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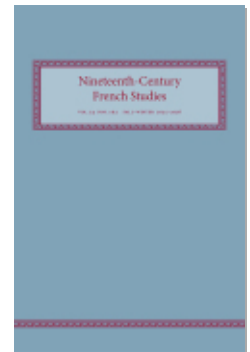
On the Threshold of Dreams: Proust and Maine de Biran

Alessandra Aloisi

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On the Threshold of Dreams

Proust and Maine de Biran

ALESSANDRA ALOISI

On the opening page of Proust's novel, the narrator describes the fluctuations of his consciousness between sleep and wakefulness as a dialectic between *passive identification* and *active separation*. Among all the possible philosophical intertexts that have been evoked to understand this passage, there is one notable reference that often goes unnoticed. This famous and yet enigmatic page can be elucidated if we look at a specific conception of consciousness that was introduced by Maine de Biran at the beginning of the nineteenth century. If Bergson's influence on Proust has often been discussed, the study of the afterlife of Biran's philosophy can bring new light to the literary and philosophical understanding of key aspects of the *Recherche*, particularly concerning the themes of sleep, dreams, and awakening. It is perhaps not coincidental that the only explicit reference to Biran in Proust's work is nestled within a famous passage about sleep.

SLEEP, DREAMS, AND CONSCIOUSNESS ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE *RECHERCHE*

From the very first page of *Du côté de chez Swann*, a theme emerges that will receive extensive development throughout *À la recherche du temps perdu*—that of sleep, dreams, and awakening. Sleep is presented as an “altered” state of consciousness which makes it difficult to draw the boundaries not only between past and present, imagination and reality, but also between *subject* and *object*:

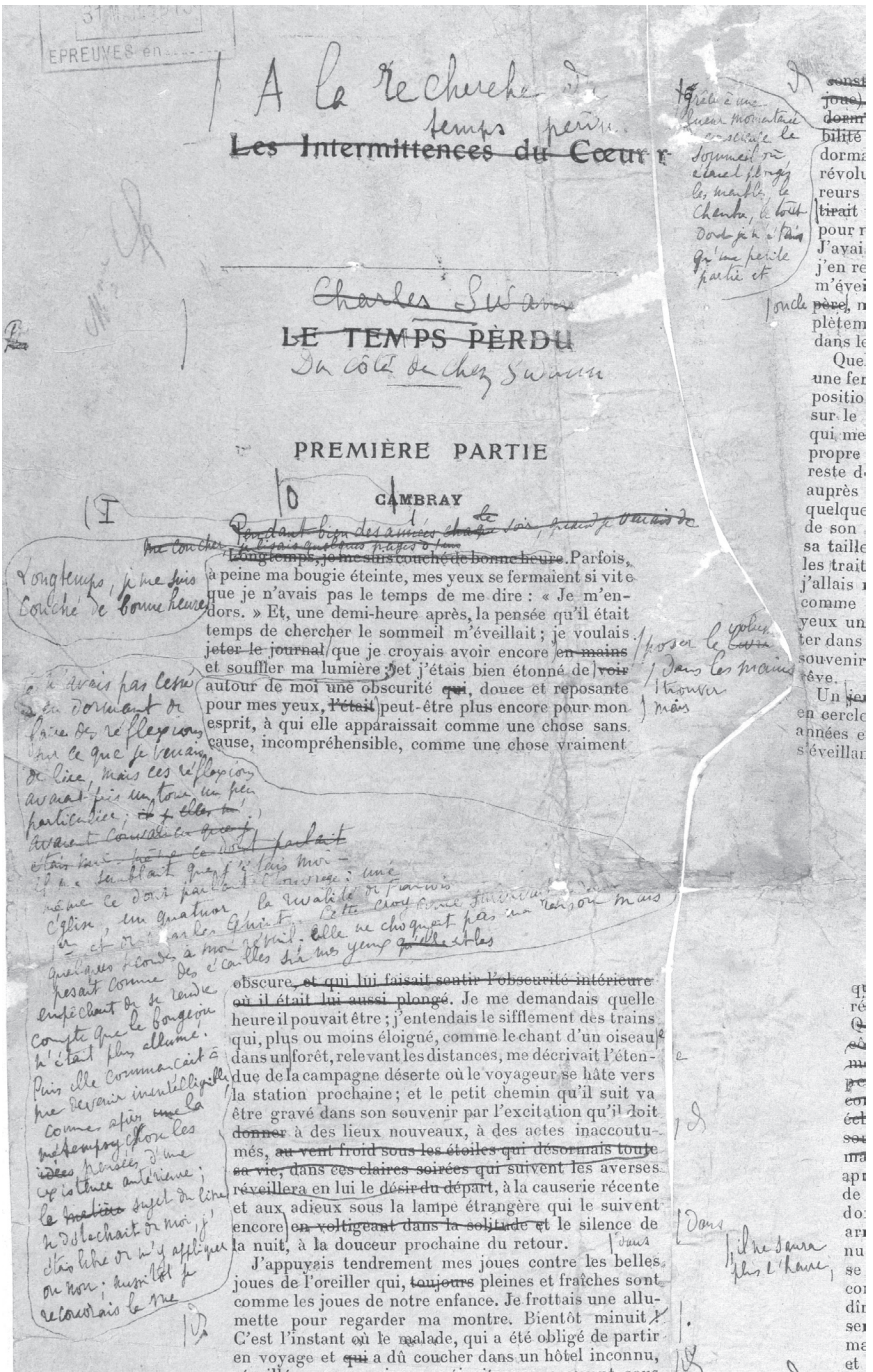
Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure. Parfois, à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n'avais pas le temps de me dire: “Je m'endors.” Et, une demi-heure après, la pensée qu'il était temps de

