

Candide
by **Voltaire**

Translated, Edited, and with an Introduction by

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Introduction:
The Paradoxes of
Voltaire

Eighteenth-century Europe is often called the Age of Voltaire. What is astonishing is that this expression was already common in Voltaire's lifetime.¹ He was the first writer to become the symbol of his age—to his age. As a young man, he was hailed by the French literary establishment as the most gifted poet in the nation. In his middle years, he turned against authority and became the first critic of religious extremism, the first defender of human rights, to appeal to a mass audience in several countries. As an elderly man, this impious crusader became the object of a cult with fanatical overtones of its own.

Voltaire died at the age of 83 and was combative to the end. He took part in nearly every major controversy of his time. While engaging the external world, he challenged himself too: he evolved as a human being and underwent profound changes in his philosophy. He was also remarkably prolific. The modern edition of his writings fills more than 135 volumes.² On account of his productivity and complexity, Voltaire eludes simple textbook classifications. The purpose of this introduction is to avoid easy definitions; to draw attention to Voltaire's unconventional acts and volatile ideas; and even to bring out the contradictions in his thought,

¹André Magnan, "Siècle de Voltaire," in *Inventaire Voltaire*, ed. Jean Goulemot, André Magnan, Didier Masseur (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 1252.

²*The Complete Works of Voltaire*, ed. Theodore Besterman (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1968–1977).

which, far from being an embarrassment to him, are the true emblems of his brilliance.

An introduction, of course, is just a beginning. In the end readers must forge their own opinions of Voltaire. There is still much debate about *Candide*, not only about its value as a work of literature and philosophy but also about the very meaning of the text. Interpretation, however, is not an entirely subjective matter. To know about the life of an author, the society in which he or she lived, and the controversies of the time—all of these things help to place a book in proper perspective. And only by viewing a work in this historical manner can we begin to appreciate it fully, or to criticize it responsibly.

THE DUALITY OF VOLTAIRE

Voltaire was born in Paris in 1694. After studying at a boarding school run by Jesuit priests, he rebelled against his father's efforts to turn him into a lawyer and devoted himself to quenching his thirst for sensuality and literary fame. "He slipped like an eel into all the places where pleasure was prized," noted Gustave Lanson, one of Voltaire's great biographers.³ In 1718 his first play, *Oedipus*, retold the ancient story of the Theban prince who killed his father and slept with his mother. Composed in poetic verse, the dialogue of this play alluded to outrageous acts in impeccably refined language. *Oedipus* was an immediate success: it set a record for consecutive performances of a tragic play that was unsurpassed in Paris in the eighteenth century.⁴ But Voltaire's straight path to glory was blocked by his own impetuous character. While he longed for success, he also had a compulsion to shock the high and mighty. He had already been imprisoned in 1717 for a poem implying that the regent of France⁵ committed incest with his daughter. In the early 1720s he composed poems attacking Christianity. He kept them secret, but a public explosion of his passion for creating scandal was inevitable.

It occurred in 1726. The chevalier de Rohan, a member of a powerful noble family, poked fun at Voltaire's name as they passed each other in the opera. Voltaire, who was not a noble, boldly replied that the chevalier was a disgrace to his family name, whereas his own name would soon be famous throughout Europe. The next day, the chevalier's servants bru-

³Gustave Lanson, *Voltaire* (Paris: Hachette, 1906), 16.

⁴Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), 73–74.

⁵Louis XIV died in 1715. Because his successor, Louis XV, was only five years old, a regency, or temporary rulership, was entrusted to Louis XIV's nephew, Philippe d'Orléans.

tally beat Voltaire with a stick. When Voltaire sought justice from the police, he found that his accuser's noble status placed him beyond reach. When his patrons in high society also showed him no sympathy, Voltaire purchased weapons and began to plan his own revenge. At this point the authorities intervened, imprisoned him, and promised to release him only if he left the country. So began Voltaire's life as exile and social critic. He lived most of his eighty-four years in places far from Paris, places where he was safe from arrest, either in the French provinces or in foreign countries. He still produced literature, but he used it to draw attention to prejudice and to defend its victims: "I write in order to act."⁶

This is an important statement. Once he left Paris, Voltaire abandoned the writer's traditional ambition to forge timeless works that would be appreciated forever by posterity. This literary ideal prevented writers from describing in specific terms the conditions and controversies of their own times. Authors aspiring to immortality tried to tell stories that contained universal themes and avoided the passing incidents of the present. But for Voltaire, the only person worthy of being recalled in the future is the one who gives everything to the present. Genuinely touched by the suffering of others, he was willing to descend into journalism and to saturate even his most ambitious literary works with references to the social and political issues of his time. Voltaire called this commitment to the present *humanité* (humanity).⁷

To idealize Voltaire as a great humanitarian would be to oversimplify his life, for as we will see, his personality was many-sided. It is nonetheless true that Voltaire pioneered the role of the modern intellectual who mocks tradition, disdains organized religion, and seeks to redeem himself by serving as the conscience of his age—and the response he got from his age was enormous. In 1778, at the request of numerous supporters, the elderly Voltaire returned triumphantly to Paris after many years of exile. In the course of festivities in his honor, the directors of the leading playhouse, the *Comédie Française*, placed a bust of him inside the theater. In doing so they violated a tradition according to which only deceased authors could be immortalized with a statue in this hallowed building. With the unveiling of this icon, the present suddenly became posterity. Voltaire, already a symbol of his own age, had the pleasure of seeing himself resurrected in advance for the next. The ecstasy of his supporters is evident from a report in one of the newsletters of the period:

⁶Letter to Vernes, 15 April 1767; *Correspondence and Related Documents*, ed. Theodore Besterman (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1968–1977), 116:53.

⁷Voltaire, in fact, claimed to be one of the first persons to use the word *humanité*; see letter to Palissot, 4 June 1760; *Correspondence*, 105:350.

"The theater at this moment was perfectly transformed into a public place in which one had erected a monument to the glory of genius . . . Envy and hatred, fanaticism and intolerance did not dare to cry out except in secret; and for perhaps the first time in France, one saw public opinion enjoy the splendor of its full authority."⁸

The story of the statue is an example of how Voltaire gave his admirers the exhilarating sentiment of living in an unprecedented era in history, an era in which one could set aside tradition and forge a new society on new foundations. Voltaire and other writers of his time affirmed that progress was unfolding and that theirs was a century of "reason" and "light." "The Age of Reason" and "the Enlightenment" are thus two terms we have inherited (along with "the Age of Voltaire") to describe the creative energy of the eighteenth century. In fact, we have inherited the spirit of the period as well as its self-descriptive terms; for we continue to live in a time that appreciates independence, criticism, and change. Who does not dream of achieving security and fame through one's own efforts, like Voltaire the self-made man of letters? Who does not desire to see the world become a happier place, like Voltaire the humanitarian reformer? And who does not believe that reason is an instrument of progress, like Voltaire the implacable critic of prejudice and superstition?

We are the heirs of Voltaire . . . yet it is not so simple. We are also strangers to him. He was, after all, a Frenchman of the Old Regime. His impact is incomprehensible without some knowledge of that remote time. To know him better, we will have to make a tour through France in the age of absolute monarchy. But there is more. The real Voltaire was not just the reflection of the Age of Reason. He was an enigmatic individual — calculating and passionate, imperious and vulnerable, self-righteous and self-critical. As a thinker he was more subtle than most of his contemporaries ever noticed. While striving to understand the Enlightenment that Voltaire symbolized, we must also seek to understand what he alone experienced and had to say.

To preserve a sense of Voltaire's complexity, it is useful to keep in mind this double nature of his identity. On the one hand, he was a celebrity: the leader of the Enlightenment and a symbol of the liberation of humankind through reason. In this role he coined the slogan *Écrasez l'in-fâme!* (Crush the vile thing!) "The vile thing" meant, above all, the bigotry of the Catholic Church, which Voltaire detested. But it also included anyone who promoted intolerance, torture, and murder. Many of

⁸*Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique . . . par le baron de Grimm et par Diderot*, 30 March 1778, 2nd ed. (Paris: F. Buisson, 1812), 4:180.

Voltaire's writings are witty and courageous denunciations of the perpetrators of senseless violence.

On the other hand, Voltaire was a skeptic, overwhelmed by long periods of doubt and pessimism. He never entirely believed in the Enlightenment that he symbolized. *Candide* (first published in 1759) is a perfect expression of Voltaire's double identity. As a weapon of propaganda, it is filled with indignation against religious extremism and political injustice. Yet, as a spiritual meditation, it expresses Voltaire's rejection of the idea that evil can be eliminated from the world. Though the book contains much criticism, it is ultimately a confession in which Voltaire stresses the limits of human intelligence and the dangers of applying abstract ideals to everyday life.

