

## Pascal and Gómez Dávila: Aesthetic Revolutions, Skeptical Ellipses, and Political Reactions

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### English Abstract

In the present article, I examine the work of two authors: the seventeenth-century French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal and the twentieth-century Colombian philosopher Nicolás Gómez Dávila. To speak of these two authors together, I borrow a pair of concepts from Severo Sarduy, *ellipses* and *revolutions*. Thus, I will start by describing the way in which Sarduy reframes these two concepts that were previously used on epistemological and political grounds. Then, I will focus on ellipses as an aesthetic procedure employed by Pascal and Gómez Dávila, that allows them to have an open and non-conclusive thought. Here, I will also describe how each author approaches God to decenter human beings and establish a tension between skepticism and belief. Finally, I will focus on revolutions, and I will show how Pascal's and Gómez Dávila's similar approaches to questions of theology become reactionary critiques of modernity.

### Resumen en español

En este artículo examino el trabajo de dos autores: el matemático y filósofo francés Blaise Pascal y el filósofo colombiano Nicolás Gómez Dávila, quien publicó durante la segunda mitad del siglo XX. Para hablar de estos dos escritores voy a tomar prestados dos conceptos de Severo Sarduy: *elipses* y *revoluciones*. Por lo tanto, voy a iniciar describiendo la manera como Sarduy reconfigura estos dos conceptos que fueron previamente usados en contextos epistemológicos y políticos. Luego, me voy a enfocar en las elipses como un procedimiento estético empleado por Pascal y Gómez Dávila que les permite tener un pensamiento abierto e inconcluso. Finalmente, me voy a enfocar en las revoluciones y voy a mostrar cómo ciertas posturas similares en Pascal y Gómez Dávila se convierten en críticas reaccionarias de la modernidad.

### Resumo em português

Neste artigo examino o trabalho de dois autores: o matemático e filósofo Blaise Pascal e o filósofo colombiano do século XX Nicolás Gómez Dávila. Para falar destes dois escritores, tomarei emprestados dois conceitos de Severo Sarduy: *elipses* e *revoluções*. Portanto, começarei descrevendo a maneira como Sarduy reconfigura estes dois conceitos que anteriormente foram usados em contextos epistemológicos e políticos. Depois, enfocarei as elipses como um procedimento estético empregado por Pascal y Gómez Dávila que lhes permite ter um pensamento aberto e inconcluso. Finalmente, enfocarei nas revoluções e mostrarei como algumas posturas semelhantes em Pascal e Gómez Dávila se tornam críticas reacionárias da modernidade.

In the present article, I examine the work of two authors separated by both time and place. The first is the seventeenth-century French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, and the second is the twentieth-century Colombian philosopher Nicolás Gómez Dávila. To speak of these two authors together, I borrow a pair of concepts from Severo Sarduy's essays on the Baroque and Neo Baroque, *ellipses* and *revolutions*. Both will structure my analysis. These two concepts, which have particular resonance in Copernicus's and Kepler's astronomical models, serve to structure a dialogue between Pascal and Gómez Dávila on aesthetic, epistemological, and political terms.

The first part of my article describes the way Sarduy reframes two concepts—ellipses and revolutions—, that were previously used on epistemological and political grounds. This act of reframing allows Sarduy to employ these concepts on an aesthetic discussion and to describe a particular artistic and cultural form, the Baroque, as an intrinsically revolutionary movement.

The second part focuses on ellipses, and it first describes the short, fragmentary style employed by Pascal and Gómez Dávila. In so doing, I show how this style gives way to an open and non-conclusive thought. Secondly, I describe how each author approaches God—Pascal in *Pensées* and Gómez Dávila in *Escolios a un texto implícito*—to decenter human beings and establish a tension between skepticism and belief.

The third part focuses on revolutions. In it, I show how Pascal and Gómez Dávila's similar approaches to questions of theology become reactionary critiques of modernity. Through the extension of their personal relationship with God into the political realm, these authors criticize two important ideas for the project of modernity: the division of Church and State and the conception of secularism as a space devoid of religion. In this part, I also dispute Sarduy's conception of the elliptical form as an intrinsically revolutionary aesthetic, and I show how Pascal and Gómez Dávila make use of revolutionary ideas to buttress and articulate their reactionary worldviews.

### Baroque Aesthetics

By looking at Leibniz's work, particularly his writings on logic and metaphysics, Gilles Deleuze finds that the common element of the aesthetic of this time, the Baroque, is its folding and unfolding, as is evident in Bernini's sculpture of Saint Teresa (1988, 20).[1] Just before Deleuze, the Cuban writer Severo Sarduy studied the Baroque and observed that it is possible to describe the epistème of this era by looking at a specific model; however, he found this model not in Leibniz's logic and epistemology but in Kepler's cosmology (1987, 147).

