

Ludwin, Dawn M.

Blaise Pascal's Quest for the Ineffable. New York: Peter Lang, 2001.

Blaise Pascal's Quest for the Ineffable is an admirably clear and thought-provoking look at the Pascalian quest for God crowned by the experience celebrated in the Memorial of his *nuit de feu*, a quest seen as a rational being's search through thought and language for Another who transcends both language and thought – to say nothing of Being itself, and indeed all categories. Dawn Ludwin seeks an Ariadne's thread in a hitherto recognized but not fully sounded affinity: negative (apophatic) theology, in particular that of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

Ranging over the entire Pascalian corpus, her succinct study “initiates a philosophical dialogue” between Pascal and Dionysius that incorporates instructive asides on thematic resemblances to the thought of Foucault, Leibniz, Nietzsche, Heidegger and many others. However, the attempt to add Pascal to the long list of thinkers clearly and directly influenced by Dionysius is much less successful – perhaps inevitably, given the dearth of explicit indications, and given that the need for some kind of apophatic speech is a theological *lieu commun*. It is implied even by common, affirmative-seeming practices such as the attribution of analogous meanings to divine predicates (cf. hyperboles such as Augustine's *omnipotentissimus*). The obvious source for apophatic elements in Pascal would of course be St. Augustine, though as she points out he is not so radical or thoroughgoing as Dionysius.

To all appearances, Pascal's actual contact with Dionysius is slight: Ludwin finds but two explicit references to ‘Denys’ (Dionysius) in the Pascalian corpus. Nor is it clear that these show Pascal to believe in the traditionally accepted, though wholly erroneous, (self-)identification of the author of the influential mystical treatises with the Dionysius of Acts of the Apostles (17:34), converted by Saint Paul in Athens at the Areopagus.¹ This literary imposture, strongly suspected with the first, brusque appearance of the treatises at Constantinople in 533, and devastat-

ingly critiqued by both humanists and Reformers, did not receive its *coup de grâce* until the late nineteenth century. Still, he may have accepted it: the doubts concerning Dionysius were less influential in France than elsewhere. And he may have read him: Latin versions were readily available, and a French translation, preceded by a defense of Areopagite authorship, appeared in 1629. Detail on Dionysian influence on Pascal's theological associates would have been helpful here.

In any event, there are enough thematic resemblances, whether or not stemming directly from Dionysius, to see Pascal's relation to the supposed auditor of Saint Paul as a web of (elective?) affinities. Their charting and sounding in Ludwin's sensitive study is a welcome reminder of the extent to which previous generations of critics tended to undervalue Pascal's theological sophistication, and it is a contribution to the discussion of the context and character of Pascal's views on language, reason and God.

Transcending all categories of thought and speech, the divine nature can be represented by neither. Hence for Dionysius there can be no adequate positive theology (*via positiva*): *logos* cannot capture *theos*. Are we then reduced to silence about him? Not exactly; though God transcends all categories, we can say what he is *not*. Thus, fashioning a negative theology, the mind can approach God by a *via negativa*. But even to say this is misleading, for in transcending all categories God transcends that of negation too. And so, though since God transcends Being he may be said to be non-Being, as he likewise transcends negation he cannot be said to be mere privation of Being, pure nothingness. Rather, following the *via eminentiae*, he is best called hyper-Being, Beyond Being (cf. "the Good" in Plato's *Republic* VI). In various guises and with varying emphases, these ways pervade natural theology in the Christian tradition, though they have often co-existed uneasily with Revelation, with Augustinianism and indeed with each other.

Ludwin argues that these themes, along with such Dionysian concepts as hierarchies -- "sacred orders" of angels, rites and persons -- have echoes in Pascal's views on the three orders, the vacuum, language, the Incarnation, the Eucharist, infinity and transcendent godhood. But she is principally concerned to show that

negative theology's strategies for accessing the ineffable Divine are mirrored in Pascal. They do not aim to enable us speak the unspeakable, nor do they leave us in mere silent acceptance of divine mystery.² Rather, these strategies – non-representational discourse with its “essence avoidance”; “thinking on the other side,” the use of paradox to undermine traditional logical and linguistic dichotomies; and *aphaeresis*, a “removal” which “empties the clutter of the finite mind to clear a space for divine illumination” -- aim instead to transform consciousness so that, transcending the subject/object distinction, it penetrates/is penetrated by the “inaccessible light” or “divine darkness” enshrouding/revealing God.

