

Forthcoming as a chapter in *The Return of Theory in Early Modern English Studies: Tarrying with the Subjunctive*, edited by Paul Cefalu and Bryan Reynolds, David Hawkes's essay, "Against Materialism in Literary Theory," is published here with permission of Palgrave Macmillan. Due out in February 2011, *Tarrying with the Subjunctive* is the first collection to look at the growing *rapprochement* between contemporary theory and early modern English literary-cultural studies. With sections on posthumanism and cognitive science, political theology, and rematerialism and performance, it includes essays by leading scholars whose work incorporates the most recent theoretical inquiries into new readings of early modern texts. We hope that the publication of David Hawkes's essay and responses to it in *Early Modern Culture* will initiate dialogue on topics that a number of the collection's other contributions also engage.

Against Materialism in Literary Theory

David Hawkes

I

'Materialism' has been a shibboleth in cultural analysis for three hundred years. If we discard the word itself and concentrate instead on its various, shifting significances, it has been a major bone of contention in philosophy and aesthetics for three thousand. In fact, materialism predates theoretical thought altogether, and there seems a distinct possibility that it will also postdate such thought. Because of its invariably pivotal position in humanistic discourse, a survey of materialism's historical vicissitudes illuminates the progress taken by abstract thought in general. It also suggests some explanations for materialism's increasing prominence today in the field of literary theory. For although that field is as riven by contention as it has ever been, it is close to unanimous in one regard. The vast majority of today's literary theorists, like the overwhelming majority of

Western intellectuals as a whole, share a methodological commitment to materialism. In fact, this commitment is often so deep as to be unconscious.

The firm roots that materialism has sunk within the contemporary intellectual psyche are discernible from the fact that a methodological materialism is practiced even by critics who abandon the rhetorical commitment to materialism that was practically *de rigueur* during the closing decades of the last century. Gabriel Egan's elegant and effective contribution to this volume, 'Shakespeare, Idealism and Universals', correctly notes that such commitment was frequently automatic and reflexive:

Since the 1980s idealism, essentialism, and universals have become dirty words as the New Historicism and Cultural Materialism popularized an unthinking association between these philosophical principles and political conservatism. In these new and related schools, the alleged antidote to all three evils was said to be materialism, which meant paying more attention to the physical (often the economic) realities of a system under consideration than to the ideas in it.

Egan rightly objects to the 'unthinking' nature of this tendency, and proposes instead to 'argue that essentialism and Platonic idealism are reasonable ways to think about the various manifestations of a play'. The argument he actually makes, however, immediately concedes the main materialist position concerning human subjectivity. Egan blithely announces that the Cartesian notion of an autonomous, non-material core of subjectivity is manifestly false: 'most people when pushed will accede that it cannot actually be true. It is certainly difficult to see how there could be an interface between the body and an immaterial spirit such that the latter could control the former.' We are not

informed why this should be difficult. Despite the claim that ‘most people’ find it impossible to conceive of an autonomous non-material subject, the vast majority of people throughout human history have found no difficulty whatsoever believing in such a phenomenon. More immediately problematic, it is hard to see how a Platonic argument of any sort can be constructed from a position that rejects the existence of an autonomous non-material subject. Any such position is materialist by definition.

And indeed Egan proceeds to offer an impeccably materialist explanation for belief in the autonomous non-material subject. He contends that ‘it has served an evolutionary purpose’. Far from defending Platonism, in fact, the essay bases its case on the most dogmatically materialist of all methodologies: evolutionary psychology. This approach to the human subject, popularized by thinkers such as Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, claims that human behavior can be explained by reference to the physical structure of the brain, and that this structure has been formed according to the principles of Darwinian evolution. Although he concedes that Dawkins himself ‘only half-intended’ his theory of ‘memetics’, which suggests that culture operates in an evolutionary fashion analogous to biology, Egan readily employs it in his analysis of literary texts. He finds it confirmed by cognitive neuroscience, and he argues for example that the ‘mirror neurons’ of our brain account for the empathy we feel for Hamlet or Lear:

These neurons fire not only when we perform an activity but also when we watch someone else performing that same activity. They appear to be the reason that it is difficult to watch someone yawning or laughing without joining in, and equally why it is difficult to watch Lear’s agony at the death of his daughter without sharing in the emotion. Our mirror neurons

make us feel his pain even though we know we are watching only an imitation.

Such arguments reduce ideas to matter: they are materialist. The tautological reasoning, biological reductionism, and ideological function of evolutionary psychology are discussed below.¹ My point here is to note that an essay that begins by announcing its attention to defend Platonism against ‘unthinking’ materialism should have recourse to the most uncompromising form of materialism in pursuit of that end. This is eloquent testimony to the almost instinctual hold that materialist assumptions currently exert on the Western intelligentsia. Today’s debates are not usually over whether materialism is a desirable theoretical orientation, but over which approximation is most faithful to materialism’s authentic nature. To understand how this situation has arisen, a glance at materialism’s ancient and illustrious lineage will be useful.²

Materialism is an instinctive response to the world, initially based on sense-perception alone. To the entirely unreflective eye, it appears that matter is all that exists, for only matter is perceptible. Thus materialism was the first position that the Greeks arrived at when they began to consider their situation in conceptual terms. Such a reaction to experience shows a failure to distinguish between appearance and essence. Primitive materialism assumes that the way things appear to be is the way they really are. Once it is accepted that all existence shares the single characteristic of being material, the natural next step is to identify an *arche*, a single element within all matter, which would provide it with a definitive characteristic and a unifying principle. Thus in the early ‘Ionian’ school of philosophy, materialism takes the form of ‘monism’, the attempt to impose unity on the multifarious, to insist that apparent difference is in fact identity. Such

a principle was a theoretical rather than an empirical necessity. The earliest known Western philosophers, the 'pre-Socratic naturalists', include Thales, who held that everything was composed of water, and Anaximenes, who believed that everything was made up of air. Empirical observation was besides the point of such assertions; the point was to establish a unifying principle within all matter.