In his analysis of the Baroque movement, Sarduy describes the ellipse as its dominant figure, the one that guides its aesthetics and worldview: "the dominant figure is not the circle, with its single, radiating, luminous, paternal center, but the ellipse, which opposes the visible focal point with another [that is] equally functional [and] real, albeit closed off, dead, nocturnal" (2010, 292). This figure, taken from Kepler's

astronomical model, gives way to the epistemological possibility of ambiguity or diffusion; it substitutes a figure with a unique center for another one with focal points that allow for the expansion and exploration of new spaces or aesthetic ideas. Through this elliptical figure, as Sarduy sees it, cities began to lose their center during the seventeenth century, buildings started to experiment with new shapes, and mirrors came to stand for multiple represented subjects.

However, the astronomical model that Kepler built with the ellipse takes as its basis Copernicus' model, that one in which the Earth is no longer the center of the universe, but becomes another planet that revolves around a new center: the Sun. Yet, Sarduy finds Kepler's elliptical shape a more radical movement than Copernicus' displacement of the center. In Copernicus' model the universe keeps the circular shape that was given to it since antiquity, and if there is a new center, its orbits are still perfect spheres. For this reason, Sarduy describes this model as a reformation, not a revolution (1987, 161). With the ellipse, on the other hand, not only the shape of the universe changes, but it also dilutes its fixed center in the ellipse's foci.

Sarduy was not the first one who described an epistemological model as revolutionary. As Kuhn points out, the word revolution has strong political connotations, it is normally used to label events such as the French Revolution, the American Revolution, or the Russian Revolution. But Kant extended this word to the sciences too. In the preface to the second edition of his *The Critique of Pure Reason* he describes two important intellectual revolutions, being one of them the one that took place in the early modern period with the emergence of the experimental method and that started with Galileo (Kuhn 2012, xii).[2]

Nevertheless, Sarduy goes one step further, he uses this label of revolution not just to describe a social and epistemological movement, but a cultural and aesthetic too. Borrowing Feyerabend's concept of *anamnesis*, he shows how Galileo and those who followed him used rhetorical devices to produce new interpretations of different phenomena while at the same time they hid the fact that changes were taking place in these interpretations. These tricks, as Feyerabend calls them (2010, 69), expose these early scientific works as *propaganda*, something that becomes more evident as many of them chose to write in vernacular languages rather than Latin to reach a new and broader audience. Thus, these early modern natural philosophers reveal themselves as accomplished masters in the art of concealing (Sarduy 1987, 14).

These rhetorical strategies of showing and concealing, this obscurity, this displacement of a previously fixed center is what links the intellectual revolution of Galileo with an aesthetic movement that was taking place at the same time: The Baroque. Thus, for Sarduy this movement is intrinsically revolutionary: "A Baroque that, in its sway, its fall, its *painterly* language, at times strident, motley, and chaotic, metaphorizes the contestation of the logocentric entity that formerly structured it and us with its distance and authority; A Baroque that rejects all instauration, that metaphorizes the disputed order, the judged god, the transgressed law. A Baroque of the Revolution"

(Sarduy 2010, 290). Nevertheless, these elements that Sarduy enumerates do not describe a particular period. Rather, they describe an aesthetic, a way of representing that was common in the early modern period, but not exclusive of it.

Seen as a historical period, the Baroque took place during the seventeenth century. However, as made visible by the corpus of authors that Severo Sarduy analyzes in his essays, the Baroque was an aesthetic movement that, since its very beginning, moved between Europe and the Americas and entailed mutual influence. This movement also extended through multiple artistic and cultural practices: music, painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, and even philosophy. Artists and writers classified under the Baroque label include Caravaggio, Borromini, Góngora, Aleijadinho, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and Velázquez. On the other hand, Sarduy also points out that a revival of some of the Baroque aesthetic and philosophical concerns took place during the twentieth century in Latin America. Some authors he classifies as part of this Baroque revival, which he calls the Neobaroque, include Alejo Carpentier, José Lezama Lima, Gabriel García Márquez, and Carlos Fuentes.

### Elliptical Forms, Elusive Truths

I began with Sarduy's conceptualization of ellipses and revolutions to clarify these terms and to provide a bridge (across time and space) between Pascal and Gómez Dávila.[3] Born in 1623 in France (where he died in 1662), Pascal is perhaps best remembered for his contributions in mathematics. However, after a religious conversion and some years before his death, he began working on an *Apology of the Christian Religion*, unfinished upon his death and published posthumously in 1669 under the title *Pensées*. Gómez Dávila, for his part, was born in Colombia in 1913 and died in 1994. I will argue in what follows that the texts of these two authors are built upon an elliptical form that also influences their epistemologies.

As a book that Pascal began writing six years before his death and never completed, the *Pensées* do not form a continuous and clearly structured text. Instead, they are a collection of meditations ranging in length between one sentence and a few pages. Its editors usually arrange these fragments following a plan sketched out by Pascal himself or by dividing them according to their approximate year of composition. If *Apology of the Christian Religion* was supposed to be a radiating and luminous center of Pascal's thought, the *Pensées* are the foci, obscure, nocturnal (or vice versa?). Because of its fragmentary nature, as the sketch of an expected round and closed text, the ellipsis works too as a metaphor for Pascal's unfinished work.

