

A MANNERED MEMORY AND TEACHABLE MOMENT: WILLIAM JAMES AND THE FRENCH CORRESPONDENT IN THE *VARIETIES*

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ABSTRACT

Traditional views of the “French ... correspondent” reporting panic fear in the Varieties portray the anonymous William James in crisis followed by a Charles Renouvier-inspired commitment to free will, as a first step in his philosophical career. Revisionists propose that the intellectual path was less important than his personal troubles, and that the incident did not even happen prior to the philosophical commitment. There is, however, no evidence of the incident’s timing at all. Instead, the stylized and religious tone of the writing suggests that it is a composite and mannered memory drawn from a lifetime of experience and learning from moods of weakness and despair, which James enlisted to display the attractions of redemption for the “sick soul” temperament. In telling the story, James drew on both his personal difficulties and his intellectual development to create a potent teachable moment in his book on religious experience.

How irrelevantly remote seem all our usual refined optimisms and intellectual and moral consolations in the presence of a need of help like this! Here is the real core of the religious problem: Help! help!

—William James, 1902, *Varieties* 135

After a few month one feels well again, or at any rate, one can work again, and so one staggers on.

—William James, 1904, *Varieties* 507

I had a crisis ... which was more philosophical than theological.... Why God waits on our cooperation is not to be fathomed—but as a fact of experience I believe it.

—William James, 1874, *Correspondence*, 4:489

The “crisis of William James” is a well known but mysterious moment in American culture and the history of philosophy. It is at once an alluring story with limited and scattered pieces of evidence, and an important starting point for James’s own career and theorizing. The surviving sources are slim and elusive enough that James almost seems to be toying with us to

keep the case mysterious and dramatic.¹ James's youth floats like a surreal preface to his established career, and is often enlisted within the prefaces of works evaluating his life and thought. The importance of the crisis as a potent story in its own right and in relation to James's philosophy has also spurred scholarly detective hunts into this period to shed light into the darkness of evidence and develop narratives that will fit with the rest of James's career; much of the hunting, however, has involved more speculation than investigation. At the center of these searches is the case of the passionate "French ... correspondent," in "panic fear," cryptically anonymous in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* chapter on "The Sick Soul," even though he later said this was his own self. Despite the slim evidence, this incident has received a very wide range of interpretations ranging from traditional views emphasizing James's philosophical development with the crisis displaying a problem solved by his reading of Charles Renouvier and endorsement of free will, to revisionist views that emphasize the personal and psychological dimensions of the crisis, especially his troubles with his father, with his career, and with his sex life. However, new light can be shed on the incident by returning to the evidence about James's use of the story three decades after his youthful troubles in his text on religious experience; in that setting, James tells the story to explain the condition of humanity in spiritual despair seeking hope, comfort, and redemption.

THE TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE

In 1920, ten years after his death, James's son, the third American Henry James, launched a very plausible crisis-and-recovery narrative linking the French correspondent's panic fear story with William's declaration of a "crisis" in his April 1870 diary and his reading of Renouvier's philosophy. This was an important step beyond previous views, which had effectively overlooked the crisis years; for example, Émile Boutroux, in *William James*, makes no mention of any troubles stating delicately that during from 1869 to 1872, he simply "assumed no professional obligations." The sequencing from crisis to philosophical recovery made sense based on the conventional understanding that "crisis" meant an unambiguous trouble and on the assumption that the use of this word in the opening line of his Renouvier diary entry was indeed a reference to the *Varieties* text. The son conjectured a chronology: "perhaps it was during the winter of 1869-70." Reasoning backwards from indications of recovery in the diary entry, he gave a reason for the date: "one of the note-books contains an entry dated April 30, 1870, in

which James's resolution and self-confidence appear to be reasserting themselves." This line would become a centerpiece of James's reputation since the adoption of French philosopher Charles Renouvier's resolution for free will was "not only illuminating with respect to 1870, but suggests parts of the 'Psychology' and of the philosophic essays that later gave comfort and courage to unnumbered readers."² James's son gave a tidy answer to the mystery by very plausibly, but with little evidence, suggesting that the youthful problems were a prelude to an intellectual resolution, with the whole youthful period serving as the taproot for much of his mature theorizing.

Ralph Barton Perry amplified the view of the *Varieties* incident as indication of psychological troubles in *The Thought and Character of William James*, adding a scolding tone about the panic fear text and any suggestion of religious impulses in it: it was "a pathological seizure rather than a spiritual crisis," and it was "symptomatic of his desperate neurasthenic condition during these years," enlisting the prevalent diagnostic category of James's time for depleted energy and loss of will. He admits that the desperate Frenchman showed James's "understanding of religious mysticism," which in itself he associated with the "morbid mentality," but it primarily was a "hallucinatory adventure." Perry assumes the timing to be "between his return from Europe [in 1868] and the definitive improvement of his health in 1872, ... probably in 1870, just prior to his conversion to Renouvier." Perry christened the now-conventional wisdom about the turn from personal problems to philosophy with the religious word "conversion," but with secular meaning: it was a "personal crisis that could be relieved only by a philosophical insight" as a secular substitute for religion: Beginning with Renouvier, James developed "the gospel of belief.... To believe by an act of will in the efficacy of will." The turning point was a start but not a cure; his theories were his cure.³ Without questioning the identity or timing of the *Varieties* incident, Perry confirmed its place at the shadowy beginning of a philosophic career.

Gay Wilson Allen's *William James: A Biography* expands on the psychological characterizations of the crisis as a pathological incident, but remains within the philosophical interpretation. Creating his own detective language, he refers to James revealing "a crucial phase of his own psychological drama ... in his secret diary and in a disguised 'case history,' which he later published in his *Varieties*." The upshot of the drama was "James's later doctrine of 'The Will to Believe,'" but the very uncanniness of the case also foreshadows his "interest in faith

healing and psychic research.” The psychology folds into the intellectual interpretation with James from the time of his youth “desperate ... to find ... answer[s],” and the crisis illustrating that his search was a “symptom of his sickness.”⁴

S. P. Fullinwider’s “William James’s ‘Spiritual Crisis’” assumed that the *Varieties* story can be “dated from 1868 to 1870,” and he followed the interpretation that James was in trouble because “he needed a philosophy to lift him out of his depression.” But the philosophy he turned to was based on psychology—not his own troubles but the theories of his times. The “then-current definition” of James’s self-described “melancholia” and “nervous weakness” was “nervous exhaustion” or “neurasthenia” due to “loss of ‘nerve force.’” Fullinwider then shows that it matches the narrative of mental illness presented by the emerging profession of neurology in the 1860s to 1880s: the “exhaustion ... of the higher centers” allowed “the lower centers” with their “savagery [and] automatism” to gain control of the mind and bring insanity through a “loss of the sense of self.” According to the reigning views, “introspection was a step towards insanity,” and so, at the time of the crisis, by the terms of the theory, he “*was going insane.*”⁵ Rather than explore elements of James’s psychology in development that could have generated those dire feelings, Fullinwider turns to James’s later, fully developed ideas in arguing that his desire to escape the insane feeling of unreality in the youthful crisis “explain[s] how James arrived at his central theories,” by explicitly “attack[ing] ... the higher-lower doctrine, and not trying to exercise self-control over his lower nature.” Like the traditional narrative, this is a story of intellectual response to the crisis, but with neither Renouvier’s free will nor religious concerns. Instead, the crisis was a first step in James’s “transition from the philosophers’ ‘essences’ to a world—and a self—of process.” In fact, Fullinwider focuses on James as a psychological theorist of immediate experience, putting behind him the questions of “ultimate reality” of the crisis.⁶

Bruce Kuklick, in *The Rise of American Philosophy*, does not mention the *Varieties* case as he reviews James’s abundant youthful “physical ills ... [and] depression.” Kuklick turns immediately to theoretical issues: he was deeply bothered by scientific advocates such as Herbert Spencer whose determinism and materialism meant that “human existence had no meaning.” Instead, James embraced Renouvier whose voluntarism suggested a place for mind and the choices of the will even within science’s understanding of the natural world.⁷

Jacques Barzun's *A Stroll With William James* "find[s] heroism from the very start of William's odyssey," whose opening scene features the French correspondent in morbid fascination with an asylum patient; "like a painter," James had "objectified [Thomas] Huxley's [scientific] view of man as automaton, giving visual equivalents for the horror, vacancy, and desolation that the conception implied." Only once he could think of himself "as an active and rational being" could the vision "recede by degrees," and even then it required the "long intellectual analysis" of his theoretical work. Reinforcing the accepted thread from panic fear to ideas of Renouvier to all later theories, Barzun artfully rephrases the conventional wisdom: "James in his twenty-eighth year had forged in the throes of adversity a set of working principles by which to build a character. They were at the same time to determine the shape of a philosophy."⁸

