

Pascal's *Pensées* and the 'rêve'

by

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Dreams, an aspect of human life, exist outside reality, but at the same time are part of it. This domain, to which Freud dedicated most of his life, still remains as problematic and polemical a topic as that of God's existence. As with interpretations of the dream world, the existence of God and his form are ontological questions to which philosophers have found many different responses. By linking these two subjects in a study about Pascal, the affective ambience which Pascal tried to create in order to convert the "libertin", becomes clear. In his fragment 'Contrariétés', he, himself, alludes to this mysterious domain:

Ne se peut-il faire que cette moitié de la vie n'est elle-memê qu'un songe, sur lequel les autres sont entés, dont nous nous éveillons à la mort, pendant laquelle nous avons aussi peu les principes du vrai et du bien que pendant le sommeil naturel. Qui sait si cette autre moitié de la vie où nous pensons veiller n'est pas un autre sommeil un peu différent du premier (131).¹

Life perceived as a dream illusion is not unique to Pascal and can be traced throughout the works of his contemporary, Descartes. A quotation similar to Pascal's appears in Descartes' dialogue *De la vérité* when Eudoxe asks: "Comment pouvez-vous être certain que votre vie n'est pas un songe continuel, et que tout ce que vous pensez apprendre par vos sens n'est pas faux, aussi bien maintenant comme lorsque vous dormez? (511). Unlike Pascal, Descartes uses the deception of the dream illusion to appeal to man's reason. He opens his *Méditations* revealing that it is in the state of dreaming that our senses deceive us and are thus unreliable because we mistake oneiric illusions for realities. In the sixth and final meditation, Descartes concludes that the mind and memory do not function in this dubious state of dreaming because oneiric scenes remain fragmentary whereas in reality, events are sequentially connected to form a whole. Although Pascal may have borrowed from Descartes, a

historical inspiration which probably influenced Pascal more comes from Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. Saint Augustine was also concerned with the deceptions of dreams: "And to such an extent prevails the illusion of the image, both in my soul and in my flesh, that the false persuade me, when sleeping, to that which the true are not able when awaking" (168). In a present-day study on the paradox of Pascal, McBride examines why man's faculties, especially the power of reason and of imagination, are faulty according to Pascal.² He concludes that: "Since the sources of all our judgments are influenced by factors which are constant only in their variability, all our reasoning about ourselves and the external world can have no necessary correspondance to reality. The result is that man is removed from any claim to establish truth and enclosed in a dream-like world of subjective circularity" (116). In this study, the oneiric world of Pascal's *Pensées* will be explored by underlining certain characteristics common to the *Pensées* and to the dream world: obscurity, time, and fragmentation.

In his "Divertissement," Pascal claims that "tout le malheur des hommes vient d'une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos dans une chambre" (136). Somewhat misrepresented in his prose poem 'La solitude,' Baudelaire remembers this same fragment and juxtaposes it to La Bruyère's statement: "Ce grand malheur de ne pouvoir être seul!" (314). The spatial dimension, indicated by Pascal, immediately leads us to a place where we spend nearly half of our lives--'la chambre' which according to Bachelard, "donne au rêveur l'impression d'un 'chez soi'" (153). It is here that we often find ourselves plunged into obscurity inside a room associated entirely with the night. This obscurity resembles the 'gouffre infini' which Pascal describes in his famous passage concerning the two infinities. This 'gouffre infini', like the cave in Plato's *Republic*, does not allow much light to penetrate; thus, a contrast between 'clair/obscur' is foregrounded. Obscurity, often associated with 'ténèbre' or the 'cachot' in the *Pensées*, reveals the distance separating man from God. Darkness signifies man's state without God, whereas a luminous image represents the knowledge of God and of a true religion. Obscurity functions affectively by encouraging sleep, which in turn induces dreams to occur. An emotion associated with obscurity is that of fear, as

Pascal himself acknowledges: "le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie" (201). 'La chambre' represents an intermediary domain where one is neither awake nor asleep, living nor dead, but simply existing between the two, much like Pascal's description of man's life on earth which represents an intermediary moment of fluctuation between the 'néant' (the state of nothingness) and the 'tout' (the state of all knowing). He believes himself to be superior to animals and inanimate objects but at the same time inferior to the omniscient supreme being. Dreams and their significance are seemingly as incomprehensible for man as God's nature. Our inability to understand the meaning of the dream or to grasp the idea of the infinite is comparable to our incapability of understanding a supreme being who by definition is unknowable. Steinmann links these two ideas together in a clear manner by explaining that: "A look at the infinite is a look at the signature of God in the universe, a look at what with the exception of thought most closely resembles the divine greatness and the divine obscurity. It is the necessary prelude to the examination of faith" (257). Both the mysterious abyss of dreams and the infinity of reality trouble humanity, which still continues and insists on finding some sort of certitude in these domains.

