

# Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto

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Medieval views of matter have traditionally been left out of discussions of materialism, in part because philosophers and historians of science have considered them to be too “metaphysical” in orientation. Materialism has therefore been defined univocally in terms of the definitions of matter in vogue during the Enlightenment (primarily physicalism and Cartesian dualism). The effects of this omission are still felt in the materialist paradigms that continue to underwrite much work in literary criticism, history, and other humanist disciplines. This article argues that our modern understanding of materialism would be usefully widened by admitting that medieval definitions of matter, both hylomorphic and humoral, constitute their own versions of “materialism,” versions that can help us to historicize later understandings of the term. Finally, medieval poetics would play a significant role in such a recuperative project, since late medieval natural philosophy and literary practice shared similar representational challenges in their respective attempts to textualize the material world and understand the immaterial forces that shaped it.

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Noþing is more vnknowe þan is matiere.  
(John Trevisa’s translation of Bartholomeus Anglicanus)

The mystery isn’t mind  
(what else are we, evidently,  
besides *aware*?)  
but materiality, intersection  
of solidity and flame,  
where quick and stillness meet —  
Materiality the impenetrable thing.  
(Mark Doty)

For the thirteenth-century scholastic Bartholomeus Anglicus and his fourteenth-century translator Trevisa, “nothing is more unknown than matter” because,

according to Aristotle, matter never exists independent of form. “Raw” matter could never be apprehended, never precede a formed thing; instead, the two were intertwined in a sensuous commingling that laid the foundation for the objective world. For the poet Mark Doty, a writer known for his deft explorations of embodiment and its limits, recalcitrant or deteriorating flesh often nullifies any easy distinction between the mind and the body. What these medieval writers and this modern poet share is not only a belief in the mingling of sensation and thought, but also a conviction that the substrate of these activities cannot be easily defined. The question of matter — of the difference it makes in a thing’s existence, be it a thought, a sensation, or an object — must be continually revisited.

Bartholomeus and Doty are useful points in a triangulation of material readings because they can be plotted against what intervenes: the rise of a philosophy emphasizing a different understanding of materialism in early and middle modernity, a much-documented phenomenon discussed under many names (“Cartesianism,” “mind–body dualism,” “empiricism”) that in the main argued for the separation of mind and body, matter and form, material and immaterial. To talk about matter in any period, it is necessary to discuss metaphysics, since, as the historian of science Anneliese Maier reminds us, the solutions a society offers to the problem of material substance — how it relates to the immaterial, how it relates to mind — determine a society’s views on nature and, therefore, on what it means to be an embodied human (*Threshold*, 125). For modern philosophers, sociologists, political theorists, and literary critics, the question of the human and the post-human have emerged as critically central over the last two decades; at the same time, “materialism” has multiplied, and one (or more) of its divergent forms (historical, dialectical, cultural, post-Marxist, Althusserian) has become the virtual default setting for much of this critical work.

Within literary studies, the continuing predominance of materialism since the late 1980s has been both celebrated and lamented. New historicism employed what we might term a “reciprocating” historicism that sought to read the cultural context in the textual object and simultaneously read the textual strategies of symbolization at work within the culture at large. Predominant for most of the 1990s, it was celebrated as a way out of historical positivism by some, criticized by others for fetishizing the object of historical inquiry or, more insidiously, for rendering all social practices the equivalent of texts, effectively aestheticizing everything on which it turned its agentless attention.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of the new historicism, literary materialism was reinvigorated by turning anthropological and sociological models on objects — both actual and represented — and their cultural circulation. The influential 2001 volume of the journal *Critical Inquiry* edited by Bill Brown and entitled simply “Things” might be seen as the watershed between the previous materialist work of new historicism and the more recent materialist work of what came to be known as “thing theory.” Working from a Heideggerian account of the way in which humans share agency with their tools, much of this recent strain of criticism seeks to chart what Arjun Appadurai called “the social biography of things” in order to understand the shifting boundary between the human and the non-human in any given period.<sup>2</sup> Brown has recently rephrased the critical project as an exploration of “how particular

objects dramatize the problematics of otherness” (“Objects,” 186). This version of materialist criticism has become increasingly popular in medieval and early modern textual studies; some critics have labeled this strain of work in the early periods as the “new” new historicism.<sup>3</sup> The proliferation of the “neo” in this designation gives one pause, however. Precisely how many “news” does it take until we find ourselves right back at the same old models of historical materialism?

Such designations also suggest that these critical paradigms can be considered “remediated” materialisms, such that each succeeding materialism contains the philosophical seeds of that which has come before.<sup>4</sup> While this latest strain of materialism — whether called “thing theory” or “new new historicism” — has led to some innovative work on premodern objects, there are some critical and disciplinary questions that this strain of materialism raises, particularly for those working in earlier historical periods.<sup>5</sup> For example, the problem of fetishizing the object as a site of cultural alterity is that it can lead us to feel that the object is less a site of meaningful historical inquiry than a fulfillment of some desire to “fix” the otherness of the distant object through the wonder it evokes. These historical objects of inquiry are rendered opaque as they transform before our eyes into transparent windows onto an “actual” historical moment, a transformation that is accompanied by the thrill of seeing the faint reflection of our own modernity in the glass. Douglas Bruster has memorably remarked that this line of inquiry runs the risk of devolving into “tchotchke criticism” (203). If the work of materialism is always a remediated one, we ought at the very least to return to the originary site from whence our modern understandings of what counts as “materialism” have emerged and, from there, survey what has been atavistically preserved in each successive incarnation. In the most far-reaching analysis of recent materialist criticism as applied to early modern literature, Jonathan Gil Harris rightfully notes the temporal conundrum that besets attempts to reconstruct the social biography of things using a kind of Geertzian “thick description.” Objects, he argues, despite their comforting solidity, are not just static and atemporal; they often contain sedimented within themselves previous technologies, uses, and practices. Harris concludes that

the relations between matter and temporality have been largely occluded in recent scholarship on objects, which has tended to transform the “material” of material culture into a synonym for “physical” — thereby freezing not just the object in time but also the time in the object. (*Untimely Matter*, 7)

