

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84973-9 - The Cambridge Companion to Voltaire

Edited by Nicholas Cronk

Excerpt

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NICHOLAS CRONK

Introduction

The French seventeenth century is commonly referred to as ‘the age of Louis XIV’ – indeed it was Voltaire who popularised the expression. But the eighteenth century is rarely described as the age of Louis XV: it is, by common consent, ‘the age of Voltaire’. Commenting on this anomaly, in a speech to mark the centenary of Voltaire’s death in 1878, Victor Hugo declared that until Voltaire’s time, centuries always bore the names of heads of state; but, he went on, ‘Voltaire is more than a head of state, he is a head of ideas’ (*‘Voltaire est plus qu’un chef d’états, c’est un chef d’idées’*).¹ The essays in this volume will explore how one writer came to occupy such a dominant position in his century, and to exercise such continuing influence.

No eighteenth-century writer was depicted more often than Voltaire; and no image of him has greater iconic status than the bust sculpted by Jean-Antoine Houdon (fig. 1). In fact, there is not one bust but a whole assortment of them, in various materials and presentations; the number of surviving portrait busts makes clear that Voltaire was Houdon’s best-selling subject.² Mme Denis, Voltaire’s niece and mistress, even commissioned a full-length version, the large seated statue in marble which now dominates the first-floor foyer of the Comédie-Française. Voltaire’s head, wearing no wig, is turned to the right, his eyes in a piercing glance, his lips drawn tightly in a smile. So potent and so omnipresent was this image that writers in the nineteenth century not only debated Voltaire’s ideas, they argued about his smile. The Romantic poet Alfred de Musset famously described Voltaire’s ‘hideous smile’.³ Joseph de Maistre evidently had the phrase in mind when he spoke of Voltaire’s ‘ghastly grin’ (*‘rictus épouvantable’*), a phrase which Gustave Flaubert quotes when he mocks the received bourgeois wisdom concerning the writer whom he admired: ‘Voltaire: Superficial knowledge. Famous for his ghastly grin’ (*‘Science superficielle. Célèbre par son rictus épouvantable’*).⁴ Victor Hugo tried to set the record straight: ‘This smile is wisdom. This smile, I repeat, is Voltaire’ (*‘Ce sourire, c’est la sagesse. Ce sourire, je le répète, c’est Voltaire’*).⁵ Despite the ambiguity of its smile, or perhaps because of

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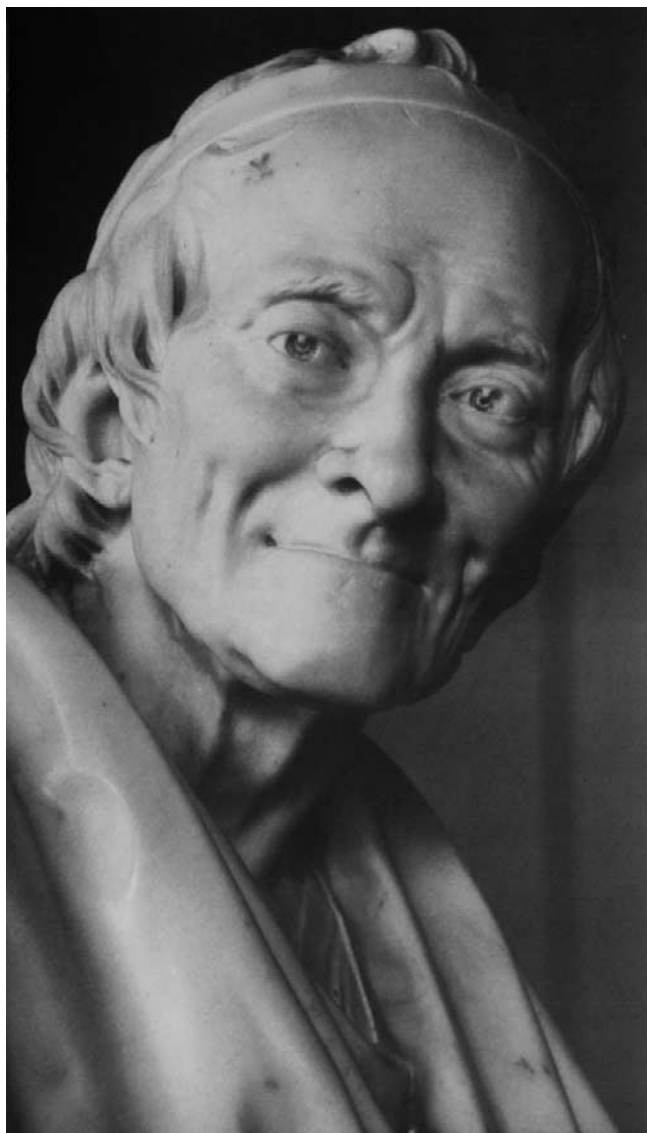


