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THE GARDENING FALLACY: J. M. COETZEE'S MICHAEL K AS A PARODY OF VOLTAIRE'S CANDIDE

Abstract

The aim of the essay is to demonstrate that John Maxwell Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* can be perceived as a parody of Voltaire's *Candide*, a novel intended as a ridicule of Leibniz's *Theodicy*. While Voltaire proposed to withdraw from the world and "to cultivate one's own garden" as a remedy to Leibniz's ill-conceived optimism, Coetzee shows that Voltaire's praise of passivity and life in accordance with nature, symbolized by a retreat into gardening, is as erratic as Leibniz's philosophy. The essay concludes that Coetzee's Michael K can be treated as a caricature of Voltaire's Candide.

Nadine Gordimer (b. 1923), the 1991 Nobel Laureate for Literature, in her 1984 review of John Maxwell Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*, claims that "the initial [in Michael K's name] probably stands for Kotze or Koekemoer, and has no reference, nor need to have, to Kafka" (Gordimer 3). While Gordimer is wrong to deny Coetzee's literary allusions to Kafka's work, especially to the short stories "A Hunger Artist" (1922) and "The Burrow" (1931), she is right to indicate that *Life and Times...* contains other literary references than those to Kafka (3). In my view, one of the most evident parallels is Voltaire's *Candide*, a 1759 satire on Leibniz's *Theodicy* (1710), the idea of sufficient reason and the hypocrisy of Catholic clergy. Both Coetzee's *Life and Times...* and Voltaire's *Candide* feature characters who, despite numerous misfortunes, endure in their search for peace, which for both of them means finding and cultivating their own garden. Moreover, the two works question the logic of warfare, popularize similar lifestyles, particularly that of peaceful and non-consumerist withdrawal, and advise to absent oneself from historical time. They also advocate silence as the only possible means to alleviating human earthly misery.

However, despite these similarities, the aim of this essay is to challenge the above-suggested hypothesis that *Life and Times...* is ideologically congruent with *Candide*. Rather, while Voltaire's work is a parody of Leibniz's optimism, Coetzee's novel seems to caricature Voltaire's remedy to Leibniz, that is, through exaggeration, it depicts the virtues of gardening, social absenteeism and enlightened silence as naïve and absurd. Accordingly, the essay will first investigate Voltaire's critique of Leibniz, then, it will demonstrate the similarities and differences between *Life and Times...* and *Candide*, and eventually, it will analyze the manner in which Coetzee criticizes Voltaire's work and his praise of self-sustainable gardening. The paper will conclude with the claim that, contrary to Voltaire's, Coetzee's hope for a successful dealing with hardship, violence and evil is significantly curtailed.

Nadine Gordimer's main charge against Coetzee is that in *Life and Times...* he advocates passivity, escapism from active struggle against political and social oppression, and idleness, all conveyed through the main protagonist's striving to retreat into gardening. She argues that the novelist "denies the energy of the will to resist violence" (4), while, taking into consideration the apartheid realities of 1980s South Africa, he should call for active defiance and fight against abusive politics. Consequently, although Gordimer admits that *Life and Times...* is "a marvelous work that leaves nothing unsaid [...] about what human beings do to fellow human beings" (5), she nevertheless perceives it as a deficient novel, mainly due to its misguided allegorism, that evades important social issues, such as the presence of apartheid in South Africa, by focusing on Michael K who is not only a caricatured simpleton but also ignorant of the history happening around him, or else who does not care for its course. Thus, owing to its lack of political involvement, which Gordimer ascribes to Coetzee's failure to relate private destiny to public life, the novel is only a partial success (Head 57). Gordimer also suggests that through its emphasis on passivity and indolence the novel contests the soundness of conscious opposition against repressive modes of power. Accordingly, due to the lack of his clear condemnation of the apartheid system, she almost accuses Coetzee of being inattentive to it (Gordimer 4).

