

*Pascal, ou, le défaut de la méthode: Lecture des "Pensées" selon leur ordre.*

Laurent Thirouin.

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In his latest book on Blaise Pascal, French scholar Laurent Thirouin brings together twelve of his essays in slightly modified form that were originally published between 1982 and 2013. The subtitle of the volume, *Lecture des "Pensées" selon leur ordre* (A reading of the *Pensées* according to their order) indicates their common denominator: for more than three decades Thirouin's Pascal scholarship has sought to demonstrate that any valid interpretation of the collection of fragments known as the *Pensées* must take into account the placement of the individual fragment within the entire body of text. Thirouin's stated intention in once again publishing these case studies is to "reconcile" what he takes to have been disconnected for too long: philological work and interpretive efforts on the *Pensées* (8).

Starting with the first edition in 1670, the editorial history of the *Pensées* has given ample evidence that linking the meaning of Pascal's text to its internal order is a challenging task. Two distinct editorial traditions have thus emerged: one that seeks to create a finished body of text based on what a given editor believes to be Pascal's ultimate intentions at the time of composition; and another that regards the work as essentially unfinished, if not unfinishable, resulting in editions based on two copies of Pascal's manuscript made in 1670. While both traditions have produced accepted scholarly editions, Laurent Thirouin clearly favors the second approach. He quotes from the 1976 edition of the *Pensées*, edited by Philippe Sellier, that is based on the second copy of the manuscript, and he frequently criticizes examples of the first approach that he considers misleading for offering a simplistic interpretation of the twenty-eight classified *liasses* (bundles) of fragments as coherent, theme-based unities.

Several of Thirouin's essays demonstrate that the power of Pascal's classification of fragments into bundles resides precisely in separating reflections on a given theme into different such bundles if one follows the second copy of the manuscript, as Sellier does. Thus, a theme is taken up at different places within the text under different premises: "Each bundle represents not a theme . . . but a dialectical movement, an argumentative step, a particular light shone on the themes" (74). Thirouin's subtle analysis of fragments that have seemingly little in common but may be read as variations on the same theme are particularly convincing, such as his comments on Pascal's notion of resemblance.

If Thirouin's book initially seems to limit itself to a close, philological reading of the *Pensées* by focusing on the placement of its individual fragments, the scope of his approach and knowledge is ultimately much broader. One of Thirouin's particular strengths is to delineate the exact meaning(s) of certain terms in Pascal's text, usefully combining classical philological work with interdisciplinary exploration. Based on a reading of Pascal's scientific work, Thirouin thus manages to show that the unusual term "raison des effects" (usually translated as "causes and effects") is "an implicit

scientific metaphor" (108), and one of numerous notions invoked by Pascal that have a precise scientific connotation that tends to go unrecognized.

Another strength of this collection are Thirouin's insights into the role of Montaigne's *Essais* for Pascal: three of Thirouin's twelve essays deal explicitly with Montaigne, and several others refer to his work. While Montaigne's influence on Pascal has been much discussed in scholarship, Thirouin rightly argues that mechanical comparisons of passages in which both authors deal with the same subject matter are sterile, albeit common. If, according to Thirouin, thematic borrowings from Montaigne by Pascal "mask a more essential affinity" (32), Thirouin shows that Montaigne's "lack of a straight method" (51) in his writing was essential for Pascal's own way of conceiving his fragments. Thirouin supports his analysis with readings of Pascal's scientific, rhetorical, and polemical writings; his analysis of the multilayered meanings of key terms such as *conférer* that Pascal took up from Montaigne is exemplary, and directs the reader's attention to submerged connotations of words that initially appear self-evident.

Overall, this book will appeal most to readers already familiar with the *Pensées*. Thirouin's deep knowledge of Pascal's work and the scientific, religious, and philosophical debates it engages with firmly grounds his readings of the *Pensées*. The strength of this collection of articles is that it far surpasses the scope indicated by the book's title and introduction.

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