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Popularization and/or Trivialization of Philosophy in Voltaire's Narrative *Candide or Optimism*

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Abstract

Voltaire produced his works within the literary-historical period of Classicism and Enlightenment, in which the prevalent role of literature was educational. The period also dictated what genre, theme, style and structure authors should follow. However, more and more changes of literary genres appear, and the process of stratification of literature into high and trivial takes place. The aim of this paper is to describe the polarization of two mutually different processes involved in the literary shaping of Voltaire's philosophical narrative *Candide or Optimism*. In Voltaire's narrative, the popularization of philosophy, in order to simplify and illuminate the philosophical writings of G. W. Leibniz, results in the changes of style and content that become understandable to the general readership since they work within the scheme of an adventure novel. In this process, trivialization does not affect only the genre, but is also present in other parts of literary analysis and interpretation such as the theme, motifs, structure, characterization, narrative techniques, stylistic features, and so on.

Keywords

Voltaire, *Candide or Optimism*, Leibniz, popularization, trivialization

Introduction

The 18th century was crucial for the affirmation of the European novel, since it achieved an inconceivable poetic rise and won both the general and more educated audience. Historical and social events were responsible for the diffusion of the novel in terms of deviations from the set classicist conventions and the introduction of comments in accordance with the principles of rational critical analysis of social life. The novel also, more than other literary genres, proved to be suitable for the application of the "literary syncretism" much needed for the reconciliation of expectations between different layers of readership (Žmegač 48).

However, the influence of the bourgeois Enlightenment did not only relate to the rational explanation of the existing social events, but it also promoted civil moralism as opposed to aristocratic hypocrisy. Within these oppositions one should reflect and interpret Voltaire's narrative *Candide or Optimism* that, on the one hand, contains progressive tendency of tolerance and liberalism, whereas on the other, reflects the moral corrective of the society. A distinctive, pervasive irony that derives from this gives the right to determine Voltaire's philosophical tale as a literary genre that both popularizes and trivializes the philosophy of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.

The notion of popularization and its realization

In order to develop such an analysis, one should first determine what popularization in fact signifies. It refers to the effort and action to present and illustrate the scientific knowledge in an accessible manner with the aim of making the scientific content understandable for the general public. The

persons engaged in the popularization of science, and philosophy for that matter, work strenuously in order to convey their knowledge to the public in a funny and accessible way. Can Voltaire be one of them considering that the subtitle of *Candide* suggests it is a philosophical narrative? Does this mean that Voltaire struggles to bring philosophical ideas closer to a wider audience in a funny and imaginative way? There are two things that one has to consider. First, Voltaire wrote *Candide* just before "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster" in which he, inspired by the earthquake, introduces the topic of evil (Radner 669-686). After Rousseau had tried to prove him otherwise in one of the letters, namely that "there is no evil in the world, for which the responsibility falls on Providence," Voltaire created *Candide* (Šinko 150). Second, the story became a "rude puerility" in the author's eye only when it provoked an outrage among the educated audience (Marion 127). Nevertheless, Voltaire's narrative experienced forty editions during his lifetime, although he valued his tragedies and the heroic epic *Herniade* more (Solar 175). The next chapter will present the reasons why Voltaire thought that his narrative is "trivial literature."

Easy or difficult literature. When does literature become trivial?

Trivial literature is a concept that emerged in the 1920s in German literary scholarship, and denotes texts of a lesser quality than those that were considered to have an artistic value. *Trivial literature* is also referred to as an *entertaining* or *easy literature*. However, the concept of the *entertaining literature* includes both the *easy* and *trivial literature* that reflect a lower quality and complexity of the text. Therefore, an *easy reading piece* is a text that is actually empty and unoriginal.

It should be noted that the process of stratification of literature began in the Middle Ages, when the literature of the educated coexisted with the strong tradition of folk culture. This process flourished in the periods of classicism and the Enlightenment because the occurring changes, in terms of the genre system, resulted in today's distinction between the trivial and high-brow literature. In other words, ever since the 18th century one can identify and specify a particular kind or a particular type of literature discussed here (Solar 307).