REVISIONIST INTERPRETATIONS

The crisis-and-recovery narrative emphasized the intellectual character of James's problems and their solutions: Renouvier's ideas, or some equivalent, saved James from his personal doubts and intellectual worries, generally in a fairly swift conversion allowing him to begin his career and to create theories that replicated his personal solution in useable forms for others. Horace Kallen, in *The Philosophy of William James*, expressed the theme with terse pride in the power of thought: "what healed him was the attainment of his philosophy."⁹ Revisionists of the last few generations have reacted against this traditional reading of the crisis, by emphasizing psychological issues rather than intellectual formation in the young James. The chronology of the undated *Varieties* text has served as a lever for overturning the traditional views. Howard Feinstein proposed that the panic fear incident happened in the fall of 1872, two and a half years after the proclamation about Renouvier: therefore "there is no evidence that [Renouvier] had any effect at all ... on James's health." In fact, it was the very attraction to Renouvier that was a major part of James's problem, Feinstein argues: he needed to "stifle himself, ... force himself away from the philosophic speculation he loved." Excessive reflection disturbed him because it showed parallels to Henry James, Senior's youthful crisis, and William "feared that biology tied him inevitably to his father's fate."¹⁰

Feinstein's reasoning for the fall 1872 timing of the panic fear incident is based on circumstantial, if suggestive, evidence in some letters of the early 1870s. First, just one week

after bravely quoting Renouvier in April of 1870, William wrote to his brother Henry that, still, “I feel melancholy as a whip-poor-will”—so much for being recovered and converted. And yet he went on to say, in the same letter, “I have at last, I think, begun to rise out of the sloughs of the past three months.” Second, however, Feinstein presents as further evidence that even in a letter to Renouvier himself in 1872, James said that “my health ... has been very bad for several years.” Since that timing sweeps back over the supposed conversion to Renouvier, Feinstein concludes that therefore, “reading Renouvier had [not] produced such a dramatic improvement.” Tacitly bowing to the traditional view linking the French correspondent and Renouvier, Feinstein simply reverses the order of events. And so, Feinstein concludes that “in the fall of 1872, William broke down as his father had done,” and claims that “the date of this ‘crisis’ [the “panic fear” story] can be fixed through internal evidence,” by referring to an April 1874 letter to his brother Robertson in which William speaks of “a philosophical crisis associated with anxiety and despair.”¹¹

Feinstein regards the 1874 letter as a smoking gun for showing that the *Varieties* incident happened *after* the Renouvier diary (thus demoting its significance as a spark to philosophical innovation), since William speaks of “a crisis” he had had “just before and about the time of your last visit here”—which was in November of 1872—more than two years after the diary resolution praising Renouvier’s ideas about free will. Instead of Renouvier-style talk, William’s description of “a theoretical crisis” does indeed sound like the *Varieties* case: in it, there is a “need of knowing the truth, which after reaching a greater or lesser point of distress terminates in a faith.” As with the French correspondent, William shows sympathy for the comfort that comes from quieting the intellect (not “perpetually reinvestigating the warrants for ... faith”). Then “the sound thing to do is simply to go on living with it [faith] inside of you as a motive and an inspiration,” as he went on to say with little spirit of striving will.¹²

As with the *Varieties* story, there is no clear statement that William is describing himself here. He refers to a “theoretic crisis” rather than something his own personal issues. He is actually summarizing back to Robertson “what you say” about the “theoretic settlement of your relations to God & the universe.” Even more important, William goes on to compare his own struggles in sharp contrast with Robertson’s efforts; he distinguishes his own attitudes from his brother’s distinctly religious character: William said his “crisis ... was more philosophical than theological,” because it “did not deal with my personal relations to God as yours seems to have

done.” Then William shows his hope to strengthen his will: although the crisis “was accompanied with anxiety and despair &c—I worked through it into the faith in free-will and into the final reign of the Good conditional on the co-operation of each of us.” The end of the letter, with moralistic style—so different from the weakened and prayerful French correspondent—reveals problems with Feinstein’s reading: even if it would suggest the revisionist timing, it does not support the revisionist unimportance of Renouvier. William’s description of his “more philosophical than theological” crisis closely matches Renouvier’s arguments for “faith in free-will.” In other words, far from rejecting the French philosopher, William found support in Renouvier’s philosophy of free will for his own prior philanthropic faith. Then the earlier part of the letter, reviewing Robertson’s condition, coincides with the *Varieties* story as a display of the importance of comforting religious faith for “The Sick Soul” psychological type, with which he had full sympathy, especially in moments when his will was not feeling strong.¹³

Beyond challenging Renouvier’s influence, more revisionist works have focused on psychological explanations, and thus they have tacitly de-emphasized the development of James’s theories in general. Even before Feinstein’s work appeared, Cushing Strout’s “William James and the Twice-Born Sick Soul” helped to inaugurate a psychological reading of the crisis. Although he set an early date for the panic attack, between 1866 and 1869, he linked “this paralyzing recollection” to medical literature on insanity of the time, especially William Acton’s *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, about which James may have known (however, there is no evidence). Such works linked “the habit of introspection” with “the temptation of masturbation,” and both to the “threat to sanity.” With his “sexual frustration,” this “hideous figure [in the *Varieties* case], we may speculate, objectified ... the self-punishing guilt in his own symptoms.” In addition, vocational problems made James feel hemmed in: he was “ambivalently attracted and repelled by both science and philosophy—an ambivalence connected with his feelings about his father’s wishes, attitudes, and example.” Strout did not neglect intellectual issues, observing that from the crisis on, James established his own identity—by separating from his father yet “com[ing] to terms with his father’s teachings”—by “very slowly bid[ding] farewell to his scientific career and gradually mov[ing] from psychology toward those deep interests he shared with his father in religion and metaphysics.”¹⁴ Strout’s

interpretation shows personal troubles on the way toward—and even prompting—the fields of interest of his mature work.

In Strout's own work, he readily points out that many of his ideas came from collaboration with Howard Feinstein, who focuses on William's close ties with his father in *Becoming William James*. He observes that Henry James, Senior, without a clear vocation, imposed his ambivalence on the son, plunging William "into a mire of confusion and conflict over the choice of a vocation." The problem began with Henry's own father, who was stern, unreflective, very rich, and eager to keep Henry from inheriting money until he showed a more conventional vocational direction. Henry never did, but he was able to break the will in court; yet the triumph turned into a family curse, Feinstein argues, because it generated a "struggle over vocation and ... self-definition." William's depression stemmed from "his rage over the bind he was in" by being "a dutiful son" who was never able to satisfy a quixotic father. Feinstein depicts William reluctantly turning to science to save himself from speculation, with a spirit of grim duty: downplaying William's own keen interests, he argues that the father "forced ... the son ... into science." As William's depression deepened and he professed to be saved by Renouvier's doctrine of free will, Feinstein argues that the vocational and family problems were more important than theories: "Instead of freedom of the will, William needed to be freed from the will—his own and the testamentary shadow cast by [the grandfather]." ¹⁵

Sander L. Gilman's *Disease and Representation* expands on Strout's sexual theme. Based on the psychological evaluations of masturbation in the medical literature of the nineteenth century, Gilman associates James's "self-abuse" with the panic fear representing "a direct fear of receding into madness as a result of his own behavior." Gilman amplifies this reading with an engraving from Jean Etienne Dominique Esquirol's *Des maladies mentales*, an 1838 medical text, which depicts, according to Gilman, an insane masturbator, who visually happens to match James's verbal description. Although there is no evidence that James read Esquirol, Gilman also quotes Henry Maudsley's *Body and Mind*, a medical text James certainly knew—he read, reviewed, and taught other Maudsley books. Without making any claim to evidence in James's case—and selecting the medical evidence from Maudsley—Gilman argues that the conventional wisdom treated masturbation as richly symbolic of the slide into insanity because it encouraged "morbid sensations," sapped mental energy, and encouraged "suspicious

self-brooding.” These were things that James periodically exhibited, although the literature on the psychological impact of masturbation also cites traits that he did not show at all.¹⁶