Candide thus sustains a duality, or what might be called a deliberate bifurcation of thought. A closer look at Voltaire in relationship to the French society in which he lived reveals a similar splitting of consciousness. He was rarely for or against something entirely but was usually both for and against. He rebelled against the dominant institutions, but he simultaneously accepted the given structures of society. The greatest critic of his time, he had no utopian expectations. He died more than ten years before the Revolution of 1789; had he lived to see it, he probably would not have supported it. This paradoxical combination of struggle and conservatism, criticism and reconciliation, is the hallmark of Voltaire's posture as an intellectual living in the period of French history known as the Old Regime.

VOLTAIRE AND THE OLD REGIME

While the phrase "the Century of Voltaire" was used in Voltaire's century, the phrase "the Old Regime" was never used in the Old Regime. The term was first used during the French Revolution to designate the traditional society that the revolutionaries detested and wanted to annihilate. Though historians now refer to the Old Regime in a more neutral way, simply to refer to the two hundred years or so before 1789, the term still denotes a specific form of society based on the principle of hierarchy. The Old Regime was hierarchical in the political sphere because sovereignty was invested in an absolute monarch. It was hierarchical in the social sphere because prestige and economic advantages inhered in the nobility. And it was hierarchical in the religious sphere because Catholicism was the only religion officially permitted in France. This was the world that Voltaire tried to change, but it was also the world that he took for granted.

Absolute Monarchy

The French monarchy dated back to the early Middle Ages, but by the time Voltaire was born, this old institution had taken on a new form, that of *absolute* monarchy. Officially, all power rested in the king. In contrast to England's constitutional monarchy, the French system had no parliamentary elections and no political parties which openly competed for power. Theorists of French absolutism (and Voltaire was sometimes one of them) emphasized that any opposition to the Crown was likely to degenerate into massive and unstoppable violence. This argument was grounded in the experiences of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Following the Protestant Reformation of the early sixteenth century, France had been ravaged for decades by religious war. In the midst of this continuous bloodshed, political philosophers such as Jean Bodin, author of *The Six Books of the Commonwealth* (1576), claimed that the only way to bring about peace among religious enemies was for everyone to defer to the all-powerful authority of the state. The community, according to Bodin, could achieve stability only by accepting the government's right "to impose laws generally on all subjects regardless of their consent."⁹ Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, spokesmen for the Crown repeated this principle. They developed the logic of absolutism even further by stressing the antisocial dimensions of human nature. Nicolas Delamare, the author of *A Treatise on Police* (1705), affirmed that ordinary people always acted on the basis of "self-love." He concluded that good laws were never enough to bind the populace. The essential thing was to have a "powerful authority to oversee their enforcement at all times."¹⁰

It followed from these principles that the king was the only "public" person. In other words, the capacity for making decisions about the common good belonged to him alone. Defenders of absolutism stressed that private citizens were capable of representing only their own selfish interests and had no right to gather in the marketplace or in clubs to discuss current events among themselves. Not just political gatherings but voluntary assemblies of any kind were inherently threatening to the Crown, even if they were peaceful. In fact, they were especially threatening if they were peaceful, because sociability implied that the king was superfluous, that human solidarity was possible without his command—and this is exactly what absolutist theorists claimed was impossible.

⁹Jean Bodin, *The Six Books of the Commonwealth* [first published in 1576], ed. M. J. Tooley (New York, 1955), 32.

¹⁰Nicolas Delamare, *Traité de la police*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam, 1729), 1:246.

During the rulership of Louis XIV (1661–1715), the principles of absolute monarchy found their greatest expression in practice. Louis expanded the frontiers of France and carried the centralized system of his predecessors to its logical conclusion. He regarded the state as a cultural force as well as a political one. To destroy provincial differences and impose a uniform civilization was his goal. The center of this civilization was the court of Versailles, a town near Paris where Louis established the government in 1682. The refined etiquette at Versailles—its formal rules for table manners, conversation, and entertainment—shaped the tone of all other courts in Europe.

Many scenes in *Candide* take place in the New World, so it is worth noting that Louis's policies brought about the strong French presence there. His chief advisor, Colbert, ran the departments of commerce, colonies, and the navy. In 1664 Colbert founded the Company of the West, which monopolized trade with the West Indies, America, and Africa. A four-zone system developed in which slaves taken in West Africa were forced to labor on sugar and tobacco plantations in the West Indies. America provided foodstuffs for the slaves, and all three areas supplied Europe with raw materials for manufacturing.

Readers of *Candide* will have no trouble seeing that Voltaire regarded slavery as an outrage. That is enough to prove that he never accepted Louis XIV's legacy without question. Although he admired the power and prestige of the government that the Sun King established, he reserved the right to deplore any particular law or policy. As a critic whose works kindled political debate, Voltaire violated the principle that the king is the only public person. Yet, the fact remains: like most Enlightenment thinkers, Voltaire believed that monarchy was the only sensible form of government. He despised ignorance wherever he saw it, especially in the masses, and never imagined that the people could govern themselves in a large nation. In short, he was no democrat. He even wrote a laudatory history of the reign of Louis XIV, drawing special attention to the ways in which Louis stimulated literature and culture. While he supported freedom of religion, freedom of the press, the abolition of torture, and limits on the slave trade, Voltaire believed that only the king had enough power to implement such reforms effectively. Only a very strong state, he thought, could repress any opposition that might arise against these enlightened policies.

Voltaire's political outlook is a world away from that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the author of *The Social Contract* (1762). Rousseau, a democrat, dreamed of transferring absolute authority from the king to the people. Voltaire wished only to temper authority with humane principles. Liberal absolutism (or enlightened absolutism) is the best label for Voltaire's political philosophy.

Nobility

Imagine a young man of the middle class who hates his prosperous and disapproving father so much that he changes his last name. In selecting the new name he decides to give himself a noble image. That is exactly what Voltaire did at the age of twenty-three: he changed his name from François-Marie Arouet to François-Marie de Voltaire. The “de,” known as the particle, is the sign of noble lineage in France. Eventually, Voltaire acquired a large estate with servants and lived the life of a privileged man. He was never truly a nobleman, but there was growing disagreement in the Old Regime about how to define membership in the nobility. Taking double advantage of the disintegration of feudal society, Voltaire became a part of the elite and then ripped it apart with criticism.

According to feudal tradition, the nobility was a hereditary order whose function was to defend the kingdom in wartime. The tax exemptions that elevated the nobles above the rest of the population were its compensation for protecting the realm. Other privileges included the right to be saluted by commoners, the right to seek satisfaction for an insult by fighting a duel, and the right to go hunting in order to exercise their warrior skills in peacetime.

Writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often asserted that this “nobility of the sword” was a race possessing special virtues:

Nobility is a quality which makes generous whoever possesses it and which inwardly disposes the soul toward the love of worthy things. The virtue of a man's ancestors confers this excellent imprint of nobility. There is in the seed I know not what power or principle which transmits and continues the inclinations of fathers among their descendants.¹¹

Yet in this same period the nobility underwent great change. First, in the sixteenth century, judges in the royal courts called *parlements* received permission from the King to acquire noble titles. In the seventeenth century, these judges were allowed to pass their titles on to their children. The “nobility of the robe,” as it is called, thus became hereditary.

But the complications did not stop there. Louis XIV did more than any other monarch to undermine the independence of both the old nobility of the sword and the new nobility of the robe. To encourage loyalty to the state, he ennobled many commoners who acted as functionaries in his government. And in moments of financial difficulty, he simply sold

¹¹Gilles André de la Roque, *Traité de la noblesse*, Preface to the 1678 edition (Paris: Mémoire et Documents, 1994), 23.

titles of nobility to financiers. Louis was not the inventor of these venal practices, but he expanded the system enormously. The sale of offices on a large scale was an insult to the *gentilhommes*—the great nobles who traced their lineage back many generations. Louis justified it by saying that people who gave money to the state deserved as much respect as people who fought to defend it.¹² He considered nobility a creation of the government and a reward for any service that the king deemed useful.

The subordination of the noble class to the interests of the Crown was one of the great historical trends of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Louis XIV accelerated it more than any other ruler, but it continued throughout the Old Regime. Since it raised fundamental questions about the relationship between state and social status, it was a topic of continuous debate in the Enlightenment. Montesquieu, a member of the robe nobility and author of *The Persian Letters* (1721) and *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), believed that France was becoming a despotic country with no checks on royal power. He supported the sale of titles of nobility because it expanded the noble class and infused it with new wealth. But Montesquieu bemoaned the fact that many nobles were abandoning their localities and forgetting their responsibility to protect the liberties of ordinary people. He was disgusted by the many nobles who were taking up residence in the court of Versailles and pandering to the king. Montesquieu regretted the decline of a proud and feisty nobility, which he saw as the protector of the people and the best check on royal despotism.

Voltaire did not share Montesquieu's idealized image of a distinguished and independent nobility. He regarded the provincial nobility as uncouth, ignorant, and absurdly proud of its lineage—as the beginning of *Candide* caustically shows. He was seized by an intense hatred of the whole concept of hereditary nobility, calling it “a monstrous insult to the human race because it assumes that some men are created with purer blood than the rest.” He also considered the sale of titles to be absurd because it allowed mediocrities to enter the nobility: “In France, anyone can become a marquis who wants to be.”¹³ Overall, Voltaire detested the nobility. When he changed his name to de Voltaire, it was not an attempt to convince others that he came from a noble family: everyone knew very well that he did not. It was instead a gesture of defiance and flamboyant

¹²Roland Mousnier, *The Institutions of France under the Absolute Monarchy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 1:127.

