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**HEADLINE:** VOLTAIRE'S GARDEN;

The philosopher as a campaigner for human rights.

**BYLINE:** ADAM GOPNIK

**BODY:**

**Voltaire**, like God, whom he patronized, is always there. "No authors ever had so much fame in their own life-time as Pope and **Voltaire**," Dr. Johnson dogmatized in the late eighteenth century, and though Pope still sings for those with ears to hear him, **Voltaire** still squabbles, a more lifelike sound, and does it everywhere. On the Op-Ed page of the *Times*, he can ornament Paul Krugman or offend William Safire, and he is fun to read about, no matter what he is doing. In fact, he is most fun to read about when what he is doing is doing good, since he does good without being pious, an unusual mixture. For all that he was a mad egomaniac and an unabashed self-promoter, he remains matchlessly entertaining company, incapable of either shame or shoddy thinking.

There are at least three distinct **Voltaires**. First is the scandalous **Voltaire**, who by the seventeenth-twenties had become the leading controversialist in France, with a series of topically loaded plays and poems, only to be thrown into the Bastille twice for being generally annoying, and in 1726 get exiled to England, where he absorbed and wrote about English learning and English parliamentary institutions. Next, there is the scientific **Voltaire**, who returned to France in 1728 and eventually became the lover and disciple of the brilliant Mme. Chatelet, and who, closeted with her at her Chateau de Cire, wrote on math and science and did more than almost anyone else to bring the news of Newtonian physics to Europe. Then, from the seventeen-fifties until his death, in 1778, there is the socially conscious **Voltaire, the Voltaire** who became one of the first human-rights campaigners in Europe, and whose determination to remake the world one soul at a time W. H. Auden could still idealize in 1939, in his poem "**Voltaire** at Ferney." ("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.")

Although no single volume in English does justice to all the **Voltaires**, the second, scientific **Voltaire**, at least, inspired one of the most blissfully entertaining books in the language, Nancy Mitford's 1954

"**Voltaire** in Love," an account of his great affair with Mme. Chatelet and of their joint introduction to the pleasures of sex and calculus. It is de rigueur to dismiss Mitford as a reckless amateur who, as someone said, made the Enlightenment *philosophes* into members of her family. But they *were* members of her family-or more like them than they were like the kind of responsible, well-read, judicious dons, offering syntheses of current thought, beloved of academic historians. **Voltaire** spent his life with society people and show people, and lived in terror of boredom, not inconsistency. Mitford understands **Voltaire's** mixture of bad faith, irascible egotism, genuine altruism, and sporadic courage, all played out in an atmosphere of petty literary politicking-in part because the type remains intact in France to this day.

Ian Davidson, a longtime correspondent for the *Financial Times*, has, in his new book, "**Voltaire** in Exile" (Grove; \$24), taken on the story of the last **Voltaire**. **This Voltaire** evolves out of the two others; in fact, they are still right there. The old, good **Voltaire** was exactly the same man as the young rascal, and the rascality fuelled the goodness with energy and mischief. Yet the transformation is complete: in 1753, at the beginning of Davidson's story, **Voltaire** was, in contemporary terms, like Michael Moore and Susan Sontag all mixed up: a provocateur who was also a universal literary celebrity. By the end, he was more like a cross between Andrei Sakharov and Mr. Toad of Toad Hall-a conceited grand bourgeois with a big house who was also one of the first dissidents, embodying a whole alternative set of values, and who came to be treated even by the government almost as an independent state within a state. How this came about, and without any Tolstoyan repentance or self-remaking, is one of the great stories of literary evolution.

