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VOLTAIRE
CHOIX DE CONTES

WITH AN
INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

by

F. C. GREEN

*Drapers Professor of French at the
University of Cambridge*



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PREFACE

'DANS la vie' Stendhal once airily remarked, 'il faut savoir ce qu'on veut.' In these stringent times, however, it is not so much a question of knowing what we want as of knowing how much we can get. Therefore, in preparing this anthology and its Introduction, I have been obliged to confine myself to the *contes* written by Voltaire before 1760. But if circumstances prove favourable it is hoped to include in a second volume a selection from the tales of Voltaire the Sage of Ferney.

F. C. G.

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INTRODUCTION

LIKE most of his generation, Voltaire looked on the novel as an inferior genre, ‘la production d’un esprit faible écrivant avec facilité des choses indignes d’être lues par des esprits sérieux’. As a young dramatist, he had attributed the decline of French tragedy to the baleful influence of the seventeenth-century authors of heroic romances, and their successors met with no more favour in Voltaire’s eyes. In his comedy, *Le Droit du Seigneur* (1762), he inserted a lengthy tirade on the futility and immorality of novels. A very old friend, Mme du Deffand, tried in vain to persuade Voltaire to admire Richardson because, as she insinuated, the English novelists portray morality in action. But *Clarissa* made him almost scream with boredom. ‘Il est cruel pour un homme aussi vif que je suis de lire neuf volumes entiers dans lesquels on ne trouve rien du tout!’ *Habent sua fata libelli*. Voltaire wrote over fifty plays, whilst his poems, histories and polemical treatises fill many volumes. Yet it would be safe to say that for every thousand readers who have succumbed to the diabolic charm of *Candide* or *Zadig*, probably only one has ever opened the pages of *Zaïre*, *La Henriade* or even *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*.

To indulge the caprice of a great lady, Voltaire made his apologetic début as a novelist at the age of 52 or 53, a point upon which his biographers have never been able to agree. At any rate, the event occurred either in 1746 or 1747, during one of two visits which he paid to his old friend the Duchesse du Maine, the widow of an illegitimate son of Louis XIV who lived just outside Paris in her château at Sceaux. Here she reigned over a miniature court frequented

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by such brilliant men of letters as Fontenelle and by witty ladies such as Mme du Deffand and Mlle de Launay-Staal. From time to time, it seems, they used to entertain their hostess with fêtes called *Les Nuits Blanches de Sceaux*. One favourite amusement was an alphabetic lottery in which each letter represented a literary genre. Thus the guest who drew C had to write a short comedy; or if it were B, a ballet, and so on. One lady, it is said, drew the letter N which stood for *nouvelle* and begged Voltaire to write one for her. Entering into the spirit of the game, he smilingly agreed and, as a result, produced his first essays in prose fiction which, of course, he read to the duchess before showing them to the others. In this atmosphere, then, Voltaire composed *Babouc ou le Monde comme il Va*, *Le Crocheteur Borgne*, and *Cosi-Sancta*—an irreverent trifle suggested by St Augustine's *Civitas Dei*. Most probably, also, he sketched out the first version of his *Zadig ou la Destinée*, though it was originally entitled *Memnon* and was published in 1747. This tale is not to be confused with *Memnon ou la Sagesse* (1750), which is quite a different story.

Though Voltaire was not, in the Rousseauistic sense of the term, a subjective author, all his imaginative writings reflect the writer's immediate preoccupations, his attitudes, prejudices or hatreds. The prevailing tone of these early *contes* is optimistic—though not quite so cocksure and provocative as, for instance, his poem *Le Mondain* (1736). It is rather the optimism of one who has never expected a great deal from humanity, and is agreeably surprised to find that life on the whole offers more ha'pence than kicks. This mood, we shall see, did not survive the bitter experiences which culminated in Voltaire's departure from Germany in 1753. But meanwhile he had no serious quarrel with life. Thanks to the influence of his old school comrades the brothers D'Argenson, who were both