This seminal materialism was expanded and elaborated by Democritus, who recognized that all matter was composed of atoms. But Democritus also departed from his predecessors by elaborating the distinction between matter and ideas, and by producing an account of how material circumstances influence the mind. He suggested that objects transmit images, or *eidola*, that impact the organs of our senses to produce our impressions of the world. Epicurus further refined this atomism, arguing that matter emanated physical images, called *lamina* or *simulacra*, which were shaped like matter itself, and whose impression on the eye gave rise to our perception of images. In the Roman poet Lucretius, this kind of materialism is used to refute the existence of the gods, and as an antidote to superstition in general. Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius move beyond the eliminative materialism of Thales and Anaximenes by acknowledging the objectivity of ideas. They remain materialists, however, because they trace the development of ideas to an origin in material stimulation of the senses.

These early forms of materialism eventually faced formidable, concerted opposition from Platonic idealism. Reversing the approach of the materialists, Plato believed that the realm of ideas creates the realm of matter. For him, human experience is always mediated through ideas, or concepts. It is impossible for a human being to have a merely sensory experience, for we inevitably impose concepts on the data that we receive

through our senses. Although these ideas do not have any material existence, they nevertheless determine the way human beings experience their surroundings, and in this sense they create those surroundings for us. This reasoning led Plato beyond the contention that ideas determine our material experience, to the conclusion that ideas constitute the only objective reality, and that the material world is a mere illusion. Platonic idealism is thus the mirror-image of materialism. Both approaches reduce the relation between ideas and matter to one of its poles, assuming that only one side of the dichotomy is authentic, and claiming to explain how it creates the illusion of the other.

Platonic idealism became an extremely important influence on Christianity, and the institutional power of Christianity ensured that for almost two thousand years materialism was relegated to a minority opinion among Western thinkers. It did not disappear altogether, it always survived as an oppositional undercurrent, but generally speaking philosophers and theologians assumed not just the ontological but also the ethical priority of ideas over matter. Materialism was not only mistaken, it also showed a morally reprehensible orientation toward carnality. In fact the modern reaction in favor of materialism drew much of its impetus from a revulsion against the religious imposition of idealism, which often took the form of a puritanical denial of fleshly pleasure.

Platonic thought also provided a much-needed rationalization of slavery, for which it drew on an alliance with Aristotelian teleology. Aristotle claimed that the proper purpose, or *telos*, of a human being was 'an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue'. This claim coalesced with Platonic idealism, by elevating intellectual speculation above physical labor, associating the former with nobility and the latter with servility. A slave was by definition not a fully human being, because he served the purposes of his

master rather than his own. He was a 'property' of his master. According to Aristotle, the majority of the human race were 'natural slaves' because they reversed the Platonic hierarchy between ideas and matter within their own souls. To be a natural slave was to prefer the pleasures of the flesh over those of the spirit, and to act in accordance with the demands of the body rather than those of the soul. The ideological utility of this argument, as well as its philosophical coherence, helped to bolster idealism's long-term intellectual dominance over materialism.

Over the course of the seventeenth century, however, materialism enjoyed a dramatic resurgence. The scientific empiricism of Francis Bacon depends upon the basic materialist proposition that our knowledge of the world comes from sensory experience. This led Bacon to advocate a highly successful 'instrumentalist' view of science, which would pursue and evaluate theories according to the practical achievements they made possible. At the same time, the atomist physics of Pierre Gassendi was giving rise to a revived materialist approach to scientific theory. The dramatic scientific advances facilitated by this pragmatic materialism gave it an unassailable advantage over the abstract speculations of idealism.

The literature of the Renaissance frequently intervenes in this debate, generally denouncing materialism under the rubric of 'worldliness' or 'carnality'. As Ian Munro observes in his contribution to this volume, 'Theater and the Scriptural Economy in *Doctor Faustus*', Marlowe's Faustus evinces unmistakable tendencies toward materialism. He espouses an empiricist ontology in such remarks as 'I think Hell's a fable' (1.5.126). The play's message, however, is that such beliefs are absurd: Faustus' confident opinion is voiced to Mephistopheles, a manifest inhabitant of the place in

which he claims not to believe. The devil mockingly notes the self-refuting nature of Faustus's skeptical empiricism: 'Ay, think so still, till experience change thy mind' (1.5.127). He assures Faustus that 'I am damned, and now in Hell' (1.5.131), but the magician's refusal to admit the objective existence of what is non-material prevents him from accepting the devil's assertion: 'How! Now in Hell! Nay, an' this be Hell, I'll willingly be damned here' (1.5.132). The literary texts of the early modern period regularly link philosophical materialism with personal villainy. When *The Tempest's* murderer Antonio is asked about his conscience, he gives the archetypal materialist response: 'Ay, sir: where lies that? If it were a kibe, / 'Twould put me to my slipper; but I feel not / This deity in my bosom' (2.1.273–275).

