

Article appearing in *Le Figaro*, spring 1942:

“Parisian *bacheliers* [baccalauréat students] confronting literature”

[Translation: Charles J. Stivale]

[At the end of the article, the following statement appears in bold print]:

“Gilles Deleuze’s composition received 17 over 20 with the following commentary by the corrector: ‘Incontestable talent. A clear and strong composition, not badly written. Somewhat lacking in modesty or moderation’”.¹

We have the pleasure today to publish three of the best French compositions from the most recent *baccalauréat* session at the University of Paris – among the thousands of texts submitted to the examiners’ scrutiny.

“Gilles Deleuze, who was born 18 January 1925 and is a student at Lycée Condorcet and candidate for the A series, chose the following subject: ‘Provide a commentary on this judgment by Vauvenargue: “To accomplish great things, one must live as if one might never die”’.”

“A Judgment by Vauvenargues”²

While annotating a text by La Rochefoucauld, Vauvenargues often wrote these words: “A maxim from a novel”.³ With this, he meant quite precisely that La Rochefoucauld’s maxims are linked to special cases, that they are maxims derived from an experience. (Just as Stendhal’s novels are novels derived from an experience). And Vauvenargues’s maxims as well are maxims derived from an experience. But instead of being nourished by the example of another person, this experience for Vauvenargues is profoundly derived from his own example. Thus, in a maxim such as this one, “To accomplish great things, one must live as if one might never die”, one finds Vauvenargues in his entirety.

Let’s not provide any commentary yet; we must first contemplate all of the maxim’s greatness and beauty, especially as its source is the lips of a man who, throughout his life, was half dead, who *would certainly die*, and who knew it. He knew that great things – what vast horizons he opens to us with this word “things” – he knew that the things he dreamed of doing would be abruptly, brutally interrupted by death.

Do I hear an objection? – Well, if we were to live as if we might never die, would wicked people, or just the timid ones who bridle at the idea of death, hurl themselves into the greatest forms of excess? Without limits, without remorse? – That’s possible. But Vauvenargues wasn’t thinking of them; he was thinking of people who had the ability to achieve great things. He was thinking of people who had no fear of following the impulse of their heart and passion. This Vauvenargues is entirely of the 18th century!⁴ As he said, “great things come from the heart”; passions are good: they allow us to achieve great things – provided that, in letting ourselves to be guided by the force emerging from the movement of such things, we live as if we might never die.

Another objection: Vauvenargues is a tender Pascal (as Sainte-Beuve said), but not a weakened one. That is, Pascal without the abyss. But Pascal is profoundly, intimately Christian. And wasn't Vauvenargues Christian? Isn't this very maxim Christian? Doesn't it seem that the Christian must think about death, and contemplate it, and dwell upon it, and even expect it? – Not at all! The best way to prepare for death is not to think about it, but to act as if it might never arrive. This is something that Vauvenargues understood admirably. He's much more Christian than might be evident – this maxim proves it – he is Christian to the depths of his soul.

What is the purpose of life for a Christian, for Vauvenargues? This purpose is to take one's place – and “through its voice”, as Claudel said – in the eternal concert of forceful souls; it's to leave behind something of oneself, after one's life. (Not to die completely summed up Vauvenargues's agony). Life's purpose is to leave one's work on earth, to sacrifice oneself, to give oneself to this work.

Can we leave a work behind – a human, terrestrial work – if we only think about death? Consider Amiel:⁵ he was obsessed by the idea of death, by the weakness and the vanity of our being. Through an absolute folding into one's self, he examined himself, analyzed himself, told himself: you are weak, and what are you? Soon you will be nothing. Hence his famous inability to accomplish the slightest thing. Amiel presents the rout of the will when faced with the pernicious results of analysis as well as with this obsession with annihilation. Once again, how could he have possibly left behind the slightest work? Mathematically speaking, it is impossible for someone used to thinking “we hardly have the time to find what we're seeking, we don't have the time to make it known because death must be coming” – it's impossible for such a man to accomplish great things. Why would he accomplish any great things since he is persuaded that, before dying, he couldn't even communicate to others the results of his works?

Consider Joubert, this genius so like Amiel. This is a man like Vauvenargues devoured by the ambition of leaving something behind but, like Amiel, was someone constantly confronted by death and who only completed a small book of 100 pages.⁶

What is the goal of Art? Using forms of our imperfect life, the goal is to recreate the forms of a perfect life, thereby restoring a bit of beauty onto earth. By considering modern society to be a poorly written poem, the goal is to seek to revise this poem. Such an endeavor cannot be undertaken unless we succeed in freeing ourselves from the moral grip and imprint of death. For death as an idea is something exclusive. Alongside death, nothing can survive. Death is to the spirit what sensuality is to the senses: it can sustain nothing other than itself. It kills all tenderness and love of beauty.⁷ Why would we restore any beauty to the earth if we were persuaded that we would leave it so quickly? Why would we feel any need to surpass ourselves – which is, in fact, what Art is – if we believed that soon death would cut off this impulsion?

