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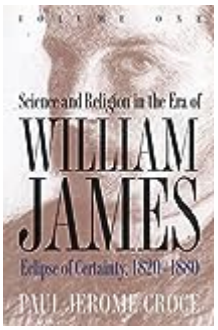

Paul Jerome Croce. *Science and Religion in the Era of William James: Ecplipse of Certanity, 1820-1880.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. v. <1 >. $55.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-8078-2200-5; $32.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4506-6.

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In his masterful autobiography, Henry Adams recalled the impact that Darwinism had on his generation and the education they received in the middle of the nineteenth century. He was, he said, a Darwinist "because it was easier than not." Nothing else seemed to comfort the unease that he and his generation felt about their lives. "As though the world had not been enough upset in his time, he was eager to see it upset more. He had his wish but he lost his hold on the results by trying to understand them....Henry Adams was the first in an infinite series to discover and admit that he really did not care whether truth was, or was not, true. He did not even care that it should be proved true, unless the process were new and amusing. He was a Darwinian for fun." Adams continually lamented the lack of education that left him unprepared for an uncertain world; instead, he argued, his education had prepared him for certainty and assurance about his place in the universe.[1]

Henry Adams often mocked the uncertain world he faced in the middle of the nineteenth century. But despite his own resignation regarding Darwinian science, the problems of truth and falsity that he recognized were serious ones for the "generation of 1840." Paul Croce, in his brilliant *Science and Religion in the Era of William James: The Eclipse of Certainty, 1820-1880*, suggests that the problems of truth and falsity were central concerns of mid-nineteenth-century American culture. William James took these problems as seriously as any philosopher or scientist in the nineteenth century, and he directed his entire philosophy toward an assimilation of the impact of Darwinian science on faith and belief. Croce's study focuses on the shock of uncertainty in science for mid-nineteenth-century intellectuals, and the attempt to reconcile religious faith with the new demands for scientific fact and inquiry.[2]

Croce's study is not a biography of William James. His goal is much broader than a study of James's life and influence - in fact, James himself appears only occasionally in this first volume of a projected two-volume work. It is instead what Croce calls "cultural biography" - a genre gaining increasing interest in the study of American cultural and intellectual history. Croce studies what he calls a "community of inquiry": a generation of scientists, philosophers, and intellectuals dedicated to asking similar questions about meaning and truth in science and in religion.[3] The work, he argues, "focuses on the intellectual and cultural context of James's early development, and in telling that story, it is also an interpretation of the way James became a central figure in a far-reaching cultural trend away from certainty in science and religion" (p. x). Two broad trends in recent historiography influence Croce's approach to the intellectual

and cultural life of Victorian America: the examination of epistemological uncertainty in the history of science and social science; and, the interest in secularism and "unbelief" in nineteenth-century American religion.

The studies of uncertainty in nineteenth century science, Croce argues, have uncovered the "language of tentative but plausible probabilities"(p. 7) in scientific method and inquiry. Rather than an intellectual world of progress, order, and assurance, historians have recognized the "probabilistic revolution" as a defining discourse of Victorian intellectual life. Croce argues that although historians of science have recognized the role that uncertainty played in the development of professional science and social science, they have generally paid little attention to the broader cultural influence of uncertainty and chance in social life. Historians of religion, on the other hand, have paid attention to broader trends in social thought by focusing on secularism and unbelief in American religion. But this scholarship had also been limited by a lack of attention to concurrent developments in the nascent professional scientific community of the nineteenth century. Even those scholars who have examined the impact of scientific rationality on Christian faith and belief, Croce argues, have not fully appreciated the "probabilistic" revolution in American intellectual life. William James, he suggests, provides the focal point for joining these realms of historical scholarship. James's interest in both the world of faith and the world of rational science allows Croce to examine "the emergence of a culture of uncertainty when intellectuals of religion and even of science came to a recognition that wholesale certainty could not be achieved"(p. 16). It is in this context, he concludes, that mid-to late-nineteenth-century intellectual and cultural life is "the era of William James."[4]

Croce begins his study by examining the influence of Henry James, Sr., on the eldest of the five James children. The elder Henry James inhabited an intellectual world far different from that of his five children. Henry James, Sr., was raised in the stern Presbyterian world of his father, the first William James. The wealth provided by his father's estate allowed the elder Henry James a leisure to pursue the life of a spiritual philosopher, and his varied intellectual interests in religion, the nature of spiritual faith, and the meaning of scientific fact and inquiry. His obsession was the education of his five children in freedom and spirituality -and these would be the first interests of his son William: "When [Henry] James raised his own children, he hoped to maintain their natural innocence for as long as possible. He insisted that their unencumbered development would be more important than any formal instruction....Henry James bathed his children in freedom and enforced nothing on them, except of course his insistence on freedom itself..."(39-40).

