

*Modern Critical Views*

BLAISE  
**PASCAL**

Edited and with an Introduction by  
**HAROLD BLOOM**



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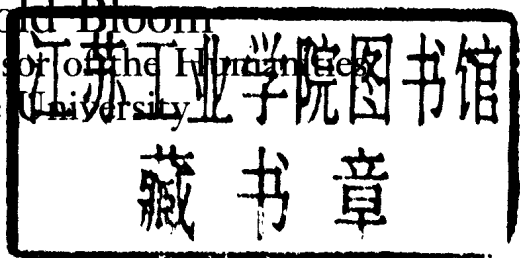
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*Edited and with an introduction by*

**Harold Bloom**

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## *Editor's Note*

This book brings together a representative selection of the most illuminating modern criticism of Blaise Pascal—philosopher, scientist, mathematician, controversialist, aphorist, and Christian religious writer. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to James Swenson for his assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction meditates upon Pascal's influence-anxieties in relation to Montaigne, and charts the swerve away from Montaigne in the *Pensées*. Monsignor Ronald A. Knox begins the chronological sequence with his discussion of the relation between Pascal and his fellow Jansenists.

The triumph of evil in Pascal's thought, as shown by his association of political power with original sin, is the subject of the essay by Erich Auerbach, distinguished scholar of European mimesis. A defense of Pascal as an improviser, Stendhalian and Mozartean, is made by Jean-Jacques Demorest against the accusations of sophistry by Voltaire and Valéry.

Lucien Goldmann centers upon the Pascalian "wager" that God exists, and that the paradoxical and incomprehensible Christian religion is the only answer to the paradoxical and incomprehensible nature of human existence. Pascal's grand formulation of the three Orders—Flesh, Spirit, Charity—is analyzed by Martin Price as "a brilliant rhetorical device for making us see false orders replacing true."

Jean Mesnard expounds Pascal's vision of the mystery of Revelation, while Jan Miel gives an exegesis of the Augustinian basis of Pascal's theology. The *Provincial Letters* are read by Philip Lewis as a work that communicates truth and establishes a context for dialogue precisely "through the lack of dialogue."

Paul de Man, the great theoretician of reading, examines Pascal's *Réflexions* in order to uncover the Pascalian theory of rhetoric, or "allegory of persuasion." At the other extreme of Pascal's intellectual career, Robert J.

Nelson expounds the *Memorial* in which Pascal recorded his mystical conversion.

The discourse of power in Pascal is depicted by Louis Marin, after which Sara E. Melzer concludes this volume by finding in Pascal's theory of metaphor the mirror that reflects the double aspect of language in Pascal, rhetoric as Fall and rhetoric as Redemption.

## Contents

Editor's Note	vii
Introduction	1
<i>Harold Bloom</i>	
Pascal and Jansenism	7
<i>Ronald A. Knox</i>	
On the Political Theory of Pascal	17
<i>Erich Auerbach</i>	
Pascal's Sophistry and the Sin of Poesy	37
<i>Jean-Jacques Demorest</i>	
The Wager: The Christian Religion	53
<i>Lucien Goldmann</i>	
The Three Orders: Flesh, Spirit, Charity	81
<i>Martin Price</i>	
The Revelation of God	95
<i>Jean Mesnard</i>	
Pascal and Theology	115
<i>Jan Miel</i>	
Dialogic Impasse in Pascal's <i>Provinciales</i>	123
<i>Philip Lewis</i>	
Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion	135
<i>Paul de Man</i>	
The Convert	155
<i>Robert J. Nelson</i>	

## *Introduction*

Pascal never loses his capacity to offend as well as to edify. Contrast his very different effects upon Paul Valéry and T. S. Eliot. Here is Valéry:

I hate to see a man using artifice to turn others against their lot, when they are in it in spite of themselves and are doing what they can to make the best of it; to see a man trying to persuade others that they must expect the worst, must always keep in mind the most intolerable notion of their predicament, and be alert to whatever is most unbearable in it—which is precisely the notion of suffering and risk, and anxiety about the risk—using the notion of eternity as an almighty weapon, and developing it by the artifice of repetition.