It is astonishing that Gordimer so readily charges Coetzee with neglect of the on-going social issues, if not entirely with political escapism, especially that she herself argues in the above mentioned review that he depicts Michael K, a figure avoiding any engagement into socio-political matters, as a "simple man" (3), a caricature, an eccentric that eventually fails to make gardening a life-sustaining occupation. On the one hand, then, she argues that Coetzee praises garden-like idleness, for which she strongly criticizes him, but, on the other hand, she implies that he himself criticizes such a lifestyle by narrating a

failure of a profoundly idle character, that is, of Michael K, his pitiable gardener-protagonist. To accuse an author of promoting passivity, idleness and political escapism by describing a decline of an altogether inert and withdrawn figure, such as K, seems a contradiction in itself. While it is questionable whether Michael K fails as a gardener, the apparent inconsistency of Gordimer's argumentation, especially her suggestion about Coetzee's praise for escapist gardening, evinces an intertextual correspondence between *Life and Times...* and Voltaire's *Candide*, in which the ideas of gardening, silence and pensive withdrawal from social matters are commended as remedies to Leibniz's failed optimism, understood not in the modern sense as being positively helpful but in the classical one, that is, as being optimal.

Voltaire (1694–1778) intended *Candide* to satirize Leibniz's theory according to which the imperfections of the world, such as evil, suffering, and injustice, are merely apparent because almighty, all-knowing and good God could not have created an imperfect world which He would consider bad. Thus, although people, limited in their wisdom and in their will, may not see it, all the evils must eventually lead to some good. This is connected with another of Leibniz's ideas, i.e., that of sufficient reason according to which nothing happens without some reason, even the greatest misfortune, for all has already been predetermined by God. Accordingly, Leibniz would claim that despite ravaging wars, deadly earthquakes and other cataclysms there is some pre-established harmony which positively explains the course of the world. Adopting Leibniz's notion of sufficient reason, Voltaire exposed in *Candide* numerous logical defects of such a reasoning:

the nose has been formed to bear spectacles, thus we have spectacles. Legs are visibly designed for stockings, and we have stockings. Stones were made to be hewn, and to construct castles, therefore my lord has a magnificent castle; for the greatest baron in the province ought to be the best lodged. Pigs were made to be eaten – therefore we eat pork all the year round. Consequently they who assert that all is well have said a foolish thing, they should have said all is for the best. (2)

The absurdity of such logic is further revealed by the argument that the existence of arms serves as a sufficient reason for killing people in thousands. Other instances of Leibniz's ill-conceived philosophy include the misfortunes of an Anabaptist named James, who throws himself into the sea to rescue a selfish and ungrateful sailor from death, and who eventually drowns for he is denied help by *Candide*'s philosopher friend, Pangloss, arguing that “the Bay of Lisbon [has] been made on purpose for the Anabaptist to be drowned” (11). Voltaire mocks here the optimistic and naïve belief that evil is always balanced by good. James, who is righteous, dies when saving a corrupted sailor. Ironically, James falls victim to his own altruism. In

effect, evil is not balanced by good but, instead, it survives good. Having seen James's misfortunes, terrified Candide, who has meanwhile witnessed the atrocities following an earthquake, asks himself: "[if] this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others?" (14). Voltaire questioned here the Leibnizian argument that natural disasters have some higher purpose and that there is some sufficient reason for their occurrence.

The idea of sufficient reason is further ridiculed by Voltaire on the example of a certain English admiral, sentenced to death only because it is customary to execute a high-ranked military man to encourage soldiers to fight more courageously. The logic of sufficient reason is also satirized when, at the end of all their struggles, Pangloss explicates to Candide that they have had to endure all the hardships to eventually find a safe and quiet retreat, a garden close to Constantinople, where they could live far from the distress of the world. Hence, all the misfortunes they have survived and all the lost lives have ultimately turned out necessary for them to find repose and a peace of mind. This final and profoundly ironic remark evinces Voltaire's critique that those who wish to make the world the best of all possible worlds or who want at least to make it possibly better usually make it worse than it is.