The same elliptical metaphor could describe Gómez Dávila's *Escolios*, a work that was the product of a lifetime. First published in 1977 in two volumes, *Escolios* continued growing during the years. Gómez Dávila published two more volumes in 1986, *Nuevos escolios*, and one last volume in 1992, *Escolios sucesivos*. The word *escolio*, which ties these five volumes, comes from the Greek word *scholion*, a literary and philosophical genre developed during late antiquity. Scholia were commentaries

done on the margins of texts written by classical authors such as Hesiod, Plato, Virgil, or Cicero. These glosses worked as explanations or critiques of classical texts and, since they always depended on an already given text, were seen as a minor genre. However, the text on which Gómez Dávila's scholia depends is never given; it remains *implicit* throughout his work.

Before publishing his *Escolios*, Gómez Dávila published two other books: *Notas I* (1954), a collection of short notes that never saw a second volume, and *Textos I* (1959), a collection of essays that never saw a second volume. In *Notas*, Gómez Dávila first defined the style that he used in his later work, delineating a contraposition between two writing styles: one slow and meticulous, the other short and elliptical. Even if he acknowledges the possibility of a great metaphysical meditation within the first style, he opts for the second given that it allows for the treatment of subjects in their most abstract form, when they are just emerging or about to die. Gómez Dávila finds that some models for this style are Nietzsche and Pascal: "That is how Nietzsche writes, that is how death wanted Pascal to write" (quoted in Volpi 2005, 31).[4] But if for Pascal it seems that the elliptical form was something accidental, for Gómez Dávila it is an existential choice: Sketches are the means through which he can express his thought.

However, Pascal's style is not only elliptical because his *Pensées* are the sketch of an unfinished book but because they revolve around a project that he never completed. Like Gómez Dávila, Pascal conceives of writing as an activity in which short ideas demand further reflection: "The way in which Epictetus, Montaigne, and Solomon de Tultie wrote, is the most usual, the most insinuating, the most easily remembered, and the most often quoted; because it is wholly composed of thoughts which arise out of the ordinary conversations of life" (1901, 311 [618]).[5] Pascal and Gómez Dávila thus conceive of writing and meditation as closely related actions; they both become a way of living and take on existential connotations. What they write about are reflections born out from a single moment, an instant; however, they should invite further meditation, as they are just a glimpse of a larger idea that has no solid shape, that is not yet apprehended, only presumed.

As temporal phenomena, Pascal's meditations, his *pensées*, are always in movement, evading themselves: "In writing down my thought it now and then escapes me, but this reminds me of my weakness, which I constantly forget" (1901, 29 [540]). Meditating for Pascal, developing his *pensées*, becomes a spiritual practice; it reminds him of his own limits, it allows him to become humble. This movement of his thought is also in agreement with his own nature, it is in a continuous flow, approaching and receding, as the sea or the sun, as he states in fragment 105 [636]. In this fragment Pascal



Illustration 1



even draws this movement in the margins of his text as a zigzag in constant expansion (Serres 233). If looked from above and in three dimensions, this line could be a spiral drawing several ellipses in its trajectory (illustration 1). In this fragment Pascal also states next to his drawing that “continuous eloquence bores”; this is perhaps why his work moves through several centers, making use of discourses, dialogues, figures, or proofs in its different fragments.

It is possible that Pascal’s text, as Gómez Dávila states, is only elliptical because his own death forced him to write in that way. Still, a common elliptical element in these authors is a tension in between the whole and its fragments. Both Pascal’s *Pensées* and Gómez Dávila’s *Escolios* are presented as fragments of a planned text, projected to be completed in the future, that remains always invisible. As Franco Volpi states, the implicit text to which Gómez Dávila scholia refers is the perfect and ideal work, one that is only imagined by the reader and where his short statements can be totally fulfilled and unfolded (Volpi 2005, 33). The *Pensées* and the *Escolios* attempt also to grasp, via thought, a perfect and infinite idea—God. It is this insurmountable task, combined with the intellectual limits that Pascal and Gómez Dávila recognize in themselves, that moves them to produce a massive work composed only of fragments.

This elliptical and fragmentary style, whether it bears the label of *pensées* or *escolios*, puts these two works into dialogue with the philosophical and literary genre of aphorisms. Aphorisms are a way in which brief but profound thoughts are rendered in an aesthetic manner. The purpose of these thoughts is not to reach a definitive conclusion but to open the possibility for reflection, meditation, and continuous elaboration. When talking about his own aphorisms in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche describes the activity of writing and reading them as “rumination” [*wiederkäuern*] (2006, 9). In this sense, aphorisms become a practice and an art in which thought and literature are intertwined. In turn, Gómez Dávila describes the writing of the *escolios* as “chromatic spots within a pointillist composition” (2005a, 15).[6] With respect to reading, Pascal calls for a practice that is neither too fast nor too slow so that one may attain some understanding (fragment 601).

