparently insoluble problems, best to say nothing and just get on with life. Martin seems suddenly to be cured of his earlier dogmatism: “Let’s get down to work and stop all this philosophizing. It’s the only way to make life bearable.” This philosophy is crystallized in one of the most famous sound bites of the novel: “I also know,” said Candide, “that we must cultivate our garden.” And the novel ends—concludes?—with these memorable words: “We must cultivate our garden.”

The curtain comes down, and we are left with this highly quotable phrase ringing in our ears. Is this really Voltaire’s final word on the subject, the “conclusion” promised by the chapter’s title? For what it’s worth, Voltaire in his own life did not act like his characters in *Candide*, in fact he continued worrying about the question of Providence until his dying day. He most certainly hated dogmatism and intolerance, but he never argued that faced by a difficult problem, one should just give up. And when we look more carefully at the characters in this garden, there is surely something worrying about their desire to cut themselves off from the rest of society and to keep their heads down. If, while cultivating the garden, they were to raise their heads, “They would often see boats passing beneath the windows of the farmhouse laden with effendis, pashas, and cadis, who were being exiled to Lemnos or Mytilene or Erzerum. They would see more cadis, more pashas, and more effendis coming to take the place of those who had been expelled, and being themselves in their turn expelled. They would see heads duly stuffed with straw being taken for display before the Sublime Porte.” In other words, they would see the repeated evidence of systematic and cruel political persecution, the Ottoman Empire being as corrupt as all the other countries they have visited. It is really the conclusion of the novel that happiness is to be found by selfishly concentrating on one’s own work and ignoring the plight of others? This would seem an oddly anticlimactic conclusion to draw.

But if “cultivating the garden” is not the true conclusion of the novel, what is?

One clue might lie in the actual image of gardening: it seems mundane enough, but every eighteenth-century reader was steeped in the Bible, and sure to recognize in “cultivating the garden” an echo of “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener” (John 15:1). And if chapter 30 “concludes” with this nod to the New Testament, it is clear that chapter 1 contains an overt parody of the Old Testament: when Candide is kicked out of the castle by the old baron after kissing Cunégonde, we are clearly meant to recall God expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden after the Fall: “Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden *to till the ground* from whence he was taken” (Gen. 3:23, my emphasis). So the idea of cultivating the garden, mentioned explicitly only at the end of the novel, is already anticipated in the opening chapter, by means of these transparent biblical references.

Voltaire is not exactly making fun of the Bible here; he is using narratives that are intimately familiar to his readers to play with the narrative process itself, and the Bible is an obvious place to start. There is a similar effect in chapter 19 when Candide, on his return from Eldorado, loses most of his precious red sheep: impossible here not to see a playful nod in the direction of the Parable of the Lost Sheep as told in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Other moments in the narrative contain blatant allusions to the best-known contemporary novels. In the very first paragraph, for example, Candide’s genealogy is explained as follows: “The older servants of the household suspected that he was the son of the Baron’s sister by a kind and upright gentleman of the neighbourhood.” Any reader in 1759, English or French, would immediately have recognized this as a reworking of the plot of Fielding’s hugely popular *Tom Jones*, which first appeared in 1749 (and in French translation the following year). Having once recognized the imitation, we are given a clue to the future course of the action: Candide, like Tom, is presented as the bastard son of his protector’s sister, and we can already guess that following an amorous liaison, Candide, like Tom, will be expelled from his protector’s house, and so launched into the world. Voltaire mimics a contemporary En-

glish novel at the same time as he mimics the book of Genesis, and this narrative game is all the more amusing and unsettling because a modern novel and the Bible are placed on an equal footing.

Beyond this parody of specific texts, *Candide* is brimming with allusions to what one might call fictional prototypes. Modern readers, necessarily less familiar than were Voltaire's first readers with the earlier traditions of prose fiction, may not be so immediately sensitive to this phenomenon, but it is something that we can sense in the tone of the narration. The shipwrecks, chance meetings, and amazing coincidences are all spoofs of earlier adventure novels, indeed the very structure of the journey is in some sense a reworking of the archetypal journey of Odysseus in Homer's epic. The parody of medieval chivalric epic, by Ariosto in verse (*Orlando furioso*) and later by Cervantes in prose (*Don Quixote*), is often seen as the catalyst of "modern" fiction, and this process continues in *Candide*. True to this tradition, Voltaire's hero (or antihero) is driven mad by love; when, in chapter 19, "Candide, quite carried away, carved the name of Cunégonde on trees as he passed," he acts like the crazed lovers in Ariosto or Shakespeare. Candide embarks on a journey in search of his beloved accompanied by a more down-to-earth male servant, and the assonance between the names Cacambo and Sancho, Don Quixote's companion, speaks for itself. It would be too simple to say that Voltaire is making fun of chivalric romance. Rather, he is exploiting our familiarity with these canonical narrative plots to play with our expectations about the shape of the story.