Antonio is unambiguously evil, but his depraved opinions were gradually growing more common. In the mid-seventeenth century the philosophical implications of Bacon and Gassendi's scientific theories were developed by Thomas Hobbes, whose epistemology led him into a skeptical form of empiricism. Believing that only matter existed, he claimed that experience of matter produced consciousness. However, Hobbes also claimed that there was no reason to assume that our sensory experience gave an accurate impression of its objects. It followed that human knowledge must inevitably be imperfect and provisional. Since absolute knowledge was inaccessible, it made sense to regard human thought as guided by the material interests of its advocates rather than by the search for objective truth. The Darwinian identification of self-interested market behavior with human nature is among materialism's first fruits. This kind of materialism molded the skeptical relativism that predominates in the post-humanistic discourses of the twenty-first century.

Modern materialism implies a relativist morality, in which human beings are guided by the pursuit of economic self-interest. Hobbes suggested that, because the appetites were natural, they must be accommodated. In the eighteenth century this philosophical assumption became the basis of the new science called 'political economy'. Showing the influence of the Calvinist notion of 'total depravity', according to which human nature was completely and inescapably corrupt, thinkers like Bernard de Mandeville made the case that, left to themselves, people will always pursue their selfish desires. This proposition is still the fundamental assumption of mainstream economic theory. Early political economists like David Ricardo and Adam Smith gave an optimistic gloss to this bleak view of humanity by asserting that if every individual sought to maximize his material self-interest, the cumulative result would be beneficial for society as a whole.

By the nineteenth century, political economy was under attack by early socialist theorists, but most of these shared the basic assumption that human ideas were rooted in material self-interest, if not of the individual, than of a particular social class. The kind of socialism advocated by Karl Marx became especially closely associated with philosophical materialism. Marx was challenging the idealist thought of G. W. F. Hegel, who had refined Plato's idealism into a dialectical historicism. Like Plato, Hegel believed that ideas determine people's experience, but unlike Plato he conceived of ideas as changing and developing in the course of human history. Marx agreed with Hegel's historicism, but he emphasized the role of material circumstances, especially economic circumstances, in determining historical developments.

However, it is misleading to think of Marx as a ‘materialist’, just as it is to conceive of Hegel as an ‘idealist’. Both Hegel and Marx were ‘dialecticians’, which means that they conceived such paired contradictions as the one between ideas and matter as mutually determining. They thought that each pole of the dichotomy brought the other into existence, a doctrine known as ‘the interpenetration of opposites’. It would be impossible to conceive of ‘matter’ unless we also held the opposite conception of ‘idea’. It is thus a ‘reductionist’ fallacy to claim the either pole of the dichotomy determines or creates the other. This vital insight has frequently been obscured in subsequent philosophy. The followers of Marx, led first by his friend Engels and later by his most successful disciple Lenin, emphasized the materialist elements in Marx’s argument, and the institutional communism of the twentieth century insisted on a dogmatic and unsophisticated form of doctrinaire materialism. In this philosophy, the ‘economy’ was conceived as material, and as giving rise to the ‘ideologies’ in which social classes understood and advanced their collective interests.

Although communism and capitalism are opposed modes of thought in many ways, they share some core materialist assumptions in common. In particular they both ascribe determining power to the ‘economy’. Over the course of the twentieth century the ‘dialectical materialism’ which was the official ideology of the communist world converged with the materialism fostered by the capitalist marketplace, which depends upon the notion that the acquisition of wealth is the natural purpose of human life. The notion that the ‘economy’ is ‘material’ hardly stands up to close analysis, however, and as the last century drew to a close, however, it became progressively harder to maintain. Economic developments were increasingly driven by consumption rather than

production, and thus by psychological decisions instead of material activity. The very concept of the ‘economy’ as a discrete field of human behavior began to break down, and with it the materialist determinisms that had dominated twentieth-century philosophy.

But this certainly did not mean the end of materialism. The fall of the wall dividing the ‘economy’ from other areas of life enabled the view of human nature that was first developed by political economists to colonize every part of experience. The view that the pursuit of material self-interest is natural, and thus inevitable, appeared to be corroborated by Darwin’s evolutionary theory, and today it is solidly entrenched in both popular culture and the academy. By the end of the twentieth century, eliminative materialism had become the dominant approach to the study of the mind. Just as astronomy had eliminated astrology, just as chemistry had superseded alchemy, it was claimed that the insights of cognitive neuroscience, which equates ideas with the neurological patterns of the brain, could and should abolish the ‘folk psychology’ which conceived of ideas as occupying a separate sphere from matter. Ideas were no more real than the elves and fairies of popular mythology.³

A majority of today’s literary critics take the basic assumptions of materialism for granted, although their application of these tenets varies considerably. ‘Cultural materialism’, a movement largely inspired by the work of Althusser’s disciple Michel Foucault, continues to thrive within literary studies. Some critics use the term ‘materialism’ to designate a field of interest rather than a theoretical approach. They include ‘historians of the book’, who analyze the development of printing and the physical shape of books, and those critics with a particular interest in the way objects such as furniture or clothing function within literary texts. More recently, such forms of

materialist criticism as ‘cognitive’ or ‘evolutionary’ theory have gained significant followings. Above all, the word ‘materialism’ is frequently used for polemical effect, to indicate the practitioner’s opposition to essentialist or idealist approaches to the literary artifact. Having considered how this situation has arisen, we can now examine some of the current forms taken by materialist literary theory.

