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Mary Ann Caws, *Blaise Pascal: Miracles and Reason*. London: Reaktion Books, 2017. Preface by Tom Conley. 196 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. £15.95 (cl.). ISBN 978-1780237213.

Review by John D. Lyons, University of Virginia.

Mary Ann Caws is a distinguished and prolific author and translator, with scores of books on many aspects of French, British, and American literature, art, poetry, and biography. Indeed, it would be a major task to inventory her many essays, commentaries, translations, and other writings over the decades of her intense activity. *Blaise Pascal: Miracles and Reason* comes as a useful and attractive addition to her work. It is a brief and lively essayistic introduction to Pascal's life and major writings for the non-specialist. Although it is not the most original of Caws' books—she acknowledges her sources gracefully, especially her use of Jacques Attali's 2003 biographical essay, *Blaise Pascal ou le génie français*<sup>[1]</sup>—it is certainly a good starting point for those not yet familiar with the important seventeenth-century polymath and polemicist. And since Attali's book is, surprisingly, not yet available in an English translation, Caws offers no doubt the best biographically organized introduction that can be read easily in one sitting. Available only in an attractive hardcover, *Blaise Pascal* is also copiously illustrated, with images ranging from historical portraits from the seventeenth century, images of places associated with Pascal such as Port-Royal des Champs, and even, in conclusion, René Magritte's surrealist painting, "Pascal's Coat" (*le Manteau de Pascal*). Although there is little need in an introductory essay for extensive engagement with specialist scholarship, some indication of the important recent publications on Pascal would at least have confirmed that work on the author is lively and ongoing.<sup>[2]</sup>

The book is organized in eight chapters (of an average length of fifteen pages) that follow Pascal's life and work chronologically. The longest chapter, touching on a side of Pascal not often seen in most scholarly writings about him, is "Jacqueline Pascal, Poet and Devout of Port-Royal." Caws emphasizes here Pascal's clearly tormented relationship with his brilliant, only slightly younger sister, who gave up a potential career as a writer for the austere life of the Jansenist convent, and who died less than a year before her brother. Did she flee to the convent to escape an excessively close relationship with Blaise? Did his feelings for her influence his often-expressed disapproval of all human affection? Caws' book is interesting not only for what it includes and emphasizes but also for what it touches upon only lightly. Refreshingly, from this reviewer's perspective at least, she gives a rather brief (thought certainly necessary) mention of "the Wager," adding, "I have not wanted to add to the many books about 'Pascal's Wager'" (p. 87). Caws then makes a stimulating comment about the problem of translating a key phrase in the relevant fragment of Pascal's *Pensées* (sometimes called the *Discours de la Machine*, Sellier number 680).<sup>[3]</sup> The claim (apparently stated by the Catholic believer to the atheist interlocutor) that everyone necessarily takes a position on the existence of God, because "vous êtes embarqué" could be literally translated as "you are embarked," and yet, Caws notes, Roger Ariew's translation gives "you are committed." Caws highlights contextually the pluses and minus of the less literal translation. On one hand, in an existential sense the "commitment" probably engages the modern sense of agency. On the other hand, removing "embarked" has the consequence of obliterating the network of associations with the fluctuating seas of the (secular)

world and of chance.

In this often very personal essay, Caws does not hesitate to speak of her own lengthy acquaintance with Pascal and with his adversaries. She mentions studying at the Institut Catholique in Paris and her interest in Ignatius of Loyola and his visually-oriented spiritual exercises (p. 74). She tells us that her first engagement with Pascal's thought began with her early reading of his ecstatic prose-poem prayer, known as the "Mémorial," in which he secretly commemorated what is known as his "second conversion" to the austere Christianity of the Jansenists (pp. 97-98). She takes stands on such things as Voltaire's negative comments about Pascal whose views of Montaigne the eighteenth-century *philosophe* dismissed as "paltry" (p. 107). Her description of the difference between Montaigne's and Pascal's reactions to near-death experiences (pp. 105-106) takes the form of reflection on André Breton's comments about "haunting": Pascal remained haunted by the approach of death while Montaigne overcame it. These rich associations that occur to Caws's highly literate and cultivated mind are a great part of the charm of this book. In one instance there is a striking example of how such personal engagement can be creative in unacknowledged ways. Commenting on the Pascal's use of the concept of the "order of charity" (p. 109), Caws mentions—quite pertinently—the discussion of Pascal in Eric Rohmer's 1969 film *Ma Nuit chez Maud*. In her endnote description of the film there is "the discussion between the philosopher and the priest" about charity. Indeed, there is such a discussion in Rohmer's film, but it is between a philosopher and an engineer from the Michelin plant in Clermont-Ferrand, and Pascal would certainly have had much more in common with an engineer than with a priest.

