

Vergil's Corycian Gardener and Voltaire's *Candide*

At the end of *Candide*, Voltaire's eponymous protagonist laconically invites his ragtag group of fellow survivors to till their garden. While critics generally agree that *Candide*'s melioristic *dénouement* contrasts with both the early chapters' feigned optimism and the novel's subsequent pessimism, they often disagree over its take away. Does Candide's injunction hold out the hope that scaled down social and political action can succeed where ambitious attempts at reform have failed, or does it merely amount to a thinly veiled admission of defeat, at once a reluctant, yet realistic, leave-taking of the public stage and a pragmatic retreat to the safety and anonymity of life spent by one's hearth. Either way, Candide's encounter with an old Turk, a wizened patriarch contentedly settled on twenty acres of land, stands out as the pivotal scene after which the novel's pessimism makes way for the final chapter's melioristic outcome.

Voltaire knew Vergil's works intimately. In his correspondence, he cites Vergil, "*mon idole et mon maître,*" more than three hundred times, and his comments show that he particularly revered *The Georgics*. I want to suggest in my paper that Candide's pivotal encounter with the old Turk may have been inspired by the episode of the Corycian gardener and its aftermath in Book IV of Vergil's *Georgics*. I also want to show that this likelihood helps us shed further light upon the novel's *dénouement* and adds shades of meaning previously overlooked.

The overlap between the Corycian gardener's and the old Turk's respective estates is striking. Both gardens afford lush plants, fresh air, and welcoming shade. Both stand at a remove from the city, yet both sit within the city's gravitational orbit. As Christine Perkell has argued, the Corycian gardener is no farmer bent on dominating the land and on seeking maximum profits but an aesthete who loves the beauty of the natural world for its own sake. Likewise, the old Turk savors aesthetic and sensory pleasures: the shade of his orange-trees, coffee, and home-

made perfumes. Yet, neither author overlooks physical toil: while Vergil painstakingly describes the numerous activities the gardener must engage in to nurture his piece of land, Voltaire entrusts the old man with one of the novel's most famous pronouncements about the moral value of physical work. Finally, after the brief passage on the Corycian gardener, Vergil returns to his main topic, bees, and celebrates their efficient division of labor and sense of solidarity. Similarly, as Candide and his friends leave the old Turk, they recommit themselves to their agrarian life as each takes on discrete responsibilities and works towards the betterment of their little commonwealth.

The likelihood that Voltaire was thinking of Vergil's Corycian gardener as he was writing the last chapter of *Candide* is not farfetched, given Voltaire's particular devotion to *The Georgics*, nor does it fundamentally alter our reading of the novel's ending. But it qualifies prevailing readings that highlight Candide's pragmatism yet overlook the aesthetic dimension of the garden, a dimension so much in keeping with Voltaire's own life experience at Ferney. More importantly, while before the encounter with the old Turk Candide's garden is a place utterly spoiled by unremitting and lonely toil, it blossoms afterwards into a place where human solidarity fosters individual contentment. Candide's pivotal encounter with the old Turk enacts Voltaire's periodic return to Vergil's *Georgics*, an encounter between reader and text which, although it is recursive over a lifetime, can also suddenly yield fresh insights. Candide's injunction to work in our garden can thus be read as Voltaire's invitation to till anew the Classical literary landscape left in our keeping.

Vergil concludes the Corycian gardener episode with the hope that others might continue the story for him. Voltaire fulfills that hope.