II

Raymond Williams’ *Culture and Society* (1958) is often cited as the first application of cultural materialism to literary studies. However, the movement’s intellectual roots lie further back, in Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, composed in the late 1920s and early 1930s, which mark an important departure from the materialist determinism espoused by institutional communist dogma. Gramsci argued for a ‘relative autonomy of the superstructure’, meaning that the realm of culture could change and develop in a manner distinct from the economic ‘base’. Culture and aesthetics could thus become venues for political action, and the cultural materialist critics conceived of their work as interventions in broader power struggles. It was this sense of political engagement, more than any inherent philosophical bias, which led them to call their work ‘materialist’. Their focus on the influence of social forces and power relations on literary texts enabled the cultural materialists to break new interpretive ground, and by the 1980s, critics like Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Dollimore, and Stephen Orgel had forged a formidable body of innovative materialist work.

The contention that the superstructure is autonomous of the base, even ‘relatively’ so, is a retreat from dogmatic materialism. In fact the cultural materialists inhabit something of an oxymoron, for they are generally quite prepared to admit the existence of

ideas, and also the influence of ideas on people's material activities. Their brand of materialism is concerned to emphasize the historical circumstances in which an aesthetic work is produced, but it does not necessarily prioritize 'economic' factors. Cultural materialists can abandon economic determinism and still call themselves 'materialists' because they contend that all culture is material, not just the economy.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, the term 'materialism' became code for leftist or liberal political commitment. A materialist critic would tend to pay attention to relations of class, gender, and sexuality in literary texts, although he or she would not necessarily trace these back to foundations in the economy. In fact, cultural materialists would be more likely to point out the way such relations are organized by and through systems of signification. The title of 'materialist' could then be justified by pointing out that such systems inevitably express themselves in material form. Thus poststructuralism and philosophical neo-pragmatism, which lay heavy stress on the role of language in determining ideas, are frequently classed as species of materialism. The term 'materialist' thus grew increasingly capacious as the twentieth century wore on.

By the turn of the millennium, in fact, it was no longer clear who the materialists were opposing. They had achieved a philosophical predominance not seen since the pre-Socratics. Seventeenth-century materialists had been an avant-garde minority who often made it their business to scandalize respectable society. In his 'Satyr against Reason and Mankind', the Earl of Rochester made a libertine case for materialism, pouring scorn on what he views as humanity's vain faith in abstract reason:

The senses are too gross, and he'll contrive

A sixth, to contradict the other five,

And before certain instinct, will prefer
Reason, which fifty times for one does err;
Reason, an *ignis fatuus* of the mind,
Which, leaving light of nature, sense, behind,
Pathless and dangerous wand'ring ways it takes
Through error's fenny bogs and thorny brakes

(8–15)⁴

Unlike such seventeenth-century cavaliers, today's materialism shocks nobody. Eighteenth-century materialists fought bravely against the political and intellectual power of religion, but that battle is long over in the West. Nineteenth-century materialists were often committed to socialist or communist political causes that seem impossible or undesirable today. In the first half of the twentieth century, literary studies was still dominated by post-Romantic individualists, who luxuriated in the subjective affect and emotions generated by the text, but the materialists have long routed such feeble opposition. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it seems that there are very few literary critics who are *not* materialists.

Galloping onto this wide open field, the materialists have broken off into clusters. One version of materialism, found in works like Jean Howard's *Theater of a City* (2006) and Stephan Mullaney's *The Place of the Stage* (1988), directs our attention to the influence exerted by the physical locations of early modern theaters on the plays performed there. Another materialist tendency devotes itself to the analysis of objects. Historians of the book like Peter Stallybrass and Elizabeth Eisenstein study the physical shapes and textures in which semiotic significances have been transmitted to the minds of

readers. Other critics, like Margreta de Grazia and Natasha Korda, concentrate on the ways that physical objects are represented in literary texts, often to brilliantly illuminating effect. Occasionally, however, this kind of materialism can degenerate into what Douglas Bruster has unkindly called ‘tchotchke criticism’⁵: an interest in objects for their own sake which, ironically enough, frequently eschews the cultural contexts in which objects acquire meaning. In order to distinguish it from both cultural materialism and Marxism, this object-centered approach is sometimes referred to as the ‘new materialism’.

Object-centered criticism is often exciting and informative. For example, Jonathan Gil Harris’ *Untimely Matter* (2007) undertakes the task of ‘recasting matter as an actor-network’⁶ in a manner that yields important new insights into Renaissance drama. Drawing on the work of philosophers like Bruno Latour and Paul Virilio, as it has been expanded into an ‘object oriented ontology’ by younger philosophers like Graham Harman and Levi Bryant, Harris points out that what we identify as a unitary and coherent ‘object’ is in reality a formal construct, made up of many other ‘objects’, and finally of subatomic particles that are not material at all. Objects are constantly changing, becoming larger or smaller, cleaner or dirtier, harder or softer. Objects have their own conditions of possibility, circumstances that must be in place before they can come into being and that determine their nature, such as particular relations of gravity, air pressure, internal chemistry.

