

MARK NOBLE, *American Poetic Materialism: From Whitman to Stevens*. New York, NY: Cambridge UP, 2015. 242 pp.

PAUL MARIANI, *The Whole Harmonium: The Life of Wallace Stevens*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016. 496 pp.

Wallace Stevens's poetry has frequently been regarded as philosophical¹ and used to support claims of a postmetaphysical age.² This encourages one to either read his work as part of a history of ideas or to attempt to write his literary biography. Both options tend to neglect his poetry—the first one for the sake of his ideas, the second for the events of his life. These two publications on Wallace Stevens deal with the resulting challenges of interpreting his poetry and give two snapshots of different approaches to contemporary scholarship on his work.

Mark Noble's critical study appeared in the *Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture Series*, which in recent volumes focused on new approaches to canonical as well as uncharted areas of American studies. He investigates the established poetic genealogy from Lucretius via Emerson and Whitman to Santayana and Stevens from the perspective of materialism "in order to sketch a short history of the atomized human subject" (2). The book consists of a theoretical introduction, four topical chapters dedicated to each of the poets, and a conclusion that connects the argument with the work of Gilles Deleuze³ and Alain Badiou. Two of the essays collected here have been published previously,⁴ which may account for occasional stylistic and argumentative inconsistencies.

¹ Charles Altieri, *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity: Toward a Phenomenology of Value* (Cornell UP, 2013).

² E.g. Scott Freer, *Modernist Mythopoeia: The Twilight of the Gods* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 162; 188-89.

³ David R. Jarraway, *Wallace Stevens among Others: Diva-dames, Deleuze, and American Culture* (McGill-Queen's UP, 2015).

⁴ Mark Noble, "Emerson's Atom and the Matter of Suffering," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 64.1 (2009) 16-47, Web.; Mark Noble, "Whitman's Atom and the Crisis of Materiality in the Early Leaves of Grass," *American Literature* 81.2 (2009) 253-79.

In line with his theoretical approach and argument in the tradition of the history of ideas, Noble uses an abstract language to elegantly convey important poetic genealogies. He speaks of a "vexed model of poetic vocation—one in which what charters the poet's revisionary project coincides with what limits the intelligibility of every materialism" (3). His points of departure are Stephen Greenblatt's 2012 *The Swerve* and Michael Serres's *The Birth of Physics* (1977/2000) as two extreme interpretations of Lucretius, whose *De rerum natura* is used as a template for a history of ideas. Greenblatt defends secular humanism as Lucretian inheritance, whereas Serres argues that the fluidity in Lucretius destabilizes precisely the epistemological preconditions of secular humanism. One is led to ask how this volume's focus on human materiality contributes to current debates on basic philosophical questions.

The author's aim is to recover materiality from the recent surge in "material culture studies" for a literary criticism inspired by the history of ideas. Elegantly synthesizing previous research on canonical authors and engaging with two contemporary theorists, the balanced work has by now become an important and well-known literary genealogy. It is therefore all the more regrettable that the author fails to justify his selection of theorists and primary texts. By including the philosophy of William James as a point of reference, Noble reiterates the established narrative that links Lucretius with American pragmatism and American thought and poetry since Emerson. The reader is left wishing for more evidence that this genealogy "has often been overlooked" (12), in light of the many publications in the field⁵ (none of which he refers to), and for a more detailed critique of the research he targets. As a consequence, the main question, which he himself formulates—namely,

⁵ William H. Shurr, "Emerson and Lucretius on Nature: Questions of Method and Matter," *American Transcendental Quarterly: A Journal of New England Writers* 38 (1978) 153-65; Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Harvard UP, 1992); Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein* (Cambridge UP, 2007); Andrew Taylor, *Thinking America: New England Intellectuals and the Varieties of American Identity* (UP of New England, 2010).

how far this represents an American literary tradition—remains unanswered. He reiterates the established literary and intellectual history, and presumably for this reason considers an explanation or justification of his own approach unnecessary. A bibliography would have been helpful here in clarifying his use of literature. In sum, Noble delivers an erudite and readable account of an established line of American intellectual history, but does not offer a critical assessment of this narrative.

He uses terms from twentieth century quantum physics (12; 32) to bolster his central claim, focusing on a universal history of ideas from the vantage point of poetic or “aporetic” materialism and “the atomist poetics of American writers” (17). He trusts the explanatory power of abstract terms from literary theory and philosophy in explaining the poetic texts; he favors narrative over scientific innovation, and intellectual history over philology and theology of literary modernity in America, which is in line with the trend in American studies towards “critical theory.” The word ‘poetic’ in the title refers more to its Greek origins in a philosophical sense than to literature, to the detriment of Noble’s account of Stevens. In re-appropriating Stevens for his critical and theoretical project, Noble fails to account for the real conundrum of contemporary American poetry, namely, the question concerning its relation to modernism, to Stevens and, through him, to Romanticism. The timelessness and topicality of theoretical discourse that he strives for jars with his silence on contemporary poetry. Noble evidently intends to make clear statements on contemporary culture, yet this is undermined by his use of abstractions and undefined terms—for example, his reference to “the present ascendancy of materialist ontology (in our scientific disciplines) and historiography (in our humanistic disciplines)” (29). Which disciplines precisely does he mean by ‘scientific’ and ‘humanistic’?