Davidson tells it well, too. In 1753, **Voltaire** was in flight from Frederick the Great, of Prussia, who had taken him in as a kind of house philosopher at Potsdam. **Voltaire** may have imagined that he would rule hand in hand, philosopher and king, but soon discovered that he was there merely as an exotic intellectual toy. ("We shall squeeze the orange," Frederick had said, secretly, "then, when we have swallowed the juice, we shall throw it away.") Even after the falling-out with Frederick, **Voltaire** knew that he had some big guns on his side. The foreign minister of France, the Duke de Choiseul, was a fan, as was Mme. Pompadour, the King's mistress, not to mention the Empress of Russia. He was also, luckily, very rich, in no small part because of his participation in a bizarre swindle devised by a mathematician friend, who, back in 1728, realized that the French government had authorized a lottery in which the prize was much greater than the collective cost of the tickets. He and **Voltaire** formed a syndicate, collected all the money, and became moneylenders to the great houses of Europe.

During his escape from Frederick, **Voltaire** first thought of going back to France, which he loved as only Frenchmen who have been away from it can. But a message from his old friend Mme. Pompadour confirmed the stunning news that the King had exiled him and forbidden him to return. (This turned out to be not quite true; the old man had probably said something merely pettish, like "Tell him to stay away!") The terms of his exile were unclear, but **Voltaire** decided to move someplace close enough to feel like France and far enough away to keep him out of the official grip. He chose Geneva, which was then a small, suspicious Calvinist Protestant city-state. Through the good offices of a prominent Geneva friend, he found, and managed to rent, a small estate. He moved in with his new love, Mme. Denis, and renamed the villa Les Delices, the Delights. Although it was his later, sister retreat at Ferney that became legendary (he moved there in 1765, after a series of feuds with the Calvinist authorities in

Geneva), it was his escape to Les Delices that marked a new epoch in his life.

**Voltaire's** work, to this point, consisted essentially of a mass of journalism, essays, poems, potted, vivid histories, and historical plays all pulled together in the public imagination by a single strong personality. The "philosophy" that ran through it, though allergic to sectarian piety, was still officially Deist-partly because this was insurance against accusations of atheism, partly because, in a slightly condescending spirit, **Voltaire** was in favor of a benign, supervisory God in the way that British leftists used to be in favor of the Queen, or in the way that Yankee free agents are in favor of Joe Torre; it's nice to think that someone genial is overseeing things. But there doesn't seem to be any evidence that he actually believed, with any intensity or appetite, in "spiritual" experience, or found the sense of God's presence even momentarily engaging. But then **Voltaire** was never exactly a "philosopher" in the conventional sense; his philosophy is almost always a moral instinct rendered as a dramatic gesture, rather than consecutive thoughts turned into a logical argument. As with Victor Hugo and Zola, his moral instincts were so good that we still intellectualize the dramatic gestures they became.

He quickly turned his exile into a desirable condition-a version of the ancient Horatian ideal of escape from the corrupting city into a small enclosed country house. Pope had done the same thing when he built his grotto at his little house in Twickenham, and wrote about it as enthusiastically. Yet Pope's grotto is playful, an obvious mock hermitage. **Voltaire's** ideas were far more bourgeois; he wanted to play host to as many people as he could, and to build the sweetest **garden** he could, and, after renting the villa, he started shopping like Martha Stewart newly freed from prison.

There are few more premonitory or touching documents than **Voltaire's** shopping lists. He demanded green olive oil, eight wing armchairs, rosewood commodes, and furniture covers in red morocco. He hired two master gardeners, twenty workmen, and twelve servants. He ordered the best coffee and crate after crate of wine (though, odd reminder of another time, he drank his Burgundies and laid down his Beaujolais). He decided to paint the trellises green, the tiles red, and the doors either white or "a fine yellow." He wrote to his agent asking for "artichoke bulbs and as much as possible of lavender, thyme, rosemary, mint, basil, rue strawberry bushes, pinks, thadicee, balm, tarragon, sariette, burnet, sage and hyssop to cleanse our sins, etc." When he wrote that it was our duty to cultivate our **garden**, he really knew what it meant to cultivate a **garden**.

It was a **garden** with a principle. It represented what he saw as a new, French ideal of domestic happiness, windows wide and doors open, "simplicity" itself. "We have finally come to enjoy luxury only in taste and convenience," he wrote in those years, in his history "The Age of Louis XIV": "The crowd of pages and liveried servants has disappeared." All that counted now was "affable manners, simple living and the culture of the mind." Of course, it was a very Petit Trianon simplicity. As Davidson shows, though, it was deeply, emotionally rich: "He was enjoying real happiness, for the first time in his life."