Fig. 1 Jean-Antoine Houdon, bust of Voltaire (private collection)

it, Houdon's bust has come to symbolise Voltaire, and indeed 'the age of Voltaire'.

The most immediate reason for Voltaire's dominance of his century is simply that he wrote far more than anyone else. There has been no comprehensive edition of his writings since the 1880s, and the project to publish

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the first ever full critical edition of his complete works, currently being undertaken by the Voltaire Foundation in Oxford, will result in an edition of some two hundred volumes. Steeped in classical as well as more recent European literature, Voltaire was a master of virtually all literary genres. His writings include poetry in many different styles (epic, mock epic, ode, epistle, satire and much occasional verse), theatre (tragedy, comedy, even opera librettos for the composer Jean-Philippe Rameau), history, short prose works in a variety of forms (tales, dialogues, satires, pamphlets); and for good measure, a scientific treatise. And in addition to all that, he has the most extensive correspondence of any writer of the period. The only genre he did not practise was the sentimental novel – and that he parodies in his satirical fictions. If we know Voltaire as one of the greatest prose writers in the French language, his contemporaries regarded him as the greatest poet of the age. It is worth recalling that his philosophical response to the horrific Lisbon earthquake was first formulated in verse (the *Épître sur le désastre de Lisbonne*) well before it found expression in prose (*Candide*).

The act of writing in so many different genres constituted an insurance policy with posterity. The reputations of some writers come in and out of favour as certain forms or styles are in or out of fashion. If Voltaire has never gone out of fashion, or out of print, that is in part because each generation, each country, each reader, can choose from this vast œuvre what appeals most. In the eighteenth century, Voltaire was widely acclaimed as an epic poet and tragedian, on the basis of works which are now scarcely read or performed. *Zaïre*, the last of Voltaire's tragedies to survive in the repertoire of the Comédie-Française, has not been performed there since 1936. In the twentieth century, Voltaire's reputation was based more squarely on the *Lettres philosophiques* (following Lanson's pioneering edition of 1909) and on the satirical tales, such as *Zadig*, *Candide*, *L'Ingénu*, which we have come to call *contes philosophiques* (a label which Voltaire himself did not use).⁶ In the second half of the twentieth century, there was a marked revival of interest in Voltaire as a historian, with paperback editions appearing of such works as *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* and the *Essai sur les mœurs*; and the publication by Theodore Besterman of a fifty-odd-volume edition of Voltaire's correspondence was a landmark, both because it provided much new information about Voltaire's life, and because the correspondence emerged, perhaps for the first time, as a literary masterpiece in its own right. And what of Voltaire in the twenty-first century? There remain texts, some of them important ones, which still await their first ever critical edition (for example, the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*), and in years to come, the appearance of new volumes of the Oxford edition will continue to focus attention on texts which have hitherto been ignored or seemed inaccessible.

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Modern interest in ideas of the public sphere and public opinion lend a new importance to Voltaire's voluminous production of brochures and pamphlets, long thought ephemeral works, but which now seem to reveal an original and even unexpectedly modern aspect of Voltaire's writing. A successful production in Paris in 2007 of one of his comedies, *L'Écossaise*, suggests that the theatrical repertoire has not yet yielded all its secrets.⁷ It is perhaps Voltaire's poetry that seems most intractable to modern taste; yet the appearance of an affordable edition of *La Pucelle* (a very rude mock-burlesque epic about Joan of Arc) might well challenge even that prejudice.

The sheer range and quantity of Voltaire's writing can, paradoxically, do him a disservice. There is the suggestion that Voltaire is a Jack-of-all-trades – clever certainly, but perhaps superficial. And so we fall into the condescension of a Roland Barthes, who in a well-known essay concludes that 'Voltaire was a happy writer, but doubtless the last'.⁸ This notion of an innocent thankfully spared the horrors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries does not do justice to the complexity of the man, or of his writings.

