

# A Proustian Reading of Michel Onfray's *Cosmos* and Christian Signol's *Les vrais bonheurs*: "Privileged Moments" of Sensorial Ecstasy

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Number 117, Winter 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076095ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076095ar>

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Publisher(s)

Department of French, Dalhousie University

ISSN

0711-8813 (print)

2562-8704 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Moser, K. (2021). A Proustian Reading of Michel Onfray's *Cosmos* and Christian Signol's *Les vrais bonheurs*: "Privileged Moments" of Sensorial Ecstasy. *Dalhousie French Studies*, (117), 95–109. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076095ar>

Article abstract

This study probes the philosophical significance of the strange joy induced by a trigger sensation that immediately strikes the reader in Michel Onfray's *Cosmos* and Christian Signol's *Les vrais bonheurs*. Heavily influenced by Proust's vision of involuntary memory, the role of the senses, and the nature of time in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Onfray and Signol attempt to explore the essence of everything in the context of powerful, transformative sensorial encounters. Some critics automatically dismiss the rendering ecstasy depicted by the Proustian narrator in the "petite madeleine" scene as nothing more than a form of whimsical artistry. However, Onfray and Signol's rewriting of this renowned passage demonstrates that the notion of a privileged moment, associated with Proust in French literary circles, is an all-encompassing metaphor for delving into the most fundamental philosophical questions of all.

## A Proustian Reading of Michel Onfray's *Cosmos* and Christian Signol's *Les vrais bonheurs*: "Privileged Moments" of Sensorial Ecstasy

Keith Moser

This intertextual exploration of the poignant, ephemeral moments of sensorial ecstasy that pervade Michel Onfray's *Cosmos* and Christian Signol's *Les vrais bonheurs* takes advantage of the theories developed by Marcel Proust in *A la recherche du temps perdu* related to these instants of pure elation. Specifically, the intense feelings of bliss experienced by the Proustian narrator in the famous "petite madeleine" episode serve as an invaluable point of departure and a rudimentary theoretical framework for understanding the importance of the material ecstasy vividly described by Onfray and Signol. Explicitly building upon and expanding the Proustian perspective, Onfray and Signol posit that this fleeting "bonheur," which is inextricably linked to the senses, is replete with philosophical value. Far from being a banal, gratuitous type of sensorial pleasure, Onfray and Signol demonstrate that the "essential experience of the book" in the form of the "petite madeleine" in *A la recherche du temps perdu* is emblematic of a nuanced, coherent, and biocentric worldview (Dobrovsky 108). As evidenced by their direct, intertextual homages to the most celebrated passage from *A la recherche du temps perdu*, both contemporary writers attempt to refine Proust's ideas and to conceive an even more elaborate intellectual paradigm for probing all of the philosophical implications of these rending moments.

In their analyses of the significance of the extreme jubilation felt by the Proustian narrator when he consumes a rather common pastry soaked in tea, Gilles Deleuze, Bettina Knapp, Daniel Melnick, and Keith Moser underscore that these fortuitous encounters are "Moments of enigmatic ecstasy resulting from direct contact by means of one or more of the senses" (Moser ix). In a monograph dedicated to J.M.G. Le Clézio in which he examines the Franco-Mauritian author's contemporary development of this traditional French literary device, Moser proposes the term "privileged moments" to describe these powerful, life-affirming instants of sheer euphoria.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the preferred terminology of the given scholar in question, all researchers unequivocally assert that this deep joy is induced by a sensorial encounter. In his highly original interpretation of the "petite madeleine" episode predicated upon the discoveries of cognitive science, Jean Delacour explains, "The *Narrateur* experiences a sensation which comes unexpectedly (trigger sensation, TS), accompanied by an extraordinary feeling of pleasure and happiness which far surpasses any comparable feelings and which cannot be explained by the TS" (259). From an empirical standpoint, Delacour indicates that the notion of a "trigger sensation" is the most accurate expression for highlighting the ecstasy actuated by these sensorial contacts.<sup>2</sup>

In her article "Remembering Swann: Memory and Representation in Proust," Claudia Brodsky notes that Proust's revalorization of our sensorial faculties that allow us to *make sense* out of the world around us runs counter to the basic tenets of Cartesian philosophy. As Brodsky reveals, "Un amour de Swann" leads Swann, by a deductive route diverging

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1 In the introduction to "Privileged Moments" in the *Novels and Short Stories of J.M.G. Le Clézio: His Contemporary Development of a Traditional French Literary Device*, Moser provides a detailed operational definition of this concept and what it often encompasses in French and Francophone literature.

2 It should be noted that Delacour discusses four other privileged moments in addition to the "petite madeleine" scene in *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

sharply from that of the *Discours de la méthode*, to a conclusion most nearly opposite the Cartesian affirmation of a subject of deduction whose being is essentially independent, or severed, from his senses" (1017). As Brodsky outlines, Proust implies that Descartes overrationalizes the human agent to an alarming extent. In this vein, Brodsky contends that the "petite madeleine" episode and the ones similar to it throughout the novel challenge Descartes's assertion "that all certainty of knowledge depends upon an unrelenting distrust of sensory experience" (1017). Counterpointing Descartes's position "Je pense donc je suis," the euphoria experienced by the Proustian narrator compels the reader to taste, touch, smell, hear, and see everything that life has to afford. Proust argues that the key to understanding the universe and our minute place in it more fully is to hone our senses. The author implores us to reflect upon what it means to be a sensuous being tossed into the chaos of existence by indiscriminate ecological forces.