This is to accuse Pascal of being an obscurantist rhetorician, rather resembling the T. S. Eliot of the religious prose writings. Here is Eliot on Pascal:

But I can think of no Christian writer, not Newman even, more to be commended than Pascal to those who doubt, but who have the mind to conceive, and the sensibility to feel, the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering, and who can only find peace through a satisfaction of the whole being.

I suspect that Valéry and Eliot are saying much the same thing, the difference being the rival perspectives towards Pascal of a secular intellectual and a Christian polemicist. Pascal essentially is a polemicist, rather than a religious or meditative writer. The *Pensées* ultimately are not less tendentious than the *Provincial Letters*. A Christian polemicist in our time ought to find his true antagonist in Freud, but nearly all do not; they either evade Freud, or self-defeatingly seek to appropriate him. Pascal's Freud was Montaigne,

who could not be evaded or appropriated, and who scarcely can be refuted. But Pascal's case of influence-anxiety, in regard to Montaigne, was hopelessly overwhelming. Eliot, putting the best case for Pascal, insisted that Montaigne simply had the power to embody a universal skepticism, in which Pascal necessarily shared, though only to a limited degree. Doubtless Eliot attributed to Montaigne one of the essayist's plethora of authentic powers, but a secretly shared (and overcome) skepticism hardly can account for the full scandal of Montaigne's influence upon Pascal. Tables of parallel passages demonstrate an indebtedness so great, extending to figuration, examples, syntax, actual repetition of phrases, that Pascal would be convicted of plagiarism in any American school or university, with their rather literal notions of what constitutes plagiarism. The frequent effect in reading Pascal is that he begins to seem an involuntary parody of his precursor. This is particularly unfortunate whenever Pascal overtly denounces Montaigne, since sometimes we hear the pious son castigating the unbelieving father in the father's inescapable accents.

It has been surmised that Pascal jotted down his *Pensées* with his copy of Montaigne's *Essays* always lying open before him. Whether this was literally true or not, we may say that Montaigne was for Pascal quite simply a presence never to be put by. Eliot speaks of Montaigne's readers as being "thoroughly infected" by him, and certainly Pascal must have known inwardly the anguish of contamination. What are we to do with *Pensée* 358, one example out of many:

Man is neither angel nor brute, and the unfortunate thing is that he who would act the angel acts the brute.

That would have been admirable, had it not been lifted from the best essay ever written, Montaigne's "Of Experience," where it is expressed with rather more force and insight:

They want to get out of themselves and escape from the man. That is madness: instead of changing into angels, they change into beasts; instead of raising themselves, they lower themselves.

It is an ancient commonplace, but Montaigne plays variations upon his sources, since his sense of self is his own. What is distressing is that Pascal does not evade or revise Montaigne but simply repeats him, presumably unaware of his bondage to his skeptical precursor. Since Pascal's mode is polemic, and Montaigne's is rumination and speculation, the rhetorical edge is different; Pascal emphasizes moral action, while Montaigne centers upon moral being. Yet the reader is made uncomfortable, not because Pascal has

appropriated Montaigne but because Pascal has manifested a paucity of invention. Voltaire and Valéry would seem to be confirmed. Pascal writes as a pragmatic enemy of Montaigne, and this necessarily makes Pascal, as Valéry said, into an enemy of humankind. We are in a difficult situation enough, without being castigated by Pascal merely for being what we have to be. Do we still need Pascal? We read Montaigne as we read Shakespeare and Freud. How can we read Pascal?

Nietzsche insisted upon finding in Pascal an antithetical precursor, and shrewdly located Pascal's major error in the famous "wager":

He supposes that he proves Christianity to be true because it is necessary. This presupposes that a good and truthful providence exists which ordains that everything necessary shall be true. But there can be necessary errors!

