VOLTAIRE AND HARRY, CHAPTER 14

Someone once said that salt water is a great cure, be it tears, the sea or sweat. In chapter fourteen of Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery, Suki speaks of the therapeutic and cathartic benefits of working in a garden. She likes to watch things grow and it makes her sad to see things die, but more importantly, when she feels upset, it is the work in the garden that makes her feel better. She tells Anne, "It's funny, sometimes when I'm upset, I'll work in the garden, and I'll feel better afterwards." Anne, who is going to have a hard time in this chapter saying almost anything right to Suki, appears to completely miss Suki's point when she asks why Suki's parents don't tend the garden. The point for Suki isn't the work involved in tending the garden but rather the benefits she derives from doing such work.

Gardening has a similar symbolic significance in Voltaire's Candide wherein the author rejects, as his hero, Candide, comes to reject, the life of idle reason in favor of a life of meaningful work. Using outrageous absurdities and poignant satire, Voltaire both repudiates reasoning that has no purpose and mocks the institutions, the people and the beliefs of his era. He accomplishes all this by sending his hero on a quest, a quest that exposes him to all the ugliness, the squalor, the brutality, and the absurdity of the world. Candide even comes to realize how important travel is because it exposes him to how different things are in other parts of the world. "This is very different from Westphalia and the castle of My Lord the Baron; if our friend Pangloss and seen Eldorado he would no longer have said that the castle of Thunder-ten-tronckh was the best thing on earth; travel is certainly necessary."

Thus, it seems to me that Voltaire is doing two things in his story. First, he is satirizing much of the injustice and absurdity he sees in the world of the eighteenth century; nothing is sacred. He mocks the Inquisition, the Jesuits, the Jews, the French, and the English as this passage shows:

> *"You know England; are they as mad there as in France?" "It's another kind of madness," said Martin. "You know that these two nations are at war over a few acres of snow out around Canada, and that they are spending on that fine war much more than all of Canada is worth. As for telling you precisely whether there are more people who need to be locked up in one country or another, that is something that in that my poor lights do not allow me to do. I only know that in general the people we are on our way to see are very gloomy."*

Not only is Voltaire satirizing England and France in this passage, but he also points out the absurdity of war. Similarly, he not only satirizes the Inquisition, but he demonstrates the injustice of religious persecution. His satire is deadly serious, an attempt to persuade people to mend their ways.

Secondly, Voltaire satirizes and rejects a philosophical point of view and presents an alternative to that viewpoint. It is the philosophy of Pangloss, Candide's tutor, that Voltaire refutes. Pangloss believes, and evidently has persuaded Candide to unquestioningly believe, that both there is no effect without a cause and that this is the best of all possible worlds. Throughout the story, Voltaire satirizes this philosophy and this optimism. Pangloss is even able to find optimism in the gonorrhea he catches from Paquette, and Candide is almost able to maintain his tutor's optimism throughout the story in spite of all the counter-examples he sees and the arguments to

the contrary presented by his friend Martin. Several times Candide seems to waver and begins to recognize the absurdity of Pangloss's philosophy, but he always returns to it. He tells his friend Cacambo that optimism is "the mania of maintaining that all is well when we are miserable!" And yet, when Martin points out all the ill will and wickedness that exists in the world, Candide can only reply, "Yet there is some good."

Twice, however, Candide is able to escape from the evil of the world; twice it appears that he is in the best of all possible worlds. In Eldorado, Candide and Cacambo find a country free from religious strife and in which there are neither law courts nor prisons. A benign king rules Eldorado and physics and mathematics are studies of distinction. The people are gracious and neither money nor the ills associated with it exist. Indeed, the gold pebbles that litter the street are deemed worthless. One would think that Candide had finally found the best of all possible worlds. Candide is tempted to think so, but Eldorado lacks Cunegonde, the love of his life, the object of his quest. Perhaps Voltaire is point out here that even what seems to be utopia is not necessarily the best of all possible worlds.

When finally reunited with his love, Cunegonde, his tutor, Pangloss, and his friend, Cacambo, Candide and his philosopher friend Martin all settle down on a small farm. Because they are bored on the farm, they pass their time arguing metaphysics and morality with Martin taking a view opposite that of Pangloss. Whereas Pangloss asserts that this is the best of all possible worlds, Martin thinks it is as he and Candide have actually seen it - miserable. When discussing which of the atrocities they suffered was the worst, Martin "above all concluded that man was born to live in the convulsions of anxiety or the lethargy of boredom. Candide did not agree, but he asserted nothing. Pangloss admitted that he had always suffered horribly; but having once maintained that everything was wonderful, he still maintained it and believed not a bit of it."

A simple farmer, ignorant of worldly affairs and yet perfectly content on his twenty acres, sets the three straight. He has all the material possessions he needs and espouses what I take to be Voltaire's philosophy, "work keeps away three great evils: boredom, vice, and need." Candide takes this Jeffersonian notion to heart and suggests that the three return to their farm to "cultivate our garden." Martin sums up Voltaire's attitude: "Let us work without reasoning, it is the only way to make life endurable."

Voltaire feels that action is what is important; reason without action is empty and impotent. Suki also recognizes the therapeutic value of work; for her it not only makes life endurable, but it also smooths out the rough spots.

As for me, your author, I'm going out to tend my cows.

Walter N. Plaut, Jr.

Sources

Matthew Lipman. Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery. New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation, 1982. 2. Voltaire. Candide. New York: New American Library, 1961.