chercher le sommeil m'éveillait; je voulais poser le volume que je croyais avoir dans les mains et souffler ma lumière; [je n'avais pas cessé en dormant de faire des réflexions sur ce que je venais de lire, mais ces réflexions avaient pris un tour un peu particulier; *il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage: une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de François Ier et de Charles-Quint*. Cette croyance survivait pendant quelques secondes à mon réveil; elle ne choquait pas ma raison, mais pesait comme des écailles sur mes yeux et les empêchait de se rendre compte que le bougeoir n'était plus allumé. Puis elle commençait à me devenir inintelligible, comme après la métempsychose les pensées d'une existence antérieure; *le sujet du livre se détachait de moi, j'étais libre de m'y appliquer ou non*; aussitôt je recouvrais la vue] et j'étais bien étonné de trouver autour de moi une obscurité, douce et reposante pour mes yeux, mais peut-être plus encore pour mon esprit, à qui elle apparaissait comme une chose sans cause, incompréhensible, comme une chose vraiment obscure.¹

The section indicated within the square brackets makes the description of the dream state significantly more complex. Interestingly, Proust seemed to have had significant hesitations and second thoughts about it as well; added after he had already finalized his opening sentence, he kept amending it before the text reached its ultimate form.² While genetic critics were able to trace Proust's constant changing of his novel's first sentences with remarkable complexity, this article aims to show how a philosophical approach attentive to intertextual resonances can help us understand the networks of references behind these numerous emendations.

The narrator describes the fluctuations of his consciousness between sleep and wakefulness as a dialectic between *passive identification* ("il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage") and *active separation* ("le sujet du livre se détachait de moi, j'étais libre de m'y appliquer ou non"). Dreaming would involve an *identification* with the subject of the book that the narrator was reading before falling asleep. This identification is not with the characters but, far more intriguingly, with a church, a quartet, or the rivalry between two kings. As the sleeper awakens, this identification fades away and the awakening coincides with a progressive separation from the subject of the book. In addition to regaining his sight and the awareness of the darkness that surrounds him, the narrator also goes back to being free to apply (or not apply) himself to these reflections—reflections in which, during sleep, he had on the contrary been completely absorbed.

Scholars have often commented on this strange identification which characterizes the description of the oneiric state. Patrick French in particular has spoken of an "equivalence of the *je* with the object of attention" and observed how this opening passage stages a sort of "primordial state" in which "consciousness emerges from a threshold between sleep and wakefulness" and "before any certainty in relation



A la recherche du
 temps perdu.
 Les Intermittences du Cœur

Charles Swann
 LE TEMPS PERDU
 Du côté de chez Swann

PREMIERE PARTIE

CAMBRAY

(I) D
 Pendant bien des années, chaque fois, quand j'étais en train de
 me coucher, ~~longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure.~~
 Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure. Parfois, à
 peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite
 que je n'avais pas le temps de me dire : « Je m'en-
 dors. » Et, une demi-heure après, la pensée qu'il était
 temps de chercher le sommeil m'éveillait ; je voulais
 jeter le journal que je croyais avoir encore en mains
 et souffler ma lumière. Or j'étais bien étonné de voir
 autour de moi une obscurité qui, douce et reposante
 pour mes yeux, ~~était~~ peut-être plus encore pour mon
 esprit, à qui elle apparaissait comme une chose sans
 cause, incompréhensible, comme une chose vraiment
 obscure et qui lui faisait sentir l'obscurité intérieure
 où il était lui aussi plongé. Je me demandais quelle
 heure il pouvait être ; j'entendais le sifflement des trains
 qui, plus ou moins éloigné, comme le chant d'un oiseau
 dans un forêt, relevant les distances, me décrivait l'éten-
 due de la campagne déserte où le voyageur se hâte vers
 la station prochaine ; et le petit chemin qu'il suit va
 être gravé dans son souvenir par l'excitation qu'il doit
 donner à des lieux nouveaux, à des actes inaccoutu-
 més, au vent froid sous les étoiles qui désormais toute
 sa vie, dans ces claires soirées qui suivent les averses
 réveillera en lui le désir du départ, à la causerie récente
 et aux adieux sous la lampe étrangère qui le suivent
 encore en voltigeant dans la solitude et le silence de
 la nuit, à la douceur prochaine du retour.
 J'appuyais tendrement mes joues contre les belles
 joues de l'oreiller qui, toujours pleines et fraîches sont
 comme les joues de notre enfance. Je frotais une allu-
 mette pour regarder ma montre. Bientôt minuit.
 C'est l'instant où le malade, qui a été obligé de partir
 en voyage et qui a dû coucher dans un hôtel inconnu,

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 J'ai écrit une
 lettre à Morand
 en soirée le
 dimanche 10
 et j'ai plongé
 le journal, le
 dimanche, le lundi
 dans le lit à Paris
 par une petite
 partie et

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 sans
 dormir
 bilité
 dorme
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 pour r
 j'avai
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 reste d
 auprès
 quelque
 de son
 sa taille
 les trait
 j'allais
 comme
 yeux un
 ter dans
 souvenir
 éve.
 Un je
 en cercle
 années e
 s'éveiller

