There are certain figures in the history of human thought who in the deepest sense of the word must be regarded as tragic; and this not because of any accidental sufferings they have endured, or because of any persecution, but because of something inherently desperate in their own wrestling with truth.

Thus Swift, while an eminently tragic figure in regard to his personal character and the events of his life, is not tragic in regard to his thought.

It is not a question of pessimism. Schopenhauer is generally, and with reason, regarded as a pessimist; but no one who has read his "World as Will and Idea" can visualise Schopenhauer, even in the sphere of pure thought, as a tragic personality.

The pre-eminent example in our modern world of the sort of desperate thinking which I have in mind as worthy of this title is, of course, Nietzsche; and it is a significant thing that over and over again in Nietzsche's writings one comes upon passionate and indignant references to Pascal.

The great iconoclast seemed indeed, as he groped about like a blind Samson in the temple of human faith, to come inevitably upon the figure of Pascal, as if this latter were one of the main pillars of the formidable edifice. It is interesting to watch this passionate attraction of steel for steel.

Nietzsche was constantly searching among apologists for Christianity for one who in intellect and imagination was worthy of his weapons; and it must be confessed that his search was generally vain. But in Pascal he did find what he sought.

His own high mystical spirit with its savage psychological insight was answered here by something of the same metal. His own "desperate thinking" met in this instance a temper equally "desperate," and the beauty and cruelty of his merciless imagination met here a "will to power" not less abnormal.

It is seldom that a critic of a great writer has, by the lucky throwing of life's wanton dice, an opportunity of watching the very temper he is describing, close at hand. But it does sometimes happen, even when the subject of one's criticism has been dead two hundred years, that one comes across a modern mind so penetrated with its master's moods; so coloured, so dyed, so ingrained with that particular spirit, that intercourse with it implies actual contact with its archetype.

Such an encounter with the subtlest of Christian apologists has been my own good fortune in my association with Mr. W. J. Williams, the friend of Loisy and Tyrrel, and the interpreter, for modern piety, of Pascal's deepest thoughts.

The superiority of Pascal over all other defenders of the faith is to be looked for in the peculiar angle of his approach to the terrific controversy--an angle which Newman himself, for all his serpentine sagacity, found it difficult to retain.
Newman worked in a mental atmosphere singularly unpropitious to formidable intellectual ventures, and one never feels that his essentially ecclesiastical mind ever really grasped the human plausibility of natural paganism. But Pascal went straight back to Montaigne, and, like Pater's Marius under the influence of Aristippus, begins his search after truth with a clean acceptance of absolute scepticism.

Newman was sceptical too, but his peculiar kind of intellectual piety lacked the imagination of Pascal. He could play, cleverly enough, with hypothetical infidelity, and refute it, so to say, "in his study" with his eye on the little chapel door; but there was a sort of refined shrinking from the jagged edges of reality in his somewhat Byzantine temperament which throws a certain suspicion of special pleading over his crafty logic.

Newman argues like a subtle theologian who has been clever enough to add to his "repertoire" a certain evasive mist of pragmatic modernism, under the filmy and wavering vapours of which the inveterate sacerdotalism of his temperament covers its tracks. But with Pascal we get clean away from the poison-trail of the obscurantist.

Pascal was essentially a layman. There was nothing priestly in his mood; nothing scholastic in his reasoning; nothing sacerdotal in his conclusions. We breathe with him the clear sharp air of mathematics; and his imagination, shaking itself free from all controversial pettifogging, sweeps off into the stark and naked spaces of the true planetary situation.

One feels that Newman under all conceivable circumstances was bound to be a priest. There was priestliness writ large upon his countenance. His manner, his tone, his beautiful style, with something at once pleading and threatening, and a kind of feminine attenuation in its vibrant periods, bears witness to this.

Stripped of his cassock and tossed into the world's "hurly-burly," Newman would have drawn back into himself in Puritan dismay, and with Puritan narrowness and sourness would have sneered at the feet of the dancers. There was, at bottom, absolutely nothing in Newman of the clear-eyed human sweetness of the Christ of the Gospels; that noble, benignant, tolerant God, full of poetic imagination, whose divine countenance still looks forth from the canvasses of Titian.

Newman's piety, at best, was provincial, local, distorted. His Christ is the Christ of morbid Seminarists and ascetic undergraduates; not the Christ that Leonardo da Vinci saw breaking bread with his disciples; not the Christ that Paolo Veronese saw moving among the crowds of the street like a royal uncrowned king.

Nietzsche would never have singled out Pascal as his most formidable enemy if the author of "The Thoughts" had been nothing but a theological controversialist. What gives an eternal value to Pascal's genius, is that it definitely cleared the air. It swept aside all blurring and confusing mental litter, and left the lamentable stage of the great dilemma free for the fatal duel.