Among the chief strengths of this book are the freshness of its approach and its choice of topic. Pascal's affinity to negative theology is undeniable -- consider for example the first part of the famous *pensée* “infini rien” (the wager, S680/L418) and his powerful emphases on mystery, the hidden God, our nullity before him and his incomprehensible justice. Other strengths include its lucidity of expression and arrangement and its ingenious integration of materials from throughout Pascal's works as well as from a wide variety of later thinkers.

Yet, topic and thesis bring difficulty in their train. As the paramount importance of Scripture for Pascal makes plain, his “quest” is not ultimately for the ineffable as such, nor for what is finally ineffable *tout court*. Argumentation is fluid and fluent, but some particular arguments and judgments are *contestables*, some perhaps a bit thesis-driven. The famous distinction of fact vs. right, a legal commonplace, is subsumed under the Pascalian doctrine of the three orders; they are then treated as tantamount to a Dionysian epistemology of proportionate knowledge reflective of his hierarchies, thus revealing “an apophatic theology hidden deep in the *Lettres provinciales*” (20). “Est et non est” (S441/L877), part of a question in the Sellier text, is, as the context makes clear, a contemptuous reference to the yes-and-no permissions of the casuists. It does not proclaim that “For Pascal, contradiction is the only adequate expression of truth” (93). To stand foursquare in the Dionysian tradition Pascal must reject traditional natural theology as insufficient. Clearly he is distrustful, even disdainful of it: *by itself* it

ends in deism, which is no less repugnant than atheism. But one goes too far to say that “Pascal rejects cosmological proofs of God as vehemently as he does the heresy [sic] of pagan religions” (12). While rhetorically they are highly ineffective, especially for the apologist, they are not necessarily epistemologically defective on their own ground (cf. S690/L449; but cf. also the *sic et non* remarks in “infini rien” in their rhetorical context).

But if Pascal travels the *via negativa*, is it to its uttermost end? And for him is there a unique epistemological path to God? For what of Scripture, whose voice is so prominent even in the Memorial of the mystical *nuit de feu*? If indeed “Dieu parle bien de Dieu” (S334/L303), is it for Pascal, as for Dionysius in the *Celestial Hierarchies* (ch.2 140C), by propounding absurdities that point to the inability of signifiers to signify for God? Moreover, an implication of the Dionysian viewpoint is that since, in a tradition as old as Parmenides, knowledge is of what *is*, and since God transcends Being, although he may have hyper-epistēmē of his hyper-ousia, properly speaking God is unknowable not only to us but to himself. Thus in the ninth-century John Scotus Eriugena, translator of Dionysius, steeped in apophatic thought, can write “de mirabile divina ignorantia, qua deus non intellegit quid ipse sit” (“Concerning the wondrous divine ignorance by virtue of which God does not understand what he is” [*De div. nat.* II]). But this is a better fit for the God Pascal tells us he did not encounter in his *nuit de feu* – the God (e.g., neo-Platonic) “des philosophes et savants,” than for the God that he tells us he did: “Dieu d’Abraham, Dieu d’Isaac, Dieu de Jacob” – the God who, eschewing essence avoidance, said “I am Who Am.” As Being *par excellence* he would be in and of himself of all things the *most* knowable, since knowledge is of what *is* (cf. Plato’s Forms).

And so, in Platonic shorthand, for Pascal is God, *tout compte fait*, as *eidōs* or *agathon*, Form or Good? Harking back to a famous phrase of St. Paul (I Cor. 13:12) – “Now we see but through a glass and darkly, but hereafter face to face” -- C. S. Lewis asked how we could see God face to face “Till we have faces.” But what if, as implied by the Dionysian epistemology, God has no face? What then of Pascal’s Pauline “Par la gloire nous connaîtrons sa

nature” (“infini rien”)? Such questions and quandaries – *aporiai*? - - await the reader who takes the stimulating journey with Ludwin along the darklingly luminescent *via negativa*.

Charles M. Natoli

NOTES

¹This first mention (*Provinciales* XVIII) concerns, as Ludwin notes, what was in fact another traditional error in identification: “...saint Denis, premier évêque de Paris, qu’on tient communément être l’Aréopagite...” (The report that the identification is common belief need not, *pace* Ludwin, signify its acceptance by Pascal.) As for the second, “Denys a la charité, il était en place” (*Pensées* Sellier 629/Lafuma 762), like the first it is consistent with both identifications but entails Pascal’s acceptance of neither. Note that neither mention is of Dionysius as an author.

² Some of my own views these matters are sketched in an article on Pascal’s Memorial, “Pascal: mystique/anti-mystique,” *Cahiers du dix-septième* VI 1 (1992).