Methodologically, there is a tension between his own eclectic intellectual history and his critique of contemporary research for its emphasis on historiography. His project appears to be concerned with the onset of modernity in the treatment of William James (1842-1910) alongside Theodor W. Adorno (1903-69) and Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-51), but his focus on idealism and materialism results instead in another intellectual history, without thereby deepening our in-

sight into the conditions of modernity. For example, his claim that La Mettrie’s materialism diverges in its radicalism from previous forms of materialism has been made before.⁶ He juxtaposes apparently contradictory or complementary passages of single authors (Emerson 97; Santayana 126-27) to draw conclusions. While this is legitimate, given the theoretical claims of his book, the reader would benefit from an account or justification of this method. Besides, any history of ideas that covers a long time period must justify its exclusions and denials. In this case, the theological deficiency comes especially to the fore in the exclusion of the early modern Reformation period, in which atomism and matter theory was at the center of epistemological debates. This study unjustifiably neglects early modernity in favor of the Late Enlightenment.

Noble identifies a shift in Whitman’s aporetic materialism in his diachronic analysis of different editions of *Leaves of Grass*. He mentions mysticism, but focuses on materialism. By contrast, in some passages, the study invites reading modern American poetry not merely philosophically, as an illustration and part of intellectual history, but instead theologically, by inquiring into the functions of its mysticisms.

Noble approaches Emerson in a similar fashion, commenting on Emerson’s “Natural History of the Intellect” as well as his most famous essays. Noble’s focus on his reception of Michael Faraday (1791-1867), whose visualizations of magnetic lines of force constitute the only illustration of the volume (89), does not lead him, however, far beyond specific applications of Emerson’s rewriting of the omnipresence of the Spirit: “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact.”⁷ Both the necessary retracing of the origins of Emerson’s work in Puritan writings⁸ of the (early) seventeenth century and new insights concerning his connections to other authors in the volume are not mentioned. Although his double focus

⁶ Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford UP, 2001).

⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson and Larzer Ziff, *Selected Essays* (Penguin Publishing Group, 1985) 49.

⁸ Jan Stievermann, *Der Sündenfall der Nachahmung: Zum Problem der Mittelbarkeit im Werk Ralph Waldo Emersons* (Schöningh, 2007) 419.

on Faraday and Nietzsche may have been necessitated by the structure of his study, it is not clear to the reader what this adds to the argument and what justifies it. His method, then, in this and other passages, remains unjustified; the influence of Sufi poetry on Emerson through Goethe, which is of great importance for the subject and has received less attention than the canonical line of authors he investigates and draws upon, also goes unmentioned.

Instead of examining the constellations and repercussions of Catholicism and Protestantism—which is referred to as Emerson’s “crypto-Calvinism” in passing (112)—or, more narrowly, between atheism and Pragmatism in George Santayana’s (1863-1952) “hagiographic” rendering of Emerson, Noble focuses here, in his otherwise elegant and informative chapter on Santayana, on the more evident distinction between “mysticism” and “religion,” an established approach which falls back behind his theoretical claims in other chapters in its execution. His detailed focus on Santayana’s reception of Lucretius and Wordsworth fits less evidently within the logic of his overall approach than do the other chapters.

The need for a theological approach here and in the final chapter on Wallace Stevens is evident, especially in light of the passages chosen for close readings. It is contestable whether musing on the significance of Stevens’s “the rock” in “How To Live. What To Do” (150) while adhering to the “secular” tradition of Stevens criticism, and focusing on “Stevens’s attempt to record the processes with which poetry replaces sacred forms of assurance with profane” constitutes a true advance in Stevens scholarship. Noble’s interpretive restriction to the Mosaic context and the imprecise secularization argument impoverishes the work’s hermeneutic weight; it also undermines his claim of theoretical sophistication, which would have demanded a methodological justification, especially given its prominence in Stevens’s criticism. The strength of the book does not lie in critical self-reflection of its methodology. The materialist approach here evades the two questions of sacralization versus secularization and mysticism versus revealed theology. Noble does not take into account the latest criticism in these important fields. His descriptions of the “secular heroism” (152), which he takes up from Helen Vendler⁹ and

identifies as Stevens’s poetic attitude in reading selected poems, spell out much that could have been made clearer by taking into account the religious connotations of Stevens’s oeuvre. Noble’s focus on the image of “the rock” in Stevens’s poetry is useful, but his poems do not only “pose a question about what poetry can do with the material world” (159) but also with the spiritual. Thus the implicit overall argument of his book, of emphasizing the role of materialism in certain important works (cf. 160) is ultimately not very persuasive. Because Noble lacks entirely a theological perspective, he cannot draw conclusions from his claim that Stevens poetry transcends both Whiteheadian process philosophy and Heisenbergian quantum physics (172). The specifics of Stevens’s concept of emptiness or “nothingness” thus remain unclear.