Out of the immense darkness of the human situation, that forlorn stage rises. The fearful spaces of the godless night are its roof, and row above row, tier above tier in its shadowy enclosure, the troubled crowds of the tribes of men wait the waverer issue of the contest. Full on the high stage in this tragic theatre of the universe Pascal throws the merciless searchlight of his imaginative logic, and the rhythm of the duality of man's fate is the rhythm of the music of his impassioned utterances.

The more one dreams over the unique position which Pascal has come to occupy, the more one realises how few writers there are whose imagination is large enough to grapple with the sublime horror of being born of the human race into this planetary system.
They take for granted so many things, these others. They have no power in them to lift eagle wings and fly over the cold grey boundless expanse of the shadowy waters.

They take for granted--materialists and mystics alike--so much; so much, that there is no longer any tragic dilemma left, any sublime "parting of the ways," any splendid or terrible decision.

Pascal's essential grandeur consists in the fact that he tore himself clear of all those peddling and pitiful compromises, those half humorous concessions, those lazy conventionalisms, with which most people cover their brains as if with wool, and ballast their imagination as if with heavy sand.

He tore himself clear of everything; of his own temperamental proclivities, of his pride, of his scientific vanity, of his human affections, of his lusts, of his innocent enjoyments. He tore himself clear of everything; so as to envisage the universe in its unmitigated horror, so as to look the emptiness of space straight between its ghastly lidless eyes.

One sees him there, at the edge of the world, silhouetted against the white terror of infinity, wrestling desperately in the dawn with the angel of the withheld secret.

His pride--his pride of sheer intellect--ah! that, as Nietzsche well knew, was the offering that had the most blood in it, the sacrifice that cried the loudest, as he bound it to the horns of the altar. The almost insane howl of suppressed misery which lurks in the scoriating irony of that terrible passage about sprinkling oneself with "holy water" and rendering oneself "stupid," is an indication of what I mean. Truly, as his modern representative does not hesitate to hint, the hand of Pascal held Christianity by the hair.

To certain placid cattle-like minds, the life we have been born into is a thing simple and natural enough. To Pascal it was monstrously and insolently unnatural. He had that species of grand and terrible imagination which is capable of piercing the world through and through; of rising high up above it, and of pulverising it with impassioned logic.

The basic incongruities of life yawned for him like bleeding eye-sockets, and never for one moment could he get out of his mind the appalling nothingness of the stellar spaces.

Once, after thinking about Pascal, I dreamed I saw him standing, a tall dark figure, above a chaotic sea. In his hand he held a gigantic whip, whose long quivering lash seemed, as he cracked it above the moaning waters, to summon the hidden monsters of the depths to rise to the surface. I could not see in my dream the face of this figure, for dark clouds kept sweeping across his head; but the sense of his ferocious loneliness took possession of me, and since then I have found it increasingly difficult to confine his image to mild Jansenistic heresies, ironic girdings at Jesuitical opponents, philosophic strolls with evangelical friends.

What Pascal does is a thing that, curiously enough, is very rarely done, even by great metaphysical writers; I mean the bringing home to the mind, without any comfortable illusive softenings of the stark reality, of what life really implies in its trenchant outlines. To do this with the more complete efficacy, he goes back to Montaigne and uses the scepticism of Montaigne as his starting point.

The Christian faith, in order to be a thing of beauty and dignity, must necessarily have something desperate about it, something of the terrible sweat and tears of one who wrestles with the ultimate angel. Easy-going Christianity, the Christianity of plump prelates and argumentative presbyters, is not Christianity at all. It is simply the "custom of the country" greased with the unction of professional interests.

One remembers how both Schopenhauer and Heine sweep away the Hegelian Protestantism of their age and look for the spirit of Christ in other quarters.

That so tremendous a hope, that so sublime a chance should have appeared at all in the history of the human race is a thing to wonder at; and Pascal, coming upon this chance, this hope, this supreme venture, from the depths of a corrosive all-devouring scepticism, realised it at its true value.
Hung between the infinitely great and the infinitely little, frozen by the mockery of two eternities, this "quintessence of dust" which is ourselves, cries aloud to be delivered from the body of its living death.

A reed that thinks! Could there anywhere be found a better description of what we are? Reed-like we bow ourselves to the winds of the four horizons--reed-like we murmur repetitions of the music of forest and sea--reed-like we lift our heads among the dying stalks of those who came before us--reed-like we wither and droop when our own hour comes--but with it all, we think!

Pascal looking at the face of the world sees evidence on all sides of the presence of something blighting and poisonous, something diabolic and malign in the way things are now organised. He traces the cause of this to the wilful evil in the heart of man, and he finds the only cure for it in the acceptance of God's grace.

There may be something irritating to the pagan mind about this arbitrary introduction of the idea of "sin" as the cause of the lamentable misery of the world. Among modern writers the idea of "sin" is ridiculed, and the notion of its supernaturalism scouted. But is this true psychology?