Longtemps, je me suis
 couché de bonne heure

Je n'avais pas l'habitude
 de dormir de
 faire de réflexions
 sur ce que je venais
 de lire, mais ces réflexions
 avaient lieu surtout un peu
 particulière ; et elles
 étaient considérables
 et se prolongeaient
 même le soir, quand je me
 couchais, un quart
 de nuit, dans les
 quelques heures à mon
 resait comme de
 des éclats de la
 compte que le voyageur
 h'était plus allé
 Puis elle commençait à
 me devenir insupportable
 comme après une
 méditation d'une
 idées précises d'une
 up la chose antérieure ;
 le prochain sujet de l'œuvre
 de Hochstadt de moi ;
 des livres et n'y applique
 de moi ; mais l'été je
 retrouvais le me

poser le cœur
 dans les mains
 trouver
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Fig. 1. Placards corrigés de Du côté de chez Swann (detail). Fondation Martin Bodmer, Geneva, bodmerlab.unige.ch/fr/constellations/autographes/mirador/1072068803?page=004

to time and place” (8). What this opening passage appears to question, French argues following Agamben’s reading of Proust in *Infancy and History*, is not only “the certainty of the Cartesian subject” but also “the modalities of the Kantian subject—the a priori modalities which form a capacity to establish a position in time and space.”³

What does it mean, exactly, *to be one with* the subject of a book? Among all the possible philosophical intertexts that could be evoked to elucidate this passage (including Plotinus, given the allusion to “metempsychosis”), there is one notable reference that often goes unnoticed. I believe that this famous and yet enigmatic page can be enlightened if we look at a specific conception of consciousness that was introduced by the French philosopher Maine de Biran (1766–1824) at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Starting with his *Nouvelles considérations sur le sommeil, les songes et le somnambulisme*, written in 1809 but first published only in 1841 (Cousin 211–95), Biran studied extensively the phenomena of dreams and sleep, which he also compared to metempsychosis: “sans doute le phénomène du sommeil a dû faire naître [l’idée] d’une survivance ou d’une vie qui ne fait que changer de forme quand elle cesse d’être” (Biran, *Œuvres* 5: 83). Biran also devoted many pages in his writings, in particular in his *Journal*, to the description of the transition from sleep to wakefulness—a transition that he tried to grasp within himself by self-observation and first-person narration, hoping to understand, by “analogy,” something that is essentially outside our cognitive reach: that is to say, the original conditions of the birth of the self, of consciousness, and of personal existence. Biran can indeed be considered among the initiators of the scientific literature on dreams and sleep usually cited to elucidate these Proustian pages, including le Marquis d’Hervey de Saint-Denis or Alfred Maury.⁴

In a manner that could be compared to the opening of Proust’s novel, Biran noted that sometimes “l’animal peut s’éveiller [. . .] pendant que la pensée et le moi sommeillent encore” (*Œuvres* 9: 138, original italics). It is precisely, “dans ce passage,” in these fleeing moments of awakening, that we can grasp “le sentiment immédiat de l’existence,” still devoid of any sense of personal existence. In these passing moments, Biran maintained, some of the images and affects coming from the pure sentiment of existence (what he also calls “vie animale”) can appear vividly, sometimes obsessing us (“se retracent vivement, m’obsèdent”): “je me reproche cette faiblesse qui tient à l’organisme, je lutte mais il faut que l’esprit reprenne son activité ou que de nouvelles idées se représentent pour pouvoir me tirer moi-même de cette ornière des affections et des images qui avaient pris tant d’empire sur me sensibilité et mon imagination.”⁵

On the basis of these self-observations, and radically distancing himself from his predecessors, Biran introduced a gradualist conception of consciousness as *effort* or *activity* which can increase or decrease without ever dividing itself, moving between

the two extremes of wakefulness and sleep.⁶ Consciousness increases according to its capacity for separation and decreases as a function of its identifications. Biran uses the term “identification” to indicate the eclipse or temporary obliteration of consciousness into the pure affections, sensations, and images produced by passive imagination coming from animal life (Azouvi, “Conscience” 470). If wakefulness corresponds to the maximum level of effort or activity, and can have different degrees (ranging from pure attentiveness without an object to deliberate attention), deep sleep, on the contrary, implies the suspension of the minimum degree of effort required by consciousness (Devarieux 2016). According to Biran, this state of passive identification, also typical of madness, was captured by Condillac when he described his animated statue which, while still lacking a sense of self, *becomes* all its different modifications, without perceiving them or separating itself from them; in the presence of the scent of a rose, “l’âme de la statue devient la sensation odeur. Puisqu’elle le devient, elle n’en a pas l’idée ou la conscience; elle n’est pas un moi distinct de la modification sensible” (Biran, *Œuvres* 9: 112). Like madness, dreams would correspond to this preeminence of the passive element and entail a spontaneous and accidental succession of images and affections devoid of any representative aspect and of any spatial or temporal dimension.⁷ Biran explains all the phenomena of sleep, including dreams and reveries, through this principle; they imply, to different degrees, a passive identification with images and affections, the suspension of any sense of self, and the non-separation between subject and object.⁸

As François Azouvi has rightly pointed out, this conception of consciousness marks the essential difference between Biran and Bergson. While for Bergson consciousness is “quality,” for Biran it is essentially “quantity”; more precisely, it is an “intensive quantity” [*grandeur intensive*] (“Conscience” 465–66), capable as such of different degrees which are not, nevertheless, measurable because of their infinitesimal nature. This means that for Biran consciousness (that is, personal existence) is essentially discontinuous and implies actual interruptions, given that these degrees tend to zero in deep sleep.

