Tropes at Play: Rhetoric and concupiscence in Pascal’s Pensées

BARBARA WOSHINSKY

L’éloquence fait injure aux choses,
qui nous destourne à soy.
(Montaigne, Essais I, 26)

Over fifty years ago, E. B. O. Borgerhoff redefined the essence of Pascal’s Pensées for successive generations of readers.1 Rather than the outpourings of a tortured seeker, Borgerhoff states that “they have to be understood as rhetoric; they begin and end as rhetoric” (28). No mere decorative embellishment, rhetoric is inseparable here from persuasion; in Gary Kuchar’s words, it is “a formal means of arousing readers” (2). Despite his own criticisms of traditional argumentation, Pascal might not have disagreed: the Pensées ostensibly aim to “arouse” us from our sinful stupor, to make us reject this fallen world and seek union with God for eternity. However, I will argue that rhetoric in the Pensées is not always fully engaged in this pious enterprise. In a brief introduction, I will examine Pascal’s critique and rethinking of rhetoric in the context of its time and sketch the rhetorical (or anti-rhetorical) underpinnings of the work. The main body of the article will examine some of the mechanisms whereby Pascal’s discourse breaks away from its persuasive confines and flies into hyperbolic free spin. The analysis will concentrate on the closely-meshed figures of contradiction and negation, repetition and discontinuity. In conclusion, I will consider the implications of Pascalian “play” referred to in my title.

From their initial discovery shortly after Pascal’s death, the enigmatic scraps of paper that would become the Pensées have fascinated and discon-

1 Parts of this article were first presented as a paper at the 2011 MLA session on “Sinful Style.” Ellen McClure’s charge to the panelists proved cathartic for my work: “How does style become less a means to an end than an end in itself, an expression of pleasure, and how is this shift viewed ethically or theologically?”

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certed readers. The first impression created by the *Pensées* was their lack of traditional form: Pascal’s nephew Etienne Périer, author of the preface to the original Port Royal edition (1670), had the uncomfortable job of praising his uncle’s genius and piety while dealing with a text he sometimes found incomprehensible and perhaps even shocking. Périer writes that the original “fragments” showed “very little” (bien peu) of the author’s intentions: “et les choses mêmes que l’on y trouvera sont si imparfaites, si peu étendues et si peu digérées, qu’elles ne peuvent donner qu’une idée très grossière de la manière dont il avait envie de les traiter” (*OC* 467). Jean-Raoul Carré observes that the style of the *Pensées*, considered “trop violente ou négligée” in its time, was “softened up” by its first editors (1). The Port-Royal edition attempted to domesticate the text by cutting out unacceptable fragments and arranging the rest in what was considered a more “logical” order. For example, either misunderstanding Pascal’s complex dialectic, or simply finding it distasteful, the original editors eliminated the troubling assertion that the Christian religion is not “certaine” (Havet xiv). Voltaire dismissed several of Pascal’s expressions as “galimatias” or gobbledygook; yet the eighteenth-century philosophe would hardly have spent much of his career combating Pascal had he not recognized in his Jansenist bête noire an extraordinary power of language that made him “le grand homme de l’apologétique moderne” (Carré 11, italics added). In Voltaire’s view, it was these original rhetorical gifts that rendered Pascal dangerous.

Pascal’s rhetoric was not his grandfather’s or even his father’s; he was already operating within the context of a revolution in linguistic concepts. As other scholars have pointed out, rhetoric in early modern France had lost its place in the traditional trivium and been reduced to “a mere esthetic adjunct, an ornament within the semantic” (Koch xv). The authors of the Port-Royal *Logique* attempted to remove any remaining traces of rhetorical argument, replacing it with pure logic and dialectic. In this venture, they saw Pascal’s *Provinciales* as a model. Pascal’s own writings contain multiple critiques of traditional rhetoric. In “De l’Art de persuader,” he castigates

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2 “XVI. ‘La distance infinie des corps aux esprits figure la distance infiniment plus infinie des esprits à la charité; car elle est surnaturelle.’ Il est a croire que M. Pascal n’aurait pas employé ce galimatias dans son ouvrage, s’il avait eu le temps de le faire.” Voltaire, *Lettres Philosophiques*, vingt-cinquième lettre (174). It is interesting that Pascal attacks most severely the passages where Pascal’s evocative, reiterative poetic is most evident.