Marian C. and Edward H. Madden’s “The Psychosomatic Illnesses of William James” assesses the crisis in terms of learning theory and James’s large proliferation of illnesses. They similarly begin with the father, not with his ideas, but with his “utterly pervasive” influence as a parent, especially his lack of commitment, which in turn prompted William’s tendency toward indecision and his development of psychosomatic illnesses at each juncture of commitment avoided. The crisis was simply one particularly intense example, one which they date to “soon after his ... March 9, 1870” diary entry about his beloved cousin Minny Temple’s death. As with all his troubles, they maintain, James “misconstrued what was cause and what was effect in his psychosomatic illnesses.” Moreover, “symptoms [were] ... produced by the occasion or even invented retrospectively,” and the psychological motivation was that “one can’t fail in an enterprise he is unable to undertake.” On the panic fear itself, although the Maddens point out that there is “little or no evidence to suggest that it was as intense and debilitating as he described it,” they do not doubt its existence in James’s youth, and so it was “magnified by the neurotic state in which James was nearly always immersed.” The Maddens also suggest that these psychosomatic tendencies influenced his theorizing, in his recognition that “all dimensions of mental life ... affect the physical functioning of the body.” Even though they also recognize that “physiological states ... to some extent determine what occurs in the mental world,” they do not pursue the implied intersection of mind and body that was so important to James. Instead they adhere to strictly dualistic assumptions: because “no physical cause was ever found for these assorted symptoms”—meaning by implication no modern medical diagnosis—“the only conclusion to draw is that the disorders were emotional in origin.”¹⁷ To the Maddens, James’s luxuriant array of mental, physical, and social problems show that he was a hypochondriac in the modern sense: the problems were all imaginary, that is, in his head.

Kim Townsend, in *Manhood at Harvard*, does not hesitate to say that “the most penetrating exploration James ever made into what precisely he was contending with during these years [of the early 1870s] is to be found in the culminating example that he gave in ‘the Sick Soul,’ in the *Varieties*.” Like Feinstein, Townsend dates the “panic fear [to] 1872,” and following Gilman, he emphasizes Esquirol’s treatise on mental illness and its depiction of an insane masturbator. He infers James’s guilty mood very indirectly: Equirol’s patient is named

Aba, which also happens to be close to the Hebrew name for father, Abba. In later years, James's friend John Jay Chapman in conversation noted the importance to simple-minded people of the presence of God. Such a creature would "cry out, Abba, Father!" Chapman observed that with those words, "James started like—not a guilty—but angry thing surprised, and a trap door opened under the interview." Although the inferences are lurid, there is very little evidence to support this reading of the crisis. Moreover, masturbation is not a major player in Esquirol's book, even if evidence could be found that James did read it. In his chapter "On Madness," he cites masturbation as a cause of madness in only 11 cases out of 235; and when it comes to sexual causes of madness, he even adds that mania can also be "caused by continence"—given James's extreme awkwardness with women and his vow not to marry, this may have been a more immediate issue.¹⁸

EDGING BACK TO THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

In recent years, most works that deal with the young James have returned to the traditional reading about the crisis culminating in philosophical fruit even while often making some use of revisionist scholarship, but with more emphasis on religious thinking. In fact, most recent interpreters have mingled the schools of thought, generally taking the fact of the panic fear incident in James's youth for granted, with various intellectual and psychological routes to his soon endorsement of free will on the path to his mature philosophy. Henry Samuel Levinson, in *The Religious Investigations of William James*, makes no reference to revisionist views but makes use of its chronologies in his tacit endorsement of traditional views through depiction of stages of personal and philosophical resolution: the Renouvier reading was at the heart of the first stage; without explicitly referring to the *Varieties* incident, Levinson argues that James turned to "religion as a second stage of cure for philosophical melancholy." This reinforced the first stage, and therefore, "only in response to [the consolations of religion] did he commit himself to certain habits of mind suggested by Renouvier," and thus Levinson connects the conversion to free will, now with a religious accent and central to James's youthful crisis period. The net result was a transformation from "a life of 'merely cognitive or intellectual form' in the years around 1870," characterized by an "apathetic existence," and "his life thereafter, which was often charged with breathtaking energy."¹⁹

Erik Erikson's *Identity: Youth and Crisis* follows the traditional narrative and chronology, but emphasizes that the crisis experience was an "expression ... of a prolonged identity crisis." He refers to the tensions between James's embrace of free will and the French correspondent's religious impulses as the contest between "stubborn selfhood" and "the surrender to some higher identity." The ultimate importance of the crisis to Erikson is that through it James began to develop his psychological theories with ideas that are "the basis of psychotherapy, which"—in the spirit of the Renouvier diary—"aims at the restoration of the patient's power of choice." Robert Michaelson's "Identity and Conversion" similarly says that during James's "shattering angst," scripture texts sustained him, but the incident also pointed to tension with the father, who in trying to protect the son "could not provide [him] access to maturity." James was then only finally redeemed by Renouvier and free will, which "sustained James for a lifetime."²⁰

James William Anderson, in "The Worst Kind of Melancholy," looks to James's December 1869 letter to his physiologist friend Henry Bowditch as evidence that "the fragmentation experience [cited in the *Varieties*] occurred in the autumn of 1869." Beyond that chronology, Anderson assumes the skeptical spirit of the revisionist outlook in stating that James's "philosophical concerns" were "inextricably tied to psychological factors."²¹ However, the psychology Anderson points to is his emerging volitional theorizing to cope with "lack of will" rather than his own psychological traumas.

In "William James and the Life of the Mind," Mark Schwehn points to James's "acute vocational crisis that exacerbated the depression that he experienced from 1867 to 1873." He cites James's temptations to suicide in the winter of 1867-68, while so lonely in Germany, and proposes that by the time he returned to the US the next fall, he was already "broken in body and mind." Without mentioning the *Varieties* case, Schwehn emphasizes the "critical turning point" of reading Renouvier, which along with reading poet William Wordsworth, allowed him to overcome materialist philosophies. Armed with this "healthy state of mind" generated by philosophical answers to his problems, he argues, James was able to take on work, and the theories he soon developed in "critique of vulgar naturalism" came from his personal resolutions forged during the crisis.²²

George Cotkin's *William James, Public Philosopher* tacitly follows Feinstein's chronology, with the *Varieties* story taking place after 1870, but goes on to claim its specific link

to an April 1873 diary entry that expresses a great fear: the struggling young man seemed to identify the famous “panic fear” incident with “a concrete description of the ‘abyss of horrors’ or the ‘Maya’ ... dread ... [of] a world ... marked by flux and indeterminacy.” James was tapping his fascination with ancient religion to explain the notion that the phenomenal world is unreal, and this in turn suggests a connection to his father’s spiritual philosophy. Although Cotkin recognizes the psychological conflicts of the revisionist outlook, especially Feinstein’s emphasis on the vocational struggles with his father, he does not “lose sight of the degree to which William consistently symbolized, and in the process expressed and repressed, these disputes into philosophical discourse.”²³ Like his father, he maintained a deep interest in depth spirituality, translated onto his own terms.

Charlene Seigfried, in *William James’s Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*, places the youthful crisis period squarely at the starting point of his philosophy, but only as a first stage. Closely following the traditional narrative about crisis and recovery through embrace of free will (but without mentioning, in this section, the *Varieties* incident or Renouvier), Seigfried argues that James overcame his “despair over the meaninglessness of life by asserting the right to believe.” This first bold stage is not a full prelude to his later philosophy, however, because “in his earliest writings the young James has not yet abandoned the philosophic quest for ultimate answers.”²⁴ She adds that later developments veering away from guaranteed truths were prompted by later crises, when he similarly refined his philosophy in response to personal and theoretical questions.

