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 ***The Whole Harmonium: The Life of Wallace Stevens* by Paul
Mariani (review)**

Denis Donoghue

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Denis Donoghue (bio)

Paul Mariani has published biographies of several modern poets: Hopkins, Hart Crane, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, William Carlos Williams, and now Wallace Stevens. His method has been to obey the instructions of chronology: one thing and then another, according to their temporal sequence. Chronos is his master. The method is reasonable, but it has its problems. If you think that “Sunday Morning” is Stevens’s greatest poem, you may want to say why it is, and give plenty of evidence, but you may not have room for evidence if you obey the next item in your chronology which happens to be Alfred Kreyborg’s founding of *Others: A Magazine of the New Verse*. If you think that “The Course of a Particular” is an even greater poem than “Sunday Morning,” you may not have any room to make that case. T. W. Adorno referred to “the unspeakable pressure exerted on what is human by what merely exists.” Chronology favors what merely exists, and proposes only to put each item in persuasive order, such as beginning, middle, and end: birth, maturity, and death.

Then there is the question of literary criticism. Presumably when Mariani comes to a major poem, he feels an urge to comment on it as a critic, but his idea of criticism is mainly paraphrase, the reduction of a poem to the domestic story that may be deduced from it by the application of a little force. His commentary on “The Comedian as the Letter C” takes Crispin as Stevens, and the whole poem as a cartoon autobiography: fine, except that the poem, those twenty pages of Stevens’s verse, keeps its secret—its esoteric life—among the words. Admittedly, few critics know what criticism should be doing. F. R. Leavis thought he should be concerned with evaluation: is this poem or novel good or not; if so, why so? Some critics think they should try to show how the poem has the energy to get from first word to last. But no critic, so far as I know, regards paraphrase as a prime duty.

Chronology enforces Mariani’s procedures so coercively that he has no time to step aside and consider Stevens at leisure and at large. I have

not read all the books and essays on Stevens, as Mariani has, but some of those I have read have lodged in my mind, with phrases worth making a note of. I recall with pleasure Blackmur's thinking of Stevens and Hart Crane together and apart: **[End Page 598]**

Crane you understand best if you try for nothing beyond the senses, Stevens is for relishing as the longest repetition of sweet things in the world. Both men are saved by their sensuality, by "the dry sound of bees stretching across lucid space" in Crane, or, in Stevens, "the dark encroachment of that old catastrophe, as a calm darkens among water-lights."

One of those sweet things in Stevens is, to my taste, this stanza from "Credences of Summer":

It is the rock of summer, the extreme,
A mountain luminous half way in bloom
And then half way in the extremest light
Of sapphires flashing from the central sky,
As if twelve princes sat before a king.

Yvor Winters, more severe than Blackmur, said that "Stevens gives us, I believe, the most perfect laboratory of hedonism to be found in literature." When I started teaching American literature at University College, Dublin, I was quizzed a good deal about Winters and that hedonism.

In Dublin, too, I made the mistake of reading Stevens as a philosophic poet. I concluded that he was some kind of German Idealist, before stumbling over passages that would please an American Naturalist. It turns out that he didn't study the big philosophers through their collected works, but he merely read the snippets provided by popular handbooks. He liked some second-level philosophers, notably Cassirer, Whitehead, and Santayana. He read A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*, though I can't imagine for pleasure. And Henri Focillon's *The Life of Forms...*

patronizing) for these points to be made at this late date, but if they are being stated with such repetition on Broadway right now, it tells us something about contemporary audiences. Particularly when the points are being made by largely or exclusively female creative teams who may be pardoned a bit of an agenda, it would seem that a marker is being laid down. Parity of esteem is being freshly claimed. These works demonstrate that we will all be better off as the claim is more consistently honored.

—Jack L. B. Gohn

Paul Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium: The Life of Wallace Stevens* (Simon & Schuster, 2016), 496 pp.

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