

Notes for “William James: The Pragmatic Romantic.” In  
*Romantic Science and the Experience of Self: Transatlantic  
Crosscurrents from William James to Oliver Sacks*. By Martin  
Halliwell. New York: Routledge, 2016. 284pp. \$140

**M**artin Halliwell’s *Romantic Science and the Experience of Self* explores various facets of romantic science after a nineteenth century conceptual shift to empirical science. As such, the author examines the work of five romantic scientists: William James, Otto Rank, Ludwig Binswanger, Erik Erikson, and Oliver Sacks. More specifically, Halliwell’s stated goal is to consider “how and in what ways the self — the conscious self and the embodied self — has endured and developed as a theoretical construct within the medical humanities in the twentieth century” (12). To this end, his introduction describes the history of romantic science, a philosophy which was prevalent from the late eighteenth until the mid-nineteenth century, at which point a different theoretical approach to science took over: positivism. Halliwell distinguishes between positivist and romantic stances by describing positivists as confining social “truths” to natural science, while romantics look to “engage with dimensions of experience which normal science usually ignores” (4). That is, unlike positivists, romantics are reluctant to dismiss spirituality and other highly subjective experiences as being irrelevant to scientific study. Rather, romantic scientists (particularly those in the social sciences) see such experiences as essential to understanding the self from a therapeutic perspective. Establishing that romantics are interested in the mind’s awareness of itself and of seeking to broaden, rather than to limit theoretical possibilities, Halliwell provides insight into James’s influences, speculating as to why James chose to deviate from the fixed narratives of natural or “normal” science.

Since James is the first scientist discussed in Halliwell's book, James's work is effectively positioned as being foundational to understanding the perspectives of scientists considered later in this text. Halliwell offers close readings of James's work, including excerpts from *The Principles of Psychology*, *The Will to Believe*, and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, contextualizing James's ideas both socially and historically, including explanations of how he was influenced by the writings of the romantic poets, as well as Shopenhauer, and Nietzsche. Halliwell argues that James's interest in drawing from various disciplinary perspectives to formulate his views became the basis for the therapies he offered as a psychologist. More specifically, Halliwell writes that the therapeutic aspect of James's work "is a vital dimension of James's romantic science and should not be isolated from his theoretical interest in the active and experiencing self" (26). In this sense, Halliwell connects James's views to those of Emerson not only in terms of pragmatism and a uniquely American spirit of individualism, but also in terms of how we recognize our own consciousness, the therapeutic value of narrative, and how we recount narratives of the self ("self-telling").

According to Halliwell, James's perspectives deviated distinctly from prevailing cultural beliefs about selfhood, individuality, the will, and identity. For instance, James resists nineteenth-century scientists' need to define and determine how we articulate self-awareness, calling for a more open-ended form of "self-telling," that is, as a "discontinuous discourse" rather than a neat linear narrative (53). Like Emerson, Halliwell argues, James considers perception to be an "act" crucial to self-awareness and ultimately, self-help: "for James, without attention to and acknowledgement of narrative possibilities the individual cannot hope to locate him/herself in an open-ended universe" (60). More specifically, instead of adhering to the nineteenth-century belief that neurasthenia (now known simply as "depression") was strictly physiological in origin, James believed this affliction to be more complex. He realizes neurasthenia is a lack of energy, but understands energy as coming from a spiritual source, believing that if we inadvertently block the source

we become depressed. Further, James suggests that the common nineteenth-century solution to neurasthenia (bed rest and a lack of stimulation) might be the exact opposite of what is necessary to overcome it, particularly if neurasthenia is indeed a condition wherein a sense of meaningful connection to the world is missing. Thus, James asks his audience to broaden their approach to and beliefs about neurasthenia by considering possibilities other than those presented by mainstream — or what Halliwell terms “normal” — science.

By discussing subjectivity and different sociohistorical understandings of it — particularly with respect to the relationship between romantic and positivist science, Halliwell provides the reader with a comprehensive account of how James developed his unique version of romantic science. In turn, Halliwell’s work illuminates ways in which James made his mark on the (then) fledgling field of psychology, and moves on to consider how James’s ideas endured well into the twentieth century.

In examining the scholarship of James, Rank, Binswanger, Erikson, and Sacks, Halliwell believes that “the challenge for romantic scientists is to discover a method of inquiry which incorporates subjective interpretation without reverting to metaphysical speculation or dismissing creative expression as the epiphenomena of essential materialist creatures” (5). Halliwell also suggests that each of the men he discusses in this study did, in some way, hit upon such a “method of inquiry” — though often at great personal and professional cost.

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