Henry James's philosophy was a mixture of mysticism and scientific rationality. As a young man he rejected the stern Presbyterianism of his father and searched for a more satisfying solution to his intense intellectual and spiritual needs. He found his answers in the mysticism of Swedish philosopher and scientist, Edward Swedenborg. For Henry James, Croce writes, "the path to spiritual creation lay in weaning humanity away from its prideful focus on self in favor of a redemptive union with the divine"(p. 60). Swedenborg's interest in the dual nature of Christ, the human and the divine, fired Henry James's interest in science and faith. Spiritual principles, James agreed with Swedenborg, were the foundation of scientific inquiry, and the divine revealed itself in nature as much as spirit. In Henry James's philosophy - as with the ideas of many intellectuals in the early to mid-nineteenth century - scientific research would serve as a confirmation of spiritual interests and ideals.

Henry James imparted to his five children this interest in the union of spirit and science. As Croce suggests, Henry James's influence over his children was profound, and his involvement in raising his children unusual for a father in the mid-nineteenth century. It was in the intense intellectual atmosphere of the James household that William first began to work on the problems of faith and reason, truth and falsity. Croce's patient handling of these early interests reveals the impact that private pressures can have on the education of children in the nineteenth century. But William James, Croce argues, would eventually find his father's answers to the spiritual nature of scientific inquiry less than satisfying: "William James found his father's spirituality constraining, overconfident, and unsuited to the intellectual challenges of his generation...The spiritual liberation of the father," he writes, "became the intellectual shackles of the son"(p. 66).

In this context, Croce examines William James's famous troubles over his vocation as in part a reaction to the unanswered questions regarding science and spirituality prompted by his father's philosophical inquiries. When he finally settled on a scientific education at Harvard University's Lawrence Scientific School in the early 1860s, the intellectual world his father had so carefully preserved in the James household was falling apart. It

left the young William James unprepared for the newly emerging intellectual universe: the impact of Darwinism on science and faith. But unlike his contemporary, Henry Adams, James was not a Darwinian for fun. The methods and implications of Darwin's work became the starting point for the young philosopher's career, and his examination of belief without certainty in modern life.

The "shock of Darwin" is the central subject of the rest of Croce's study of the early influences on James's thinking -both on William's own scientific education as well as the impact Darwinism had on his teachers. The real Darwinian revolution, Croce argues, went far beyond the impact of evolutionary theory on religious conceptions of creation. "The Darwinian revolution," he writes, "epitomized a sea change away from the assumption that scientific research can provide certainty and toward a branch of science that found plausible, persuasive explanations as patterns in the midst of indeterminate events"(p. 88). Throughout the nineteenth century religion and science existed in increasingly separate realms of experience. Empirical, Baconian science seemed far removed from the world of religious faith; and, personal religious experience, with an emphasis on a faith of the heart, had little to do with the demands of scientific inquiry.

Many intellectuals sought to "heal the breach" between empiricism and faith, and bring science and religion together within one intellectual universe. Henry James's search for certainty in spirituality and science - especially his personal discovery of Swedenborg - was one of the most influential factors in young William's life. The breach became even wider, however, with the work of Charles Darwin, who offered a persuasive argument in favor of a developmental theory of species but not Baconian "proof." William James's education took place in the midst of heated intellectual debates about the veracity and meaning of Darwin's ideas. His father's spirituality had less and less of a hold on William James. He accepted neither the militant anti-Darwinian position on the part of Darwin's opponents nor the anti-religious position of many of his adherents: "The major shock of Darwin for James turned out to be the great biologist's method and its implications for science and religion," Croce argues. "Because the theory of natural selection was a plausible explanation rather than a proof of the origins of species, James began to doubt the need to expect certainty in either his science or his religion"(pp. 109-110).

The last three chapters of Croce's study focus on the intellectual circle that influenced James's early scientific education and his quest for solutions to the problem of certainty. Louis Agassiz, Asa Gray, Chauncey Wright, and Charles Sanders Peirce, among others, became his teachers and guides in a search that led him far away from his father's intellectual world. James's education at Lawrence provided him with a solid grounding in the methodology and arguments of scientific inquiry. Louis Agassiz and Asa Gray, for example, were two of the leading commentators in the United States on the implications of Darwinian science. His younger teachers and colleagues, such as Chauncey Wright and Charles Peirce, exposed him to an even wider range of philosophical and intellectual debate. Their discussions in the loosely organized association of younger intellectuals were a training ground in philosophical argument. Their debates revealed to James the uncertainty and probability of faith as well as science that his father had denied: "The younger philosopher would develop a host of theories that involved an embrace of uncertainty in the form of flexibility, practicality, openness, will, risk, freedom, and pluralism…James's philosophy was a response to the proposed certainties that he saw all around him in scientific and religious assumptions of his culture, in his father's ideas, in his teachers, and even to a certain extent in the scientific thought of Chauncey Wright and Charles Peirce"(p. 223).