overblown style, declaring “je hais ces mots d’enflure,” because they dis- 
courage us from seeking spiritual truth: “Et l’une des raisons qui éloignent 
ceux qui entrent dans ces connaissances du véritable chemin qu’ils doivent 
suivre, est l’imagination qu’on prend d’abord que les bonnes choses sont 
inaccessibles, en leur donnant le nom de grandes, hautes, élevées, sub-
limes.” In place of this lofty language, he prescribes simple words: “Je 
voudrais les nommer basses, communes, familières: ces noms-là leur 
conviennent mieux” (“De l’Art de persuader,” OC 359). The Pensées also 
contain examples of what Pascal considers bad rhetoric, such as the use of 
figures that are not coextensive with the object described: “Langage. Ceux 
qui font les antithèses en forçant les mots sont comme ceux qui font de 
fausses fenêtres pour la symétrie. Leur règle n’est pas de parler juste, mais 
de faire des figures justes” (S466). In a similar vein, Pascal critiques unnec-
essary paraphrases and circumlocutions that distance language from its 
object: “Masquer la nature et la déguiser: plus de roi, plus de pape, 
d’évêque, mais ‘auguste monarque,’ etc. Point de Paris, ‘capitale du roya-
ume.’ ” At this point, the author seems to be espousing an extreme version 
of a “classical ideology” of clarity and purity—a kind of Jansenist linguistics. 
Yet, in Pascalian fashion, after the passage just cited, he immediately 
reverses direction, leaving space for style: “Il y a des lieux où il faut appeler 
Paris, Paris, et d’autres où il la faut appeler capitale du royaume” (S669). 
Thus, the new rules for writing do not eliminate rhetoric. When Pascal avers 
that “la vraie éloquence se moque de l’éloquence” (S671,) his ostensibly 
anti-rhetorical claim is in itself rhetorical. The writer employs short, 
brusque vocables—all the words except for “éloquence” are of one syl-
latable—and poetic techniques such as internal rhyme (se moque de l’élo-
quence) to punctuate his argument. Rather than erasing eloquence, Pascal 
displaces it. Hence, I would argue that within a general anti-rhetorical 
revolution, the Pensées enact a second revolution. Rejecting the limits of the 
old rhetoric, Pascal seeks a perfect “modèle d’agrément et de beauté” to 
which his readers will respond (S486).

Recent scholars have confirmed that the Pensées contain, in Sara Mel-
zer’s phrase, a “new kind of rhetoric” (Melzer 36). Other critics have thor-
oughly highlighted the non-traditional features of the work, including its 
discontinuities, contradictions and aporia. To give a few examples: Pierre Force’s careful hermeneutic studies, Emma Gibbs’s 
reflections on the text’s self-referentiality, and Jean-Louis Lebrave’s characteri-

4 Quotes from Pascal’s Pensées refer to the Philippe Sellier edition (Paris: Garnier, 
1999.) Other quotations from Pascal are taken from the Oeuvres complètes (OC).

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studies aim to connect any textual anomalies to a global meaning, goal or message—to incorporate them, in other words, into a Pascalian strategy of conversion. According to Carré, “[Pascal] accumule les antithèses et les difficultés pour interdire de rechercher toutes les conciliations rationnelles qui pourraient être envisagées, pour forcer l’esprit à tenter un saut désespéré dans le mystère” (22). My perspective is deliberately contrarian: rather than tracing links between form and meaning, I hold that the originality of the Pensées lies in the ways these links are broken. Hence, the article will focus on points in the text where language becomes an obstacle rather than a guide to understanding. This analysis will proceed by dialectical stages. After exploring the apparent rhetorical intentionality of each example, I will show how Pascalian discourse moves beyond argument to self-reflexivity.