At the time when *Candide* was written (1759) it was a common idea that literature should educate and not entertain, and the themes, style, composition, and stylistic figures were strictly proscribed in order to establish a firm hierarchy of literary genres. Taking that into consideration, as well as the philosophical subtitle, it seems that *Candide* is a failed project that is no match for the canon. Still, if one considers literature in its entirety, and how the oppositions between the easy and difficult literature mutually permeate each other instead of separate, it is obvious that there are no fixed boundaries. This results in the borderline literary genres - between traditional literary values and those belonging to entertaining literature. The following chapter will define the features of an adventure novel.

The trivialization of the adventure novel in Voltaire's *Candide*

Next to the crime, romance or science fiction novels, one should consider the complex issue of the stratification of literature and the relationship between the trivial and the high-brow in adventure novels as well. On the one hand, it is a literary genre whose audience does not require nor expect any aesthetic value, while on the other hand, the compliance with the set genre conventions of the adventure novel causes analytical thinking and reasoning, for both the readers and the authors. There are three most important features of adventure literature that should be taken into account: the romantic space, the inciting incident and the pronounced vitality of the characters. As entertaining literature does not directly point to the core problems of modern society, it nevertheless indirectly speaks of the need to escape from reality. In this sense, it again entertains the reader and sets some new frontiers in the world of imagination. When it comes to Voltaire's *Candide*, the irony turns out to be the omnipresent feature that connects the high-brow and trivial literature.

First of all, it should be noted that the scheme of such novels is characterized by its simplicity. The opening description of the main character Candide confirms this statement: "In the country of Westphalia, in the castle of the most noble Baron of Thunder-ten-tronckh, lived a youth whom Nature had endowed with a most sweet disposition. His face was the true index of his mind. He had a solid

judgment joined to the most unaffected simplicity; and hence, I presume, he had his name of Candide” (Voltaire 1).

The twisted simplicity and sentence structure is typical of a fairy tale, as well as the Hellenistic romance novel, in which the initial love of the young couple, Candide and Cunegonde, is disrupted by life struggles. This indicates the author's denial of reality and an attempt to entertain which is arranged so that it is already detached from reality: "...being expelled from the castle upon her account, I could not write to her, especially as soon after my departure I heard she was dead; but thank God I found afterwards she was living. I left her again after this, and now I have sent a messenger to her near two thousand leagues from here, and wait here for his return with an answer from her" (Voltaire 70). Furthermore, the romantic environment is ironic from the opening chapter: "The Baron was one of the most powerful lords in Westphalia, for his castle had not only a gate, but even windows, and his great hall was hung with tapestry" (Voltaire 1). The same chapter speaks of the inciting incident: "The Baron chanced to come by; he beheld the cause and effect, and, without hesitation, saluted Candide with some notable kicks on the breech and drove him out of doors" (Voltaire 2). In addition, this is the irony of philosophy presented by David Hume in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

One should not disregard the frequent travels, a feature that essentially triggers the plot, such as the sailings on the Atlantic and Mediterranean, shipwrecks, chases and stunts, and which followed the inciting incident: "While he was arguing in this manner, the sky was overcast, the winds blew from the four quarters of the compass, and the ship was assailed by a most terrible tempest, within sight of the port of Lisbon (Voltaire 10). Furthermore, the irony penetrates the lives of the characters as well: "At the expiration of two months, being obliged by some mercantile affairs to go to Lisbon he took the two philosophers with him in the same ship; Pangloss, during the course of the voyage, explained to him how everything was so constituted that it could not be better. James did not quite agree with him on this point (Voltaire 10). With this, Voltaire refers to his contemporary J. J. Rousseau, who remained untouched by the earthquake victims of Lisbon in 1755, and indirectly pointed to the social reality:

