

Review of *Young William James Thinking*, by Paul Croce.
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017.
392 pp. US\$54.95.

In his wide-ranging 1995 study of William James's intellectual context, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, Vol. 1: *Eclipse of Certainty, 1820-1880*, Paul Croce noted that in James's day, "[s]cientific theories and religious beliefs were becoming less and less reliable road markers toward confident assurance."¹ James, Croce explained, offers an exemplary lens for understanding these cultural trends, for three reasons.

First, his early years span the period of the most intense change of ideas of uncertainty. ... Second, his own background and early life included close contact with some of the major figures and movements in the evolution of uncertainty. He experienced firsthand some of the major temptations, confusions, and traumas of declining certainty of his family teachers and peers. And third, as will even become more apparent in my planned second volume, he not only came to understand the intellectual and cultural place of uncertainty in science and religion, but also devised strategies to cope with it and its difficulties. ... From the raw material of his own life and education, he would construct his own prototype of ways to cope with uncertainty in science and religion.²

With his new book, *Young William James Thinking*, Croce has written his promised second volume, "a companion to the earlier book, with stories and evaluations of the young adult James on his way toward his mature life and thought," revealing significant

historical material that has not seen the light of day for many years, if ever.³ Croce's project is a variation on the theme of James's own early attention to the interaction of material and immaterial aspects of life. This is a work of real scholarship, not a popular treatment: Croce has not put James on a Procrustean bed for the sake of a clean and easily accessible biography. Instead, he gives us the full flavor of James's odyssey as a young man. The reader gets to know him as literally embodying the Jamesian message of a life in full—a philosophy later expressed in James's various writings.

Unlike biographical approaches that follow a strictly chronological scheme, Croce has applied the method of "development biography," a new road in the field of intellectual biography.⁴ The sources—predominantly notes, diary entries, and correspondences—have been arranged in circles focusing on four major themes (see the description below) that Croce argues contributed significantly to the formation of James's ideas for a science that would include something of religious experience rather than denouncing value judgments as irrelevant for a life in full. Croce's book, it should be noted, is addressed to everyone interested in William James. While the average reader will be surprised to discover a philosopher in the making and find comfort in James's struggle with life's challenges, the academic/professional reader familiar with James's published writings and mainstream interpretations will certainly be surprised to see how James's (later) philosophical key terms already take shape in his early notes and how they subtly change in James's basic writings, e.g. the essays in *The Will to Believe*, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and *Pragmatism*.

After a brief opening ("An Invitation"), Croce's introduction ("Almost a Philosopher") offers a general account on James's context. The body of the text is organized around Croce's aforementioned four themes. Chapter 1, "First Embrace of Science," portrays James's study of mainstream, materialist science and culminates in his expedition to Brazil with Agassiz, serving as an antipode to James's first work in the laboratory. Chapter 2, "Between Scientific and Sectarian Medicine," shows James both

studying and using healing practices shaped by scientific naturalism and by alternative healers with an interest in body-mind interactions, and provides extensive insight into the world of Harvard Medical School. Chapter 3, "The Ancient Art of Natural Grace," focuses on James's studies in Germany and his affinity for Greek art and the Stoics: "Their [the ancients] focus on depths of meaning in nature provided a resource for his program of future science, in critique of scientific tendencies to reduce experience to material forces."⁵ Chapter 4, "Crisis and Construction," is an examination of James's developing strategies to cope with the complex tensions "that grew from familial and societal expectations, vocational indecision, frequent ill health, [and] awkwardness with women..."⁶ The book closes with a conclusion called "An Earnestly Inquiring State." Croce's notes are a rich trove of both published and unpublished sources. Brief quotations in the main text have been arranged in the footnotes as chunks, in order to avoid long lists of sources for single-lines. An impressive example of James's artistic skill is his drawing, "The Head of Alexandrina," one of the book's sixteen illustrations.⁷ The bibliography is extensive and first-rate, provoking curiosity and paving the way for further research. A chronology consisting of a careful selection of significant biographical dates is given on the first pages.

In Chapter 3, Croce musters substantial evidence in favor of his main hypothesis that James's vision of a pluralistic universe aims to unify science and religion. Readers are likely not to have previously realized how attracted James was to the worldview of ancient Greek and Stoic thinkers. Croce states that "James was drawn to both the Stoic cosmic picture of Reason in the world and the commanding role for the will in human life."⁸ As Croce explains, "[a]t the core of Stoicism was a belief that everything exists from the power of and in conformity with universal Nature, also named with words that can be translated as Reason, Logos, Destiny, Creative Fire, God, Providence, Soul of the World, or just the All."⁹ Referring to James's diary entries, including his record of visits to Dresden's Zwinger-Museum, Croce provides valuable insight into how James processed what he saw with his own eyes. In comparing plaster casts

of ancient art with the modern examples, Croce writes, James “observed what came naturally to the ancients, and he experimented with ways to reduce the prevalent modern dualistic divide between nature and the transcendent.”¹⁰ An extended treatment of James’s encounter with Charles Renouvier’s philosophy of volition is given in Chapter 4. Here, as in many other cases, Croce brings new material to light and integrates it into his narrative of young James’s thinking, reporting, for example, on James’s doubts regarding Renouvier’s “secular outlook,” and giving evidence for James’s preference for “the more obscure French Catholic mystic Jules Lequier.”¹¹