Later Nietzsche observed: "One should never forgive Christianity for having destroyed such men as Pascal." Yet Nietzsche also remarked, in a letter to Georg Brandes, that he almost loved Pascal for having been "the only *logical* Christian." The true link between the two was in their greatness as moral psychologists, a distinction they share with Montaigne and with Kierkegaard, and in another mode with Swift. Pascal's strong swerve away from Montaigne, which transcends his guilt of obligation to a naturalistic and skeptical master, is manifested in the development of a new kind of religious irony. Montaigne urges relativism because we are opaque to ideas of order other than our own, but this is precisely Pascal's motivation for our necessary surrender to God's will. Since God is hidden, according to Pascal, our condition is not less than tragic. A hidden God is doubly an incoherence for us; intolerable if he exists, and equally intolerable if he does not. We are thus reduced to an ironic quietism, in which we are best off doing nothing in regard to worldly realities. We reject the order of society so thoroughly that pragmatically we can accept it totally.

The extraordinary ironies of the *Provincial Letters* are founded upon this Pascalian stance, that allows him to chastise the Jesuits for worldliness while defending society against them:

What will you do with someone who talks like that, and how will you attack me, since neither my words nor my writings afford any pretext for your accusation of heresy and I find protection against your threats in my own obscurity? You feel the blows of an unseen hand revealing your aberrations for all to see. You try in vain to attack me in the persons of those whom you believe to

be my allies. I am not afraid of you either on behalf of myself or of anyone else, as I am attached to no community and no individual whatsoever. All the credit you may enjoy is of no avail as far as I am concerned. I hope for nothing from the world; I fear nothing from it, I desire nothing of it; by God's grace I need no one's wealth or authority. Thus, Father, I entirely escape your clutches. You cannot get hold of me however you try. You may well touch Port-Royal, but not me. Some have indeed been evicted from the Sorbonne, but that does not evict me from where I am. You may well prepare acts of violence against priests and doctors, but not against me who am without such titles. You have perhaps never had to deal with anyone so far out of your range and so well fitted to attack your errors, by being free, without commitments, without allegiance, without ties, without connexions, without interests; sufficiently acquainted with your precepts and determined to drive them as far as I may believe myself obliged by God to do, without any human consideration being able to halt or check my pursuit.

Implicit in this superbly polemical paragraph is the unassailable rhetorical position of the ironic quietist, beyond this world yet its only true defender. One calls this "unassailable" in Pascal's stance, because his rhetoric and psychology are so intimately related to his cosmology, and the three indeed are one. We have fallen into figuration, psychic division, and the eternal silence of the infinite spaces, and all these ought to terrify us equally. Sara Melzer usefully emphasizes Pascal's difference from negative theology, to which I would add Gnosticism, as the most negative of all theologies. God's otherness, the Pascalian version of which is hiddenness, has nothing in common with the alien God of the Gnostics and the hermeticists. For Pascal, the hiddenness leads to the wager of faith, rather than to a negation of all tropes, terms for order, and scientific postulates.

If this is error, it is at least one of the necessary errors, psychologically speaking. Pascal never found his way out of the shadow of Montaigne, not I think because Montaigne spoke also for Pascal's own skepticism, but because Montaigne was too authentic a self and too strong a writer to need wagers of any kind. A paragraph like this, from the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, must have been a permanent reproach to Pascal:

Furthermore, it is here in us, and not elsewhere, that the powers and actions of the soul should be considered. All the rest of its perfections are vain and useless to it; it is for its present state that

all its immortal life is to be paid and rewarded, and for man's life that it is solely accountable. It would be an injustice to have cut short its resources and powers; to have disarmed it, and to pass judgment and a sentence of infinite and perpetual duration upon it, for the time of its captivity and imprisonment, its weakness and illness, the time when it was forced and constrained; and to stop at the consideration of so short a time, perhaps one or two hours, or at worst a century, which is no more in proportion to infinity than an instant; in order, from this moment of interval, to decide and dispose definitively of its whole existence. It would be an inequitable disproportion to receive eternal compensation in consequence of so short a life.