According to André Benhaïm, it is in this context in which Proust's deep-seated conviction in the superiority of involuntary memory should be understood (60). All of the narrator's earlier attempts to remember events from his childhood in Combray "par la mémoire volontaire, la mémoire de l'intelligence" are unmitigated failures (Proust 43). As the narrator further elucidates, "Il en est ainsi notre passé. C'est peine perdue que nous cherchions à l'évoquer, tous les efforts de notre intelligence sont inutiles" (Proust 44). In stark contrast to the evident limitations of voluntary memory that only allow him to recall a tiny fraction of the formative experiences from his childhood, the proverbial flood gates of memory are automatically opened due to the veritable force of the olfactory and gustatory trigger sensations associated with the "petites madeleines." Juxtaposing the frustration that the narrator feels when he makes a concerted effort to retrieve specific memories from his past to no avail to the happiness experienced as a result of the *réminiscences*<sup>3</sup> relived in the present through involuntary memory, Benhaïm affirms, "La saveur a suscité en lui le souvenir aussi soudain qu'involontaire du temps où, enfant, il goûtait aux morceaux de madeleines que lui offrait sa tante après les avoir trempés dans son infusion de thé ou de tilleul. Avant de goûter à la pâtisserie imbibée de thé, il ne souvenait qu'une partie de son enfance à Combray. Une fois qu'il a reconnu ce goût, c'est tout Combray qui réapparaît" (60). Proust's reflections about voluntary and involuntary memory illustrate the limitations of Cartesian rationality. It is through sensory processing initiated by a TS epitomized by the absence of any kind of "preuve logique" that the narrator will ultimately be able to project meaning upon his existence and to discover a sense of purpose at the end of the novel (Proust 45). From an existential perspective, the narrator's ontological journey of self-discovery in *A la recherche du temps perdu* is rendered possible by his keen senses. Drawing a vastly different conclusion than Descartes, as noted by Brodsky, Proust suggests that our sensorial faculties are transcendental pathways that enable us to define ourselves and to create meaning in an absurd universe. Instead of being wary of the information that we receive from our senses and only trusting our intellect, Proust maintains that our sensory organs are our saving grace.

Candidly admitting that he has derived a considerable amount of inspiration from Proust, the provocative and controversial philosopher Michel Onfray confesses in his reworking of time,<sup>4</sup> "Bergson est grand, bien sûr, mais Proust le bergsonien l'est plus encore en racontant de façon romanesque le temps perdu puis retrouvé plutôt qu'en le disséquant à la façon d'un philosophe institutionnel. La philosophie n'est jamais aussi grande que quand elle n'est pas pratiquée par un professionnel de la discipline" (*Cosmos* 29). In this passage from what the philosopher himself identifies as his most important

3 Jean Delacour reveals that what Moser refers to as privileged moments in *A la recherche du temps perdu* are an artistic representation of a specific type of memory that contemporary researchers in the fields of psychology and cognitive science call *réminiscences* (255).

4 This point will be further addressed later in the essay.

philosophical tract, Onfray expresses both his admiration for Proust and his evident derision for the mainstream philosophical establishment (Portevin n.p.). Moreover, Onfray's scathing criticisms of the philosophical canon in Western civilization and how the discipline is often taught in general reveal that the maverick philosopher and the renowned novelist share the same anti-Cartesian, sensorial sensibilities. Onfray's disdain for traditional academic philosophy inspired him to write a multivolume work entitled *Contre-histoire de la philosophie*.

In a recent interview with Guy Samama in which he discusses the core concepts of his subversive "counter-history," it soon becomes apparent why Proust's conception of memory and his sensorial outlook on life are appealing to the philosopher. Taking an anti-Cartesian stance concerning the role of the senses and decrying Western thought for being excessively theoretical and nebulous, Onfray declares,

Quelle est cette méthode si radicale ? Elle consiste à proposer comme nouvelle, ou révolutionnaire, une histoire de la philosophie qui ne se constitue pas contre le corps, malgré lui ou sans lui, mais avec lui [...] la logique des vainqueurs ne se contente pas d'opposer un idéal obscur et ésotérique à un langage clair : la philosophie académique, celle des vainqueurs de l'histoire crée des néologismes, cultive l'obscurité. (Samama 373-374)

In these epitextual comments, Onfray argues that much of Western philosophy is written and shared in such a way that this knowledge remains within the confines of a small, hermetic, inner circle. For the purposes of this discussion, Onfray's most important philosophical claim in *Contre-histoire de la philosophie* and throughout his entire *œuvre* is that the defeat of the "materialists" at the hands of the "idealists" had sweeping repercussions in Western civilization. According to Onfray, the thinkers who deny our very corporality and material essence that bind us to the cosmos won the ideological battle. In this regard, as opposed to enlightening the masses, Onfray posits that the pervasive mentality fostered by this sort of misguided thinking has dulled the very organs that lead to a greater understanding of the biosphere and our relationship to it.

In a separate conversation with Sébastien Charles, the philosopher urges the reader to reawaken his or her senses by (re-)establishing a direct connection to the so-called "world of things" to which all species including *Homo sapiens* are linked. As Onfray explains, "Je veux un corps réconcilié et non pas mutilé. Si je lutte contre la hiérarchisation qu'opèrent les idéalistes et les spiritualistes qui privilégient les sens de la mise à distance sur ceux du contact direct, ça n'est pas pour procéder comme eux en inversant les rôles et en donnant une place majeure à certains sens contre d'autres. Pour réhabiliter tous les sens, j'ai écrit plusieurs livres" (Charles 111). Instead of distrusting our sensorial faculties, as Descartes recommends, Onfray adopts a radically different approach. Onfray insists that we should make a deliberate effort to eliminate all of the ideological and physical obstacles that prevent us from experiencing the world directly through our senses. In this manner, Onfray asserts that we can begin to restore our numbed senses to their primordial vitality. The philosopher points out that mind-body dualism collapses under empirical scrutiny, given that modern science has proven definitively that "the brain along with the other organs of the body constitutes an integrated organism" (Lyons 173). By shunning the pleasures of the flesh and the information that our brain processes through sensorial encounters with others and the remainder of the cosmos, Onfray contends that the subject loses a critical part of himself. Linking the senses to self-discovery, self-actualization, and the timeless pursuit of happiness, Onfray opines that the Cartesian view of the relationship between the mind and body is myopic at best.