The Pascalian strategy of persuasion begins on a structural level. The Pensées are not so formless as they may first seem; a deeper examination reveals that their fragmented surface is supported by a strong discursive armature, built on principles of contradiction/negation, antithesis/reversal, and unflagging repetition. As Pascal states in S452, “Quand dans un discours se trouvent des mots répétés et qu’essayant de les corriger on les trouve si propres qu’on gâterait le discours, il les faut laisser, c’en est la marque.” All these techniques serve as outward “marks” for our incontrovertible duality: “Contrariétés. L’homme est naturellement crédule, incrédule, timide, téméraire” (S158). This duality is conveyed through stylistic duplicity: “Source de contradictions. Deux natures en Jésus-Christ. Deux avènements. Deux états de la nature de l’homme” (S273). Frequent oppositions reinforce this duality: “aveugler/éclaircir” (S268); “trop et trop peu de vin” (S72). “Renversement continuel du pour au contre” (S127), on the other hand, is a rhetorical shaking-up process, a kind of permanent revolution meant to break readers of their comfortable intellectual habits. In “Il n’y a rien de si conforme à la raison que ce désaveu de la raison” (S240), the repetition of raison in two contradictory contexts makes readers not just morally but logically uneasy by upsetting our customary modes of thinking.

As stated above, duality, with its stylistic avatars of contradiction and repetition, lies at the heart of the Pensées. Contradiction or contrariété per se

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6 This strategy seems to parallel Pascal’s own comments in “The Art of Persuasion:” “Je sais qu’il a voulu qu’elles [les vérités divines] entrent du cœur dans l’esprit, et non pas de l’esprit dans le cœur, pour humilier cette superbe puissance du raisonnement, qui prétend être juge des choses que la volonté choisit, et pour guérir cette volonté infirme, qui s’est toute corrompue par ses sales attachements” (OC 355.)
was not considered a novelty in the seventeenth century. Not only was it recognized as a guiding principle of Pascalian thought; it already formed a familiar part of Jansenist moral analysis. According to Etienne Périer, Pascal’s presentation of his apologetic project at Port-Royal outlined “toutes les contrariétés étonnantes” present in human nature (OC 495). As we will see, it is not contradiction itself but Pascal’s particular use of it that makes his writing anomalous. The main rhetorical technique employed to highlight contradiction in the Pensées is renversement or reversal. As the author states poetically in S163:

S’il se vante, je l’abaisse
S’il s’abaisse je le vante
Et le contredis toujours
Jusqu’à ce qu’il comprenne
Qu’il est un monstre incompréhensible.

This fragment artfully enacts the process of renversement through chiasmus in the first two lines and paradoxical wordplays in the last two (comprendre... incompréhensible); the middle line, a still center, sets off and controls the movement of the others. However, as we discover in fragment S1, the balance between thematic antinomies and contrariétés of style is not always maintained: “Les hommes sont si nécessairement fous que ce serait être fou par un autre tour de folie de n’être pas fou.” This sentence again deploys the technique of renversement, but the concentrated verbal acrobatics of “être fou par un autre tour de folie de n’être pas fou,” and the near homophony between être and autre, make the statement draw attention to itself as language. A similar process occurs in S208: “Ni la contradiction n’est marque de fausseté, ni l’incontradiction n’est marque de vérité.” This chiasmic sentence, where two clauses collide in mutual negation, is obscure but not opaque: those familiar with Pascal’s mental structures may construe the fragment to mean that a preoccupation with consistency is irrelevant, even contrary, to the spiritual search the author would have us undertake.7

At the same time, stylistic features like the geometrically formal parallels and oppositions and the weak rhyme vérité/fausseté divert our attention away from the semantic level.

My next examples differ thematically from the previous instances while extending the negative patterns of S208. S112 (Orgeuil) begins with a neat maxim à La Rochefoucauld: “Curiosité n’est que vanité le plus souvent.” As

7 On Pascal’s use of chiasmic writing, see Erec Koch, Pascal and Rhetoric 41 ff., 112-14. Philippe Sellier includes negation among his eight principles of Pascalian rhetoric, but not renversement or chiasmus.
the fragment develops, however, the negatives and restrictives spread a multiple, diffuse panoply: “Autrement on ne voyagerait pas sur la mer pour ne jamais en rien dire et pour le seul plaisir de voir sans espérance d’en jamais communiquer.” (italics added). In S36, Pascal expresses humanity’s epistemological deprivation and dependence on Christ through a more patterned series of negations:

Non seulement nous ne connaissons Dieu que par Jésus-Christ mais nous ne nous connaissons nous-mêmes que par Jésus-Christ. Nous ne connaissons la vie, la mort que par Jésus-Christ. Hors de Jésus-Christ nous ne savons ce que c’est ni que notre vie, ni que notre mort, ni que Dieu, ni que nous-mêmes.