Similarly to Coetzee's Michael K, Candide travels throughout the world, witnessing much hardship, affliction and violence, and finally settling on a detached farm near Constantinople. At the end of his journey, Candide offers his friends, Pangloss and Martin, a surprising solution to the quandary of how to handle with the inevitability of evil in the world, a solution similar to the leitmotiv of Coetzee's *Life and Times...*: to "cultivate our own garden" (97). Candide adopts this message from a Turkish farmer who finds happiness and a peace of mind in absenting himself from historical time. When asked about the last events in Constantinople, especially about the death of some state officials, the Turkish farmer reveals to Candide, Pangloss and Martin, the latter being a Spanish amateur philosopher and a Manichean, the following truth:

I have not known the name of any Mufti, nor of any Vizier. I am entirely ignorant of the event you mention; I presume in general that they who meddle with the administration of public affairs die sometimes miserably, and that they deserve it; but I never trouble my head about what is transacting at Constantinople. (96)

The Turk takes pride in cultivating his little farm with his own hands for such a labour helps him to stay away from the misery of the outside world. He also explains that cultivating a garden "keeps off from [him] the three great evils – idleness, vice, and want" (96). However, such an attitude still does not account for "a horrible deal of evil on the earth" (96). Therefore, Candide asks a certain dervish, "who passed as the best philosopher in Turkey," what must be done to reduce the evil, and dervish's answer is to "be silent" (96). When

provoked by Pangloss to “reason with [him] a little about causes and effects, about the best of possible worlds, the origin of evil, the nature of the soul, and the pre-established harmony” (96), the dervish shuts the door in his face.

Candide is a severe critique of the Enlightenment school of optimism as well as of the idea that people can curtail their misfortunes by means of rational thought. Voltaire’s work roused much controversy, mainly in the Church, because, in addition to satirizing the Christian logic of the pre-established harmony, it also caricatured the churchmen’s hypocrisy and arrogance. Admittedly, *Candide* witnesses Catholic ruthless persecutions against deviations in belief; he observes friars’ promiscuity and their illegitimate children; he is flabbergasted by their avarice, ethnocentricity and insolence. Moreover, although Voltaire was rather a deist than an atheist, believing “in the existence of a God who is the creator and orderer of a cosmos regulated by natural law” (Bottiglia 27), in his novel he refuted the Christian idea of linear time and, instead, he adopted the ecological notion of circular time, which he exposed at the end of his work with the praise of a return to gardening. It could also be argued that such a gesture symbolizes a return to simplicity, if not entirely to tribal primitivism, or even to a pagan cult of the Earth. Such a solution was advocated approximately at the same time by Jean-Jaques Rousseau (1712–1778), a Swiss social thinker and a political philosopher, known for his praise for “the state of nature” in which “uncorrupted morals” prevail, and man can be free and happy.

Similarly to *Candide*, Michael K strives to live outside politics and society, and even outside historical time. After the death of his mother, Anna K, Michael finds an abandoned estate, the Visagie farm, where he settles. Not actually occupying the household, he begins to cultivate its barren soil in hope of growing his own food. Meanwhile, he chooses to inhabit a hole in the ground. Such a decision can be treated as a retreat to “the state of nature.” By living underground, Michael symbolically unites with the nature, therefore, he can be perceived as Rousseau’s “savage,” or, following Gordimer, a “simple” (2). Harelipped, orphaned, and rather mentally slow, Michael experiences great difficulties adjusting to the reality of the Visagie farm, but he eventually finds peace there devoting himself to planting and tending his small garden. He feels happy because when he dedicates himself to physical work his handicap becomes irrelevant. Moreover, the solitude of the farm provides perfect conditions for a withdrawal from the oppressiveness of the social order. It could be argued that the farm supplies him with a shelter from the outside world. Thus, in his own vision of himself he is compared to an underground creature, a mole or an earthworm, that is, to a being for which farmland is the natural habitat. Coetzee thus narrates Michael’s thoughts: “I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because he lives in

silence” (182). Indeed, as Michael is “not clever with words” (48), which means that he finds it difficult to narrate his life, the stillness of the farm seems to ideally suit his needs. Since it is a place filled with silence, he can rest assured that, unlike in the outside world, there is no-one on the farm who will ask him to tell stories about himself. It must be mentioned at this point that although Michael refuses to narrate stories about his life he is nevertheless “full [of such stories], but the right words would not come” (48). He does not lack stories, then. He merely lacks the proper language to tell them. Therefore, unlike *Candid*, Michael does not merely choose to be silent; rather, he is forced to be silent; forced, as David Atwell suggests, by language, for it cannot satisfactorily express the trauma of his suffering (88–99).

