

Voltaire



Candide

or Optimism

Translated by Burton Raffel

Candide

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or Optimism



Translated from the German of Dr. Ralph
with additions found in the doctor's pocket when he died,
at Minden, in the year of our Lord 1759

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For Amy Raffel

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INTRODUCTION

Candide, Voltaire, and the Enlightenment

Johnson Kent Wright

As Burton Raffel remarks in the prefatory note to his sparkling new translation, *Candide* has been “compulsory reading” for nearly two hundred and fifty years now. At first glance, the explanation for this staying power seems obvious. It clearly reflects *Candide*’s undiminished capacity to move, delight, and instruct its readers, according to the classical maxim. Yet it remains to explain exactly *how* Voltaire’s novella still manages this feat, so long after the world in and for which it was written has passed away. For *Candide* is a satire—one of the most celebrated examples of the genre in modern literature—and satire, no matter how captivating at the time, has a notoriously short shelf-life, once its object and moment have passed. What has kept Voltaire’s lampoon of eighteenth-century philosophic “optimism” so fresh and so engaging, after all these years? Raffel rightly suggests that the answer lies in the *universality* of Voltaire’s themes—the sense that we still recognize ourselves in the mirror of his characters and their concerns, as if we would not be surprised to encounter Candide or Cunégonde on the streets of Manhattan today. Paradoxically, however, any attempt to explain this sense of familiarity and currency must return us to the very particular context in which *Candide* was produced—above all, to the intersection between an

unprecedented intellectual movement and an extraordinary individual life.

The movement was the Enlightenment, the great revolt against inherited intellectual authority—classical and Christian alike—that swept across Europe in the eighteenth century. Its seeds can be traced to a set of intrepid thinkers from the middle of the preceding century: the major figures of what was later called the Scientific Revolution—Galileo Galilei, William Harvey, and Isaac Newton; philosophers such as René Descartes, Benedict de Spinoza, and Gottfried Leibniz; and theorists of “natural rights”—Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke. It is no accident that most of these came from or lived in either England or the Dutch Republic, countries that had succeeded in overthrowing the rule of divine-right or absolute monarchy in the course of the seventeenth century. Nor is it surprising that their ideas began to make their way into France early in the eighteenth, when that nation was in recovery from the long and exhausting reign of the greatest of all absolute monarchs, Louis XIV. For this was what the Enlightenment amounted to, in the first instance: the process by which French thinkers translated and popularized the ideas of their more advanced Dutch and English predecessors, for presentation to a far wider audience than they had ever reached before. These ideas never formed a single coherent doctrine. But by the time the Enlightenment reached its maturity, in the middle years of the century, there was a rough consensus among its leading thinkers in regard to certain key themes: rejection of orthodox, scriptural Christianity, in favor of deism or natural reli-