

# Form and as ] Mode of Existence

Although Bruno Latour has said that he began working on the vast diplomatic-ethnographic-metaphysical project known as AIME (short for *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*) in the 1980s (xix), it emerged publicly in 2012 (2013 in English) in the shape of a single-author monograph and a website produced and curated by a team of researchers, and to which readers are invited to contribute. Print and electronic versions refer constantly to each other, but contribute different things to the overall enterprise. I shall refer to the multiauthored network of monograph and website as AIME, in the singular, while crediting sources as precisely as the project allows.

Subtitled “An Anthropology of the Moderns,” AIME aims to identify and classify a range of “modes of existence” (corresponding to what one might call different tools for living), and to accord them an ontological weight that is normally denied in what Latour calls “Modern” culture (Western, post-Enlightenment), which considers only science and economics to be genuinely realist, because materialist, discourses.<sup>1</sup> AIME is fundamentally opposed to the idea that reality is singular, and that only the ways in which that reality is perceived, interpreted, or represented are multiple, therefore secondary or superstructural. The modes of existence that AIME distinguishes include not only such materialist favorites as [REP], reproduction (primarily associated with material durability; examples include mountains and cats); [REF], reference or “equipped, instrumented, and rectified knowledge” (Latour 83) (exemplified by but not limited to the natural sciences); and [TEC], technics (a combination of technologies and techniques); but also [REL], religion; [MOR], morality; and [FIC], which characterizes literature, visual art, music, theatre, dance, and so on, and also rhetoric and performance of all sorts. By presenting these modes as equally real, AIME

challenges Western philosophical traditions and sends us back to metaphysical basics in order to reboot our world. AIME aspires to be a political movement as well as an intellectual project, and therefore insists that its descriptions of the modes of existence are designed for comparative ethnography. “Moderns” urgently need to learn how to talk with cultures that deploy and arrange the “modes of existence” differently, in order to move towards more ethical and ecologically sustainable ways of life.

Although the non-Modern “others” towards which AIME looks are principally non-Western contemporary cultures, premodern Europe has a distinctive contribution to make to its project. This essay will bring medieval cultural artifacts into dialogue with AIME’s discussion of [FIC], with the aims both of exploring AIME’s utility and limitations for medievalists, and of suggesting ways in which looking to medieval practices may strengthen AIME’s impact on its chosen target: Modern life. In the next section, I relate AIME’s descriptions of the [REF] and [FIC] modes and of their “crossing” (a point of fertile entanglement and uncertainty where modes interfere in and assist one another) to the reflections about valid knowledge in a famous “diuerticulum” (William 294–95; digression) in the *Gesta regum Anglorum* by William of Malmesbury (c. 1095–c. 1143). By showing how Moderns and medievals negotiate differently the historically variable relation between “fiction” and “reference,” I suggest ways in which AIME’s terminology and schema can help medievalists better appreciate William’s approach to historiography. Conversely, medieval texts can help finesse AIME’s understanding of its own project. In spite of its declared aims, AIME occasionally manifests a residual Modernist suspicion of the potential of “fiction,” “art,” and “the aesthetic” to derail referential knowledge. William of Malmesbury, however, is bolder about the potential of the [FIC•REF] crossing to advance both aesthetic quality and referential knowledge—and his confidence is entirely in accord with AIME’s guiding spirit. Comparing William’s practice with AIME’s also shows how the latter’s restriction of

crossings to two modes limits its analytic potential. The final section of this essay builds on this insight to discuss what I shall call the “plaiting” of three modes—[FIC], [REF], and [TEC]—in a study of brackets used in the layout of verse in medieval manuscripts.