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ministers, he had obtained in April 1745 the coveted post of *Historiographe de France*. And by a happy chance, in May came the news of Fontenoy, a great French victory. Here was a marvellous opportunity for the new historian to show his mettle. His *Poème de Fontenoy*, composed in three days and immediately published, ran through ten editions in a fortnight. Striking while the iron was hot, the unofficial poet laureate dashed off an elegantly turned compliment to the new favourite, Mme d'Étioles, soon to be better known as Mme de Pompadour. And in the spring of 1746 Voltaire achieved his dearest ambition. Hitherto the Académie Française, whilst recognising him as the greatest living French playwright, had felt bound to close its doors to an author whose latest tragedy, *Mahomet ou le Fanatisme* (1741), had scandalised all good Catholics by its thinly veiled impiety. Voltaire, by a master-stroke of diplomacy, boldly dedicated it to the Pope, Benedict XIV, who thanked him for the honour, blandly pretending to accept the work at its face value, that is to say, as an attack on the Moslem religion. Now, a vacancy having occurred in the Académie Française, Voltaire judged the moment propitious for a final onslaught. Rallying his friends, he wrote to his old Principal, le Père de la Tour, protesting his passionate attachment to the Jesuits and to the Catholic faith. Through Mme de Pompadour he also made certain of the King's approval of his candidature. And so, in May 1746, he joined the company of the *immortels*—an honour which was quickly followed by his appointment as 'gentilhomme de la chambre du roi'. Therefore, when Voltaire, as the honoured guest at Sceaux of Madame du Maine, began to compose his little tales, he felt that the world, all things considered, was not a bad place. Fortune, undoubtedly, held up her sleeve a few nasty surprises, but only for those who were naïve enough to call themselves her favourites. The wise man will take life

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as it comes; for if everything is not perfect, we must take the world as it is.

Now this is precisely the final impression formed by Babouc, the envoy chosen by the angel Ithuriel to decide upon the fate of Persépolis (Paris), whose follies and excesses have aroused his anger. Such is the prelude to Voltaire's astringent commentary on French institutions and *mœurs*: the imbecility of war; the abuses inherent in the traditional practice of selling legal offices; the arrogance of the *nouveaux-riches* and the infidelity of ambitious married women; the cynical unscrupulousness of the literary critics; the immorality of *directeurs de conscience* and the fanaticism of the Jansenists. Yet, at every turn, Babouc-Voltaire is forced to admit that the medal has another and brighter side, so that in his final report to Ithuriel he pleads earnestly for clemency. With all her faults Paris is a lovable city. 'Si tout n'est pas bien, tout est passable.' And *Babouc* closes with a glowing tribute to the wit and charm and wisdom of the lovely Téone, who is Mme de Pompadour.

The same spirit pervades *Le Crocheteur Borgne*. Mesrour, the ragged, one-eyed street-porter, is happy because he has lost the eye that sees only the dark side of life and because he lives from day to day. This is the tale of his love for a beautiful princess, whose runaway horses Mesrour manages to stop just on the verge of a precipice. She, in her gratitude, forgets he is a street-porter and returns his passion, whereupon Mesrour is transformed into a divinely handsome young nobleman—until he is rudely awakened from his drunken slumber. For it was only a beautiful dream. Now, anyone else, says Voltaire, would have been plunged into despair. Not Mesrour, however, since he possesses only the eye that sees the bright side of life. Therefore, instead of whining, he resolves to work hard so as to be able to treat himself occasionally to a glorious

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debauch in which he may recapture, if only for a brief moment, the vision of his dream princess.

When is a virtue a vice and vice a virtue? In an alertly narrated little tale, *Cosi-Sancta*, maliciously attributed to St Augustine, Voltaire seeks to convince us that excess of virtue may often be a sin whereas out of what he airily dismisses as ‘un petit mal’ a great good may emerge. *Cosi-Sancta*, though married to an elderly, suspicious lawyer, virtuously repels the advances of the ardent young Ribaldo, who is waylaid and beaten to death at her husband’s orders. *Cosi-Sancta*’s fidelity is all the more remarkable because a Jansenist *curé* has prophesied that her virtue will cause her many misfortunes, though she will eventually be canonised for having been thrice unfaithful to her husband. And so it comes to pass. At the price of her chastity she saves in turn the lives of her husband, her brother and her son. And after her death she is deservedly canonised, says Voltaire, for having benefited her family by her self-mortifications.

But *Cosi-Sancta*, like all Voltaire’s *contes*, should be read at least twice; first for the irresistible charm of his narrative style and afterwards so as to absorb at leisure the essence of his provocative ideas. Note for instance the thoroughly immoral ‘moral’ implicit in the mocking epitaph accorded to the canonised heroine. ‘Un petit mal pour un grand bien.’ By adhering to her Jansenist principles *Cosi-Sancta* caused the death of Ribaldo, whilst by abandoning them she saved her family. But, suggests Voltaire, there was another and more sensible course. She could have followed her natural inclinations, and connived with her lover to lull her husband’s suspicions—thus averting a train of unnecessary disasters.

As the sub-title of his next tale reveals, Voltaire was now keenly interested in this eternal problem of human liberty.