In developing their styles, Gómez Dávila and Pascal appealed to some forerunners. Gómez Dávila mentions Nietzsche and Pascal, while Pascal invokes Epictetus and Montaigne. Now I wish to bring in Montaigne to discuss one of the main subjects that appear in Pascal and Gómez Dávila’s aphorisms: God and His elusive nature. In Montaigne’s famous essay “Apologie de Raimond Sebond,” he defends Sebond’s theological arguments, a defense that carries within itself a paradox. If Sebond argues for the possibility of approaching God through reason, his adversaries claimed that his arguments are weak and insufficient. Montaigne develops his defense of Sebond by “taking from their hands the weak arms of reason” (2002, 184).[7] For this purpose, he employs a pyrrhonist method, in that he gathers a great number of examples, taken from the animal and the human world, to relativize reason, showing that it is not exclusive to humans and demonstrating that mistakes are common in rational judgments.

In so doing, Montaigne can claim that the arguments of Sebond's adversaries are also weak. He argues that since Sebond's detractors themselves rely on reason and argumentation, they cannot refute other arguments produced by reason. In this way, Pascal recognizes the importance of pyrrhonist skepticism to remind reason of its own limits and invite humility in thinking (fragment 448). Pyrrhonism does not stop here, however. It continues casting doubt on our capacity for thought, on our origins, and even on the first cause. For this reason, Pascal devotes some of his *pensées* to an attack on the pyrrhonists, "contre le pyrrhonisme." One attitude that goes completely against pyrrhonism is dogmatism, yet for Pascal this cannot be a definitive epistemological or metaphysical solution, since dogmatism requires immediately that one silences one's own reason to have blind but solid faith.

In the tension between pyrrhonism and dogmatism, Pascal acknowledges that, even though human reason cannot attain truth, there is still a truth to be sought. Gómez Dávila positions himself between these two opposing philosophical attitudes: "Only the fool knows exactly why he believes or why he doubts" (2005a, 233).[8] Thus, it is possible to distinguish in this ellipse two focal points or two kinds of truths. One is typical in man, produced during the fleeting moments of his existence, and which is a "casual epiphany" (2005b, 302). The other is that to which all those little truths are oriented but cannot fully attain: "All truths converge in one single truth, but the paths have been erased" (2005a, 29).[9] What is implied in Pascal and Gómez Dávila's meditations on truth is that there is one eternal truth, but our human nature allows us to have only brief and incomplete glimpses of it.

If the paths have been erased, it is not because of reason that Gómez Dávila claims there is one truth; it is not something he infers but rather something he feels. Pascal develops this elliptical movement by decentering man's capacity to know; in addition to reason, human nature also has heart, *cœur*, through which it can grasp some truths: "We know instinctively [le *cœur* sent] that there are three dimensions in space, and that numbers are infinite, and reason then shows that there are no two square numbers one of which is double of the other. We feel principles, we infer propositions, both with certainty, though by different ways" (Pascal 1901, 102 [142]). It is through the heart, through the sensible operation that it performs, that human beings come to a first knowledge of principles. These principles relate to a notion of space and numerical dimensions, but they also place the being in time, in that fleeting instant in which thoughts are born. Even more, they can go all the way to the very first principle, to which all other principles are secondary.

José Lezama Lima describes the Baroque aesthetic as the voluptuous manifestation of an urban dweller, of someone who knows abundance and idleness. In this sense, the sensual character already present in Pascal is also found in Gómez Dávila and becomes even more corporeal. Making a bold statement, the Colombian philosopher says: "A naked body solves all the mysteries of the universe" (2005a, 127). [10] This body can be understood as a physical body and as an idea that is taking

shape: “Ideas are not specters, but verbal bodies, dense, sonorous, luminous” (2005a, 96).[11] It is through language that ideas take shape and become corporeal. Thus, if they are luminous and intelligent, they can produce sensual pleasures (2005a, 36). A naked body, an image that acquires a strong sensual connotation, has also an epistemological and even theological connotation; truth is that naked body shaped by language that can solve all problems in the universe.

Montaigne and Pascal are two authors who lived at what is considered the beginning of modernity. Charles Taylor finds that in this period there was a shift from a society in which it was impossible not to believe in God to one in which its existence is not negated but belief is now open to doubt, question, or meditation (Taylor 31). Thus, Montaigne’s use of pyrrhonism as a method for testing a particular way (reason) in which God is approached does not necessarily rule out the existence of God himself or the possibility of belief in him. However, for the same nature of his project, the *Essays* (from the French “to try”) do not arrive at a conclusive answer in matters of belief. Particularly, in “Apologie de Raymond Sebond,” after he crumbles the whole edifice of dogmatic reason with respect to theological matters, he never clearly states other ways in which belief and God’s knowledge can be supported.