A writer famous for one great work is easier to grasp than a writer who seems bewilderingly active on so many fronts. True, no single one of Voltaire's writings on political theory is as celebrated as Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* or Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Contrat social*; on the other hand, his voluminous political writings – and activities – had an immediate and practical impact which arguably the works of Montesquieu and Rousseau did not. His fiction might be judged timid alongside experimental works such as Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* or Denis Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*; but on closer inspection, *Candide* emerges as an innovative fiction which in some ways anticipates the technical daring of *Jacques*. Voltaire's polemical writings contain nothing as monumental as the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alembert (to which he contributed only a few articles, mainly on literary topics); yet in his late 70s he produced a seven-volume compendious work, the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (1770–2), an instant best-seller which has been unaccountably neglected by critics.

Even if Voltaire's celebrity does not depend on a single great work, *Candide* remains the first point of contact with Voltaire for many readers. This satirical work was a best-seller from the moment it was published in 1759, and so it remains today. Its sheer anarchic absurdity seems to translate into all languages and appeal to all readers (including those who know nothing of the philosophical debate which is supposedly the work's subject): in a happy phrase, Italo Calvino describes the work as 'an essay in velocity'.⁹ Perhaps no other book of the eighteenth century has been so often illustrated: Paul Klee wrote in his journal that it was reading *Candide* that inspired him to become an illustrator.¹⁰ A novel of 1958 by the Danish

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writer Hans Jürgen Lembourn (translated into English as *The Best of All Worlds, or What Voltaire Never Knew*, 1960) resituates Voltaire's work in the modern world; while a French film *Candide* (1960), starring Pierre Brasseur and Louis de Funès, updates the action to the Second World War.¹¹ Leonard Bernstein's comic operetta *Candide*, premiered in 1956, continues to hold the stage: it is hard to think of another eighteenth-century fiction that would have so successfully survived the translation to film and musical.¹² A production of Bernstein's work scheduled for La Scala, Milan, in 2006 had to be cancelled, amid accusations of censorship, largely on account of a scene in which various war-hungry leaders including Tony Blair and George W. Bush performed a drunken dance dressed only in their ties and under-pants: the director Robert Carsen was possibly over-zealous in modernising Voltaire's anti-war satire, but there is no denying the satire's continuing power to shock and offend.

Uniquely among the *philosophes*, Voltaire rapidly emerged as a prominent European, rather than merely French, writer. When in London in the 1720s, he deliberately cultivated his English readership, and he grew to become the most famous living writer in Europe. His *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* was soon read across the continent, translated into all the major European languages; before the century was over there had been three separate translations of the poem into Polish alone. In the late 1750s, the young and confident Edward Gibbon, then 20 or 21 years of age, paid a call on the great man in Lausanne: 'Before I was recalled from Switzerland, I had the satisfaction of seeing the most extraordinary man of the age; a poet, an historian, a philosopher, who has filled thirty quartos, of prose and verse, with his various productions, often excellent, and always entertaining. Need I add the name of Voltaire?'¹³

In the course of the 1760s Voltaire would become even more celebrated, for it was his activities during this period which turned the famous writer into the famous campaigner, so creating the image of the prophet of tolerance which has endured to this day. During this decade Voltaire undertook a number of high-profile campaigns against judicial and ecclesiastical intolerance, most famous among them the Calas affair. Jean Calas, a Protestant merchant in Toulouse, was executed in 1762 for the murder of his son who allegedly had expressed a desire to convert to Catholicism; after a campaign lasting three years, the verdict was quashed and Calas's innocence declared. Voltaire's activities on behalf of the Calas family led to a string of works targeting intolerance, the *Traité sur la tolérance*, the *Dictionnaire philosophique* and many other pamphlets besides. The writer had become a political activist. The character 'Moi' in Diderot's satire *Le Neveu de Rameau* is probably speaking for Diderot when he declares that 'there are certain things

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I would give everything I own to have done. *Mahomet* [Voltaire's tragedy dealing with religious intolerance] is a sublime work; but I would rather have rehabilitated the memory of Calas.'¹⁴

Already in his lifetime the name of Voltaire became synonymous with a set of values: dislike of bigotry and superstition, belief in reason and toleration, and in freedom of speech. The authorities in France had in fact very limited success in censoring what Voltaire wrote, but he liked to portray himself as the victim of censorship. In November 1763, Voltaire wrote from Ferney to David Hume, recently arrived in Paris: 'We are generally speaking, half philosophers as we are half free. We dare neither see truth in its full light; nor unveil openly the little glimpses we discover . . . The abettors of superstition clip our wings and hinder us from soaring.'¹⁵ Voltaire's passionate rhetoric always impresses, even when, as here, he is writing in English.