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Zadig ou la Destinée is an amusing parody of the oriental tales which had begun to make their appearance early in the century in very free French translations, such as Galland's *Les Mille et une Nuits* (1704), and *Les Mille et un Jours* (1710) by Pétis de la Croix. These initiated an oriental craze which rapidly included every form of literature: comedy, tragedy, ballet, opéra-comique, not to speak of the decorative arts. By 1730, we gather from the preface to Antoine Hamilton's *Le Béliier*, translations of Persian, Arabic and Turkish tales were in the hands of all the ladies of the Court and Town. Some preferred, however, the *contes allégoriques* of Crébillon junior or of Cahusac and Voisenon, whose pseudo-oriental décor served merely to add piquancy to their witty and licentious satires of fashionable manners. But it is clear from the tone of *Zadig* that Voltaire had no intention of imitating these shallow boudoir novelists. In his tragedies *Zaïre* (1732) and *Mahomet* (1741) he had boldly exploited the new vogue for his anti-religious propaganda and indeed, as we have seen, much too rashly. Therefore, when, in 1747, Voltaire began to compose *Zadig*, he was by no means disposed to risk his position at Court by another tussle with the authorities.

He quickly discerned the possibilities latent in these amusing *pastiches* of the oriental style. How expert Voltaire was at this game we know from his correspondence. Note, for instance, the opening of his comic letter of thanks to the abbé Aunillon (October 1742): 'Je baise les barbes de la plume du sage Aunillon, fils d'Aunillon resplendissant entre tous les imans de la loi du Christ'. And in the same humorous vein *Zadig* dedicates his tale to the beautiful Sultana Sheraa or Mme de Pompadour. Yet it would be an error to suppose that Voltaire regarded these ancient Eastern story-tellers purely as figures of fun. Like all rationalists, he was at once irritated and fascinated by the

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irrational in any form. Again and again, in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, he discusses the fables and allegories of antiquity, not merely in order to undermine the authority of the Old Testament but to show that if modern man takes an apparently childish delight in oriental fictions it is usually because their flowery metaphors conceal some new and interesting truth. At any rate, Voltaire resolved that this should be the case with his pseudo-oriental tales. *Zadig*, we are warned, is ‘un ouvrage qui dit plus qu’il ne semble dire’. It is, in short, an excellent example of a genre really created by Voltaire, *le conte philosophique*. And if in his use of oriental ‘local colour’ he put all his rivals in the shade, it is because the future author of the *Essai sur les Mœurs* already possessed a rich fund of notes on the manners, customs, mythology, religion and history of the Orient, which later composed the first seven chapters of this famous work. Yet seldom in his tales does Voltaire obtrude his erudition. Volatilised, it clings like an oriental perfume to the gauzy tissue of incredible adventures which animate his narratives. You would not guess, for instance, that the farcical episode called *Le Nez* is adapted from a Chinese tale which the author unearthed from the learned Duhalde’s *Description de la Chine*. And who would suspect that the chapter entitled *Le Bûcher*, with its gay dénouement, reflects Voltaire’s profound interest in the psychological origins of Indian suttee? Yet read his article *Brachmanes* in the *Dictionnaire Philosophique* for a concise and fascinating disquisition on this subject.

When *Zadig* first appeared, one of its reviewers, the Abbé de la Porte, observed that Voltaire’s chief object was to show that everything which happens in the world is the result of a power independent of our will. And he concludes: ‘C’est presque l’Islamisme des Turcs, le Fatum des Anciens . . .’. But the abbé’s statement requires

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considerable elucidation. The lesson Voltaire wants to inculcate in *Zadig* is contained in Jesrad's remark that there is no such thing as chance : ' tout est épreuve ou punition ou récompense ou prévoyance '. What *Zadig* finally learns from his experience of that bewildering chaos of individual vices, follies, ambitions and passions called social intercourse, is that we are all puppets dancing at the will of an unseen Power, or, as Voltaire elsewhere observed, ' les marionnettes de la Providence '. Here is a young man endowed with unusual intelligence, prudence and common sense—that most uncommon faculty whose function is to enable us to live on tolerably comfortable terms with our fellow creatures. Yet, at every turn, these qualities are rendered useless because of certain apparent contingencies. *Zadig's* free-will, then, seems to play little part in the weaving of that crazy design we call our destiny. Shakespeare, it will be recalled, thought otherwise when he urged us not to blame the stars but seek within ourselves the cause of our misfortunes. But, as *Zadig* reveals, Voltaire insists that we are never masters of ourselves. We are, he wrote to Frederick II, in 1741, ' des machines faites pour aller un certain temps comme il plaît à Dieu '. Life, as seen by us, he infers, is only a tiny fragment of a rationally organised cosmic system, the pattern of which is known only to the Great Artist of the universe in which our little globe resembles an atom of dust, swarming with insects busily engaged in striving against one another. Ever since the dawn of time, metaphysicians have tried to visualise this master-plan—a futile occupation.