Taking aim at Descartes, Onfray theorizes in *Cosmos* that it is nearly impossible to achieve the philosophical ideal of knowing thyself when the information that one internalizes from his or her senses is dismissed entirely. In a passage in which he examines

the Buddhist worldview, the philosopher affirms, “Même si le bouddhiste ne croit pas au moi et qu’il enseigne la fiction du je, la plaisanterie que serait la subjectivité susceptible de dire ‘je pense donc je suis’, son corps est présence active au monde. Non pas présence contemplative, mais présence soucieuse, présence en quête” (*Cosmos* 436). Scoffing at one of Descartes’s most important premises, Onfray argues that the philosophical search for meaning and wisdom is destined to fail when the body is in essence relegated to the status of non-existence in our dominant thought paradigms. Later in the essay, Onfray sharpens his attacks on Descartes in an attempt to undermine the shaky edifice of mind-body dualism.

Accusing Descartes of rehashing puritanical Christian ideology<sup>5</sup> and betraying his own philosophical convictions in the process, Onfray grumbles in disgust, “Après avoir douté de façon méthodique de tout, sauf de la religion de son roi [...] prudence oblige, Descartes effectue un travail de quête intérieure à la recherche d’une première vérité sur laquelle bâtir son édifice philosophique. Cette façon de faire, révolutionnaire en son temps puisqu’elle fait l’économie de Dieu [...] réalise l’autonomie de la pensée de façon radicale” (*Cosmos* 486). Onfray further clarifies, “La raison devient l’unique instrument de savoir et de connaissance. La sensation, l’émotion deviennent suspectes, là où l’esprit, un avatar de l’âme, doit faire la loi” (*Cosmos* 486). Although his comments directed at Descartes in *Cosmos* are undoubtedly polemical at times, it is noteworthy that Onfray recognizes that Cartesian philosophy was indeed revolutionary for the seventeenth century. Nonetheless, Onfray adamantly maintains that it is time to go beyond the limitations of some of Descartes’s theories and to envision a new way of thinking. In particular, Onfray advocates in favor of a balanced approach to engaging in philosophical inquiry that puts the senses back into the philosophical equation. Realizing that the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of the utter negation of our sensorial faculties in part because of the lingering influence of Cartesian thought in Western society, Onfray endeavors “to define an ethical hedonism, a joyous utilitarianism, and a generalized aesthetic of sensual materialism that explores how to use the brain’s and the body’s capacities to their fullest extent” (Ireland 50). For Onfray, the ontological cure for this lost state of intellectual equilibrium is to “apprendre à sentir, goûter, toucher, voir, entendre, afin de pouvoir sentir, goûter, toucher, voir, entendre, puis comprendre et jouir du monde” (*Cosmos* 70-71).

In the chapter “Les Formes liquides du temps,” Onfray provides a concrete example of his hedonistic ethic that represents a sensual way of being in the world. For those who are familiar with Proust, this entire section of the essay is a rewriting of the “petite madeleine” episode and a philosophical reflection about the importance of these sorts of sensorial encounters. Reinforcing his aforementioned declaration a few pages earlier in the essay that literary texts often impart philosophical lessons in a more accessible and cogent fashion than the standard works of philosophy incessantly taught in mainstream academic circles, Onfray describes privileged moments that he experienced in a wine cellar drinking Dom Pérignon. Similar to the Proustian narrator of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Onfray recounts how an unanticipated trigger sensation (TS) induced intense feelings of euphoria, unlocked memories from his childhood, and challenged his preconceived notions about the essence of time. As the philosopher reveals, “Nul endroit plus magique pour partir à la recherche du temps perdu qu’une cave dans laquelle, si l’on sait goûter l’âme d’un vin, on accède au temps retrouvé. Mieux qu’une bibliothèque qui dit sans suggérer, qui apporte la mémoire sur un plateau sans inviter le corps à la découvrir [...] Michel Guillard, Richard

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5 Onfray is a rather unapologetic and militant atheist who rarely misses an opportunity to criticize Christian theology and its nefarious, pervasive influence on modern society. However, this contentious subject transcends the pragmatic limitations of the present study. It is in his widely-read, polemical essay *Traité d’athéologie* (*Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*) in which Onfray most clearly articulates his atheistic, post-Monotheistic worldview.

Geoffroy et moi-même étions convenus qu'un jour nous partirions à la recherche du temps perdu avec un Dom Pérignon 1921" (*Cosmos* 38-41). In these passages in which he explicitly refers to the main title of Proust's novel in addition to the name of the final volume, Onfray indicates that the Proustian vision of memory and the role of the senses is what allowed him to understand the philosophical significance of these poignant instants of joy.

After the ephemeral ecstasy had long dissipated, these gustatory and olfactive trigger sensations were "followed by introspection and analysis" (Weiner 682). These kinds of revelations are one of the defining characteristics of "privileged moments." As Moser explains in his previously mentioned definition of this concept, "These moments often transform the subject. They constitute epiphanies through which the subject discovers something radically transforming about the reasons for his or her existence" (x). In the case of Onfray, the philosopher recognized that *A la recherche du temps perdu* is a philosophical novel *par excellence* that helped him to overcome some of the pitfalls of Cartesian rationality. Onfray encourages other sensorial philosophers to take a closer look at the "petite madeleine" scene, as opposed to dismissing it as merely a work of fiction. Furthermore, not only does the philosopher assert that *A la recherche du temps perdu* was written by a "romancier-philosophe" who has a lot to offer those who seek a better understanding of the human condition, but he also underscores that the Proustian narrator beckons us to think and live otherwise (Bai 46). For Onfray, a true philosopher is someone who is capable of "Faire de la philosophie un art de vivre, de *bien* vivre, de *mieux* vivre" (Samama 373). These philosophical convictions shed light on Onfray's deep respect for Proust as an artist and thinker. The "petite madeleine" episode and the Dom Pérignon scene promote a way of being in the world that corresponds to a sensorial, hedonistic ethic that is antithetical to the values of much of the mainstream Western philosophical tradition. Similar to his ardent defense of the intellectual rigor of Camus's ideas in *L'ordre libertaire: La vie philosophique d'Albert Camus*, Onfray implores other contemporary philosophers to reread Proust. Onfray refuses to respect what he considers to be an arbitrary division between philosophy and literature.

