Paul Stob’s *William James and the Art of Popular Statement* is an exceptionally insightful addition to the ever-growing list of Jamesian studies. Drawing from a 1903 letter to F.C.S. Schiller in which James writes, “I believe popular statement to be the highest form of art,” this diligent and penetrating book explores the role of popular statement in James’s life and work. Stob argues that “[t]he art of popular statement was far more than an aside in James’s career. It was integral to the way he carried himself, to his interactions with colleagues, to his choice of venues for speaking and publishing, to the discursive style he adopted, to the conversations he influenced, and to the intellectual bonds he fostered with his fellow citizens” (xv). *William James and the Art of Popular Statement* masterfully blends historical and contemporary secondary literature (rhetorical, sociological, and philosophical) in order to present a careful and contextualized reading of James’s correspondence, lecture notes, and published articles and texts. The result is a novel rhetorical and sociological analysis of how and why James’s civic-minded philosophy captivated the American public. In short, Stob presents James as an “intellectual populist,” a “reconciler of epistemological differences,” and ultimately an “intellectual champion of the people” who confronted the “aristocrats of the mind” and argued that “intellectual power should be returned to the people” (xvi).

The book begins by situating James within the transitioning intellectual cultures of eloquence and professionalism of his day, documenting the shift from civic to specialized (scholastic and professional) modes of inquiry, production, and transmission of knowledge (introduction and chapter one). Stob then proceeds to argue that James’s evolving rhetorical practices of popular statement serves as “a kind of corrective” (xvi) which attempts to mediate the specialists’ monopolization of knowledge by reconfiguring intellectual discourse within a more pluralistic and egalitarian framework (chapters two through six). The work concludes by highlighting the rhetorical elements of James’s art of popular statement: “oral style,” “topical breadth,” “professional ethos,” “intellectual collaboration,” “intellectual participation,” and “personal empowerment.” Stob’s central claim throughout is that “James’s commitment to popular statement ultimately led him to a different kind of thought, a different epistemology, a view of science, religion, and philosophy that revolved around ordinary people and their experiences and perceptions” (xv-xvi). For James “[t]he art of popular statement was a threat to specialization, expertise, and the in-group language of academic inquiry. It was, at the same time, a way of creating a vibrant public sphere by inviting people to participate in civil society.” (xxvii-xxviii).

Chapter One locates James within the changing intellectual culture of the nineteenth century. Caught between the decline of a “culture of eloquence” and the rise of a “culture of professionalism,” James grew up amidst “competing systems of knowledge, which carried (and still carry) very different consequences for intellectual accessibility, participation, power relationships, and discourse” (xvii). In his youth James witnessed (and later studied) the civic-minded rhetorical prowess of his father Henry James, Sr., and family friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, both of whom were “giants of the culture of eloquence, modeling for him an artistic, oratorical, visionary, and civically minded form of engagement” (3). Equally important, however, were the figures of Benjamin Peirce (Charles Sanders’s father), Asa Gray, Jeffries Wyman, Louis Agassiz, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., all of whom James studied with at Harvard. Under the influence of the latter group, James had access to “resources for surviving—and, indeed, thriving—in an era of acute scientism” (23) and its ethos of...
expertise. Stob characterizes the gulf between eloquence and professionalism as a source of “productive tension” from which James actively confronted the challenges of modern intellectual discourse with the hope of “keep[ing] alive the spirit of inquiry that defined his youth” (xxv).

Chapter Two draws from James’s fifty anonymous book reviews published between 1865 and 1878, and challenges the standard scholarly view of them as “largely insignificant when compared to his later work” (xxv). In Stob’s deft hands, these early reviews become “sites of intellectual invention that allowed James to develop many of the ideas, arguments, and strategies of his subsequent work” (xxv). Through a careful analysis of selective themes, Stob depicts James as an “intellectual mediator” (51) and “reconciler of epistemological differences” (67) that straddled the growing linguistic, professional, and epistemic divide between specialists (academic and professional) and the general public. Experimenting with various rhetorical strategies for addressing the burgeoning tensions between modern science and public culture, the young James learned the importance of rhetorical style as a means of determining the character of the relationships between writer, readers and ideas (94). These early efforts of mediation and style were brought to a head in James’s 1878 lectures at John Hopkins University and the Lowell Institute: in them, James emerged from anonymity and put into practice the strategies he developed as a book reviewer to work through the escalating social tensions between professional inquiry and public culture.

Chapter Three, which focuses on the various permutations of “Talks to Teachers on Psychology,” argues that James’s opinions regarding public lectures are best revealed by his practices rather than the fickle commentary expressed in his personal correspondence. Working the lecture circuit of the 1890s, James delivered his “Talks” twelve times. Stob suggests that the lecture series/text is best viewed as a distinct work whereby James collaborated with specific groups of teachers across the country, honing his rhetorical skills to such a point that he transformed his popular statement into a “practical art” (71). Mindful of the growing rift between science and society, James’s “Talks” went beyond the mere application of psychology to pedagogy; these carefully crafted lectures “worked with [teachers] on bettering themselves, their professional predicament, and their place in a democratic society” (xxvi).

Chapter Four, “Speaking up for Spirits,” depicts the social and epistemic aspects of James’s ongoing engagement with psychical research. Focusing on James’s public defense of psychical research in the 1890’s, Stob notes that the rhetorical and epistemic arguments James developed with the hope of legitimizing psychical research can be understood as the “turning point in James’s development as a public intellectual” (xxvi). Stob’s analysis suggests that James’s failure to legitimize psychical research aided his overall trajectory as a public intellectual. Negatively, this failure “resulted in the popular-professional divide that shaped the remainder of his career” (xxvi). More positively, however, Stob maintains that this professional failure provided him with the necessary rhetorical tools to develop a “populist epistemology.”