Yet it is easy to prove from Voltaire's own narrative that many of *Zadig's* misfortunes occur not because he has no free-will, but because he misuses this faculty. It was his duty as a *galant homme* and experienced courtier to know what should be done when a lady drops her garter. By an

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unpardonable oversight, he provokes the implacable enmity of the *Envieuse* and finds himself involved in a chain of horrible disasters. The fault lay not in his stars but in himself. After all, had he not read in the first book of Zarathustra that *amour-propre* is a bladder swollen with wind out of which, if pricked, tempests emerge? Again, it was not because he had no free-will that Zadig was obliged to flee the king's jealous rage. It was his passion for Astarte which, although undeclared, kept him at her side when common sense advised a temporary absence from Court.

But, of course, Voltaire was never really a convinced determinist, and in spite of occasional doubts, never completely denied the principle of human liberty. *Zadig* reflects this uncertainty, this dilemma which continually exercised his mind. According to the doctrine of determinism, the universe is a mechanical system, all the elements of which are necessarily linked. And since man is a mere fragment of the cosmos, we ought, therefore, to be able to predict his acts, just as astronomers can foretell the movements of the heavenly bodies. Now, though Voltaire's reactions to this desolating philosophy were strongly influenced by his immediate experience, he never finally accepted the view that the events and phenomena of the whole universe are linked by a rigorous causality. For one thing, as a disciple of Newton and Locke, he must have observed the essential incompatibility of pure fatalism and of an empiricism which favoured the idea of liberty precisely because it restored to philosophy the notion of contingency—the sentiment that certain things *might* have happened otherwise or that we *might* have acted differently. This, surely, is implied in Zadig's eloquent 'Mais . . .' which is Voltaire's own reaction to Jesrad's 'Il n'y point de hasard . . .'.

A modern Zadig, familiar with Bergson, would have been

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able to substantiate his ‘ Mais . . . ’ and to point out the fallacy in Jesrad’s reasoning. The latter implies that according to the Leibnizian ‘ loi du meilleur ’ he simply had to set fire to his benefactor’s house and drown the poor widow’s nephew. But Jesrad, as Bergson would maintain, observes these actions after they have occurred and thus has no difficulty in substituting for them the result which every act leaves like a trace behind it. This result is an object, a thing, the inertia of which appears to justify the determinist’s theory. But what may be valid in the case of material actions, such as the fall of a stone from a cliff—in obedience to purely physical laws—does not apply to a human activity in the process of seeking the act it will perform. This the determinist cannot possibly foresee, since the life of the mind is qualitative, whereas the realm of determinism is the material universe. It deals, like science, only with what can be weighed or measured.

Zadig is obviously, therefore, a work which says more than it appears to say, and indeed it says more to us than it did to the eighteenth-century reader or even to its author. That is precisely why *Zadig* is a classic. But all Voltaire’s stories, whatever their philosophic content (which is often slight), succeed in holding the reader’s attention to the very last page. This is not because they reveal hitherto unexplored regions of the human soul. As in *Zadig*, the characters portrayed by Voltaire lack psychological density. They exteriorise, in their actions rather than in their utterances, certain primary traits: courage, jealousy, kindness, brutality, stupidity or malice. Sometimes they resemble algebraic symbols whose significance depends on the functions arbitrarily imparted to them by the author. Yet with what superb *élan* Voltaire recounts the incredible adventures of these almost synthetic creations whose ultimate fate really never matters to the reader; for who

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cares whether or not Zadig finally marries Astarte? What really fascinates us is the elegance and *esprit* of Voltaire's narrative style. Wit or *esprit*, he once remarked, is not simply a question of discovering the right word or figure of speech. That, no doubt, enables a writer to present his ideas with energy and clarity. But to infuse a phrase with *esprit* the author must possess the talent for associating ideas which are apparently incompatible, or again, for dissociating or contrasting things normally regarded as inseparable. Above all, Voltaire infers, *esprit* is the art of knowing when to stop communicating an idea: 'l'art de ne dire qu'à moitié sa pensée pour la laisser deviner'.

If there is a little more disillusionment and somewhat less optimism in *Memnon ou la Sagesse* it is perhaps because 1749 was an unpleasant year for Voltaire. At Versailles, his enemies now loudly proclaimed the veteran Crébillon as the greatest French dramatist, and were enthusiastically abetted by Voltaire's former ally, Mme de Pompadour. Furious at the welcome accorded to his rival by the critics and the undiscerning public, he let himself become involved in a welter of polemic, and, in order to demonstrate his own superiority, launched a series of tragedies on themes already treated by Crébillon. He attached himself now to the puppet court of Stanislas of Lorraine, where his impiety shocked the older members of the King's household. But the crowning disaster was the loss of his friend Mme du Châtelet, who died shortly after having given birth to a child whose father was a brilliant young officer and budding *philosophe* called Saint-Lambert.