It was at this moment of delight and apparent retreat, of affable manners and simple living, that he began the series of crusades that eventually blossomed into the human-rights campaigns that came to dominate the rest of his life. It would be nice to say that **Voltaire** was a courageous man whom no amount of comfort could seduce. The truth is that, as his friend Condorcet wrote sadly, he was easily

terrified, and often a coward: "He was often seen to expose himself to the storm, almost with temerity, but seldom to stand up to it with firmness." And, of course, no man of fewer sublime feelings has ever lived; he was baffled by religion and spirituality, materialist and carnal to the core.

What motivated him, then, to start up? Partly it must have been that he so much enjoyed vexing stupid powerful people that he kept forgetting that stupid people who had gained power were never stupid about threats to their power. Each time he poked the silly tiger and the tiger clawed back, he was genuinely shocked. And then there is a kind of egotism so vast and so pleased with itself that it includes other people as an extension of itself. **Voltaire** felt so much for other people because he felt so much for himself; everything happened to him because he was the only reasonable subject of everything that happened. By inflating his ego to immense proportions, he made it a shelter for the helpless.

But there was something else, too. His exile moved him away from court practices and court values, with their hypersensitivity toward status, toward family practices and family values, with their hypersensitivity toward security. (In these Delices years, he took in and later adopted a teen-age daughter, and began to sigh that he had never had children of his own.) As Tocqueville saw half a century later, home-making, which ought to make people more selfish, makes them less so; it gives them a stake in other people's houses. It is not so much the establishment of a **garden** but the ownership of a gate that moves people from liking a society based on favors to one based on rights. Enclosing his **garden** broadened **Voltaire's** circle of compassion. When people were dragged from *their gardens* to be tortured and killed in the name of faith, he began to take it, as they say, personally.

In those days, unspeakably cruel tortures were still routine in the French penal system. Condemned criminals were tortured by being broken on the wheel-that is, being bound on a scaffold to a wheel and then having their bones broken, one by one, with an iron bar. Davidson suggests (shrewdly and originally) that **Voltaire's** sense of outrage may have been galvanized by the hideous execution in Paris of the would-be assassin of Louis XV, the mad Damiens, in 1757. Damiens was pulled apart alive, his limbs attached to four horses and the horses driven in different directions, for public instruction in the center of Paris. **Voltaire** was no fan of regicide. It was because he was for the execution that the public torture frightened him: it was a sign of how quickly civilities could disintegrate under threat. ("Enlightened times will only enlighten a small number of honest men," he wrote. "The common people will always be fanatical.") He coined his most famous phrase, *écrasez l'infame*- "Crush the horror"-and began to use it, in jauntily (and evasively) abbreviated form. Historians have fussed for centuries about exactly what **Voltaire** meant by it-the Catholic Church? the Court?-but it's clear. The horror was the alliance of religious fanaticism with the instruments of the state, and the two combined for torture and official murder.

It is against this background, of a **garden** built and the encroaching fanatics, that **Voltaire** wrote "Candide," in 1759. Two fine new translations of the book have just appeared, one by Burton Raffel (Yale; \$22) and one by Peter Constantine (Modern Library; \$19.95). The young Candide lives in the little German principality of Thunder Ten Tronck, under the guidance of his tutor, Pangloss, a theorist of optimism. A liaison with his beloved Cunegonde causes him to be exiled, and soon afterward the principality is sacked by the Bulgars, who rape Cunegonde and leave Pangloss for dead. Candide then encounters every kind of eighteenth-century horror, from enslavement by the Turks to bondage on a

French galley, and ends up on a little farm near Constantinople, wisely counselling Pangloss that the only worthwhile thing for people to do is to cultivate their **gardens**.