Admittedly, in a world ravaged by violence, it seems that the only reasonable response to evil is willed silence. Man cannot do anything to eradicate hardship, inequality and pain, for, according to Leibniz, they are the necessary elements of our earthly existence. In this context, the sole expression of one’s protest against the inevitability of evil is to stay quiet and passive, limiting thus one’s susceptibility and proneness to that evil. Although Michael’s “mouth would never wholly shut” (139), and although throughout the novel he is only forced to speak and to take action, he remains consistently passive; he hardly ever talks to people, he sleeps most of the time, and he appears little interested in the outside world. He is happy, or at the very least, complacent, with the ability to simply survive. He does not wish to be remembered as a figure in history. He wants to live alone, in his solitude, beyond governments, politics or wars. Accordingly, he thinks that “perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of all the camps at the same time” (182), and by “camps” he may mean literal camps in which he has spent a substantial part of his life, but also camps in a more figurative sense, that is, the state, patterns of social behavior, and language. When asked to tell his story, he prefers not to say anything. When offered a drink, he is made to accept it, but he soon vomits it. When presented to a company of women, he feels embarrassed. Admittedly, Michael K does not feel he is part of earthly existence. He is a misfit; an eccentric, for whom a world of civil and political unrest is so hostile that he cannot even find an appropriate language to express his disgust with what he witnesses. Therefore, he remains silent, as only quietness can adequately express who he really is. In a sense, then, the most complete story of him is his quietude. Michael K is a natural character, an earthly being, living in an unnatural world. Consequently, his retreat to gardening must be perceived as a conscious and desperate effort to survive in a world of rules and social patterns that he hardly understands (Head 59).

Both for *Candide* and for Michael K land is like a mother: to be lived off but not to be colonized or to be subdued. The farm is a place of no want, no

desire and no vice. Both Candide and Michael K, as peaceful beings, choose to live on a farm as the only place where they can survive. For Michael, who wants merely water and seeds to live, the abandoned but arable Visagie farm seems to satisfy all his needs. If read in such a manner, *Life and Times...* conveys a minimalist but profoundly optimistic message that in the times of evil and inhumane social order, there is a way in which, as Michael claims in the last sentence of the novel, “one can live” (184).

However, in a world of a civil war, which affects every human being through conscriptions, riots in the towns, shortages of work and food, regular skirmishes, curfew, camps for refugees, failures of public services, Michael K’s resolution to grow his garden seems rather naïve. Moreover, taking into account that the Visagie farm does not appear to be the one he has been looking for, and that he nearly starves to death while trying to live on the plants he has grown there, Michael’s Voltairian idea of a sustainable and peaceful existence on the farm becomes entirely compromised. Although he strives to be free, to grow his own garden, and to “live by the rising and setting of the sun, in a pocket outside time” (60), as Voltaire recommended, his “freedom is defined [only] negatively” (Gordimer 5), that is, he never really achieves it. Both a life outside the farm and a life on the farm are equally dangerous and detrimental. When soldiers find Michael, he is so haggard by living on what he has grown that he can hardly walk or think clearly. Contrary to Voltaire’s idealized vision of the garden, the place where Michael lives is not one of idleness and happiness but rather one of decline and physical emaciation.

Coetzee satirizes Voltaire’s garden by denying its independence from the violence of the social order. Ultimately, nature is as cruel and unfair to those who would live according to its laws as is society to the socialized man. In this regard, Michael’s choice to live on a farm outside society and outside time proves to be a rather defective solution. He cannot escape violence, hardship and pain because they are present both in society and in nature.

The strength of Coetzee’s bitter caricature of Voltaire’s character is further exposed by the fact that in *Life and Times...* “virtually everybody seems to be of Michael’s opinion that it is best to be out of all camps at the same time” (Masłóń 41). Accordingly, the army deserter who visits Michael’s farm reflects that there “is a war going on, there are people dying. Well, I am in war with no one. I made my peace” (Coetzee 64). A guard in the Jakkalsdrif camp where Michael is temporarily detained says that “the day I get orders to go north [to the front] I walk out. They’ll never see me again. It’s not my war. Let them fight it, it’s their war” (86). Similarly, all the army officials who manage the camps, the medical officer that takes care of Michael, and the commandant of the Kenilworth camp object to the war and intend to return to their previous occupations. The medical officer shares with Michael a belief in the idea of a circular universe:

War-time is a time of waiting What was there to do in the camp but wait, going through the notions of living, fulfilling one's obligations, keeping an ear turned all the time to the hum of the war beyond the walls, listening for its pitch to change? ... To me, listening with one ear to the banal exchanges of camp life and with the other to the suprasensual spinning of the gyroscopes of the Grand Design, time has grown empty (158).