Memnon, like Voltaire, is a victim of the illusion that by observing the golden rule of temperance in all things a man can attain perfect happiness and tranquillity. Memnon resolves to keep clear of women and to be content with a modest fortune. Living soberly, independent of Court

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society, envying no one, what can possibly happen to disturb the even tenor of his existence? But Voltaire tells us what does happen the moment this sage puts his head outside his window. Is it concupiscence or natural goodness that prompts Memnon to take that first fatal step which leads to bankruptcy and the loss of an eye? According to his good genius, it was the folly of imagining that any mere mortal can ever be perfectly wise or happy. Perfection in anything is incompatible with life on our planet. Yet Pascal, whom Voltaire perhaps had in mind when he wrote this *conte*, would have suggested a different reason for Memnon's plight. Remember what he says in *Les Pensées* (139): ' . . . j'ai découvert que tout le malheur des hommes vient d'une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos, dans une chambre '.

Bababec ou les Fakirs (1750) is a brief yet savage attack on brahminism, which illuminates Voltaire's temperamental inability to grasp the essential nature of oriental mysticism or the significance of the religious exercises systematised in *yoga*. *Bababec* is, in fact, a variant of his famous gibe at Pascal: ' Les saints ont des plaisirs que je ne connais pas '. Omri, the sensible Brahmin, persuades the fakir to abandon his grotesque rites, but the holy man, on realising that he is no longer an object of public interest, goes back to his self-maceration.

Voltaire dispenses with the oriental setting in *Micromégas* (1752), which he describes simply as an *histoire philosophique*. Instead of Ithuriel or Jesrad, therefore, we meet an inhabitant of Sirius and his butt, the scientist from Saturn, who is obviously Fontenelle, the venerable Secretary of the Académie des Sciences (which, by the way, had never admitted Voltaire to its ranks). Fontenelle, moreover, had temporarily fallen from grace because of his friendship with some enemies of Voltaire. The latter seems also to have been

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out of humour at this juncture with the French scientists La Mettrie and Maupertuis, with whom he consorted in Potsdam—where *Micromégas* was written. This is how Voltaire writes of Maupertuis in November 1750 to his niece, Mme Denis: ‘Maupertuis n’a pas les ressorts bien liants. Il prend mes dimensions durement avec son quart de cercle’. We have no difficulty, therefore, in identifying ‘le raisonneur de la troupe’, armed with his ‘quart de cercle’ or quadrant, who coolly proceeds to take the dimensions of *Micromégas* in Chapter VI. And Maupertuis was actually one of the members of that scientific expedition to Bothnia whose activities are so amusingly parodied in Voltaire’s tale. *Micromégas* was not, however, written simply to ventilate the author’s private grudges, nor to belittle the achievements of experimental science. On the contrary, the Sirien is deeply impressed by the intelligence of the ‘atomes pensants’ whom he ranks amongst the ‘petit nombre des sages’.

How, then, are we to interpret *Micromégas*? Though admittedly inspired by *Gulliver’s Travels*, it is not the work of a confirmed misanthrope dwelling with savage delight on the follies and vices of humanity. No doubt, with few exceptions, the world seems inhabited by madmen, rogues and unfortunates. It is also true that *Micromégas*, angered by the spectacle of thousands of idiots slaughtering one another for a heap of mud which none of them wants, is tempted to put his foot through this ‘fourmilière d’assassins ridicules’. That, however, he is blandly informed, would be an act of supererogation. Why not leave it to the highly efficient sedentary barbarians responsible for these mass-killings? When Voltaire conceived this fantasy he was pre-occupied, I think, with the problem of human progress which is implicit in the questions addressed by *Micromégas* to the savants and

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especially in their replies. Man is a being composed of mind and matter. Must we look for the source of evil in man's efforts to satisfy his material needs or does it stem, as Rousseau passionately maintained, from the foolish scientific aspirations of modern man, from his unnatural desire for intellectual progress? Is not this the problem adumbrated in the reply made by the 'animalcule philosophique' to the visitor from Sirius? Voltaire does not attempt to explore the question but, instead, wheels round to attack the metaphysicians—the disciples of Aristotle, Descartes, Malesherbes, Leibniz or St Thomas of Aquinas—all of whose systems he shamelessly distorts and mercilessly ridicules. The only philosophy which meets with his approval is the sensualism of Locke, who admits the possibility that God endowed matter with thought; in other words that the soul may be material and yet immortal.

