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Alain Cantillon, ed. *Lettres à Pascal*. Vincennes: Éditions Thierry Marchaisse, 2023. 240 pp. €19.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-36280-301-7; €13.99 (eb). ISBN 978-2-36280-302-4.

Review by Chad Córdova, Cornell University.

Among the many colloquia, panels, seminars, new editions, and publications related to Blaise Pascal in 2023—the four hundredth anniversary of his birth, commemorated mostly in France—I suspect that few were as admirably quixotic as *Lettres à Pascal*. Assembled and prefaced by Alain Cantillon and published by Éditions Thierry Marchaisse (which also published Cantillon's new edition of the *Pensées* in 2023), *Lettres à Pascal* is the latest addition to *Lettres à…*, a series of collections of letters to dead writers, scientists, and theorists (Flaubert, Lacan, Shakespeare, Marie Curie, among others). The volume's twenty-one letters and one poem-epistle to Pascal were written largely by members of the Centre d'études interdisciplinaires sur Pascal, Port-Royal et l'Europe moderne (CEIPPREM) coordinated by Cantillon and Anne Régent-Susini. Exceptions include a contribution by André Comte-Sponville and a remarkable letter by Gérard Bras.

Following a preface by Cantillon, the twenty-two texts are organized under four headings: the letters in "Communication/Questions" ruminate *inter alia* on the problem of entering into communication with Pascal and submit questions to him; those in "Postérités" inform Pascal about his afterlife; those in "Une vie avec Pascal" tell of sustained engagements, or battles, with his ideas; while the "Lettres retrouvées ou supposées" are impersonations of Pascal's contemporaries and followers, both real and quasi-fictive. Here, too, is a letter by the great mathematician Girard Desargues (1591–61), which has been expertly edited by Sébastien Maronne. The letter all but confirms that Pascal did visit Desargues's Domaine de Château-Grillet near Condrieu—the inspiration for Pascal's famous *pensée* on diversity—, and it shows how fraught the question of the originality and force of the Puy de Dôme experiment was at the time. Desargues, who knew well the work of Descartes and Pascal and their divergent positions on the existence of the "*vide*" (or vacuum) in nature, here suspends his judgment and offers an ambivalent assessment of the experiment's meaning for that debate. "Par ainsi, vous avez raison mais M. Descartes n'a pas tort," he quips, in one of the most intriguing lines in the volume (p. 188).

Blaise Pascal has long since departed. He will never receive these woefully late letters. The back cover hence deems the texts "imaginaires." But can we so easily decide between imaginary and real? To be sure, five of the letters are composed as if they had been written by Pascal's

contemporaries (Philippe de Champaigne and Boileau, written respectively by Pierre Antoine Fabre and Léo Stambul) and disciples (David Hilbert, written by Jean-Pierre Cléro), or by quasi-fictional characters (the letters by Vincent Julien and Yasushi Noro). Yet, in a decisive sense, these letters are no more "imaginary" than the "real" letter from Desargues, or than those written by living scholars writing as themselves, in their own name. Writing wavers undecidably between reference and fiction. It is a spectral medium. It always involves an invention of selves. In epistolary texts, this holds for the addressee (especially, yet not only, for one who is dead) but also for the sender. Thus emerges the auto-bio-graphical question, an important thread running through several letters: who am I, who will I have become, in reading and working on your texts, Pascal? Or, as the provocative opening letter by Hall Bjørnstad asks, how has your text, your voice, been writing me? Such questions are all the more crucial when addressing a theorist who deconstructed *le moi* and who troubled the line between imagination and reality, a writer who excelled in epistolary dissimulation and who shuffled through many masks in the vertiginous proliferation of a centrifugal style of thinking governed by no single principle (on this, see Bras's letter).

