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*On the Interpretation of Ordinary
Language: A Parable of Pascal*

By gathering together in one volume, essays that differ as much in content as in methods of analysis, the editor of this book aimed "in concreto" at a theory of the interpretation of literary texts which includes, as one of its essential propositions, an axiom regarding the plurality of meaning. This axiom must be clearly understood: it does not imply that there are *several meanings* and that the truth of the interpretation is dependent upon the contingency of critical approaches, the arbitrary choice of a point of view, procedure, or method of analysis, or the opportuneness (not to say the opportunism) of a historical, social, and cultural position of critical discourse. It signifies rather that *meaning is plural*, that the possible, the latent, and the divergent enter into its very definition—not just into its speculative definition, but also into its concrete production, be it that of the writer or that of the reader, of the emitter or the receiver of the message at different moments of history and at different places in the world and in culture. A truly fundamental theory of interpretation must therefore find its impetus in the elaboration of a logic of the possible and the plural, a logic of diversity and divergence in which meaning is not assignable to a closed system of univocal signs, but in which it is produced and indicates its processes of production by the displacement of signifiers.

In order to give a sketch of this theory, I have chosen to analyze some of Pascal's fragments, in which a production of meaning [*pratique du sens*] seems to be clearly indicated, and in

which, at the same time, we can elaborate the pragmatics that corresponds to this production in interpretative discourse. It is a question here of ordinary language, of the discourse of the "people." The people speak the truth—"their opinions are sound"—but they do not know what they say: "the people are vain, although their opinions are sound, because they do not see the truth when it is there, and assume things to be true when they are not, with the result that their opinions are always thoroughly wrong and unsound" (93).¹ They do not know how to discern "the cause of the effects" [*la raison des effets*] of meaning in their discourse. "Astute men" [*les habiles*]² and learned men speak like the people, but they know what they say. Still, their knowledge is ignorance, and, in this respect, they find themselves in the same ignorance as the people. They "run through the whole range of human knowledge, only to find that they know nothing and come back to the same ignorance from which they set out, but it is a wise ignorance which knows itself" (83). The dialogic play between the people and the learned men allows Pascal simultaneously to describe ordinary language through the utterance of a political maxim—"we should honour the gentry" (92)—and to criticize this language as a general form of discourse and as a political discourse. From here on, the questions that we will ask starting with the fragments on "the cause of the effects"—questions that seem to lead directly to a specific theory of interpretation—are the following: what is the "true" content (*illusorily* true) of ordinary language and how does the passage from natural ignorance to "knowing ignorance" allow one to discover the truth of the illusion? How and why is it not possible to *speak* this truth, to *construct* the theory of ordinary

¹This and all further quotations followed by a simple number in parentheses are taken from Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1966). The numbers are those of the individual *pensées* and follow the order of the Lafuma edition. Brackets indicate necessary adjustments in the translation by the editor.

²The seventeenth-century concept of *l'habile* is extremely complicated; no one English word expresses its full meaning. Gaston Cayrou's *Le Français classique* defines the concept, in part, as follows: *l'habile* has "not only facility of assimilation, but also a judgment that is both quick and profound, as well as a sharp and extensive discernment." For the purposes of this translation, "astute man" will be employed for *habile*.—Ed.

language while unveiling its structure? How and why will this structure appear to us as a structure of *referral* [*renvoi*] or *displacement* toward a discourse, a text that is always "other," resembling in this the structure of the biblical parable, a genre that might well constitute the "model" of Pascalian discourse, and whose characteristic is to offer itself immediately to interpretation while making it impossible to confine it to a univocal allegorization.

The Parabolic Narrative of the

First Discourse on the Condition of the Great

Let us examine the political example: what does the astute man discern which the people do not recognize and which yet allows him to use their language? "We should honour the gentry but not because gentle birth is a real advantage, etc." (92). It so happens that Pascal occupies the astute man's discursive position, and practices his discourse of discernment by putting on stage a character who, in the circumstances of fiction in which he finds himself, necessarily discovers what the people and the gentry dissimulate in their ordinary discourses while letting a truth surface in the formula of the maxim that they utter. It is in the exercise of astute discourse undertaken by Pascal as subject of the speech-act that the unformulable theory of discourse is indicated. The *Three Discourses on the Condition of the Great* provide the text of this theory:

A man was cast by a tempest upon an unknown island the inhabitants of which were [anxious] to find their king who was lost; and [bearing] a strong resemblance both [corporally and facially] to this king, he was taken for him and acknowledged in this capacity by all the people. At first he knew not what course to take; but he finally resolved to give himself up to his good fortune. He received all the homage that they chose to render, and suffered himself to be treated as a king. [*Discourse*, p. 382]³

³This and all further quotations followed by *Discourse* and a page number are taken from Pascal, *Discourses on the Condition of the Great*, in *Blaise Pascal*, the Harvard Classics, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: P. F. Collier, 1910). Brackets indicate necessary adjustments in the translation by the editor.

