

Book Review

Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu: A search for certainty* by Jack Louis Jordan. Birmingham, Alabama: Summa Publications, 1993.

Richard L. Meadows

In his new book on Proust, Jack Louis Jordan seeks to demonstrate that—more than a great author—Proust was also a profound scientific theorist. Defending Proust from accusations of pseudo-scientific dabbings, Jordan claims that Proust was not only acutely aware of contemporary advances in the various scientific fields, but also managed to synthesize these into a wholistic, relativistic theory.

Jordan begins by supporting those—like Camille Vettard—who first maintained that Proust's novel accomplished in the realm of psychology what Einstein's theory of relativity accomplished in the realm of physics (10-1). This analogy holds that both Proust and Einstein discovered limits beyond which the classical sciences were unable to account for certain phenomena. Just as Einstein discovered that the strange behavior of matter approaching light-speed could not be explained within the models of Newtonian physics and Euclidean geometry, Proust found that "involuntary memory" could not be accounted for within Cartesian rationality. Jordan maintains that this discovery of contemporary science's limits inspired each to create a new, relativistic theory in order to recapture a lost sense of certainty.

Yet—for Jordan—while the formula of Vettard marked an important advance in the study of Proust's scientific theory, it was also unnecessarily restrictive. Jordan is quick to point out that Proust's scientific theorizing was hardly limited to psychology—the accepted common-ground between literature and science.

Indeed—as Jordan demonstrates—more recent studies have given ample evidence of Proust's interest in scientific fields as varied as optics, pathology, heredity, and the technology of transportation. Jordan thus undertakes to synthesize the results of these studies in order to extract the wholistic theory which—he believes—governs Proust's scientific theory. In doing so, he arrives at the conclusion that Proust's theory can best be understood “in the light of the first—and only—effort by a psychologist (Carl G. Jung) and a physicist (Wolfgang Pauli) to give a unified view of the nature of the world and man” (86).

Jordan admits that his study “is, to say the least, a large undertaking” (1) and acknowledges “the admitted limitations inherent in its effort to reunite such apparently disparate fields of inquiry” (3). In fact, while his discussions of Proust's use of individual scientific fields are useful and informative, their brevity unavoidably makes for some omissions.

For example, the chapter on Proustian optics—which synthesizes the work of Roger Shattuck, Howard Moss, and others—is generally well-argued and thorough. My only criticism is that it does not mention Louis Bolle's work entitled *Marcel Proust ou le complexe d'Argus* in which a similar argument traces Proust's optical perspectivism to an affirmation of his relativism which—unlike Jordan's own conclusion—leaves little room for certainty.¹

In the next chapter, on transportation technologies, Jordan more convincingly advances the parallel between Proust's work and Einstein's theory. For instance, Jordan deftly compares their analogous use of the train as a model for spatio-temporal relativism (42-3).

The chapter on “Proust and the Human Sciences” is sound overall with some exceptions. For example, the section on pathology seems to be moving towards an association of illness, homosexuality, and the Jewish “race” though this relationship is never made completely explicit. Given Sander Gilman's intriguing work in this area (*Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*), it seems this analysis might have been taken further.²

In his section on heredity entitled “The Naturalist,” Jordan persuasively argues that Proust follows Darwin's thinking to its paradoxical, modernist conclusion: that what seems to obey classical laws of causality on the macroscopic scale relies only on blind chance at the microscopic level (81). However, when Jordan writes that Proust gives “a naturalistic description of man heretofore not seen in any novel, he sidesteps the pertinent comparison between Proust's use of heredity and that of such Naturalist predecessors as Zola. More specifically, Jordan should counter the assertions of those—like Jean-Yves Tadié—who argue that Proust's use of heredity had purely artistic motivations and that he explicitly rejected “un scientisme à la Zola.”³

In his culminating section on Proustian psychology, Jordan follows Gilbert

Durand's example in forsaking the conventional Freudian comparisons in order to advance a more radical parallel with Jung (95). Jordan first draws a very convincing homology between the Jungian theory of synchronicity and the Proustian phenomenon of involuntary memory. He successfully demonstrates that both rely on what Jung refers to as "a causal connection principle" which cannot be explained at the level of Cartesian rationality but points, instead, to "a psychically conditioned relativity of space and time" (95). Moreover, this conceptualization provides an excellent theoretical justification of Jordan's critical method—one that depends on a supposition method—one that depends on a supposition of synchronic, acausal advances in the thinking of various theorists rather than on the classical assumption of diachronic influence.

However, Jordan's discussion of Jungian archetypes found in Proust's work is less compelling. The first archetype discussed—which is of a geometrical nature—relies on common-places of linearity and circularity, verticality and horizontality, light and darkness, etc. Largely because it so amply fulfills the requirements of "essential simplicity" and "universal applicability" (97), it fails to be of much interest when applied to the specific case of Proust's work.

With his second, numerological archetype, Jordan goes to the opposite extreme. His contention that the number "43" constitutes one of the most fundamental archetypes not only of Proust's work but also of the humankind—and, indeed, the entire cosmos—stretches credulity, to say the least.

Perhaps most fundamentally, Jordan's study is open to attack from those who see Proust not as the bearer of some new (relativistic unwilling) prophet of uncertainty, ambiguity, and provisional theories which one hesitantly accepts until their weaknesses become apparent. Besides the aforementioned Louis Bolle, Gerard Genette persuasively argues that—despite Proust's original intention to make his work "the illustration of a doctrine, the demonstration, or at least the progressive unveiling of a Truth" (my translation)⁴—he in fact creates a palimpsest of discordant views which allow for no ultimate synthesis.⁵

University of Virginia

Notes

¹ Bolle, Louis. *Marcel Proust ou le complexe d'Argus*. (Paris: Grasset, 1967).

² Gilman, Sander L. *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985).

³ Tadié, Jean-Yves. *Proust et le roman*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1971) 214-5.

⁴ Genette, Gérard. "Proust palimpseste." *Figures I*. (Paris: Seuil, 1966) 66.

⁵ Genette 51.