Against this, Pascal's eloquence and psychic intensity must fall short, even in the most notorious of the *Pensées*:

## 205

When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened, and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me? *Memoria hospitis unius diei prætereuntis.*

## 206

The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.

"It is here in us, and not elsewhere, that the powers and actions of the soul should be considered." Montaigne remains in our mind, Pascal in our heart. Freud, the Montaigne of our era, reminded us that the voice of reason was not loud but would not rest until it gained a hearing. Montaigne's voice is never-resting, while Pascal's voice is restless. As Montaigne's involuntary and perpetual ephebe, Pascal always knew which voice was stronger.



RONALD A. KNOX

*Pascal and Jansenism*

Admiring Pascal as a genius, edified by Pascal as a Christian, we forget to pity Pascal as an invalid. Yet an invalid he undoubtedly was; Madame Périer, in her sketch of his life, tells us that the illness which overshadowed his last four years was only "a redoubling of the great disorders he was subject to from the time of his youth." He was constitutionally bilious, and in consequence somewhat atrabilious by temperament. The satirist of the *Provincial Letters* was a man, I think, who was hard put to it all his life to restrain his fidgets. "The extraordinary vivacity of his temper," says Madame Périer, "made him sometimes so impatient that it was difficult to please him"; the "spark of the lion" which Sainte-Beuve notes in his attitude was partly native to him. He was predisposed to take the jaundiced view; his loveliness, we may add, is by that all the more remarkable. A little time before his conversion, it seems (I mean his complete conversion in 1654), this jaundiced outlook had begun to colour his whole mind. "Although" (writes Sister Euphemia) "for more than a year he has had a great contempt for the world, and an almost intolerable disgust for all the people in it—a state of mind which might well carry him to great excesses, with the heated temperament (*bumeur bouillante*) he has, he nevertheless displays a moderation over it which gives me quite high hopes of him." Observe that she appears to regard his discontent with the world as something belonging, in itself, to nature; it is in the *moderating* of these transports that the promise of grace is to be seen. He might have tears of joy at his conversion, but he did not emerge into that serenity which would enable him to say, with Mother Julian, "All thing

shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." He had the markings of an embittered atheist; grace caught him and turned him into a Christian pessimist.

Hence the characteristic note of the *Pensées*. Bremond hardly exaggerates when he describes Pascal as *obsessed* by the idea of original sin. "La foi chrétienne ne va principalement qu'à établir ces deux choses, la corruption de la nature et la rédemption de Jésus Christ." This is the foundation of his edifice, and he will not let us leave out of sight for a moment the depravity of man or the misery which is its punishment and counterpart. (It was easier for him than for us to treat sin and suffering as obverse and reverse of the same medal, because, like Port Royal generally, he accepted Descartes's notion that animals are automata, without feeling.) "It is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own misery, and to know his own misery without knowing the Redeemer." "There is nothing in the world which does not betray either man's misery, or God's mercy, or man's impotence without God, or man's power with God's help." Original sin is the only key which fits the whole puzzle of existence. And so he leads up to the terrific twenty-fifth Thought, on the Feebleness of Man, and twenty-sixth Thought, on the Misery of Man. For Sainte-Beuve the *Pensées* are consciously, or almost consciously, an answer to Montaigne. It may be so, but I do not think Pascal needed Montaigne to give him any depressing information about human existence. He could read it himself, all too clearly, in his own sickly body, and his restless mind, impatient of that clogging companionship.

I am not suggesting that it was Pascal who taught the Jansenists to be gloomy; they had the art of it long before his time. But I think he helped fix in them that mood of despair which took it for granted that nearly everybody was damned. St. Cyran (a neuropath, if Bremond is right) certainly had it, especially about the rich. And I think Prunel is right in suggesting that there is a humanness, a lightness of touch about Mother Angélique while she is still under Zamet's direction which she loses afterwards. Of all the Jansenist tricks none is more clearly un-Catholic than the readiness with which they assume their neighbour's damnation. St. Cyran, for example, giving the *petites écoles* a lesson on Virgil, "ce grand auteur qui s'était damné, disait-el, en faisant de si beaux vers, parce qu'il ne les faisait pas pour Dieu." How infinitely more gracious was the legend, current in an earlier Christendom, of St. Paul reaching Naples, and weeping over Virgil's tomb:

Quem te (inquit) reddidissem,  
Si te vivum invenissem,  
Poetarum maxime!