I argue that this conception of consciousness can also be found in Proust’s novel, where it is conveyed and performed in some of the most crucial passages about sleep, dreams, and awakening. In this article, I will show how this perspective can change our reading of specific aspects of the *Recherche*. If it is true, as Anne Henry has observed, that many of the similarities between Proust and Bergson can actually be regarded as hidden consequences of a common cultural background, including Biran’s influence (“Bergson”), it could also be argued that the comparison with Bergson has often overshadowed the appreciation of specific themes and motifs for which Proust is actually closer to Biran than to Bergson. However, before delving into the exploration of this hypothesis, some initial methodological remarks are necessary.

PROUST AND THE AFTERLIFE OF BIRAN'S PHILOSOPHY:
METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

Biran published very little before his death in 1824. His name is largely forgotten today, and as early as the 1870s Flaubert could write: "Maine de Biran. On ne le lit pas, quoi qu'on dise."⁹ What about Proust? Did Proust know or read Maine de Biran? Answering this question requires addressing some general methodological problems concerning the complex reception and circulation of Biran's philosophy in the nineteenth century.

Despite Flaubert's sarcastic comment, Biran was indeed one of the most influential thinkers in nineteenth-century France, whose work was extensively read not only by writers such as Stendhal, but also by philosophers well-known to Proust, starting with Ravaisson, Bergson, Boutroux, and Gabriel Tarde (Contini, *Biblioteca*). Nevertheless, his ideas took a long time to be made public and were considerably manipulated, concealed, and exploited for political and ideological reasons by his successors, starting with Victor Cousin, who was the first editor of his writings (Goldstein, *Post-Revolutionary*; and Antoine-Mahut). With the exception of his famous *Mémoire sur l'influence de l'habitude sur la faculté de penser*, published in 1802, the official circulation of Biran's philosophy only began in the 1830s and 1840s, when the majority of his works were published for the first time.¹⁰ As Jacqueline Carroy and others have shown, these are also the decades in which Biran's ideas contributed to important debates throughout the nineteenth century in France concerning the implications of sleep, dreams, and somnambulism for the unity and identity of the self.¹¹

The idea of "legacy" has proven to be insufficient to grasp the complex, multi-directional, and often anonymous dissemination and impact of Biran's work in the nineteenth century (Azouvi, *Maine de Biran*). The notion of "afterlife" might offer more apt methodological tools, since his philosophy often manifests itself as a ghostly presence, discernible not so much explicitly or directly but only within the folds of other texts. As a ghost, this afterlife is primarily visible through its effects and through the echoes, resonances, and sameness that it produces within the context of other authors and texts. The aim of this methodology is not to restore Biran's "legitimate legacy" or to prove his "paternity" of specific ideas. Rather, it is to show how his contribution (whether direct or indirect) might have enabled the shaping and advancement of specific ideas and debates.

The *Recherche* serves as an ideal testing ground for this methodology because Biran literally manifests himself as a ghostly presence in Proust's work. That Proust actually read Maine de Biran is difficult to prove. However, scholars have widely acknowledged that Proust had an indirect (if not direct) knowledge of Biranian ideas, and recent studies have pointed not only to Proust's education, but also to his knowledge of French experimental psychology, which was deeply marked by the

influence of Biran's philosophy.¹² Building on these studies, I show the implications that a philosophical approach attentive to intertextual resonances with Biran's philosophy might have for our understanding of Proust's novel. My intention is not to unify the complex network of influences underling Proustian ideas under a single name, but to show how the afterlife of Biran's philosophy can help us uncover new interpretive directions which have remained unexplored and enhance our comprehension of Proust's position in relation to other thinkers of his time, in particular Bergson.

While previous explorations of the effects of Biran's philosophy in Proust's work have predominantly focused on the motif of habit,¹³ little attention has been given to the themes of sleep, dreams, and awakening. It is perhaps not coincidental that the only explicit reference to Biran in Proust's work is nestled within a famous passage about sleep. As we will see, Proust was familiar enough with Biran's philosophy to initially quote Biran's name in his preparatory notes, before deciding to erase the reference in the final version of his manuscript. Rather than necessarily viewing this omitted reference as evidence of Proust's direct knowledge of Biran's work (as we will see, it could be a second-hand reference or an echo of a conversation), I will interpret it as indicative of the often anonymous, clandestine, and unofficial reception of circulation of Biran's ideas in the long nineteenth century.

MAINE DE BIRAN, OR THE GHOST IN THE TEXT

The passage in question is found in the second part of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, at the beginning of the third chapter. During an evening at La Raspelière, the narrator encounters a Norwegian philosopher from whom he learns about a conversation between Bergson and Boutroux on sleep, memory, and sleeping medication. In his room later that night, stirred by this discussion, the narrator embarks on an extensive reflection on the same topic:

Les moments d'oubli qui suivent, le lendemain, l'ingestion de certains narcotiques ont une ressemblance partielle seulement, mais troublante, avec l'oubli qui règne au cours d'une nuit de sommeil naturel et profond. Or, ce que j'oublie dans l'un et l'autre cas, ce n'est pas tel vers de Baudelaire qui me fatigue plutôt, "ainsi qu'un tympanon," ce n'est pas tel concept d'un des philosophes cités, c'est la réalité elle-même des choses vulgaires qui m'entourent—si je dors—et dont la non-perception fait de moi un fou; c'est—si je suis éveillé et sors à la suite d'un sommeil artificiel—non pas le système de Porphyre ou de Plotin dont je puis discuter aussi bien qu'un autre jour, mais la réponse que j'ai promis de donner à une invitation au souvenir de laquelle s'est substitué un pur blanc. L'idée élevée est restée à sa place ; ce que l'hypnotique a mis hors usage, c'est *le pouvoir d'agir* dans les

petites choses, dans tout ce qui demande de *l'activité* pour ressaisir juste à temps, pour empoigner tel souvenir de la vie de tous les jours (3: 373–74).

