

Jeffrey Johnson. *Creative Development in Marcel Proust's A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. New York: Peter Lang, 2012. xv + 230 pp.

Discussing *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* as the basis of one single philosophical tenet is an unusual approach to Marcel Proust's body of work. Famous critics have looked into numerous facets of Proust's creativity and other essential questions raised by his novels. Jeffrey Johnson's premise identifies "creative idealism" as the essence of Proust's concerns. Johnson then goes on to argue in a long exposé that Proust embraces the Romantic idea that the source of art resides in the self of the artist, tracing this idea through all the themes and issues that Proust treats in his narrative.

Johnson seems to state the obvious. *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* is, indeed, a work of art about the quest of the artist in search of his creative self. One could think of equating this theme to James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or Balzac's *Les Illusions Perdues*, to cite two of many possible parallels. These novels focus on a quest (successful or not) to discover the path that the artist chooses for himself. Thus, it is very much like saying that the earth is round. However, on second thought, proving that the earth is round becomes a more elaborate endeavor than one may think. In the same way, to demonstrate that *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* embodies creative idealism at its core is a complex undertaking. Johnson sets out to illustrate his topic in a convincing way, showing that Proust's quest is unique or reserved only for the "happy few" who have enough self-awareness to embark on a life-long search that derives meaning through creative purpose.

Johnson's perspective in developing his point of view is refreshing. He explains that his approach is originally non-academic but not unliterary. He applies criteria derived from his scientific background of formal studies in zoology, his personal creative and artistic practice, and his forty years of intimate study of Proustian texts.

Another fact that Johnson underscores, relying on a modern structural approach to criticism, is that he makes a clear differentiation between Marcel and Proust: Marcel, the only child, heterosexual man of a gentile mother is the voice and character of the novels and has written very little; Proust, the homosexual man with a brother and Jewish mother, is the writer and creative artist. Johnson's words are always carefully chosen. For example, he employs Wordsworth's distinction between imagination and fancy to make his Proustian case. He reinforces his argument with good supporting evidence when he leans on William James's descriptions of individuals who are particularly sensitive to resonance, transformative or religious illuminations, to explain Marcel's evolution. He recalls Henri Bergson's examination of the unconscious mind. Johnson considers the moment in Proust's thought, around 1808 and 1809, which recognizes the

important experiences of involuntary memory with the unavoidable madeleine and dimension of time. Then he displaces slightly the decisive Proustian “eureka” by showing that, most probably, it could have happened first as a gradual interior growth and second as a specific transformative event. On the one hand, Proust’s physiological and psychological progression was to become a unifying concept for the art of writing. When Proust realized that his own life could be the subject of his novel, he then could show Marcel’s evolution as a writer from cradle to near-grave and establish the essential foundation of a work of fiction. On the other hand, Johnson believes that there also must have been a major event, decisive and transformational, in Proust’s life, thus agreeing with both sides of most critics’ positions. To reach his explanation of the Proustian crucial “decisive moment,” Johnson reviews different studies by famous critics and biographers of Proust: André Maurois, Germaine Brée, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, George Painter, Philip Kolb, William Carter, Jonah Lehrer, and Jean-Yves Tadié. In the final chapter, Johnson merges metaphysics and science to delve into the plane of the Fourth Dimension.

All other elements entering Proustian texts are therefore considered metaphoric vehicles for this single unifying construct of the growth of an artist. Time, déjà vu, memory, place, nineteenth century society, social relations, success, experience, love, friendship, and the nature of creativity are included to support the Romantic precept that the origin of art is in the self.

This last chapter analyzes the concept of the Fourth Dimension already set forth in chapter five, as a vehicle for Proust to visualize his whole life as a sensory continuum. It is an understanding of the unconscious in relation to the self and has links to recessive linearity. Johnson defines recessive linearity as the thread of experience reaching to one’s point of origin, the past. It unifies Proust’s illuminations and metaphysical foundation with the dimension of time. This fourth dimension is presented in a mathematical equation: gift plus talent plus inspiration combined with the need to write gives art-making. Added to the equation comes the logical formula that Inspiration is proportional to Art as Inspiration is proportional to Necessity. Proust would have been able to view his past as a plane, perpendicular to his present existence. Far-fetched or not, Johnson proves his point.

Johnson’s analysis of Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* makes a strong book with an excellent preface, introduction, and epilogue. The seven chapters detail the aspects of Proust’s art based on Johnson’s central concept of the Romantic idea of creative idealism. They gradually develop the idea of identity in one’s century, industrialization, the discovery of the unconscious, importance of place in an interior landscape, personal song of homeland, inspiration, illumination, genius and uniqueness. Overall, the work provides an

original commentary against determinism, based on the concept that the source of art resides in the self of the artist.

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