¹³A good discussion of Voltaire's attitude toward nobility is Jean Goulemot's “Noblesse,” in *Inventaire Voltaire*, 970–71. The two quotations, the first from Voltaire's posthumously published notebooks and the second from his *Letters from England* (1733), are cited in this article.

self-esteem, as if he were saying, "I am as noble as anyone else because I am a genius and because I am going to be the greatest writer in Europe."

Although Voltaire hated the nobility, something also drew him toward it: he admired greatness and wished to be counted among the great. He could never distance himself entirely from the elite. He was fascinated, for example, by the heroism and intellectual refinement that the grandest nobles exhibited. In 1749 he published a funeral oration commemorating the courageous lords who died on the battlefield during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48).¹⁴ It was also in 1749 that Voltaire's beloved mistress, Emilie du Châtelet, died in childbirth. Brilliant in her own right, she introduced Voltaire to the study of metaphysics and natural science. She belonged to the nobility. She was also married. Her aristocratic husband tolerated Voltaire's presence amicably. She even had a third lover, the writer Saint-Lambert, who was responsible for her fatal pregnancy! In certain circles of the French nobility there was an acceptance of sexual freedom and a deep respect for men of letters. Voltaire, who was a free spirit and believed in the nobility of the pen, was most at home among the upper crust.

Religion

While Voltaire had a love-hate relationship with the nobility, his attitude toward the Catholic Church was one of uninterrupted hostility. He once informed the English poet Alexander Pope that his Jesuit teachers had sexually used him when he was a schoolboy and that he would never get over it.¹⁵ Several of his writings were burned by the Church on account of his audacious criticism of the whole Catholic hierarchy, including even the popes. The animosity between Voltaire and the clergy was so intense that after Voltaire died, some conservatives began to spread the vicious rumour that endured well into the nineteenth century: that Voltaire on his deathbed refused to make confession and that he languished in a state of animality, consuming his own excrement.¹⁶

Voltaire's hatred of the Jesuits may have stemmed from his years in a Jesuit school, but his systematic anticlericalism was above all a reaction against the enormous power wielded by the Catholic Church. Under the Old Regime there was no separation of church and state, and no concept of religious equality. The monarchy was sacred, which meant that the

¹⁴ *Eloge funèbre des officiers qui sont morts dans la guerre de 1741.*

¹⁵ A.-M. Rousseau, *L'Angleterre et Voltaire*, published in *Studies in Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 145 (1976), 113.

¹⁶ André Magnan, "Excrément," in *Inventaire Voltaire*, 517.

king ruled by "divine right" and was obligated to promote Catholicism among his subjects. King Henri IV had granted some toleration to Protestants in the Edict of Nantes (1598). But Louis XIV, at the height of his power in the 1680s, confidently set out to overturn the edict, believing that he could eliminate Protestantism without risking a dangerous civil war. He succeeded. In 1682 he issued edicts closing Protestant churches and schools. Troops appeared in town after town, officially requesting Protestants to convert voluntarily to Catholicism, but actually threatening them with death or separation from their families. Finally, in 1685 came the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. All Protestant ministers were expelled and all Protestant churches ordered to be demolished. Hundreds of thousands of the faithful emigrated along with their pastors. Many of the converts who stayed behind practiced their old religion in secret; but as a public faith, Protestantism was crushed.¹⁷

If we turn from the treatment of non-Catholics to the internal structure of the French Catholic Church, it is striking how many privileges and powers it possessed, yet how divided it was at the same time. Like the nobility, the clergy was exempt from most forms of taxation. In fact, it levied its own tax, the tithe, which was essentially a portion of the gross agricultural product—grain, wine, sheep, and so forth—that any peasant produced. The Church also had its own sphere of disciplinary authority. Though the king had the power to appoint bishops, the bishops claimed the right to decide all questions relating to faith and morals and to punish "heresy," that is, stubborn attachment to an idea or action condemned by the Church. Punishment could be a fine, public penance, confiscation of property, or death. Heretics were also denied Christian burial and thrown in the garbage dump. In *Candide* the dump is mentioned several times. This persistent image reveals Voltaire's fear that he would end up being buried in disgrace. (The fear was well grounded. When Voltaire died on May 30, 1778, the Archbishop of Paris tried to prevent a Christian burial. But friends of Voltaire smuggled the corpse out of Paris. A priest named Mignot, who was Voltaire's great-nephew, arranged for the body to be buried with proper ceremony in the abbey of Scellières, in Champagne.)

In contrast to the nobility, the clergy was not a hereditary class; the

¹⁷ Beginning in the 1760s, the anti-Protestant edicts were enforced less severely. This was partly due to the influence of Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire who advocated religious liberty. In 1787 Louis XVI formally recognized the right of Protestants to live, work, contract marriages, and worship in private on French soil. But they were still excluded from holding administrative and judicial appointments. Only with the Revolution did religious minorities gain civic equality.

church had to recruit young priests from outside. It was an attractive profession because it provided authority and income. Some members of the clergy joined for profit and had only elementary notions of Catholic theology. They drank heavily, frequented prostitutes, engaged in brawls, and routinely skipped Mass. The inhabitants of certain parishes were so accustomed to the promiscuity of their priests that they had no idea that the clergy was supposed to be celibate.¹⁸ Voltaire loved to satirize the hypocrisy of this impious clergy, which exercised religious authority but not religion.

Many, probably most, clergymen, however, were filled with a sense of duty. The Jesuits often stood out in this respect. The Jesuits were an order of monks but they minimized the solitary duties of the cloister and participated actively in the social and political life of the nation. They saw themselves as soldiers using all possible means to fight for the Catholic Church. One of these means was education. Supremely well-educated themselves, the Jesuits established schools across France that provided the best instruction to boys from the upper classes. The oldest and most famous was the *Collège de Clermont* in Paris, which Voltaire attended from age ten to sixteen. The rigorous Jesuit curriculum emphasized languages and literature—the arts of communication. Ironically, the Jesuits were the first to kindle Voltaire's passion for the writer's craft. They provided him with the literary and philosophical tools that he would eventually sharpen on his own and use to lacerate his teachers.

Thanks to their ambition and superior education, the Jesuits acquired considerable influence in France. Many bishops and royal confessors belonged to their order. But the Jesuits were vulnerable on one point: they swore absolute allegiance to the pope, and after him, to the father general of all the Jesuits in Europe. They were thus open to the charge of disloyalty to the French monarchy, an accusation raised often by their opponents, the Jansenists.

In *Candide* Voltaire alludes several times to the Jansenists and their rivalry with the Jesuits. The Jansenists were Catholics but their religious beliefs resembled Calvinist Protestantism in important ways. They considered grace to be a pure gift of God, not a reward for good deeds. And they disapproved of the worldly lifestyle of courtiers and rich Jesuit prelates. The struggle between Jansenists and Jesuits raged from the early eighteenth century onward. Obeying a papal order against Jansenism, the Bull *Unigenitus* (1713), the Jesuits and other Catholic priests aggressively persecuted the Jansenists. In the 1740s and 1750s,

¹⁸Mousnier, 1:339.

the Church required dying persons to sign certificates called “bills of confession” stating that they were not Jansenists. Those who refused could be denied the last rites and proper burial. Voltaire ridicules these bills of confession in Chapter 22 of *Candide*.

Although the Jesuits were formally bound to support the Pope over the king, Louis XV trusted them and preferred them to the Jansenists. But Jansenism was popular among the judicial elite of France—the members of the parlements. A surge of judicial resistance beginning in the 1750s, along with growing hatred of the Jesuits among the public, pressured Louis XV to suppress the Jesuit order. In 1764 he issued an edict expelling the Jesuits from France. It was a dramatic setback for Europe's most militant religious order. And it was a setback for French absolutism too. While it revealed the supreme authority of the king—his power to expel whomever he wished—it also revealed the king's inability to control public opinion on matters of religion.

Voltaire's writings certainly played a role in discrediting the Jesuits. He understood that humor was the best way to destroy a group's prestige. Readers were delighted by the scene in *Candide* in which cannibals chant: “It's a Jesuit, it's a Jesuit . . . here's a good meal; let's eat Jesuit, let's eat Jesuit!”¹⁹ Yet, there is more to Voltaire's religious thought than his rabid anticlericalism. While conducting a campaign of satire against Jesuits and religious fanatics of all kinds, Voltaire waged a second war: a war against atheism.