Pascal, in contrast, tries to see if there is something in reason that could still be used in matters of belief. In fragment 680, “Discours de la machine,” he states that if man’s heart allows him to sense that numbers are infinite even without needing to know every single infinite number, his heart also shows him that there is a God, without being necessary for this to know the nature of this God. But reason can lessen this situation of uncertainty in a very practical sense. In the discourse present in this fragment, reason can persuade one of the advantages of believing in God even if God’s existence can never be proved. According to reason, working as a mechanical calculator, if you believe in God, and he happens to exist, your reward is a joyful eternity; if you believe in God but he does not exist, then you lose nothing. Thus, in this wager, presented by reason, belief in God is always a safe spiritual investment.

Doubting, for Nicolás Gómez Dávila, plays an important role in belief; as he says, in the ocean of faith it is better to fish with doubts (2005c, 75). If believing is an act of submission to a higher truth, skepticism renders clear the conditions for this submission: “God does not ask for the submission of intelligence, but for an intelligent submission” (2005b, 383).[12] Reason, when it is not dogmatic, does not go against belief. It provides Pascal with good arguments about the advantages of believing in something that could not be fully known. For Gómez Dávila, reason and the doubts it elicits help to catch some vague notions in this immense subject that is belief; in turn, belief can make intelligence, which is an activity in which reason plays an important part, more solid: “*Credo ut intelligam*. Let’s translate it this way: I believe as a means to become intelligent” (2005b, 525).[13] Therefore, believing in Gómez Dávila is an exercise that involves reason as well and that helps to strengthen it.



As the *Pensées* were a sketch of what was supposed to become the *Apology of the Christian Religion*, God and the conditions of belief remain an important element through all of Pascal's fragments. They are at times a visible and concrete center and at others an invisible and diffused center around which all these fragments gravitate. In these movements, I have described the role that reason could play in belief, I have also described how the heart helps humankind have a glimpse of the first principles. In a more sensual way, it is through the knowledge of Jesus Christ and his misery that believers approach God. This human figure is the one and only connection humans have with our first principle (Pascal, fragment 221). Certainly, Jesus Christ has certain metaphysical implications that for Pascal are still impossible to be understood by humans. Nevertheless, his human nature and actions render the mystery of God closer for us.

In one of the *Escolios*, Gómez Dávila states: "What distances [us] from God is not sensuality, but abstraction" (2005a, 149).[14] For Pascal, Jesus is a sensitive and sensual figure who brings God closer to humans. In him, God acquires a concrete albeit transitory shape. That said, Gómez Dávila barely mentions Jesus in the *Escolios*. For the Colombian philosopher, it is the Catholic Church and its doctrines that make God a less abstract figure. "Sensuality is the constant possibility of saving the world from the captivity of its triviality" (2005a, 195).[15] Meaning in the world can only be found for Gómez Dávila in a naked body or in closer contact with God. Gravitating around these sensual poles, moving in an elliptical orbit, I will end the second part of this work and move to the section on revolutions.

## Revolutions and Reactions

In 1851, the Spanish philosopher Juan Donoso Cortés wrote *Essays on Catholicism, Liberalism, and Socialism*. In it, the former liberal decries liberalism and socialism while favoring a world inspired by Catholicism: "Theology, inasmuch as it is the science of God, is the ocean that contains and embraces all sciences, as God is the ocean that contains and embraces all things" (1879, 9). Later in the text, he adds: "Through Catholicity order entered into man, and through man into human societies" (1879, 27). In what follows, I wish to explore how, for Pascal and Nicolás Gómez Dávila, beliefs and the search for the divine intertwine with the political realm and influence a conservative perspective along the same lines as what Donoso Cortés proposes.

In Donoso Cortés's words, one sees the need to have a fully closed system, one in which every single element of the universe, even human morality and its political institutions, are emanations from God. By Pascal's time, the preponderant image of the universe was no longer that of a closed cosmos. In its place, in the wake of discoveries by Copernicus and Kepler, what remains is an open and infinite space: "So it is not surprising that the first reactions to the breaking open of the cosmos into an infinite universe included horror and fear. Kepler expressed his 'secret and hidden horror' at Bruno's infinite space, where 'we feel ourselves lost'. Pascal's cri de cœur: 'le silence éternel des espaces infinis m'effraye' is well known" (Taylor 337).[16] But if Pascal's

sensibility leads him to imagine someone who feels fear before the infinite universe, Gómez Dávila fully embraces this chaotic image, for it makes evident the limitations of modern science. Thus, he writes: “It is upon the antinomies of reason, upon the scandals of the spirit, upon the ruptures in the universe, that I base my hope and my faith” (2005e, 67).[17] Gómez Dávila accepts this chaos, insofar as it shows that God’s perfection exceeds the universe. If there is an element of fear in Gómez Dávila, it is that modernity’s inclination to explain everything ends up creating a dull and tedious picture of the universe.