Objects, in short, are historical – and this has nothing to do with our subjective experiences of them, but is an inherent property of the objects themselves. To take this fact seriously is to experience all objects as palimpsests, containing different levels of

historical significance. Like other object-oriented critics, Harris perceptively notes that the market's attribution of independent agency to commodities is reflected in much of the period's literature. He demonstrates, for example, how the material body of Desdemona's handkerchief becomes a subjective force in Shakespeare's *Othello*, and thus 'enters into a diverse array of actor networks'.⁷ The handkerchief plot is recapitulated in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, when Corvino tells his wife: 'you were an actor with your handkerchief' (2.3.40). Although he notes that the kind of power bestowed upon the handkerchief is fetishistic and magical, Harris' account of the acquisition of subjective agency by objects is by and largely ethically neutral. For the people of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Britain, however, magic was quite literally a satanic activity. They protested loudly against the quasi-magical attribution of agency to objects. In John Bale's *Comedy Concernynge Thre Lawes* (1538), a character named 'Idololatria' boasts of her ability to animate objects by 'charmes of sorcerye:' I can make stoles to daunce / And eaerthen pottes to praunce ...⁸ Bale's concern is to establish the satanic source of such illusory animation, and the moralistic horror with which such agency was generally portrayed in early modern Europe contrasts with the ethically neutral position adopted by materialist criticism.

The usury controversy provided a particularly congenial venue for protests against the magical illusion that objects can act independently, for in usury money takes on an artificial agency that displaces the human activity it originally represents. Roger Bieston's *The Bait and Snare of Fortune* (1559) offers an allegorical dialogue between Man and Money, in which the pair bicker over which of them is responsible for usury. 'Man' has forgotten that 'Money' is nothing more than his own alienated activity, and

‘Money’ is forced to remind him that: ‘I as of my selfe can nothing doe nay say / In thee lieth al the dede ...’⁹ Thomas Floyd’s *The Picture of a Parfit Commonwealth* (1600) is typical in its outraged declaration that: ‘[u]sury is an actiue element that consummeth all the fewell that is laid upon it, gnawing the detters to the bones, and sucketh out the blood and marrow from them ...’¹⁰ When Marlowe’s villainous Barabas declares ‘I hope our credit in the Custome-house / Will serve as well as I were present there’ (1.1.57–58), he alludes to the false subjectivity that money was achieving before the audience’s eyes.

In our own time, such category confusion between subject and object has led thinkers like Paul and Patricia Churchland and Daniel Dennett into an eliminative materialism which denies the existence of subjective experiences, or ‘qualia’ altogether. For them the Kantian dichotomy between the ‘for us’ and the ‘in itself’ can be resolved by the simple abolition of the former. Phenomena such as pain or desire amount to nothing more than specific configurations of neurotransmitters in the brain.¹¹ This philosophical ‘eliminative materialism’ is beginning to influence some literary critics. For example ‘evolutionary criticism’ takes its inspiration from the allegedly scientific discipline of evolutionary psychology, and purports to show how the material operations of the human brain are reflected in literary texts.

In the words of Mary Thomas Crane: ‘literary theory derived from cognitive science ... offers new ways to locate in texts signs of their origin in a materially embodied mind/brain’.¹² In *Shakespeare’s Brain*, Crane aims to show how ‘[s]everal of Shakespeare’s plays experiment with different forms of polysemy and prototype effects in ways that leave traces of cognitive as well as ideological processes in the text’.¹³ In *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics* (1992), Reuven Tsur claims that responses to

literary texts are ‘constrained and shaped by human information processing’.¹⁴ On the basis of this claim, Tsur builds many more specific assertions, such as the discovery of a ‘definite spatial setting’¹⁵ for emotion produced by poetry which, he believes, works by channeling language through the right hemisphere of the brain, which is not usually used in linguistic comprehension. Although the instruments they use and the detail in which they can analyze the brain are vastly more sophisticated, cognitive neuroscientists share the essential assumptions of nineteenth-century phrenologists, who sought to study behavior and character by analyzing the shape of the skull. In the *Phenomenology of Mind* Hegel famously satirized phrenology for its assumption that ‘the spirit is a bone’.¹⁶ This materialist tradition assumes that human beings are identical with their bodies so that, in the words of Stephen Kosslyn and Oliver Koenig: ‘the mind is what the brain does’.¹⁷

This kind of materialism has moved away from historicism, since it declines to take account of culture or society as formative influences on the personality. Evolutionary psychology, which was formerly known as ‘sociobiology’, is extrapolated from the theories of ultra-Darwinist biologists like Richard Dawkins. Its essential presupposition is that, since the human brain has evolved according to evolutionary requirements, and since human behavior is caused by the brain, all social and cultural relations ought, in theory, to be explicable according to evolutionary principles. The dogmatic claims of this school’s adherents accrue confidence from its allegedly scientific basis. In *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998), E. O. Wilson declares that the assumptions and method of Darwin, being objectively accurate and true, ought to be imported wholesale into the humanities. Wilson explicitly connects this desire to unify all

knowledge to the efforts of Thales and the other pre-Socratic materialists to find a single *arche* underlying all existence: he refers to his endeavor as ‘the Ionian enchantment’.¹⁸