What is least forgivable in the Jansenists is that seeing the world as a *massa damnationis*, rushing on to its ruin, they could find no other remedy for its unhappiness but to make war on the Jesuits.

Thus obstinately ultrasupernatural in its approach to morals, has Jansenism a corresponding attitude towards the intellect? We have seen [elsewhere] that some enthusiastic movements—that of the Lollards, for example—are characterized by a distrust of human learning, and of human reasoning, as something “carnal” for which the children of light have no further use. The intuition which comes from the direct *afflatus* of the Holy Spirit shall replace, for them, all their natural powers of discernment or of speculation. It must be freely confessed that the sectaries who use this language with most confidence are not, as a rule, men remarkable in any case for intellectual gifts; there is a suggestion of sour grapes about the Lollard protest against the learned clerks of their day. And the Jansenists, evidently, were in a different position; Port-Royal quite certainly had brains, and knew how to use them. Learning was encouraged there, and not only learning but reasoning; the *Logic* written for and taught in its *petites écoles* was famous. Only in two directions does it express hesitation. The love of learning for its own sake, “curiosity” as they call it, is censured as likely to puff up the soul with pride. And “reasoning” about the faith is sometimes alluded to with disapproval; thus St. Cyran observed of St. Thomas, “Nul saint n’a tant raisonné sur les choses de Dieu”; and the *Augustinus* itself contrasts the method of the schoolmen unfavourably with that of the Fathers. If it be objected that St. Augustine never stopped arguing, and that his Jansenist followers were more than worthy of him in this respect, we shall be told that Truth is sometimes compelled to meet subtlety with subtlety, but that this is no excuse for *recherches trop curieuses* and a *trop grand désir de savoir*. Such sentiments, however, reflect little more than the Jansenist grudge against St. Thomas, who had substituted Aristotle for St. Augustine as the *maestro di color che sanno*. Port-Royal distrusts the human reason as an appetite, but not as an instrument.

It may be questioned, however, whether Pascal does not go farther. His supernaturalism was more far-reaching than that of his colleagues; Arnauld and Nicole had to tone it down when they bowdlerized the *Pensées*. And the apologetic method of the *Pensées*, even as we have them, is highly characteristic. Pascal recognizes the classical proofs of God’s existence and admits the force of them, but he dislikes them. You may almost say that if he had been in a position to do it he would have hushed them up. He *wanted* our fallen nature, left without grace, to be as weak and miserable as possible;

"l'homme n'est donc qu'un sujet plein d'*erreurs* ineffaçables sans la grâce"; his picture of man's misery remained incomplete, lopsided, if you could think of man unredeemed as possessing any skylight, even, that gave on the supernatural. A purely speculative knowledge of God, such as the Five Proofs offer to us, is (in Pascal's view) worse than no knowledge at all; it is *nuisible*. The only saving knowledge of God is that which approaches him with and through the knowledge of our own misery, so that we are looking for him as our Redeemer. Speculative knowledge, instead of bringing us to our knees, puffs us up with pride, and we are worse off than the atheist. Deism, he says, and atheism are two things which the Christian religion equally abhors. Even a cursory reading of the *Pensées* makes it clear that it was written against the former, rather than the latter; and its criticisms, as against the deist, obviously have weight. But how could Pascal be so certain that a proof of God's existence by way of natural philosophy could not be at least the remote preparation for a true conversion of the heart to God? Evidently because he believed that such conversion must be a *simultaneous* discovery of God's existence and our Redemption. The Fall, instead of being a doctrine revealed to us as part of a general revelation, must be an axiom grasped intuitively in the experience of conversion. You must not take two bites of the apple.