Voltaire even coined what we would now call a campaign slogan, *Écrasez l'Infâme*, which translates roughly as 'Crush the despicable', where 'l'Infâme' stands for superstition, intolerance or irrational behaviour of any kind. Voltaire has an eye and an ear for the telling phrase. *Candide* has given us several immediately recognisable expressions: 'pour encourager les autres', and, of course, 'il faut cultiver notre jardin'. You don't need to be French to recognise 'If God had not existed, it would have been necessary to invent him'; though the original French, 'Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer', is all the more memorable for being cast in the form of an alexandrine (the twelve-syllable line of high verse): Voltaire knew that he was on to a winner when he first used the line in a poem of 1769, and thereafter he was ingenious in finding ways to repeat it at every opportunity.¹⁶ When we say that God is (not) on the side of the big battalions, we may not even know we are quoting Voltaire, but we are.¹⁷

This talent for the telling phrase is of course central to Voltaire's achievement, for he always insisted on the need for writing to be effective as well as enjoyable. As he recorded in one of his notebooks, 'A book must be like a sociable man, made for the needs of men' ('Un livre doit être comme un homme sociable, fait pour les besoins des hommes').¹⁸ It is not sufficient simply to please, and Voltaire famously contrasted his own practice with that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: 'Jean-Jacques writes for writing's sake and I write to act' ('Jean Jacques n'écrit que pour écrire et moy j'écris pour agir', D14117).

If Voltaire's life is remarkable enough, his after-life is extraordinary. He symbolises the Enlightenment's rigorous separation of religion and politics which remains the defining (if increasingly contested) element of modern secular culture.¹⁹ As a focus for a certain set of values, Voltaire has become a cultural icon: his continuing, often conflictual, presence is what Daniel

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Brewer calls in this volume ‘the Voltaire effect’. In nineteenth-century France, Voltaire defined the political divide: on the ‘left’, radicals acclaimed the deist Voltaire as an atheist, while on the ‘right’, Catholics denounced him as the Antichrist. Gustave Flaubert makes the point succinctly in *Madame Bovary*: Emma dies with a Catholic priest to one side of her bed, and the self-proclaimed Voltairean pharmacist Homais to the other. (Neither, of course, is of any use to her: the irony is also Voltairean.) Victor Hugo declared that ‘Voltaire’s reputation, diminished as a poet, has grown as an apostle’ (‘Voltaire, diminué comme poète, a monté comme apôtre’).²⁰ As a writer-campaigner, Voltaire stands as the first of a succession of ‘engaged’ French writers, which includes Victor Hugo himself writing against capital punishment, Émile Zola defending Dreyfus, and Jean-Paul Sartre protesting against the war in Vietnam. Voltaire remains an emblematic figure in French politics: when in early 2007 the French presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy came to London to address young French entrepreneurs working in England, he assured them, perhaps to their surprise, that they were following in the footsteps of Voltaire.

Atheists, humanists, Christians, Freemasons have all claimed the great man as one of their own. Voltaire’s status as cultural icon places him in the frontline whenever any individual or interest group is in need of a hero – or a fall guy. In an era of identity politics, this leaves him vulnerable to appropriation on all fronts, witness a recent article on ecofeminism and *Candide*.²¹ A proposed reading of the tragedy *Mahomet* in Geneva in 2006 led to protests, both from the local Islamic community that their religion was under attack, and from the director who in an open letter in *Le Monde* declared himself the victim of censorship.²² In 1942, in German-occupied Paris, a disreputable pamphlet acclaimed Voltaire as a patriot on account of his dislike of Jews,²³ and even today the anachronistic claim that he was anti-Semitic resurfaces periodically.²⁴ Even more extravagantly, Voltaire has been denounced for his alleged complicity in the slave trade, an accusation which has continued to be repeated even though it has long been known to be false.²⁵ More complex and more interesting is the question of Voltaire’s ‘anthropology’, and his views about race deserve more study. Arguing against his contemporary the Comte de Buffon, Voltaire insists on the irreducible differences between races. True, *Candide* is moved to tears by the pitiful spectacle of the negro from Surinam; but this is not because he is a slave, it is because he has been harshly treated by his master.²⁶ This eighteenth-century humanitarian is no twenty-first-century liberal.