Ainsi sans l’Ecriture, qui n’a que Jésus-Christ pour objet, nous ne connaissons rien et ne voyons qu’obscurité et confusion dans la nature de Dieu et dans la propre nature. (emphasis added)

The three opening sentences of the fragment display a quantitative buildup of negatives. The first contains two restrictives in italics (ne… que). The second sentence is built on a restrictive that takes on the function of a multiple negative: “ne connaissons la vie, la mort” is actually an ellipsis for “ni la vie ni la mort.” It also contains five instances of non-negative que (underlined in the example), which accentuate the percussive repetitiveness of the text. The third sentence explicitly deploys a quadruple negative, “ne… ni… ni… ni…” The concluding statement (Ainsi…) ratchets up the negation level to the absolute by claiming we know nothing (nous ne connaissons rien). This total negation is symmetrically framed by two restrictive ne… que clauses. Without wholly blocking the absorption of meaning, the supersaturated negatives call attention to themselves above and beyond what the words are ostensibly aiming to express. Instead of concentrating on content, the reader is diverted by style; to quote the less-often cited conclusion of a famous Pascalian aphorism, one seeks a man, only to find an author:

Quand on voit le style naturel, on est tout étonné et ravi, car on s’attendait de voir un auteur, et on trouve un homme. Au lieu que ceux qui ont le goût bon et qui en voyant un livre croient trouver un homme, sont tout surpris de trouvent un auteur (S554, italics added.)

In S112 above, negation is inseparably conjoined to repetition: depending on one’s method of linguistic analysis, the passage contains at least seven negative structures. For Erec Koch, such repetitive discourse is not merely a rhetorical device but an integral part of the argumentative process in the Pensées: in Koch’s words, “graded progression and repetition are the necessary properties of dialectic” (Koch 118). Without disputing this point, I
would argue that the close fusion between reiteration and purpose can sometimes become delaminated. I will develop this assertion by examining a specific form of repetition called *ploce*. Derived from the Greek word for “plaiting,” it suitably evokes the complications of Pascal’s verbal play. *Ploce* is a figure that places the same word or expression in different contexts in order to create rhetorical emphasis and extended, sometimes contradictory, meanings. As Pascal himself states, in a sentence that performs the technique it describes: “Les mots diversement rangés font un divers sens. Et les sens diversement rangés font différents effets” (S438). We have already seen an instance of this semantic shift in S240, quoted above. Like Shakespeare, in the classic example “brother to brother / Blood to blood, self against self” (*Richard III*, II.4), Pascal often sets his repetitions in prepositional clauses which accentuate difference through syntactic similarity. In fragment S33, the play of identity and difference is stretched further by exploiting the polyvalence of the preposition *de* in French. “La seule chose qui nous console *de nos misères* est le divertissement, et cependant c’est le plus grand *de nos misères*.” While the repeated phrases “de nos misères” look identical, there is a syntactic shift: the first italicized element is an indirect object clause—console us *for* our sufferings, whereas the second is a hyperbolic prepositional phrase—the greatest *of* our sufferings. A similar technique is employed in a lesser-known fragment, L283: “Qui veut donner le sens *de l’Ecriture* et ne le prend point *de l’Ecriture* est ennemi *de l’Ecriture*. Augustin, *De doctrina christianæ*” (italics added). In this sentence, the meaning of “de” symmetrically vacillates between “of” and “from” Scripture, eroding any solid signification.

Analogously, one of the “Roseau pensant” fragments plays on the different meanings of *point* and *comprendre*:

> Ce n’est *point* de l’espace que je dois chercher ma dignité, mais c’est du règlement de ma pensée. Je n’aurai *point* d’avantage en possédant des terres. Par l’espace l’univers me *comprend* et m’engloutit comme un *point*, par la pensée je le *comprends* (S145, L113; emphasis added).