Voltaire firmly believed in God. Like many thinkers of the Enlightenment, he was a “deist.” This means that he accepted the existence of a divine being who created the world, but did not accept the specifically Christian notion of the Trinity. He venerated Jesus but only as a man, a moral example, a teacher—not as the son of God. It was precisely because he admired Jesus that he abhorred the Catholic Church. (He was fond of saying that Jesus never had anyone burned for his religious views.) The essence of religion, as he saw it, was a belief in God and a conviction that God wants humans to be generous to each other. He considered all religions true to the degree that they promoted tolerance and fellowship, and false to the extent that they created hatred and division. “We need a God who speaks to the human race,” he wrote.²⁰

Around mid-century, Voltaire's religion began to look outdated to some of the younger and more radical philosophers of the Enlightenment,

¹⁹According to the Duc de La Vallière, “Let's eat Jesuit” instantly became a popular slogan in Paris. See his letter to Voltaire, Jan./Feb., 1759; *Correspondence*, 103:365.

²⁰Voltaire to Elie Bertrand, 18 Feb., 1756; *Correspondence*, 101:73.

such as Julien Offroy de La Mettrie, the author of *Man A Machine*. La Mettrie was a doctor who insisted that the world, including human beings, is composed of physical matter and nothing else. He refused to accept the notion of a separate world of spirit. He even claimed that virtue did not exist because everything is physical and can thus be explained through mechanical causes. Voltaire found these ideas intolerable but difficult to refute. Sometimes he answered the materialists by arguing that atheism would destroy society if it became widespread. "If God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him" is his most famous pronouncement on religion.²¹ In other words, society could not endure without religious belief, which binds people into a moral community.

This argument did not convince Voltaire's atheistic opponents — because it is not a convincing argument. The fact that society would crumble without belief in God does not prove that God exists. It only suggests that religious mythology has a beneficial social function. But Voltaire never defined religion as a false myth that happens to have useful consequences. His sentiment that God existed was genuine. He believed in what he invented. There is no escaping the conclusion that Voltaire, the symbol of the Age of Reason, was a man of passionate faith.

Considered as a whole, Voltaire's relationship to the Old Regime was many-sided and filled with paradoxes. One might say that he was a radical who tended to interpret his own ideas in the most conservative spirit possible. He criticized kings when they promoted injustice, but he defended kingship. He scorned the nobility, while cultivating connections with it. He attacked the Church, and tried to save the moral essence of Christianity. On many points he had to defend himself not only against apologists for the status quo but also against other thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as Rousseau, Montesquieu, and La Mettrie. Though they often paid homage to Voltaire as the symbol of independent reason, the philosophers of the Enlightenment disagreed among themselves, precisely because each wished to reason independently. The unity of reason that Voltaire symbolized never became a reality.

Yet that does not mean that Voltaire was a failure. The failure, if there was one, belonged to his admirers who were blind to the forces dividing the Enlightenment. They placed Voltaire on a pedestal as a symbol of their common longing for truth and progress. They avoided dwelling on their disagreements, on everything that threatened to blow their dream

²¹Voltaire composed this line in 1769. For fuller discussion, see André Magnan, "Si Dieu n'existait pas . . .," in *Inventaire Voltaire*, 1246–47.

of a perfect new age into pieces. Voltaire himself was more lucid than that. As *Candide* shows, he had no illusions about himself as a savior of the human race.

CANDIDE

Candide is about the pursuit of happiness. Enlightenment philosophers often affirmed that human beings have a right to seek happiness in their own way. Voltaire believed this too. But in *Candide*, he is less concerned about defending the right to pursue happiness than he is about describing what really occurs—the result—when individuals embark on a quest for perfect bliss. The result, he suggests, is disaster.

The main character is a "youth" named Candide. His exact age is not given, but he is clearly in his late teens. In French, *candide* means naive and simple and thus suggests ignorance; but it also means candid and honest and thus suggests integrity. In the beginning of the story it is Candide's naiveté that stands out. He is utterly untutored in the ways of the world and all the suffering it contains. By the end, however, his candor has allowed him to receive an education. Thanks to his openness to new lessons, he is able to reconcile himself to the pain that he finds in the world, and in his own soul.

The Unhappy Voltaire

Every reader of *Candide* who has heard of Voltaire only as a leading thinker of the Enlightenment is astonished by the dark aspects of the tale. The inevitability of suffering, however, is one of the great themes of Voltaire's work. "The earth is a vast theater where the same tragedy is playing with different titles," he wrote in one of his historical works.²² And in his notebooks: "Man is the only animal who knows that he will die. Sad knowledge, but unavoidable because he has ideas. There are thus sorrows necessarily attached to the condition of man."²³

Voltaire could be hilariously gay and witty, but as these remarks show, he had a tendency to brood. Beginning in his late twenties, he became nervous about his health and certain that he would not live long. Voltaire was a tall, extremely thin man. His constitution was strong — he lived into

²²Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877), 12:430.

²³Voltaire's *Notebooks*, ed. Theodore Besterman (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1952), 2:352.

his eighties—but he always imagined himself to be on the verge of death. He consumed vast quantities of drugs and medicines and frequently began his letters by expressing astonishment that he was still alive: “I interrupt my agony to inform you . . .” “I am rising a little from my grave to tell you . . .” “I forgot to have myself buried . . .”

Besides this anxiety over his physical state, Voltaire was no stranger to emotional difficulties. All the fame in the world could not erase his recurrent bouts of gloom. In 1971, the influential literary critic Roland Barthes failed to take this into account when he mistakenly described Voltaire as “the last happy writer.”²⁴ According to Barthes, Voltaire lived comfortably and had the luxury of believing that he was always right in his battles against injustice. Barthes claimed that Voltaire took for granted the existence of absolute “Good” and “Evil” and never worried about the validity of his own moral judgments. In the nineteenth century, Barthes argued, philosophers discovered the relative nature of all systems of thought, and from that time onward, all writers suffered from uncertainty—including uncertainty about the value of their own writing. Describing the Enlightenment as “outdated,” Barthes consigned Voltaire to the trash heap of thinkers who failed to anticipate the problems of living in the modern age.

Barthes has influenced French studies in both France and America, but never has one brilliant writer so thoroughly misunderstood another. Voltaire was no stranger to unhappiness. His mother died when he was ten. At seventeen, when he was working as a secretary in the French embassy in Holland, he fell passionately in love with a Protestant girl named Pimpette. He tried to elope with her but was forced to return to France when Pimpette’s mother complained to the embassy and when his own father threatened to deport him to America. Then there was the death in 1749 of Madame du Châtelet. She was his lover, friend, and intellectual partner all at once. Voltaire respected her as an equal and described her to his friends as “a great man.”²⁵ When she died he declared, “I have not lost a mistress, I have lost half of myself.”²⁶ Weeks later, his servants observed him waking up at night and calling for her from room to room.²⁷

Being a humanitarian was not all joy either. In a sharp reply to Barthes,

²⁴Roland Barthes, “The Last Happy Writer,” in *Critical Essays* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1972; first published in French in 1971), 83–90.

²⁵Letter to Fawkenner, 2 March 1740; *Voltaire’s Correspondence*, 91:118; and to d’Arnaud, 14 Oct. 1749, 95:179 (translated in this volume).

²⁶Letter to d’Argental, 23 Sept. 1749, 95:167.

²⁷Mason, *Voltaire*, 45.

Patrick Henry, an authority on Voltaire, noted that Voltaire’s commitment to improving society was a painful struggle. Since he wished to improve the world, he was bound to be distressed when the world refused to improve.²⁸ And in fact Voltaire did lose many of his fights. An example is his unsuccessful effort to save the life of the British Admiral John Byng, who was condemned to death in 1757 for backing away from a naval battle. Voltaire’s bitterness is clear in Chapter 23 of *Candide* when he describes the brutal execution. This is only one of many injustices portrayed in the tale that actually occurred and that touched Voltaire deeply.

Jean Starobinski, one of the great interpreters of eighteenth-century thought, has suggested that *Candide* presents the first global vision of suffering.²⁹ The tale does in fact give a panoramic view of disasters and atrocities on different continents. Mutilations, castrations, disembowelments, amputations, and rapes are everywhere. Every form of debasement of human life, from slavery to war to unbearable loneliness, is represented. *Candide* is a catalogue of suffering, comparable to Dante’s *Inferno* in its completeness, except that the suffering takes place in this life, and Voltaire never suggests that things could be better in a world to come.

Voltaire did not just write about suffering; he suffered along with the victims. His extreme, visceral sympathy could even make him physically ill. Every year, on August 24, he became sick and could not rise from his bed. This was the anniversary of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572, when French Catholics murdered thousands of French Protestants in a fury of hatred.³⁰ In *Candide*, Voltaire’s evocation of suffering is so intense that it is impossible to imagine him writing it in the spirit of self-satisfaction that Barthes and other anti-Enlightenment critics attribute to him. In Chapter 19, his empathy stretches across the color line as he reveals the pathetic image of an African slave whose limbs have been hacked off as punishment for trying to escape. In Chapter 24, he crosses the gender barrier in a poignant section about the degraded and hopeless life of a prostitute:

Oh! Sir, if only you could imagine what it’s like . . . to be exposed to every kind of insult and outrage; to be frequently reduced to borrowing a skirt so that some disgusting man can have the pleasure of lifting it; to be robbed by one man of what you’ve earned from another;

²⁸Patrick Henry, “Contre Barthes,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (1987), vol. 249, 19–36.