This brief review cannot do justice to the subtlety and sophistication of Croce's examination of James's early education, and the intellectual circle that influenced him. Nevertheless, two broad questions occur in reading this first volume of Croce's work. The first has to do with the term "cultural biography," and the place that a public culture might have in an examination of a key figure in nineteenth century intellectual life. James and his circle at Harvard were just one group that attempted to deal with the realities of Darwinian science. Others in James's generation - a number of positivists for example - reacted in different ways to the implications of Darwinian science. One hopes that the broader "public" will somehow make a more definite appearance in the second volume of Croce's study - expanding the impact of a culture of uncertainty outward from a small community of philosophers in Cambridge, Mass. Although Croce does address the problem of the public when he examines the work of Charles Peirce, we still want to know if the philosophers of a culture of uncertainty speak to and for a broader public culture. Croce's study brilliantly illustrates the complex relationship between James's family and private troubles as well as the larger public community he was involved with at the Lawrence Scientific School. If cul-

tural biography seeks to place thinkers in their contexts, then a view of the public culture that their work engages with would help clarify the impact that uncertainty had on late-nineteenth-century American cultural and intellectual life.[5]

A second and related question occurs when we consider the role of gender and class in the public culture and intellectual life of mid-nineteenth-century America. Croce recognizes that factors such as social class, status, and gender provided James and his intellectual circle with the social power and leisure necessary for their philosophical inquiries into uncertainty. Moreover, Croce suggests in his introduction, "an even more direct connection between mid-nineteenth-century concerns over science and religion and late-twentieth-century scholarly assumptions is James's role as grandfather to our embrace of diversity....philosophical certainty generally had cultural correlations to dominance by elites and rationalizations of mastery by upper-class European males. James was a pioneer of the shift away from the power of those ideas of certainty and their cultural manifestations..."(p. 20)

But Croce makes only fleeting reference to this insight into the origins of pluralism in this first volume, and never considers the role that gender (or class) plays in nineteenth century intellectual and public life. For example, exactly how did certainty have connections to male power in public and private life? How did the embrace of uncertainty in Darwinian science - the recognition of belief without certainty - alter the division of male and female power? Croce suggests early on in his study that the reversal of gender roles in the James household - with Henry James having enormous influence over the emotional lives of his children - had an impact on William's understanding of the culture around him. Moreover, Alice James makes only a few brief appearances in this first volume. One would like attention to the often strained relationship between Alice and William, and the intellectual impact that the intense atmosphere of the James household had on her emotional and intellectual concerns. Cultural biography generally seeks to go beyond the immediate lives of one subject in order to examine a thinker's life in a variety of often competing cultural and intellectual contexts. If James spoke to and shaped a broad public culture troubled by uncertainty in faith and reason, what role did private and public concerns about gender play in the implications that uncertainty had for nineteenth-century American culture?[6]

These questions, however, do not take away from the intelligence of this study. Croce's book is a remarkable example of recent cultural and intellectual history, especially as a model for a "cultural biography" that goes beyond the study of a life. It is a study of thinking as much as thought, and treats the process of intellectual inquiry as a dynamic element in nineteenth-century cultural life. *Science and Religion in the Era of William James* should not only renew historical interest in Victorian intellectual life, but also shift debate about the legacy and meaning of nineteenth century uncertainty for science and religion.

NOTES 1. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (1918. Reprint. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), pp. 225, 231-232.

2. See Donald Bellomy, "Two Generations: Modernists and Progressives, 1870-1920," *Perspectives in American History*, n.s., no. 3 (1986): 269-306. George Cotkin also discusses the common ground of the "generation of 1840" in his biographical study of James. See Cotkin, William James: Public Philosopher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), esp. pp. 22-29.

3. In this sense, Croce shares David Hollinger's definition of discourse in the study of American intellectual and cultural history as well as his concerns about James's philosophical interests. See David Hollinger, "William James and the Culture of Inquiry," in David Hollinger, ed., *In The American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 3-22; and, David Hollinger, "Historians and the Discourse of Intellectuals," in ibid., pp. 130-151.

4. See especially James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

5. George Cotkin does deal with James as a "public philosopher" but the scope of his project is smaller than Croce's examination of the culture of uncertainty. See Cotkin, *William James: Public Philosopher*. There are a number of recent studies in the realm of cultural biography. See, among many others, John L. Thomas, *Alternative America: Henry George, Edward Bellamy, Henry Demarest Lloyd and the Adversary Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1983); Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and America Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); Joseph Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). Two recent studies also fall into this category, although both were unavailable to Croce at the time of his publication: Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's*

Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1900 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); and, David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995). All of these studies go beyond the immediate lives of their subjects to try to understand the cultural and intellectual forces that shaped nineteenth and twentieth century intellectual and cultural life.

6. See Louise Stevenson's insights into the nature of intellectual work by men and women in the mid-nineteenth century: *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), esp. pp. 156-181; and, the insights of Sklar (although this was not available to Croce) in *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work*. Both of these works examine gender as a central organizing principle for public intellectual life in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America.

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