According to Joseph Carroll, ‘the study of literature should be included within the larger field of evolutionary theory’.¹⁹ This is because Darwinism ‘necessarily provides the basis for any adequate account of culture and literature. If a theory of culture and literature is true, it can be assimilated to the Darwinian paradigm; and if it cannot be reconciled with the Darwinian paradigm, it is not true.’²⁰ Evolutionary critics note that narrative storytelling is a feature of all human societies, and that it therefore presumably predates civilization and must have played a role in the evolution of the human race. Paul Hernadi argues that ‘the protoliterary experiences of some early humans could, other things being equal, enable them to outdo their less imaginative rivals in the biological competition for becoming the ancestors of later men and women’.²¹ Michelle Sugiyama speculates that ‘those individuals who were able (or better able) to tell and process stories enjoyed a reproductive advantage over those who were less skilled or incapable of doing so, thereby passing on this ability to subsequent generations’.²² William Flesch suggests that narrative fictions trained human beings in ‘social scanning’, and that realism in literature enables evolutionary advantage: ‘[e]ffective narratives are therefore likely to be accurate representations of human interactions, just because genuine human interactions are what we are so attuned to monitor’.²³

The focus of evolutionary critics on the modular structure of the physical brain takes a slightly different form in ‘cognitive criticism’. This approach departs from the notion that ideas are embodied in material form, and examines instead the ways in which they are determined by informational structures. It deserves to be called ‘materialist’,

however, because it shares materialism's skeptical attitude toward autonomous consciousness and subjectivity. Cognitive critics are influenced by evolutionary theorists such as Stephen Pinker, the 'posthuman' approach of anthropologists such as Donna Haraway, and the poststructuralist philosophy of Jacques Derrida. As summarized by Katherine Hayles:

Among the characteristics associated with the posthuman are a privileging of informational pattern over material instantiation; a construction of consciousness that sees it as an epiphenomenon rather than the seat of identity; a view of the body as an originary prosthesis that we all learn to operate at birth and that is supplemented later in life by other prostheses; and above all, a configuration of the human so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. The posthuman can be understood as an extension of postmodernism into subjectivity, carrying the projects of fragmentation and deconstruction into the intimate territory of nerve and bone, mind and body.²⁴

Like evolutionary critics, cognitive theorists are committed to the reduction of subjectivity to the functions of the brain, but they depart from their colleagues in conceiving of those functions as informational rather than physical. Unlike evolutionary critics, cognitive theorists can therefore gain access to the insights of Derridean deconstruction. Thus Ellen Spolsky describes her approach as 'based on an analogy between some elementary facts about the human evolved brain and the post-structuralist view of the situatedness of meaning and of its consequent vulnerability to the displacements and reversals that deconstructionist criticism reveals'.²⁵ Despite their

differences, however, all of the materialisms currently prominent in literary studies share one fundamental assumption. They all believe that the human subject, mind or soul is an illusion. Object-oriented critics neglect subjectivity in favor of analyzing the representation of physical things; evolutionary critics view subjectivity as merely an advantageous adaptation produced by the development of the brain; cognitive critics consider subjectivity an epiphenomenon produced by patterns of information. Any evaluation of materialism's benefits for literary analysis must therefore focus on this core shared assumption. Is it true that human beings have no soul?

III

The dominance of materialism in today's literary studies is in large part a result of the colonization of the human by the natural sciences. This in turn results from the enormous boost in self-confidence that the natural sciences have received since the Second World War, from the 'new synthesis' between Darwinian evolution and genetics. Many scientists believe that this synthesis provides a universal explanatory key that can account for *everything* – animal, mineral, vegetable – in the entire universe, the arts and humanities very much included. This assertion is made with ever-increasing confidence, and it involves a blanket dismissal of the non-material subject as an outmoded, superstitious fantasy. The geneticist Walter Gilbert is apparently fond of beginning his lectures by brandishing a compact disk containing genomic information and announcing to the audience: 'this is you'.²⁶

That is a provocative gesture, but many natural scientists believe that it is nothing but the truth. DNA, we frequently hear, is destiny. Not only our bodies but our character, our essence, is contained in our genes. Genes are eternal, while the bodies that contain

them are mortal. It is no exaggeration to say that in the work of evolutionary geneticists like Richard Dawkins, genes have replaced both the soul and its traditional source: God Himself. Dawkins makes no secret of his colonialist ambitions toward the humanities, and has proposed that units of signification that he calls ‘memes’ function in culture in a fashion analogous to the operation of genes in nature. And it is certainly true that evolutionary and genetic determinism have profound implications for literary texts. That is one reason for the almost undisputed reign of materialism in today’s departments of literature. However one of materialism’s traditional tenets is that truth-claims can never be considered in isolation from the wider social context in which they arise. It therefore seems appropriate to consider how the various claims of contemporary materialism fit into the current political, social, and economic context.

There is no doubt that materialism can serve politically progressive causes. By showing how human society and the human subject are formed by external circumstances, it provides a potent antidote to essentialist arguments that portray particular social formations or subjectivities as natural. Materialism can thus be enlisted in the service of identity politics, and used to show, for example, that femininity or homosexuality are not immutable conditions that must occupy particular roles. It can challenge the contention that a certain race or gender is naturally or inevitably dominant; indeed it can call into question the very existence of races or genders. By demonstrating the contingency of culture, it can encourage us to envisage different and more equitable social arrangements from those that currently pertain. By emphasizing the importance of practical engagement in political affairs, materialism can facilitate ameliorative engagement with oppressive hierarchies that were once assumed to be unavoidable.

When applied to literary texts, materialist criticism can enhance our understanding of why particular forms, themes and effects come into being and pass out of common usage.