²⁹Jean Starobinski, “Voltaire’s Double-Barreled Musket,” in *Blessings in Disguise: The Morality of Evil* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 85.

³⁰René Pomeau, *Voltaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1955), 39.

to be blackmailed by officers of the law; and to have no future in view except an atrocious old age, a hospital, and the public dump . . . Voltaire's sympathy is unmistakable here, but so is his sense of futility and sadness.

Nevertheless, a portion of what Barthes said about Voltaire has to be considered more carefully. When Barthes affirmed that Voltaire was "happy," he meant two things. First, he meant that Voltaire's life was free of anguish, and we have seen that this view is simply uninformed. Second, Barthes meant that Voltaire was lucky because he lived in an age that naively took for granted that the universe had a clear moral structure. This view is also mistaken, but it is a far more complex issue—one that takes us deeply into Voltaire's philosophy.

The complexity of Voltaire's philosophy is often omitted from essays on *Candide*, especially those designed for students and nonspecialists. *Candide*, after all, is a story, not a dense philosophical treatise, so it seems that no technical background is necessary. Voltaire, however, wrote stories because he reached a point where it was clear to him that stories were the best way to approach philosophical questions that others had dealt with only in abstract treatises. The questions were: Why is there suffering in the world? And, what attitude should we take toward the imperfections of the universe? Voltaire himself worked on a long *Treatise on Metaphysics* in the 1730s, but he shifted to storytelling afterward. To understand his move from theory to narrative, from philosophy to literature, we must look into his struggle with one of the great thinkers of modern times.

Voltaire against Leibniz

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) was the most universal genius of the era before Voltaire's ascendancy. Born in the German town of Leipzig, he was largely self-taught. He learned Latin on his own as a child and consumed books in law, philosophy, mathematics, and theology. At the age of twenty he wrote *De Arte Combinatoria* (On the Art of Combination) in which he maintained that all reasoning is reducible to an ordered combination of simple elements. He later constructed a calculating machine and perfected the binary system of numeration (i.e., using two as base). For this work he is seen as one of the forerunners of modern computer science. But that is only a small part of his intellectual achievement. As a mathematician, Leibniz laid the foundations of integral and differential calculus. As an engineer, he developed a water pump run by windmills; he worked on submarines, clocks, and many other devices. He is

regarded as one of the creators of geology on account of his theory that the earth was at first molten.

Leibniz, however, was not just a scientist. He was a devout Protestant with a passion for understanding the world as God's creation. This passion took him into metaphysics (literally "beyond physics," the study of reality as a whole and the principles behind the existence of things). It was Leibniz's great dream to explain why all things are the way they are and, in so doing, to reconcile faith and science. He began with the assumption that God himself is a rational creature. Hence, to imitate God and to comprehend his creation, humans too must exercise their faculty of reason. Leibniz expressed this beautifully by saying that to be pious one must love God, but one cannot love God without knowing him. Religion and intellect are not mutually exclusive. One must enter into the mind of God and appreciate the glorious consistency of the world he created.³¹

According to Leibniz, if God is rational, then everything he does is grounded in reason. God does nothing by caprice.³² And since God is all-powerful and controls all aspects of the universe, it follows that nothing in the world occurs through mere chance. For every event in the world, there corresponds a cause, and this cause is nothing other than God's reason for bringing this event—and not some other event—into being. Leibniz called this "the principle of sufficient reason." Voltaire, who rejected this principle, mentions it no fewer than seven times in *Candide*. Essentially, the principle of sufficient reason means that we do not fully understand something until we perceive why the thing is *exactly* the way it is—why God created it in its given form as opposed to some other form.

Consider Newtonian science, which Leibniz studied with great interest but did not consider real science. Newton was able to formulate the law of gravity according to which every thing in the universe attracts other things with a force that is proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them. Newton was confident that his theory was sound because experiments verified it. But Leibniz's conception of science was based on a more demanding standard. He criticized Newton for merely *describing* the manner in which bodies are attracted to each other and not *explaining* why they are attracted to each other the way they are. For example, why is gravity inversely proportional to the *square* of the distance, instead of being inversely proportional to the *cube* of the distance?

³¹G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1985), 51, 53. First published in 1710, this book was the only one published in Leibniz's lifetime. Most of his work took the form of journal articles, unpublished memoranda, and letters.

³²*Ibid.*, 74.

Newton modestly admitted that he could not explain why the laws of nature are what they are, and he doubted that any ultimate reason could ever be found. Leibniz, in contrast, insisted that to honor God's intelligence we must search for the ultimate reason for the laws governing the world. We must recognize, in other words, that God selected the blueprint for the world out of a range of possible blueprints. And since God is rational, he must have selected this blueprint because it is best. Hence, it is part of the philosopher's job to show that the world has an optimal structure — that every phenomenon fits into a plan for "the best among all possible worlds."³³

That is exactly what Voltaire refused to do. Throughout most of his life he was suspicious of grand philosophical systems that tried to explain the necessary connections among all things. He was an empiricist, which is to say that he admired scientists such as Newton, who made precise observations through experimentation and who generalized on the basis of these observations. He considered science valuable because it could be put to practical use, not because it answered every question about the essential nature of reality. In *Candide*, the brilliant sections on Eldorado (Chapters 17–18) portray an imaginary ideal country. There are no theologians and no metaphysicians in Eldorado, but there are many scientists and engineers who build machines that are useful for the people.

As for metaphysics, Voltaire described it as "an immense abyss in which everyone is blind."³⁴ Yet, Voltaire's position was inconsistent in the 1730s and 1740s, the period in which he was living with Madame du Châtelet, his mistress, who was a great admirer of Leibniz. Under her influence Voltaire sometimes leaned toward Leibniz's belief that everything in the world is arranged as it should be. But two events pushed him away from Leibniz once and for all. The first was Madame du Châtelet's death in 1749, which Voltaire could in no way construe as necessary and beneficial. By dying prematurely and for no evident good, Voltaire's mistress contradicted her own optimism, leaving Voltaire alone to scrutinize the reasons for unnecessary suffering in the world.

The second event was the great Lisbon earthquake of November 1, 1755. This disaster claimed the lives of tens of thousands of victims. Voltaire, overwhelmed by reports of innocent children crushed beneath the rubble, responded with a cry of protest against the assumption that a good God directs everything in the world for the best. In December he wrote a poem about the disaster and boldly questioned the belief that

³³Ibid., 128; see also 138.

³⁴Letter to Des Alleurs, 26 Nov. 1738; *Correspondence*, 89:378.

there is a moral purpose inherent in the universe.³⁵ Voltaire still believed in God, but he was now convinced that God had not arranged everything according to an ideal blueprint. He concluded that God is simply not as powerful as most people think — not strong enough to prevent evil.³⁶ This "shattered sense of cosmic security," as Henry calls it, is precisely what Barthes failed to detect in Voltaire's writings.³⁷ In *Candide*, written three years after the Lisbon earthquake, Voltaire expresses his permanent despondency by devoting a whole section (Chapter 5) to the disaster.

In fact, Voltaire ridicules Leibniz's cosmic optimism throughout *Candide*. The main vehicle of his satire is Pangloss, one of the most famous characters in modern literature. Pangloss is an expert in "metaphysico-theologico-cosmolo-boology." With this term Voltaire pokes fun at Leibniz's all-encompassing philosophy. Pangloss, whose name means all-tongue, asserts that the world could not be better than it is because "all is for the best." He is always ready with a long-winded theory to explain that an apparent evil is really a good — even when it is obvious to everyone else that a disaster has occurred with no benefits for anyone. Pangloss is so out of touch, so obsessed with philosophical abstractions, that he is unable to give voice to anybody's pain, including his own. When he contracts a dreaded disease, all he can do is affirm — without really believing it — that his grotesque condition must be part of a system that works for the general good. Through Pangloss, Voltaire shows how stubborn people can be in their blindness to reality.

Scholars have sometimes argued that Pangloss is an unfair caricature of Leibniz, who, after all, was no fool.³⁸ They have suggested that Voltaire had only a superficial knowledge of Leibniz's thought and that his satire is not effective against Leibniz himself but only against the watered-down version of Leibniz's philosophy that one finds in books by his student Christian Wolff and in the poetry of Alexander Pope. In his *Essay on Man* (1733–34), Pope declared:

All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
All chance, direction which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood;

³⁵The full title of the poem is "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster, or Examination of That Axiom: 'All is Well,'".

³⁶For an interesting discussion of Voltaire's view that God is not all-powerful, see A. J. Ayer, *Voltaire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), 118ff.

³⁷Patrick Henry, "Contre Barthes," 29.

³⁸John Weightman gives a good summary of this argument, "The Quality of *Candide*," in *Essays Presented to C. M. Girdlestone* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Durham University Press, 1960), 336–37.