Frederick Ruf’s *Creation Out of Chaos* reviews the intellectual and psychological readings of the crisis period and proposes a theme that would permeate James’s concerns: “the image through which he perceives himself ... is that of paralysis.” Ruf then follows the traditional view in both chronology and interpretation. He states that “the French correspondent incident takes place ... between the fall of 1869 and the spring of 1870.” And he sees the first bloom of James’s mature thought in these years. He does not mention Renouvier or the April 1870 resolution for free will; however, he argues with a similar if more general theme that in response to the problem of paralysis, of inaction, James was able gradually “to achieve his own motion.” Then over the next few years, his recovery of health emerged with his development of theories of mind “flowing beyond narrow fixed limits” that had made him feel so immobile. With a similarly speculative and metaphorical outlook, Bush in *Halfway to Revolution*, mentions

Renouvier and the *Varieties* crisis in separate parts of his book, and offers no one particular theme about the crisis; he does, however, suggest an array of personal, social, and intellectual interpretations. James's "hypnagogic vision" displayed his "longing to escape the crudeness of American materialism and the naturalist ethic of 'survival,'" his own "desire for reassurance and love," his awareness of "the shock waves of the implausibility of religious description after the death of God," and the "fascination of the upper bourgeoisie" that he shared in "the 'world of spirits.'"²⁵

Historian Tom Lutz, in *American Nervousness*, calls the *Varieties* case James's "spiritual autobiography" from "an event in the early 1870s, when James was having trouble finishing his medical studies." As with the traditional view, Lutz notes that James emerged from the crisis with "a new career and a new philosophy," and his evidence is his turn to philosophical issues and his 1870s diary entries on Renouvier. And so, "his philosophical conclusions" were "the answers to personal crisis." Lutz also calls James's crisis "neurasthenia"—as did James, but only years later, about this case, but also about other medical problems he repeatedly coped with. Similarly Bennett Ramsey's *Submitting to Freedom* places James's crisis in the context of the "spiritual crisis of the Gilded Age," frankly borrowing from Paul Carter's general contextual book of that name. Putting less emphasis on James's own personal path, Ramsey focuses on the loss of meaning that came with modernization and secularization. James's turn to private religious experience was representative of a popular reaction to these cultural problems.²⁶

Eugene Taylor, concentrating on the post-1890 period in *William James on Consciousness Beyond the Margin*, does not mention the *Varieties* incident, but says that "[Chauncey] Wright's brand of positivism" drove him "nearly to suicide by 1870," a slough from which he "recovered by reading Wordsworth and Renouvier." In an earlier essay, "James on Psychopathology," Taylor mixed some psychological readings with this intellectual argument for James's early problems: James was "tossed back and forth between the deterministic materialism of science and the free will of philosophy;" and that "dilemma was perhaps symbolic of the struggle between his own choices and the will of his father."²⁷

Philosopher Gerald Myers defended the power of philosophy by emphasizing the Renouvier diary entry and not mentioning the *Varieties* incident. James's declaration for the French philosopher's free-will position confirmed "whether a fundamental pessimism can be avoided." Myers supports this firm defense of the traditional view by saying that it can only be

“doubted by those who believe that a philosophical issue is not powerful enough to cause or resolve an emotional crisis.” Murphy, in *Pragmatism*, reviews James’s feelings of “horrible dread” also without mentioning the *Varieties*, but he proposes that James “lift[ed] himself out of his depression by the strength of his own will” as inspired by Renouvier.²⁸ These views emphasize the healthy-minded, willful sides of James’s thought, downplaying his religious interests.

By contrast, religious studies scholars tend to emphasize the *Varieties*. Ann Taves, in *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, does not mention Renouvier in evaluating the *Varieties* case of James’s “own experience ... as a further example of the sort of psychopathic temperament exemplified by John Bunyan,” another case James mentions along with his own anonymous case. James as French correspondent sets the stage for James the religious seeker. In bypassing James’s willful impulses, she emphasizes the “sick soul” side of his thought, arguing that in the *Varieties*, he was “moving toward” the “pluralistic, panpsychic, radical empiricism that came to full fruition in *A Pluralistic Universe*.” Similarly, Julius Rubin’s study of *Religious Melancholy* reviews James’s physical and mental symptoms and separately discusses the *Varieties*, but sidesteps his other views of free will and moral striving.²⁹

Donald Capps, in the essay ““That Shape Am I”” (with title words taken from the French correspondent’s own fearful worry about identifying with the asylum epileptic patient), states flatly that “the breakdown occurred when he was 28 years old (in 1870),” and he follows Strout, Gilman, Townsend, and Lewis in proposing that it was a result of guilt over “auto-eroticism.” He bases this argument on James’s mention of his “moral degradation,” and the medical literature’s propositions that “epilepsy was ... caused by auto-erotic self-masturbatory acts.” After this frank borrowing from the revisionists, Capps defends the core of the traditional view by stating that “the turning point occurred in late April [1870],” when James declared for Renouvier and free will in his diary. However, by the time he wrote the *Varieties*, he simply “no longer believed that he could lift himself from the depths by his own act of will;” this follows the trend among religious studies scholars to emphasize the James of religious belief rather than the James of willful striving. And the reason James did not offer more explanations about himself were, Capps suggests following a psychological hint from philosopher Myers, that “James simply was not very self-analytical” or that he was “reluctant to speak negatively about his parents.”³⁰

Alfred Habegger, in *The Father*, offers a new twist on the theme about James's theoretical construction: his adoption of Renouvier's free-will philosophy was a "qualified version of his father's religion" because it would "take the creative power his father ascribed to God alone and parcel it out to each thinking individual."³¹ This is a more forceful and explicit version of the readings, such as Perry's, of James as a secularizer of religious views. This interpretation also solves a tension in the traditional interpretation because he portrays James's moralism not as an outlook in conflict with his religious sensitivity, but as a kind of democratized version of it.

Richard Gale, in *The Divided Self of William James*, believes the tension endures between James's moralism and his religion. With the anachronisms of twentieth-century philosophical language, he calls the *Varieties* case his "experience of existential angst in 1868." Gale argues that it demonstrates the weakness of free will in the face of morbid problems. This expresses James's mystical side that could not sustain the "Promethean self" and its "morally strenuous life." Although he does not mention Renouvier, he implies that James's attraction to free will is at the center of that other side of James's philosophy. While most interpreters make no attempt to reconcile these contrasting sides of James and of his crisis period, Gale joins Julius Bixler in emphasizing that the two sides existed in creative tension through his youth, with James remaining "a highly divided self throughout his life."³²

Linda Simon in *Genuine Reality* tacitly places the *Varieties* incident in the early 1870s although she registers a hint of skepticism about whether it is an actual primary source: Without doubting its timing, she notes its lack of fit with the rest of James's thinking of the time, observing that, "there is nothing in James's correspondence or journal entries for the period in which the attack occurred to reveal any religious conversion or epiphany." Instead she points out, following the traditional view, he registered a "belief in free will" with his April 1870 diary entry on Renouvier. Similarly, Louis Menand in *The Metaphysical Club* describes James's "deep depression" and many physical ailments in the winter of 1869-1870, but does not mention the *Varieties* case. Menand emphasizes James's turn to Renouvier, but points out that he continued to have troubles for years. He suggests that they were "psychosomatic disorders" and that the French philosopher did not cure him, but "James believed that Renouvier had cured him," which adds an ironic psychological grounding for Menand's reinforcement of the traditional view about the crisis launching James's mature philosophy.³³

REMEMBERING HIS TROUBLES, WRITING TO TEACH

The thinness of evidence between James's return from Germany to study physiology in October 1868 and his appointment in August of 1872 to begin his teaching career has invited a wide range of explanations about his "crisis," with eagerness to understand the launching moments of America's most popular philosopher. There is an impressive variety of interpretations. The very thinness of the record, combined with the diversity of James's thought, have made his youth a flexible platform which has been turned to show the young James aiming in many directions. And yet, questions remain about the crisis itself and James's French correspondent. What happened that spurred this gripping story of panic fear? Words and traits of the event, emerging from the story itself and from the times, can provide clues. This article concludes with attention to the words neurasthenia and crisis, the three-decade gap between proposed incident and the account, and the religious resolution of the story as told.

At the time, the incident in the asylum would have been recognized as a feature of neurasthenia. Although this medical outlook has been widely discredited, a few interpreters (Perry, Fullinwider, Lutz, and of course James himself) have recognized this dimension of the times and of James's own thinking. The term itself was a new diagnosis, coined and explained by George Beard in 1869. Neurasthenia means "nerve fatigue," resulting in the "want of nervous force," just as anemia "means want of blood." It provided a physical, neurological explanation for a "vast array of symptoms," most notably depression, anxiety, morbid fear, and hopelessness, but also many other mental troubles and physical pains throughout the body. Like modern physiological medicine emerging in the late nineteenth century (which James was studying in medical school and in Germany in the 1860s), neurasthenia identified physical causes for ill health; however, with the predominance of subjective symptoms in its etiology, the disease was presented as a result of functional problems in the nervous system—notably exhaustion of the tissues—rather than a set of problems caused by organic impairment. James's description of his depleted energy is similar to the way Beard and his colleagues used the metaphor of contemporary industrial engines that have a limited storage of energy in danger of being used up, because "men, like batteries, need a reserve force." James used this self-realization about his own battery of energy to make a modest but firm resolution: he had an impulse for "narrowing and deepening the channel of my intellectual activity, of economizing my feeble energies."³⁴ His

resolution shows that his good mood of this period was punctuated by earnest expectations for himself, along with a realization of the fragility of his mental and physical health. And both of those traits—his drive to learn and his constitutional weakness—suggest that he and those around him would have perceived his problems in terms of the nervous exhaustion diagnosis.