The castaway—in this exceptional circumstance—thinks and acts in a state of separation: he acts as a king but he thinks as a man by recognizing his true state and the hazardous contingency of his royal position. "He concealed the latter thought, and revealed the other. It was by the former that he [dealt] with the people, and by the latter that he [dealt] with himself" (*Discourse*, p. 383). If this is the initial parable, one must nevertheless note that in its second part the narrative continually shifts toward its own interpretation: as narration, it already encompasses the constituent elements of its code, since the fictive character is analyzed by the narrator and presented in his motivations and behavior as an astute man. Even at this point, Pascal's interlocutor is no longer fictively one of the island's subjects, an inhabitant of this kingdom whose king has vanished; from now on, he shares the secret of a political and social behavior, since he sees the castaway act as a king. He also shares the secret of the castaway's judgment on his own behavior, the thought the castaway hides from the people. Nevertheless, this thought is also a thought that hides and dissimulates. Indeed, from here on the decoding of the narrative (which is presented as an "image") is at work in the narrative itself, and it is this code and its rules that, quite naturally, the text presents: "Do not imagine that it is less an accident by which you find yourself master of the wealth which you possess" (*Discourse*, p. 383). This code is precisely the one that suits the interlocutor (the young duke addressed by Pascal in the second person) as an "other" who enters into a dialogic situation with an "I" who, for the moment, appears in the utterance only through this "other" whom he addresses. This dialogic situation defined in its sociopolitical specificity masks, at the same time, the other possible codes, the "potential of meaning" generated by the fictive narrative—and also masks speculative or theoretical discourses (or even theological or spiritual ones) that could, by the rigorous play of comparisons and *rapprochements*, articulate other codes of the narrative.

In effect, however, in the passage from the narrative third person to the first person of the cosmological imagination, does not the speculative discourse appear in the parable, as well as in the following fragments? "I see the terrifying spaces of the universe hemming me in, and I find myself attached to one corner

of this vast expanse. . . . I only see infinity on every side, hemming me in like an atom" (427, para. 13); "When I consider the brief span of my life absorbed into the eternity which comes before and after . . . the small space I occupy and which I see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing. . . . I . . . am amazed to see myself here rather than there" (68); "let him regard himself as lost [in this canton turned away from nature] and in this little dungeon, in which he finds himself lodged, I mean the universe, let him take the earth, its realms, its cities . . . and himself at their proper value" (199, para. 4). The tempest that casts the man upon the unknown island could well be the theoretical cosmological "tempest" that, by breaking the stable certitudes of a closed world for a universe with neither limits nor center,⁴ has put the subject of knowledge in a position of total contingency.⁵ Is not the lost king Man, who was formerly the center of the world and who finds himself dispossessed of this center in an epistemological situation that Pascal perceives tragically? "All these examples of wretchedness prove [man's] greatness. It is the wretchedness of a great lord, the wretchedness of a dispossessed king" (116).

At another level, however, is not the true lost king God himself, who withdrew from men, who hid himself from their knowledge as manifested by the very name that He gave himself in the Scriptures, *Deus absconditus* (427, para. 1)? Pascal says that Nature is "the presence of a God [who hides himself from the eyes of those who try to see God in it]" (449, paras. 13–16). In addition, is the man cast upon the unknown island not a return of the hidden God? "He remained concealed under the veil of Nature that [hid him from us until] the Incarnation; and when it was necessary that he should appear, he concealed himself still the more in covering himself with humanity. . . . All things cover

⁴Cf. A. Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958).

⁵*Pensée* 198: "When I see the blind and wretched state of man, when I survey the whole universe in its dumbness and man left to himself with no light, as though lost in this corner of the universe, without knowing who put him there, what he has come to do, what will become of him when he dies, incapable of knowing anything, I am moved to terror, like a man transported in his sleep to some terrifying desert island, who wakes up quite lost and with no means to escape" (my emphasis).

some mystery; all things have veils that cover God."⁶ In this way another discourse is superimposed upon the first in order to overdetermine the parable, and to convey still another meaning: the three discourses of knowledge, power, and "charity" (or desire) become implicit simultaneously in the same narrative. Because the plurality of meaning has been produced in this way, the dialogic situation limits this plurality to a single decoding, while still conserving it in the narrative itself. At the end of the discourse addressed by Pascal to the young duke, the dialogue opens the text to its other possibilities of meaning: "We should honour the gentry but not because gentle birth is a real advantage, etc." (92). One must act as a king and think as a man, but not because the sociopolitical order, even an upright one, is the truth of man, the place of judgment. . . .