In *Les vrais bonheurs*, the popular fiction writer Christian Signol, who has been relatively ignored by the academic community, also transgresses these same artistic boundaries. Although many of Signol's novels have achieved commercial success and his trilogy *La Rivière Espérance* was even adapted into a television series by Josée Dayan, Signol is rarely discussed in scholarly circles (de Sousa 66; "Le regard de Christian Signol" n.p.). In his semi-autobiographical essay *Les vrais bonheurs*, Signol seamlessly blends philosophy and literature in order to revisit enduring philosophical questions related to the pursuit of happiness. Despite the fact that he is often hastily labeled a "regional" writer by his detractors, Signol delves into universal themes that have inspired authors and philosophers alike since the dawning of human civilization ("Christian Signol déjà dans les meilleures ventes" n.p.). In response to his critics, the weighty philosophical issues contemplated by Signol in *Les vrais bonheurs* demonstrate that he is also a "romancier-philosophe" like Marcel Proust. In this vein, the opening passage in which the author forces the reader to reflect upon whether or not God exists sets the tone for the entire essay. One possible explanation as to why Signol has yet to receive the accolades that he deserves inside of academia is that the beauty of his prose has perhaps given some of his detractors the wrong impression. In other words, the lyrical nature of his writing sometimes overshadows the nuances of his realistic, ecocentric worldview that equally highlights all of the searing ontological pain and immense pleasure experienced by a sentient being in an absurd universe governed by indifferent, hostile cosmic forces (de Sousa 74). A close reading of *Les vrais bonheurs* and his prolific body of work as a whole deconstructs Signol's unfounded reputation as a "songeur idéaliste" (Gardes n.p.).

As the title of the essay implies, *Les vrais bonheurs* is a philosophical reflection about the viable pathways that lead to an authentic state of happiness. To be more precise, Signol urges the reader to embrace a way of being and acting in the world that is conducive to a sense of self-actualization and inner fulfillment. Referencing Camus's collection of essays *Noces* in which the *pied-noir* author lauds the grandeur of the Mediterranean Sea and of the cosmos in general, Signol promulgates "une certaine manière de vivre et d'être au monde" (*Les vrais bonheurs* 174). Not only do Signol and Onfray hold Camus in high esteem as an underrated thinker, but they also both contend that Proust's reconceptualization of time and the significance of our sensorial faculties merit philosophical consideration. In the chapter "Les fruits," Signol recalls an experience that is reminiscent of the privileged moments outlined by Onfray in the wine cellar in *Cosmos*. When Signol eats the fruit from a medlar tree and relives past events in the present, he becomes cognizant of the importance of our senses on multiple levels. As Signol reveals,

C'est aussi le cas avec les nèfles que je mangeais presque pourrissantes à l'époque de Noël [...] Leur goût âpre et suave à la fois me renvoie vers ces hivers où rien n'était mortel : ni les saisons, ni les hommes, ni les femmes. Ni l'enfance, devrais-je ajouter. Car c'est de cela qu'il s'agit : à l'exemple de la madeleine de Proust, le goût aussi bien que les parfums nous transportent dans les temps et nous y laissent incrédules, tremblants, perdus (*Les vrais bonheurs* 163).

Deep in contemplation after the powerful euphoria itself has faded away, Signol takes advantage of the Proustian novel as a philosophical lens from which to view these destabilizing instants of joy. In this passage, it is evident that Signol has adopted Proust's belief in the superiority of involuntary memory that enables the subject to remember details that are impossible to retrieve within the limited storage capacity of "la mémoire de l'intelligence."

Moreover, Proust's reworking of memory, the notion of time, and the role of the senses in the creation of meaning appears to have influenced Signol's overall *weltanschauung* rather heavily. In the chapter "La Rosée," Signol speaks directly to the reader offering this piece of advice for actualizing a genuine, lasting form of happiness: "Pour apprivoiser la rosée, pour s'en faire une amie, en connaître la douceur, il faut quitter les chemins et entrer dans les prairies [...] Ne pas hésiter à la laisser imprégner vos chaussures et vos pantalons jusqu'au-dessus des genoux" (*Les vrais bonheurs* 60). In the following chapter "La pluie," the author reiterates, "Je peux marcher longtemps, accompagné par cette princesse aux pieds nus, qui fredonne un air connu de toujours, celui des premières pluies sur la terre éternelle" (*Les vrais bonheurs* 64-65). In these lyrical passages, the message that the author is trying to convey is rather clear. Signol encourages the reader to (re-)establish a direct, sensorial connection to the biosphere in the modern world. The writer posits that it is difficult to comprehend our relationship to the larger, ontological Chain of Being when we live in complete isolation from the other links that render our continued existence possible. It is in this context in which the writer's sensual metaphors should be understood. Like the Camusian narrator of *Noces* who unabashedly bathes nude in the Mediterranean Sea, Signol underscores the significance of removing all barriers that prevent the subject from experiencing unfiltered, material reality through his or her senses. Similar to the philosophical ideal outlined by Onfray in *Cosmos*, Signol is promoting a way of life that corresponds to a sensorial vision of happiness in *Les vrais bonheurs*.

In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the biocentric nature of some of the epiphanies induced by an unexpected trigger sensation helps us to understand the importance of the elemental communion described by Signol more fully. As Moser highlights in his aforementioned study of privileged moments in the French literary canon, the unbridled joy that temporarily inundates the subject during these sensorial encounters is sometimes

triggered as a result of a close rapport with the rest of the universe to which our species belongs (ix). Although the ecstasy felt by the Proustian narrator is not explicitly linked to the cosmos, several critics including Finis Dunaway, Gang Bai, Steven Walker, and André Benhaïm note that the “petite madeleine” episode initiates a journey of ecological self-actualization. In reference to the narrator’s inner quest to discover “la constitution de l’homme,” Bai explains, “le romancier-philosophe propose une solution [...] à l’éternel débat sur la ligne de démarcation entre le corps et l’esprit, entre la nature et l’homme” (46; 46). Not only does the narrator realize that the mind and body are part of an integrated organism, but he also becomes aware that the human saga is intertwined with the long history of the biosphere that predates the appearance of the first humans on this planet by billions of years. Given that nothing exists in a cosmic void detached from the indiscriminate forces that spawned all life, the Proustian narrator attempts to “meld nature with human experience” (Dunaway 203).