We are no longer basking, it seems, in the relatively sunny climate of the earlier *contes*. Indeed, at times, particularly in the incidents described in Chapters V and VI, Voltaire's jokes fall flat, probably because there he is imitating Swift, an author whose comic genius is alien to his own. Voltaire is happier in those amusing duologues between Micromégas and the Saturnien, for then he is in his natural element, and 'le mot pour rire' is spontaneously generated by the clash and friction of ideas.

We may pass quickly over *Les deux Consolés* (1756), which is really an anecdote designed to show that when we are in trouble it is cold comfort to be told that the illustrious figures of history suffered even more grievous misfortunes.

In *L'Histoire des Voyages de Scarmentado* (1756) Voltaire reverts to his ideal medium, the traveller's tale, which allows him to present, in a variety of attractive settings, a fascinating panorama of cosmopolitan manners and ideas. As we follow, however, the exciting narrative of

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Scarmentado's adventures in Italy, France, England, Spain, Turkey, China and Africa, it becomes painfully clear that whilst all these countries have different *mœurs* and traditions, all are united by a common vice: intolerance, trailing in its wake cruelty, fanaticism and perpetual strife. 'Vous avez le nez long et nous l'avons plat', explains Scarmentado's negro captor, 'vos cheveux sont tout droits et notre laine est frisée; vous avez la peau couleur de cendre et nous couleur d'ébène; par conséquent nous devons par les lois sacrées de la nature être toujours ennemis.' To this, Scarmentado ironically remarks, there is no possible reply. Therefore, after having seen all that is 'beautiful, good and admirable' on this earth he resolves henceforth to stay at home. And this, we shall see, is the maxim reluctantly adopted by Candide as a result of his even more unpleasant world tour.

Le Songe de Platon (1756) affords a brief glimpse of Voltaire's general attitude to life just three years after the German fiasco. In Plato's dream, Demiourgos or the Eternal Geometer desires to test the abilities of the geniuses who had watched him creating the Universe. He requests one of them, Démagorgon, to see what he can fashion out of the tiny fragment of matter we call the Earth. But the resulting work of art is satirically criticised by the geniuses who have just created Jupiter and Mars. Poor Démagorgon ruefully admits that he has not turned out a masterpiece, for it certainly reveals the presence of such disagreeable elements as physical and moral evil. Yet, he protests, it is no easy matter to fashion a human animal who shall be consistently reasonable, endowed with free-will, and who can yet be trusted never to abuse his liberty. He has not produced a flawless work of art: only the Eternal Geometer can achieve perfection. But he stoutly asserts that there is on the whole more good than evil in his creation. And this

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also is Voltaire's general view. Yet, only three years later, in a spirit of savage mockery he conceived *Candide*, which apparently reflects a radical change of outlook. For in this tale he presents us with the vision of a world where evil in every imaginable form reigns supreme; where at every turn we are gleefully invited to witness the sorry role played by the human virtues in Voltaire's diabolic Morality.

Now, one may easily form a wrong impression of *Candide* and dismiss it as the work of an intellectual dilettante for whom ideas were, as for Anatole France, 'd'agréables passantes'; who found in the spectacle of human misery merely an excellent opportunity for a coruscating display of intellectual fireworks, of elegantly phrased yet superficial comments on the imbecility of human nature viewed in the mass. That would be to miss, however, the seriousness underlying Voltaire's ironical survey, the genuine sympathy for humanity latent in his bitter satire of Leibnizian optimism, or rather what he mistook for the philosophy of Leibniz. *Candide*, as we shall observe, will not bear such an interpretation, and it does not, in fact, reflect any fundamental divergence from the outlook on life illustrated by Voltaire in *Scarmantado*, in *Le Songe de Platon* or, above all, in his *Poème sur le Désastre de Lisbonne* (1756), which contains these illuminating lines:

' Le passé n'est pour nous qu'un triste souvenir;
 Le présent est affreux, s'il n'est point d'avenir,
 Si la nuit du tombeau détruit l'être qui pense.
Un jour tout sera bien, voilà notre espérance;
 Tout est bien aujourd'hui, voilà l'illusion.'

No one familiar with the life and writings of Voltaire can fail to discern in this poem the sentiments and accents of one whose psychological existence had just been profoundly disturbed and reoriented. This is precisely what occurred in 1753 when Voltaire, shocked and humiliated by his

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detention at Mainz on the orders of Frederick II, suddenly realised at the age of fifty-nine that he was an exile. Paris was closed to him and tentative, unofficial enquiries revealed that Louis XV, who regarded him as an unpatriotic Frenchman, would prefer him to be domiciled outside France. Voltaire, therefore, installed himself first in Switzerland, and later, just outside Geneva, on the beloved soil of his own country, though conveniently near the frontier.

