

Candide or, Cautiously Optimistic

Even against the brilliant constellation of philosophers who lit up the French Enlightenment, Voltaire's audacity dazzled, and *Candide* is his masterpiece.

"To hold a pen is to be at war," wrote M. de Voltaire, né François Marie Arouet, and the satire that flowed from his pen earned him exile or imprisonment roughly once every ten years, including a spell in La Bastille—and an epic repatriation à Paris just before his death, at home in bed, at eighty-four. Deftly turning misfortune to advantage, Voltaire produced plays while imprisoned, and cultivated friends in high places while exiled. His output was prodigious.



Though skinny and sickly, Voltaire's disposition was ebullient. His tastes were expensive, the company he kept, royal—though his ticket into society's upper tier was only himself, for in an age of patronage, an artist without pedigree was technically a servant. "The Great Man," as he was called, had an authentic grasp of the commoner's plight in feudal Europe, especially the misery of refugees, both political and religious. Some scholars have named the entire Eighteenth Century after him. But the Age of Voltaire was not a philosophical monolith. Voltaire's fame lay in his condemnation of the many follies and cruelties of his times, and his celebrated crusades in later life sealed Voltaire's immortality as a champion of human rights against tyranny. "It is very advantageous," Voltaire had written of courtly life, "[although] the cage is so exquisitely gilded that one must try not to see the bars through the gold."

Voltaire's breezy way with a quip had made him popular, but his enduring influence owes much to a revolution in print technology across the continent. Fourteen thousand known letters survive, many of them transcripts of pithy party patter, and more

than two thousand pamphlets and books. *Candide* is Voltaire's wildly concocted itinerary of a sycophantic student and his master, in which he strings together the social, political, and religious pet-peeves of his long life. Swiss censors immediately ordered all copies burned. Voltaire's publishers then distributed *Candide* from Stockholm.

By the time he wrote *Candide*, Voltaire was over sixty and well ensconced in his estate at Ferney, France, on the remote French-Swiss border—a “princely establishment,” said guests, and Voltaire's private socio-economic laboratory, complete with theater, silk factory, and low-income housing. There Voltaire worked in his study as his drawing room teemed with fancy visitors. Boswell. Casanova. Ben Franklin. Princess Dashkova. If Ferney's commodity was freethinking, its currency was flattery. “The great, brilliant poet kept [the company] amused,” wrote Casanova, with not a little envy, “[and was] always applauded, though satirical and often caustic, but always laughing, and never failing to raise a laugh.”

Just so does *Candide* gaily decry medieval superstition, and challenge the institutions that exploit superstition to tyrannize the undefended. Voltaire called his satire, *Candide; ou L'optimisme, traduit de l'Allemand, de M. le Docteur Ralph (Candide; or the Optimist, translated from the German by Herr Doktor Ralph)*. The subtitle is the key. *Candide* is Voltaire's response to a prevailing philosophy of “Metaphysical Optimism,” articulated by such Enlightenment lions as English philosopher-poet Alexander Pope, and German mathematician and philosopher Gottlieb Leibniz. Both were commended by Voltaire—but not for their embrace of “Optimism.”

At the root of Metaphysical Optimism is the axiom of an omniscient, almighty and benevolent God. If a better world were possible, the theory goes, God would know about it, and would have *the power* to create it. Being also good, he would. But he hasn't, *ergo*: a better world is not possible. “Whatever is, is Right,” intoned Pope. *QED*. The *nature* of God is never in question. Nonetheless, humanity suffers both evil and calamity. In a world of woefully unfinished business, “What can I hope, when all is right?” scribbled Voltaire, in the margin of his copy of Pope's *Essay on Man*.

Thus we arrive at, in philosophical parlance, the “Problem of Evil.” An all-good God is neither capable of evil, nor of delegating it—to, say, the Devil. Whatever we experience as evil or suffering must therefore belong to some larger plan—which we

would understand, says Leibniz, “had we but God’s point of view,” neatly sidestepping any pesky inconsistencies. Leaving Lisbon behind, Candide sings, *There must be sunlight I cannot see. / It must be me. It must be me.* Voltaire answered, “[Optimism] drives to despair the philosophers who embrace it....The problem of good and evil remains an inexplicable chaos for those who seek in good faith.”

Voltaire slips the most salient and untenable of Leibniz reasonings into the “Metaphysico-theologico-cosmologology” of Candide’s master, Pangloss, and sends him on a tour of disastrous humiliations, which even Pangloss is hard put to reconcile. By saga’s end, he confesses to never really believing his own theories. Voltaire wrote elsewhere: “Leibniz realized that these questions were unanswerable...so he wrote thick books in which he did not agree with himself.”

