

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers I*, 1885 – 1886 Oct 3, '85 to May 29, '86) The original is very badly faded.

The Maxims of Vauvenargues

The works of Luc de Clapiers, Marquis de Vauvenargues, are but little known, and yet Voltaire pronounced his funeral oration, and proclaimed him to be the “most unfortunate that the most tranquil of men.” His misfortune arose from his ardent ambition to distinguish himself as a soldier, and the cruel treatment awarded him by the goddess of war, but his tranquility came from the gravity and uprightness of his character. He was a moralist, just as Voltaire was a wit. Obscurity has unfortunately covered up the career of Vauvenargues, and all that we know him by now are a few maxims, which ornament like vignettes the dull chapter heads of later French writers. Voltaire did not exaggerate when he said that Vauvenargues was the most unfortunate and yet tranquil of men. In the Bohemian Campaign both his legs were frozen, he was badly wounded, he became nearly blind from small pox, and he died at thirty; and yet from his couch of misery he could still say to his friends, “Despair is the greatest of our errors.” And all that the failure of his life's ambition, broken health, and poverty, could wring from him the reflection that “Misfortune has its charms even in great extremes, for this opposition of Fortune elevates a courageous mind and makes it collect a force, a power, that otherwise would lie idle and be unemployed.

This is certainly the real heroic metal, out of which a genuine moralist could be made; for if the pearl is the product of the diseased oyster, the maxim is the tear or tribute which the suffering stoic pays to human sorrow.

We call at random a few of these maxims, many of which were so highly prized by Voltaire, that he endorsed them as “fine” very beautiful, and wrote notes upon their excellences. The first ones evidently relate to authors and critics. “It is easier to say something new, than to reconcile those already said.” “There is no truth but is regarded as an error by some false mind.” “It is a sure sign of mediocrity always to give moderate praise.” “The wits would be isolated if it were not for the fools who pride themselves upon being witty.” We owe perhaps to our passions the greatest advantages possessed by our minds.” “I know some men who are as much shocked at simplicity as sensitive persons are at the site of a naked body: they require that the mind should be draped as well as the form.”

The following have a wider and more general application:

“too little and too much secrecy in our affairs are both signs of a weak nature.” “To accomplish great purposes we must live as though we should never die.” (A sentiment at which Voltaire clapped his hands.) “If all our foresight cannot render life happy, much less our indifference.” “The advice of age, like the sun in winter, gives light without heat.” “Only a fool believes he can dupe a man of sense.” “Love was the first author of the human race.”

The next one we can recommend to the consideration of the Universal Peace Society: “Vice foments war, virtue combats it, and if there were no virtue we should have perpetual peace.” The next one calls into question the supposed order, calmness and gentleness of nature; and yet it has History for a backer. “Among kings, peoples, and private individuals, the strongest always impose upon the weakest, and this is equally true of animals, of matter, and the elements in such a degree that everything in the universe is produced by violence. And this rule, which we blame with so much apparent justice is the most absolute, general, immutable, and ancient law of Nature.”

Here is a word of caution to the philosophers: “Great men, in teaching weak minds to reflect, have placed them on the road to error.” We may all take a little comfort from the following: “Reason and extravagance, vice and virtue have their happiness. Contentment is not the sign of merit.” “Great men undertake great enterprises, because they are great; and fools, because they think them easy.”

Montaigne has somewhere said that the laws of conscience which we attribute to nature come from custom and habit; and Vauvenargues speaks still more disrespectfully of that infallible guide. “Conscience is presumptuous in the strong, timid in the weak, an unfortunate and uneasy in the vacillating; it is an organ obedient to both our sentiments, and to our opinions.” He also reverses the judgment of the poet: “We can not judge a man's life by a falser rule than by his death; the firmness or meekness of the final moment depends upon the last sickness.”

But there is this difficulty about reading maxims – many of them at one sitting tire the attention, and the effect is lost. They are like essences, and must be tasted in very small quantities, and at wide intervals; otherwise they

pall upon the intellectual palate. But before closing this brief paper, I must give one which is considered his best; and of which Voltaire said that Vauvenargues without knowing it, described himself; it is very short. "All great thoughts come from the heart." It is a sentence worthy of Bacon and should be carried in the memory as a canon of criticism.

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