Paul Mariani’s *The Whole Harmonium: The Life of Wallace Stevens*, the latest in a long series of Stevens biographies, takes a different approach. Upon meeting Stevens and becoming acquainted with his sonnets, Santayana “composed a sonnet of his own in response.” In one sentence on the same page, Santayana’s religious perspective becomes much clearer than in Noble’s entire chapter: Santayana “preferred to describe himself as a Catholic atheist or, better, aesthetic Catholic” (21). In his balanced account, Mariani gives us the life of Stevens through his travels, professional and private life, encounters with influential personalities, major poems and poetry collections as well as lectures. On the whole, the persistent religious engagement of his poetry and thinking comes to the fore, be it through the Pietism of his maternal ancestors (306) or through his reflections in his lectures (321). This is a far cry from the “truly agnostic major American poet” that he was long believed to be.¹⁰ In full command of the ample sources and secondary literature, which he lists by decades in the bibliography, Mariani succeeds in fleshing out the experiences that permitted Stevens to create his poetry. Unlike some previous biographers of Stevens, he reminds us that his early life not only overlapped with the lives of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, but also with Stephen Crane’s, Sarah Bernhardt’s, and Pe-

1988) 86; cf. Charles M. Murphy, *Wallace Stevens: A Spiritual Poet in a Secular Age* (Paulist Press, 1997) 34-35.

¹⁰ David Daiches, *God and the Poets: The Gifford Lectures, 1983* (Oxford UP, 1985) 162.

⁹ Helen Vendler, *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (Harvard UP,

ter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's. His account suggests that Stevens's frequent travels within and beyond the cultural hub of New York City might have influenced his work, and that his break as a young man with his family, especially his father (161; 263), might correlate to the spiritual-material divide he tried to negotiate in his poetry. Mariani's experience as a "poet biographer" of Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Hart Crane, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and William Carlos Williams has resulted in an eminently readable, stylistically pleasing book, which never loses sight of the importance of poetry. It includes twenty photographs, endnotes, a bibliography and an index.

At times, the function of partial paraphrases of poems, which Mariani artfully weaves into the biographical narrative, is not entirely clear (118). However, this approach is justified by the unity and relative brevity of the book, which exemplarily fleshes out the contexts of specific poems, thereby serving the purpose of the book as far as possible within the scope of a biography. In the interest of understanding Stevens's poetry, one hopes that this gives rise to a new focus on content. As much as it is in the nature of literary biography, the biographical readings of poems, if too closely attached to Stevens or his wife, become scientifically questionable. One hopes that, beyond the accolades this biography has already received, it will serve as an invitation to further interpretive efforts of his poetry that open up new directions. Its overall consistency and literary merit would certainly warrant this. On the whole, Mariani's biography strikes a balance between the hagiographical and the demystifying, providing a succinct overview of the poet's and the man's literary and personal life.

Given the tradition of literary biographies of the early lives of writers, the Stevens bibliography—despite the meticulous work of Joan Richardson¹¹ and others—still lacks a work

which reveals better how Stevens acquired his impressive command of the language. Mariani gives this no special weight. He shows, however, that—unlike much of contemporary Anglo-American poetry—Stevens's work as a whole is still marked by its integration of formalism and freedom of expression with the search for the semantically exotic yet meaningful. It is a mixture that is characteristic of modernism, but also his personal trade-mark (176-77). For Stevens, imagination as "the next greatest power to faith" (350) in Romantic tradition comes to supplant it, albeit from the New Testament perspective proper to modernism; he articulates the high modernist need for a religion of art beyond mysticism (377), while the biography also brings out his penchant for the mysticism of the Gospel of John. In this sense, Mariani's more balanced account reveals that Noble's dichotomizing perspective is too limited to do justice to the wealth of Stevens's poetic imagination. A different approach in such a theoretical work on Stevens would have allowed the readers to judge more clearly the extent to which Mariani has written a Catholic biography or the biography of a Catholic.

These books exemplify, for better or for worse, two major strands of recent Stevens scholarship: Paul Mariani offers biographical insight as a basis for philological research; for Mark Noble, Stevens becomes a stepping stone, or rather the culmination, in a history of ideas. Both works show that there is still much to be done in Stevens's scholarship, especially in engaging textually, more than theoretically or historically, with his poetry. It is as an invitation to deepen this textual scholarship both philologically and theologically,¹² which finds a new basis in the recent corrected edition of his collected poems,¹³ that these two volumes are best read.

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¹² John McDade, "Wallace Stevens on God, Imagination and Reality," in *Poetry and the Religious Imagination: The Power of the Word*, ed. Francesca Bugliani Knox and David Lonsdale (Ashgate, 2015) 129-47; 144-46.

¹³ Wallace Stevens, John N. Serio, and Chris Beyers. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens. Corrected Edition*; Second Vintage Books Edition (Vintage Books, 2015).

¹¹ Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years, 1879-1923* (Beech Tree Books, 1986).