In the interval between his inglorious exit from Germany and the composition of *Candide* he found nothing to modify the pessimism of his new outlook on life. The terrible earthquake at Lisbon reinforced his hatred of the imbeciles like Rousseau, who refused to acknowledge the existence of evil as a terrible reality, stubbornly maintaining, after Pope, that the general good is composed of individual misfortunes. In 1757 a European war broke out, and Voltaire became reconciled with Frederick, now driven to thoughts of suicide by his military defeats. Fresh from his vast survey of world history, the author of the *Essai sur les Mœurs* discovered nothing in the past to authorise a belief in the continuous progress of humanity. On the contrary, he was enraged by the docility with which the stupid herd invariably yielded to their persecutors, and allowed themselves to be gulled by hypocrites and fanatics. In this mood Voltaire wrote *Candide*, which reflects by its very irony his anger at the bovine resignation with which the vast majority of human beings accept their misery; the blind selfishness, avarice and stupidity that prevent men from uniting to combat the obstacles to a happier existence for all humanity. The mockery of Voltaire is intended as a goad to self-criticism and as a stimulus to revolt.

Yet, it may be objected, if such was Voltaire's purpose, why did he not write a serious novel portraying the tragic

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experiences of credible characters in credible situations? The answer is that Voltaire knew his limitations. Lacking the true novelist's faculty of self-hallucination, he could only parody the art and technique of a genre which he had always openly despised. 'Nous eûmes longtemps' he once wrote, 'neuf muses; la saine critique est la dixième qui est venue bien tard.' And criticism was Voltaire's favourite Muse. He could criticise life but he could not, like the great dramatist or novelist, re-create life by Art.

Candide resembles nothing so much as a film of animated cartoons. The characters are like puppets caught up in a stream of extravagant events which are projected, however, with such rapidity that the spectator has no time to reflect on their essential incredibility. The continuity is achieved by the traditional device of making every new character relate his or her adventures, thus accentuating by a cumulative process the general effect aimed at by the scenario-writer. Voltaire's object here, as in *Zadig*, is to present human existence as an illogical succession of unpleasant, sudden and unpredictable incidents. Little attempt is made to analyse the psychology of the characters. Each, as a rule, incarnates a particular comic obsession which determines his behaviour and is strongly reflected in his utterances. Candide is the naive young disciple of Pangloss, who is the disciple of Leibniz. He is the dewy-eyed greenhorn, 'toujours étonné de tout' whose conception of life has been formed at an early age by his tutor. Candide and Pangloss are comic for the same reason. Governed by the *idée fixe* that, whatever happens, the world they live in is the best of all possible worlds, they are impelled like robots along the track illuminated by their ruling obsession. What makes them absurd is their automatism, their obstinate refusal to be moved from their rut by experience, which vainly keeps hammering in the lesson that life contains precious little to

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justify their optimism. The ridiculous Baron Thunder-ten-tronck caricatures the *Von und zu* mentality, which Voltaire must certainly have encountered in Germany, with its scores of petty princelings and swarms of titled Junkers. What of Cunégonde, the bovine Teutonic Cunégonde? Voltaire's satire of the other sex usually takes the form of a gallant, oblique tribute to feminine beauty, malice and intelligence. But Cunégonde represents everything that is purely carnal in woman, unrelieved by feminine charm or intelligence. And Candide's quixotic infatuation for this pink and white plump Westphalian blonde is Voltaire's jeering comment on the imbecility of *l'amour courtois* which in various forms had saturated imaginative literature ever since the Middle Ages. Note the general impression that emerges from the narrative of Candide's obstinate pursuit of his dream woman; the ridiculous contrast between his vision of a perennially lovely, fragile Cunégonde exposed to unthinkable dangers and the savagely realistic picture of a Cunégonde who rather enjoys, if anything, the multiple assaults committed upon her person or, at any rate, quickly forgets her experiences. These, as the old woman constantly reminds us, are mere bagatelles, and on this matter she can certainly speak with authority.

In a different category is Martin, who, after the hanging of Dr Pangloss by the Inquisition, assumes the latter's functions as mentor to Candide yet without shaking our hero's faith in his old tutor. Martin the sceptic and misanthrope is comic in a different way, for we laugh with him and not at him. That is because his *idée fixe*, his unswerving pessimism, although inflexible, is less irrational than the optimism of Pangloss and Candide. Excessive no doubt, it conforms more or less to reality. Martin, like Pocourante, reflects in some degree Voltaire's low opinion of the eighteenth century—'sot et petit'. They are both

