

Candide or Optimism  
by Voltaire

At the start, there is harmony. Dr. Pangloss is a learned man in metaphysics, he teaches it to the children of Baron Thunder-ten-tronckh. He maintains that everything has been pre-established,

and that we are living in the best of all possible worlds. Candide is an exuberant young lad, who listens readily to his teachings, after all it is the next best thing to being near Lady Cunegonde, daughter of the Baron.

Candide is unbearably infatuated with her, and one day - following Dr. Pangloss's example with the Baroness's lady-in-waiting - lady Cunegonde decides to exercise the very same 'experimental physics' with Candide. This "exercise in 'cause and effect', which made both eyes flash and knees tremble", was noted by her father, and consequently sent Candide from the estate with a sore backside.

Here begins the unprecedented, fantastic voyage of our fallible

young hero, as he is bounced across the four corners of the earth, in search of happiness. He is miserable that he has been exiled from the one place where his love lies, and which he had taken for the noblest of courtships. For the first time he must wonder is it all for the best, in the end?

Candide's travels take him through a complex set of tragedies, where each seems to surpass the previous in magnitude. However convincing the evidence, confirmed by changing travelling-company, Candide still believes in Dr. Pangloss's philosophical statement (derived from the German rationalist, Leibniz) that the progression of events in the universe are teleological and determined. This means, unconceivable as it sounds, that he had to

be thrown out to make way for a greater 'good'.

The first (9) chapters are set in the old continent of Europe. After being forced to leave his home, Candide makes his way through war, treachery and moral dilemma. These make immediate impressions on him, but are not enough to refute his optimism.

He makes new acquaintances, and finds out that the establishment he had left behind had not only been torn apart, but his lovely Cunegonde savagely murdered. This makes him doubt Dr. Pangloss's holistic 'system', since it now seems that good does not always win in the end.

Between the 10th and the 20th chapters of "Candide", we follow

our hero upon Terra Nova, fueled with the same naivete, but now - restricted from his former continent - having to pursue a new cause. Miraculously, Candide finds his Cunegonde - who was supposed to be dead! - but loses her again, after setting foot in the new world; hence, in the search for her, the most noble of causes. This and many other reversals of fortune or 'revelations of universal reason', come to explain the writer's blatant Leibniz-

Macchiavellian way of misleading the reader. This Voltaire uses as impeccably as a wolf hides in lamb's clothing.

The splendid thing about this kind of novel, is its great capacity to entertain, while teaching. For example, there is ample violence but it is always treated kindly. The violence and illogical events hit the reader subtly (if this is at all possible), and leave -

especially for the youth today - a lot to be 'digested'. Here is where the novel is similar to contemporary advertising. But Voltaire goes further than the subliminal. He uses and paraphrases current philosophical 'logic', and by the means of satire, he indicates to what enormous extent this reasoning can lead.

The story, a mutation of current historical events and personal experiences, bears inherently a clear definition of the nature of optimism in an environment of suffering. What Voltaire most wants to achieve with this 'story', is simply - with the text - to mimic and mock the fruits of following this logic, to wake people up to exercise their own judgement.

He felt that the contemporary interpretations of Leibniz and the strict use of British empirical methods were a misleading contradiction. It couldn't possibly be wise to reason in such rigid ways, at least not in all cases - for example, moral discussion (where a wholly universal 'theorem' has YET to be formed).

An important turning-point and a most central 'scene' in the development of the story, is almost stumbled on in chapter 17, when the young Candide and his travelling-companion, Cacambo, arrive at the far (utopian) state of... Eldorado.

In Eldorado, our young heroes find customs, totally different to the ones they are accustomed to. Gold 'stones' are as worthless to the people of Eldorado as pavement stones would be to the Europeans, and since there is no crime, there is no need for law, as Candide knows it.

In these two chapters, Voltaire portrays - through the unique way-of-life in Eldorado - a 'mirror' to our society; by isolating the place from recognizable 'space and time', we begin to project this concept to 'our world', and although the idea of "the place where all goes well" may never be achieved, by means of a 'telos', we may begin to re-assert our own values; And as much as Eldorado reminded of Paradise, the two travellers moved on; as the peaceful and prosperous life in Eldorado was not

to be fully understood, unless one had another (a mistress) to share it with, and unless one could see the contradiction it provided beside 'western' civilisation, or the tradition of the Old World. In this epitome of "the best of all possible worlds", a potential danger - 'empty life' - loomed invisibly - both travellers had restless spirits and sought 'vivid' experiences to talk about. In Eldorado, this wasn't about to happen, as such would jeopardize the state's stable nature.

Stable nature of the state.

an idea

One must understand the use of metaphors, especially in times of unrest. Popular in the eighteenth century, utopian landscapes provided, as well as the chance for fantasy, an incentive for developing current political, artistic, or eg. philosophical thoughts.

The form these thoughts took in fictive literature, allowed them to be taken 'seriously', but in a less dogmatic, scientific fashion.

Already in Plato's literary work, we see 're-structuring' and satirical methods, aimed at the ancient polis, the ways of surrounding states, and finally 'collected' in his "Republic", fresh commentary of contemporary life. The 'Plato-analogy', is duly interesting, because of the condition both Voltaire and Plato's states were in at the times of their lives.

In the last ten chapters we see Candide and his new friend, Martin, return to Europe, where after some detours, they finally arrive at Venice, where they should meet the most honourable Cunegonde, and the trustworthy Cacambo...

After, astonishingly, working out several obstacles from his way, Candide suddenly discovers himself in a 'class-reunion' of lost,

sought and impermanently dead friends, creating unwittingly an Eldoradoan community in Constantinople.

He even finds his lovely Cunegonde, who <sup>worn from time and life</sup> as time and life has it's wear <sup>has</sup> the visage of her harsh experiences.

So, life proves to be unacceptable, until, after two specific visits - one to a Turkish philosopher, and one to a Turkish farmer - Candide, for the first time in the novel takes control of things (ie. becomes a 'conscious' hero). He notes the useless nature of metaphysical 'debate', and the quintessential value of work, as a part of the value(s) of Life. Although he, and his friends, have been through 'more than any man could imagine', and albeit

his 'love' has turned ugly and embittered, there is hope in "all turning well".

For now, to 'counter' the last eminent dangers in his life - boredom, vice and poverty - he has ample resources to draw from. So they all put to profitable exercise their talents, without arguing; living life with the expectation of something new, - tomorrow.