Honest James, forgetting the injury he had so lately received from him, flew to his assistance, and, with great difficulty, hauled him in again, but, notwithstanding, in the attempt, was, by a sudden jerk of the ship, thrown overboard himself, in sight of the very fellow whom he had risked his life to save and who took not the least notice of him in this distress. Candide, who beheld all that passed and saw his benefactor one moment rising above water, and the next swallowed up by the merciless waves, was preparing to jump after him, but was prevented by the philosopher Pangloss, who demonstrated to him that the roadstead of Lisbon had been made on purpose for the Anabaptist to be drowned there. (Voltaire 11)

Therefore, one can conclude that the character of Anabaptists is actually an irony of J. J. Rousseau's attitudes. Such irony is evident in the mockery of Rousseau's stand of the noble savage personified in the old man from El Dorado that tells Candide about the wisdom of savages: "Those princes of their family who remained in their native country acted more wisely. They ordained, with the consent of their whole nation, that none of the inhabitants of our little kingdom should ever quit it; and to this wise ordinance we owe the preservation of our innocence and happiness" (Voltaire 48).

Finally, the structure of Candide echoes the scheme of an adventure novel thus exhibiting another feature of trivial literature. This begs the question: is it not Voltaire's intent to make the readers think? The permanent polarization between the trivial and high-brow literature is reflected at the end as well: "'Excellently observed,' answered Candide; 'but let us cultivate our garden'" (Voltaire 97). Therefore, it is necessary to explain the philosophical ideas that have been made ironic in the context of the social conditions of the existing period.

The author's perspective – social conditions from which *Candide* emerges

Voltaire develops his desire for freedom and spontaneity early on, as well as his sceptical view of all ruling religious and moral authority. He began his literary work with the satirical poem written against the regent of Philip of Orleans that brought him anything but glory, and similar problems will follow

him later in life. This struggle with authority, in this case the literary one, remains present in the period of the Enlightenment (Marion 129).

The poetics of rationalism characterized the Enlightenment and were a basis for sceptical philosophical perspectives built on Descartes' assertion that all should be doubted using the common sense (Descartes 10). The era of rationalism sharply criticizes the society, as well as religion and metaphysics since they do not conform to empirical principles. At the same time, it defends the principle of the individual, as illustrated in Voltaire's work: "Excellently observed," answered Candide; "but let us cultivate our garden" (Voltaire 97). Numerous philosophical points of view arise from this and other examples contained in Voltaire's *Candide* - notably Leibniz's stand of metaphysical optimism that Voltaire mocks throughout *Candide*. With this procedure, consciously or unconsciously, Voltaire also popularizes Leibniz's philosophical stand. This is evident in the character of the teacher Pangloss who, in the novel, presents Leibniz's philosophy of "the most perfect of all possible worlds" (Leibniz 67) to the general public. Therefore, it is necessary to describe Leibniz's metaphysical optimism that serves as an actual foothold in comparison with the teachings of the fictional character, teacher Pangloss.

Leibniz's Metaphysical Optimism

For the clarity of this chapter, it is important to first explain the concept of metaphysical optimism. Leibniz takes the stand of metaphysical optimism in his *Monadology* asserting that "since in the ideas of God there is an infinity of possible universes, and since only one can exist, there must be a sufficient reason for God's choice of that one—a reason that leads him to choose one rather than some other of the possible universes" (53). The reason for such a godly choice lies in the degree of perfection that this particular world owns (54). Leibniz further states: "Thus the actual existence of the best that wisdom makes known to God is due to this, that His goodness makes Him choose it, and His power makes Him produce it" (55). Metaphysical (philosophical) optimism is essential to Leibniz. In ethics, he is the representative of philosophical optimism believing that this world is the best of all possible worlds. In order to defend the positions of such optimism, Leibniz attempts to explain the problem of evil in the world. In his opinion, there are three kinds of evil: metaphysical, physical, and ethical; the first being a consequence of an imperfect monad (a limited individual), the second represented in the absence of pleasure in conscious monads, and the third being the lack of aspiration for perfection.¹

