
Provincianes

Blaise Pascal

Translated and edited by Pere Lluís Font

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With the publication of *Provincianes (The Provincial Letters)*, Pere Lluís Font has completed the herculean task of translating almost all of Blaise Pascal's non-scientific texts into Catalan. After an initial sample in the guise of a selection of texts within his *Introducció a la lectura de Pascal* (Barcelona: Cruïlla, 1996) and the epistemological compilation of *Escrips de filosofia de la ciència* (Girona: Edicions de la Ela Geminada, 2017), two new masterpieces have been issued: *Pensaments (Thoughts) (Pensaments i opuscles, Martorell: Adesiara, 2021)* and *Provincianes (The Provincial Letters)*, the latter the subject of this review. As a whole, Pere Lluís makes the bulk of Pascal's corpus available to Catalan readers in exquisite translations and painstaking editions, the outcome of an entire life spent studying and reflecting on him. He displays particular linguistic savviness when navigating the labyrinth of originals (which are especially hard to disentangle in *Thoughts*) and a sense of language that enables him to recreate the elegance, vigour and irony of Pascal's prose without doing violence to it. This is a monumental milestone for Catalan culture.

The translation of *The Provincial Letters* comes with an introduction (on the genesis, context and main content of the text), a timeline, a bibliography, name and analytical indexes (the latter invaluable: a *morceaux choisis*-like summary of the 18 letters comprising Pascal's work) and more than 500 notes: the footnotes contain the textual variations in the different editions issued during Pascal's lifetime. At the end of the book we find informative indexes to introduce contemporary readers to the people either cited or alluded to, and to guide them in the debate (the opposite would have been more convenient: informational references in the footnotes and the others at the end). In short, it is a wonderful publication, not only because of its contents but as a physical object as well: it is sewn, not glued, and practically free of errata (I was only able to identify two insignificant ones which are easy to identify and rectify by context without the need to refer to the original: on p. 115, l. 9: a "no" is missing; and on p. 263, l. -9: a "que" is missing).

This is a unique book. Actually, *The Provincial Letters* is not a book (nor is *Thoughts*, albeit in a different way) but a series of letters which Pascal wrote and published anonymously over two consecutive years between January 1656 and March 1657, until they were ultimately published in book form in that latter year. Even though it was included in the Church's *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (or perhaps for that very reason?), two more editions were published during Pascal's lifetime, or three if we count a Latin translation.

The success can be explained by the quality of the writing, as well as the context that nurtured it and the calibre of the adversaries who stood in opposition to it. Indeed, *The Provincial Letters* is a combative work in the sense of theoretical combat, that is, against the perversion of submitting to truth by force (such as when deciding whether certain supposedly heretical propositions are actually found in the work where they were said to be found, the *Augustinus* by the Flemish theologian Jansen), the distortion of the moral conscience through the subtleties of reason lost in its own convoluted delirium (such as the justification of lying through mental reservation), the denaturalisation of the evangelical spirit resulting from the devices of casuistry (such as the authorisation of theft or homicide through different clauses or by virtue of the central doctrine of probabilism).

But the theoretical combat was also a battle against the historical representatives of such vices, and especially those who made a rallying cry of everything Pascal denounced: the Jesuits. Indeed, Pascal's letters, which were initially addressed to a friend (an imaginary one) in the provinces, started being addressed directly to the Jesuit priests in the eleventh letter (the two last ones were directed specifically to a particular Jesuit, Father Annat). This is because the Jesuits were at the forefront of the condemnation, harassment and ultimate destruction of those whom Pascal decided to defend, due to not only personal proximity but more importantly ideological affinity: the Jansenists. The contrast between the Jansenist spirit (which is difficult to precisely define, although Pere Lluís successfully strives to describe it in the introduction) and the Jesuits' theological and political machinations is, in fact, the backbone of *The Provincial Letters*. The speculative discussions on sufficient grace and efficacious grace, on whether or not Jansen or Arnauld conformed to Catholic orthodoxy, are moments in that counterpoint (which is the bulk of the book) which culminate with the rebuke of the Jesuits' moral laxness, which Pascal unveils with merciless detail in order to clearly expose what he interpreted as sacrificing the gospel truth for the sake of worldly success.

The adversary was fearsome because the Jesuits were powerful. At the request of a large contingent of French bishops, in 1653 the papal bull *Cum occasione* issued by Innocent X condemned five propositions which were supposedly found in the *Augustinus* as heresy, and in 1657 the Pope Alexander VII withdrew that condemnation in the papal bull *Ad sacrum*. Practically speaking, the battle was lost by the Jansenists. The nail in the coffin came from Pope Clement XI with the papal bull *Unigenitus* (1713), which became state law in France in 1730, followed by a purging of the clergy. By 1710, the spiritual centre of Jansenism, the Cistercian abbey in Port-Royal des Champs, where one of Pascal's sisters professed her faith, and which he had often visited, had

been destroyed down to the foundations on the orders of the King's Council, with not a single stone left in place.

However, if the battle was unequal in deeds, it was also unequal in the opposite way: ideas. Pascal revealed to his readers all the feebleness of the position he condemned. His strategy consisted of presenting the Jesuits' positions, often cited literally with precise reference to the works where they were laid out, and showing how ridiculous they were. One example should suffice: there is no subtlety that should conceal to a healthy spirit the fact that a lie does not cease being a lie just because the part of the phrase that would make it true is uttered under the breath, so that the listener cannot hear it. What he condemned would be risible were it not so outrageous. Pascal was aware that this type of Jesuit procedure, which pretended to respect the letter of the gospel while betraying its spirit in order to make the religious and moral demands of Christianity less severe and cumbersome and more compatible with worldly passions, will spark in readers hilarity here, indignation there, depending on their threshold of religious sensibility. Pascal himself realised the risk of laughing ("I do not choose to be the vehicle of such reading to those who would make it the subject of diversion", p. 193), yet at the same time he acknowledged the power of humour and jest as weapons of denunciation, which he explicitly upheld in the eleventh letter. Regardless, the Jesuits' bungling of morality, and even the most elementary common sense through subtleties, equivocations, misunderstandings, references to authorities taken out of context and manipulated or outright invented citations is starkly exposed. It is clear that Pascal was incensed, but one gets the impression as well that he also had a quite a bit of fun writing his letters. 350 years later, even though the context is entirely different and the theological debate is a thing of the distant past, we can continue to chuckle thanks to the finesse of his irony.