The memory alterations produced by the ingestion of sleeping medication are compared to the forgetfulness experienced during a night of deep sleep. The similarities with the beginning of the novel cannot go unnoticed. Just as in the first page, here too we read that the main effect of sleep, now explicitly associated with madness, is to suspend the perception of our surroundings: more precisely to produce a “non-perception” of the simplest objects around us. According to the narrator, this is also what happens the day after the ingestion of sleeping medication, which would undermine “le pouvoir d’agir.” Earlier in the same passage, awakening itself is described as an “effort” to regain a sense of time (3: 373). A few lines after, we also find another implicit reference to metempsychosis, though this time it is employed to expose the inconsistencies of Bergson’s theses concerning memory and the immortality of the soul (3: 374). As at the beginning of the novel, here too Proust reveals and performs a conception of consciousness in which important Biranian motifs seem to become visible, such as the relation between madness and “non-perception,” or the central role of effort and activity as essential aspects of conscious and relational life.

This is precisely why it is particularly intriguing to find in Proust’s preparatory notes for this episode in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* a reference to Biran.¹⁴ In the *Cahier* 59, written in 1921–22 in preparation for his proofs of the second volume of *Sodome*, Proust had initially referred to Biran in conjunction with Porphyry (fig. 2), before replacing his name with that of Plotinus, opting for a much more obvious textbook association between two Neoplatonic philosophers: “Ce que j’oublie pendant que je dors ce n’est pas tel poème de Baudelaire [. . .] ; c’est la réalité elle-même des choses qui m’entourent, la vérité qui sépare un homme bien pourtant d’un fou. De même j’ai pris du véronal, je discuterai fort bien sur Porphyre ou Maine de Biran. . . .”¹⁵ While being indicative of a familiarity with Biran’s ideas, this reference is most likely second-hand, as noted by several scholars (Romeyer-Dherbey 68 and Piazza, “Proust on the Subconscious”). And yet, the concealment of Biran’s name is as intriguing as its initial reference. Why did Proust mention Biran in this context, and then delete his name?

Before proposing some hypotheses, I would like to take a closer look at what is going on in this section of the text, from which I have quoted only an extract. This episode is well-known, especially by philosophers, who would find in it the evidence that Proust disagreed with Bergson. In these pages, Proust—or rather the narrator—seems to provide us with a philosophical refutation of Bergson’s theses. For this reason, it is not surprising to find several echoes of some of Bergson’s conferences, in particular his 1901 conference on “Le Rêve.” However, if we also look at these pages from a literary perspective, we realize that things are more complicated. First of all,

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Je n'ai pas tel poème de Baudelaire que
je continue à me récrire et que
je ne juge pas beaucoup moins
bien qu'à l'état de veille ; c'
est la réalité elle-même des choses
qui m'enthousiasme, la vérité qui
se fait un homme bien portant
d'un fou. De même j'ai pris de
ce roman, je dirai fort bien de
Porphyre ou même de Biran,
mais à la place où se trouvait
ceci : "tu dois répondre ce matin
à M. X si tu n'as rien de bon
à lui dire et envoyer avant
midi cent francs à un pauvre qui
meurt de faim" il y a un bloc
complet, je l'ai entièrement
oublié, il faut que de chez
quelqu'un me rappelle parle de

Fig. 2. *Cahier 59* (1921), 8 recto. Gallica / Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des manuscrits. NAF 16699.

with a narrative device reminiscent of Montaigne,¹⁶ in this passage the narrator plays it safe, so to speak, and claims that he is not entirely sure that Bergson's thesis had been correctly reported to him by the Norwegian philosopher who, in turn, would have learned them from Boutroux: "Je ne sais si cette conversation entre M. Bergson et M. Boutroux est exacte. Le philosophe norvégien, pourtant si profond et si clair,

si passionnément attentif, a pu mal comprendre” (3: 373). This remark produces a displacement that should alert the reader.

Further, it is not entirely clear on what point, exactly, the narrator disagrees with Bergson. Does the disagreement concern the relationship between sleep and memory or, more generally, the possibility to recollect memories that we didn't know we have? Does it have to do with the immortality of the soul, the relationship between memory and the brain, or the correlation between dreams and external sensations (Megay 83–84)? Jumping from one topic to the other, the narrator's reflections are not as linear as one could expect; some of his statements here are openly contradicted by several other passages in the novel, in particular those about involuntary memory.