In simple terms, Proust poses fundamental philosophical questions related to the essence of all life in the “petite madeleine” scene. In the early moments of his (re-)awakening after the euphoria itself has waned, the narrator struggles to make sense out of what has recently transpired. As Serge Doubrovksy muses, “If, I take up again my question: the madeleine gives shape and solidity to what?” (115). The narrator’s inability to formulate a coherent answer to this question initially haunts him. Expressing his mounting frustration concerning this philosophical quandary, the narrator wonders, “D’où avait pu me venir cette puissante joie? Je sentais qu’elle était liée au goût du thé et du gâteau, mais qu’elle le dépassait infiniment, ne devait pas être de même nature. D’où venait-elle? Que signifiait-elle? Où l’appréhender” (Proust 44). The narrator openly admits that he has arrived at an impasse in terms of understanding all of the implications of this sensory experience. He intuitively realizes that this powerful encounter is the key to unraveling the ontological mysteries that often preoccupy his thoughts and to project a semblance of meaning upon his existence. Nevertheless, all of the philosophical ramifications of the information that he receives from his senses appear to elude him for quite some time.

Yet, in the preliminary stages of this painstaking process of introspection, it is already apparent that the narrator has started to make some meaningful connections. Articulating his conviction that the peculiar inebriation actuated by the TS reveals something essential about his very essence, the narrator asserts, “Il m’avait aussitôt rendu les vicissitudes de la vie indifférentes, ses désastres inoffensifs, sa brièveté illusoire [...] en me remplissant d’une essence précieuse: ou plutôt cette essence n’était pas en moi, elle était moi. J’avais cessé de me sentir médiocre, contingent, mortel” (Proust 44). The narrator is struck by the ecocentric realization that in a universe in which everything is comprised of the same recycled material particles that have been around since the big bang nothing truly ever dies. As Kevin Newmark elucidates, “Proust’s symbolism is a materialism at the furthest remove from the merely abstract truths of logic and speculation” (118). In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust reminds the reader of the universal principles including the laws of thermodynamics that govern the existence of every sentient and non-sentient being from which there is no escape. Even though all organisms will one day perish in their current shape, the cosmos recycles the material essence of everything as part of indifferent cycles that were set into motion eons ago. For Proust, this biocentric knowledge seems to be a source of consolation, or an ontological remedy for the contingent nature of human existence. Aware that he is part and parcel of a larger entity, the narrator tries to understand his relationship to the cosmic whole. Furthermore, the narrator is now cognizant of the greatest existential paradox of all. Although mortality is an inescapable reality for all of the creatures that inhabit this biosphere, the narrator realizes that a certain kind of eternity is impossible to avoid as well because of the physical laws that undergird life in all of its divergent forms.



In his essay entitled “L’âge de la madeleine: La préhistoire de Proust,” André Benhaïm affirms that these biocentric insights induced by “les petites madeleines” are indicative of a non-anthropocentric conception of humanity and a postmodern rethinking of time in an interdependent and interconnected universe. Revealing how Proust exposes Western notions of time as simplistic and erroneous, Benhaïm concludes, “A la fin, c’est bien ce que laissait entendre la madeleine: le passé est toujours là. Nous avons les pieds dans la préhistoire ; l’homme des cavernes est notre contemporain [...] A la fin, dès le début Proust rêve au (re)devenir animal, au temps *d’avant* la langue natale, aux temps *d’avant* l’homme des cavernes. Le temps de la mère de la mère, l’origine de l’origine” (67-70). On a planet in which matter incessantly changes forms but never really disappears, Proust is unconvinced that time follows a linear progression. Like the philosopher of science Michel Serres, whose worldview is informed by contemporary scientific erudition, Proust clearly adopts a “materialistic” view of time (Ma 236). Due to the “endless wheel of deaths and resurrections” that is emblematic of existence itself, the past, present, and future coexist in what could be described as a rhizomatic relationship with roots that overlap and bifurcate in all different directions (Girard 13). As Benhaïm underscores, the “petite madeleine” scene implies that time is “folded and crumpled” (Clayton 41). The realization that the past is still alive within and all around us leads the Proustian narrator down a path of cosmogonic reverie. In this heightened state of ecological awareness, the narrator strives to reconnect to his cosmic roots from which modern *Homo sapiens* have become progressively displaced. Recognizing that our material essence is what binds us to the history of the universe and enables us to catch a glimpse of our small place in it, the heart of the Proustian project is to explore this “cathédrale du Temps” through our maligned sensorial faculties to the greatest extent possible (Picherit 203).

In *Les vrais bonheurs*, Signol seems to have espoused Proust’s radical re-conceptualization of time that ultimately culminates in a philosophical reflection about the cosmogonic origins of all life in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. In the chapter that precedes the previously mentioned section of the essay “La Rosée” entitled “Le gel,” Signol generates an even more forceful cosmogonic vision laden with philosophical meaning. Recounting personal memories from his childhood related to the first frost of the season, the author recalls, “Je parlais au hasard pour le seul plaisir de ressentir le premier froid, longeant un ruisseau familial. Le sol crissait sous mes pieds [...] J’eus alors l’impression d’entrer dans le premier matin du monde [...] j’avais l’impression d’être né du matin” (*Les vrais bonheurs* 53). In this passage, an intense sensorial encounter with unfiltered, material reality fuels the narrator’s cosmogonic reverie. During these fleeting instants of joy and the period of introspection that follows, Signol imagines a reverse cosmogonic voyage, or a return trip to the precise moment when life began to “emerge from undifferentiated matter” (Schloss 132). This impossible quest is undoubtedly a product of a writer’s vivid imagination. However, in spite of the fantastical nature of this cosmogonic journey through the corridors of time and space, Signol asks valid questions concerning the essence of time and existence itself that should not be disregarded. In both the Proustian novel and in *Les vrais bonheurs*, cosmogonic reflection is a literary device employed by the authors in an effort to reexamine Western preconceptions of time in our dominant thought systems.