Pascal’s struggle to find a certain order in the universe leads him to look for it first not in the infinite space, but in his immediate surroundings, in human society: “Gradation. The people honors persons of high birth (....) Devout persons of more zeal than knowledge despise them, in spite of that consideration which makes them honored by the educated, because they judge by a new light arising from their piety. But true Christians honor them by a still higher light” (1901, 71 [124]). It is through hierarchies that some of the order of the universe enters human societies. For this reason, Pascal sees the social necessity of a king, noblemen, and common people, each one with a clear space and role.

The social order described by Pascal is one in which medieval social institutions are still intact and in which social roles are still largely fixed. For Gómez Dávila, medieval society is indeed a better social model than that of modernity: “Every society can solve, somehow, the problem of government. But the quality of government, which created anxiety for ancients and which moderns ignore, only the middle ages knew how to solve” (2005b, 178).[18] This sense of order present in Gómez Dávila should be part of every single aspect of human life; in addition to establishing social and political institutions such as feudalism, it should also guide daily human interactions: “The degree of civilization in a given society is measured by the number of greetings present in everyday treatment” (2005b, 216).[19] In this sense, courtesy, a matter of personal good manners, is closely related to the political institutions in which it takes place as it binds together different social groups and as it turns a social order into something material and sensible through rituals and visible marks.

I already mentioned that in Pascal’s quest for God there is skepticism as well as several doubts; nonetheless, Pascal’s *cœur* allows for some vague notions of Him. Something similar happens when Pascal analyzes social and political institutions. In this case, there is some notion that hierarchies and authority should be respected, though it is not clear what the foundations of this hierarchy might be. Even if in human morality some rules or precepts could be confused (i.e., the same action could be judged as right or wrong depending on the customs of different societies), Pascal still establishes the existence of a natural law, one that is revealed by God’s justice: “I have passed much of my life believing that justice existed, and in this I did not deceive myself, for there is justice according as God has willed to reveal it to us” (1901, 63 [453]). For Pascal, even if our corrupted human nature, with the aid of social customs or our imaginations, confuses the way someone judges some laws, yet that does not cancel

the fact that these laws do exist and that they emanate from a universal and eternal justice.

Gómez Dávila is very critical of how modern societies employ the word *justice*, of how in their egalitarian or democratic form they go against God's order and hierarchy by simplifying humanity through common and basic qualities: Either by claiming universal rights they try to raise humanity to God's status, or by aiming for economic and material equality they reduce human complexity to a few valuable or objects, or through its techniques and industries such as tourism they turn sacred places and rites like cathedrals into vulgar attractions and transform individuals into slaves and consumers of their own inventions (2005a, 29). For Gómez Dávila, divine justice is what keeps a society united and organized and, when it enters the human realm, it must acquire some force that compels its subjects to act properly, something that can be achieved through politics (2005a, 125). But, to put it in Pascal's words: "Justice without power is unavailing, power without justice is tyrannical" (1901, 66 [135]).

Justice, or divine justice, is force without violence. One of its main characteristics is that it organizes an entire society, gives roles to every single member, without creating conflict among them. Justice is an eternal truth, and it has more power than violence as it emanates directly from God (Pascal 1893, 251). Thus, justice cannot be imposed in a society through a revolution or any other violent or coercive act, nor can it be imposed through social and political institutions that downgrade individuals to see them as equals, it is a contradictory truth that cannot be fully discerned but that can be felt by everyone as a "just inequality" (Gómez Dávila 2005e, 116). If Pascal and Gómez Dávila want to keep a social hierarchy it is because through it they can keep God's power and the radical distinction between this figure and humanity.

In a discussion of Pascal and Gómez Dávila and the relation between theology and politics, it is admittedly important to explore the relation between Church and State. During the early modern period, the rise of secularism (a concept that opens spaces for new kinds of beliefs and even for not believing at all) brought with it the formation of political constitutions that clearly distinguish between Church and State. In his writings, Pascal does not make clear how he stands on this division, nevertheless he does unequivocally state that God's truth does have the force of a law: "The note of true religion must be that it obliges man to love his God. This is very right, and yet no other religion than ours has thus commanded; ours has done so" (1901, 66 [247]). For Pascal, even if customs of other states or one's own state dictate that the true God is a different God from the Christian God, in our private realm we must believe in the Christian God, while in the public sphere we respect the laws, the customs, and the God of our nation. In this sense, belief in the Christian God is a higher law and its private compliance binds the subjects more than the opposite public laws that they follow in public.