As Harris’s critique makes clear, this renewed interest in premodern things necessitates a harder look at what constitutes a “thing,” what constitutes ideas about what is material both “back then” as well as now, and, consequently, how the passage of time has shaped our successive understandings of matter. Like Harris, I am interested in the temporalities of materialism. My interest, however, is in the unacknowledged lacunae and asynchronicities that plague philosophical and scientific histories of materialism, temporal structures that, I argue, continue to support the critical paradigms based on them. This is a story about forgetting and atavistic preservation, about the way that ideas of matter retrospectively labeled “modern” displaced their

medieval antecedents while nevertheless silently absorbing continuities with these earlier concepts, concepts which, until recently, few have been curious enough about to retrieve and explore.

Just as we should not take for granted the temporal unity of the object, we should also not take for granted the temporal unity of the idea of materialism itself. Just as the thing is not one, neither is matter unitary. The historical genealogy of philosophical materialism is particularly problematic to those with an interest in the material culture of the medieval period, since the Middle Ages is regularly elided from these accounts. The usual genealogy of materialism begins with the Greek atomists — natural philosophers including Leucippus and Democritus who believed that the visible and invisible worlds could best be explained through the material interaction of bodies — then moves on to the revival of these doctrines in the Epicureans and Lucretius. The narrative then leaps over the Middle Ages to arrive breathlessly on the fifteenth-century doorstep of the Roman curia where inside Poggio Bracciolini is single-handedly rediscovering the “lost” atomist tradition in his translation of Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*, the philosophical epic that had explained atomist principles of physics and a concomitant ethics of human responsibility to its first-century BC Roman audience. Cue the Renaissance. All exaggeration aside, the omission of this “middle” — the medieval Arabic and western traditions of natural philosophy synthesized out of Aristotle’s suspicion of atomism — is striking and problematic from the standpoint of both the history and philosophy of science and the humanities disciplines whose critical paradigms often depend, however implicitly, on this genealogy.

This article takes as its point of departure the idea that the existence of such a lacuna at the center of philosophical and scientific histories of materialism — one that requires us to skip over a millennium in which atomism and its adherents served as negative examples in Aristotelian accounts of the world — poses a challenge to imagining what a medieval materialism might look like. In the received narrative, the Middle Ages were never quite material enough. While historical narratives must always suppress something in order to tell a coherent story, this temporal gap skews our understanding of what “materialism” itself is. Are the well-known seventeenth-century conceptualizations of matter — whether within Cartesian dualism or the more physically determinist “mechanical philosophies” popularized by Gassendi and Hobbes — the only plausible definitions within a broader intellectual history of the category? And if not, how might these definitions be modified? The materialism that we have now may not, ultimately, be the materialism that we want. For starters, the current definition of materialism is in large part the ideological legacy of the seventeenth century, and perhaps it is time to challenge the rough equation of “materialism” with some version of “physicalism.” To this end, this article will look first at why the Middle Ages has been repeatedly left out of the history and philosophy of materialism — the attitude behind this omission as well as arguments for its inclusion. The second half of the article will look at what medieval poetics has to offer the study of materialism as well as how debates about representing matter shaped what we have come to know as the form of poetry in the medieval period

and, hence, the originary moment of many literary founding stories that get told afterwards. Because of this early generic affinity between poetry and arguments about matter, literary studies is an appropriate place for a continuing exploration and redefinition of materialism. Put simply: medieval views of matter should matter. And they should matter not only to medievalists and historians of science but to cultural critics whose critical paradigms ultimately rest on a comprehensive understanding of the many varieties of materialism that would have been available before the seventeenth century, not just after it. A reconceptualization of what we say when we mean “material” will allow us a more responsive critical model with which to analyze texts, objects, ideas, humans, and the cultures that produce them.

## Mind the gap

The nineteenth-century German philosopher Friederich Albert Lange’s monumental *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart* [*History of Materialism and Criticism of its Present Importance*] (1866) argues that materialism, beginning with the Greek atomists, provided the basis for what was to become modern empirical science. Lange lauds the efforts of early natural philosophers such as Leucippus, Democritus, and Lucretius who looked to the natural (rather than supernatural) world for answers to the most pressing epistemological and ontological questions. Lucretius’s argument for benignly neglectful gods uninterested in the affairs of mankind was particularly compelling to Lange not just as a *quondam* disciplinary point of origin, but also as an antidote to the prevailing Hegelian idealism of his own time. Unfortunately, this promising materialist beginning was actively repressed by the pernicious influence of Aristotle in the medieval period. Aristotle’s rejection of atomist doctrine enabled the tyranny of religion to stamp out the feeble pulse of science. Whereas “materialism explained natural phenomena by immutable necessary laws,” according to Lange, Aristotelianism “introduced a reason fashioned after human models haggling with necessity, and so demolished the basis of all natural science by the convenient instrument of arbitrary caprice” (52).

What is this caprice, this barrier to “every empirical tendency” (89)? It was an Aristotelian natural philosophy whose first principle was hylomorphism, the inextricable joining of matter to metaphysical form. On this view, there was no such thing as “independent” matter, since matter was thought to be “potentiality” in relation to the “actuality” of form. Aristotle’s own metaphors still explain this concept best: the matter of the acorn and the oak tree are the same even though the form changes over time; bricks and lumber are the matter of the house while the idea of the house (first in the builder’s mind, then in the disposition of its parts) is its form. For Lange, as for many Enlightenment thinkers before him, this compound substance comprised “the most reckless anthropomorphism” (83). Indeed, it is “pantheism” insofar as it asks that the divine will everywhere permeate matter “and realise itself and become immanent in the growth and becoming of all things” (85). It is this narrative of an empirical atomism obliterated for centuries by an anthropomorphizing Aristotelianism

that remains the basis of philosophical materialism. If Lucretius — followed by Locke and then Lange — writes to free us from the tyranny of religion, what can the Middle Ages be but the triumph of this tyranny, one enacted by an ecclesiastical hierarchy whose power was shored up by Aristotle?