Another oneiric characteristic present in the *Pensées* is that of time. Freud maintains that all dreams are caused by the residues of the preceding day. Upon analysis of his own dreams and those of his patients, he affirmed that the events "of the previous day provided its starting point" (140). According to Freud, the past is the main source of the dream which in return can evoke other past experiences or even future anticipations since the moment one dreams, an act of wish fulfillment by the dreamer is taking place, which reveals a projection into the future. Thus, the past, the present, and the future can become rather vague, intertwined, and confused in the dream world. Like the dreamer, the 'libertin' also remains unaware of his temporal environment. The Pascalian being is always preparing for the future, while looking back into his past. He avoids or rather forgets to live for the present moment while thinking and hoping for a better life in the future. He runs blindly towards his death, refusing vainly to see it. "Le présent n'est jamais notre fin" writes Pascal (47). In reality as in a dream, the 'libertin' fails to recognize

temporal divisions and confuses past, present, and future. In reality man manipulates time, whereas in the dream state, time controls man; however, whether awake or asleep, man can not avoid being constantly subjected to a temporal framework.

The fragmentary structure of Pascal's *Pensées* appears to be intended to resemble the structure of the human condition. Pascal's ideas, as revealed in the *Pensées*, suggests that man is incomplete in order to make the 'mondain' aware of his intellectual incapacity and of the partial vision that he possesses of reality. Since man is capable of reasoning, he understands that he is different from nature; however, he knows that he is incapable of answering all the questions that he ponders. Since he understands neither his destiny nor his origin, he knows that he is intellectually limited. Here Pascal wants the 'mondain' to become intoxicated by the conflict between his greatness--due to his intelligence, inseparable with his inevitable misery--due to his preordained death. Thus, man's perception of himself is not in harmony with his expectations or goals. The human being becomes a displaced and/or distorted image, as those found in the dream world.

Man's fragmentation and distortion underline his fragile existence, also a characteristic of the dream world. A dream can be interrupted and even halted by another dream or by the act of waking; it is a non-sequential series of events which, as already seen, Descartes does not hesitate to differentiate from reality. Unlike Descartes, Bergson approaches more Pascal's mode of thinking by stating: "Elle [la vie] ne procède pas par association et addition d'éléments mais par dissociation et dédoublement" (90). The dream state is easily and rapidly destroyed like man: "L'homme n'est qu'un roseau, le plus faible de la nature, mais c'est un roseau pensant" (200). Pulled in opposite directions, man is full of contradictions. His natural state does not permit him to live among the extremities of this world. Extremes of heat or cold are intolerable; his vision is limited if he is too far from or too near an object; he detests too much noise, while at the same time, he avoids absolute silence; and as already mentioned, he does not possess all knowledge of the universe, but refuses to be content with knowing nothing or only partial facts. The Pascalian being evolves in a

"continual state of flux" (Steinmann 254); he lacks entire control over his destiny and remains "toujours incertain[s] et flottant, poussé d'un bout vers l'autre" (199). This aquatic metaphor not only reinforces the image of movement, but according to Le Guern, also suggests the importance of time.

The force or reason behind man's existence, as that of a dream, is not clear. The dreamer does not know what caused the dream, the libertin does not know what created the world. The dream, tied to other dreams becomes a confused entity.³ In Pascal's description of this confusion: "Il me semble que je rêve; car la vie est un songe un peu moins inconstant" (803); reality, like the dream, exemplifies a state where man exercises no control; he is a slave to unforeseen actions. The following fragment describes man's situation on earth which can be transferred to the dream state or the moment of awakening; "je me trouve attaché à un coin de cette vaste étendue, sans que je sache pourquoi je suis plutôt placé en ce lieu qu'en un autre ..." (427). The reason for man's existence in this particular time period or in this particular world remains an enigma to him, as do the content and the precise meaning of his dreams.

By extracting oneiric aspects, common but yet unique elements of man's everyday life, the *Pensées* reveal that man's reason is not capable of understanding intellectually the idea of a Supreme Being, just as he is not capable of controlling or directing his dream. In Furetière's dictionary the dream "signifie aussi quelquefois une vision céleste et surnaturelle" (np). Thus, in the 17th century, many believed in a mysterious link between God and dreams through which he sent messages. Pascal writes: "Il en est de même des prophéties, des miracles, des divinations par les songes ... (734). The dream world was treated as a mysterious, inexplicable, non-rational, and surreal domain, very much like pascal's description of God's existence. As shown in this study, neither the dream world, nor man's origin, nor his destiny, nor even God can be understood or interpreted by the intellectual faculties of the human being. Freud claims that the best interpreter of a dream is not the psychoanalyst, but the dreamer who has had the unique experience. The union with God is also inexplicable and very personal for each individual and, according to Pascal, is felt only by the

heart. For Pascal, it is God who is real and man who represents a phantom, as those found in dreams: "Quelle chimère est donc l'homme?" (131). In Pascal's eyes, without God, man is only an oneiric chaos, but with faith, all the fragments, become a part of a true and divine whole. Like Saint Augustine, who stated "upon waking we return to peace of conscience", Pascal persuades the 'libertin' that in the pursuit of God or in belief in God, he not only finds happiness but his 'repos'.

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Notes

¹All quotations from Pascal's *Pensées* will be indicated according to Lafuma's numerical arrangement with the text. All other quotations will be indicated by page number within the text.

²With Pascal, McBride also includes Montaigne.

³In his dictionary, Furetière defined the dream as: "Pensées confuses qui viennent en dormant par l'action et de l'imagination" (np).

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