The Sociopolitical Code

One must obey the injunctions of Pascalian discourse in its dialogic situation and recognize the first articulation of discourse in the parabolic narrative as political discourse. Pascal carries out a very careful "decoding" of the "image." The chance occurrence by which this man finds himself owner of the kingdom is no different from the one that makes the young duke a master of wealth. Neither the castaway nor the nobleman has a natural right over these things. In other words, the right of neither has a natural foundation; both are based only upon the arbitrariness of imagination and the chance occurrences of the tempest and of circumstances. The duke's ownership of his possessions is doubtless legitimate, since the legitimacy of possession is in no way identified with a natural right, but is founded on that very law by which this ownership is made legitimate.⁷ Thus, the argument of the narrative—"this man possessed his kingdom only through

⁶Pascal, *Letters to Mademoiselle de Roannez*, in *Blaise Pascal*, pp. 354-355.

⁷*Pensée* 60: "... Nothing is so defective as those laws which correct defects. Anyone obeying them because they are just is obeying an imaginary justice, not the essence of the law which is completely self-contained: it is law and nothing more. ... The truth about the usurpation must not be made apparent: it came about originally without reason and has become reasonable. We must see that it is regarded as authentic and eternal, and its origins must be hidden if we do not want it soon to end."

the error of the people" (*Discourse*, p. 384)—describes only a situation of "beginning," while the duke's ownership of his own goods is, in reality, founded in all legitimacy. God's authorization only concerns the regulation of societies by laws and, very precisely, by the law of ownership. It permits their validation; it does not establish their value rationally.

One last nuance is introduced between the code and the narrative: the double thought by which the castaway behaves as king and man is a factual necessity in the narrative—"as he could not forget his [natural] condition" (*Discourse*, p. 382)—for otherwise he would have been prey to madness or stupidity. This factual necessity is that of the fictive situation—in the narrative—but it is also a situation of "beginning" in the code. On the other hand, this double thought is a rule or norm for the young duke to observe: "you should have a double thought" (*Discourse*, p. 384). It is the passage from *fact* to *right* like that from the parabolic narrative fiction of the beginning to the present reality of a sociopolitical situation that can no longer admit anything other than injunctions and prescriptions.

One perceives how narrative and code function in relation to each other in the construction of Pascalian discourse: the first narrative is (in its textual manifestation) the figural development of the notion of chance occurrence contained in the second code. This notion appears in the narrative only in the form of an "image," without being expressly manifested: the tempest, the disappearance of the island's king, the shipwreck, and finally the castaway's corporal and facial resemblance to the lost king, are all so many figures of contingency, the notion of which permits the deciphering of the parabolic narrative by another narrative which is unveiled in its turn, as it comes into contact with the "parable," at a point of articulation marked by the term "chance occurrence." This other narrative is the biographical "structure" of the interlocutor: his birth as son of a duke, his finding himself "in" the world, the marriage of his parents and all those of his ancestors, a thousand unforeseen events which left their mark on his family and whose narration would constitute the family tradition (*Discourse*, p. 384). This real biographical structure becomes, in turn, a figurative narrative, through its relation to the figures of the parabolic narrative that precedes it textually; in its

essence, the biographical structure is fiction. The function of the parabolic narrative therefore appears through an ambiguity which gives it a great practical efficacy: the parable designates in its fiction a real narrative (situation, position) that it assimilates to itself in the process of showing that this narrative is the revealing figure of one term of the code by which the parable was encoded into a fictive narrative. The parable functions as an explanation, but a figurative one; it shows, it designates, but as *figure*; it introduces into this explanation a "play" of the imaginary that provokes new explanations.

The mechanism must be taken apart in order to exhibit the operation of the astute man's discourse. What is he showing? That "the right which you have [to your possessions] is not founded . . . upon any quality or any merit in yourself which renders you worthy of it. Your soul and your body are, of themselves, equally indifferent to the state of boatman or to that of duke; and there is no natural bond that attaches them to one condition rather than to another" (*Discourse*, p. 384). This is the astute man's thesis, the object of his discernment whose nature neither the people nor the nobleman grasps; he perceives that there is no bond between body and soul on the one hand and social condition on the other, neither resemblance nor difference, but rather a lack of difference which is the sign of a natural difference prohibiting, by definition, any type of natural bond. Furthermore, in the parable itself, the island castaway *corporally and facially resembles* the lost king so much that he is taken for him and recognized in this capacity by all the people. The parable therefore bases its own commentary on a factual resemblance; it signifies first that a king is a body and a face, that he is defined by exteriority (*Discourse*, p. 384). The fact that there is no structural or causal, no rational or rationally justifiable relationship between merit (stemming from a natural quality) and the mastery of wealth on the one hand and of external power in sociopolitical reality on the other, is shown by the mimetic relationship that permits the castaway to be king: it is the relationship of resemblance which, in fiction, authorizes the criticism and negation of the relationship, in reality, of proportion and congruence [*adéquation*]. In other words, it is because the notion of representation articulates the whole of the astute