Even as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the gradual dismantling of Cartesianism — with its belief in the separation of mind from matter and its consequent belief in an objective knowledge gained by an observer outside the observed field — there still remains a sense that Aristotelianism suffers from the ethical taint of mixing mind and matter, form and bodies, in an unclean way. While the last decade has seen a reappraisal of so-called “late” Aristotelianism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the works of historians of science such as Dennis Des Chene, Stephen Gaukroger, and Daniel Garber among others, Lange’s was the standard textbook on materialism well into the twentieth century. His neo-Kantian critique of medieval Aristotelianism thus continued to influence generations of modern philosophers and historians well after its own time. It is perhaps unsurprising that even modern genealogies of materialism regularly exclude the Middle Ages in similar language: “for a millennium and a half, Greco-Roman materialism disappeared from European civilization, driven underground by Christianity . . . [t]entatively resurfacing in seventeenth-century England and France in the writings of Francis Bacon and Pierre Gassendi” (Vitzthum, 13). The idea that one could not be a Christian *and* a materialist — that is, someone for whom matter possesses an independent, determining existence — remains a frequent refrain. Thus in such histories of materialism the medieval makes an epiphenomenal appearance at best (sometimes Ockham or Cusa is admitted as a challenger to Aristotle) but its absence is a foregone conclusion given these starting assumptions. A medieval materialism would be an oxymoron.

And yet medieval studies has much to offer debates on materialism if such assumptions are addressed in their philological, theological, and philosophical specificities. While the words “matter” and “material” were common in the medieval and early modern periods, the term “materialism” does not enter English until the early eighteenth century, a time when Aristotelian views on matter were seen as hopelessly mystical or even animistic — ideas that Lange’s history later codifies. The idea that Christianity and materialism are mutually exclusive seems to be posited on a narrowly Neoplatonic understanding of medieval Christianity, one which — while debated in post-Augustinian metaphysics — was rarely found in practice in later medieval England. Moreover, the mutually exclusive nature of Christianity and materialism would certainly have surprised many of the seventeenth-century proponents of mechanistic ideas of matter — those in Lange’s account who vanquished “the tyranny of religion” — who were themselves deeply invested in the religious life of their day: Francis Bacon wrote several treatises on the state of the Church of England; Pierre Gassendi was not only a cleric but, at one time, a cathedral provost.<sup>6</sup> As the historian of science Stephen Gaukroger argues in his magisterial study *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture* (2006), early modern science developed in conversation with, and was in many important senses compelled by, religion rather than hindered by

it. While these natural philosophers shared a dislike of the abstruseness into which Aristotelian scholasticism had devolved, it is unlikely that they would have agreed with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century definitions of materialism that made matter the only determinant of observable change in the world. A faith in “pure,” independent matter then should be seen in its historical context as an ideological rather than an empirical necessity, one of several competing materialisms available to post-sixteenth-century writers.<sup>7</sup>

In propagating the idea that materialism and late medieval Christianity were mutually exclusive, nineteenth-century histories of materialism similarly exaggerated the extent to which Aristotelianism and late medieval Christianity were seamlessly compatible. There is a latent anachronism underlying Lange’s view of Aristotle’s purported “mysticism” that reads the later medieval Christian adoption of Aristotle retrospectively back onto the works attributed to Aristotle himself: was Aristotle really a proleptic, closeted Christian waiting to spring the tyranny of a pantheistic religion on Western Europe? And, if so, how did his Arabic interpreters manage to sidestep this particular fate? This narrative of materialism is forced to overlook the fact that Aristotle’s views on natural philosophy (and specifically on matter) were frequently condemned by the medieval Church over the course of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

As the work of Maier and Des Chene has shown, the basis of any time period’s view of nature is based on its views of the structure of material substance. One of the problems with including medieval views on matter in the history of materialism stems from the fact that, historically, there were many competing understandings of matter prior to the seventeenth-century watershed. Debates over matter were often vitriolic as medieval scholastic culture attempted to integrate Aristotle’s works into the university curriculum. The scholastic challenge was twofold: first, to accommodate Aristotelian views of nature to biblical and patristic writings and, secondly, to resolve the contradictions within the Aristotelian system itself. Both projects proved difficult. The first, largely Thomist project, was only partially successful. The well-known condemnations of Aristotle’s natural philosophy in 1277 include objections to Aristotle’s views on matter: theologians were always uneasy with Aristotle’s assertion that everything in the world comes from pre-existing matter as it rendered the *ex nihilo* creation story found in Genesis an absurdity. Similarly, Aristotle’s views on the incorruptibility of matter were seen to infringe on divine omnipotence (Grant, 537–8). If Aristotle’s views on matter were deemed to attribute too much agency to matter by some conservative theologians, they were seen as not material enough by a slightly later group of scholastics interested in theories of motion and impetus. The work of Grosseteste, Ockham, Buridan, and others sat uneasily with received Aristotelian ideas about how matter moved in both real and counterfactual situations. One extreme example of a materialist revision of Aristotle is the case of Nicole Autrecourt, the Parisian cleric whose views were condemned in 1347. Leaving aside the extent to which Autrecourt could be considered a “skeptic,” it is certainly the case that his physics sought to replace Aristotelian hylomorphism with atomist principles.<sup>8</sup> If

scholastic intellectual culture had been as homogeneously opposed to interrogating materialism as is often implied, why the continued need to condemn the more deterministically material aspects of Aristotle's natural philosophy or those who wished to discard Aristotelian ideas in favor of a more atomist understanding of physical causation?