The rift between the public and private sphere, and between belief and law, is for Gómez Dávila a contemporary problem. His explicit longing for medieval society is a

clear example of this: “In medieval societies the State was the Society; in bourgeois societies State and Society clash; in communist societies the State is the entire society” (2005a, 34).[20] For Charles Taylor, secularism and its rise in modernity brought new ways and experiences of belief. For Pascal, but more so for Gómez Dávila (or Donoso Cortés), it produces a lost sense of order, a confusion in beliefs and in the basic structures that should rule society. This close identification between personal space, political institutions, and belief is on full display in an aphorism such as the following: “Catholicism is my homeland” (Gómez Dávila 2005a, 138). Here it is possible to see the state, and every single political, social, and personal organization, as subsidiaries of a higher order given by God.

In my analysis of the political implications of Pascal’s and Gómez Dávila’s theological and epistemological thought, my goal has been to provide examples that might allow us to classify these two thinkers as reactionary. They both long for a society and a sense of order that crumbled with the advent of modernity. Certainly, in analyzing the role of laws in society, Pascal does not worry much to question if they are just or not, but why they should be kept by all means: “It is dangerous to say to the people that the laws are not just, for men obey them only because they think them just. It is therefore necessary to say at the same time that they must be obeyed because they are laws (...) All sedition is averted, if this principle be established” (1901, 65 [100]). Thus, justice is for Pascal the activity of following laws and not falling into sedition or civil wars. These authors, who experienced epistemological and social revolutions in their own times (like the Keplerian universe, the Big Bang, the Huguenot rebellions in France, and the introduction of communism and Liberation Theology in Latin America), fear or despise them and react against them: “Leftist ideas produce revolutions, revolutions produce right-wing ideas” (Gómez Dávila 2005b, 350).[21]

Steven Shapin has argued that “there was no such a thing as the Scientific Revolution” (1). This is of course odd to read in a book titled, *The Scientific Revolution*; however, Shapin’s point is that we tend to see certain periods of time or certain social and aesthetic movements as closed manifestations that emerge from the same spirit. In this sense, although Sarduy classifies the Baroque movement and its elliptical form as intrinsically revolutionary, it is an error to see Pascal and Gómez Dávila, two authors who dialogue with this movement and who make use of this form, as somehow conforming with this image. This does not mean, however, that they did not relate themselves with some of the revolutionary elements of their respective times. Both Pascal and Gómez Dávila took part in the revivals of skepticism in the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, some epistemological movements that revealed weaknesses in the foundations of dogmatism. And even if their meditations led them to support decadent political and social organizations, this is the product of a deep acquaintance with revolutionary thought. The political skepticism of these authors shows up in the fact that they acknowledge the possibility of other forms of government. If they are attached to a previous order, it is because to them it seems to be the one that has worked the best so far, not because they consider it to be the only one possible. Therefore, the term reactionary describes these authors more specifically than conservative as they are the

product of many social revolutions, they long for a lost past, but they are also looking with interest at the most recent political developments.

But the interest these authors can elicit goes beyond a curious reaction to modernity and its revolutions. They also show how reactionary thought and different political factions can internalize the revolutionary ethos and many of its procedures. If Feyerabend saw a propagandistic method in the Scientific Revolution and Sarduy saw it replicated in the Baroque when these thinkers and artists used old rhetorical methods to promulgate new ideas, in Pascal and Gómez Dávila there is a similar movement going in an opposite direction: They both used a simple and short language, produced by ordinary reflections, to promote social organizations that were already gone or in decadence. Pascal elaborated or promoted his ideas through satirical and polemic letters (*Lettres provinciales*) or through essayistic notes (*Pensées*), while Gómez Dávila's *escolios* move in between the philosophical aphorism common among the French and German philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century that he admired and the *refranero popular*, or collections of popular proverbs. This rhetorical movement is not exclusive to them, in looking to alt-right thinking it is important to notice how it also appropriates an epistemic value usually associated with liberalism like freedom of speech and uses it to condemn cancel culture and to continue divulging its own ideas, even those that are clearly intolerant. How some radical sectors also appropriate traditional liberal media and aesthetics, just like they did when they appropriated of cartoons and characters like Pepe the Frog and the This is Fine Dog to promote extremely right messages. For this reason, Gómez Dávila describes this overlap between liberal, conservative, and reactionary discourses as: "We reactionaries are unfortunate: those from the left steal our ideas and those from the right our vocabulary" (2005d, 31).[22]

One last element of interest present in Pascal's and Gómez Dávila's work and that ties their political and epistemological skepticism with their propagandistic methodologies are emotions. Alberto Moreiras points out that, even though affectivity is not exclusive of reactionaries, to be reactionary is always a mobilization of affectivity (2004, 323). One obvious emotion that Pascal and Gómez Dávila are mobilizing in their reflections is nostalgia, longing for a lost order, but their work on emotions goes beyond the mobilization of this or other specific feelings. Liberal thinking tends to see the political or the public space as a realm where discussions or decisions should be led by rational argumentation, thinkers like Pascal and Gómez Dávila cast doubt on this notion. For them, it is not enough to have good arguments to make a good decision, what matters is how you personally feel with the truth to which these arguments lead. As Jonathan Haidt argues, in our political behavior emotions are the ones that are in charge, and this is something that conservatives know better than liberals (2013, 181). Looking at reactionaries like Pascal and Gómez Dávila allows us to see how certain branches of conservative thought start employing ideas, methods, and vocabulary from opposite political sides and appropriating them; this also show us the different shapes that conservative thought can take and to see it as a complex phenomenon (that has seen new relevant political forms through alt-right movements and conspiracy theories),



finally, these thinkers also remind us of the importance of analyzing emotions and working with them in the political realm as they play, with reason on the other side, a focal role in our political discussions and decisions.