In the first two sentences, *point* is employed as an emphatic negative: *ne... point* or not at all. In the concluding sentence, *point*, transformed into a noun, takes on a physical and geometric meaning while retaining a sense of shrinking and negation: in the infinite space of the universe, man is a nearly invisible point—*il est point*, or practically nothing at all. However Pascal reverses this shrinkage by a dialectical opposition between the worlds within and without: while the universe physically contains the speaker (*me comprend*), intellectually the speaker comprehends, and thus contains, the universe (*je le comprends*). It is useful to compare this text to Roger Ariew’s
excellent English translation, in which these variances in meaning are necessarily lost:

It is not in space that I must seek my dignity, but in the ordering of my thought. I will gain nothing by owning land. Through space the universe encompasses me and swallows me up like a mere point; through thought I encompass it.

Obviously, no negative point, no double meaning of comprendre are present.

In the following example, ploce is stretched almost to breaking point (or pointe): “Les hommes sont si nécessairement fous que ce serait être fou par un autre tour de folie de n’être pas fou” (S31). This statement reverses itself in mid-course through “another turn” (or trope) that negates its initial assertion: where all are mad, it would be madness not to be mad. While the underlying logical structure of this conclusion remains clear, the multiple turns of the trope call attention to themselves, creating an opening for autonomous play on (with) words. This effect is felt most strongly in the last example, a long fragment captioned “A.P.R. Grandeur et misère:”

La misère se concluant de la grandeur et la grandeur de la misère, les uns ont conclu la misère d’autant plus qu’ils en ont pris pour preuve la grandeur et les autres concluant la grandeur avec d’autant plus de force qu’ils l’ont conclue de la misère même, tout ce que les uns ont pu dire pour montrer la grandeur n’a servi que d’un argument aux autres pour conclure la misère, puisque c’est être d’autant plus misérable qu’on est tombé de plus haut. Et les autres au contraire. Ils se sont portés les uns sur les autres par un cercle sans fin, étant certain qu’à mesure que les hommes ont de lumière ils trouvent et grandeur et misère en l’homme. En un mot l’homme connaît qu’il est misérable. Il est donc misérable, puisqu’il l’est. Mais il est bien grand, puisqu’il le connaît. (S55, L21)

This passage plays on multiple repetitions and variations, including the reiterated nouns grandeur, misérable and conclure, the intensifier d’autant plus, and the oppositions of les uns to les autres. The opening assertion, “La misère se concluant de la grandeur et la grandeur de la misère,” is developed in the following clause: “les uns ont conclu la misère d’autant plus qu’ils en ont pris pour preuve la grandeur et les autres concluant la grandeur avec d’autant plus de force qu’ils l’ont conclue de la misère même.” This tortuous proposition could be diagrammed in the following way:

Les uns: grandeur > misère
Les autres: misère > grandeur

However, such a logical condensation would destroy the rhetorical effect. The sentence ends by reverting to the first side of the argument: that man is miserable because he has fallen from a higher state (tombé de plus haut). The
following sentence fragment elliptically summarizes the opposing argument, while using the word *contraire* in an argumentative context that ironically recalls the *contrariété* of human nature itself. The word *conclure* also appears ironic in this context, since the whole point of the debate between “some” and “others,” as staged by Pascal, is that there can never be any real closure: unable ever to reach a single conclusion about our dual nature, we are doomed to repeat the dialogue “en un cercle sans fin.” Pascal himself “concludes” by maintaining both poles of the argument intact, in two parallel but slightly disparate statements: “Il est donc misérable puisqu’il l’est. Mais il est bien grand, puisqu’il le connaît.” The first sentence contains a deliberately circular proposition couched in the form of a syllogistic conclusion. When read aloud, it also reveals a deeper, existential level of meaning through poetic play. The written phrase “puisqu’il l’est” states that man is miserable because he is miserable (the antecedent of *l’*); but the oral homonym “il est” suggests that the state of being is already a state of misery in itself. To be miserable, it is sometimes simply enough to be. The following sentence introduces two variations: the intensifier *bien* replaces the logical *donc*, and the previous circularity is broken by introducing the role of consciousness: “il le connaît.” Again, while the apparent aim of these variations and repetitions is to dramatize our paradoxical, contrary state, syntactic condensation and proliferation call attention to themselves: Montaigne’s words, “l’éloquence... nous destourne à soy” could be extended to “la poésie nous détourne à soy.”