For James, as for many of his peers, such nervous exhaustion culminated in a crisis. At the time, this was a familiar word associated with the ideas of water-cure practitioners. While such practices are now widely associated with leisurely spas, in the nineteenth century they were a form of medical practice, one of the non-mainstream sectarian forms of medicine that circulated widely, including in the James family. When James went to Germany for scientific study, he also went to many water-cure establishments in search of improvements for his many physical and mental symptoms. Water-cure practitioners emphasized the power of nature's cures, fostered through a wide variety of water applications. Organisms are in a constant state of "appropriation and secretion," taking in and letting out substances both healthful and harmful. One significant cause of disease, they proposed, was congestion, with the body holding on to decaying matter, and health coming with its release. The body had its own natural mechanisms for removal of unhealthy material: Sweating drives such matter through the pores of the skin, and excretion could release still more. To supplement these processes, various baths would change the configuration of the blood vessels and other organs. Practitioners had confidence their cold water could constrain the capillaries even more effectively than drugs—without their often unhealthy side-effects. Careful distinctions in the use of temperature for different patients also applied to different types of illness. For example, "persons with shattered nerves must, under all circumstances, carefully guard against taking cold," instead "diseased nerves must be tranquilized not excited" and such patients need "temperate water" which "gradually soothes" the nerves. This was, of course, a condition that James was treated for repeatedly. These therapists viewed the use of cold water as a powerful tool, which if used improperly could cause injury or even death. However, in measured application, the shock of the cold water would bring improvement, but only after temporary worsening, such as "evacuations of the morbid matters in boils, eruptions, perspirations, diarrheas, etc." This was the period of crisis in the cure, and although uncomfortable, it was anticipated eagerly "with pleasure and hope." James was fully aware of this dimension of water cures, and so he may actually have welcomed his personal crisis, especially after years of water-cure treatment and after completion of his M. D. on the

effects of cold on the body. The crisis was a stage in the conversion of a long-standing health problem into a condition ready to exit from the body; in short, the therapy turned chronic diseases into acute ones, expressed in the crisis. This is why water-cure therapists, along with other sectarians, showed less concern for symptoms than did regular physicians. Instead of being objects for attack, boils or fevers were regarded as “radical curative endeavors of the organism.” They even called acute symptoms—really “crises”—“healing diseases.”³⁵ In this context, talk of James’s crisis is not just a tale of woe, but a recognition of worsening as an essential prelude to improved health.

The problems of crisis called for deep reflection, an application of introspective psychology on the person whose experience the psychologist knew best, oneself. James described his “horrible fear of my own existence” as an account of himself, however, it was written so many years after his youth, and it leaves so many factual gaps that it is not a fully reliable primary source. He composed it anonymously to illustrate a religious type in his psychology of religion and placed it in the “Sick Soul” chapter of the *Varieties*, serving as the last example in a series of reported religious conversions—after yet another anonymous French melancholic, the writer and mystic Leo Tolstoy, the Puritan John Bunyan, and the evangelical preacher Henry Alline—in all of which “man’s original optimism and self-satisfaction get leveled with the dust.” And it is accompanied by both a footnote equating the psychological reaction to “a very great trembling” during Bunyan’s conversion experience, and another note coyly comparing the experience to the youthful crisis of his own father, “another case of fear equally sudden,” the crisis of Henry James, Senior.³⁶

The person behind William’s vivid but unauthored description would have remained hidden had James not told a friend that the passage, ostensibly from a “sufferer,” written “original[ly] ... in French,” and “translate[d] freely” by James himself, was in fact the record of “my own case,” but “I naturally disguised the provenance!”³⁷ The “natural” need to disguise has generally been taken to mean that he was shy about exposing his personal life so publicly, even resorting to a clever but tricky hoax to cloak authentic facts about himself in a public statement. But in addition, his approach also hints that the case was not fully true to his experience. The story’s use suggests that he did not mention himself because he himself was not the point of the story. Then, even when he did admit that the case was his own, James added elusively that he was disguising the “provenance;” this reference to the source or point of origin of the case was

not the same as saying he was hiding his identity. Disguising of the source of the story suggests that its purpose runs beyond a mere report of an identifiable moment in his life.

There is no very definite reason to believe that James was not talking about himself, but the case is undated, the setting is not specified, and it was composed in retrospect. The mannered and carefully controlled story-telling quality of the narrative—so different from the “notes struck off with the animal heat of the fever upon them,” as he said of the private writings from his youth—suggests that the text is a composite of personal experiences, written from memory, and edited for public delivery and for illustration of psychological points about a religious type in the *Varieties*. He even offers the hint of distraction from his own identity by urging readers not to analyze the case too deeply: the “case has ... the merit of extreme simplicity.”³⁸ Like much of James’s mature work, there is a deceptive simplicity to it. The case is William James—or more likely the fruit of William James’s long reflections on his crises—filtered through time, and carefully edited and stylized.

This illustrative case of “the worst kind of melancholy” took place of an evening during the simple routine of walking “into a dressing room in the twilight,” as he added with brittle artificiality, “to procure some article that was there.” The quiet was interrupted “without any warning” when “there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum.” The reported case does not take place in an asylum, but involves the memory of a scene at one. This was one of the only identifying markers in the whole text, since James had in fact been interested in asylum work at least since 1863, and he had worried about his own sanity from about that time. But even this link to James himself is not firm: despite his youthful fears about his own mental state, he says of the French case that it did not involve “any intellectual insanity or delusion”—an indication of a different identity, or just hopeful thinking about his own? The image from an asylum was central to the case, but it was not itself an example of madness. Although there is lurking fear of insanity, the point of the story is the importance of religious conversion for the “sick soul;” as he explains in the chapter, this personality type requires a stark path through utter pessimism about humanity’s rational and moral abilities before the hope and help of religion can be achieved. Conversion requires the possibility for change, and although epilepsy is now widely regarded as a physically based ailment, James regarded it as “largely a matter of habit.”³⁹

Even without confronting the actual epileptic, even just the mental image of the patient within the incident itself was vivid and troubling: the youth had “greenish skin,” was “entirely idiotic,” and looked “absolutely non-human,” like a “sculpted Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy.” These were not just scary pictures, since “this image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other.” Still, that combination was not complete, since, although he feared “that shape am I,” he added that the identification was only “potentially” so—as with his disguising of “the provenance,” he was diverting from direct identity. Even with only the potential to take on that shape, it converted him to “a mass of quivering fear” because of his own weakness. Therefore, “nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me.” There is no report about what would bring that hour or prevent it; that is presumably because it is a report of the irrationalities of abject fear—and that inaccessibility to understanding is what makes it so fearful. The image left him “with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since.” As crises that brought positive results, in the spirit of water-cure, this experience was full of insight—“a revelation”—and in this case, it brought sympathy “with the morbid feelings of others.” In addition, he felt amazed by those, like his mother, who lived with such “unconsciousness of danger.” The reference to the mother is another point of potential identification with James himself since the description of her, as “a very cheerful person” who lived with little inquiry into “dangerous” religious thoughts, closely matches Mary James. The realization of the vulnerability of existence was the point of the piece as written, since it would show how a “sick soul” is formed; in contrast to the healthy-minded soul, this darker personality type feels the “pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life.”⁴⁰ For those with such recognition of bleak sides of life, there is such a deep inadequacy about the natural self that there is a need for recourse to powers beyond the natural order in order to feel truly whole.

The French correspondent’s account recalls James’s pair of leanings toward willful strength and craving of security and comfort—struggle and acceptance, fighting faith and comforting faith—although this case is a more extreme version of resignation of will than any that James himself ever directly reported. In other cases of depressed moods, he would refer to the difficulty of summoning will power, or he would regret that he did not have a reservoir of faith or ideals in which to seek such comfort. He did not ever pray in the style of the French correspondent. Later in life, he even said that it made him feel “foolish and artificial.” In his

youth, he rarely mentioned prayer. In his letters, he would gush, often extravagantly, with emotion and good wishes, but no matter the trouble, he did not say he would pray. And in those rare private moments when he did, it was itself a way to fortify his will drive, not a slide into resignation and comfort. He even quoted in his diary from “one fine prayer” that he had come across in 1868: “Now God help me through this! For you know that I am in the right and you see that I am trying to help myself.” As with his water cures and stretches of rest from work, prayer was a brief way station on the way to renewed willful action. By contrast, the Frenchman goes much further in his belief that “this experience of melancholia of mine had a religious bearing.” Specifically, the sufferer reports that if he had not “clung to scripture-texts” from the Bible, “I think I should have grown really insane.”⁴¹ Although James never put his name to such traditionally religious solutions for his depression, he often expressed sympathy and admiration for the power of faith, and the general pattern of seeking spiritual comfort was wholly familiar and even an occasional practice.