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## Notes

[1] On Leibniz's use of folds as metaphors, it is useful to remember a passage from his chapter "Of Complex Ideas" of his *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding* where he compares the mind to a particular kind of camera obscura: "... you should suppose that in this room there was a canvas to receive the images, not even, but diversified by folds, representing the (kinds of) innate knowledge; further, that this canvas or membrane being stretched would have a kind of elasticity or power of action, and also an action and reaction accommodated as much to the past folds as to the newly arrived kinds of impressions" (Leibniz 1896, 147).

[2] The first revolution took place in antiquity and is the transformation of mathematics as a discipline that dealt with proofs into one that laid down principles. The revolution of the early modern period brought experimentation into natural philosophy. These two revolutions, in turn laid down the bases of modern science (Kant 1998, 108).

[3] It is an implicit claim of this article, that will not be fully discussed here, that Nicolás Gómez Dávila is a Neobaroque author just as much as Pascal is a Baroque one. The last part of this claim has been discussed and debated by critics and writers such as d'Ors (1993), Carpentier (1967), Sarduy (1987), Deleuze (1988), and on works of historical fiction like Neal Stephenson's first novel of his Baroque Cycle, *Quicksilver* (2003). The first part of my claim has not been discussed at large, even though Ernesto Volkening, a friend of Nicolás Gómez Dávila and who read the *Escolios* before they were published, wrote after he first read them: "A veces tengo la impresión de que NGD, formado en austeras disciplinas, cultiva el arte clásico sin desdeñar el barroco, hacia el se que se siente secretamente atraído." ("Sometimes I have the feeling that NGD, formed in austere disciplines, cultivates the classical art without dismissing the baroque, to which he feels secretly attracted") (2020, 195). Translation to the English is mine.

[4] "Así escribe Nietzsche, así quiso la muerte que Pascal escribiese." Although Nicolás Gómez Dávila's works have been translated and have generated some interest and discussion in Germany, France, or Italy, they are barely known in the English-speaking world. Beside some selections of his aphorisms found on the Internet, there are not many materials available on English about him. Therefore, all translations from Gómez Dávila in this article are mine.

[5] Although I will be quoting Pascal from an English edition, I will provide in brackets the number of the fragment in Sellier's French edition. I chose this edition as it is more inclusive than other authoritative French edition, including several interesting fragments that are not present in Brunschvicg's or Lafuma's edition.

[6] "... toques cromáticos de una composición puntillista."

[7] Translation from the French is mine.

[8] "Sólo el tonto sabe claramente por qué cree o por qué duda."

[9] "Las verdades convergen todas hacia una sola verdad –pero las rutas han sido cortadas."

[10] "Un cuerpo desnudo resuelve todos los problemas del universo."

[11] "La idea no es un espectro, sino un cuerpo verbal, denso, sonoro, luminoso."

[12] "Dios no pide la sumisión de la inteligencia, sino una sumisión inteligente."

[13] "Credo ut intelligam. Traduzcamos así: creo para volverme inteligente."

[14] "Lo que aleja de Dios no es la sensualidad, sino la abstracción."

[15] "La sensualidad es la posibilidad permanente de rescatar al mundo del cautiverio de su insignificancia."

[16] It is important to keep in mind, as Koyré reminds us (2016, 283), that this *cri de cœur* does not represent Pascal's opinion necessarily. These words are also mentioned in fragment 681 by an agnostic who dismisses God's problem sooner than what Pascal could have expected.

[17] "Es sobre las antinomias de la razón, sobre los escándalos del espíritu, sobre las rupturas del universo, sobre lo que fundo mi esperanza y mi fe."

[18] "Toda Sociedad resuelve, de alguna manera, el problema del mando. Pero el problema de la calidad del mando, que angustió a los antiguos y que los modernos ignoran, sólo el medioevo supo resolverlo."

[19] "El grado de civilización de una sociedad se mide por el número de reverencias acostumbradas en el trato cotidiano."

[20] "En la sociedad medieval la Sociedad es el Estado; en la sociedad burguesa Estado y Sociedad se enfrentan; en la sociedad comunista el Estado es la Sociedad."

[21] "Las ideas de izquierda engendran las revoluciones, las revoluciones engendran las ideas de derecha."

[22] "Los reaccionarios somos infortunados: las izquierdas nos roban ideas y las derechas vocabulario."