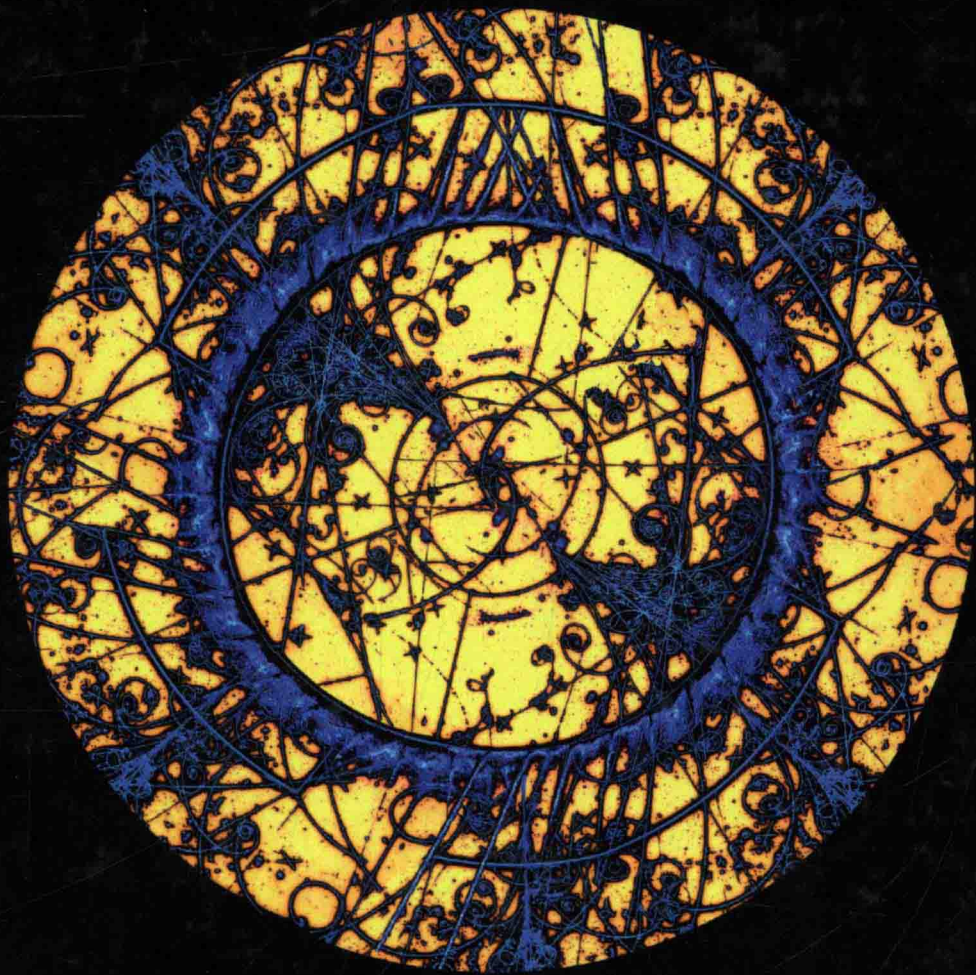


American Poetic  
Materialism  
from Whitman to Stevens

MARK NOBLE





In *American Poetic Materialism from Whitman to Stevens*, Mark Noble examines writers who rethink the human in material terms. Does the intelligibility of human experience correlate to the intelligibility of its material elements? Do visions of a common physical ground imply a common purpose? Noble proposes new readings of Whitman, Emerson, Santayana, and Stevens, that explore a literary history wrestling with the consequences of its own materialism. At a moment when several new models of the relationship between human experience and its physical ground circulate among critical theorists and philosophers of science, Noble turns to poets who have long asked what our shared materiality can tell us about our prospects for new models of our material selves.

MARK NOBLE is Assistant Professor of English at Georgia State University, where he teaches American literature and critical theory. He received his PhD from Johns Hopkins University in 2009. Noble's essays have been published in *American Literature* and *Nineteenth-Century Literature*.

Cover image: Bubble chamber: colour enhanced tracks  
© 1998 CERN.

Cover designed by Hart McLeod Ltd

**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS  
[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

ISBN 978-1-107-08450-6



9 781107 084506 >

# NORBLE

American Poetic Materialism  
from Whitman to Stevens

DODGE

AMERICAN POETIC  
MATERIALISM FROM  
WHITMAN TO STEVENS

MARK NOBLE

*Georgia State University*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**UNIVERSITY PRESS**

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107084506](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107084506)

© Mark Noble 2015

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2015

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Noble, Mark, 1979–

American poetic materialism from Whitman to Stevens / Mark Noble,  
Georgia State University.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-107-08450-6 (hardback)

1. American poetry – History and criticism. 2. Subjectivity in literature.  
3. Materialism in literature. 4. Poetics. 5. Modernism (Literature) –  
United States. I. Title.