"Candide" is such a familiar book that it is easy to miss its real target. What marks it off from most other didactic literature, as Davidson says, is its gaiety; the disembowelings and rapes are drawn with breezily overdone matter-of-factness. The tone is like that of the Monty Python movies, which are genuinely appalled by violence but register their shock by making it absurd. "Candide" is said to have been occasioned by the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, a tsunami-like event, and is meant to satirize the optimism associated with Leibniz. It is also usually said to be unfair to Leibniz, a great philosopher, who was among the inventors of calculus. Leibniz's view, after all, was not that everything was good but that our world was the best *possible*. Given that God could have considered every world before he made it, he must have chosen the best one-so that if there is suffering and evil in it, these things must have a cause in the mind of God. Given that the deity is benevolent, small-scale pain must be part of some universal balance, or, as Pope puts it in his "Essay on Man," "All discord harmony not understood; / All partial evil, universal good." Leibniz and Pope after him are arguing not that life will always be happy but that the world is optimally designed. Suffering is explicable-not defensible but explicable.

But **Voltaire** was not unfair to Leibniz. He understood exactly what Leibniz was saying, and has Pangloss say it. On the tutor's first appearance, he gives the classic instance: pigs are made to be eaten and so we have pork. It seems hard only from the narrow point of view of the pig. "Those who have suggested that everything is good have spoken obtusely," Pangloss explains, in Raffel's rendering. "What they should have said is that everything is for the best." **Voltaire's** point was that the two ideas are, in concrete terms, the same idea. Insisting that everything is for the best means finding the best in everything. To subsume individual suffering or pain within a larger equilibrium is to accept the logic of the slaughterhouse. The pig has a right to his protest.

**Voltaire's** target throughout "Candide" is not optimism in the sense of fatuous cheerfulness but optimism in the sense of optimal thinking: the kind of bland reassurance that explains pain with reference to a larger plan or history. In this way, the Christmas tsunami cannot have for **Voltaire's** readers today anything approaching the force that a natural disaster like the Lisbon earthquake had for the eighteenth century. Few people any longer believe in a benevolent nature-much less a benevolent nature sitting in for a providential God. We can feel comfortably superior to Leibniz's particular brand of optimism, which is centered on natural law of this kind, since we no longer believe that nature is part of an inherently balanced or benevolent system.

But almost all of us still do believe, stubbornly, in some kind of optimal thinking. We believe, vaguely or explicitly, that liberal democracy, with all its faults, is the best of all possible political systems, that globalization, with all its injustices, is the best of all possible futures, and even that the American way is the best of all possible ways-with appropriate cautious Leibnizian emphasis on "possible." (One can track the path, and the travails, of modern popular optimism just by following Thomas Friedman's columns in the *Times*, agonized Tuesday to hopeful Sunday.) We are all optimists of this kind, perhaps reinforced by the doctrines of evolutionary psychology (which say exactly that all discord is harmony misunderstood) or by faith in an inevitable evolving "future of freedom." Attacks on these

beliefs-September 11th was the most acute-shake us up the way eighteenth-century people were shaken by the Lisbon earthquake. The realization that all may not be tending toward the best, that religious fanaticism and tribal intolerance could prevail over liberal meliorism, is the earthquake of our time.

**Voltaire's** radicalism, then and now, lies not in his refutation of optimism but in his refusal of belief. "Candide" is not really, or entirely, a satire on optimism. It is an attack on organized religion. The joke about optimism in "Candide" is always the same joke: something terrible happens, and Pangloss gallantly rationalizes it. The jokes about religious cruelty are mordant, varied, and encyclopedic: every kind of religious intolerance-Muslim, Jewish, and, particularly, Christian, dignified, crude, and greedy-is trotted out and exposed. The one thing that **Voltaire** is sure of in "Candide" is the idiocy of theodicy. What drives him crazy is the ability of religious fanatics to exploit the fatality of the world in order to enact their own cruelties.