However, I would argue that these benefits actually derive from historicism rather than from materialism. The contention that there is no fixed human nature or natural mode of social organization is best advanced by locating the objects of study within their contingent historical circumstances, but it is not necessary to claim that those circumstances are solely material. There seems no reason why an idealist historicism should not achieve the same ends. In fact it seems likely that the association of materialism with leftist or liberal political agendas is a historical accident. It originally arose out of the need to challenge the political power of organized religion. It was consolidated by the imperative to improve the living conditions of the industrial proletariat. During the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, conservatives often took refuge in idealism, identifying their own power with the state of nature, and appealing to invariant human nature as a bulwark against progress.

Today, in contrast, arguments for materialism emanate largely from advocates of capitalism and the market economy. From its inception Darwinian evolutionary theory has been twisted into rationalizations of the competitive marketplace. Indeed Darwin himself was aware of the economic implications of his theory, as the famous passage from his *Autobiography* reveals:

In October 1838, that is, fifteen months after I had begun my systematic inquiry, I happened to read for amusement Malthus on *Population*, and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long- continued observation of the habits of

animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The results of this would be the formation of a new species. Here, then I had at last got a theory by which to work.²⁷

Theories of evolution are ancient, dating back to Anaximander, and no serious thinker disputes that organisms evolve through interaction with their environments. However, that does not mean that Darwinism can be regarded in isolation from its own environment as an absolute, axiomatic set of truths. Darwinist biology is often invoked to suggest that the competitive marketplace is the natural mode of social organization, and several materialist critics are now applying this connection to the literary canon. In *Fiction Sets You Free* (2007), Russell Berman argues that by its very nature, literature ‘contribute[s] to the value structure and virtues of a capitalist economy’, and to ‘the dissemination of capitalist behavior’, because all fictional writing ‘cultivates the imaginative prowess of entrepreneurial vision’.²⁸ It does this, Berman suggests, simply because it is not true. By describing situations other than those that actually pertain, ‘literature imposes an economic choice on the reader’. All fictional texts are thus ‘indispensable sources for capitalist psychology’ because they address themselves ‘to entrepreneurial risk takers who have the will to imagine’.

Berman returns to the roots of modern philosophical materialism, laying heavy stress on the Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*. He claims that a work of literature comes into existence surrounded by antecedent texts ‘which threaten to crush it’, and that it is immediately forced to ‘assert itself against its competitors and predecessors’. The deployment of evolution as a universal explanatory key has already spread beyond

biology into sociology, psychology, and, above all, economics. Evolutionary theory imports it into literary studies. Berman uses ‘a Darwinian axiom’ and an ‘evolution-theoretical claim’ to support his contentions, and displays the influence of Richard Dawkins’ theory of memes in his speculations on ‘literature’s genomic character’. Dawkins’ ‘memetics’ is an attempt to extend the synthesis of Darwin and genetics into the realm of signification. He suggests that, rather than being driven by the power of reason or the motor of history, ideas replicate autonomously, in a manner analogous to genes. Such attempts to colonize the humanities with the materialist assumptions of economics and the natural sciences are proving quite successful: it seems they strike a chord in the *Zeitgeist*.

This is a paradoxical consequence of materialism in the humanities. It was precisely in order to assert the influence of culture and society on literary texts that leftist critics of the 1980s insisted that these were material phenomena. They desired to show how art reflects the real power struggles of society, and so they claimed that the sphere of culture was material. But if that is true, if art and literature really are material, then they must be susceptible to study by the same methods as the materials of the natural sciences. And such methods will frequently contain political implications that are the reverse of those desired by the cultural materialists when they initiated their project twenty and thirty years ago. For the reduction of the human self to matter, the objectification of the subject is the prime ideological effect of capitalism. The present prominence of materialism in literary theory reflects the bleak conclusion of Theodor Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*: ‘The subjective consciousness of men is socially too enfeebled to burst the invariants it is imprisoned in. Instead, it adapts itself to them while mourning

their absence. The reified consciousness is a moment in the totality of the reified world.²⁹

The facts that philosophical materialism began its modern rise to prominence at the same time as capitalism, that it has blossomed and flourished to the same degree as capitalism, and that its current virtually undisputed power coincides with the global triumph of capitalism may all be coincidental. But there are also theoretical reasons for suspecting collusion between materialist philosophy and capitalist economics. A capitalist economy is a vast machine that seems almost consciously designed to reduce people to the status of objects. It universalizes the condition that Aristotle described as slavery, whereby a human being is not free to pursue his own ends but must serve the ends of his master. By this definition, everyone who works for a wage is a slave, and it is reasonable to suppose that the psychological objectification that Aristotle associated with slavery has spread and solidified along with slavery itself.

But even if we leave the subjective effects of wage-labor aside, the capitalist economy objectively transforms its participants into commodities. Virtually everyone in such an economy must sell his or her time for money. Time is indistinguishable from life, so that everyone in capitalist society must constantly translate his or her life, his or her self, into the objective form of financial representation. It is not surprising that the idea that human beings are purely material objects should gain credibility in such a system. Nor is objectification limited to the sphere of production. Today's consumer societies erase the distinction between production and consumption, and the job of consuming commodities is at least as economically important as the job of producing them. A vast array of ideological apparatuses is therefore devoted to convincing people that their

identities can be constructed through the commodities they consume, and postmodern capitalism encourages us to equate identity with image. It is not difficult to see how this kind of society would produce philosophies arguing that subjectivity springs out of material representation.