In the chapter “La neige,” it becomes even more evident that Signol shares Proust’s rhizomatic conception of time. Questioning the standard temporal divisions of past, present, and future, Signol writes, “Si le temps a passé, le pouvoir de la neige sur moi est demeuré intact. Je l’attends, je l’espère, sur que je retournerai dans une enfance bénie, comme si les jours n’avaient pas coulé de ma vie. Cette permanence me rassure. Elle me souffle à l’oreille que si j’ai changé, la neige, le froid, le monde, eux, sont restés les mêmes” (*Les vrais bonheurs* 73). In the chapter “Les sons” in which he reveals the most important sounds from his childhood, Signol expresses his belief that it is only a matter of time until

an unanticipated trigger sensation will resuscitate memories from the past that were never really lost at all. As the writer explains, “Ces sons-là, je les emporterai avec moi de l’autre côté du monde [...] Je sais qu’ils vont surgir au moment où je m’y attendrai le moins et me feront accéder à un bonheur magnifique, extraordinaire, qui ne durera pas, certes, mais qui, l’espace d’un instant, m’aura rendu heureux” (*Les vrais bonheurs* 97-98). In these passages, it is obvious that Signol adheres to the Proustian vision of time. The author’s autobiographical comments about the potential *renaissance* of the formative sounds that shaped his childhood in Southwestern France are based on his understanding of the “petite madeleine” scene.

Additionally, Signol’s reflections about the “eternal” cosmic forces that initially thrust everything into being with a big bang linked to his deep appreciation of snow are a “description du temps cosmique” (Bai 35). In his analysis of the philosophical and spiritual importance of the privileged moments experienced by the Proustian narrator, Gang Bai probes the concept of cosmic time. Asserting that time as it is traditionally conceived in Western civilization is a social construct in a deterministic, chaotic universe in which a single substance (i.e. matter) temporarily adopts an infinite number of divergent modalities before it resurfaces in another shape, Bai contends, “Le soleil aujourd’hui est le même que celui d’hier en même temps un autre. Le temps retrouvé est un temps ré-animé, donc restructuré. L’existence de ce continuum discontinue ou le ‘temps à l’état pur’ se révèle comme le rythme même du réel en mouvement” (52). Taking the position that “time must be understood in relation to matter and motion,” Bai argues that the Proustian perspective is much more accurate from an empirical stance due to the discoveries of modern science (Rugh and Zinkernagel 8). As the scientists S.E. Rugh and H. Zinkernagel note in their article “On the Physical Basis of Cosmic Time,” recent scientific breakthroughs have caused some researchers from several different fields to reevaluate our understanding of time. Given that this contentious issue has been at the center of many heated exchanges in philosophical and scientific circles for centuries, this debate will continue to rage for the foreseeable future.

Regardless, Signol embraces Proust’s vision of time connected to matter and its incessant transformations in *Les vrais bonheurs*. Moreover, Signol also identifies the “eternal” permanence of the material world as an ontological remedy for the human condition like the Proustian narrator. In this vein, Signol beckons the reader to reduce the distance that separates him or her from the other material strands that constitute the delicate web of life. As Isabel Veronica Ferraz de Sousa reveals, “Finalement découverte, puis profondément appréciée, une relation fusionnelle s’établit entre l’humain et la Nature. Il y a une véritable communion, ce sont les noces grandioses” (71). According to Signol, attempting to “fuse” with the remainder of the cosmos is what allows us to understand what and who we are in relation to the rest of the biotic community of life. This philosophical ideal of (re-)establishing a more intimate union with the biosphere, or “becoming one with the one,” is reminiscent of the metaphysical and spiritual belief systems of many Eastern and indigenous civilizations.

Explaining that privileged moments initiated by a TS represent a philosophical exercise linked to ecological self-actualization, Signol opines, “Le bruit du vent, des vagues, du ressac me donnait conscience d’une petitesse qui, curieusement, ne m’angoissait pas: elle me renvoyait à mon exacte dimension, à une vérité oubliée, d’un monde qui pourrait très bien se passer des hommes” (*Les vrais bonheurs* 176). After the ephemeral feelings of elemental intoxication have worn off, Signol is left with ecocentric epiphanies that deconstruct lingering, pervasive anthropocentric logic in Western society. Although it is a comforting illusion to perceive the species to which one belongs as a superior life form, Signol illustrates that this mentality is a chimerical way of thinking that is easily debunked by a rudimentary understanding of how the universe operates. In a

biosphere that indiscriminately recycles material particles according to cycles that began billions of years before the first humans ever roamed this planet, our species has the same intrinsic right to exist as anything else. Not only do we exist because of a “big bang,” but we will probably one day vanish as a result of a “big crunch.”

Reminding us of this scientific reality that demystifies homocentric explanations of the world and our place in it entirely, Signol affirms, “On devine dans l’écume bouillonnante quelque chose de cosmique qui a commencé bien avant nous et qui ne s’achèvera peut-être jamais” (*Les vrais bonheurs* 177). Whether we like it or not, science has now confirmed that the universe seems destined to continue its indifferent trajectory without us at some point in the future. Furthermore, the unfounded, anthropocentric notion that our species is the center of the universe around which everything else revolves is a suicidal kind of thinking that appears to be disrupting and accelerating these indiscriminate cycles. In several apocalyptic passages all throughout the essay, Signol broadens the Proustian concept of a privileged moment in order to allow him to reflect upon the advent of the Anthropocene epoch. In the context of the author’s palpable apprehension related to global warming, rising sea levels, pollution, and excessive urbanization, de Sousa emphatically proclaims, “Tout est Nature mais Tout est en danger!” (78). In Signol’s lyrical prose, sensorial encounters with other links in the Chain of Being open up into new ecological dimensions.