Given his European reputation, Voltaire has been a point of cultural reference outside France as much as within. When the English satirist James Gillray chose to depict the infant Jacobinism (revolutionary democracy)

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receiving his education at the knee of Voltaire, he naturally imagined the French philosopher in the form of Houdon's seated figure (fig. 2). William Blake's early poem 'Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau' (c.1804) expresses forcefully the Romantic-cum-Christian rejection of what he perceived as narrow Enlightenment rationalism:

Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau!
Mock on, mock on – 'Tis all in vain!
You throw the sand against the wind,
And the wind blows it back again.

And every sand becomes a gem
Reflected in the beams divine;
Blown back they blind the mocking eye,
But still in Israel's paths they shine.

The atoms of Democritus
And Newton's particles of light
Are sands upon the Red Sea shore,
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.²⁷

Predictably, an anonymous poet replied on Voltaire's behalf:

Hope on, hope on, Boswell and Blake
Hope on and pray: 'tis all in vain.
You think perhaps the dust that blows
Will someday come to life again?

In the twentieth century, there was perhaps less concern with Voltaire as an antagonist (or not) of the Catholic Church, and more interest in him as the emblem of reason, in an age which seemed ever less confident of its Enlightenment inheritance. The 1933 Warner Bros film *Voltaire*, starring George Arliss in the lead role and directed by John Adolphi, opens with a title announcing that Voltaire 'attacked intolerance and injustice' and 'educated the masses to think and act'. The crafty Voltaire skirmishes with the king, but when the crowds gather to cheer the author, the king orders his writings to be burned. Warned by Voltaire that revolution will come, the king tells him: 'Make us laugh – give us your wit, but keep your wisdom.' With Europe on the brink of war, the poet W. H. Auden evoked the patriarch of Ferney as an emblem for the writer's fight against persecution and stupidity. His poem 'Voltaire at Ferney' is dated February 1939:

Yet, like a sentinel, he could not sleep. The night was full of wrong,
Earthquakes and executions. Soon he would be dead,

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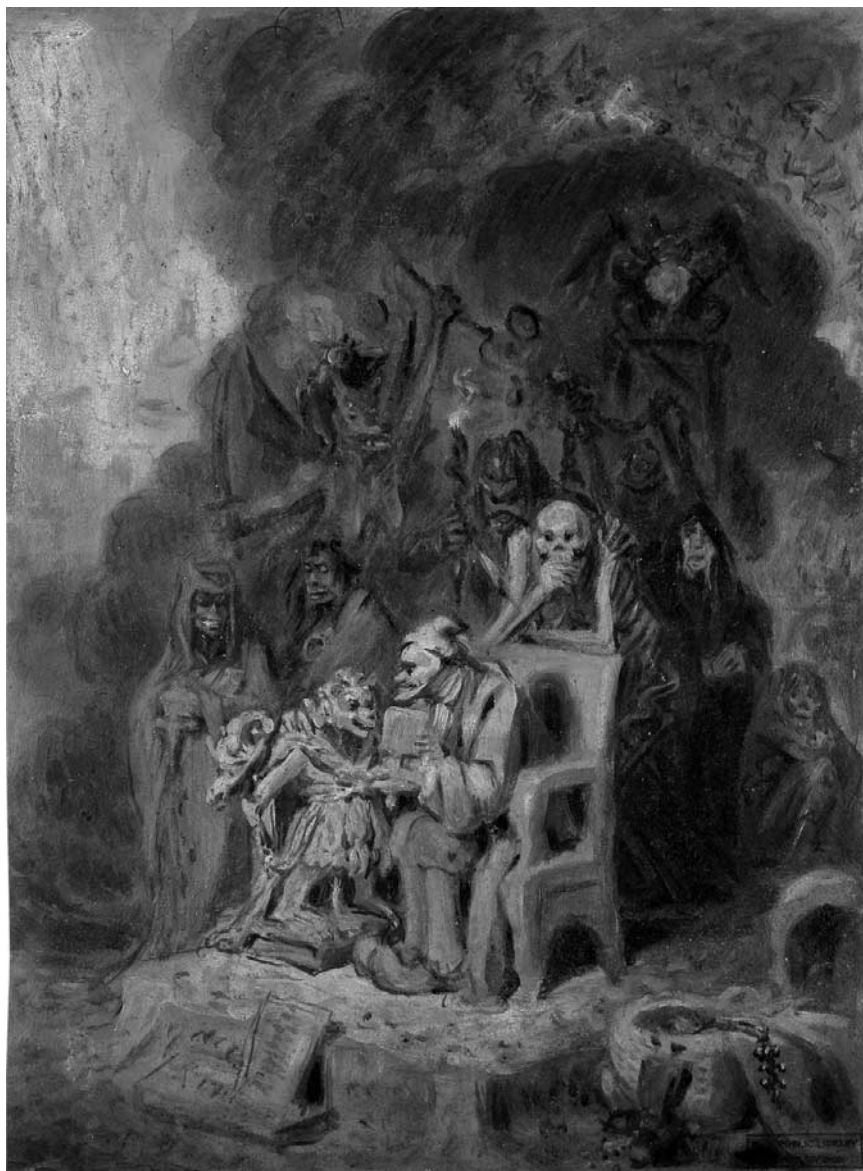