But who, or what, is "Pascal?" Beginning with Cantillon's preface, there arises an understandably unavoidable overlapping of "Pascal," the name of an author or a shorthand for a group of notoriously opaque and often fragmented text(s) that still survive, and Pascal, the long-deceased human being, a phantom haunting his writings and his readers. This ambiguity is palpable, for example, when we read of a "surabondance de la présence de Pascal encore aujourd'hui," to which several letters seem to bear witness (p. 12; see also Cantillon's own letter). The same ambiguity is present, too, in the volume's title (not letters to "Blaise Pascal," but to "Pascal"), and it is immanent in the question of the second- versus the third-person pronoun. In many letters, the second-person pronoun "vous" (and, more rarely, the "tu") used to address Pascal could be replaced by the third-person pronoun "il" with little or no consequence. In these cases the sender—that is, the author of the letter—holds fast to the role of the public-facing scholar, rather than embracing that of the friend, the student, or some other sort of correspondent. Along the same lines, the short titles given to the letters (e.g., "Figures de Pascal en feu" or "L'art du contrepeser"), while taken from the texts themselves, push the epistolary form—which has no title—toward that of the short essay, rich as the result may be. While some letters to Pascal are thus essays on Pascal in disguise, one must read the volume to appreciate that there are others where something would be lost were one to impose the third person. Paradoxically, it is these more confessional or intimate letters—if one could ever be intimate with Pascal!—that, more than the others, could best be repurposed as good introductions to the *Pensées* (I could imagine assigning them to students who have never read Pascal). Such letters convey something of the desire—for reading and rereading, for thinking and rethinking—that is tantamount to the experience of that mysterious, fragmentary text.

I have dwelled on problems of genre, epistolary form, intimacy, and the spectral ontology of writing, for they emerge from the book itself, especially given its strange status in the 2023 anniversary context, a year of institutionalized retrospectives and authoritative developments in Pascal studies (a dauntingly specialized field of which some of the letters politely make fun). The book encourages us to ask questions such as these: what is the relationship between scholarly criticism or authoritative (the French would say "scientific") editing practices and the unofficial practice of writing "imaginary" letters? Why do we always write about writers and almost never

to them? Why not admit that the analytic detachment of the third-person pronoun is often haunted by a second-person intimacy? If scholarly endeavors are driven by more or less opaque fixations—by reasons that reason doesn't know—why not allow the murky mix of intellect and passion a chance to rise to expression? After all, an absence of scholarly apparatus or aim does not *a priori* entail a loss of critical acumen or authority. The long letter by Éric Méchoulan is in this sense exemplary. But all the "lettres à Pascal" arguably display this fact rather clearly.

It would be impossible to summarize or comment on all the letters in the volume. The texts adopt a wide range of styles and foci according to the many domains in which Pascal was active and to each letter writer's philosophical, scientific, or mathematical orientation. Nor will I try to account for what could be said to be lacking from the volume—for example, readers working in the United States might have wished to see more ruminating about the fate of Pascal today and tomorrow outside of the exceptional circumstances of French academia and its hagiographic tradition of "les grands hommes"—, for no claim to totality is made by a collection of letters. I will instead highlight a few important themes, some of which return to issues—of epistolary vs. scholarly form, of the imaginary vs. the referential, and of writing's mysterious ontology—raised above.

As Pascal studies are often tinged, even motivated, by theological commitments, noteworthy here are the respectfully irreverent letters that push back against this current. One, in the voice of the mathematician David Hilbert (by Jean-Pierre Cléro), critiques Pascal for having confined the comprehension of space to three dimensions while already venturing, in his mathematical practice, beyond this limit. Pascal's mathematical daring was intimidated by apologetic and theological concerns. He thus accorded too much value to the evidence of intuition (the "heart") in mathematics, but also, the letter daringly suggests, in theology. Similarly, Laurent Bove addresses not Pascal the mathematician but the Pascal of the *Pensées*. Bove writes to Pascal about a group of faithfully wayward disciples, "*les pascaliens de l'immanence* ou *pascaliens de la seconde nature*" (p. 110). These thinkers (Vauvenargues, Camus, Comte-Sponville, Bourdieu) affirm the quasi-Spinozist positivity and intensity of what Pascal portrayed as negative, vacuous, fallen nature. In the next letter, a living member of this renegade group, André Comte-Sponville, testifies to the fertility of thinking with and against Pascal, and to how atheistic thought can find in the *Pensées* an inspiring paradigm of absolute irreverence: "l'incroyance à l'état pur" (p. 133).