All partial evil, universal good:

And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.

Voltaire was certainly out to refute the simple optimism of Wolff and Pope. But he was also refuting Leibniz, whose philosophy he understood very well.

Voltaire did not respond to all the nuances of Leibniz's metaphysics, but he seized with great clarity its fundamental contradictions. One of the problems Leibniz never fully overcame was how to make sense of contingencies—in other words, how to explain events in the natural or human world that seem to occur by chance or to have no special significance. Consider the fact that an old man named John Doe died at 10:02 A.M. It would appear that the exact time of the death has no necessary relationship to any essential conception of who John Doe was as a person. In other words, we can imagine him dying at 10:03 or 10:01, and it would not change our image of him. But Leibniz maintained that everything that happens *must* happen, given the nature of the person or thing that it happens to. He affirmed that all apparent contingencies can be deduced logically from our fundamental knowledge of the subject. This means that someone who knew John Doe well when he was alive as a young man should have been able to deduce his precise time of death.³⁹

But this is clearly a very difficult position to sustain, and Leibniz knew it. He modified his theory several times and admitted that it was practically impossible for human beings to explain why every event takes place as it does. He continued to assert, however, that in principle nothing occurs through chance. God has arranged every detail of the world for a purpose. If we fail to detect this purpose, if we are unable to apply the principle of sufficient reason in practice, it is simply because our minds are not powerful enough to view the world from God's perspective.

Voltaire perceived this weakness and used it effectively to criticize Leibniz. In *Candide* he makes it clear that sometimes unpleasant things happen to people for reasons that are not a consequence of their own being. Misfortunes cannot be deduced logically from the qualities of the person they destroy. They simply result from the chaotic intersection of events. Thus, when a woman is raped and killed by soldiers in *Candide*, it is not due to her intrinsic nature or to a blueprint for a perfect

³⁹Here I have attempted to summarize in untechnical language Leibniz's claim that all attributes of a thing are logically internal to it. For fuller discussion, see G. H. R. Parkinson, "Philosophy and Logic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, ed. Nicholas Jolley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 199–223.

universe—it is due to the fact that she happens to be caught in the middle of a war.

Leibniz ran into a similar difficulty in defending his view that God created "the best among all possible worlds." He recognized that misfortunes do occur, but he claimed that God allowed them to happen only as part of a process of creating a greater good.⁴⁰ But Leibniz admitted that it is sometimes very difficult for us to grasp how a specific evil is connected to a greater good. He affirmed, once again, that only God is in a position to perceive all the redeeming features of the world he created. Our duty is simply to trust that if we fully understood God's supreme wisdom, we would wish the world to be exactly as it is.⁴¹

Thus, on two separate points—the issue of contingency and the issue of evil—Leibniz backed into passive religious belief. His assertion that God does everything for a rational purpose begins as the premise of his system and ends as an article of faith which he uses to patch over the system's problems. Voltaire refused to enter this circle of faith—where faith means the idealization of reality. Even though both Leibniz and Voltaire believed in God and both were decent human beings, their temperaments were different. Leibniz loved God more than humankind, while Voltaire loved humankind more than God. Leibniz's whole system is, as he described it, "a vindication of [God's] perfections."⁴² Voltaire's thought flowed from his sympathy for those who suffer. His particular brand of faith was that of a reformer who believed that even though God created the world, it might be possible to improve a bit upon His creation.

Voltaire thought Leibniz's ideas were not only logically unsound but also evil when put into practice. Precious time is wasted theorizing about the ultimate causes of things, time that could be better used reacting directly to events around us. When *Candide* is about to jump into the sea to save a drowning man, he is distracted from doing so by Pangloss, who theorizes on the necessity of the man's death. Voltaire is saying that when we engage in metaphysical philosophy, we ignore the passage of time and miss unique opportunities to intervene in history. While we theorize, we lose sight of reality, until reality makes us notice it by afflicting us with the very same misfortunes that we trivialized when they afflicted others. In *Candide*, Voltaire expresses this rather heavy insight with a light touch: whenever the characters immerse themselves in theory, they never move forward in their conclusions. Meanwhile, the world around them always changes, whether they notice it or not. For example:

⁴⁰Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 128–29.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 55.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 61.

While he was perfecting his logical proof, the ship broke into two and everyone perished . . .

When one of the characters wisely concludes in the last chapter, "Let us work without theorizing," it is the last point in Voltaire's denunciation of Leibniz.

Now the reason that Voltaire stopped writing philosophical treatises and began writing stories like *Candide* should be clear. Philosophers had failed to explain why human beings suffer. Voltaire came to the conclusion that there is in fact no overarching explanation. The point is not to account for evil logically but to narrate it vividly. For Voltaire the purpose of literature (and also history, which he wrote a lot of) is to represent the amazing incidents of the world in the only way they can be represented: as a series of events that did not have to happen but did in fact happen. He does not seek to rationalize reality; he only seeks to tell tales that make us face it.

Ridicule, Sex, Irony

But there is another reason that Voltaire liked to write stories more than philosophical treatises: he wanted to be funny! *Candide* is soaked with suffering, yet it is buoyant with humor. It is a tragicomedy in which we laugh our way to a sober understanding of the world. Voltaire knew many ways to make people smile. One of them is *ridicule*—the act of singling out someone for witty and merciless criticism. Voltaire's ridicule could be indignant, especially against anyone who denied his own greatness. In 1759 when *Candide* was published, a journalist named Elie Fréron wrote a review of it. Fréron was an enemy of Voltaire and the Enlightenment. He edited a publication called *L'Année littéraire* (The Literary Year); Voltaire liked to call it *L'Âne littéraire* (The Literary Ass). In his review, Fréron sarcastically pretended that *Candide* was a horrible book and that someone as distinguished as Voltaire could not possibly have written it. (Fréron's review appears in the related documents in this volume.) Voltaire answered by modifying *Candide* for the 1761 edition so as to include Fréron in the story. In this new section, located in Chapter 22, Candide attends a play that he enjoys. In fact, it is one of Voltaire's own plays that Candide sees! A pseudosophisticated art critic informs him that the play is worthless. Afterwards Candide asks his companion, "Who was that fat pig?" and his companion responds that it is a stupid writer "who makes a living by saying nasty things about every play and every book." And he adds the devastating words, "He hates anyone who becomes pop-

ular, just as eunuchs hate anyone who makes love." A few lines later, the impotent "fat pig" is identified as Fréron.

This example of ridicule shows another aspect of Voltaire's style: his sexual playfulness. Sex is everywhere in the book. It should be no surprise, for many Enlightenment authors, seeking to capture a broad audience and to influence the thinking of ordinary people, infused their works with sexual themes.⁴³ Yet, readers today often assume that people in the eighteenth century must have been more reserved, more prudish than we are today. It might not occur to us that Voltaire was as shocking as anything we encounter in today's culture. We run the risk of not registering his innuendo because, when we run into a passage that sounds like it might be about sex, we say to ourselves, "Oh no, he couldn't mean *that*!" But innuendo, or the art of suggesting something outrageous without saying it explicitly, is one of Voltaire's great techniques of humor. The book is filled with these understated outrages, and they are very often of a sexual kind. Here is an example.

In Chapter 10, Candide, his lover Cunégonde, and their servant, who is called "the old woman," are at an inn. They are fleeing from the police because Candide has killed two men. Cunégonde and the female servant share a room. When Cunégonde rises in the morning, she finds that someone has stolen her money and jewels. The old woman suspects that the thief was a Franciscan monk who, she says, "came into our chamber twice" during the night. The reader naturally wonders why the old woman is volunteering this information so late. Why didn't she say anything when she saw the monk enter their room? There is no explicit answer in the chapters, but here is the answer suggested by innuendo. "Came into our chamber twice" is a double-entendre: Voltaire is saying that the old woman copulated with the monk, not just once but twice. That is why she kept quiet. The innuendo is outrageous because monks are supposed to be celibate. Voltaire took delight in showing the hypocrisy of the clergy. But it is even more outrageous because the old woman is so old and because she is horribly ugly: her nose touches her chin, and she is missing one buttock.

A reserved reader might suspect that this interpretation goes too far. But how else to explain the fact that the old woman watched a monk enter her room during the night and did not say anything? Besides, Voltaire often clarifies his innuendo in subsequent chapters. In other words, he drops a hint in one place and confirms the most outrageous implications

⁴³Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995).

afterward with a second hint. The same monk is mentioned a few chapters later; this time he is described as "a long-sleeved Franciscan." It is a fairly natural term to use, because long sleeves were part of the clothing of the Franciscan order. But the word for sleeve in French is *manche*, and this word also meant shaft, handle, or tube. We are back in the realm of sexual innuendo again, and the lewd overtones confirm our reading of the earlier scene.

The same pattern occurs many times in the tale: a subtle hint of conventional sexual action is followed by other hints so that we do not miss the allusion. In this way, Voltaire is able to portray certain relationships with a very subtle mockery. But sometimes the mockery is so nuanced that we suspect Voltaire is sympathizing with the victim of his own sarcasm and we are thrown off guard. The complicated theme of homosexuality is a case in point.