Fig. 2 James Gillray, *Voltaire Instructing the Infant Jacobinism*, oil on paper, c.1798
(New York Public Library)

And still all over Europe stood the horrible nurses
Itching to boil their children. Only his verses
Perhaps could stop them: He must go on working. Overhead
The uncomplaining stars composed their lucid song.²⁸

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Perhaps with Auden in mind, the contemporary poet Peter Porter has written a poem probing Voltaire's cultivation of the garden as an exercise in influencing opinion:

Therefore what I choose to cultivate,
Like an attendant servant's smile,
Is the allotment of debate.²⁹

An altogether more disturbing image is Salvador Dalí's painting *The Slave Market with Disappearing Bust of Voltaire* (1940). The surreal depiction of the Houdon bust set in a landscape creates an emblematic juxtaposition of reason and unreason – an effect reinforced by a visual trick in which the bust of Voltaire ironically contains within its features two Catholic nuns.³⁰

Voltaire's targets – stupidity, war, fanaticism, dogmatism – are perennial, and so we (must) continue to read him. Leonard Bernstein recalled that, when he was creating his operetta *Candide* in the mid-1950s, 'everything that America stood for seemed to be on the verge of being ground under the heel of Senator Joseph McCarthy'. When *Candide* now plays in New York, London or Paris, the audiences probably no longer think of 1950s McCarthyism, but other persecutions, other wars, other acts of bigotry are in their minds. With the recent rise of terrorism, as a fact, and as an object of media attention, hardly a week passes without the appearance in the British press of an article quoting Voltaire's 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.'³¹ This rallying cry of tolerant multiculturalism is so well known in the English-speaking world that it seems pedantic to point out that the expression was coined by an Englishwoman in 1906.³² No matter: the idea is Voltairean, and since he omitted to formulate the expression himself, it was necessary to invent it.

Beyond Voltaire's continuing presence in our political consciousness, he remains firmly established in our cultural landscape. Any number of writers have been inspired by him. The heroine of George Bernard Shaw's comedy *Candida* (1895) is clearly named with Voltaire in mind, and Shaw's essays and prefaces are packed with allusions to Voltaire, whose views on established religion he warmly endorsed. His comic parable *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (1932), banned in the Irish Free State, takes *Candide* as its model – and includes Voltaire in its cast of characters.³³ When Shaw bequeathed his own bust to the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre, he specified that it should be placed 'in the foyer as the bust of Voltaire by Houdon is placed in the foyer of the Comédie-Française'.³⁴ Lytton Strachey, a prominent member of the Bloomsbury group, devoted several essays to Voltaire and hung a portrait of him by Jean Huber over his desk, where it dominated his study.³⁵ More recently, the novelist Leonardo Sciascia