

Nicolás Fernández-Medina. *Life Embodied: The Promise of Vital Force in Spanish Modernity*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018. xxxv, 377 pp. ISBN 9780773553378.

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In his fascinating diachronic interdisciplinary study of the theories of vital force in Spanish modernity, Nicolás Fernández-Medina revisits forgotten texts on vital force —“the immanent energy that promotes the processes of life and growth in the body and nature” (XIII)— in order to demonstrate their profound influence on various disciplines such as Philosophy, Medicine, and Literature from the Spanish peninsula between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Divided chronologically into three sections, *Life Embodied* details the historical contexts, medical debates, philosophical exchanges, and literary innovations that helped shape Spain's path to modernity. In addition to compiling an extensive bibliography on the subject, Fernández-Medina's ability to masterfully navigate such a wide array of texts (ranging from medical treatises to Avant-garde literature) allows him to present his reader with an original, exciting, and comprehensive thesis supported by exhaustive research and in-depth analysis.

*Life Embodied* opens with a Preface and an Introduction. In these preliminary texts, Fernández-Medina gives a detailed historical account of how the concept of vital force evolved between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, thereby establishing a foundation of knowledge on the subject that prepares his reader to better understand the assortment of complex issues addressed in the sections that follow.

### **Part One. Blood, Circulation, and the Soul**

In this first chapter, Fernández-Medina posits that Juan de Cabriada's *Philosophical Medico-Chemical Letter* (1687) presents a groundbreaking perspective on medicine for 17<sup>th</sup> century Spain and introduces the theory of vital force into the debates, propelling Spain towards modernization. The author's meticulous analysis of Cabriada's letter sheds new light on the polemic document's importance by providing fresh insight regarding its subversion of popular philosophical and scientific theories of the time, thus making a

strong case for its reconsideration as a seminal work in the push toward Spanish Enlightenment.

In the second chapter, Fernández-Medina demonstrates how the issue of vital force was central to the criticisms of Cartesianism made by three 18<sup>th</sup> century Spanish physicians and philosophers: Marcelino Boix y Moliner, Martín Martínez, and Diego de Torres Villarroel. In his detailed overview of key treatises by Boix y Moliner and Martínez, Fernández-Medina shows how each author's "neo-Hippocratic" perspective dismantles the Cartesian metaphysical approach to medicine by revealing its shortcomings with respect to dealing with the actual living body—the former claiming that Cartesianism was purely "philosophizing" and lacked empirical practice and the latter arguing that Cartesianism did not solve the body–soul nexus nor answer crucial existentialist questions related to embodiment. But perhaps the most intriguing part of this chapter is when Fernández-Medina dissects Diego de Torres Villarroel's treatise *Anatomy of the Visible and Invisible*, in which the 18<sup>th</sup> century thinker proposes a seemingly impossible, but necessary alternative to Descartes' anatomical studies that can reveal the true origins of vital force: the immortal soul. Under the guise of a fantastic journey, Torres embarks on an exploratory trip inside a *living* body in an attempt to expose the soul as its unseen driving force but, according to Fernández-Medina, through the use of specialized medical terminology and concepts, he unwittingly ends up reinforcing the authority of the same modern scientific community that he is trying to discredit.

## **Part Two. Political Reform and the Order of Nature**

In chapter three, Fernández-Medina focuses on two key figures of Spain's 18<sup>th</sup> century "medical revolution" whose research gave way to new theories of vital force. First, the author describes the trailblazing micro-anatomical studies of Sebastián Miguel Guerreros Herrero, a prominent member of Seville's Royal Society of Medicine who believed that the solution to the mystery of vital force lay in the connections between the visible and the invisible fibers of the body. Subsequently, Fernández-Medina examines how the findings of anatomist, physician, and chemist Ignacio María Ruiz de Luzuriaga's experiments, combined with his extensive knowledge of popular vitalist theories of the time, allowed the scientist to link vital force to respiration and blood oxygenation and identify the existence of an intermediate physical state between life and death. However, as Fernández-Medina illustrates in the last section of this chapter, the advancement of these new theories did not come without opposition from Spanish traditionalists and religious apologists.

In chapter four, the author painstakingly examines late-Enlightenment thinker Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos' travelogues, diaries, and his 1799 *Oration* in an effort to further explore the Spanish philosopher's thoughts on nature's vital force and its relationship with the embodied self. Through a detailed analysis of Jovellanos' writings on the subject, Fernández-Medina makes the case for their importance in serving as a

bridge between Spanish Enlightenment and Romanticism—a connection that has been largely overlooked.

### **Part Three. From Neo-Hippocratism to the Avant-Garde**

In chapter five, Fernández-Medina explains how a growing interest in physiology during the complex political and socioeconomic climate of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Spain prompted “a new enthusiasm for the question of vital force” (206). Later, he carefully outlines the Great Debate between neo-Hippocratic vitalists and positivist materialists, demonstrating how Pedro Mata y Fontanet’s lectures played an integral role in pushing Spain’s medical community towards progress and a materialist worldview. Lastly, Fernández-Medina describes how, in the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century, krausists like the Spanish philosopher Julián Sanz del Río viewed vital force holistically, believing that “[a]n intimate and thorough understanding of bodily life and nature revealed a path to the ideal society” (225).

In the final chapter, Fernández-Medina demonstrates how, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of the *lived* body as more than just the sum of its parts “serves as the organic, existential medium [...] through which the individual relates to the world” (235) and “laid the groundwork for new critical paradigms of subjectivity that propelled modernist aesthetics in Spain” (236). By examining key philosophical and literary works by Miguel de Unamuno, Pío Baroja, and Ramón Gómez de la Serna through the lens of biological phenomena and theories of vital force discussed in previous chapters, Fernández-Medina is able to offer valuable new insights on the artistic production of these three important Spanish authors, particularly on the different ways that their work relates the myriad experiences (both physical and psychological) of the *lived* body to modernity and the modern world.

In conclusion, Fernández-Medina’s interdisciplinary analysis of the question of vital force in Spain across three centuries not only contributes a wealth of invaluable information that greatly broadens the scope of our understanding of these philosophical debates, scientific trends, and literary innovations, but it also successfully leads to the inextricable connection of vital force to the project of modernity, to ongoing reassessment and self-reflexivity, and to a constant push forward in an effort to redefine limits and then go beyond them.