If Voltaire's work is interpreted by the definition of metaphysical evil as a result of the imperfections of the individual, the irony is perfectly highlighted and presented in the form of the teacher Pangloss. He, despite all the problems that prove the contrary, believes in his idea of the best of all possible worlds, which is often caricatured in the following statements: "the most magnificent of all castles" (Voltaire 1) or "the best of all possible baronesses" (1), and other examples that accumulate superlatives throughout the work thus retaining the position of unlimited and unconditional optimism. Besides that, such optimism is confirmed by those parts in the novel where Candide scrutinizes Pangloss' teachings: "If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others?" (14). The similar is expressed at the end of the work in Pangloss's words: "I have always abided by my first opinion," answered Pangloss; "for, after all, I am a philosopher, and it would not become me to retract my sentiments; especially as Leibniz could not be in the wrong: and that preestablished harmony is the finest thing in the world, as well as a plenum and the materia subtilis" (91).

The character of Pangloss as a caricature of the philosophical thought

Pangloss, perhaps the most famous character in *Candide*, the comical scholar and pseudo-philosopher, is often the subject of entertainment, but also ridicule. Although most scholars considered him a comical figure, he can also be characterized as a tragic one. In *Candide*, Pangloss suffers more than all the other characters - he was hanged, dissected, and whipped. Even before all these hardships, he was infected with syphilis and, although cured, remained disfigured for life. The grotesque style, the

¹ See Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, *Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm*. <http://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=35902>. Accessed 27 Nov 2015.

underlined expressiveness, is reflected in terms of overly emphasized traits or personality, which in some cases results in a caricature (Tamarin 56). The presentation of any deficiency or anomalies, well-known since Hugo's Quasimodo, creates the most effective impression of the grotesque as it combines the synesthesia of different senses. Pangloss' optimism in the form of comfort helps him to fight against these hardships, but only partially, because his mantra that "this is the best of all possible worlds" is entirely relativized and trivialized after a long repetition: "Pangloss avowed that he had undergone dreadful sufferings; but having once maintained that everything went on as well as possible, he still maintained it, and at the same time believed nothing of it" (Voltaire 95). However, such optimism keeps Pangloss alive, it is his entire world view reflected in the mix of the tragic and the comic, which ultimately causes no sympathy in readers.

The grotesque of Pangloss leads to depersonalization also reflected in language. Voltaire uses puns, for example, when he claims that Pangloss "taught the metaphysico-theologo-cosmolonigology" (fr. *nigaud* - stupid). This pun, together with the names of the Baron Thunder-ten-tronckh and the city Wald-berghofftrarbkdikdorff, can be considered a mockery of the German city names, the names in general, and the philosophical terms by means of onomastics (Voltaire 1-3). Pangloss' attitude is enhanced by many superlatives given to characters, for example, the character of Cunegonde whom Candide introduces as "the best of all possible baronesses" or objects, the baron's castle described as "the most magnificent of all castles" (Voltaire 1).

The use of hyperbole connected to motivation and the structure of the plot is expressed through inciting incidents and fantastic events which, due to mixed causes and consequences, have no logical sequence. In other words, we have a world devoid of any laws of logic and critical thinking. The connection based on reason and experience is ignored, and the center of action is reserved for Pangloss' optimism. Pangloss is hanged in the sixth chapter, but later reappears, as well as the character of the previously murdered son of Baron Thunder-Ten-Tronckh, whom Candide and Cacambo meet again during their journey across the Black Sea in the twenty-seventh chapter.