Michael and the medical officer live from day to day. They indulge themselves in repetitiveness by following the circle of the Grand Design. However, for each of them the Grand Design stands for a different concept: for the officer it stands for history, whereas for Michael it represents nature. Bearing in mind the two explications of the Grand Design, it can be claimed that both history and nature operate according to the same overarching principle, that is, a "cosmic intelligence that has to run its course on its own so that balance is brought back by forces beyond [man's] grasp" (Masłóń 42). Therefore, similarly to history, nature is a realm of an utter lack of freedom. Admittedly, the laws of nature cannot be changed, questioned or abandoned. In this respect, Michael's endeavor as well as *Candide's* seem defective because they both must do what the laws of nature require man to do: they must eat, breathe, and socialize to survive. Consequently, the misconception that nature liberates from the social order, an idea proposed both by Voltaire and by Rousseau, seems as enslaving as the social order this misconception tries to evade. Such a misapprehension stems from the fact that the idea of liberating nature is essentially a cultural construct, i.e., the vision of nature as unaffected by the influence of civilization is ultimately a product of civilization. Hence, instead of being exclusive to each other, civilized society and the idea of liberating nature are mutually complementary.

In this regard, the farm is neither good nor evil; it is merely neutral. Michael chooses to ignore this fact and, in order to demonstrate the farm's positive value, he identifies it with his mother. He spills her ashes on the soil of the farm and believes that the plants he grows are his brothers and sisters, coming from the same womb. Accordingly, Michael romanticizes the place, which is very similar to Voltaire's approach in *Candid*, that is, Michael idealizes the garden as the place of peace and a repose from evil. It is this idealization that Coetzee criticizes when he depicts Michael K as a caricature of a gardener. The farm where Michael stays is not Voltaire's garden. Instead, the farm is a barren land that slowly kills. Furthermore, although the place to which Michael travels at the end of the novel is called "Côte d'Azure," evoking a vision of comfort and joy, it is not even similar to Voltaire's garden. Rather, it is the same old block of flats where his mother used to stay and struggle to earn a living by working as a domestic servant for a retired hosiery manufacturer and his wife. Inside the building there are stacked some usual garden utensils: steel chairs, beach umbrellas, vinyl tables,

a peg and some plaster statues. These objects, cluttered and unused, seem displaced and out of context. They look awkward and, so, they make the place appear grotesque. Thus, the flat he returns to, with its depressing surroundings, caricatures what is usually associated with garden and, particularly, with its Voltaire's idealized version. It is in this sense that *Life and Times...* could be perceived as Coetzee's parodied vision of *Candide* and Voltaire's praise for gardening. Unlike *Candide*, after months spent on a search for peace, instead of reaching a place of bliss and security, Michael K makes a circle and returns to the same shabby block from which he set off. The bitterness of the irony is enhanced by the fact that in addition to becoming a store for some unused garden gear the building has also turned into a squat for the homeless, i.e., a desolate place which signifies solitude and danger. Whether it is possible to treat such a place as a refuge from earthly evils, such as misery, inequalities and injustice, is highly questionable, especially that places like this are usually the products of these evils.

When at the end of *Life and Times...* Coetzee describes Michael's vision of his return to the Visagie farm, the general tone of this description is rather optimistic because it clearly reveals that, eventually, it is feasible to survive outside the social order, beyond the injustices and horrors of everyday life, and away from other evils of the civilized world. However, once analyzed as a satirical response to Voltaire's parody of Leibniz's *Theodicy*, the novel seems to offer a rather pessimistic view over the possibilities of a successful resistance against the oppressiveness of social institutions, war and violence. In this respect, while Voltaire's *Candide* is a parody of *Theodicy*, Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* is a parody of Voltaire's parody of Leibniz's defected philosophy. Therefore, following Gordimer's criticism, Michael K can be seen as a caricature; however, contrary to Gordimer's claim, he is a caricature not of the South-African anti-apartheid movement but of Voltaire's idealization of *Candide* as a self-fulfilled man-gardener.

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