

Review of *Marcel Proust in the Light of William James: In Search of a Lost Source*. By Marilyn M. Sachs. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014.
311 pp. \$105.00

Marilyn M. Sachs's *Marcel Proust in the Light of William James* takes part in a narrow scholarly tradition of studies that focus on the influences of a single author. Though whole monographs have been committed to identifying individual writers as important sources for Marcel Proust—including Henry James and Henri Bergson—none, Sachs argues, have done justice to the influence of William James. Her book rectifies this oversight by providing a thoroughly researched, exhaustively detailed account of the many correspondences between James's writings and Proust's novels. Sachs illuminates how Proust's aestheticized depictions of mental life echo James's scientific discoveries, leaving larger Jamesian concerns mostly in the shadows. Accordingly, the book will appeal primarily to scholars of Proust, and secondarily to scholars of James or early psychology. Beyond the highly focused beam of scholarly attention devoted to Proust's reading habits, personal relations, and psychological insights, Sachs's study sheds passing light on the relationships between French modernism and American pragmatism, literature and neuroscience, and French literature and psychology.

The primary argument of the book is that James served as an important source for *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Traces of Jamesian thought can be discovered in both its form and its psychological preoccupations. As there is scant evidence that Proust read James directly or even in translation, Sachs surveys discussions of James's work in the French press and Paris's intellectual circles, arguing that his ideas had penetrated Parisian social life sufficiently to influence Proust's conception of mental life. Chapter One argues

that Proust actively drew upon James's ideas, mediated by book reviews, commentaries, and mutual relations. Sachs's meticulous documentation of James's reception in Proust's circles is valuable for its suggestion that indirect influence can still be profound. The Proustian term "pénombre" [penumbra] provides an apt image for such indeterminate spheres of relation. The implications of this suggestion, however, are eclipsed by Sachs's desire to uncover evidence of more direct, conventional influence. Lacking this evidence, Sachs resorts to speculation, leaving the bulk of the chapter's research under-utilized. Fortunately, the remainder of the book sits more comfortably with the notion of indirect influence. Chapters Two through Four argue that Proust's novel aestheticizes James's philosophy and psychology. With wide-ranging knowledge of each author's *œuvre*, Sachs assesses the degree to which Proust and James shared ideas about consciousness, habit, attention, and emotion. This is the book's primary contribution, more comparative than argumentative. Finally, Chapter Five suggests that contemporary neuroscience has confirmed the depiction of mental life found in Proust and James, despite Sachs's contention that neuroscientists have neglected the importance of the latter. Though this chapter ventures into exciting new territory, it is also slowed by its one-note advocacy of James's importance and its literature-review qualities, thus missing an opportunity to clarify James's potential contributions to the intersections of literary studies and neuroscience.

Sachs's knowledge of Proust's biography, intellectual context, and *œuvre* are expansive, and her first chapter lays out in great detail the extent to which James's works and ideas permeated Proust's circles. It describes James's favorable reception in Europe, discussions of his work in the French media (e.g., *Le Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, which Proust read), and commentaries about his work that Proust might have read (by Bergson, Émile Boutroux, and Paul Sollier). This contextual work is most fruitful when Sachs describes the proximity of Proust and James with abnormal psychology in France. For example, the novelist's father, Adrien Proust, was a medical doctor with close

connections to Jean-Martin Charcot, the preeminent French neurologist whose work James draws upon in *The Principles of Psychology*. Paradoxically, however, the success of Sachs's contextualization undercuts one of her repeated claims—namely, that James deserves a privileged place as a “source” for Proust's writings. For example, Sachs describes the elder Proust's work on neurasthenia, hysteria, and “automatisme ambulatoire” [involuntary ambulation]—all concepts important to James's psychology—as forming “a template for some of the thematic material that appears later in *À la recherche du temps perdu*” (15). Yet Sachs makes no further comment on this connection, preferring to make James the point of origin—rather than part of a milieu—for nearly every psychological concept described in Proust's novel. Indeed, Sachs casts her goal in almost mythic terms, as a “quest to identify Proust's provenance”—a search for the “lost source” of the title that would confirm a more direct form of influence (21). Framing the endeavor in this way has the unfortunate effect of de-emphasizing the fascinating contextual ties Sachs uncovers between Proust and James, and it puts an unbearable burden of proof on the book's foremost argument. Consequently, the chapter sometimes resorts to rhetorical questions in lieu of argumentation: “Might Bergson himself have served as a vector for James's ideas to Proust?” (22). Readers are left to supply their own answers.

One of Sachs's central claims is that Proust's masterpiece is thematically structured around distinct aspects of James's psychology: the “stream of consciousness” (Chapter Two), the “fringe” of attention (Chapter Three), and introspective subjectivity (Chapter Four). Most discussion of James in these chapters is devoted to *The Principles of Psychology* and the *Briefer Course*, though Sachs has read widely across his oeuvre. Her emphasis is notable, given that Proust's two direct references to James both refer to *Pragmatism*, the work most widely known in France—a text that appears less integral to Sachs's reading. Nevertheless, her comparisons between Proust and James are impressive in scope. They encompass “how inner feelings arise as personal emotions known only to ourselves; how subsequent thinking about our

sensory experience is a route to knowledge, becoming the ‘*conceptions* and *judgments*’ through which we acquire understanding; how attention and interest drive experience in fits and starts; how sensation, memory, habit, and the experiences of an adaptive pragmatic self allow us to observe, select, and create the reality around us,” and much more (64). Sachs repeatedly juxtaposes long passages by the authors, sometimes revealing how they share strikingly similar imagery. In one such case, James’s image for the “stream” of thought and his critique of psychological quantification are echoed in a passage where Proust’s narrator watches children filling carafes in the Vivonne River; in another, both authors comment on the subjective nature of interested attention by focusing on the image of a railroad timetable (85-86, 265). Even if such comparisons fall short of demonstrating the more direct form of influence Sachs quests after, they offer flashes of insight into how psychological concepts are conveyed through aesthetic forms.