These debates over the nature of matter did not remain confined within the centers of university learning. They spilled into the vernacular, most notably with reference to arguments about transubstantiation. Aristotle's views on matter arguably precluded the central sacrament of late medieval Christianity. Since all accidents, according to Aristotle, must inhere in a substance, the proposition that the eucharistic wafer became Christ's body on the inside at the moment of elevation but remained bread on the outside would be a metaphysical impossibility. In such a process, no material substrate could remain the same throughout the process. There was no easy way to reconcile the Church's official position that the consecrated host was "subject without accidents" with the Aristotelian position. The conflict between natural philosophy and theology could only be resolved by assuming that Christ was speaking metaphorically, an assumption that the late medieval church was loath to make; this conflict necessitated the continual re-evaluation of the status of matter by late medieval scholastics including Duns Scotus, Ockham, and others (Sylla, 361–71). This debate over the exact nature of what happens to the eucharist appears as a joke in Chaucer's poetry and informs the poetic visions of vernacular poets such as Guillaume de Deguileville and Thomas Hoccleve (see, for instance, Strohm, Somerset, and Stanbury). Debates over the nature and status of matter thus defined not only the limits of the human but also the limits of the divine, as arguments about Aristotelian models of materiality challenged orthodox understandings of the sacraments.

The reason Aristotelianism triumphed for centuries was not because all medieval people (together with a good helping of early moderns) were gullible and tyrannized by religion, but rather because atomism left major questions about the nature of reality unanswered even as it answered others. It posited the existence of both matter and non-matter — void — but failed to articulate compellingly how the two were related or how change was possible in such a world. Aristotelianism rejected this model in favor of one that explained change as an innate principle of matter.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the late medieval period, these answers continued to be fought over, generating an ongoing dialogue about matter in both scholastic and secular contexts. As historians of philosophy and science (including Lange) have rightfully remarked, this dialogue was initiated by Aristotle's rejection of atomism, a rejection continually tested by tensions within and without an evolving medieval Aristotelianism. It would be perhaps most appropriate to consider Aristotle as an engaged interlocutor — perhaps the most serious interlocutor — of atomism and materialism rather than its "oppressor." This type of dialogism should be the model for our materialism, as it is indeed the model for most other critical paradigms that seek to explore ontological or epistemological questions. In almost every other variety of modern criticism, we recognize the need for a dialogic understanding of our categories. We don't imagine



theories of gender in isolation from medieval views on sex and biology, for instance; why then should the predominant model of materialism be imagined as the solitary splendor of matter reified, after the Enlightenment, into the singular realm of the physical?

This necessarily brief smash-and-grab précis of medieval debates over matter is not meant as an overview of medieval accounts of matter; rather it is merely a point of departure from which to argue for the recuperation of the term “materialism,” a term that would more accurately refer to the views on material substance and the controversies these views generated *in any given period*, rather than to a more narrow definition that effectively affirms the Epicurean, Enlightenment notion of the existence of a “pure,” determining matter independent of any metaphysical constraints. Materialism need not be a synonym for varieties of physicalism.<sup>10</sup> My line of argument advocates not merely moving the boundary of materialism backwards — i.e. the Middle Ages is materialist too — but rather redefining the term to include alternate conceptions of the material. This broader definition of materialism would not only recognize the centrality of medieval debates about matter to the genealogy of materialism but also encourage new questions about the landscape of the modern itself. It is finally time to shed the lingering idea that Aristotelian views of matter are not “material enough” because they are predicated on a collaboration of form and matter as opposed to a notion of “pure” matter.

This latter idea has, of course, been philosophically suspect since at least the time of Leibniz, but it has only recently been revisited in debates in the history of science, debates inspired in part by the work of the historian of science Bruno Latour. For Latour, the legacy of the Enlightenment’s notion of “pure matter” has been shown to be its own myth, a powerful one no doubt, often seen as the basis for modernity itself. Latour argues that “we have never been modern” precisely because the separation of the human from the material world — matter from everything else — can never fully be realized despite its apparent necessity to Enlightenment science. Even as the ideological necessity of this separation of thing from idea has dwindled — what Latour calls the desire for “purification” (11–2), a desire whose beginnings he locates in the seventeenth-century laboratory of Boyle and the treatises of Locke — the taint against Aristotelianism and the medieval remains.<sup>11</sup> It is no longer the case that the existence of a medieval materialism should be excluded because ethics and religion have tainted pure reason in this period through its dependence on Platonic and later Aristotelian ideas of natural philosophy (as Lange and others have argued). While it is certainly the case that critics as well as historians of philosophy and science have, by and large, given up this language, they have been less quick to give up the implicit teleologies that structure our disciplines — the “gap” in the center of the history of materialism.

This discontinuity has influenced not just philosophy and the history of science but discussions about periodization and modernity in many disciplines including literary studies. Ideas about what counts as “material” have repeatedly been used to determine what counts as “modern.” The philosopher Hans Blumenberg identified “the elementary exertions of the modern age” as “the *mathematizing* and the *materializing*

of nature” carried out by diverse disciplines in Enlightenment culture (164). In refuting the so-called “secularization thesis” — the idea that progress necessitated a movement away from religious absolutism even as religious habits of thought and practices got transferred into other, more secular institutions such as the monarchy, banking systems, or science — Blumenberg’s identification of the modern with an immanently ordered material world is what allows him to assert a historical break between the Scientific Revolution and what had come before. Such “rupture narratives” — refuted in the work of Latour and Gaukroger — reveal the role that materialism plays in historical periodization. Minding the gap is what allows the “modern” to be put in “early modern.” Within literary studies, such periodizations in turn have defined how we think about genre and other literary structures, often producing classificatory problems that need not exist otherwise: if the sonnet is a Renaissance genre, to what period does Dante belong? If the novel is a post-Scientific-Revolution prose form, to what genre does *Don Quixote* belong?