Chapter Five focuses on the maturing quality of James’s rhetorical abilities, showing the evolution of his public intellectual personae and the transition from engaging intellectual that lectured to the public to an active collaborator working with the public. Stob reads “The Varieties of Religious Experience” as a “carefully constructed public performance” (xxvii) that functioned as “an alternative to the exclusionary tendencies of Science, Philosophy, and Theology” (152). He argues that “for the purposes of the Gifford lecture, [James] deployed a populist discourse to question the world of academic professionalism so prominent at the time and to affirm the widely
participatory, eminently pluralistic intellectual culture he envisioned” (153). In response to professionalism’s “unnecessary antagonism in the pursuit of knowledge,” James’s “populist” epistemology matured insofar as it went beyond his former work by building his thought around the beliefs, feelings, and perceptions of ordinary people (xxvii).

The book’s last chapter attends to James’s most important contribution to creating a new intellectual culture. Stob’s analysis centers on the “oratorical birth” of Pragmatism and “the difference that James’s commitment to public lecturing made in the tone, texture, appeals, and character of the [democratic] philosophy” (192). He claims that “[p]ragmatism became America’s intellectual creed in large part because of the rhetorical choices James made on the lecture circuit from 1898 to 1907” (192). Through a careful sociological analysis of the text’s oral and rhetorical character, Stob persuasively argues that “Pragmatism was the culmination of James’s intellectual populism and his pursuit of popular statement because it not only commanded the nation’s attention but fostered an intellectual community in which ordinary people could gather together, craft the ideas that would serve their lives, and overthrow the philosophical aristocracy of the day” (193).

William James and the Art of Popular Statement has many notable qualities, and space permits this reviewer to mention only three of its contributions to Jamesian studies. First, Stob’s work adds to a growing body of literature (e.g. Joshua I. Miller, Kenneth Ferguson, Francesca Bordogna, and Colin Koopman, to name but a few) that moves away from viewing James as a “rugged individualist…blind to the social problems of his time” (xxviii) and takes seriously the social and political dimensions of James’s work. As Stob writes, “to insist that [James’s] emphasis on the individual came at the expense of communal and social concerns misses the point of his work on the lecture circuit and in popular periodicals. James entered the forums and venues he did to build a new type of community and to push society into new directions…The art of the popular statement was about creating a community of individuals” (236, emphases added). Second, alongside the work of Eugene Taylor, G. William Barnard, Ann Taves, and Francesca Bordogna, Stob’s rhetorical and sociological treatment of James’s work in psychical research provides a fresh reading of an important yet often neglected aspect of James’s thinking. One can only hope that this endeavor to sincerely engage with James’s psychical research constitutes a new trend in the scholastic treatment of James’s pluralistic thinking. And lastly, Stob’s book enriches our historical and factual understanding of James. For example, thanks to recently published material, Stob has verified that James did in fact present a version of “Talks to Teachers” at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences in 1894; previous scholarship has been uncertain as to the actuality of the lecture.

At the same time, however, William James and the Art of Popular Statement has its limits, a fact that Stob regularly acknowledges in his text. Rather than offer a synoptic view, it focuses on “turning points in his development and in his relationship with intellectual culture,” and these snapshots, Stob argues, are “enough to reveal the contours and substance of his eloquent vision” (xxv-xxiv). Given the text’s relatively short length, it is reasonable that Stob restricts his focus to particular lectures and texts that best illustrate James’s rhetorical and social concerns, yet he nonetheless leaves the reader desiring more comprehensive commentary: sustained treatments of the Hibbert lectures (published as A Pluralistic Universe), the Ingersoll lecture on Human Immortality, and the “Talks to Students” could richly add to the text, for example, yet they are all absent.
Most problematic for this reviewer is the absence of a rhetorical and sociological reading of James’s radical empiricism. Stob’s justification for the absence of “The Will to Believe” lectures is as follows: “while it would certainly be possible to place an analysis of the text in the overall development of James’s art, the fact was that James accomplished more by delivering The Varieties of Religious Experience” (xxiv-xxv). Two points need to be considered here, one which concerns form and the other addresses content. In regard to content, James’s preface to The Will to Believe provides us with an entryway into the epistemic and public dimensions of radical empiricism—despite the fact that he does not explicitly express these sentiments. In this manner, the lectures and addresses that comprise The Will to Believe significantly differ in content from Varieties insofar as they serve as “illustrations of the radical empiricist attitude” and that James’s concern focused on the utility of these ideas in the market-place (The Will to Believe [1979], preface 7-8). Thus, while it might not be as “accomplished” as Varieties, it certainly provides solid ground for future exploration. With respect to form, the lectures and addresses that comprise James’s Will to Believe are largely directed toward a collegiate student body. Along these lines, an analysis of the lectures/text could provide Stob with an added public dimension insofar as we see how James engaged the younger generation of scholars and professionals. Accordingly, an engagement with Will to Believe would raise a variety of questions: what impact did James’s rhetorical or oratory techniques have on the younger generation?; how did these public engagements shape the trajectory of James’s popular statement?; how does his early radical empiricism fit into the picture?; etc.

These slight concerns notwithstanding, William James and the Art of Popular Statement is a masterful presentation of James’s engagement with public audiences. It comes highly recommended and is appropriate for a wide range of audiences. The text will easily enrich courses in communication studies, philosophy, and sociology: graduate students will appreciate Stob’s solid scholarship and undergraduates will be grateful for his elegant prose. William James and the Art of Popular Statement is a significant contribution to the field of Jamesian studies and a most welcomed edition to any personal library.

Ermine L Algaier IV  
Department of Religion  
Temple University  
ermine.algaier@temple.edu