Whatever its extraordinary origin, this thing which we call "conscience" has emerged as a definite and inalienable phenomenon among us. To be exempt from the power of remorse is still, even in these modern days, to be something below or above the level of ordinary humanity. If the thing is everywhere present with us, then, as an actual undeniable experience; if we feel it, if we suffer from it, where is the philosophical or human advantage of slurring over its existence and refusing to take account of it?

The great artists are wiser in these matters than the philosophers. Are we to suppose that the depths of malignity in an Iago, or the "dark backward and abyss" of remorse in a Macbeth, are things purely relative and illusive?

"Hell is murky," whispers the sleep-walker, and the words touch the nerves of our imagination more closely than all the arguments of the evolutionists.

We will not follow Pascal through the doctrinal symbols of his escape from the burden of this consciousness. Where we must still feel the grandeur of his imagination is in his recognition of the presence of "evil" in the world as an objective and palpable thing which no easy explanations can get rid of and only a stronger spiritual force can overcome.

The imagination of Pascal once more makes life terrible, beautiful and dramatic. It pushes back the marble walls of mechanical cause and effect, and opens up the deep places. It makes the universe porous again. It restores to life its strange and mysterious possibilities. It throws the human will once more into the foreground, and gives the drama of our days its rightful spaciousness and breadth.

The kind of religious faith which lends itself to our sense of the noble and the tragic is necessarily of this nature. Like the tight-rope dancer in Zarathustra, it balances itself between the upper and the nether gulfs. It makes its choice between eternal issues; it throws the dice upon the cosmic gaming-table; it wagers the safety of the soul against the sanity of the intellect.

And it is pre-eminently the mark of a great religion that it should be founded upon a great scepticism. Anything short of this lacks the true tragic note; anything short of this is mere temperamental cheerfulness, mere conventional assent to custom and tradition.

The great religion must carve its daring protest against the whole natural order of the universe upon the flaming ramparts of the world's uttermost boundary. The great religion must engrave its challenge to eternity upon the forehead of the Great Sphinx.

And after all, even supposing that Pascal is wrong; even supposing that making his grand wager he put his money upon the wrong horse, does that diminish the tragedy of his position? Does that lessen the sublimity of his imagination? Obviously it is the practical certainty that he is wrong, and that he did put his money on the wrong horse, which creates the grandeur of the whole desperate business. If he were right, if the universe were really and truly composed in the
manner he conceived it—why then, so far from his figure being a tragic one, he would present himself as a shrewd magician, who has found the “wonderful lamp” of the world’s Aladdin’s cave, and has entered upon inestimable treasures while disappearing into the darkness.

The sublimity of Pascal’s vision depends upon its being illusive. The grandeur of his world-logic depends upon its being false. The beauty of his heroic character depends upon his philosophy being a lie.

If all that is left of this desperate dicer with eternity is a little dust and a strangely shaped skull, how magnificently dramatic, in the high classic sense, was his offering up of his intellect upon the altar of his faith!

In the wise psychology of the future—interesting itself in the historic aberrations of the human mind—it is likely that many chapters will be devoted to this strange “disease of desperation” full of such wild and fatal beauty.

The Spectacle of the world will lack much contrasting shadow when this thing passes away. A certain deep crimson upon black will be missing from the tapestry of human consciousness. There will be more sun-light but less Rembrantian chiaroscuoro in the pigments of the great Picture. At any rate this is certain; by his tragic gambling in the darkness of the abyss between the unfathomed spaces, Pascal has drawn the perilous stuff of the great disease to a dramatic head. The thing can no longer diffuse itself like an attenuated evil humour through every vein of the world-body.

Customary piety, conventional religion, the thin security of self-satisfied morality, can now no more tease us with their sleek impertinence. In the presence of a venture of this high distinction, of a faith of this tragic intensity, such shabby counterfeits of the race’s hope dwindle and pale and fade.

We now perceive what the alternative is, what the voice of "deep calling unto deep" really utters, as the constellation of Hercules draws the solar world toward it through the abysmal night. No more ethical foolery; no more pragmatic insolence; no more mystical rhetoric.

The prophets of optimism "lie in hell like sheep." The world yawns and quivers to its foundations. Jotunheim rushes upon Asgard. From the pleasant fields of sun-lit pagan doubt comes to our ears the piping of the undying Pan—older than all the "twilights" of all the "gods."

But for the rest the issue is now plain, the great dilemma clear. No more fooling with shadows when faith has lost its substance; no more walking on the road to Emmaus when the Master is transformed to a stream of tendency; no more liberal theology when Socrates is as divine as Jesus.

The "Thinking Reed" bows before the wind of the infinite spaces. It bows. It bends. It is broken.

Aut Christus aut Nihil!

(The end)

John Cowper Powys's essay: Pascal

By John Cowper Powys