The drawback of this comparative technique is that Sachs tends to find correspondences everywhere, minimizing the differences between the two thinkers. For example, Sachs argues that for Proust, habit is a “blunt instrument” that “masks the underlying reality” of things; thus, his narrator is “escaping habit to attain novelty,” exploring instead a world of fleeting impressions and diffused attention (120-21). Though James would have agreed that habit masks the complexity of reality, he praised this trait for its pragmatic utility, identifying habit as society’s “most precious conservative agent.”¹ Sachs thus obscures the different attitudes Proust and James held toward habit, focusing instead on their similar conceptions of psychological phenomena. By downplaying James’s more pragmatic orientation, Sachs ultimately confirms the modernist canard that habit is antithetical to creativity—a proposition James would have vigorously contested. Habit’s tendency to render certain actions automatic or half-conscious may dull the multiplicity of sensory experience, but it also enables some of our most complex thoughts and creations: “A glance at the musical hieroglyphics,” James writes in *The Principles of Psychology*, “and the pianist’s fingers have rippled through a cataract of notes.”² Sachs also

underplays to the extent to which the “pure experience” of sensory life connotes, for James, a “quasi-chaos” that must be restrained for us to make sense of the world.³ In other words, Sachs often substitutes James the pragmatist with James the modernist, bringing him more in line with Proust’s aesthetic than is probably merited—especially given that Proust’s only references to James are to *Pragmatism*, not his psychology.

Though such discussions show Sachs’s wide reading across James and Proust, they often miss the opportunity to connect with the subfields most relevant to her discussion. Lisi Schoenbach’s *Pragmatic Modernism*, for example, neatly deconstructs the false binary between modernist aesthetics and Jamesian habit, and includes a substantial discussion of habit in Proust.⁴ It is also striking that the single paragraph devoted to distinguishing Proust from other “stream of consciousness” writers (James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson) neglects to mention any critical work on the subject (64). Instead, Sachs builds a scholarly edifice almost entirely out of the two *œuvres* at hand. Her fourth chapter, “From Jean to Je: Experience in the First-Person Singular,” is a case in point. Though its title promises linguistic or narrative analysis, Sachs treats the “first-person singular” as synonymous with first-person point of view—a narrative technique that is discussed in general terms, without reference to any relevant critical or literary discussions. Instead, the chapter primarily compares descriptions of experience in James and Proust; Sachs argues that James’s model of consciousness influenced Proust’s shift from a third-person narrative in his early autobiographical novel *Jean Santeuil* to a first-person account of subjective experience in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. The claim is intriguing in terms of Proust’s *œuvre*, but the argument about narrative point of view remains shakily supported by a number of unarticulated assumptions wanting explication or critical grounding. Ultimately, Sachs makes it difficult for the book to live up to its own arguments, and misses many chances to discuss the larger relations between modernism, psychology, and pragmatism.

Sachs's fifth and final chapter, on James and Proust in contemporary neuroscience, provides a wider framework than the previous chapters. It argues that James's theories about cognitive brain functions and Proust's representations of them have been confirmed by modern science: "James summarized the thinking of his time on these questions, Proust explored them in painstaking detail in his art in ways very reminiscent of James's theory, and neuro-cognitive science now has better tools with which to revisit the same questions and explain the mechanisms" (236-37). Scientists have affirmed James's theory about the brain's essential plasticity, Sachs claims, yet they fail to credit him as frequently as they credit Proust. Though one might agree that Proust gets more attention in studies like (the prelapsarian) Jonah Lehrer's *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*, it's hardly the case that James has been ignored—as one reviewer quips, an alternate title for Lehrer's study could have been *James Was a Psychologist*.⁵ Unfortunately, aside from a few "chicken or egg" discussions about the relations between art and science, Sachs's argument does not advance beyond repeated assertions of James's primacy. Instead, the chapter is primarily structured as a literature review. In several passages, Sachs questions whether the authors under review are "forgetting" James, and in one case, because of an omitted page reference, whether they "had actually read James—something that may not be the case" (259, 234). As with prior chapters, Sachs appears most interested in confirming James's importance for Proust, and for those who have followed in his wake. If contemporary neuroscience has discovered ways in which James or Proust were inaccurate about neuro-cognitive functions, Sachs isn't interested; her priority is to ensure James gets credit where she believes he is due.

In sum, *Marcel Proust in the Light of William James* offers a comprehensive assessment of Jamesian psychology in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and will be useful for those interested in biographical questions of Proust's reading. Those looking for insight into how psychological concepts are translated into narrative aesthetics will find much relevant material, but insufficient nuance in discussions of literary method or technique. Readers interested in

questions about the intersections between psychology, literature, modernism, pragmatism, or science will likely prefer more wide-ranging studies.

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NOTES

- ¹ James, *Principles*, 125.
- ² *Ibid.*, 119.
- ³ James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 32-33.
- ⁴ Schoenbach, *Pragmatic Modernism*, 19-48 and 134-46.
- ⁵ Engber, "Proust Wasn't a Neuroscientist."