Other letters poke fun at the institutionalized version of Pascal studies—indeed, the institutionalized version of anything (see the letter by Sabine Prokhoris)—using Pascalian lines of attack. While Sylvie Robic laments that Pascal has been "transformé en un impénétrable totem" (p. 73), Christian Belin imagines Pascal's amusement at "le bataillon de [s]es glosateurs" who seek to appropriate his texts and claim hermeneutic or editorial authority: "l'apprenti exégète s'arrogerait même volontiers un droit de propriété sur tes écrits, sur ta pensée. Candeur désarmante, erreur comique! Mais toi, dynamiteur de jésuites, tu dynamites toutes les formes de l'usurpation" (p. 53). Perhaps the most amusing of all the letters, written by Yasushi Noro, carries out this dynamiting à la Pascal on Pascal scholarship itself. Noro cites another (likely fictional) letter by a colleague who dutifully consults Pascal scholars to learn the official position concerning Pascal's degree of participation (author, mere secretary, team member?) in the *Provinciales*. A brilliant pastiche of Louis de Montalte's (a.k.a. Pascal's) satire of Jesuit ratiocination, Noro's letter is a comical commentary on the fate of Pascal in the modern "monde

'universitaire'" (p. 88)—a "world" that has shown itself to be rather hospitable to the spirit of coterie, jargon, and inner dissent mixed with outer coherence that characterized the Society that Pascal mocked.

In closing, let me return to the letters that, while addressed to and concerning Pascal, would appeal to a readership that goes beyond those already familiar with his texts and their scholarship. This includes the long letter by Gérard Bras, who suggests that the enduring attraction of Pascal's fragments, for him, stemmed from *not* understanding them (p. 149). This is the "expérience décisive" of the *Pensées*: "ils m'ont obligé à lire du point de vue de la question, de la question plus que du problème, autrement dit à faire l'effort de penser" (p. 151). As a proliferator of questions, not responses, and as a call for a mode of thinking that Bras suggestively calls "incompréhension positive," the *Pensées* bring about an "[é]preuve du vertige de la pensée qui cherche un principe et ressent sa fuite indéfinie" (p. 151). In similar terms, Agnès Guideroni writes that for Louis Marin, Pascal was the secret core of all his thinking: "un principe directeur caché" (p. 171). These ideas—of the absent center or principle, of an author irreducibly dissimulated and disseminated by the disjointed traces he left behind, of an alterity that, however familiar, remains irreducible—imbue the letters by Éric Méchoulan and Hall Bjørnstad as well. For Méchoulan, to think with Pascal is to learn to think from "une pensée de derrière," understood not as mode of consciousness, but as "une pensée du dehors" (p. 26). For Bjørnstad, Pascal is an "opacité" at the heart—or, rather, at the heart of the heart: "en deça (même du cœur)" (p. 21)—of thought and writing (Pascal's own and that of his best readers).

Beyond their scholarly insights, these letters achieve an effect that is arguably more crucial in our moment: they make contagious the desire, even the love, for reading Pascal. Not love as adoration or admiration, but as an attunement to truth as endless mystery, to what never wholly arrives, to what is not negatively but positively absent. Pascal here becomes the name for texts that are endlessly provocative, ever open, always ready to incite the desire that drives that mode of incomprehension called thinking.

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Chad Córdova
Cornell University
ccordova@cornell.edu

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