Such rupture narratives, based as they are on an implicit materialist genealogy, can be seen at work in the recent and renewed interest in Lucretius, particularly in the rediscovery of his *De rerum natura* in the early fifteenth century. Lucretius’s poem argued, *inter alia*, that the world is material — composed only of extraordinarily small atoms and void space; that the senses are dependable; and that the gods are indifferent to human fate. The appearance of numerous studies in the last few years documenting the influence of Lucretius on early modern British literature and culture (in the work of Gillespie, Quint, and Passannante) as well as the French Enlightenment (Meeker) have produced much-needed reconsiderations of the extent to which atomist ideas were adopted or entertained in these periods. While this renewed interest in Lucretius produces a more nuanced picture of the early modern period, it threatens to obscure further the contributions to debates about materialism made in the Middle Ages. Since these books argue either implicitly or explicitly that it is the fifteenth-century rediscovery that marks the rupture with the Aristotelian Middle Ages, we again have the “donut” materialist narrative with the medieval hole at its center. This narrative is neatly summed up in a recent interview given by the literary critic Stephen Greenblatt, wherein he describes a book-in-progress about the influence of Lucretius on early modern literary culture:

In one moment, 1417, the Western world gets back a robust theory that the universe consists of atoms and emptiness and nothing else — no intelligent design, no divinity pulling the strings, endless time with atoms pulling together and separating, no afterlife, no judgment — effectively the whole tool kit of modernity. It’s like a huge injection to the bloodstream of European intellectual life, and they can’t figure out what to do with it. So I’m interested in what happens when something very radical, totally unacceptable, and, in my view of things, largely true, comes as if dropped from outer space. It had been out of circulation for more than a thousand years. It completely violates everything that Jews, Muslims, Christians, you name it, believe in, and it’s suddenly there on the table, and when you encounter it you have to figure out what the fuck to do with it. I’m calling the book *The Swerve*. (Williams, 61)

While Greenblatt would surely resist the more flat-footed, anti-Aristotelian formulations of Lange, the language of renewal and innovation here is similarly striking. For Greenblatt, the fifteenth-century rediscovery of Lucretius contains “the whole tool kit of modernity,” a box that opens to reveal a strain of early modern agnosticism “as if dropped from outer space.” The new early modern subject is Lucretian and agnostic, and has his finger on the pulse of the renewal of materialism. Make way for Matter Man. And yet to a fifteenth-century audience, Lucretius would not have been a wholly alien entity: the atomism that he embraced would have been known through Maimonides, through William of Coches, through Macrobius and other encyclopedists, and, indeed, perhaps most famously, through Aristotle’s refutation of the earlier atomic writings of Democritus and Leucippus.<sup>12</sup> Nor would it necessarily have been seen as offering a viable alternative to the institutionalized religion of the time (Gillespie).

When Greenblatt’s energetic engagement with Lucretius appears it will, no doubt, engender yet more work on the reception of atomism in sixteenth-century England. Medievalists leery of being swamped in the wake of another historical repositioning such as the “subjectivity epidemic” of the 1990s should take note. The “new Lucretianism” threatens to become the new “new subjectivity.” This is not to deny that historical transformations occurred between the late medieval and early modern periods: indeed, Aristotelianism was gradually transformed into something else altogether under the pressures of humanist Neoplatonism and then empiricism as we find in the work of Charles Schmitt and others. But the keyword here is “gradually.” What David Aers whispered into the ears of early modernists in the early 1990s, we may now want to repeat slightly louder:

[A]ny account that tells us stories of transformations . . . will have to describe with great care, let me say it again, precisely that against which it is being alleged the changes are identifiable as decisive changes and ruptures. This is an elementary demand. (186)

Elementary as it is, this is a demand that has not been met until recently in the history of science (in the work of Gaukroger and others), and it is one that looks to go unheeded, at least initially, in the wave of new Lucretianism. This narrative of rupture, posited as it is on the absence or presence of Lucretius, is another version of new historicist descriptions of early modern subjectivity that were written largely out of a repression of the medieval. Again, this is not to argue against historical change. Instead, it is to caution against this particular rupture narrative that reduces materialism to atomism (more specifically, to the full text of Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*) — a narrative previously embraced by philosophers of science and, more recently, by early modern literary critics, but which is not the best fit for the evidence.

A better picture would connect the dots of materialism — in the form of a dialogue about atomism and the fate of Lucretius, dialogues about the nature of matter in Aristotelian systems — through the Middle Ages rather than around it. A more continuous narrative of ideas about materialism, one that understands the early modern revival of atomism and the subsequent development of mechanist ideas about the

material world in terms of evolution rather than revolution, should, in turn, allow for the production of a more nuanced definition of materialism. Instead of seeing a thing as reducible only to its physical properties or matter reducible to extended substance, we might be able to see an object as determined in part by the sedimented notions of thinghood operative at the moment of its own production. Such an understanding would go some way towards leavening the transhistorical assumptions behind more recent materialist paradigms such as “thing theory” and its iterations.