The fact is that his thought approximates to Marcionism. The figure of the Redeemer so fills the canvas, as to obscure all thought of God in his eternal attributes. "Pascal," says Bremond, "exalte le médiateur, mais il cache, il exile Dieu." So Joubert complained that the Jansenists "ôtent au Père pour donner au Fils." This habit of Christocentricity does not desert Pascal even when he is writing as a prophet new-inspired. In his *Mémorial*, those burning lines which he wrote, as if stupefied with some drug, after his conversion on the 23rd of November 1654—even in his *Mémorial* he is sufficiently master of his own thoughts to repudiate, carefully, the imputation of Deism. "Dieu d'Abraham, Dieu d'Isaac, Dieu de Jacob"; and, having got so far, he must needs add "non des philosophes et savants." It is as if two Gods existed, and he, Pascal, were determined that his petition should go to the right address; lest there should still be any doubt, he goes on "Dieu de Jésus Christ." This last phrase, so foreign to the vocabulary of the Church, is wrung out of him by the necessity of explaining to himself, even at such a moment, that he writes as Pascal the Christian, not as Pascal the geometer. All things have been made new.

I have described St. Cyran as an illuminist; can we trace, in the movement which owes its origin to him, and cousinship to those enthusiastic sects which claim for every Christian a kind of prophetic endowment, an inner light which lends certainty to his beliefs? It recalls the rigorism of the Do-

natist; does it recall, equally, the ecstasies of the Montanist? It is interesting to observe that in early days those who knew St. Cyran expected something of the kind. In a letter which records his arrest, Jean Louis de Balzac writes: "On a peur, à mon avis, que l'Abbé voulût faire secte et qu'il pût devenir hérésiarque. Je ne parle pas de ces hérésies charnelles et débauchées, comme celle de Luther et de Calvin, mais de ces hérésies spirituelles et sévères comme celles d'Origène et de Montanus." The writer is hard, perhaps, on the morals of the Reformers, but how admirably he seizes the point which I have tried to illustrate [elsewhere], in discussing the Reformation, that Luther's movement never achieved its proper destiny as a spiritual movement, remained "carnal" in the sense given to that word by the vocabulary of enthusiasm! The mention of Origen is perhaps inappropriate; there was no Father whom the Jansenists so much detested, because of his views on grace. But Montanus is in point; there is a kinship between him and St. Cyran. But did the followers of St. Cyran tread the path which Balzac had marked out for them? Were they, in any sense, illuminists?

Those theologies which lay great stress on the corruption of human nature, and the difficulty of salvation, are apt to make up for it by offering to the elect *sensible experiences* of God's favour. It may be the complete inner conviction of the Calvinist that he is bound for heaven; it may be the warm consciousness of the Wesleyan that his sins are, here and now, forgiven: in either case, there is the feeling that things can never be the same again, a threshold has been crossed, nature has been supernaturalized. So it is with the more modern enthusiast who tells you that "his life has been changed"; with that moment of decision to look back upon, he finds (at least for a time) that virtues or abstinences which hitherto meant laborious effort now "come easy to him." Instead of resolving to conquer his temptations, he believes that he will conquer his temptations, and does. Pascal's experience seems to have been something of this kind. The word "certitude," occurring in the *Mémorial*, definitely points to this, and Bremond's treatment of the subject seems to establish beyond doubt that Pascal expected and came to believe that he had been granted a sign from heaven. Whether it was a full assurance of his ultimate salvation, as Bremond seems to assume, is more doubtful; there is an obvious parallel to be drawn between his experience and Wesley's. It is clear that from that moment onwards the severe discipline which he imposed on his life ceased to be a matter of uphill struggle, *seemed* at any rate to be made easy for him. This can be inferred from the curious document written by him on a loose sheet of paper, and preserved for us by Madame Périer, towards the end of the *Life*. He gives a list of his own moral qualities, startlingly reminiscent of the Pharisee's thanksgiving in the temple, and then