In Chapter 2, when Candide is recruited against his will into the army of the "Bulgars," various details of the scene make it clear that the Bulgars symbolize the Prussians under Frederick II. As many commentators have noted, the word "Bulgar" also sounds like the French word *bougre* (bugger), which means a sodomite or homosexual. (In fact, *bougre* is etymologically derived from the Latin *vulgaris*, a term used in the late Middle Ages to refer to heretics in Eastern Europe who allegedly engaged in homosexuality.) The reader's suspicion that Voltaire is deriding Frederick by implying that he is a homosexual is confirmed by other words in the text. The King of the Bulgars is described as "charming" and the other soldiers encourage Candide to feel a "tender" love for him. In a later chapter, it is mentioned—almost in passing—that Cunégonde's brother was raped by Bulgar soldiers. It seems that Voltaire saw homosexuality as a deviation from normality and that the whole point of portraying Frederick and his soldiers as homosexuals was to condemn them. France was at war with Prussia when Voltaire wrote *Candide*, so the homosexuality theme appears to be good propaganda against the enemy.

It is not so simple. Voltaire clearly wished to deflate the majestic image of Frederick II, known as Frederick the Great. Portraying Frederick and his subjects as homosexuals helped him to cut the famous Prussian down to size. However, nothing in Voltaire's writings suggests that he was outraged by homosexual behavior. In his *Philosophical Dictionary* there is an entry entitled "So-Called Socratic Love." Here Voltaire noted that it was common for men to have a passion for other men and he described this passion as "natural."⁴⁴ He did not go so far as to endorse sodomy, but nei-

⁴⁴For fuller discussion see Michel Delon, "The Priest, the Philosopher, and Homosexuality in Enlightenment France," in *'Tis Nature's Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality during the*

ther did he endorse its legal repression. Several other thinkers of the Enlightenment went so far as to call for the complete decriminalization of homosexuality. Even the religious and political authorities accepted that homosexual relations were widespread. Officially, homosexual activity was a serious offense punishable by death; but in practice, such activity was widely tolerated, especially in the upper classes. Those who were arrested usually got off with light penalties.⁴⁵

But there is more: Voltaire and Frederick were deeply attached to each other. They began to correspond in 1736. The Prussian prince was then only twenty-four and still under the cruel supervision of his militaristic father, Frederick William I. Frederick eventually emerged as a superb military leader in his own right, but only after his father's death. As a young man he sought to escape the iron discipline. He played the flute and wrote poetry. Frederick William despised his son's "feminine" tastes and regularly humiliated him. When Frederick initiated the correspondence with Voltaire, he was searching for a softer, more refined mentor. This correspondence, consisting of more than seven hundred letters, lasted until 1778, the year of Voltaire's death. Despite periods of mutual hostility, it was an affectionate and enduring bond. Haydn Mason, a very careful scholar, has presented evidence to suggest that Voltaire consummated his love for Frederick during his stay at the Prussian court in 1740.⁴⁶ Whatever the precise nature of their physical relationship, there is no doubt that Voltaire was strongly attracted to Frederick. In a letter of 1751 to the Duc de Richelieu, Voltaire described how he had been enchanted instantly by Frederick's "large blue eyes and gentle smile." He found his "head swirling" in the presence of Frederick's "seductive" gestures. "I gave myself to him with passion, with blindness, and without reasoning," he added.⁴⁷

Thus, while Voltaire poked fun at other people's homosexual activity, he was aware of his own sexual ambivalence. His jokes, which begin in mockery, end in surprising self-disclosure. In *Candide*, he brilliantly turns this problem of the unpredictability of desire into a commentary not on homosexuals but on the whole human race. Candide is on a quest to find Cunégonde and marry her. He is like the hero of Homer's *Odyssey* who longs to return home from war to be with his faithful love. But Candide

Enlightenment, ed. Robert Maccubbin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 124–25.

⁴⁵Delon, 122–23; and Bryant T. Ragan, "The Enlightenment Confronts Homosexuality," in *Homosexuality in Modern France*, ed. Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8–29.

⁴⁶Mason, *Voltaire*, 52–54.

⁴⁷Voltaire, letter of 31 Aug., 1751, in *Correspondence*, 96:273–74.

is sidetracked. He has at least two affairs before he finds Cunégonde, one of them with a man.⁴⁸ And when he is finally reunited with the woman of his dreams, what he finds bears no resemblance to what he was seeking. Possession of her turns out to be as much a problem as separation had been. *Candide* is not a Homeric epic but a mockery of what the epic stands for: unswerving loyalty to a manly cause that rewards those who persevere.

In short, Voltaire believed that no one lives life with perfect consistency. That is another reason why he preferred to write stories rather than develop his ideas in philosophical treatises. The assumption underlying philosophy is that ideas and actions should unfold without contradiction. Voltaire's starting point is that humans are inherently contradictory. Since logic cannot represent human nature, a different style of writing is needed. Ridicule and innuendo are part of this style, but the crucial element is *irony*.

Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of irony: irony of plot and irony of language. Irony of plot is a series of events that ends in a totally unexpected manner: the "good guy" turns out to be the "bad guy," the slow person wins the race. Voltaire uses irony in this way, but the extraordinary cleverness of *Candide* has more to do with the other kind. Irony of language is a paragraph, a sentence, or even a phrase that turns out to have a meaning that is the opposite of the one it seemed to have in the beginning. In Chapter 1, Voltaire begins a paragraph with, "The Baron was one of the most powerful lords . . ." but by the end of the paragraph we see that the Baron is a provincial nobody. Examples of irony within a single sentence occur throughout the book. Consider this one:

The beautiful lady had observed two enormous diamonds on the fingers of her young visitor, and she praised them so unselfishly that they passed from Candide's fingers to hers.

Here the irony springs from the word "unselfishly." By the end of the sentence above, it is clear that the lady wants the rings for herself; she pretends to be kind only to trick the innocent Candide into responding with a kindness of his own.

Voltaire is the master of compressed irony in which words rapidly contradict the meaning of previous words. Often he does not need a full sen-

⁴⁸No other commentator, I believe, has noted the innuendo with which Voltaire situates Candide in a homosexual relationship with a priest called "the Perigordian Abbé." My interpretation rests on some technical semantic considerations. See the "Note on Voltaire's Vocabulary and the Present Translation."

tence to create the effect of irony. He simply relies on brilliant oxymorons, that is, incongruous or self-contradictory phrases. For example, when he describes a battle as "heroic," the reader thinks for a second that he admires the fight. But the very next word turns the description into a paradox: it is "heroic butchery." The surprising pairing of opposites forces the reader to think about the brutal reality that accompanies grand military rhetoric.

For Voltaire, irony is a philosophical antimethod that forces the reader to question the integrity of every character and the consistency of every moral in the story that he tells. Very little gets past Voltaire's implacable negativism. It is understandable why the Romantic novelist Bernardin de Saint-Pierre stated, "Voltaire is concerned with little else than to destroy."⁴⁹ But *Candide* also moves beyond cynicism. By the end, the principal characters have gained some wisdom and they manage to forge a life of honest work. The lesson that emerges in the conclusion of *Candide* is *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*: We must cultivate our garden.

The meaning of this famous line is by no means clear-cut. It is one of those immortal sayings that relates nothing in particular but simply conveys a wise reconciliation with the hardships of life. There is room to interpret each word in different ways. But whatever it may mean to "cultivate" a good life, Voltaire makes it clear that it must be different from living like Pangloss, a theorist who builds empty arguments and learns nothing through the passage of time. And whatever it may mean to work in the "garden," it surely cannot be a return to the Garden of Eden, where people lived in innocence, with all their desires gratified, prior to God's imposition of suffering on humankind. The garden in *Candide* symbolizes whatever life the individual is able to salvage after a long process of suffering.

With his combination of scathing criticism and modest hope, Voltaire managed to produce a work of great popularity. When it was first published in 1759, a spokesman for the Parlement of Paris, the highest law court in France, denounced it as "contrary to religion and good morals."⁵⁰ (The full text is in the related documents section.) An assembly of ministers in Geneva condemned it for "containing dirty things . . . contrary to good morals and injurious to Providence."⁵¹ But the reading public

⁴⁹Cited in Raymond Naves, "Voltaire's Wisdom," *Voltaire: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. William F. Bottiglia (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 151.

⁵⁰Omer Joly de Fleury to Henry-Leonard-Jean-Baptiste Bertin, 24 Feb. 1759; *Correspondence*, 103:426.

⁵¹See appendix 173, "Candide before the Genevese authorities, February 1759," in *Correspondence*, 103:449.

loved it. Over twenty thousand copies were sold within a year in Paris, Geneva, Amsterdam, London, and other major European cities. By the standards of the eighteenth century, it was a best seller. It went on to become a classic. It has been translated into dozens of languages, including Ukrainian, Chinese, and Arabic. Today it is one of the three or four most widely known books by a French author.