The real crux of the problem seems to concern the memory alterations produced by sleeping medication. According to the Norwegian philosopher, Bergson was convinced that, in moderate doses, sleeping medications have no influence on our memory of everyday things, but can undermine our ability to recall abstract notions and ideas, such as remembering a quotation (3: 373). On the contrary, the narrator maintains that the related memory alterations are very similar to those produced by deep sleep, which does not undermine our knowledge of abstract ideas such as the capacity to reflect on a philosophical system, nor make us forget quotations. Indeed, not only does the narrator remember Baudelaire's poem, but his memory is also obsessed and fatigued by it, “ainsi qu'un tympanon,”¹⁷ as if he were unable to stop thinking about it or to separate himself from it. Disagreeing with Bergson's opinion, the narrator maintains that what is actually lost in sleep or undermined by the ingestion of sleeping medications is, rather, the memory and perception of our surroundings, together with our capacity to act on them.

However, the refutation of Bergson's thesis is more *experimental* than *philosophical*. I argue that what we are reading here is actually the dreamlike reflection of a sleepy narrator returning late at night from La Raspelière: nothing but “le verbiage incessant du sommeil” (3: 371), a dream inspired by the conversation that the narrator had that same night with the Norwegian philosopher. Not by chance, these strange reflections are interrupted by the arrival of the *valet de chambre*, which makes the narrator realize that he had been sleeping: “Le valet de chambre entrait. Je ne lui disais pas que j'avais sonné plusieurs fois, car je me rendais compte que je n'avais fait jusque-là que le rêve que je sonnais. J'étais effrayé pourtant de penser que ce rêve avait eu la netteté de la connaissance [. . .]. J'étais donc assuré d'avoir dormi profondément, rêvé à rebours de mes notions de la veille” (3: 375).

In these pages Proust is interested in contesting Bergson not so much on a philosophical level as on a *narrative* and *experimental* level, showing how, in a dream or while half-asleep, the narrator is perfectly capable of remembering and reflecting on a philosophical system (notably Bergson's!), even though he has lost sight of reality and the ability to act on his surroundings. Something similar happens at

the beginning of the novel. Proportionally to the decline of his consciousness and activity, the sleeper loses sight of his environment and of the position of his limbs. At the same time, he continues to think about what he was reading before falling asleep, although his thoughts take a very particular turn such that he is no longer able to separate himself from them.

Just as at the beginning of the novel, Proust displays in these pages a conception of consciousness inherited from Maine de Biran. I have shown how this can shed new light on the interpretation of both passages. Yet, I still have not answered my initial question: why did Proust first mention Biran and then conceal his name? We can only make conjectures. One hypothesis is that the reference might be the echo of an actual conversation that, according to Edmond Jaloux, inspired these pages: a discussion between Proust and Bergson on insomnia and the use of narcotics, during a meeting in 1920 that Boutroux also attended (Jaloux 18–19). Given the topic of this conversation, it is plausible that Biran was mentioned on that occasion, as maybe evidenced by its presence in Proust's notes. The concealment of his name could thus be seen as part of the literary transposition of this conversation. Another hypothesis is that Biran's name was still, at that time, loaded with philosophical resonances that Proust wanted to avoid, such as with Victor Cousin's philosophical school, whose discredit, starting from Taine and Ribot, had not spared Biran (Goldstein, *Post-revolutionary Self*). It is impossible to know the exact reasons for this concealment. Yet, Biran is a haunting presence in Proust's work, and this can tell us a lot about the afterlife of his thought in the long nineteenth century.

It would also certainly be worth considering other episodes about sleep and memory, for instance the following passage from *La Prisonnière*, where the motif of awakening, understood as a progressive reintegration into reality, is explicitly connected to the idea of resurrection and the resurgence of effort and voluntary movement:

La résurrection ne vient pas tout de suite [. . .]. *Le mouvement seul rend la pensée*, et quand on a effectivement pressé la poire électrique, on peut dire avec lenteur mais nettement “Il est bien dix heures. Françoise, donnez-moi mon café au lait.” / Ô miracle! Françoise n'avait pu soupçonner la mer d'irréel qui me baignait encore tout entier [. . .]. *À force de volonté je m'étais réintégré dans le réel.*¹⁸

PROUST, BERGSON, AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

I would like to close with some general remarks concerning the implications of reading Proust through the lens of Biran's philosophy. Roland Barthes once noticed that, “Bien que Proust parle à un moment des ‘profondeurs de notre inconscient’,” the kind of sleep he describes “n'a rien de freudien.” According to Barthes, sleep in Proust

is not Freudian because it is not “onirique” and it is not by chance that “il y a peu de rêves véritables dans l’œuvre de Proust” (462). Proust would focus not so much on the description of dreams as on the description of the threshold between sleep and wakefulness, introducing what Barthes called “une conscience fausse” (rather than “une fausse conscience”): “une conscience dérégulée, vacillante, intermittente” (462). I have shown how this “intermittent” consciousness is close to Biran’s. Now I would like to argue that it is precisely this proximity to Biran that, while distinguishing Proust from Bergson, also makes him, at the same time, completely extraneous to Freud’s theses about dreams and the unconscious.¹⁹