PS310.S85N63 2015

811.009'357–dc23 2014026555

ISBN 978-1-107-08450-6 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

## AMERICAN POETIC MATERIALISM FROM WHITMAN TO STEVENS

In *American Poetic Materialism from Whitman to Stevens*, Mark Noble examines writers who rethink the human in material terms. Does the intelligibility of human experience correlate to the intelligibility of its material elements? Do visions of a common physical ground imply a common purpose? Noble proposes new readings of Whitman, Emerson, Santayana, and Stevens that explore a literary history wrestling with the consequences of its own materialism. At a moment when several new models of the relationship between human experience and its physical ground circulate among critical theorists and philosophers of science, Noble turns to poets who have long asked what our shared materiality can tell us about our prospects for new models of our material selves.

Mark Noble is Assistant Professor of English at Georgia State University, where he teaches American literature and critical theory. He received his PhD from Johns Hopkins University in 2009. Noble's essays have been published in *American Literature* and *Nineteenth-Century Literature*.



CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN AMERICAN  
LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Editor

Ross Posnock, *Columbia University*

Founding Editor

Albert Gelpi, *Stanford University*

Advisory Board

Alfred Bendixen, *Texas A&M University*

Sacvan Bercovitch, *Harvard University*

Ronald Bush, *St. John's College, University of Oxford*

Wai Chee Dimock, *Yale University*

Albert Gelpi, *Stanford University*

Gordon Hutner, *University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*

Walter Benn Michaels, *University of Illinois, Chicago*

Kenneth Warren, *University of Chicago*

RECENT BOOKS IN THIS SERIES

168. GAVIN JONES  
Failure and the American Writer: A Literary History
167. LENA HILL  
Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition
166. MICHAEL ZISER  
Environmental Practice and Early American Literature
165. ANDREW HEBARD  
The Poetics of Sovereignty in American Literature, 1885–1910
164. CHRISTOPHER FREEBURG  
Melville and the Idea of Blackness: Race and Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century America
163. TIM ARMSTRONG  
The Logic of Slavery: Debt, Technology, and Pain in American Literature
162. JUSTINE MURISON  
The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature
161. HSUAN L. HSU  
Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature
160. DORRI BEAM  
Style, Gender, and Fantasy in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing
159. YOGITA GOYAL  
Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature
158. MICHAEL CLUNE  
American Literature and the Free Market, 1945–2000





*For my parents*

I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhandelled globe.

– Henry David Thoreau, “Mt. Ktaadn”

Here is something rather than nothing, here is existence, here are vortices, spirals, volutes, all models out of equilibrium. They are brought back to zero by deterioration, ruin and death. But, temporarily, they form.

– Michel Serres, *The Birth of Physics*

## *Acknowledgments*

This book appears by the grace of an exceptional group of teachers, colleagues, and friends. My first thanks go to Sharon Cameron, whose generous guidance has improved my work immeasurably; to Allen Grossman, whose genius continues to inform my experience of poetry; and to Doug Mao, whose acuity and generosity as an interlocutor benefited this book immensely. At UC Santa Barbara, Porter Abbott, Tom Carlson, and Giles Gunn were extraordinary teachers who illuminated both the possibility and the exigency of academic work. For their advice on the development of this book in its particularly inchoate stages, I owe a special debt to Jonathan Goldberg, Michael Moon, Hent De Vries, and Amanda Anderson. I am also deeply grateful to friends at Johns Hopkins University patient enough to discuss drafts of this work in its early stages: Elisha Cohn, Bryan Conn, Christin Ellis, Jason Hoppe, Claire Jarvis, Andrew Sisson, Dan Stout, Matthew Taylor, and the Americanist Reading Group. And to James Kuzner, who has been both an exemplary intellectual and an exemplary friend. At Georgia State University, which has provided an exceptionally supportive research environment, I have been fortunate to discuss portions of this book with talented colleagues – especially Ian Almond, Eddie Christie, Jan Gabler-Hover, Randy Malamud, LeAnne Richardson, Marilynn Richtarik, and Cal Thomas. I have also been blessed with gifted students eager to examine Whitman and Emerson with me, especially Owen Cantrell, Amber Estlund, and Brett Griffin. It was also my good fortune to discuss this work with Laura Dassow Walls, Hugh Crawford, and Erich Nunn. I thank the editors and readers at *American Literature* and *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, where parts of this project appear, for their advice and commentary. I am deeply appreciative of the insight offered by the readers at Cambridge University Press, whose scrupulous attention to this book improved it significantly. I also thank the curators of the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, where I was afforded a summer immersed in the book and in their archives.