Despite these differences in degree of orthodoxy, there is clearly some kinship between the anonymous case and his own experience. The pattern of seeking comfort was the same, even as it was a much more extreme case of resignation to religious comfort, and even as its form was drawn from Biblical religion rather than James’s own less denominational, more spiritual impulses—with the use of shades of traditionalism that could have immediate popular appeal for audiences of the *Varieties* in Christendom. He drew on his own experiences and beliefs to create an exaggerated crystallization in narrative form of his own theoretical admiration for the power of gaining comfort from religious absolutes; it reads like a composite description of his own experiences, generalized and tailored for public presentation. James did not write up the case as an autobiographical account, but as illustration of the power of religion, especially for the “sick soul” constitutional type, in a text on the psychology of religion.⁴² The religious conclusion to the Frenchman’s case provides further confirmation that, with this story, William James is recording his recognition of the powerful fruits of religious faith expressed in a way to speak to a wide audience.

Early views of James’s crisis were born from the mingling of the French correspondent’s case with James’s diary reports of the early 1870s, but once that view was widely accepted, reference to the crisis took on a life of its own often without reference to the actual events, but with important insights about various parts of James’s theories. Revisionist views took issue

with the chronology of the traditional narrative and the exclusively intellectualist readings of the crisis in general. Despite the enrichments that have come from this embedding of James the philosopher in his early issues with vocation, family, and sex, the revisionist interpretations have passed through James scholarship with little permanent effect. Bypassing that questioning and challenging attitude has allowed traditional perspectives on the crisis and James's development of theory as therapy to come to the fore again. This turn points to the solidity of James's substantial intellectual growth even during these troubled years and suggests the often conjectural nature of the revisionist arguments, after all, the very lack of evidence for dramatic personal factors has often served as evidence for their significance because of his presumed embarrassment or concealment. However, the story line of philosophical redemption itself suffers from a highly speculative chronology and avoids the benefits that can be gleaned from understanding the host of non-intellectual issues that James was coping with through his years of crises. These works have offered many insights about James's life and thought but still more insight on James's youth, and on its relation to his emerging theories, can be gleaned from understanding the story of the French correspondent by attending to the use of the story itself and how it was told.

And so, viewing the *Varieties* incident as a composite composition, used to explain the traits of the "sick soul," still maintains a connection to James's own experiences and reflections, but as a stylized memory of those times when he himself felt the dredging burden of the sick soul. In these moods, he could not sustain the willful posture of other sides of his experience and thinking. A detailed look at the sources cannot place that incident in any particular time, but perhaps that itself is one of its major purposes as it points to the way James repeatedly learned from his crises and crafted theories that combined willful action in the face of adversity with a place for religious comfort as a deep solace when the will was not enough. As with his turn to water-cures for relief when worn down, James would write with deep sensitivity and insight about religious belief after stretches of energetic hope in the power of moral striving. These two trends of his theorizing reflected the two legs of his own experiences. The crisis period was a seedtime for James's intellectual development and much of the stimulus and nurturance for his mature theories emerged not from his solutions to his crisis, but from his efforts to cope with the psychological, medical, and social problems that so troubled him, and that circulated with his theorizing as he developed his intellectual life.

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NOTES

¹ A number of commentators have expressed this point forcefully: For example, Fullinwider, in “James’s Spiritual Crisis,” says “he almost seems to be laughing at us” with the lack of explicitness in his comments; Townsend, in *Manhood at Harvard* notes that “James was anything but eager to have his audience get to the bottom of [his early troubled times]” p. 52.

² Émile Boutroux, *William James*, p. 6; Henry James III, in *Letters of William James*, 1:147.

³ Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 1:322, 2:675, 1:323, 1:324, 1:324-25. Bixler, in *Religion in the Philosophy of William James* distinguishes the morbid from the moralistic sides of James (p. 7), a pairing that Perry pursues with reference to James’s “comforting faith” and “fighting faith” (*Thought and Character*, 2:324), and that John McDermott also suggests about James’s “escapist” religion and voluntarist “attempts to confront the actualities” of life (*Writings of William James*, pp. xxx and xxviii). F. O. Matthiessen, in *The James Family*, also calls the incident a “terrifying hallucination,” but maintains that James “found his way back to life, not through religious conversion,” but through Renouvier’s philosophy of free will (pp. 216 and 218). By the 1970s, the narrative of philosophical redemption was so thoroughly accepted that William Clebsch, in *American Religious Thought, a History*, could seamlessly weave the French correspondent’s account into his narrative as if it were simply another primary source, with Renouvier as the “antidote to th[e] misery” (pp. 139-40). In the wake of Perry’s major influence, there was little explanation for the shift from religious mood in search of comfort to willful striving through the assertion of free will.

⁴ Gay Wilson Allen, *William James: A Biography*, pp. 163, 165, 164, and 165.

⁵ Fullinwider, “William James’s ‘Spiritual Crisis,’” pp. 39-40, 42, 43, 46, 45, 47, 49, 52, and 55.

⁶ Fullinwider, “William James’s ‘Spiritual Crisis,’” pp. 53-54, 56, 57, and 55.

⁷ Kuklick, , pp. 160, 161, and 166. In the spirit of this voluntarist theme, Robert Richards, in “The Personal Equation in Science,” Schwehn, *A William James Renaissance*, also does not refer to the *Varieties* incident, proposing that the crisis was about “exercising the will in pursuit of definite goals.” In the next few years, when he got a job, married, and adopted Renouvier’s philosophy, James went into “gradual remission,” and developed the basis for a “free and independent mind” (pp. 392-93). Richards then adds a significant intellectual component to the resolution of James’s crisis in saying that this

outlook was further reinforced by Darwinism with its picture of mind evolving with spontaneity and selectivity—a scientific endorsement of the free-will method. A number of other commentators, often without reference to a youthful crisis, but focusing on James’s mature theories, have linked James’s appropriation of Darwinism to his development of a psychology of the mind as an active, selective, purposeful agent; for example, Ford, *William James’s Philosophy*, p. 27; Murphy, *Pragmatism*, p. 16; and many contributors to Donnelly, ed., *Re-interpreting the Legacy of William James*: Seigfried, “The World We Practically Live In” (pp. 77-89); Schull, “Selection—James’s Principal Principle” (pp. 139-51); Woodward, “James’s Evolutionary Epistemology” (pp. 153-69), Dewsbury, “William James and Instinct Theory Revisited” (pp. 263-91); Robinson, “William James on the Mind and the Body” (pp. 313-22); and Rychlak, “William James and the Concept of Free Will” (pp. 323-38). James Gilbert, in *Work Without Salvation*, makes tacit use of the traditional view without mentioning either the *Varieties* case or Renouvier in proposing that James resolved his crisis by the “assertion of will that he doggedly pursued in early 1870;” in keeping with his enlistment of James to illustrate cultural tensions over vocational direction, his resolution “made his decision to become a philosopher inevitable,” with deliberate construction of vocation from troubles a template for modern career paths (pp. 186-87).

⁸ Barzun, *A Stroll With William James*, pp. 268 and 18-19. Like Barzun, Daniel Bjork has great admiration for James’s genius. In *William James*, he acknowledges that in the text of the “worst form of melancholy ... there is no direct evidence that in it William referred to himself.” Bjork also downplays the Renouvier diary entry in favor of James’s own creativity, with his turn to will as a strategy in achieving original speculations.” Bjork thus lifts James out of the context of influences with his proposal for James’s development of his own Renouvier-style free will. “[H]is psychology and metaphysics were grounded in an insatiable craving to bring some fresh speculative perspective into the world.” This was the “creative grace” of James’s own philosophic innovations (pp. 287 and 89). A. N. Wilson, in *God’s Funeral*, presents a view characteristic of works that make brief reference to James’s youth within a broader history: James was “rescued” from his “sad period” by the French philosopher Renouvier, who converted him to a belief in mental causation” (pp. 318 and 320). As with the views of Barzun and other traditional interpreters, Wilson finds this conversion crucial to James’s rejection of T. H. Huxley’s automaton theory and other bold extensions of scientific authority James grappled with from the 1870s.