Although Croce sometimes allows the time frames to overlap, he arranges the material consistently and displays James’s diverse interests and ambivalences in detail. He includes sufficient explanatory asides that provide the reader with relief from young William James’s darker thoughts and conflicting feelings. At times, this challenges the reader’s patience, but the author’s explanatory power is terrific, and his skillful way of organizing the material is impressive, enabling the reader to identify with the many struggles the famous philosopher went through as a young man in the formative periods of his life.

From this reviewer’s point of view, the main argument of Croce’s extraordinary book lies in the ‘while-reading-experience,’ for it confronts the reader with James’s inner life as revealed in unpublished primary sources. It is principally about the formation and transformation of first-hand life experience into philosophical statement, argument, and method. This book does not primarily focus on a readership that takes a distanced look at a philosopher’s life; instead, Croce encourages an immediate encounter with James by both the material he uses and the way of arranging it in four ‘circles.’ Croce’s biographical method thus fully accords with James’s spiritual message: life is not a step-by-step linear process—such as it is normally sketched in biographies—but a display of each person’s own forms in their full fact and concreteness. More pointedly, Croce succeeds in drawing the reader’s attention to the multiplicities and off-shoots of James’s formative period that

eventually find expression in his published writings—often to the perplexity of traditional James scholarship.

Perhaps the last century of James scholarship would have looked different if the “crisis-recovery narrative” had been pursued *along with* an analysis of the posthumous decisions about James’s literary remains taken by his family.¹² For example, only a few James scholars have since called into question the sharp disciplinary line between William and his brother Henry. And since there is still ample material James scholars may use to pursue further inquiry, other results may be possible.¹³ In any event, Croce’s book opens new discussion on the relevance of a philosopher’s private notes. As Croce lets us know right from the beginning, James himself would have rather preferred to keep them private. But the biographer’s license to reveal “the flesh-and-blood people involved” seems to this reviewer justified by the noble intention of reaching a better understanding of James’s mature work.¹⁴ If James had established a philosophical system of abstract ideas—as many of his opponents did—his private thoughts and stories, his personal feelings and reflections would have probably been less important, and even that assumption might be challenged.

In other words, whether Croce’s method of ‘development biography’ works for *any* philosopher might be an open question. In James’s case, however, Croce’s approach is convincing, for James himself propounded a philosophy of the fullest fact and concreteness based on first-hand life experience. Given Croce’s earlier core concept of uncertainty that provides the explanatory framework to understand why James’s own life experience became the backbone of his philosophy, the early notes addressed in *Young William James Thinking* yield valuable insight and have considerable explanatory power.¹⁵

From a historiographical point of view, James’s philosophical contribution fits well with the idea of the American Renaissance: James makes such use of the ancient Greeks’ worldview that the subtitle of *Pragmatism* offers a clue for interpretation: *A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. On these grounds, Croce’s book reinforces one mainstream interpretation of James. Yet Croce’s

book goes even further. By interpreting his results as evidence for James's life project of negotiating between science and religion, he recalls the reader's attention to a long-marginalized scientific discourse. More pointedly: "medical materialism"¹⁶—today's neuroscience—is gaining ground again, blurring James's most important distinction between existential and spiritual judgments. Hence, in bringing up James's contribution to a 'future science,' Croce manages to shed light on a significant current debate.

In sum, Paul Croce's *Young William James Thinking* provides important primary and secondary sources to strengthen the argument that the Stoics offered James a model conception of how to combine nature/science and religion with respect to a 'future science,' and puts an inventive method of biography-writing to the test as a means of concretely setting forth James's approach to philosophical practice as a pluralist affair. As its title promises, Croce's take on James thus arguably comes much closer to James's *thinking* than many other biographies: Not only does he confront the reader with James 'in the making,' he also encourages his readers to rethink philosophy not as a matter of abstract ideas but, as James would have stressed, an encounter with life—a risky leap, indeed.

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NOTES

- ¹ Croce, *Science and Religion*, 226.
- ² Croce, 226.
- ³ Croce, *Young William James Thinking*, 7.
- ⁴ See Croce, "Development Biography."
- ⁵ Croce, *Young William James Thinking*, 171.
- ⁶ Croce, 25.
- ⁷ Croce, 61.
- ⁸ Croce, 166.
- ⁹ Croce, 165.
- ¹⁰ Croce, 180.
- ¹¹ Croce, 228.
- ¹² See Menand, "William James," 3–30.
- ¹³ See Loerzer.
- ¹⁴ See the novelist Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's review of Richardson's *William James*.
- ¹⁵ See Croce, *Science and Religion*.
- ¹⁶ James, *Writings*, 30.