There are some points on which Caws is unclear or somewhat elusive. While she shows very well how the pseudonym "Louis de Montalte" (used retroactively from 1657 to designate the fictive speaker of what have become known as the *Lettres Provinciales*) relates via the anagram "Salomon de Tultie" (which appears in the *Pensées*) to the Latin term for stupidity or folly (*stultitia*), she does not clarify that the letters did not initially have any authorial name nor any name for the principal speaker. In saying that "Pascal, under the name of Louis de Montalte (no one knew his identity until Pascal was dead)..." Caws might seem to be claiming that no one knew that Pascal, along with collaborators such as Pierre Nicole, was the writer of these clandestine texts. Is that what she is actually saying? There is another point of much greater significance for the retrospective construction of Pascal's work on which Caws' position is not clear. Did Pascal write a deliberately "fragmentary" work or is the form of the publication we know as the *Pensées* accidental (at least, involuntary from the point of view of Blaise Pascal)? It is no doubt the case that the great success of the *Pensées* in subsequent publishing, broad influence, pedagogy, and general reputation is in large measure due to what we could call its poetic form, the way it appears without a tight or obvious connection among the enunciations, customarily known as "fragments." Caws seems of two minds as to the form in which this text or series of texts appears. She writes that "Pascal himself was of course concerned about the ordering of them [the fragments] towards his *Apologia*" (p. 123), though she later says about the ordering "If Pascal didn't worry too much, why should we?" (p. 126). Did Pascal deliberately, and brilliantly, devise his work to be fragmentary and open to a multitude of readings? Caws quotes Pascal: "Words differently arranged give a different meaning. And the meanings differently arranged give different results" (*Les mots diversement rangés font un divers sens. Et les sens diversement rangés font différents effets*. [Sellier number 645]).<sup>[4]</sup> Caws adds "And yet, of course, he knows the impossibility of choosing any single one" (p. 126).

Did Pascal know this impossibility? In other words, did he decide to leave the text in the form that has come down to us? And did he abandon the project of publishing the set of writings destined to be "an *Apology for the Christian Religion*" (p. 124) because he was "stricken by a sickness that prevented his further work on them" (p. 124)? Caws presents this as a factual explanation for the form in which we find the material, even though Pascal still had plenty of energy during the last year of his life, when he helped set up a public transportation system for Paris: "as we know, in the very last year of his life, he and Artus Gouffier set up a public transport system that has endured" (p. 86). The answers to these questions are likely to remain a subject of academic debate unless further documentation is discovered, but the reasons

for Pascal's non-publication of the text we call *Pensées* do concern how we understand and judge the points that Caws makes in the stimulating section of chapter seven, "Particular *Pensées* and Persuasive Thinking" (pp. 133-146). There she shows desirable characteristics of Pascal's writing from which we could learn and which we could use. For instance: "*How to think*: fragmentary bursts instead of lengthy ponderings..." (p. 133). Would Pascal have recommended fragmentary bursts as a form of writing? That remains imponderable.

Overall, *Blaise Pascal: Miracles and Reason* is a book well worth the attention of anyone coming newly to the work of this multi-faceted French author.

## NOTES

[1] Jacques Attali, *Blaise Pascal ou le génie français* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2003).

[2] Titles such as these would be a useful complement to the bibliography: Michael Moriarty, *Early Modern French Thought: The Age of Suspicion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Michael Moriarty, *Fallen Nature, Fallen Selves: Early Modern French Thought II* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Hall Bjørnstad, *Créature sans créateur: pour une anthropologie baroque dans les Pensées de Pascal* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2010); Gérard Ferreyrolles, *Les reines du monde: l'imagination et la coutume chez Pascal* (Paris and Geneva: H. Champion and Slatkine, 1995); Jean Dubray, *Pascal et Baudelaire* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2011); Nicholas Hammond, *Playing with Truth: Language and the Human Condition in Pascal's Pensées* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Alain Cantillon, *Le pari-de-Pascal: étude littéraire d'une série d'énonciations*, (Paris: Vrin, 2014).

[3] Blaise Pascal, *Les provinciales; Pensées; et opuscules divers*, ed. Gérard Ferreyrolles and Philippe Sellier (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2004), pp. 1208-1217.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 1174.

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