⁹ Kallen, *The Philosophy of William James*, p. 30.

¹⁰ Feinstein, “The ‘Crisis’ of William James,” pp. 76, 75, 77, and 74. The editors of *The Correspondence of William James* follow Feinstein’s chronology: 4:490.

¹¹ Feinstein, “The ‘Crisis’ of William James,” p. 76; William to Henry James, May 7, [18]70, in *Correspondence*, 1:158. William James to Charles Renouvier, 2 Nov[em]bre [18]72, in *Correspondence*,

4:431, translated in Perry, 1:662. Feinstein, "The 'Crisis' of William James," p. 77. Feinstein, *Becoming William James*, p. 241.

¹² William to Robertson James, April 26, [18]74, in *Correspondence*, 4:489. See Maher, *Biography of Broken Fortunes*, on the visit of Robertson with his new wife to the James home in Cambridge (p. 119). Feinstein makes his case for the decisive importance of the Robertson letter in setting the date of the *Varieties* crisis to fall of 1872 in *Becoming William James*, p. 241.

¹³ William to Robertson James, April 26, [18]74, in *Correspondence*, 4:489.

¹⁴ Strout, "William James and the Twice-Born Sick Soul," pp. 1066, 1067, 1071, and 1073.

¹⁵ Feinstein, *Becoming William James*, pp. 88, 57, 131, 194, 202, 245, and 310.

¹⁶ Gilman, *Disease and Representation*, p. 78. Many of Maudsley's other descriptions of the symptoms of masturbation do not match James's: "The patient becomes offensively egotistic and impractical; he is full of self-feeling and self-conceit, insensible to the claims of others," and he "often speaks of great projects engendered by his conceit." But there were other traits that James did have and that could be explained by other diagnoses of the time, including neurasthenia. Gilman enlists the engraving by Amboise Tardieu in Etienne Esquirol, *Des maladies mentales*; this image refers to a section called "de la démence" [on madness] (p. 230), and it serves as an example of madness, but the section makes no mention of an insane masturbator.

¹⁷ Madden and Madden, "The Psychosomatic Illnesses of William James," pp. 376-90. Although he does not mention the Renouvier diary entry, Gérard Deledalle, in "William James and his Father," Corti, ed., *Philosophy of James*, uses the *Varieties* case to identify James's character traits, which he also shared with his father, thus suggesting a genealogical prelude to William's religious interests (pp. 321-25).

¹⁸ Townsend, *Manhood at Harvard*, pp. 52-53; Esquirol, *Des maladies mentales*, pp. 235 and 69 (my translation). In the early 1870s, James was "fully determined never to marry" because he wanted to avoid the "civic crime" of risking the birth of his unhealthy offspring" (*Correspondence*, 4:390-91).

¹⁹ Levinson, *The Religious Investigations of William James*, pp. 30 and 45. Levinson does date the *Varieties* case in passing: when discussing the "What is an Emotion?" essay of 1884, he refers to James's "severe melancholy roughly fifteen years before" (p. 44); and Levinson adds an extensive analysis of another anonymous passage in the *Varieties*, which he states is by "the same French correspondent" (p. 44). However, there is no scholarship to support this claim, and moreover, James says that this particular anonymous Frenchman had a sour melancholia, and "the querulous temper of his misery keeps his mind from taking a religious direction." This "irreligion" (*Varieties*, pp. 126-27) is in sharp contrast with the leanings of the French correspondent of the famous "panic fear" case. With a

similar emphasis on “religious belief as a saving faith,” Robert Vanden Burgt, in *The Religious Philosophy of William James*, maintains that James’s vivid “panic fear” indicated his awareness, as expressed in the “Sick Soul” chapter, that “the human estate of itself is not enough;” and so for Vanden Burgt, the incident illustrates James’s acute religious sensitivity (pp. 21, 26, 28, and 75).

²⁰ Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, pp. 151, 153, and 155; Michaelsen, “Identity and Conversion,” p. 321.

²¹ Anderson, ““The Worst Kind of Melancholy,”” Schwehn, ed., *A William James Renaissance*, p. 383, 373, and 376. The letter Anderson cites on p. 383, William James to Henry Bowditch, Dec[ember 29, [18]69, in *Correspondence*, 4:396-98, has no comments that are strikingly different from countless such references to “disgust for life” and other similar depressed expressions that he often made during these years; and the letter is also chock full of talk about physiology, including eagerness for “any bibliographic news”—hardly the stuff of a bleak outlook.

²² Schwehn, “William James and the Life of the Mind,” Schwehn, ed., *A William James Renaissance*, 429, 432, 433, and 433. On the significance of Wordsworth in James’s development, see Leary, “James and the Art of Human Understanding.”

²³ Cotkin, *William James*, pp. 59, 50, and 51; “maya” is not just a reference to some dreaded lower mental functions, but also a reference to the illusion-creating power of a god or demon in *The Vedas*; Diary 1, April 10, [1873], p. [87]. Perry, 1:343, quotes from this entry, but leaves out James’s most desperate passages about the “‘maya’ ... imperil[ing his] reason.” As with the elder Henry James’s view of worldly shadows cloaking spiritual substances, the term in South Asian religions also has the more generic meaning of the physical world which is illusory and transitory compared with the ultimate and enduring truths of Brahma. Especially in the Shankara tradition of Hinduism, maya distorts because it conceals and distracts from the essence of things; for example in the most popular portion of the Mahabharata texts, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the god Krishna says that “the delusion of the forces of Nature” brings “the bonds of attachment” to illusory maya, with its hapless followers hopelessly “clouded by desire” (Book 3, paragraphs 29, 19, and 38).

²⁴ Charlene Seigfried, *William James’s Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*, pp. 12 and 26. Approaching the youthful crisis from a literary perspective, Lewis, in *The Jameses*, also emphasizes its intellectual core, but he offers more general wording: James was steadily “inching closer to a decisive formulation of the dilemmas of being.” In tracing this path, Lewis includes non-intellectual factors. He places the *Varieties* incident in an exact time and even a particular place—in the early 1870s, in the “second-floor dressing room on Quincy Street”—and he speculates that “he was experiencing a sense of disgust at what appears (the evidence is skimpy) to have been a hard-to-overcome habit of self-abuse.”

Lewis is inferring that during James's extended intellectual discussion of "the moral interest," he is making an "allusion, probably, to auto-erotism." Lewis then concludes with the traditional view that James solved his crisis with the Renouvier resolution for free will, but he does not try to reconcile it with the religious message of the French correspondent (pp. 179, 190, 206, 202, 188, and 201). John Patrick Diggins, in *The Promise of Pragmatism*, reels back from the psychological interpretations, which he angrily dismisses as arguments for the centrality of "neurotic paternal tensions" and other "psychoanalytic categories." Instead, he proposes that the tensions of "modernism" can explain "James's struggles for self-definition." The key problem, Diggins proposes with a critical and cultural version of Seigfried's philosophical arguments, was that he was surrounded by "no fixed foundation on which to think." Like the traditionalists, but without mentioning the *Varieties* case or Renouvier, Diggins portrays James rebounding from physical and psychological troubles to develop "a philosophy of exuberance and uplift" (pp. 114-15).

²⁵ Ruf, *Creation Out of Chaos*, pp. 16 and 19; Bush, *Halfway to Revolution*, pp. 172, 249, 251, and 258.

²⁶ Lutz, *American Nervousness*, pp. 72-73; James took a long time to finish, but he did not, as Lutz suggests, "hav[e] trouble finishing medical school," and he graduated in 1869, not in the early 1870s. Ramsey, *Submitting to Freedom*, p. 27; Carter, *Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age*. William Barnard, in *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, also returns wholesale to the traditional view with a timing of the *Varieties* story "sometime early in 1870," followed by James's "journey to health" over the next few years "based on the power of a philosophically revised worldview." He "encapsulates this philosophical perspective" in the April 1870 diary entry citing the importance of Renouvier (pp. 84 and 86). Like Seigfried and in the spirit of some revisionism, Barnard cites examples of crisis experiences in James's later life (pp. 19, 21, 25, 29, and 37).

²⁷ Taylor, *William James on Consciousness Beyond the Margin*, p. 13; and "James on Psychopathology," Schwehn, ed., *A William James Renaissance*, p. 461.