man's discourse that this discourse can turn the notion of representation back against itself in its contents. If there is a relationship of resemblance between the castaway and the king, if there is a relationship of analogy between the situation recounted by the parabolic narrative and that of the duke's son, if representation functions as fiction at the origin of discourse, this signifies, in the end, that the true king is a false king, that the true and real son of a duke cannot and must not be honored under the pretense that gentle birth is a real advantage, that the real mastery of wealth does not refer to a natural merit, and, in short, that representation is without value in reality. The fictive or figurative use of representation is the other side of the critique of representation in the discourse on social and political reality.

But it is necessary to pursue further the parabolic narrative's "provocations." The people honor the castaway because he corporally and facially resembles the king they sought; they actually posit the relation of resemblance, even if by mistake they transform the representational relationship to one of identity, even if they take the representer for the represented, in the visibility of his perfect resemblance. Therefore, the people *believe* that nobility is a real greatness; as a consequence, they consider noblemen to be of *another nature* than their own (*Discourse*, p. 384). The nobleman himself in turn believes that *his being* is in essence superior to that of others (*ibid.*). These beliefs, these opinions—which link the people and the noblemen in the same order of respect and "legitimate" domination—are all real, all effective. Better still, the discourse that expresses these opinions states "a truth, but one which is not where [the people] imagine it to be": an illusion of truth whose truth is established by the astute man's discourse, a critical discourse that unveils an ideology still unaware of itself and demonstrates through its discursive practice how this ideology is produced. We say "through its discursive practice" because the role and function of the parable will be to trace this production in the play of parabolic fiction.

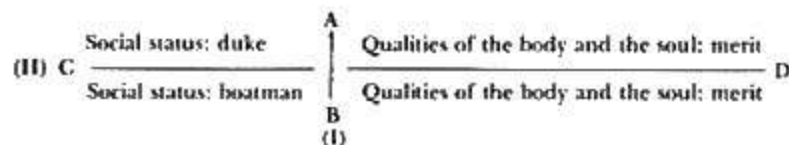
The people believe that nobility is a real and heterogeneous greatness. The nobleman believes that his own being is somehow superior to that of others: in other words, the people posit a relationship of equivalence between nobility and real greatness, a relationship which the noble brings about or reifies: it is *his*

being that is somehow superior. One must stress how, in the discursive expression itself, the structural or causal relation—which is *false*, but *really* posited by an act of belief—is transformed into an ontological identity, how the copula “to be” in the utterance formulated by the people is transformed into an ontological affirmation. In addition, the nobleman’s *being* results from the interiorization of a relationship posited in the social setting: it is this relationship that constitutes the self by determining its position. *Being* itself is therefore defined as the metaphor or the interiorization of a relationship. As a result, the nobleman is engaged in a double process of misunderstanding and illusion (*Discourse*, p. 384): misunderstanding of the movement of interiorizing, of making his own, a social relation defined by the irreducible exteriority of an other to the self, and the illusion that results from this misunderstanding, that his being is his own, while it is merely a relation external to him seized in the discourse and behavior of the other. Is this not a remarkable approach to ideology?

The Production of Ideology and the Function of Representation

The parabolic narrative is the fictive mediation between two heterogeneities, one normative or ideal, which would define *honnêteté*⁸ in the sociopolitical field, the other factual and real, which articulates this same field concretely. The first is the object and goal of the astute man’s discourse; there is no natural link between the social status of duke or boatman and their respective merits, that is, the qualities of body and soul. The second is the real situation, the object of Pascalian discourse, the content of the people’s utterance, the real attitude of the people and the noblemen: a duke’s corporal and spiritual qualities and those of a boatman are different in nature; they are heterogeneous and, simultaneously, there is between the duke and the boatman a

difference naturally founded on their own merits. The diagram shows these two opposed models.



The line AB is a line of heterogeneity which shows the break between two orders of greatness, the natural and the institutional. This is a normative model of the ordered conception of real society, of its true discourse: such is the object of the astute man’s discernment in his instructive discourse addressed to the duke’s son. On the other hand, the line CD is the line of another heterogeneity which articulates not only real society according to the distance between two classes or two social conditions, but also the real valorizations of these conditions, that is, the individual merits and the corporal and spiritual qualities attached to them. The instructive critical discourse must effect the rotation of CD onto AB, or to be more exact, it must make apparent in model II (CD) the oversight or miscognition of model I (that is, of the heterogeneity inscribed by AB); it must permit the discernment of I in II. It does not, however, transform—how could it through a simple discursive practice?—the model schematized in II into that which model I “represents”: critical discernment is not a practical transformation, and the incisive discovery of the ideology of a society or of a social group may well remain, in practice, caught up in this ideology, although the discourse that produces the ideology keeps its distance from it.