The wacky mishaps in *Candide* are all drawn from actual events. Candide, for example, sings, *Though of noble birth I’m not / I’m delighted with my lot...* This was important to M. de Voltaire, whose own aristocratic-sounding *nom de plume* he invented in his cell chez La Bastille. And Voltaire knew all about courtesans. Never married, he loved smart, self-possessed women, for whom the Eighteenth Century offered no legitimate role, and formed boundary-slipping liaisons with the smartest of them—mathematician and naturalist Marquise du Chatelet; art patroness Madame de Pompadour; her successor, Madame du Barri; Russia’s Catherine the Great. The dreadful misogyny suffered by *Candide*’s female characters is Voltaire’s exposé of ordeals faced uniquely by women.

The earthquake of 1755 in Lisbon, Portugal, traumatized the civilized world and pitched Voltaire into uncharacteristic gloom. “Nature,” he wrote to a friend, “is very cruel....Leibniz does not tell me by what invisible twists...this chaos of misfortunes mingles real sorrow with our vain pleasures, in the best arranged of possible universes, nor why the innocent suffer alike this inevitable evil.” It was a calamity unthinkable of a benevolent, almighty God, nevermind that He would strike so spitefully at sitting ducks—on All Soul’s mid-morning—a high festival among the Portuguese, universally observed by order of The Inquisition. And while there is no record on this occasion of “several persons being slowly burned in great ceremony to prevent earthquakes,” as Voltaire writes in *Candide*, The Inquisition’s last known *auto da fê* was recorded in Mexico as late

as 1808. Voltaire fictionalizes only the particulars. "That ought to teach men not to persecute each other, for while a few holy scoundrels burn a few fanatics, the earth swallows up one and all."

Still, outside the effete circles of French *philosophes*, patience for parsing of this nature was short. Devout Christians, like the Mozarts of Salzburg, for example, were shocked by Voltaire's anti-clerical deism. In 1778, Leopold Mozart advised his son in Paris to follow Voltaire's creative routine: "Everyone does likewise. Voltaire reads his poems to his friends, listens to their verdict and alters accordingly." Sulky Wolfgang responded, "The ungodly arch-villain, Voltaire, has died, pegged out like a dog!"

Voltaire is not read as he once was, perhaps because so much of his urgent social agenda is so widely accomplished. Not absolutely, but enough so that a despot sticks out like a sore thumb. Then, sure enough, everyone remembers Voltaire.

In 1954, post-World-War II America was basking in the lethargic optimism of the Eisenhower Administration when the specter of despotic fanaticism reappeared. The modern potential for nuclear annihilation had stirred primordial fears in the human psyche, and Wisconsin's junior senator, Joseph McCarthy, saw opportunity in exploiting that fear. He made Communist Russia its effigy, and demonized any American with any connection to Communist Russia, current or past, however faint. McCarthy teamed with eccentric, obsessive FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to trawl America's communities of activists, intellectuals, writers and filmmakers, whose ideas were plainly displayed in their work.

On the House Unamerican Activities Committee, McCarthy led Inquisition-style interrogations. Suspects were subpoenaed to defend themselves against undisclosed accusers, and were allowed to buy immunity with the names of colleagues and friends. When acclaimed playwright Lillian Hellmann was snared, she famously spat back, "I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashion." She thought of Voltaire.

It was Hellmann who resurrected *Candide* in mid-Twentieth Century, fitted out with music by charismatic composer-conductor Leonard Bernstein, himself pestered by the HUAC. Hellmann was determined to hold up to audiences a mirror of the ideological menace loose in the land. Bernstein wrote to a friend in 1954, "My life is all Lillian

Hellmann and *Candide*.” The strenuous book that Hellmann produced—in fourteen drafts—is often pilloried as the reason for the resounding thud of its 1956 Broadway debut, and it may be that erstwhile Algonquin wit Dorothy Parker, whose lyrics survive here and there in the score, might well have made more facile work of Voltaire’s rippling wordplay. Said she, “there were too many geniuses involved.” But Bernstein liked it. “Lillian Hellmann,” he wrote in the *New York Times*, “has taken Voltaire and...added, deleted, rewritten, replotted, composed brand new sequences, provided a real ending, and, I feel, made it infinitely more significant for our country and our time.”

For the “failure” of the original 1956 Bernstein/Hellmann production, more than one critic has blamed the audience, unprepared to see itself reflected upon the stage, in all its unflattering absurdity. As Hellmann would later write to Bernstein, “The trouble with *Candide* is that it didn't fail.”

Successive efforts to reconstitute the much revisited *Candide* have strained to discover the best possible *Candide*. Then again, there may be no such thing. It may be that every *Candide* mirrors an image unique to its times. What is sure is that in every generation, callow *Candides* do set out anew, with the highest of expectations, the best of intentions, the strongest of incentives—and find out what’s what, along the way. Even Voltaire, no atheist he, suggests that God does attend to *Candide*, one way or another. The prerogative to know God—or not—resides in *Candide*. The garden is his own. All he need do—and do this he must—is tend it.

--Kathleen Watt writes frequently on the performing arts.