Eliminative materialism is not content to derive ideas from matter but proceeds to the conclusion that only matter exists. We have seen how ancient thinkers such as Epicurus accounted for the undeniable fact that we experience ourselves as having ideas by describing them as material *simulacra* that are cast upon our sense-organs by the action of material objects. In the postmodern world, thinkers like Jean Baudrillard make a similar argument using identical terminology. For Baudrillard the whole of experience is made up of *simulacra* that combine to produce a ‘hyper-reality’ in which the distinction between sign and referent is obsolete.³⁰ As with the pre-Socratics, appearance is equated with essence: what seems to be is identified with what is. This is the logical terminus of eliminative materialism and, once again, it is demonstrably an effect of the market economy.

An exchange-based society will systematically replace the inherent use-values of objects, which are inseparable from their physical bodies, with symbolic exchange-values, which are grafted onto physical bodies by the human mind. Because use-value is implanted into objects through productive labor and manifested in the use of objects by human beings, use-value is inseparable from human activity. It follows that, since exchange-value represents use-value in symbolic form, it is ultimately a representation of human labor-power, or finally of human life itself. The objective form of exchange-value is money, and a fully developed capitalist economy allows money to breed and reproduce

independently of any human intervention. Such societies bestow absolute power on money, allowing it to rule the entire world, and money is nothing but the objective representation of human life. Once again, it seems clear that a money-based society will give rise to eliminative materialism as the inevitable theoretical expression of its practical activity.

This is not the place to ask whether capitalism is a good or a bad thing. Perhaps a phenomenon of capitalism's scale and scope is in any case not susceptible to a straightforward ethical evaluation. But there seems no doubt that materialism, in its twenty-first-century manifestations, is the ideological form of capitalism. It may be possible to be both a materialist and a political progressive, if identity politics are regarded as progressive causes, as I think they should be. Materialism is not, however, compatible with anti-capitalism. On the contrary, materialism *is* capitalism in philosophical form. I suspect that, while some literary theorists like Berman are well aware of this, the majority of critics who consider themselves materialist are not. I think that if they can be convinced of this connection, they are likely to reconsider their commitment to materialism, which I believe is now largely sentimental and rhetorical in any case. I hope that this essay will provide some impetus toward that process.

Notes

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1. For a brilliant critique of evolutionary psychology, see John Dupré, *Human Nature and the Limits of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and my appreciative review in the *Times Literary Supplement* (11 January 2002), 5–6.

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2. The most comprehensive and authoritative history of materialism remains Friedrich Lange's magisterial *The History of Materialism and Criticism of its Present Importance* ([1925] London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957).
 3. See Stephen Stich's summary of eliminative materialism's 'conclusion that beliefs, desires, and other posits of folk psychology do not exist'. *Deconstructing the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.
 4. Earl of Rochester
 5. Douglas Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Question of Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 203.
 6. Jonathan Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter* (2007), 25.
 7. *Ibid.*, 181.
 8. John Bale, *Comedy Concernynge Thre Lawes* ([1538] London and Edinburgh: Tudor Facsimile Series, 1908).
 9. Roger Bieston, *The Bait and Snare of Fortune* [1556], no page numbers. Early English Books Online, Arizona State University Library, 14 February 2010.
 10. Thomas Floyd, *The Picture of a Parfit Commonwealth* [1600], 276–277. Early English Books Online, Arizona State University Library, 14 February 2010.
 11. See in particular P. S. Churchland, *Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind/Brain* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).
 12. Mary Thomas Crane, *Shakespeare's Brain: Reading with Cognitive Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 00.

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13. Ibid., 4.
 14. Reuven Tsur, *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics* (1992), 1.
 15. Ibid., 360.
 16. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 208.
 17. Cited in Crane, *Shakespeare's Brain*, 10.
 18. E. O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998), 4–5.
 19. Joseph Carroll, 'Evolution and Literary Theory', *Human Nature* 6 (1995), 119.
 20. Joseph Carroll, 'Post-structuralism, Cultural Constructivism and Evolutionary Biology', *Symploke* 4 (Winter/Summer 1996), 214.
 21. Paul Hernadi, 'Literature and Evolution', *SubStance* 30:1/2 (2001), 56.
 22. Michelle Scalise Sugiyama, 'Narrative Theory and Function: Why Evolution Matters', *Philosophy and Literature* 25:2 (October 2001), 233.
 23. William Flesch, *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment and Other Biological Components of Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 72.
 24. Katherine Hayles, 'Desiring Agency: Limiting Metaphors and Enabling Constraints in Dawkins and Deleuze/Guattari', *SubStance* 30:1/2 (2001), 146.
 25. Ellen Spolsky, 'Darwin and Derrida: Cognitive Literary Theory as a Species of Post-structuralism', *Poetics Today* 23:1 (2002), 43–62, quote from 44.
 26. Dorothy Nelkin, 'Less Selfish than Sacred? Genes and the Religious Impulse in Evolutionary Psychology', in Hilary and Stephen Rose, eds, *Alas, Poor Darwin: Arguments against Evolutionary Psychology* (New York: Harmony Books, 2000), 22.

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27. Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 34–5.
28. Quotations are cited from my review of Berman’s book in the *Times Literary Supplement* (24 October 2008), 24–25.
29. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* ([1966] New York: Continuum, 1983), 95.
30. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).