The corporal and facial resemblance that makes of the castaway the *portrait* of the king, his “representation,” allows the people to *have* a (false) king or the castaway to *be* a (false) king; but at the same time, the play of the same mimetic representation permits the castaway to *think* of himself not as a (true) king but as a (true) man. Mimetic representation simultaneously authorizes not only the “simulation” of the real situation by the model, but also the ideal normative operation which puts, although only in the model, being and function, the natural situation and the role, at a distance from each other. From then on,

⁸Cayrou’s *Le Français classique* defines *l’honnête* as “a nobleman who possessed not only the gifts of noble birth, but also those of the body and of a cultivated mind.” *L’honnêteté* (the quality of being *honnête*) was the social ideal of the aristocracy in seventeenth-century France.—Ed.

the model functions not only as an epistemological instrument, but also as an ethical and normative example. This double game of representation, which on the one hand "translates" reality into the model, and which on the other transforms only the representation and not the reality that it represents, constitutes the astute critical discourse that Pascal uses when speaking to the young duc de Chevreuse. In this discourse, the role of the transforming practice, of the real criticism of society, is held by the parabolic narrative, by the narrative fiction which, because it is the image of reality and only its image, is the locus of operations that are certain only in this locus of fiction. These transformations will become, in the pedagogic discourse, a rhetorical exhortation to a subjective moral conversion.⁹ Yet there is something in addition which, in our care to stress the ideological character of the astute man's discourse that criticizes ideology, we risked not recognizing.

We must return to the corporal and facial resemblance between the castaway and the lost king which is the pivotal point of the fiction and which allows for the astute man's discourse of discernment: because the castaway's body and face reproduce those of the king, he becomes king. The violence that consists in taking a sign as the reproduction of the being it represents escapes unnoticed, and the people receive this false king with the same marks of respect that they would have shown to the true one. Here then is signaled, in the fiction itself, the ideological operation of representation by which the idea of reality, its reproduced sign, is taken for reality itself. This is a violent operation whose violence is dissimulated by the operation itself in that this operation remains only reproductive. If model II (CD) is the model of ideology, the parabolic narrative is then the model of the production of ideology. This model shows that reality (the true king) is reproduced in the form of a sign (the castaway who resembles him) which, substituting itself for reality, becomes reality (the false king accepted as true).

In order to understand the importance of this transformation, let us vary the narrative freely on this point: we could then read

⁹*Discourse*, p. 384; in the *Third Discourse* we also find a collection of "exhortative imperatives" (p. 387).

here what we read in many historical tales and narratives: "A man was cast by a tempest upon an unknown island, the inhabitants of which were anxious to find their king, who was lost; and as this man was very good and very virtuous, he was taken for king and recognized in this capacity by all the people." The narrative would continue to function as a model, but a weakened one, not of reality, certainly, but of moral exhortation: "It is by being very good and very virtuous that the castaway was able to become king in place of the true one. In the same way, you yourself. . . ." In fact, the parabolic narrative is not only in a structural, but also in a mimetic proximity to the two models that articulate the two poles of the discursive situation: reality and the rational norm. First, a continuity of content exists between the narrative and the discourse that interprets it; both deal with force, usurpation of power, respect, and attitudes toward the institution. Still, if no pure and simple repetition exists between the two levels of the narrative and its interpretation, it is because the form of perfect reproduction, of visible and faithful representation embodied in the "castaway," introduces an effective displacement of signification with regard to the two models produced by this analysis: that of the real situation and that of sociopolitical *honnêteté*. As "look-alike" [*sosie*], the castaway is automatically king; as double, he is immediately the other-as-same; this is certainly representation, but indicated only in order to show how representation in its purity functions ideologically. The signifier takes the place of the referent and hides it: there is a usurpation of power by the initial violence of the substitution. The signifier (the castaway as body and face) takes the place of the lost king.

One final remark must be made on this point. We have said that the parabolic narrative mediates between two heterogeneities; still, this mediation precedes that which it mediates, since the text, when read, opens onto the "image" of the castaway. Model I (AB) is the "originary" truth of the text's content, the heterogeneity between states and conditions on the one hand, and between qualities and merits on the other. Model II (CD) is the "present" reality of the sociopolitical situation: the image precedes its original, and the simulacrum the situation whose simulation it makes possible. Still, is it not fiction which makes

possible the "construction," the articulation of the original, and also permits it to be treated as a signifier? Inversely, however, the fictive narrative can only appear retroactively in its explicative and normative efficacy in relation to the ideal of *honnêteté* I (AB) and the real situation II (CD), since only the opening parable shows what this ideal effaces in its perfect discernment, in the peaceful separation of the nobleman and the man. Only the parable shows what the real situation dissimulates in the real experience of institutional power and of its external signs: that the nobleman is a man whose power is not founded naturally. The parable therefore appears fundamental to us: it opens the text and makes it work with a view toward producing a plural meaning. Through fiction as a discursive equivalent of the transforming process, the parabolic discourse shows how ideology conceals truth or misconstrues it.