With the publication of his landmark essay *Cosmos*, Onfray has positioned himself to be one of the most important French environmental philosophers of the twenty-first century. In this regard, the hedonistic, sensorial ecstasy promoted by Onfray cannot be understood outside of its larger environmental context. In a recent interview with Sarah Gandillot about *Cosmos* in which he criticizes urban ecology for its myopic frame of reference, Onfray asserts, “L’écologie politique aujourd’hui est urbaine. Elle continue de mettre l’homme au centre alors que c’est la nature qui est au centre. Moi j’invite à prendre sa place dans un écosystème” (n.p.). The philosopher admits that he has a biocentric approach to engaging in philosophical inquiry. Similar to Signol, Onfray urges us to reflect upon the philosophical implications of contemporary scientific knowledge. Given that the human story is often recounted from an anthropocentric angle in Western society, Onfray tries to recenter the narrative. The subtitle of *Cosmos* “Une ontologie matérialiste” is a response to the aforementioned idealism that Onfray considers to be naïve and fraught with peril. Additionally, the philosopher informs the reader before the preface, “*Cosmos* est le premier tome d’une trilogie intitulée *Brève encyclopédie du monde*. Il présente une philosophie de la nature.” In the first installment of this ambitious project, Onfray decries cosmic philosophy that is disconnected from the inner workings of the biosphere.

In the same manner that Signol’s representations of privileged moments in *Les vrais bonheurs* function as a literary device highlighting a biocentric worldview and ethic, Onfray takes advantage of these instants of jubilation connected to involuntary memory to create a philosophical framework for explaining the universe and our relationship to it. After the sensorial pleasure itself of drinking a bottle of Dom Pérignon 1921 has diminished, Onfray rethinks the essence of humanity and time. Reaching the same philosophical conclusions as the pre-Socratic atomist Democritus, a thinker that he greatly admires, Onfray theorizes,

Le vieux Démocrite, qui, dit la légende, survécut en respirant les atomes détachés de petits pains, sait que nous sommes exclusivement matière et que cette petite matière communique avec le restant de la grande matière du monde. Nous sommes vin, le vin est nous : de semblables particules parcourent le corps de celui qui déguste et la coupe du liquide dégusté. Nous sommes nous aussi synthèse de temps géologiques et de temps climatiques, de temps de la terre et

de temps virgiliens. En nous bruit encore le son des origines de la terre. (*Cosmos* 48-49)

Before the so-called idealists took hold of the mainstream philosophical establishment in the Western world, Onfray maintains that ancient thinkers like Democritus, Leucippus, and Lucretius proposed theories that were more in line with scientific erudition. Like the contemporary philosopher Michel Serres, with whom he has much in common, Onfray demonstrates that the “purely materialistic point of view” espoused by his ancient predecessor Democritus is quite realistic and accurate overall (Assad 219).

Later in the essay, the philosopher further contemplates all of the philosophical insights that can be gleaned from the knowledge that all organisms live in a universe comprised of a single, finite substance that manifests itself in an infinite number of possibilities. Explicitly building upon Spinoza’s ideas, another philosopher for whom he has a considerable amount of respect, Onfray posits, “Le vivant est un, unique et diversement modifié. Les hommes sont l’une des modalités de cette modification au même titre que l’ours et le bison l’oiseau et le feu, la pierre et la plante [...] Rien n’est supérieur ou inférieur, puisque tout se trouve à égalité ontologique” (*Cosmos* 347). In these profound moments of introspection actuated by a TS, Onfray explains that ontological hierarchies are a figment of the fragmented human imagination. The philosopher compellingly asserts that empirical evidence does not support the previously mentioned anthropocentric delusions of grandeur that still linger in Western society. For Onfray, the only objective philosophical position is what ecocritics and environmental philosophers refer to as “biotic egalitarianism” (Fern 31).

Like Signol, the philosopher argues that outdated homocentric logic represents the ideological roots of the environmental crisis of epic proportions that threatens to destroy all abundant life. Convinced of our ontological superiority, Western civilization embarked on the unsustainable path of trying to “master” every last parcel of matter for the exclusive benefit of our species centuries ago. Lamenting the catastrophic effects of this unending conquest including mass extinctions, pollution, and other forms of environmental degradation, Onfray contends,

Mais la terrifiante disparition des anguilles, parmi tant de disparitions inquiétantes d’espèces animales sur la planète, n’a pas pour seule cause l’impéritie des hommes qui, cartésiens sans le savoir, se sont rendus maîtres faustiens et possesseurs diaboliques de la nature ! Car, pour opposer l’homme à la nature, il faut singulièrement partir du principe que l’homme n’est pas dans la nature, mais au-dehors, à côté, en face, en marge, ailleurs ! La formulation *l’homme et la nature* s’avère une fiction face à la réalité qui se dit *l’homme est la nature* ! (*Cosmos* 174-175).

Absorbed in contemplation after the ecstasy triggered by the champagne has long faded, the philosopher realizes that the universe has no center from which it emanates. Onfray discredits anthropocentric notions and misleading dualities such as “man and nature” that have no basis in the concrete, material realities that support all life on this planet. Onfray aspires to deliver the final *coup de grâce* to the bad, anthropocentric thinking that continues to justify our parasitic rapport with the remainder of the cosmos. As opposed to being harmless fantasies, the philosopher explains that appealing, homocentric fictions are the ideological source of the problem that is currently preventing a meaningful global response to the deleterious effects of anthropogenic climate change. In essence, the pervasiveness of outmoded anthropocentric logic has convinced us that we are somehow *different* from the cosmic forces upon which our existence depends.

In addition to exposing the absurdity of anthropocentric claims, the philosophical meditation provoked when the champagne bubbles touch his palate causes Onfray to

reconsider the nature of time. In an interdependent and interconnected universe in which the same material particles have been changing shape for billions of years, Onfray seems to concur with both Proust and Signol that nothing ever disappears entirely. Articulating his position that time is connected to matter and its endless modifications, the philosopher hypothesizes, “La vie d’un vin réplique donc celle d’un humain, voire : d’un être, d’un vivant-de la potentialité à la néantisation, en passant par les différents degrés d’être. Le passé du vin résume d’abord un passé très lointain qui rend possible le présent : un *passé géologique* avec formation de la terre, nature des sous-sols, puis des sols” (*Cosmos* 45). Reiterating his biocentric conviction that matter itself holds the key to understanding the complex nature of time, Onfray highlights the significance of all of the “atomes brisés, cassés, associés, composés, décomposés, recomposés” that constitute the layers of time into which the human story has been woven (*Cosmos* 45). For Proust, Signol, and Onfray, the Western conception of time is too simplistic because it fails to take into account the ecological context of life itself. Onfray describes time as a rhizomatic arborescence with intertwined roots that cannot be untangled to form a straight line. The philosopher explains that traces of an immemorial, geological past are alive inside of the human body and all around us.