## Medieval material poetics

Literary studies has a role to play in the ongoing conversation about what materialism is and what kinds of critical paradigms it underwrites. The role of texts in understanding not only the history of matter but also the temporally sedimented idea of what constitutes a “thing” — whether represented or real — naturally falls within its domain. Medieval literary studies has a particularly significant role to play, since debates about materiality helped shape both the function and the form of public poetry in Latin and the vernacular for several centuries. Before the twelfth-century influx of Latin Aristotelian translations, Neoplatonic works such as Bernard Silvestris’s prosimetric *Cosmographia* and Alan of Lille’s *De planctu naturae* described the origin and transformation of *silva* or *hyle*, terms for originary matter. For these writers, matter was a pre-existing crude substance subsequently imprinted with a form by divine power. As the writings of Bernard and Alan demonstrate, poetry was a generically appropriate vehicle for the exploration of the role of matter as well as the relation of self to material world. These writers considered the moral complications of the human condition, yet they also felt it necessary to explain the place of matter within nature as the grounding for their respective ethical visions. These works promoted a synthetic vision of knowledge based on the idealizing integration of nature, faith, and theology, a vision that continued to influence not just later poets but also the disciplinary divisions of scholastic thought. While these Neoplatonic ideas about matter appeared too idealizing to later Enlightenment thinkers, another reason that these statements were left out of the history of materialism proper was that they do not look particularly “scientific.” They were rejected not just by nineteenth-century philosophers such as Lange, but also by more recent literary scholars and historians. In his book on twelfth-century science, Brian Stock remarks that, in Bernard Silvestris, “the mythical predominates over the scientific” (*Myth*, 30). This rejection seems to ignore something to which Stock shows himself to be acutely attuned elsewhere in his writings: the interlaced nature of medieval learned culture that produced natural philosophy in a variety of literary forms and oftentimes in a polemical style.

After the avalanche of Aristotelian natural philosophy began to erode the Neoplatonic understandings of matter found in Bernard, Alan, and others, poetry continued to be the place to discuss matter, but now it was reframed as a more Aristotelian version of matter, one that saw matter as continuous, permeated with forms and

qualities. Such discussions occur most famously in Dante's *Commedia* as well as in the *Roman de la Rose*. The overlap in subject matter between this "popular" poetry and the language of natural philosophy — what today we call "physics" — is unsurprising, since both attempted to represent the world in words. Medieval natural philosophy differs from the primarily mathematical modern discipline in that it sought to represent the world verbally through logical proofs, counterfactual imaginings, and dialectical arguments rather than through equations. Thus both medieval poetry and natural philosophy shared a common discursive lexicon for representing the material world. Tropes were the building blocks of medieval physics: Aristotle's *Physics* repeatedly used metaphor to explain the relation among various causes — material, formal, efficient, and final. Metaphors of building a house, fashioning a bronze statue, and growing an oak all illustrated the intertwined nature of material and immaterial causes. Scientific observation was dependent on metaphor and other tropes in an organic way, a dependence denounced by later Enlightenment philosophers who instituted a descriptive prose largely stripped of figurative language in its place.<sup>13</sup> What these later philosophers would find delegitimizing in Aristotle — his continual recourse to the immaterial to explain the material, to language to explain a thing — is at the center of the shared medieval rhetorics of poetry and natural philosophy, which both struggled with the problem of delineating a continuum from corporeal to cosmological. In the Middle Ages, science happened in poetry and vice versa. To borrow a phrase from Hans Robert Jauss, medieval natural philosophy contributed substantially to the "horizon of expectation" that educated medieval readers brought to the poetic texts they read.

These readers would have been primed to expect descriptions of matter as well as discussions of the ordering of the physical world in public poetry. They would also have been exposed to an ongoing (and occasionally vitriolic) exchange about the nature of matter in the spiritual and earthly worlds. There was not just the conflict between the Chartrian, Neoplatonist understanding of matter and the Aristotelian. Within Aristotelian natural philosophy itself, medieval scholastics struggled to reconcile two essentially irreconcilable notions: the Aristotelian composite of matter and form — hylomorphism — with the discrete elemental compounds formed out of earth, water, air, and fire (Maier, *Threshold*, 124–42). Scholasticism's attempts to resolve these competing notions of material substance generated not only copious commentary and quodlibetal questions on Aristotelian works of natural philosophy but also a series of questions with which medieval scholastics as well as medieval poets (including Dante, Chaucer, and Gower among others) were continually engaged: how do competing definitions of matter, and hence nature, determine what can be said about the human? To what extent is the human a part of the material world and, consequently, to what extent are we composed of it and determined by it?

What may appear to modern eyes as "academic" natural philosophical debates about how to represent the world — what is the relation of matter to form? is matter prior to or simultaneous with form? — helped to produce the culturally specific

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relationships that existed between poets and their literary subject matter and, subsequently, between readers and the textual matter they encountered. The Middle English term *matere*, like its Modern English counterpart, can refer either to a physical substance (either prime matter or elemental matter) or to an “immaterial” activity — for instance, a business affair or a subject of discussion. However, in Middle English (unlike in modern English), it also had more common and more specialized textual meanings: it regularly referred to a scholastic question or to the literary subject matter of a work (*MED*, s.v. “matere,” sense 5d). It is this homologous relation between textual matter and physical matter — the origin of a metaphor now dead — that animates much of post-twelfth-century didactic poetry. Alastair Minnis has shown how the form of medieval poetry was influenced by Aristotelian theories of causality contained in the *Physics* and *Metaphysics* (28–29). This affinity between Aristotle and late medieval poetics goes beyond form and subject matter to the attitudes of both late medieval natural philosopher and medieval poet. Late medieval poets regularly imagined themselves as creators of a quasi-material poetic world and therefore found themselves using metaphors drawn from the same storehouse. As James Simpson has rightly shown, Gower’s use of the form–matter topos in the *Confessio Amantis* takes its cue from scholastic discussions of form and matter. The figure of the lover’s guide, Genius, desires to shape his “matiere” into a “tale which is accordant / Unto thin Ere I thenke enforme. / Now herkne, for this is the forme” (II. 2496–500). Simpson argues that, “if God operates as an artist giving form to matter, this is equally true of Genius as an artist, since Genius informs the matter of his stories” (3). In this passage, Gower echoes the Neoplatonic desire to give a poetic form to the crude “content” that the poet has found in his sources, an artisan creator much like those depicted in Bernard Silvestris and Alan of Lille.