By mixing different layers of reality, optimism turns into a grotesque. In this respect, one should compare the marvelous description of the country of El Dorado, where only gold, emerald and ruby exist, with the description of other parts of the world such as Paris and its pronounced misery. Such ambivalence of different levels of reality is also expressed in the fact that Candide at first follows, and later questions Pangloss' optimism. The novel concludes with the parody of a happy ending - the beautiful Cunegonde turns into a scarecrow and treasure disappears:

It was altogether natural to imagine, that after undergoing so many disasters, Candide, married to his mistress and living with the philosopher Pangloss, the philosopher Martin, the prudent Cacambo, and the old woman, having besides brought home so many diamonds from the country of the ancient Incas, would lead the most agreeable life in the world. But he had been so robbed by the Jews, that he had nothing left but his little farm; his wife, every day growing more and more ugly, became headstrong and insupportable; the old woman was infirm, and more ill-natured yet than Cunegund. (Voltaire 94)

The optimistic attitude that stretches throughout *Candide* disappears when Candide, Martin, and Pangloss meet a good, old man. He responds to their inquiries about the event in Constantinople: "I never inquire what is doing at Constantinople; I am contented with sending thither the produce of my garden, which I cultivate with my own hands" (Voltaire 96). Such conclusion makes it possible to see how the choice of the genre, style, and, means of characterization oppose the poetics of the Enlightenment, which advocated the popularization of science. Therefore, the next chapter deals with the popularization of philosophy in Voltaire's *Candide* in the given period.

The Enlightenment as a literary period that popularized philosophy

Literary scholars assert that the readers taste significantly changed in the late 17th and early 18th century (Solar 163). This shift is also noticeable in the field of philosophy. Considering the conflict between rationalism and empiricism, the Enlightenment finds itself in a similar position since it was

based on the English empiricism. By extension, this is also reflected in literature that served as a means of spreading the ideas of the Enlightenment, visible in Voltaire's works as well. In philosophy, Leibniz belongs to the rationalists; therefore, it is not surprising Voltaire opposes his philosophical standpoint. Voltaire, having disapproved of metaphysical stands in *Candide* can therefore be considered a follower of empiricism. This is supported by the fact that *Candide* contains the elements of empirical, i.e. Hume's philosophy. When a man who spoke of mercy asks Candide "what brought him thither and whether he was for the good old cause?" the simple-minded boy answers: "I conceive there can be no effect without a cause" (Voltaire 7). In this regard, it is obvious that Voltaire adopts the empiricist attitude of David Hume. In his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume claimed that "any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. We only find, that the one does actually, in fact, follow the other" (Hume 44).

However, the idea of reason is the basic assumption both for the Enlightenment and rationalism; therefore, despite the conflict that took place between rationalism and empiricism, it is wrong to limit the period of the Enlightenment to one or the other. It is important to highlight the fact that the idea of political liberalism played a major role in the period of the Enlightenment: ² "Neither the French Enlightenment, nor the encyclopaedists, were a unique philosophical movement and the circle of thought. Each of the philosophers of the period had his original opinion and contribution to the problems of the society" (Sunajko 26). The objection of philosophy was to reform the monarchical absolutism, and the French Encyclopaedists tolerated the Church less.³ The political rift formed the three groups of thought. This first was represented by the royalists, Voltaire, and "his supporters who had opted for the institution of the king . . . who stands above all other classes and institutions for the purpose of the rule and for the sake of the kingdom as a whole. The French royalists' founded their postulates on the English tradition of thought, which relied on the philosophy of F. Bacon, less in the form of a parliamentary rule, but more due to the system of civil liberties and religious tolerance" (Sunajko 27).

The tendency of popularization of philosophy is evident in the social conditions of the time and, consequently, philosophy ceases to be only theoretical. Some philosophy scholars went even further and interpreted the Enlightenment as "the progressive thinking with the aim of making people the masters, but in its result, it returns to the myth, and the evil triumphs in the enlightened world" (Jelkić 258). A similar attitude is expressed in Voltaire's *Candide*, in which evil triumphs in most cases, despite the position of metaphysical optimism. The negative attitude towards the Christian tradition, the new and revolutionary attitudes of the Enlightenment, and the removal of the Church from the society open a place for the popularization of philosophy. The negative attitude towards the Christian tradition is expressed in the quote depicting Pangloss' hanging thus demonizing the institution of the church: "oh my dear Pangloss! my beloved master! thou greatest of philosophers! that ever I should live to see thee hanged, without knowing for what!" (Voltaire 14). Finally, it is still necessary to determine the ways in which Voltaire's *Candide* popularized philosophy.