I could not have completed this book without the daily support of Shannon Finck, whose candor and kindness have emboldened my writing and my view of just about everything else. Most of all, I thank my parents, Ed and Bonnie, for embodying the sorts of generosity and love that furnish the atoms of every opportunity.

## Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page xi
Introduction	i
1 Intimate Atomisms: Toward a History of Aporetic Materialism	15
2 Whitman's Atom: Sex and Death in the "Wide Flat Space" of <i>Leaves of Grass</i>	47
3 Emerson's Atom: The Matter of Suffering	81
4 Santayana's Lucretius: The Chance for an Ethical Atomism	110
5 Matter at the End of the Mind: Stevens and the Call for a Quantum Poetics	142
Coda: The Material Subject in Theory	183
<i>Notes</i>	195
<i>Index</i>	227



## Introduction

So far as it goes, a small thing may give an analogy of great things,  
and show the tracks of knowledge.

– Lucretius, *De rerum natura*

The sentence above comes from a particularly exquisite moment in *De rerum natura*. Lucretius has just instructed his reader to notice the motions of dust motes the next time a ray of light crosses a dark room. Following the lives of barely visible specks of matter here means tracing their sequence of meetings and partings, their innumerable contacts and endless conflicts, and the unseen factors that compel them now in one direction, now in another. Whenever it occurs, the chance to observe so many “minute particles mingling” in a sunbeam promises access to a secret knowledge – nothing less than a glimpse of that invisible primordium in which elemental bodies collide and combine to produce a world. One thus attends to the dance of the dust mote, according to Lucretius, because understanding the material lives of the smallest things means understanding the composition of all things, including those “tracks of knowledge” that comprise human experience.<sup>1</sup>

This is a book about the consequences of following Lucretius down this road. How exactly does one link the motions of atomic particles to the patterns of thought that govern our apprehension of the world? What kinds of experience would such a connection allow us to envision? What would it disallow? And what sort of poem do we require for making the collisions of particles correspond to the collisions of persons – or for observing the mind’s correlation with its own materials? The present study explores responses to such questions found in texts that presume our knowledge about the materials out of which human subjects are composed amounts to knowledge of the human. Or, more precisely, this is a book about writers who develop such an idea to exhilarating ends and about the costs of that idea’s limitations. In the chapters that follow, I trace the materialisms



of American poets and theorists of poetry in order to sketch a short history of the atomized human subject – the person conceived as its relation to a field of objects – and I explore the significance such a history might have for the range of critical practices that lay claim to the term “materialist” today. By examining poetic adaptations of Lucretius’ assertion that tracking the atom discloses the tracks of thought, this book uncovers an exchange of ideas about the viability and the limitations of radical materialist accounts of things like ethics, agency, and intersubjectivity.

When Lucretius recommends attention to the whimsical activity of dust motes, he presupposes a thesis that the American writers I discuss and a great deal of today’s most provocative scholarship adopt as a foundation: namely, that grounding any discussion of what constitutes human experience in its material components opens avenues for new models of that experience. Whether we specify this material ground as a field of atoms or a bundle of neurons, the Lucretian thesis demonstrates that the patterns of organization we think of as persons are in fact aleatory events tied to a physical substrate – irremediably contingent, historical, finite. But these conditions are not always easy to tolerate. Atomized subjects are unusually vulnerable to dissolution; a material ground constantly slides out from beneath our feet. In the atomist poetics envisioned by Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Santayana, and Wallace Stevens, the opportunity afforded by the Lucretian insight cannot be dissociated from the obliquities and opacities that come with it. In response to the epistemological lacunae that often trouble materialist ontologies, these writers stage a series of experiments with the conceptual technology of the atom. I am interested in the history of this experimentation – a history laboring to discern the edges of what our shared materiality can tell us about our prospects for new models of our material selves.

This tradition in American poetics presupposes that new conceptions of subjectivity require richer accounts of the relation between the human and the material. Of course, the terms of that relation are notoriously difficult to pin down. As scholars and theorists interested in our material investments have often noted, human experience seems at once wholly dependent on physical reality and never satisfactorily reducible to it. Or, the explanatory power of such reductions confronts the radical alterity of the very matter to which they propose access. As I suggest in Chapter 1, these difficulties often come into focus when the cornerstone ideas that found materialist ontologies prove no less mysterious than the metaphysical categories they were meant to replace. In response to the wild indeterminacy of Lucretius’ dust motes, or the inscrutable architecture of the