Thus, to achieve great things, one has to live as if one might never die. In this regard, an error to avoid is believing that Vauvenargues meant that there was no need to hurry, that one should act as if one had all the time of eternity. No, Vauvenargues meant nothing of the sort. Just because through the force of energy, a man succeeds in living as if he might never die does not mean he

can allow himself to forget about time or to delay. He must complete his work, he must be capable of doing so, which is something that forces him never to waste a single minute.

Such was the case for Molière: he was supposed to have written and produced *Les Précieuses ridicules* because it was an offense to Reason. Of course it was! But there is a much deeper cause: Molière was in the prime of life, with a vibrant vitality, that impelled him to achieve great things (and whatever one might say, I do not believe that Molière lived a life obsessed by death). It might be said that impatience was at the base of his character. And at the base of the *Les Précieuses ridicules* was delay: what else than delay could we call the “Précieuses” refusal to call things by their real names? So, in some ways, Molière wrote and produced *Les Précieuses ridicules* due to an irreconcilable difference – and his example shows that a man involved in achieving great things, that is, someone living as if he might never die, is nonetheless a man in a hurry.

Let me summarize: one can be an artist only if one lives as if he or she might never die, as if one devoted every effort to surpass oneself, as if one were eternal. Consider Ronsard: only when he was in old age did he discover new substance for surpassing himself.⁸ Consider Hugo, his eternal process of surpassing himself⁹ – he certainly believed that he would never die, and his lyricism was constantly refreshed by new elements: “Et j’ajoute à ma lyre une corde d’airain” [And to my lyre I add a brass cord].¹⁰

Consider Stendhal:¹¹ he resigned himself to the fact that he would only be understood around 1880, but in truth, he was not at all certain that he would even be alive then.

And what about Vauvenargues? He knew that he would soon die – “*immaturus*” [prematurely] – but in forgetting that he was going to die, he developed for himself an immense work: an Introduction to the knowledge of the human Spirit. Although his time was too limited to do much at all, this not-much-at still remains so precious for us due to his having lived as if he might never die.¹²

And, in fact, he is not dead at all: people who live like Vauvenargues have access to a fuller, more absolute life, I mean that they enter into Tradition.

Notes

[¹ The French system of evaluating scores over 20 was described to me as follows: Only God can earn 20 over 20, and only the instructor can earn 19 over 20. – *Trans.*]

[² Luc de Clapiers, marquis de Vauvenargues (1715-1747), a French writer and moralist. – *Trans.*]

[³ Furthermore, M. de Lacretelle devised the idea of creating novels by borrowing their substance the odd maxim by La Rochefoucauld. [Although the exact reference is somewhat vague, by referring simply to “M. de Lacretelle”, Deleuze probably refers here to the contemporary novelist and French Academy member, Jacques de Lacretelle (1888-1985). – *Trans.*]

[⁴ Not from Voltaire’s century, despite the celebrated friendship that the two men shared, but from Rousseau’s century.

[⁵ Reference to the Swiss writer, moral philosopher and memorialist Henri Frédéric Amiel (1821-1881). – *Trans.*]

⁶ Of course, this is a delicate, even delicious book, the most Athenian of French books. [Joseph Joubert's *Recueil des pensées de M. Joubert*, published posthumously by Chateaubriand in 1838. – *Trans.*]

⁷ For example, Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid*.

[⁸ Reference to Pierre de Ronsard, Renaissance poet (1524-1585). – *Trans.*]

[⁹ Reference to Victor Hugo, nineteenth-century French poet, novelist and playwright (1802-1885). – *Trans.*]

[¹⁰ The final line of poem XL, "Amis! Un mot final!" (Friends! A final word!) in Victor Hugo's 1831 poetry collection *Feuilles d'automne* (Autumn Leaves) – *Trans.*]

[¹¹ Reference to Henri Beyle, who wrote as Stendhal, a novelist, critic and playwright, who predicted correctly that his work would only be appreciated around 1880 (1783-1842). – *Trans.*]

¹² An author whose name I forget has admirably described the consolation that Vauvenargues's life and work can bring to us: this work provides an admirable example, it's a work to be read everywhere, but especially, this author says, during wartime, in the "cagnas" [dugouts]. [Let us recall that Deleuze writes this during the occupation of France by German forces, and that at some point in this period (no precise date is available), Deleuze's older brother Georges, a participant in the French resistance, was arrested by the Nazis and died in transit to a concentration camp. – *Trans.*]