In the famous early chapter, the Lisbon earthquake makes a brief Terry Gilliam-slapstick, scene-setting appearance. What happens immediately afterward is the point of the satire: "After the earthquake, which had destroyed three quarters of Lisbon, the country's wise men could find no better way of preventing total ruin than to give the people a beautiful auto-da-fe." **Voltaire** goes on to detail the hideous theatrics of the Inquisition: the yellow robes, the burnings and flogging set to Church music, the whole choreography of Christian cruelty. The point of "Candide" is that the rapes and disembowelments, the enslavement and the beatings are not part of some larger plan, not a fact of the fatality of life and the universe, but fiendish tortures thought up by fanatics. They may be omnipresent; but they are not inevitable. **Voltaire** thinks optimism merely silly. It is the flight from failed optimism into faith that he fears.

Against the horrors of religious cruelty and the emptiness of religious apologia, **Voltaire** proposes-what, exactly? Burton Raffel, the more daring of the two new translators, takes that most familiar ending, "*Il faut cultiver notre jardin*," and translates it not as "We must cultivate our **garden**" but, startlingly, as "We need to work our fields." (Raffel is a translator who doesn't mind shocking his readers-his version of "The Red and the Black" was one long provocation.) His change of the book's famous moral is obviously meant, in one way, to protect **Voltaire** from the charge of Petit Trianonism. After so much suffering, cultivating our **garden** seems too . . . *cultivated*. ("Crush the horror! Crush the horror!" **Voltaire's** friend D'Alembert wrote to him once. "That is easily said when one is a hundred leagues from the bastards and the fanatics, when one has an independent income of a hundred thousand livres!")

But Raffel is wrong, surely, in thinking that by cultivating one's **garden** **Voltaire** meant anything save cultivating one's **garden**. By "**garden**" **Voltaire** meant a **garden**, not a field-not the land and task to which we are chained by nature but the better place we build by love. The force of that last great injunction, "We must cultivate our **garden**," is that our responsibility is local, and concentrated on immediate action. In the aftermath of the tsunami, William Safire argued that this "surge of generosity" actually "refutes **Voltaire's** cynicism," as expressed in "Candide." Yet American charity is not a refutation of **Voltaire's** cynicism; it *is* **Voltaire's** cynicism, an expression of the Enlightenment tradition of individual responsibility that he promoted. **Voltaire** was a gardener and believed in **gardens**, even if other people were gardening them. His residual optimism lies in that alone.

The horror that **Voltaire** wanted crushed, cruelty in the name of God and civilization, was a specific and contingent thing. His satire of optimism is in this sense an optimistic book-optimistic not only in its gaiety, which implies the possibility of seeing things as they are, but also in its argument. **Voltaire** did not believe that there was any justice or balance in the world, but he believed that bad ideas made people bad. The villains in the book are not, as in Samuel Johnson's exactly contemporary and parallel "Rasselas," the fatality of the world and the mortality of man. The villains are the villains: Jesuits and Inquisitors and English judges and Muslim clerics and fanatics of all kinds. If they went away, life would be much better. He knew that the flood would get your **garden** no matter what you did; but you could at least try to keep the priests and the policemen off the grass. It wasn't enough, but it was something.

Though "Candide" seems to retreat from a confrontation with human cruelty to an enclosed **garden**, its publication marked **Voltaire's**, and his age's, moral development away from a passive Deism and toward a faith in liberal meliorism. **Voltaire** went on to a series of confrontations with the consequences of human cruelty that, two hundred-odd years later, remain stirring in their courage and perseverance. It is in the years *after* the publication of the supposedly cynical and even quietist "Candide" that he began the campaigns against persecution-and, more broadly, against torture and cruelty in punishment-from which, as Davidson says, most civilized societies can trace their liberation from organized cruelty and state killing.

**Voltaire** was no mere petition signer; he was intensely engaged with individual cases, and deserves credit for exposing at least two horrible judicial murders. He first took on the case of Jean Calas, a Protestant in Normandy who was wrongly accused of murdering his own son (it seems likely that the son committed suicide) to keep him from converting to Roman Catholicism. Calas was executed: publicly tortured by a judicial lynch mob of priests and local officials, and then broken on the wheel. **Voltaire**, after years of work, was able to show that Calas's execution had been a frame-up, and even managed to get official recompense for his family. He did the same thing, at greater personal risk, in the case of the teen-age Chevalier de La Barre, who had been accused by the Catholic authorities of desecrating a statue of the Crucifixion, under the influence of **Voltaire's** Dictionnaire Philosophique. **Voltaire** could not save his life-La Barre was tortured, and sentenced to have his tongue cut out, before he was killed and burned, along with **Voltaire's** book-but his writings helped make certain that La Barre was the last man to be murdered in France for blasphemy.