Maintaining that the past has never truly ceased to be at all and imagining a reverse, cosmogonic voyage induced by a TS, Onfray affirms,

Nous venons de cette géologie, nous sortons de cette eau primitive, nous avons été mollusques avant d’être goûteurs de vins-et goûter le vin peut nous conduire jusqu’à ces temps [...] Le verre de champagne ramasse également le passé climatique [...] Ce passé devient présent, il y eut le vin potentiel, le vin qui existe, voilà le vin qui est, qui peut être. Le présent du vin nomme donc ce qui se joue entre son être-là et sa disparition, sa présence au monde et son effacement du monde. (*Cosmos* 45-47)

During these moments of self-examination after the inebriation triggered by the champagne has evaporated, Onfray tries to comprehend the ontological fabric that comprises the folds of time. In this passage, the philosopher reminds us that “all that is and all that was resulted from the explosive expansion and rapid cooling of the primordial soup of radiation and matter” (Strain 30). These “eternal,” material particles that gradually emerged from these “primitive waters” or primordial soup would eventually form the basis of our genetic code. In this sense, vestiges of a cosmic past that began long ago permeate us to the very core. As opposed to disappearing completely, the past merely reconstitutes itself in a different shape. Onfray emphasizes that *Homo sapiens* are part of a cosmic past, present, and future that are so imbricated from a scientific and existential perspective that they cannot be easily placed into distinct categories. As Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre notes in her essay which examines the philosophical implications of modern science including quantum physics, “Space and time in modernity are separate, but in quantum physics space-time is dynamic, fractured, porous, paradoxical, and non-individual, with sets of space-time relations existing simultaneously, rhizomatically, and overlapping, interfering with each other” (113). Based upon these scientific principles, all three writers problematize traditional views of time in Western civilization compelling us to dig deeper into the essence of everything.

In the chapter “La Construction d’un contre-temps,” Onfray adds yet another wrinkle to his rethinking of time that further expands the Proustian vision of privileged moments. In this section of the essay, evidently inspired by Jean Baudrillard, Onfray explores the impact of the virtual technologies through which many of our quotidian experiences are now filtered in the digital age upon our already fragmented sense of time. Adopting the Baudrillardian stance that the dawning of hyperreality is upon us, Onfray bemoans, “Nous vivons dans le temps mort construit par les machines à virtualiser le réel. Le téléphone

abolit les distances, la radio aussi ; la télévision, quant à elle, abolit les distances mais aussi le temps. L'instant du tweet et du texto ne s'inscrit dans aucun mouvement" (*Cosmos* 115). According to Onfray, the phenomenon of hyperreality has eroded our understanding and appreciation of cosmic time to an unprecedented level in the postmodern world. In a ubiquitous realm of enticing simulacra that find their origins outside of concrete reality, the philosopher contends that "real time" is on the verge of imploding our connection to his rhizomatic conception of time linked to the universe.

Imploring us to "Relisons Baudrillard" and to reembrace what he terms a hedonistic, counter-time (Onfray "Dire la vérité" n.p.), Onfray proposes the following solution to this dilemma: "Le temps hédoniste [...] ne méconnaît pas la nature dynamique et dialectique du temps [...] Revitaliser le temps passe par un changement de notre mode de présence au monde [...] il faut tâcher d'être sage, Comment? En supprimant les *écrans* qui s'interposent entre le réel et nous. En allant directement au monde. En voulant le contact avec lui" (*Cosmos* 116-117). Onfray asserts that screen-based reality has become so pervasive that the postmodern subject must make a concerted effort to remove himself or herself temporarily from the confines of the hyperreal spaces that now concretize much of human existence. Onfray's hedonistic counter-time encourages us to reconnect to the material world and to reinvigorate our five senses. The pathways to sensorial ecstasy ardently defended by Onfray represent a revalorization of a sensual way of being in the universe. In addition to being a philosophical metaphor employed to disprove the aforementioned Cartesian theories that are grounded in chimerical, wishful thinking, Onfray's (re)appropriation of the literary device of a privileged moment in *Cosmos* is a blueprint for removing the technological barriers preventing us from experiencing all that life has to offer. Instead of being ashamed or distrustful of sensorial encounters, Onfray urges us to turn off our screens, at least momentarily, and to engage in the philosophical exercise of revitalizing our senses. It is also in this manner in which we can live and breathe the theory of cosmic time that the philosopher outlines in *Cosmos*.

In conclusion, this intertextual analysis has demonstrated that the notion of a privileged moment in French and Francophone literature is a multifaceted and nuanced concept. At first glance, it would be easy to disregard these poignant instants of bliss as an insignificant form of whimsical artistry. However, this study has illustrated that the profound introspection actuated by these powerful trigger sensations reflects a biocentric worldview informed by the principles of modern science. In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, *Les vrais bonheurs*, and *Cosmos*, the idea of a privileged moment is an all-encompassing metaphor that enables Proust, Signol, and Onfray to delve into the most fundamental philosophical questions of all. In addition to providing a framework that increases our understanding of the vital role of the senses in the creation of meaning in an absurd universe, the enigmatic jubilation described by the authors offers insights into the essence of life and time in a universe in which everything is comprised of recycled material particles. At the inception of the Anthropocene epoch, the philosophical dialogue initiated by "petites madeleines," Dom Pérignon, or the fruit of a medlar tree is of the utmost importance. The sensorial, hedonistic, and ecocentric ethic promulgated by Proust, Signol, and Onfray through the traditional literary device of a privileged moment is a critical source of philosophical renewal for a human-centered world in dire need of a radical paradigm shift. In an era in which it is imperative for global society to think and live otherwise, the stakes of a philosophical conversation originating from a literary space have never been greater.

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