

physics, Heidegger embraced the National Socialist revolution as “a collective break-out from inauthenticity,” a chance to attain authentic Being and create a “new intellectual and spiritual world for the German nation.” In 1933, Heidegger accepted the National Socialist Party’s invitation to become rector of Freiburg University, a prominent position in Hitler’s cultural propaganda machine.

By the end of World War II, Nazism had become for Heidegger yet another nightmarish product of modernity: a conformist and manipulative regime. Inspired by his own disastrous experience, he went on to explore the insidious ways in which a modern technological society can lead people astray. Safranski cites the philosopher’s “seducibility by power” as a partial explanation of his disastrous political misstep. Heidegger was neither the first nor the last mandarin to conflate his own ideas with a monstrous ideology; a distressing number of 20th-century intellectuals have served as shills for Nazism, Stalinism, and Maoism. Yet Heidegger’s life offers a particularly sobering lesson in the pitfalls of translating philosophical theory into practice.

—*Lawson Rollins*

GENUINE REALITY:

A Life of William James.

By Linda Simon. Harcourt Brace.

480 pp. \$35

William James (1842–1910) was a pioneer in philosophy and psychology, a muscular public citizen, and a member of a famously complicated American family. Eldest child of Henry and Mary James, William was born a year before his literary brother, Henry Jr. In time, their siblings would include the neurasthenic Alice and two boys, Garth Wilkinson and Robertson. As patriarch of the brood, Henry Sr. was self-absorbed, frustrated by a lack of recognition for his philosophical writings, opinionated, and quick to hurl himself in the path of William’s ambitions. “Unmanly” was one of the father’s favorite epithets for the boy, leaving him with a debilitating sense of unworthiness.

In keeping with his father’s views—the senior James’s failed career led him to insist that all careers are ignoble because work shrivels the soul—William reached 30 before securing his first job, teaching

anatomy at Harvard University. He also inherited some of his father’s petulance, wanderlust, and intolerance of rivals, and shared some of his sister’s emotional fragility, which subjected him to periodic breakdowns. But marriage to Alice Gibbens enabled him to transcend the worst of the family afflictions. According to Simon, a professor of English at Skidmore College, life with Alice “enlarged his experience of other people as well: students, colleagues, friends, and his own children, who provided living examples of the wide range of personalities functioning happily, healthily, and productively.”

As a thinker, James preferred possibilities to absolutes. “I am convinced that the desire to formulate truths is a virulent disease,” he wrote a friend. Fellow philosopher George Santayana remembered that “James detested any system of the universe that professed to enclose everything; we must never set up boundaries that exclude romantic surprises.” Unfortunately, the professional James proves elusive in *Genuine Reality*. While Simon recreates some of the debates among the Pragmatists—including those of James and his Harvard colleagues Josiah Royce and Charles Peirce—she fails to convey a clear understanding of James’s philosophy, his psychology, or the impact of either.

She is more successful in chronicling his career as a public figure, a moral pronouncer on the violence in Haymarket Square, the Spanish-American War, and other great events of his time. James championed citizen activism and “civic courage”—so long as the elite held the reins and kept the bellicosity of “lower types” in check. A popular speaker and writer, he ardently believed that philosophers should make their ideas plain to the masses so that they might lead more purposeful lives.

Simon lets her story unfold on James’s terms, presenting him in all his complexity with few authorial ahems. For the most part the strategy succeeds, though at times one longs to know the author’s reaction to her eccentric subject. In an era of “overpaged” (publishing-speak for “fat”) biographies, it is rare to finish reading a life and long for more. Simon is an engaging narrator, and *Genuine Reality* is an elegantly crafted book—as far as it goes.

—*Patricia O’Toole*