The popularization of philosophy in Voltaire's *Candide*

Although Voltaire wrote *Candide* exclusively for entertainment, and the subtitle reveals the philosophical character that is infused throughout the work, one should consider the authors intention of popularization. One must, however, bear in mind that Hume speaks of the two types of philosophy in his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. The one he simply calls the "light and simple philosophy" (Hardcastle 283) penetrates everyday life by encouraging people to act, up until the point when it ceases to be called philosophy and turns into popular culture (Hardcastle 283).

The idea of nonsense in philosophy starts with Hume and Kant (Richardson 254). The philosophical and revolutionary fertile ideas are developed through the presentation of philosophy in a way that any *serious* philosopher considers them to be nothing more than the utter nonsense. How to depict

² See Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, *Prosvjetiteljstvo*, <http://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=50722>, Accessed 11 June 2016.

³ Ibid.

something transcendent, as the ideas of metaphysics for example, through the simple-minded characters and their humble lives? Easily. Through the carefully weighed, although sometimes caricatured, irony of events with the final purpose to enlighten people, "to free the spirit of the unnecessary bonds and to defend the human right to their own opinion" (Duda 5). The philosophical irony is also portrayed in Voltaire's *Candide* in an extremely lively and colorful way with many humorous references to the certain aspects of philosophy. This is evident in the parts where Pangloss and Candide, despite the ill fortune that follows them throughout the work, represent the position of metaphysical optimism. For example, in the episode in which Candide and Cacambo encounter the savages and eventually establish communication. The irony achieves a comical, even grotesque effect, and it also confirms the triviality in the form of the happy ending characteristic for the resolution of the adventure novel. Alan Richardson claims that it would be better for philosophers to recognize that they are dealing with comedy and to reveal something about the nature of the world by the conscious construction of comic scenarios (254). He later added that the philosophy that reaches self-awareness simply becomes humor.

In this respect, philosophical ideas can come to life through the imaginative illustrations of the author's own ideas and descriptions of daily events in an ironic way, as numerous examples in *Candide* illustrate (Duda 9). The parody, also present in *Candide*, is created by the constant ridicule of metaphysical optimism and has the satirical effect. Because it represents the method of criticism, it must use other, original texts that it processes and mocks (Zlatović 70). With this procedure Voltaire brings Leibniz's ideas closer to the general public and popularizes them by using a simplified and comical form.

Conclusion

The analysis of Voltaire's philosophical narrative *Candide or Optimism* suggests that this work could be considered as a means of popularization empiricist and rationalist philosophy, especially G. W. Leibniz's ideas on metaphysical optimism. The numerous examples in which Voltaire makes Leibniz's stand ironic represent his philosophy in a new and funny way, thus fulfilling the requirement of the definition of *popularization*. One can, therefore, talk about the popularization of philosophy through the *trivial*, i.e. *entertaining literature*, because Voltaire himself thought that his *Candide* belonged to the *trivial literature*. However, if one takes into account the modern meaning of the term, it is more precise to refer to *Candide* as a part *entertaining*, and not *trivial literature*. By the means of irony, Voltaire brings Leibniz's stand on metaphysical optimism closer to the general audience in a funny way. Voltaire also incorporates the elements of Hume's philosophy in his work which further contributes to the idea of the popularization of philosophy through his philosophical narrative. Thus, Voltaire's *Candide or Optimism* in a unique way popularizes philosophy and confirms the possibility of entertaining literature to offer even non-trivial contents to a wider reading public, bringing closer more demanding, even philosophical ideas to a non-specialized reader. He achieves that through many literary methods; the structure, the narrative technique, the caricature, the irony, the onomastics, and even the topic characteristic of adventure fiction, but mostly through the character of Pangloss. All these methods contribute to the trivialization of *Candide* and make it popular among the wider audience.

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