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experimentalists, independent thinkers whose conclusions are based on the examination of facts. Pangloss, on the contrary, is an *a priorist* who contrives always to distort facts so as to fit them into the cadre of his preconceived idea of the universe. But we must not insist too much on the parallel between Voltaire and Pococurante. ‘Quel homme supérieur!’ exclaims the naïve Candide, ‘rien ne peut lui plaire!’ Note, however, Martin’s sensible objection that the best stomachs are not those which reject all nourishment. In short, the connoisseur, in his quest for absolute beauty in art, may easily lose his aesthetic sense altogether, like the gourmet who feeds only on exquisite viands. On the other hand, there is a valuable lesson implied in Pococurante’s irreverent remarks on the Classics. Do not let us imitate the undiscerning admiration of the mob for works of art simply because they carry the respectable seal of antiquity. It is good from time to time to break the seals and with an unprejudiced yet critical eye to reassess these venerable productions. Here, as in our attitude to every form of experience, we must form our own opinions and ideas or else risk becoming a Pangloss or a Candide.

Now we can discern the serious and constructive aspect of Voltaire’s masterpiece. We laugh heartily at Candide and his tutor because they go through life wearing blinkers. But our laughter abruptly ceases if we reflect, like Voltaire, that there are far too many people in the world wearing blinkers. He had in mind the metaphysicians Leibniz and Wolf, with their doctrine of ‘pre-established harmony’, and the ‘cause-finaliers’ who could see the hand of a beneficent Providence even in the earthquake at Lisbon. It is on these escapists whom he regarded as public enemies that Voltaire, in *Candide*, lets loose the fearful barrage of his mockery. Their unforgivable crime is the refusal to see that evil is a terrible reality, and their futile, dangerous efforts to explain

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it away by theology or metaphysics. The first step towards the deliverance of humanity is to face realities, and this Voltaire does most ruthlessly in *Candide*. There is hardly one of his characters who runs the gauntlet of life unscathed. And nearly always the emphasis is laid on physical not moral evil. As Voltaire remarks elsewhere: ‘Le mal moral sur lequel on a écrit tant de volumes n’est au fond que le mal physique’, inferring, no doubt, that a good deal of moral suffering is due to civilised man’s indulgence in morbid sensibility. To this weakness Voltaire certainly does not pander in *Candide* when he describes the havoc wrought by disease, war, lust and the cataclysms of nature. His language is absolutely transparent, so that nothing intervenes between the reader and the brutal realities communicated by the narrator, who betrays, however, in the urgency of his style, the sympathy and impotent rage aroused in him by these calamities.

The implications of *Candide* are fairly obvious. A better world is possible and, if realised, it will probably resemble Voltaire’s El Dorado. Yet, in order to deserve such a world, man must first revise his present scale of values. Otherwise, like Candide, he will always throw away the chance of peace and happiness for a few shining pebbles, or a load of yellow dross. But perhaps, as the morose Martin asserts, evil has its source in the natural constitution of man, who cannot, any more than the sparrow-hawk, escape his predatory instincts. ‘Mais le libre arbitre’, interjects Candide—meaning that men are not, like sparrow-hawks, governed by instinct, but by intelligence. For Voltaire’s opinion upon this question we must consult the article in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* entitled *Causes finales*. There do exist, he points out, sects who hold it a sin to take human life. The stuff of which human nature is made often produces massacres just as it produces calumny, vanity and

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persecution. Originally neither good nor bad, man was placed in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and not to raise hell or to waste his time on profitless speculation on final causes, on the origin of evil or the nature of the soul. These eternal problems must remain insoluble.

Our business is to cultivate our garden and we had better give up at once the notion of an ideal happiness. But we can live tolerably well if we keep out of high politics and devote ourselves with all our might to the job in hand. ‘Le travail éloigne de nous trois grands maux: l’ennui, le vice, le besoin.’ And Martin adds: ‘Travaillons sans raisonner’. In other words, speculation is a luxury: action is a necessity for the bulk of mankind. Does this mean that we are to shut our eyes to what is happening on the other side of our garden wall? Voltaire would be the last surely to advocate such a policy of complete isolation. So at least one might conclude from his splendid and successful efforts on behalf of Calas and other victims of injustice. But the average man does not possess the talent and the influence of a Voltaire, and before reforming the world he would be well advised in the first place to emulate Candide. Thus he can at least bring help and comfort to his own small group and set an example which will eventually benefit all humanity. That, I think, is the lesson Voltaire meant to convey in his picture of Candide’s little colony.

‘Travaillons sans raisonner.’ Yet no sooner had Voltaire enunciated this precept than he realised its ineptitude. In *L’Histoire d’un bon Bramin*, also written in 1759, he confesses his error. Not to use one’s reason is to be a complete though no doubt a happy imbecile, and who would purchase happiness at this price? Man will always perversely set more value on reason than on happiness, a contradiction difficult to explain. ‘Il y a de quoi parler beaucoup’, says Voltaire, who was not, however, in the