What is the difference between dreaming and the waking state? This question runs throughout Bergson’s entire conference on dreams and becomes more urgent in the final part, after he has shown that the dream mechanisms are identical to the perceptive mechanisms of the waking state, since in both cases it is memory that gives shape to the undefined material offered by sensation. At this point, Bergson seems to have no means of answering this fundamental question other than staging a bizarre and rather entertaining dialogue between two characters, “le moi de la veille” and “le moi du rêve.”²⁰ The playful tone of this exchange closely recalls some pages in the *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, in which Xavier de Maistre stages a quarrel between his soul (“l’âme”) and his body (“la bête”), when the soul surprises the body enjoying itself when its master (the soul) was absent (102–21). Similarly, in Bergson, it is his waking self that, surprising the sleeping self “en flagrant délit” in the moment of awakening, wants to know at all costs what it was doing. This is what “le moi du rêve” replies: “Regarde: *Je ne faisais rien*, et c’est justement par là que nous différons, toi et moi, l’un de l’autre [. . .]. L’effort que tu fournis sans trêve, je m’abstiens purement et simplement de le donner. Tu t’attaches à la vie; je suis détaché d’elle” (102, original italics). A little further, “le moi du rêve” adds: “Veiller, c’est vivre de la vie psychologique normale, c’est lutter, c’est vouloir. Quant au rêve, as-tu besoin que je te l’explique? C’est l’état où tu te retrouves naturellement dès que tu t’abandonnes, dès que tu négliges de te concentrer sur un seul point, dès que tu cesses de vouloir [. . .], car *veiller et vouloir* sont une seule et même chose” (104, original italics).

We should not be misled by the equivalence established here between “veiller” and “vouloir.” As we have just read, for Bergson being awake implies a state of tension of the will, “un effort positif,” which decreases in sleep: “par là, et par là seulement, [le dormeur] se distingue de l’homme qui veille” (104). However, the difference with Biran’s theses could not be more evident since, unlike Biran, Bergson is far from identifying will with consciousness. Consciousness, which for Bergson is one and the same with memory, can *contract* or *relax* itself, depending on the tension of the will and the attention we bring to life, but it can never grow or decrease to the point of vanishing. While for Biran dreaming consists in the suspension of effort and will, which implies the passive identification between subject and object, for Bergson the key aspect of dreaming is, instead, *disinterest*: more precisely, the lack

of utility in the synthesis between perception and memory. This, however, leaves Bergson with an unresolved problem that leads him to agree with Freud's thesis about dreams and the unconscious.

Referring to Plotinus's theory of incarnation, Bergson compared our unconscious memories awaiting a nocturnal sensation in which to actualize themselves to the souls in search of a body through which to become flesh: "Le souvenir voudrait bien obtenir une matière pour se remplir, se lester, s'actualiser enfin. Ils s'attirent l'un et l'autre, et le souvenir-fantôme, se matérialisant dans la sensation qui lui apporte du sang et de la chair, devient un être qui vivra d'une vie propre, un rêve" (97). However, Bergson found himself incapable of properly explaining the reason for this "attraction" between specific memories and night sensations in dreams—in other words, why, among all the useless unconscious memories that lie forgotten in the depth of our memory, only some of them (and not others) are actualized (literally "incarnated") as dreams in the relaxed mind of the sleeper. Bergson did not seem to have any other way of explaining this mechanism except agreeing with Freud's views. In a footnote that was added when the conference on dreams was published in *L'Énergie spirituelle* (1919), Bergson specified that "il faudrait parler ici de ces tendances réprimées auxquelles l'école de Freud a consacré un si grand nombre d'études," also pointing out that "à l'époque où fut faite la présente conférence, l'ouvrage de Freud sur les rêves avait paru, mais la 'psycho-analyse' était très loin de son développement actuel" (107). While Bergson's partial alignment with Freud does not suggest a complete convergence of their views,²¹ this concession to psychoanalysis is significant, especially when compared to Proust's outright rejection of it.

For Proust, who follows in the footsteps of Biran, sleeping and dreaming pose a more radical dilemma than they do for Bergson.²² Certainly they have nothing to do with repressed tendencies nor with the conflict between consciousness and the unconscious. Even though Proust, too, employs the comparison with metempsychosis and reincarnation, it serves a completely different purpose, as evidenced by this passage from *Le Côté de Guermantes*:

On appelle cela un sommeil de plomb; il semble qu'on soit devenu soi-même, pendant quelques instants après qu'un tel sommeil a cessé, un simple bonhomme de plomb. *On n'est plus personne.* Comment, alors, cherchant sa pensée, sa personnalité comme on cherche un objet perdu, finit-on par retrouver son propre moi plutôt que tout autre? *Pourquoi, quand on se remet à penser, n'est-ce pas alors une autre personnalité que l'antérieure qui s'incarne en nous?* On ne voit pas ce qui dicte le choix et pourquoi, entre les millions d'êtres humains qu'on pourrait être, c'est sur celui qu'on était la veille qu'on met juste la main. *Qu'est-ce qui nous guide, quand il y a eu vraiment interruption [. . .]? [. . .] Et peut-être la résurrection de l'âme après la mort est-elle concevable comme un phénomène de mémoire. (2: 387)*

Biran's idea that consciousness varies in intensity, diminishing to almost nothing during deep sleep, suggests that consciousness is an intermittent phenomenon. Following this view, Proust's narrator reaches the conclusion that sleep is essentially a *depersonalizing space*. As such, it represents an entirely different problem for him than for Bergson and Freud. While they both put emphasis on the "incarnation" of past memories, for Proust the problem with sleep is more radical than that and concerns the "resurrection" of our self upon awakening: why do we wake up as the same person we were yesterday, rather than someone entirely different being reborn within us? Biran, to be sure, would not have pushed his doubts that far; he had already promptly solved this problem by asserting that our consciousness, or sense of effort, is always accompanied by a feeling of permanence, which guarantees the continuity of our self across the interruptions of sleep. On the contrary, the idea of a gradualism of consciousness leads Proust to draw more radical conclusions concerning the multiplicity of the self. Nonetheless, it is crucial to emphasize that Proust's exploration of dreams, sleep, and the unconscious remains rooted in the questions initially raised by Biran's philosophy.

Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages
University of Oxford (Oriel College and Wadham College)

NOTES

1. 1: 3. Unless otherwise indicated, the emphases are mine.
2. As Pugh shows, the section in which the narrator identifies with the subject of the book is not found in the first set of Grasset proofs: originally part of the corrections that Proust made to a fair copy written by one of his secretaries, this addition was "rescued when Proust corrected his first galleys" (634). Pugh explains further: "Proust had drafted in the margin of Cottin's copy of this page (D1: 2) an important insertion to go into the second sentence [. . .]; further modified, this intercalation was written on the margin of 16753 [the first set of Grasset proofs]. When Proust came to transfer his corrections to the set he had reserved for the printer, he made further improvements, which produce the definitive text" (656). This addition also appears on the margin of the third run of Grasset placards (see fig. 1).
3. 10. "This consciousness is at the threshold, neither subject nor object [. . .] but reverie, a threshold state between the two" (ffrench 22). See also Agamben 42.
4. See Carroy 25–28, Henry 335–44, and Contini, "Sonno." Freud, too, cited Biran as one of the pioneers in the scientific exploration of dreams, who, along with Cabanis, Lélut, and Moreau de Tours, highlighted the "underlying kinship between dreams and mental disorders" (121). The text referred to by Freud is the *Nouvelles considérations sur les rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme* (*Œuvres* vol. 9), written in 1820 and first published by Cousin in 1834.

5. *Journal* 383, original italics. This page appeared for the first time in Naville 395–96.
6. Azouvi, “Conscience,” shows how, from Biran’s viewpoint, Cabanis, Pinel, and Bichat all made the same mistake, which was conceiving of consciousness as a “grandeur extensive,” capable as such of dividing itself: see Cabanis’s idea of “moi partiel,” Bichat’s notion of “sommeil partiel,” and Pinel’s idea of “faculté partielle.”
7. This was one of Biran’s most explicit points of contention with Kant. If Kant defined time and space as *a priori* forms of sensibility, Biran maintained, on the contrary, that time “est la forme du moi humain inséparable de son existence seule, commençant, s’interrompant et finissant avec lui”; this means that “toute affection simple, ou sensation animale, ou qui exclut la conscience du moi individuel, exclut par là même la forme du temps” (*Euvres* 9: 141).
8. On the separation between subject and object as a condition of conscious perception, see Azouvi, “L’affection.”
9. It is possible that Flaubert was paraphrasing Taine, who wrote of Biran: “Je suis sûr que de tous ceux qui le citent, il n’y en a pas cent qui l’aient lu” (52).
10. For a summary of the editorial vicissitudes of the posthumous publication of Biran’s works, see Aloisi and Antoine-Mahut.
11. How could a consciousness that suspends its activity each night claim unity? First raised in 1827 by Jouffroy, this question was also at the center of a competition prize announced by the Académie des sciences morales et politiques in 1851 following Cousin’s initiative (Carroy 29–31, 58–63). As noted by Goldstein (“Neutralizing Freud” 58–59), these questions were still central in 1880, when the topic of “sleep, dreams, somnambulism, hallucination, and madness” was introduced in the high-school philosophy curriculum.
12. See in particular Fraisse, who discusses, for instance, the role of Elie Rabier, a “disciple of Maine de Biran” (124), whose philosophy textbook was consulted by Proust during his university years in 1888–89, and Piazza, who has established a detailed account of the various influences and mediators.
13. See in particular Piazza, “Proust, philosophe de l’habitude,” “Proust et la philosophie de l’habitude,” and Sandreschi de Robertis.
14. See Tadié’s note in Proust 3: 1559n2.
15. The passage is partially transcribed by Megay 85. For a discussion of *Cahier 59* and the other “cahiers d’addition” within the context of Proust’s complex relationship with his proofs, see Goujon.
16. Toward the end of the chapter “Des cannibales,” Montaigne laments the unreliability of the translator who acted as his intermediary during the conversation with the Tupimambá (214).
17. It is interesting to note that the poem in question (“Je te donne ces vers . . .” from *Les Fleurs du Mal*) evokes a similar almost mesmerizing experience: “Ta mémoire, pareille aux fables incertaines, / Fatigue le lecteur ainsi qu’un tympanon, / Et par un fraternel et mystique chaînon / Reste comme pendue à mes rimes hautaines” (690).

18. 3: 630. For an analysis of these pages, with special reference to the “osmose de plus en plus forte entre héros, narrateur et auteur” that characterizes Proust’s final additions and corrections, see Delesalle 58–59.

19. Proust’s divergence from a Freudian conception of the unconscious has often been observed and confirmed by Proust himself, who said that he never read Freud: for a review of the secondary literature on this topic, see Surprenant.

20. On Bergson’s use of “dramatization” see Guerlac 884.

21. For a contextualization of Bergson’s reference to Freud, see Trochu. For the developments of psychoanalysis and of “l’école de Freud” in the eighteen years between Bergson’s conference and the publication of *L’Énergie spirituelle*, see Marinelli and Mayer.

22. For Proust’s reaction to the publication of *L’Énergie spirituelle*, which provides him with an occasion to “préciser [. . .] la formule d’un écart dont il a le sentiment depuis toujours,” see Girardi, “Présentation” 48. On Proust and Bergson, see Girardi, *Morceau*.

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