*The Thought in the Back of the Mind:
The Effect of the Infinite*

Here then the discourse of the astute man, whose position Pascal occupies in his dialogue with the young duke, terminates. The parabolic narrative permits us to understand simultaneously the illusion of truth shared by the people and the noblemen in their discourse, and the truth of the illusion of this same discourse, which is spoken as a true discourse, truth being constituted by the very possibility of *speaking* it: it is the very fact of saying and being able to say "we must honour the gentry" that makes truth appear in the relation (transposed into discourse) of master to subject, of dominator to dominated. Still, we also know that the astute man knows nothing, or rather that he knows he knows nothing (83) and that, in this way, speculatively, he resembles the people in their ignorance. In other words, it is the contents of knowledge in the astute man's discourse that give way to the form of his knowledge, that is, to his discourse. The astute man's only knowledge is that he knows nothing; this knowledge is form without meaningful content, pure discourse, not empty but with its contents continually being eroded at the very moment they are uttered. The parabolic narrative of the *First Discourse on the Condition of the Great* indicates this: the

castaway-become-king is a representation of the politically astute man who is simultaneously *honnête* and effective; he is a figure of this man. What then does this narrative which is the "image" of the discourse that corresponds to it and that it transposes reveal? It shows us that the thought by which the castaway deals with himself *annuls* and *invalidates* the action by which he deals with others. It does not annul his action in itself: the castaway continues to act, but his thought invalidates his action as the action of a king, effacing its intrinsic value, since he can perceive it only as the action of a false king, a usurper. "The thought in the back of his mind" (*Discourse*, p. 383) is the center of this corrosive action, but it is a thought, a form, and not an action. It is a judgment which leaves action, and in particular political action, intact: he acts as a king and receives all the respect that the people want to give him, but he knows that he is not king, that he is nothing but a castaway, thrown by chance upon an unknown island.

This knowledge of the usurper's true state, knowledge of being-nothing, is—in the speculative discourse into which it becomes transposed—a knowledge of nonknowledge, a science of nonscience acquired at the extremity of judgment, at a point where the latter reverts, in an instant, to its contrary: ignorance (*ibid.*). This movement defines the condition which governs the possibility of meaning in ordinary discourse in general, by a negative designation of its locus, that is, a thought in the back of the mind which tends to make all determined *contents* of knowledge equal to zero. This thought is that of the infinite, by which the formal identity between knowledge and nonknowledge operates:¹⁰ just as, on the level of political practice as represented in fiction, the astute usurper continues to act as king, so the learned man, on the speculative level, continues to augment his knowledge quantitatively; in thinking about the infinite, however, he discovers that he has not left (that he cannot leave) the state of natural ignorance which he had seemed to have left so long ago. The semi-learned man knows no less than the learned man. Like the duke's companions in the realm of power and its natural legitimization, the semi-learned man thinks and believes that in

¹⁰Pascal, *Of the Geometrical Spirit*, in Blaise Pascal, p. 444; *Pensée* 199.

the realm of learning it is possible—and it is, in fact, possible—for knowledge to develop in a linear and cumulative progression (199, para. 11). This progress by accumulation is the *real* situation of science and knowledge (which Pascal heralds in the *Preface to the Treatise on the Vacuum*¹¹) just as the nobleman's situation of power and mastery is real through institutional rights. In an instant, however, the "thought of the infinite" converts this knowledge into ignorance. The astute man's learned ignorance is nothing other than a form of knowledge (the "knowledge of the infinite") that makes all content of knowledge equal to zero; in the same way, the thought in the back of the castaway's mind, without ever keeping him from acting as a king, transforms in an instant his kingly action into that of a usurper and invalidates the action. But do politics deal essentially with values? Does knowledge deal essentially with the infinite? Quite obviously not: consequently, the castaway, in his secret thoughts, deals with the man that he is, and not with the king that he seems to be. This is also why the geometrician strives—even if it entails using everyday language—to constitute certain principles as "ultimate, which seem so to our reason, as in material things [when] we call a point indivisible when our senses can perceive nothing beyond it, although by its nature it is infinitely divisible" (199, para. 14). Therefore semi-learned people are not a dialectic mediation between the two manifestations of knowledge: zero-knowledge at one extreme, and the infinite form of knowledge at the other; they represent neither a dialectic synthesis nor a progressive totalization. The same ignorance which was present at the point of departure is rediscovered at the end but, in truth, there is neither point of departure nor end; the quest has always already begun. The "thought of the infinite" (the thought that makes all content of knowledge equal to zero) transcends the realm in which the quest for knowledge is pursued: it is other, of another realm.¹²