In the *Pensées*, discontinuity, like restrictive negation, bears a dialectical relation to repetition. For example, in fragment S636, beginning “l’éloquence continue ennuie” (continual eloquence is boring), Pascal suggests that the repetitive cycles of nature, the *itus et reditus* of the sun and the tides, also form part of our human nature: we are determined, or, in modern jargon, “hard-wired,” to crave constant change. Pascal therefore employs variety, rupture and discontinuity as rhetorical devices to avoid boring the reader and to augment the persuasive force of his text (Bjornstad 231). Examples of discontinuity are legion within the *Pensées*, whether they be located within fragments, as in S636, or between fragments or larger sections. Many fragments are paratactic in structure: as Buford Norman has shown, Pascal often replaces connectors with parallel constructions that make differences stand out: “Notre nature est dans le movement, le repos entire est la mort” (S529 bis). This syntax violates readers’ expectations of

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8 Bjornstad seems to conjoin the two related but disparate rhetorical principles of discontinuity and diversion.

a logical argument with precise relational conjunctions. In S195, the use of present participles combined with run-on sentences creates a breathless feeling, as of time’s imminent end: “Un homme dans un cachot, ne sachant si son arrêt est donné, n’ayant plus qu’une heure pour l’apprendre, cette heure suffisant, s’il sait qu’il est donné pour le faire revoquer, il est contre nature qu’il emploie cette heure-là non à s’informer si l’arrêt est donné, mais à jouer au piquet.” Thus, the text of the Pensées displays a global structure of repetitions (itus et reditus), separated by syntactical or typographical barriers which only serve to accentuate its stylistic extremity.

To summarize the argument so far: restriction, negation, chiasmus, repetition and parataxis form an interlocking set of Pascalian figures that I call “hypertropes.” I do not treat hyperbole as a separate figure because the text’s entire structure can be considered hyperbolic.10 Through their high energy, these hypertropes can displace discourse from the rhetorical category of inventio (involving content and meaning) to that of elocutio (embellishment or style; see Force 23). This stylistic opacity pushes back against the purported aim of the Pensées in two contrasting ways. First, the intellectualty of Pascal’s oppositions, their quasi-mathematical or logical structures, can create a distance between text and reader: deciphering Pascal becomes an intellectual challenge, like solving a Sudoku puzzle. More important, literary pleasure rears its unruly head: instead of suffering from our reading of the Pensées, we enjoy it. Of course, Pascal condemns “la vanité des plaisirs” (S22), including literary ones: like Montaigne, he compares poetic beauty to an overdressed female (S486).11 Yet Pascal’s rejection of conversation, play and (female) society (“jeu et la conversation des femmes,” S168) seems to set up a return of the repressed on a stylistic level. Instead of diverting the reader from worldly distractions, the text becomes its own source of diversion. Hall Bjornstad puts this paradox well:

... in order to communicate effectively, [Pascal] has to make use of an aesthetic of discontinuity and divertissement. The ultimate apologetic purpose of this un-boring appeal to the reader’s need for discontinuity and divertissement is to confront the reader with the ontological boredom or ennui that is hidden deep in himself, hidden by exactly the mechanisms that Pascal’s own aesthetic is appealing to (Bjornstad, “La continuité” 232).

Sara Melzer has called such practices “a rhetoric of the Fall.” By extracting “pyrotechnic” effects from figural discourse, she argues, Pascal draws our

11 This point is related to another project concerning the “veiled feminine” in the Pensées.
attention to the truth that since the Fall, we are trapped, in Fredric Jameson’s phrase, in a “prison house of language” (Melzer 74, n.1). At the same time, by elaborating such a rhetoric, he can impel the reader to look beyond the visible to a transcendent order. This strategic troping of discontinuity into continuity, obscurity into meaning, is enormously seductive and persuasive. Yet it is not clear that we as readers necessarily follow the desired preordained path. Anti-rhetoric is still a form of rhetoric, and discontinuity can be a source of diversion in both senses of the word: while it amuses (divertit) the reader, it also risks turning her away from the stated aim. Along with other seventeenth century religious writers, Pascal is playing a delicate and somewhat risky hand. If he wishes to make us feel our misery—intellectual and verbal as well as moral—in order to turn us towards Christ, he must do so in a rhetorically effective way that will capture our attention without diverting it for too long. Pascal seems well aware of the delicacy of this operation. In a passage not often quoted, he reflects: “Il ne faut point détourner l’esprit ailleurs, sinon pour le délasser, mais dans le temps où cela est à propos: le délasser quand il le faut, et non autrement. Car qui délasse hors de propos, il lasse; et qui lasse hors de propos délasse, car on quitte tout là” (588). Tellingly, in the midst of a serious reflection, Pascal cannot resist inserting a pun (lasse... délasse). Did he sense that in the hands of a master stylist like himself, misery can turn to enjoyment? Was the “ontological boredom or ennui” buried within the reader also sensible to the author? It would seem so. In a phrase from “L’Art de persuader,” Pascal states: “C’est alors qu’il se fait un balancement douteux entre la vérité et la volupté” (OC 356). Writing is this kind of “balancement douteux,” a dancing on the edge of the volcano.