Like Gower, Chaucer continually dramatizes his quest for literary subject matter; moreover, he uses material metaphors throughout his work, tropes that help him grapple with similar questions of how the *matere* of the physical world and the *matere* of the poet were related. Unlike Gower, most of Chaucer’s metaphors invoke an Aristotelian rather than Neoplatonic understanding of the relation of matter to form. In the *Legend of Good Women*, Jason’s betrayal of Medea is described in terms of what we might call “philo-hylomorphism.” Jason’s passion for ever new amorous adventures is framed as a continually shifting substance receiving new forms:

To Colcos comen is this duc Jasoun,  
That is of love devourer and dragoun.  
As mater appetiteth forme alwey  
And from forme into forme it passen may  
Or as a welle that were botomles,  
Ryght so can false Jason have no pes. (1580–85)<sup>14</sup>

The idea of matter hungering after form is one that Chaucer would have found in his source Guido della Colonne’s *Historia destructionis Troiae*; however, the sentiment ultimately derives from Aristotle’s *Physics* 1.9 where he describes form as the object

of matter's continual striving: "what desires the form is matter, as the female desires the male and the ugly the beautiful" (I: 328). For Chaucer, faithless Jason could best be imagined as the continual restless striving of matter, a characterization that inverts the gender valences of Aristotle's original simile.<sup>15</sup> Chaucer's metaphor frames Jason's relentless erotic pursuit of a variety of women as the continuous nature of matter imprinted with a succession of forms: "from forme into forme it passen may." This idea of "active" matter finds a complement in the "passive" poet-maker dramatized in the Legend's *Prologue*. The God of Love attacks the narrator, accusing him of having injured Love's partisans with his portrayal of faithless lovers in the *Romance of the Rose* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. The good queen Alceste attempts to defend the poet by portraying him as not the quasi-divine maker fashioning matter into rhetorical form portrayed in Gower's *Confessio Amantis* but rather an inept artisan who has no feel for his materials:

He may translate a thing in no malyce,  
 But for he useth bokes for to make,  
 And taketh no hed of what matere he take  
 Therfore he wrot the Rose and ek Crisseyde  
 Of innocence, and nyste what he seyde. (G 341-45)

The narrator's faulty indifference to his matter results in foul workmanship, shoddy literary pastiche. Alceste's characterization of the poet's relation to his subject matter, while providing a comic "defense" of sorts for his poetic misdemeanors, also shows an ambivalence to the received image of the "poet as divine artisan" trope. This passage resists a Neoplatonic vision of a writer as master over his passive matter by staging a neglectful artisan unaware of the potentially lively literary matter that eludes his own design.

Chaucer employs a similarly "philo-hylomorphic" metaphor to trope the act of writing itself in Book II of *Troilus and Criseyde*. That Chaucer understood the art of writing as consonant with natural philosophy can be seen in a passage where Pandarus counsels Troilus on how to write a love letter to Criseyde. Pandarus's tips for how to write a convincing *billet-doux* include the advice that the letter should be rehearsed but not stilted, clear as to its central themes but not repetitious, and ordered but not too rigid:

"Ne jompre ek no discordant thyng yfeere,  
 As thus, to usen termes of phisik  
 In loves termes; hold of thi matere  
 The forme alwey, and do that it be lik;  
 For if a peyntour wolde peynte a pyk  
 With asses feet, and hedde it as an ape,  
 It cordeth naught, so were it but a jape." (2.1037-43)

Pandarus explains to Troilus that, just as in the natural world form and matter were inextricably intertwined, so too should they be in his rhetoric. In effect, Pandarus

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counsels Troilus to do that which the narrator of the *Legend of Good Women* could not: master your matter so that like goes with like, thereby avoiding a rhetorical monstrosity. While the idea that a speaker's style should conform to his material was a common classical topos, Chaucer reanimates the trope's origins in the material world by noting that the metaphor originally comes from "phisik," a term which here suggests not "medicine" but "physics," knowledge of the natural world (*MED*, s.v. "phisik," sense 2). This hylomorphic allusion is reinforced by the next image of the counterfactual fish with a donkey's feet and an ape's head, an image drawn from the opening of Horace's *Ars poetica*. Horace asserts that just as painters would be ridiculed should they create such a counterfactual creature, similarly poets should beware of jumbling the natural order for rhetorical effect. This image reflects the Aristotelian view, articulated in *Parts of Animals*, that anatomical form is always matched to physiological function; when it is not (in the case of the monstrous birth), it is a transgression against *telos*, since the individual limbs had failed to achieve their final, ordered form. For Aristotle, "art and nature were alike in the regularities they produced, and therefore in the causes, especially formal and final causes, responsible for that order" (Daston and Park, 291). In an Aristotelian framework, the problems posed by physical laws and those posed by fiction are similar to the extent that both seek a "natural" order, an underlying purpose intent on its own end. Despite the morally suspect local context of Pandarus's views on language — it is after all in the service of helping his friend seduce his niece — Chaucer's use of this metaphor suggests an understanding that a poet's beliefs about the natural, material world determine how a poet is able to represent that world.