²⁸ Myers, *William James*, p. 46; Murphy, *Pragmatism*, pp. 15-16.

²⁹ Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, pp. 270 and 282; Rubin, *Religious Melancholy*, p. 19.

³⁰ Capps, "'That Shape Am I,'" Capps and Jacobs, ed., *The Struggle for Life*, pp. 91, 92, and 99; Myers, *William James*, p. 49.

³¹ Habegger, *The Father*, pp. 476 and 488.

³² Gale, *The Divided Self of William James*, pp. 16, 17, and 258.

³³ Simon, *Genuine Reality*, p. 127; Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, pp. 218-19. In "William James and the Case of the Epileptic Patient," Menand offers an engaging account of many interpretations

of James's youthful crisis, especially the *Varieties* case. He includes sound critiques, especially of the psychological readings, and he concludes with a ringing endorsement of the importance of the crisis period for launching James's moral and religious ideas and commitments; he also reviews a biographical dead end that had seemed to show that his panic fear story was actually based on his own stay in an asylum before 1872. Menand evaluates the novelist Henry James's mistaken rendition of facts, a mix-up of Horatio Alger (who was a James family friend) with his brother William Alger (who was admitted to the McLean asylum in 1871), and texts of the era linking introspection, masturbation, and insanity, for a story line with "sensational appeal," which has appeared in various forms in many leading texts. However, as Menand explicitly shows, "every one of the leaves comes off this biographical onion" (*American Studies*, pp. 15-18). Paul Fisher in *House of Wits*, reports the *Varieties* incident without question and without a date, indicates surprise at conventionality of James's religious words, and reports his discovery of Renouvier as "just what he needed" (pp. 270-71).

³⁴ Beard, "Neurasthenia, or Nervous Exhaustion," p. 217; *A Practical Treatise*, p. 17; and *American Nervousness*, p. 11; and James to Thomas Ward, March 27, [18]66, in *Correspondence*, 4:137. Like pragmatism's emphasis on the consequences or use of ideas, so neurasthenia was a diagnosis about the use of tissues rather than their structural issues; and more immediately, like James's fascination for the relation of mind and body for the psychological work he would soon take on, this diagnosis similarly mingled the mental and physical in intimate interaction.

³⁵ Rausse, *The Water-Cure*, pp. 5, 108, 68, 111, 255, and 49; Shew, *Hydropathy*, pp. 125, 118, and 173; William Horsell, *Hydropathy for the People*, p. 231; Rausse, *Errors*, p. 38. When his brother Henry impatiently reported after a water-cure visit that "'the crisis' ... failed to relieve me & completely disagreed with me," the more medically knowledgeable William calmly reported that such were the stages in "a crisis bro't on by the Water Cure;" Henry to William to Henry October 16 [1869]; and William to Henry May 7, [18]70, in *Correspondence*, 1:108 and 160.

³⁶ James, *Varieties*, pp. 135, 134, and 135n; the father reported his crisis in *Society the Redeemed Form of Man*, pp. 43-54; and Bunyan in "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners." On the relation of the son's crisis to his father's, even to another example in the *Varieties* that may have been based on the elder Henry James, see Feinstein, *Becoming William James*, pp. 241-45; King, *Iron of Melancholy.*, pp. 90-102 and 154-83; and Croce, *Science and Religion*, pp. 32 and 49-53.

³⁷ James, *Varieties*, p. 134; and William James to Frank Abauzit, June 1, 1904, in *Varieties*, p. 508. James's letter admitting the identity of the French correspondent first appeared in Flournoy, *La Philosophie de William James* (1911), p. 149 (but did not appear in the book's English translation, *The Philosophy of William James* [1917]).

³⁸*Correspondence*, 1:128; James, *Varieties*, p. 134. Some scholars have already suggested an artificiality about the story: Simon, *Genuine Reality*, p. 127; and Menand, *American Studies*, pp. 22-23.

³⁹ James, *Varieties*, pp. 134 and 135; Simon, in *Genuine Reality*, offers the conventional wisdom (from our time) that “epilepsy ... could not be cured by strengthening a patient’s will. An epileptic patient was at the mercy of his own biology” (p. 125); but James’s own comments on epilepsy and habit in his 1880-81 undergraduate philosophy class, “Psychology” do not refer to biological determinism; see Burdett notes in *Phil.* 5 (1880-81), James papers, p. 122. The role of insanity was secondary but important in this case. And the topic shows a connection to James’s early interest in asylum work and psychology. Following up on his vocational interests, he may have visited an asylum run by his cousin’s husband, William Henry Prince, or in connection with his clinical training at Massachusetts General Hospital, or with his own students while teaching physiology and psychology after 1873. There is also hearsay evidence that James himself was a patient in an asylum, the McLean Asylum in Somerville, but the McLean Hospital (to use its current name) will not release any information about patients, not even to confirm or deny their residency there. Even if he did not have such a personal experience, he could certainly write with vivid empathy about “insane melancholy.” Victims of its “overwhelming horror” did not experience merely the “intellectual perception of evil,” he noted in the same *Varieties* chapter, but “the grisly blood-freezing heart-palsying sensation of it close upon one”—horrible fear indeed; James, the *Varieties*, p. 135. Dickinson Miller, a student of James in the early 1890s, reported about “two insane asylums which he had arranged for the class to visit;” Miller, *Philosophical Analysis*, p. 50. For the conjectures about James’s stay at McLean Asylum, see Kazin, “William James: To Be Born Again,” p. 248; Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories*, p.415; Townsend, *Manhood at Harvard*, p. 43; Simon, *Genuine Reality*, pp. 121-22; and Menand, *American Studies*, pp. 22-23.

⁴⁰ James, *Varieties*, pp. 134-35; Fisher, in *House of Wits*, provides rich accounts of Mary James who had an intellect not particularly reflective, but very astute.

⁴¹On James’s twin commitments to “acceptance” and “struggle,” see Pomfret notes, c. August 1869, James papers and in Perry, *Thought and Character*, 1:301 (my translation); and *Varieties*, p. 341; also see James’s endorsement of “holidays to the spirit” for its relief from “energizing ... strenuous” work of willful commitment; PRG, p. 43 and MT, pp. 123-24. His response to James B. Pratt’s “Questionnaire” on personal religious beliefs (1904), in the James papers, is also in LWJ, 2:214. James occasionally used prayerful words in addressing friends, but they were generic, secular phrases; for example, he wrote to his brother Bob, “Pray do what you can for your eyes,” and “a blessing on you, and on your girl [his wife],” Aug[ust] 1, [18]71 and Sept[ember] 2, [18]73, in *Correspondence*, 4:421 and 444; and Diary 1, May 1, 1868, p. 48. Although James did not himself pray in the traditional manner of

the French correspondent, he did show deep sympathy for those who had “intercourse between themselves and higher powers with which they feel themselves to be related,” and he frequently visited Appleton Chapel; *Varieties*, pp. 366, and also see pp. 411-12; Palmer, “William James,” p. 34.

⁴² The “mannered memory” reading of a moment from James’s young adulthood bears some resemblance to Sigmund Freud’s theory of “screen memory,” his description for the way memories help in the process of coping with difficult experiences of the past, so that “what is recorded is another psychical element closely associated with the objectionable one.” Freud’s idea coincides with James’s case in that his later memory (perhaps) changed the content of the original experiences to (perhaps) a more acceptable form through a presentation with ordered clarity and with a traditionalist conclusion to the narrative. In addition, Freud points out that “there are numerous types of cases in which one psychical content is substituted for another;” so he suggests the possibilities for cases like James’s but he does not explore them. Freud is dealing with early childhood memories while James is remembering from late back to early adulthood; where children have obscure bits of perception that are then formed by the later memory, James had (at least the potential for) a clear adult memory in the original experience itself. Moreover, this memory of young adulthood was adapted for public presentation in lecture and book publication. However, we do not have his privately recorded memory, and so this public one cannot simply be treated as if it were. Instead, the primary-source (public) record shows James engaging in an activity (visiting an asylum) with some feelings that coincided with large portions of moods in early adulthood (uncertainty, depression, weakness, religious leanings) from his biographical record, but without other portions of his moods during the same period (willful struggle, constant learning, spiritual rather than traditional religious leanings), acting with more orderly behavior than he could summon at the time (but that he longed for), and expressing the psychological value of religious belief that in his youth he often longed for, but that he would sometimes feel more strongly in his later years—and which was the very point of the public argument he was making in the *Varieties*; Freud, “Screen Memories,” pp. 307, 308, and 322; and *Varieties*, pp. 134-35.