As though these crusades were not enough for an old man who was still busy writing plays and arguing with his neighbors about leases and noises, he also tried to demonstrate the possibilities of a **garden**-centered life by creating his own light industry at Ferney. He took several dozen Protestant watch-making refugees and supplied them with venture capital to start a watch factory in the village of Ferney. The thing should have gone the way of most virtuous communal schemes devised by well-meaning literary people-but it was a huge success, making as much as six hundred thousand pounds a year, and supplying watches to the Empress of Russia. (**Voltaire** turned out to be a brilliant salesman, using his high connections to force watches on people on consignment, and then blandly sending them bills.) It was a proof that one could do well by doing good. Ferney watches became the Ben & Jerry's ice cream of the later Enlightenment, a luxury good that was also a sign of progressive values.

Of course, in the light of later horrors, the horror that **Voltaire** wanted to crush doesn't seem a horror at all. It was a half-aware, corrupt, guilty, placating horror, which watched nervously as he was feted. His enemies were local lynch mobs, not centralized terror. A Nazi or Soviet regime would have crushed him, horribly, and everyone else with him. The argument has even been made that **Voltaire's** rejection of moral order and God helped lead to the later horrors. But unless one believes, against all the evidence, that faith in God keeps one from cruelty, this is a bum rap. There are absolutist and totalitarian elements in the Enlightenment, of the kind that Burke and Berlin alike opposed: the desire to rip up the calendar of the past and start over implies murdering whoever isn't with the program. This wasn't **Voltaire's** spirit by a mile. There couldn't be a better model of an improvisatory, anti-authoritarian intelligence, whose whole creed rests on individual acts and case-by-case considerations. He believed in the English model of trade and toleration, not the Jacobin model of ideology and intemperance. His intolerance of religion was nothing like religious intolerance; it was directed at institutions, not individuals. Even his notorious attacks on Judaism are largely of this kind. Like Gibbon, what he objects to in the Old Testament is the spirit of zealous intolerance it gave to the New; about the worst thing that he could say of the Jews is that they reminded him of Jesuits. **Voltaire's** spirit was one of tolerant cosmopolitanism, even though he didn't have the insight to see that one challenge for the cosmopolitan spirit would be how well it tolerated those who had no wish to be cosmopolitan.

It is still bracing, at a time when the extreme deference we pay to faith has made any attack on religious beliefs unacceptable, to hear **Voltaire** on Jesuits and Muslims alike-to hear him howl with indignation at the madness and malignance of religion-and to be reminded that that free-thinking, which inspired Twain and Mencken, has almost vanished from our world. (There is, after all, as much of **Voltaire** in American life as in French life. Benjamin Franklin went to him for a blessing, and got it.)

**Voltaire** made a good end. No Frenchman can keep away from Paris forever. When he was eighty-four, he made the trip back at last; although there was no official "pardon" (there had never been an official condemnation), he thought it unlikely that the authorities would try to do anything to him. Seeing how old he was, the Church sent emissaries to try to get him to recant. **Voltaire** had the priests in, and perhaps even entertained the idea of confessing-partly because he always liked toying with priests, partly because he was genuinely afraid of being thrown into a common grave, as happened to the unshriven. But finally he sighed on his deathbed, told the priest who had arrived one last time to urge on him the virtues of Jesus, "Sir, do not speak to me any more about that man and let me die in peace," and turned away. The priests, furious, and knowing that it was against the law both to bury an unsacralized body and to move it, cruelly insisted that his body could be taken from Paris to a quiet burial only if the corpse was dressed up in clothes and the pretense made that **Voltaire** was still alive. The joke, on them, was that he was.

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