The truth or the illusion of truth contained by the ordinary discourse of the people resides here, at this point of the infinite (or at infinity) that makes all the utterances of the discourse

equal, that is, equal to zero and yet all stating this point, but without knowing it. Pascal also refers to this destruction of the discourse in its contents as mockery: "To mock philosophy is to philosophize truly" (513). Thus, in the fragment "We always picture Plato and Aristotle . . .," which deals directly with politics, play, laughter, and diversion constitute the truth of the attitude of great minds in philosophy and in politics. False appearances, a superior mockery in which one plays at not laughing, introduce the interlocutor into this truth of the illusion of truth inherent in philosophical discourse: "If they [Plato and Aristotle] wrote about politics, it was as if to lay down rules [to govern] a madhouse. And if they pretended to treat it as something really important, it was because they knew that the madmen they were addressing believed themselves to be kings and emperors. They humoured these beliefs in order to calm down [the madmen] with as little harm [to them] as possible" (533). This is why living simply and tranquilly is, by a new twist, "the most philosophical part" of their lives (ibid.). Immediate and naive existence provides the very form of zero-knowledge, the natural ignorance that, "at the end" of the discourse of learning annuls its contents by the mockery of the infinite, by the fulgurating action of the judgment pronounced at this "point": one must think about everything starting from a thought in the back of the mind.

"*The cause of the effects.* One must have a thought in the back [of one's mind] and judge everything accordingly, but go on talking like an ordinary person" (91). Alien to ordinary discourse, the thought in the back of the mind is also its truth, since it judges it. But it is equally *in* the discourse as what is uttered, since it is possible to speak like the people (91). Such is the paradox encountered from the start, which appears again here in a new form: the meaning is certainly in the words, since it is their meaning, and yet it is "other," elsewhere, displaced in relation to their enunciation. Otherwise ordinary discourse would be the very discourse of truth, which it is not. Instead, it is merely the "opinions of vain people." The thought in the back of the mind, in this way, hollows out ordinary discourse, in its spoken immediacy, creating an internal distance which makes its utterance alien to its enunciation, decentering it from the subject who formulates it, disappropriating it from the self who offers it as

¹¹In *Blaise Pascal*, pp. 51, 53–54.

¹²*Of the Geometrical Spirit*, pp. 442–443.

an expression of himself, of his beliefs, and of his opinions, in order to make ordinary discourse into a speech "totally other" without modifying its form; in this "otherness," in this distancing [*retrait*] of the discourse in relation to itself, its true meaning appears.

Judgment

This distancing is the very operation of "judgment," the act of the thought in the back of the mind. Yet the judgment whose locus is the thought in the back of the mind is a unitary, indivisible, unanalyzable act. As such, it is radically opposed to reasoning, which is articulated in a logical sequence of principles and consequences (512). Judgment is not and cannot be analyzed as a comparison of two ideas, as the attribution of a predicate to a subject, as an operation of synthesis. "The [object of judgment] must be seen all at once, at a glance, and not as a result of progressive reasoning, at least up to a point" (512, para. 4; also 751). However, those principles which make up this object, that is, its elements or parts, "are in common usage and before everyone's eyes." All that is needed is good vision, but it must be good. Why? Because "the principles are so intricate and numerous that it is almost impossible not to miss some" (512, para. 2). Judgment is therefore first of all feeling, the "immediate and with one glance" apprehension of the multitude of principles in the oneness of the object, and then the sharp penetration into the consequences of these principles by *one* act which in the same movement reconciles the contrary qualities of the sociopolitical order (512).

Judgment that grasps the object in its oneness is the "position of the infinite" as the dynamic constituent of this thought. The thought in the back of the mind is, in judgment, the position, the point or indivisible locus—but is it actually discernible?—from which "one must... judge everything" (91), from which thoughts are annulled, leaving room only for simple and naive existence and for its discourse, ordinary discourse. Pascal will therefore regard the "style of... Solomon de Tultie [as] the commonest... because it consists entirely of thoughts deriving from everyday conversations" (746). Judgment therefore dis-

covers that the ordinary discourses of men are true in their illusion, their errors, and their falseness, to the extent that they are the immediate "language of real life." It discovers this negatively, however, by discovering that a theory of the language of real life is impossible because the infinite is not a speculative object: this impossibility grounds the truth of ordinary discourse (as form) in the language of daily existence, that is, as an ignorance which is the *true* locus of man.¹³ In its behavior and in its discourse, the mind ordinarily *acts*¹⁴ in accord with units and totalities which are never exhaustively analyzed. It is not possible to transpose this action of natural existence into a speculative discourse that would reflect it according to geometric order and reconstruct its meaning and its psycho-physiological mechanisms *partes extra partes*: "Descartes. In general terms one must say: 'that is the result of figure and motion,' because it is true, but to name them and assemble the machine is quite ridiculous" (84). To express this is beyond all men. It is possible, however—and this is the astute man's role—to know that it is impossible and why, and at the same time to discover that the most philosophical part of life is to live simply and tranquilly.