Since this Bedford/St. Martin's edition has been prepared especially for university students, it is worth noting that Voltaire, in his sixties, composed a tale well suited for readers younger than himself. The story of a teenage boy and girl who dream of happiness but who must confront a world where even God is not strong enough to prevent misfortune — such a story seems designed for those who are still immersed in doubts rather than those who have settled into dogmatic certainty. After years of examinations, students might find refreshment in a book that is a summary of problems that are not meant to be solved. From Voltaire, the outspoken reformer and philosophical skeptic, one can learn that it is possible to act without pretending to know all the answers. He represents a middle way between the fanatical self-assurance and dazed passivity that increasingly divide the world in which we live.

NOTE ON VOLTAIRE'S VOCABULARY AND THE PRESENT TRANSLATION

Candide was first published in 1759. The 1775 edition, printed in Geneva by Cramer and Bardin, was the last edition published before Voltaire's death and under his editorial control. In his critical French edition of *Candide*, René Pomeau used the 1775 edition, and I have used Pomeau's text as the basis for the present translation.¹ For most of the related documents at the end of this volume, I have relied on Theodore Besterman's definitive *Correspondence and Related Documents in The Complete Works of Voltaire* (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1968–77). I am grateful to the Voltaire Foundation at Oxford University for permission to translate these superbly edited texts.

Several English translations of *Candide* already exist, so something should be said about the principles underlying this new one: accuracy, appreciation of innuendo, and readability.

Accuracy

I have consulted modern dictionaries based on historical principles as well as dictionaries from the eighteenth century. Some improvements in the rendering of particular words have resulted. When Candide enters an inn in Eldorado (Chapter 17), he is asked to be seated at the *table de l'hôte*, which is usually translated as "the host's table." This implies that he is honored as a special guest. But as eighteenth-century dictionaries reveal, *table de l'hôte* meant the common table, and the point is that in Eldorado there are no distinctions: everyone sits together as equals.

In Chapter 2, when Candide is recruited into the Bulgar army because of his height, we are told that his height is *cinq pieds cinq pouces* — which all previous translations give as five feet five inches. This is a surprising figure considering that the Bulgars symbolize the Prussians, who were known for their tall soldiers, and five feet five inches was not particularly tall, even in the eighteenth century when people were generally shorter than they are today. The mystery is solved when we take into account that a *pied du roi* under the Old Regime was .324 meters, considerably more than an English foot. Candide's real height is between five feet ten and five feet eleven inches. René Pomeau already signaled this fact in his critical edition, but none of the English translators appear to have profited from Pomeau's useful notes. If nothing else, the present translation can claim to restore Candide to his true stature!

¹*Candide ou l'optimisme, édition critique par René Pomeau* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1980).

Innuendo

The meaning of expressions such as *table de l'hôte* and *piéd* can be ascertained by consulting external reference works, such as old dictionaries. The meaning of some words, however, is grounded inside the text. That is, Voltaire generates meaning by instituting semantic overtones within the book that do not inhere in basic dictionary definitions. An important example is the expression *faire les honneurs* (literally, "to do the honors" but translated in this volume as "to bestow favors on"). In French, as in English, this expression is highly elastic and can be used in a variety of situations in which one person makes a gracious gesture to another. Voltaire, however, wreaks havoc with the term by using it ironically to refer to sex. Recounting her youth, the old woman states (Chapter 11):

I was ravishing, I was beauty and grace made flesh, and I was a virgin. But not for long. The flower I had reserved for the handsome prince of Massa-Carrara was plucked by the pirate captain . . . who thought he was bestowing great favors on me (*me faire beaucoup d'honneur*).

Later, in Chapter 22, a worldly Marquise says to Candide, "I sometimes force my Parisian lovers to languish for two weeks, but I am giving myself to you on the first night, because one should always bestow the favors (*faire les honneurs*) of one's country on a young man from Westphalia."

Now, what are we to make of the line, also in Chapter 22, which says that a Perigordian Abbé "bestowed favors" (*faisaient les honneurs*) upon Candide? Here there is no obvious sexual connotation within the sentence, but the other usages of the term create an inevitable echo effect. Voltaire is hinting that Candide has a homosexual relationship with the Abbé. Two chapters later, he confirms the hint. Candide laments that he has been looking for Cunégonde for many months without finding her. "All I've encountered in her place," he says, "is one pretentious strumpet and one Perigordian Abbé." Since there is no doubt about Candide's affair with the Marquise (referred to here as the "strumpet"), this line is conclusive.

The point is that if one were to underestimate Voltaire's erotic imagination and neglect the semantic web that he spins over the course of the tale, one would miss several bold features of the story. Throughout the translation, I have made an effort to transmit Voltaire's outrageous wit, which earlier translators have obtusely erased. For example, by translating *faire les honneurs* as "to bestow favors," I have made the verb slightly more aggressive and the noun slightly more suggestive than in the vacuous literal rendering, "to do the honors."

It should be added that the process of tracking the inflection of particular words throughout a text has relevance beyond the reconstruction of

sexual innuendo. An important example is the verb *raisonner*, usually translated with the cognate "to reason." When Voltaire uses this verb in *Candide*, however, he is generally referring to a particular type of reasoning: the grand metaphysical theorizing of people who believe they can understand the ultimate causes of all things. When Martin says, in a crucial line, "*Travaillons sans raisonner*," he speaks for Voltaire. He is not saying "Let us work without reasoning," which implies anti-intellectualism. He is saying that it is futile to try to preface all our endeavors with abstract justifications. We must keep thinking, but we must also be willing to act even in the absence of intellectual certainty. Hence, a better translation is, "Let us work without theorizing."²

Readability

Voltaire intended his *contes*, or short novels, to be read and understood by a broad audience. "Could one not write a book that might be read with some pleasure, by the very people who do not like to read, a book which might bring hearts to compassion?"³ An excessive reliance on cognates is one fault that can ruin the simplicity of a translation and has in fact done so in many English versions of *Candide*. For while the English-French cognate may have the same meaning in each language, it may be a very ordinary word in French and a rare one in English. One can end up transforming colloquial French into pretentious English in this way.

In reading through other English translations, I often came across many English words that I did not understand and that reduced my comprehension of the text. In this translation, I have kept the vocabulary simple because that is how the original is. I have said "whip" where some translators have said "pizzle," "cent" instead of "sou," and so forth. I also do not see the point of using an obscure English word and clarifying it for the reader with a footnote when Voltaire selected French words that would be recognizable to his readers.

Robert M. Adams, the translator of the Norton edition of *Candide*, deserves credit for preserving respect for English idiom. His colloquialisms sometimes strike me as more British than American, but it is a pleasure to acknowledge a distinguished predecessor who has influenced some of my decisions.

²On this point I follow Patrick Henry, "Raisonnement in *Candide*," *Romanic Review* 80 (1980), 362-70.

³Voltaire to Moulton, Oct./Nov. 1766; *Correspondence*, 115:58.

Questions for Consideration

1. If you have read this book for a course and the readings included a textbook, how does the textbook define the Enlightenment? How does it portray Voltaire? Has reading *Candide* changed your conception of the Enlightenment and Voltaire? If so, explain how and why.
2. Consider Chapters 17 and 18 on Eldorado. How do these chapters represent Voltaire's vision of a good society? How does Eldorado differ from the European societies of the eighteenth century? Be sure to describe the moral and religious beliefs of the people in Eldorado. How do these resemble or contradict Christianity? If Eldorado is such a great place, why does *Candide* decide to leave it?
3. Explain the meaning of Martin's statement in Chapter 30, "Let us work without theorizing."
4. Discuss the techniques Voltaire uses to entertain his readers while he simultaneously forces them to confront difficult philosophical issues.
5. If you were a European monarch in the eighteenth century, which parts of *Candide* would you find most disturbing? What if you were a Jesuit? The pope? A Protestant? An aristocrat? An army general?
6. The references to Jews in *Candide* are consistently derogatory. (See, for example, the beginning of Chapter 9 and the last few paragraphs of Chapter 27.) On this basis, is it reasonable to say that Voltaire was anti-Semitic?
7. Read the letters by Voltaire translated in this volume. How do his letters differ from the usual type of letters people write today? Select one letter and discuss its purpose, its style, and its connections with *Candide*.
8. Read Fréron's review of *Candide* (translated in this volume) and discuss its strengths and weaknesses as a critique of the book.
9. Consider the great figures of eighteenth-century U.S. history: Franklin, Jefferson, and so on. Are any of them like Voltaire? Did any of them write stories like *Candide*? If not, how would you account for the fact that the United States did not produce a Voltaire? Is it because Voltaire was unique or because such a person could materialize only in an absolute monarchy like France?

Selected Bibliography

More has been written about Voltaire than about the history of most countries of the world. The works listed here are all readable, scholarly, and insightful. For a more systematic bibliography, a good starting place is *Pour encourager les autres: Studies for the Tercentenary of Voltaire's Birth, 1694-1994*, ed. Haydn Mason, vol. 320 of *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1994), pp. 163-318.

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