What appears to us to be a dead metaphor — the "matter" of a literary subject — was very much alive to late medieval writers. As in the examples from the *Legend of Good Women* discussed above, Chaucer's metaphor derived from "phisik" suggests a different notion of authorship than that espoused in Gower, one where literary matter is not passive clay waiting to be molded by the hand of an active author. Instead, Chaucer continually returns to the dialogic nature of matter and form, a vexed rather than easy relation between author and literary subject matter. In this return, we see a poet attempting to get to grips with the ethical responsibility of representing the world accurately, a responsibility shared equally by medieval poets and natural philosophers alike. Metaphors from natural philosophy involving matter and form — whether an Aristotelian collaboration between form and matter or a more Neoplatonic image of an author stamping his imprint on a pre-existing literary subject matter — were generative ones for poets attempting to fashion images of their own authorship. The overlap between medieval natural philosophy and poetics demonstrates a shared interest in how to represent the world discursively. In Chaucer, moreover, they often demonstrate the problems that a writer encounters in trying to textualize his matter. The interchange between these more "popular" literary appropriations and the scholastic debates about matter to form can add to our understanding of the history of materialism by demonstrating that such debates did not exist



solely in an academic domain but were rather accessible to an educated (but not necessarily university-trained) audience.

Returning to what *matere* meant in terms of what is “material” in the Middle Ages helps us to understand the choices that were available for writers as to how they troped their own textual endeavors as well as how their readers might have received such figurative language. Matter in the Middle Ages was not coextensive with materialism: in natural philosophy, it was seen to be a combination of the material and immaterial; in poetry, it could refer to both the matter of the world and the writer’s own quest for his subject matter, a search whose double valence was repeatedly dramatized by poets writing in Latin and the vernacular. As literary critics who look at the representations of things, we should be aware of the fact that medieval writers self-consciously reflected on both the physics and the metaphysics of depicting objects. This disposition should be taken into consideration as we tackle these texts armed with a historically specific materialism, one that contains the ideological traces of “materialisms past.” Like the contemporary audiences for these works, we should be aware of the potentially active nature of medieval matter as well as its resistance to being reduced to mere physicality. How will such an awareness help us avoid the pitfalls associated with “tchotchke” criticism? More work emphasizing the complicated ontological status of medieval objects as well as their perceiving subjects will aid our understanding of medieval materialism, a category that need no longer remain an oxymoron.

More importantly, we will begin to see the older narrative of medieval matter’s disappearing act slowly begin to recede. Perhaps matter and objects only seem disenchanting and timeless from the standpoint of a willed forgetting. Contemporary materialism cannot simply be “applied” to the Middle Ages, but must itself first be historicized by it. Whatever dangers materialism presents — dangers demanding a new new historicism, a new Lucretianism, or a yet again remediating materialism — these dangers are quite possibly illusory. Once medieval materialism is no longer an oxymoron, we may begin to see the insufficiency of certain modern conceptions of the world and intellectual history — tenuous conceptions insofar as they result from an agreement brokered by the dismissal of medieval views of matter and the condemnation of Aristotelianism as “pantheism.” In the meantime, we should keep reminding ourselves why medieval matter matters and whispering it in the ears of early modernists and anyone else who will listen.

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This paper had its genesis in the “Premodern Culture and the Material Object” symposium organized by Patricia Ingham at Indiana University in the fall of 2008; the participants of this symposium contributed much to my thinking on the topic. I am also grateful for the continuing and stimulating conversation of Daniel Selcer and Michael Witmore about traditions of philosophical materialism.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> On the legacy of new historicism, see Harris, “New New” (especially 112–15) and Brannigan (119–27). Critics since the late 1990s have been claiming that new historicism is over (see Porter, Mullaney); however, rumors of its demise seem greatly exaggerated even today.
- <sup>2</sup> The literature on “thing theory” has proliferated over the last decade. A good starting point would be the “Object Bibliography” in Candlin and Guins.
- <sup>3</sup> The term is invoked by Patricia Fumerton (Fumerton and Hunt, 3) and critiqued by Harris, “New New.”
- <sup>4</sup> In Bolter and Grusin’s terms, “remediation” refers to the ways in which a new technology refashions earlier ones. Far from divorcing itself from past practices, new media actively incorporate aspects of previous technologies, self-consciously staging their own engagements, rivalries, and reappropriations.
- <sup>5</sup> For a summary of recent medieval and early modern work, see Robertson. For current understandings of “materialism” with regard to late medieval literary texts, see the introduction to Cooper and Denny-Brown.
- <sup>6</sup> For a concise summary of these philosophers, see Gaukroger (“Bacon,” 298–99) and Osler on Gassendi (80–81).
- <sup>7</sup> Other alternatives would have included vitalism, a movement whose presence in the seventeenth century is well documented. See, for instance, Rogers (2–16).
- <sup>8</sup> Autrecourt has proved just as polarizing a figure in the reception of atomism as he was in the fourteenth century. On the extent to which his natural philosophy was atomist, see Lasswitz (I: 258–59); Caroti and Grellard; Dutton; and Grellard, *Croire et Savoir*.
- <sup>9</sup> On both the Platonic and Aristotelian objections to atomism, see Wilson (45–51).
- <sup>10</sup> Many modern philosophers assume an identity between the two; see, for instance, the introduction to Moser and Trout, which takes the equation of the two for granted, asserting that “materialism is now the dominant systematic ontology among philosophers and scientists, and there are currently no established alternative ontological views competing with it” (ix).
- <sup>11</sup> More recently, Latour has explored the idealist strain that underlies some versions of materialist criticism (“Can We,” 139–40).
- <sup>12</sup> On the survival of Lucretius during the Middle Ages, see Philippe and Reeve (205–8).
- <sup>13</sup> The attempt to “purify” descriptive prose is most famously set out in Thomas Sprat’s *History of the Royal Society* (1667) where he laments of the late scholastic style: “Who can behold without indignation how many mists and uncertainties these specious tropes and figures have brought on our knowledge?” (112). The extent to which seventeenth-century scientific writers were successful in this rhetorical cleansing has been subject to debate; see Vickers (6–9).
- <sup>14</sup> All citations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*.
- <sup>15</sup> In both Aristotle and Guido, it is feminine matter that lusts after masculine form.

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