The beginning of the *First Discourse* (*Discourse*, pp. 382–383), as we have seen, presents an "image" on which the rest of the text is a commentary. By dealing thus with the political example of the condition of Great Men which the fragments of the *Pensées* did not include in the typology of ordinary discourses, Pascal employs in his own discourse, and reveals through it, the very essence of ordinary discourse in general, namely, its signifying structure in the form of a parable. His narrative announces a

¹³*Pensée* 512, and notably: "Thus it is rare for mathematicians to be intuitive or for the intuitive to be mathematicians, because mathematicians try to treat these intuitive matters mathematically, and make themselves ridiculous, by trying to begin with definitions followed by principles, which is not the way to proceed in this kind of reasoning. It is not that the mind does not do this, but it does so tacitly, naturally and artlessly, for it is beyond any man to express it and given to very few even to apprehend it" (my emphasis).

¹⁴*Pensée* 821, and particularly: "Reason works slowly, looking so often at so many principles which must always be present, that it is constantly nodding or straying.... Feeling does not work like that, but works instantly, and is always ready."

truth which it totally encloses in the fiction of narration. Its commentary on this truth does not constitute a definitive interpretation; rather its explanation of it is still a sort of veiling, since true understanding of the narrative begins at the moment when the discourse ceases. Pascal's narrative is an encoded one that opens the *discourses* that will simultaneously explain and obscure it. It is a narrative whose code is given and carefully analyzed, but which is powerless to make this code's meaning appear; its meaning will appear when we know at the end of the given explanations that our ignorance is total: "learned ignorance, which knows itself, but which is the same as that of the people" from which we started. By analyzing the Pascalian practice of ordinary discourse as parabolic discourse in this political text, we have tried to bring out what Pascal left to the intradisursive process alone, the dialogic relationship between himself and the young duc de Chevreuse. We have tried to formulate a set of theoretical propositions which, by explicitly uncovering this dialogic structure and its implications, will constitute it as a pragmatics of discourse.

By carefully decoding the political meaning of the "parable-image," Pascal offers his interlocutor the choice of a meaning, but in perceiving this meaning from the injunctions of the Pascalian discourse, the young duke dissimulates from himself the other meanings, that plurality of meaning which the political meaning conceals yet indicates, without making it possible for the discourse itself or its speaker to state, outside of fiction, this multiple meaning, to fix it in a meaning that would be *the* meaning. The discourse becomes in itself an opaque object and, by a new twist, this very opacity, this secret, is—if not meaning—at least the instrument of meaning. "[Jesus Christ and St. Paul possess an organization guided by charity, not by the mind, for they wished to humble, not to teach. The same with St. Augustine. The principal function of this organization consists in digressing upon each point which relates to the end, in order to point constantly to this end]" (298). A striking paradox closes the explanatory commentary on the "parable-image." Everything has been said, the political meaning explored and made explicit, the code of the fiction unveiled with precision, and the theoretical models traced with exactitude in their representational func-

tion. Pascal adds: "What I tell you does not go very far; and if you stop there you will not save yourself from being [damned]; but at least you will be [damned like an *honnête homme*]. . . . The way which I open to you [to damn yourself] is doubtless the most honorable; but in truth it is always a great folly for a man to expose himself to damnation; and therefore he must not stop at this. . . . Others than I will show you the way to this" (*Discourse*, p. 387). The perception of meaning was a dissimulation of another meaning, a meaning that the parable already told in telling the first, but without knowing that it was saying it. Such is, briefly sketched, the movement of discernment that traverses the learned man's discourse; to speak the fiction, the narrative, then to state yet another meaning encoded in the narrative's primitive meaning—this is the astute man's role—then, this meaning unveiled, to indicate that this unveiling is still a concealment of meaning, though a practical one ("you will expose yourself to damnation"), a simultaneous opening-up and distancing in which there appears yet another meaning that was already stated but only in the *language* of the parable—and this is the role of Pascalian discourse. "I *too* will have thoughts in the back of my mind" (797).

"Why do you speak to them in parables?" And then he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to him who has, will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." [Matthew 13:10-13]