My argument throughout highlights form, exploring and connecting the term’s different meanings in AIME. Although AIME calls form “a multimodal term like no other” (*Inquiry* 361), it does not develop the potential of this multimodality, and even seems to work to limit that potential. AIME uses “form” principally in relation to [REF], “equipped, instrumented, and rectified knowledge.” Where [FIC] is concerned, AIME talks of “form” only with apparent reluctance, preferring the terms “figure” and “figuration” (Latour 243); this preference keeps scientific procedures and literary devices neatly separate. Since AIME explicitly invites creative redeployments and revisions, I accept that invitation and expand the multimodal possibilities of “form,” finally suggesting that we might add form [FOR] to the list of modes of existence.

### **[FIC•REF]**

AIME’s choice of the terms [FIC] and [REF] seems at first sight to reproduce the familiar opposition between “fiction” and “reference,” whereby the latter means referential knowledge or “fact,” and the former denotes factual untruths that, at best, may aspire to a “higher truth” (*Inquiry* 239–40) that is not taken seriously by those who patronizingly concede it. AIME, however, broadens and revises the meaning of “fiction” away from questions of referentiality; for instance, the examples it offers of [FIC] are often taken from music—to which referential truth is irrelevant—while it includes among the beings of [FIC] many kinds of figuration or instantiation unconnected to art. Moreover, it compares as well as contrasts [FIC] and [REF], insisting on the equally constructed nature of “fiction”—*fictus*, from *finigo*, “I grasp or mold”—and “fact”—*factus*, from *facio*, “I make or fashion.” For

AIME, “rectified” or “corrected” knowledge is no less mediated, indirect, conventional, dependent, and highly fashioned than is the artwork: [FIC] is fictitious, [REF] factitious, and the ways in which a being of either may be “true” or “false,” “valid” or “invalid,” are specific to each mode.

AIME’s description of Modernity prompts us to explore how medieval culture organizes [REF], [FIC], and their crossing. An obvious example is the notorious perceived overlap between historiography and romance in medieval Europe. Chronicles, life-writings, prose romances, *chansons de geste*, and *romans antiques*—to say nothing of their manuscripts—incorporate, in their different ways, elements of legend, politics, fantasy, rhetoric, and literary devices, without renouncing their claims to historical truth. An example is William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta regum Anglorum* (first edition 1125), a Latin prose chronicle of the English kings from the fifth to the early twelfth centuries. William generally earns praise from modern historians for his methods of investigation and critical assessment of evidence, but some of his reports are considered fantastical: “fiction” rather than historical “reference.” Among these is a famous series of anecdotes (chapters 167–75 of the *Gesta*) with which William interrupts his account of King Ethelred, known as “the Unready” (r. 978–1013, 1014–16). Recording a papal letter to Ethelred in 991 prompts William to embark on recounting and discussing the life of Gerbert of Aurillac, pope from 999–1003 as Silvester II (though William confuses him with John XV or XVI). An important mediator of Arabic learning to Christian Europe, Gerbert had become the subject of well-disseminated legends (Rollo 1–31; Otter 93–128). William recounts how a youthful Gerbert escapes from his monastery in Fleury and arrives in Spain where he purchases knowledge with a pagan-antique-Islamic profile from a Saracen scholar. One ultimate book is withheld until Gerbert induces his master’s daughter to help him steal it; he then escapes, evading pursuit thanks to a pact with the devil. The learning that Gerbert acquires in Spain includes magic, astrology,

and divination as well as the “*licitis artibus*” (280–81; permitted arts) of arithmetic, music, astronomy, and geometry. Upon returning to Gaul, Gerbert pursues an illustrious teaching and ecclesiastical career. William’s account of Gerbert’s life then shifts to Italy where, among other exploits, Gerbert solves a riddle inscribed on a statue in Rome and discovers an uncanny subterranean world, which William describes with a quotation from Ovid’s

*Metamorphoses*:

Conspicantur ingentem regiam, aureos parietes, aurea lacunaria, aurea omnia; milites aureos aureis tesseris quasi animum oblectantes; regem metallicum cum regina discumbentes, apposita obsonia, astantes ministros, pateras multi ponderis et pretii, ubi naturam uincebat opus. (284–86)

Before their eyes lay a vast palace, gold walls, gold ceilings, everything gold; gold knights seemed to be passing the time with golden dice, and a king and queen, all of the precious metal, sitting at dinner, with their meat before them and servants in attendance; the dishes of great weight and price, in which “workmanship outdid nature.” (285–87)

This golden world leaps into action when Gerbert’s servant tries to steal a knife, and the pair flee empty-handed.