So we arrive at the ironically Pascalian and Augustinian conclusion that we cannot escape our nature: we continue to seek pleasure in play. I will close by reflecting on this controversial topic of Pascalian play alluded to in my title and throughout the article. Pascal refers to jeu in several fragments of the Pensées, most famously in the pari, where he enjoins the reader to bet on his salvation in a cosmic game (S680). In another well-known passage, Pascal compares the rules of rhetoric to those of court tennis or jeu de paume: “Qu’on ne dise pas que je n’ai rien dit de nouveau: la disposition des

12 Like Melzer, Bjornstad concludes that the “Pascalian apologetics of discontinuity inevitably serves, as it were, to smooth out the discontinuities on which it is founded” by drawing the reader from a natural order of repetitive discontinuities towards a supernatural domain where “continuous peace reigns” (232).

13 An analogous example is Jean-Pierre Camus’s pious “anti-romans;” cf. Woshinsky, Imagining Women’s Conventual Spaces pp. 113-115.
matières est nouvelle. Quand on joue à la paume, c’est une même balle dont joue l’un et l’autre, mais l’un la place mieux” (S575). In an infinite game, Pascal plays to win, and the stakes are high. In Playing with Truth: Language and the Human Condition in Pascal’s Pensées, Nicholas Hammond confines Pascalian play to this model of the game. In the famous wager, the free play of chance is transformed into a kind of fatality: willy-nilly, we are “embarked” and forced to bet (Hammond 224). In other words, Hammond is intent on removing the playfulness from play. However, French jeu has a dual meaning, only one of which—structured and competitive play (English “game”)—is touched on in the above discussion; its unstructured and gratuitous form (English “play”) is left out. In Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility, James P. Carse distinguishes between “finite” and “infinite” play in a way apparently contrary to Pascal. According to Carse, while finite or structured play (game) has winners or losers, its outcome is trivial; infinite play, on the other hand, is significant because it leaves us open to the universe. Ironically then, the “infinite” game proposed by Pascal would be “finite” in Carse’s terms since it implies definite winners or losers (the reader, who stands to gain or lose grace; the author, who risks gaining or losing the reader). In contrast, the autonomous, “free” play of trope is truly open, without boundaries.

This view of play removes writing from the confines of intentionality. According to Erec Koch, both Port-Royal and Pascalian thought rely on intentionality to maintain writing within safe limits: “it is necessary to safeguard the proportional relations of the sensuous or ornamental and the mimetic components of the image, just as eloquent language must assure that the aesthetic manner does not... exceed the truth represented” (Koch 14). Yet can Pascal or anyone else control the result when poetic, powerful language is released into the atmosphere? does the supercharged rhetoric of the Pensées leave an ineffacable substrate of gratuity? And how significant is this substrate? I agree with Buford Norman when he concludes that “the Pensées do not deconstruct themselves beyond repair;” yet Norman’s disclaimer itself implies the existence of some free “play” in the text. To eliminate it entirely, out of misguided respect for Pascal’s lofty aims, is analogous to Port-Royal’s radical manipulation of the early edition. Whether

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14 Despite its title, Hammond’s book seems to deal less with play per se than with categorizing the various meanings of words in Pascal’s lexicon, and detailing the ways in which he manipulates language to his ends.

15 The discomfort around the question of play and gratuity in Pascal is related to the perennial question of the Baroque, which Bjornstad addresses in a recent book; see Works Cited.
willed or gratuitous, all aspects of play need to be taken into account in a truly serious reading of the *Pensées*.

**Works Cited**