We began by examining Leibniz's view that, despite appearances, there is a divine order that gives shape to the world. Voltaire counters this metaphysical position by imagining a burlesque fiction where order is absent and where chance alone rules. In this order-less (God-less?) world, the God-as-watchmaker argument becomes irrelevant: the order that might prove God's existence simply does not exist. And how do we, as readers, find order in the world, or even in the novel, in the face of such willful randomness? Perhaps our familiarity with the standard plots of other novels gives us some ability to make sense of *Candide* and to impose our own order on this otherwise disordered universe. And perhaps, in the end, all any of us can do is to create

meaning by telling stories, so as to impose some sort of shape on the chaos that surrounds us. The one order that does exist in *Candide* is the order of fiction, and reading to uncover order is in all senses a liberating experience.

Voltaire feels the challenge of Leibniz's ideas, and, like all Enlightenment thinkers, he is troubled by the question of evil. But in *Candide* Voltaire is doing more than just attacking Leibnizian philosophy. He is writing a work of fiction, not philosophy, and he uses the form of the novel to explore different and contradictory ideas, and to encourage his readers to do the same. *Candide* is an extraordinary and liberating work of the imagination, a novel that challenges us to rethink our assumptions about the order of our familiar world. If readers today continue to enjoy *Candide*, it is because we respond instinctively to this hymn to the absurd. Leibnizian optimism may no longer seem immediately relevant to modern-day concerns, but Voltaire's militant call to treat dogma with skepticism certainly does: this lesson never loses its relevance. The caustic black humor of the film *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) bears a distinctly Voltairean imprint, not surprisingly because Terry Southern, one of its cowriters, had earlier coauthored with Mason Hoffenberg the novel *Candy* (1958), a provocative rewriting of *Candide*. Voltaire's novel is one we continue to read, and to rewrite.

The "same" book can look very different depending on how and for whom it is printed, and covers can tell us a great deal, even before we reach page one. We began with an edition of *Candide* printed in French in London in 1759, and we finish with a translation by Walter J. Fultz, a mass-market paperback published in the United States in 1952, in a popular series called Lion Books, which sold in drugstores for twenty-five cents (see fig. 2). The cover illustration attempts to rewrite the novel as a 1950s B-movie, while a convenient summary of the plot explains that Candide "chased a virtuous maiden through Europe's most bawdy age." Perhaps the greatest originality of Voltaire's *Candide* is its daring rewriting of the popular fictions of its day; so it was only to be expected that after two hundred years *Candide* itself would be rewritten as pulp fiction.



Figure 2. *Candide* [translated by Walter J. Fultz], [New York: Lion Books, [1952]. Private collection.

## WORKS CITED AND RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

Throughout this chapter, I have quoted *Candide* in the excellent modern translation, *Candide and Other Stories*, trans. Roger Pearson, Oxford World's Classics (1990; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Readers may also like to sample one of the early English translations: Eric Palmer's edition of *Candide* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2009) uses the translation published by John Nourse in London in 1759, *Candide, or All for the Best*. There is a fascinating online exhibition titled "Voltaire's *Candide*" (2010) on the website of the New York Public Library (<http://candide.nypl.org>). The best modern biography of Voltaire is Roger Pearson's *Voltaire Almighty: A Life in the Pursuit of Freedom* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005); and there is a delightful biographical essay by Richard Holmes, "Voltaire's Grin," first published in *The New York Review of Books* (1995), and reprinted in his collection *Side-tracks: Explorations of a Romantic Biographer* (London: Flamingo, 2000), 343–63. Roger Pearson, *The Fables of Reason: A Study of Voltaire's "Contes philosophiques"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) contains a chapter on *Candide*; see also Jean Starobinski, "On the Philosophical Style of *Candide*," in *Blessings in Disguise; or, The Morality of Evil*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 84–100. On Voltaire more generally, *The Cambridge Companion to Voltaire*, ed. Nicholas Cronk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), provides an overview of modern readings. On the historical and cultural background, see Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment and Why It Still Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Charissa Bremer-David, ed., *Paris: Life and Luxury in the Eighteenth Century* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2011). See also Aldous Huxley, "On Re-reading *Candide*," in *On the Margin* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1923), 12–17.

Readers with knowledge of French should download the app "Candide, l'édition enrichie," freely available at the Apple iStore, a joint production of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and the Voltaire Foundation in Oxford. This contains the full text in French, with a range of annotations and other resources to provide context; it also allows you to listen to the text, read by the French actor Denis Podalydès. A recent collection of essays on *Candide*, incorporating a wide range of approaches, is *Les 250 ans de "Candide": Lectures et relectures*, ed. Nicholas Cronk and Nathalie Ferrand (Louvain: Peeters, 2013).