Introductory Note to Onfray

written by Doug Ireland | February 22, 2010

MICHEL ONFRAY, the brightest star among the younger French philosophers, is a brilliant prodigy, a gifted and prolific author who, at the age of only 46, has already written 30 books.

I first encountered Onfray on the page when I read his 1989 book*, Le Ventre Des Philosophes: Critique de la Raison Dietetique (The Philosphers' Stomach*), and was completely captivated by his wit, his talented pen, and the prodigious cultural knowledge he displayed. Would Diogenes, Onfray asked, have been an adversary of civilization and its uses absent his obsessive taste for raw octopus? Would the Rousseau of the Social Contract have been such an advocate of frugality if his daily menu had included something more than dairy products? Had not Sartre, whose nightmares were peopled with crabs, suffered his whole life long in his theoretical architecture from his aversion to shellfish? Onfray hooked me with his inventive, amusing, and thought-provoking meditations — and since then, every time Onfray publishes a new book, I pounce! Reading Onfray is a tonic.

The son of a manual agricultural laborer and a cleaning woman, Onfray was a professor of philosophy for two decades, until he resigned from the national education system in 2002 to establish a tuition-free Université Populaire (People's University) at Caen, at which Onfray and a handful of dedicated colleagues teach philosophy and other weighty subjects to working-class and ghetto youth who are not supposed to be interested in such intellectual refinements. Onfray has never forgotten his underclass origins, and his dedication to helping the young of the left-out classes is admirable and inspiring. The Université Populaire, which is open to all who cannot access the state university system, and on principle does not accept any money from the State — Onfray uses the profits from his books to help finance it — has had enormous success. Based on Onfray's book *La Communauté Philosophique*: *Manifeste pour l'Université Populaire* (2004), the original UP now has imitators in Picardie, Arras, Lyon, Narbonne, and at Mans in Belgium, with five more in preparation.

A radically libertarian socialist, a self-described "Nietzschian of the left," Onfray's philosophical project is 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 — while restoring philosophy to a useful role in art, politics, and everyday life and decisions. All this presupposes, in Onfray's philosophy, a militant atheism and the demasking of all false gods.

Onfray is a well- known figure in France — not just through his many books, which avoid academic cant and are rendered in an elegant but accessible, sparkling prose that is admired even by critics who abhor his ideas — but as a frequent guest on French TV's numerous literary and intellectual chat shows. The national public radio network France Culture annually broadcasts his course of lectures to the Universite Populaire on philosophical themes. But Onfray has deliberately rejected the incestuous and corrupt Parisian mediatic-politico-academic microcosm and its seductive but ephemeral blandishments, and insists on living in the small Normandy town of Argentan where he was born, just 57 km. from Caen. Free from the distractions of urban mundanities, Onfray devotes his time exclusively to his intellectual work, which helps explain his astonishing output at such a relatively young age.

In his books, Onfray asks (and answers) the most unexpected questions: in one of my favorites*, Le Désir d'etre un volcan: Journal Hédoniste*, he poses such conundrums as, What do prostitutes have to say to philosophers? What would a philosophy of panache look like? How does one sculpt energy? Can an erection be ancillary to knowledge? Onfray's wide-ranging works have explored the

philosophical resonances and components of (and challenges to) science, painting, gastronomy, sex and sensuality, bioethics, wine, and writing. His most ambitious project is his projected six-volume *Counter-history of Philosophy*, of which two tomes have already been published, with two more ready to appear this year.

Onfray's latest book*, Traité d'Athéologie* (Paris, Editions Grasset), became the number one best-selling nonfiction book in France for months when it was published in the Spring of 2005 (the word "atheologie" Onfray borrowed from Georges Bataille). This book has just repeated its popular French success in Italy, where it was published in September 2005 and quickly soared to number one on Italy's bestseller lists. An acerbic, stylish, and erudite polemic against received religions in general and Christianity in particular, Onfray's latest book is a powerful antidote to the tsunami of religious fanaticism that is engulfing the Western world as well as the Islamic countries, and which is rapidly turning the United States into a theocracy. On the occasion of the publication of his *Traité,* Onfray debated on French national TV a panel of Catholic theologians that included the new Cardinal of Paris, Monseigneur Vingt-Trois (and swatted them all down like flies).

ONFRAY'S INFLUENCE is growing, especially among younger readers, all over Europe (where many of his most important works have been translated into German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Greek and Portuguese), as well as in South America (particularly Brazil), and is even beginning to make its way in China, Japan, and (South) Korea. But I've long considered it a scandal that not a single one of Onfray's 30 books has as yet appeared in English. Happily, that incomprehensible slight to a superb writer and world-class intellectual will be remedied next year, with the publication, on both sides of the Atlantic, of an English translation of the *Traité d'athéologie*. Hopefully this will be but the first of many of Onfray's delicious and substantive writings to appear in the Anglo-Saxon tongue.

Until then, if you can read French and would like to learn more about Onfray, his many books, and his Université Populaire, visit Onfray's website at http://perso.wanadoo.fr/michel.onfray/ You'll be glad you did.

The essay that follows is from one of the forthcoming tomes of Michel Onfray's projected six-volume *Counter-history of Philosophy*. Onfray's essay is the first major synthesis in modern times by a world-class intellectual of the work and life of the 17th century atheist priest Jean Meslier, who spent his entire adult life as a country priest in a small village in the Champagne region of France. Meslier's three-volume *Mon Testament*, published only after Meslier's death, was a revolutionary socialist and utopian communist call for the leveling of all inequalities, commencing as a categorical imperative with the exposure of religion's lies as the "opium of the people" long before Karl Marx. Meslier went to great lengths to insure his extraordinary manuscript's survival, so it wouldn't be suppressed by the authorities of church and State when he was gone. Having willed all his worldly goods to his poorest parishioners, before his death Meslier resorted to what we would now call samizdat, carefully copying — with a quill pen, by candlelight — four complete versions of his 2000-page manuscript, which he deposed in safe hands. It circulated under the table until Voltaire — who had read it three decades earlier and plagiarized from it — chose the moment of his own greatest battle with the Catholic Church to publish a bowdlerized version of Meslier. Meslier was influential and admired in the French Enlightenment — Diderot also borrowed freely from Meslier while rarely giving him credit. One of the most famous Meslier phrases — that the world's liberation would only be achieved when "the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest" — is frequently and erroneously attributed to Diderot. Meslier also became popular among early 19th century liberal Russian intelligentsia, who made French their second language; Pushkin nodded to Meslier when he wrote an 1819 quatrain that says, "with the entrails of the last Pope, we will strangle the last Tsar." (This was one of the poems that got Pushkin sent into administrative exile in South Russia by the

Tsarist police.)

Meslier was also much admired by 19th century American free-thinkers — extracts from Meslier's *Testament* were published here in 1833 under the title "Common Sense," and again in 1878 as a book entitled *Superstition in all the Ages*, a version republished many times (both taken, unfortunately, from the bowdlerized Voltaire edition, which had excised much of Meslier‘s revolutionary politics). Marx much admired Meslier, and quoted him. And when the Bolsheviks came to power, and a stele to the "Heroes of Liberty" was erected on Red Square, Meslier's name was inscribed next to that of Spartacus. The rediscovery of Meslier began with the May 1968 student-worker rebellion in France, which adapted many of Meslier's revolutionary formulations to its own purposes.

Now, with this brilliant essay, Michel Onfray fully restores Meslier to his proper and important place in the history of ideas and the history of the left, and *New Politics* is quite proud to publish it.

Footnotes