Gerbert’s treasure hunt is then reprised in the story of an elderly monk whom the young William knew at Malmesbury Abbey. The old man relates how as a youth, he and a group of companions somewhere in Italy entered an underworld similar to the one Gerbert saw. Objects from this underworld are eventually brought into the light of day by a Jewish necromancer, but perhaps (the text is unclear here) these objects are only covered with a dust that makes things look golden, and that washes off in water (290–91). The old monk explicates water’s disillusioning powers by repeating a further tale, endorsed by Pope Leo IX and Peter Damian, about a young man who had been transformed into a performing ass and was restored by washing in water. William explains his procedure: “*Haec Aquitanici uerba ideo inserui, ne cui mirum uideatur quod de Gerberto fama dispersit*” (292–93; I have

included these stories told by the monk from Aquitaine so that a tale about Gerbert need occasion no surprise).

Another (un)surprising tale follows. Gerbert creates a fortune-telling head whose equivocating answers to his questions lead him to a terrible death: “Diu facinora sua deploravit [...] ille insaniens et pre dolore ratione hebetata minutatim se dilaniari et membratim foras proici iussit” (William 294–95; He lamented at length his own misdeeds [...] he lost his reason and, beside himself with pain, gave orders that he should be cut in small pieces and cast out limb by limb).<sup>2</sup> In concluding his series of refigurations of Gerbert’s adventures, William supplies two miracle stories: “Otbertus peccator” (294–95; Otbert, a sinner) from Saxony tells how his sacrilegious singing and dancing were miraculously prolonged for a terrible year; then, a notably ugly country priest is made archbishop of Cologne for his prophetic powers, and correctly predicts the death of a nobleman who has abducted a young woman from a convent. Finally, we return to Ethelred, and William continues the chronicle of English kings.

The digression’s sinuously interwoven tales are interspersed with passages where William hesitates explicitly over whether all these tales are true, and over how their veracity might be determined—questions central to the *Gesta*’s mission to assemble and impart historical knowledge. His methods for establishing and evaluating “knowledge” bear comparison with the procedures that AIME associates with [REF]: that is, with the procedures, stages, and rhythms of modern scientific inquiry. Both William and [REF] stress the (literal or figurative) distances, and the number and variety of connections, through which things must pass in order to become “objective, instrumented, and corrected knowledge” ([modesofexistence.org/aime/voc/441](http://modesofexistence.org/aime/voc/441), para. 2). In a classic Latourian move, AIME wants us to acknowledge the mass of technical, scientific, and institutional means required to establish objective knowledge; for example, to allow an astronomer to examine a distant planet. These

means are habitually overlooked unless a link fails (a broken lens, a funding crisis, a failure to record an observation, a power cut resulting from a storm or from political upheaval in a distant country, etc.), at which point the “knowledge” itself vanishes. William traces the displacements and (self-re)inventions that entangle Gerbert in similar chains: “[M]agna industria reuocaret in Galliam omnino ibi iam pridem obsoletas. Abacum certe primus a Saracenis rapiens, regulas dedit quae a sudantibus abacistis uix intelliguntur” (William 280–81; [Gerbert] re-established in Gaul through his untiring efforts subjects that had long been completely lost. He was the first to seize the abacus from the Saracens, and he handed down the rules which calculators for all their efforts hardly understand). The knowledge that Gerbert brings to the Christian world is tracked through a series of precarious “transformations” and “inscriptions” (in AIME’s terms) that mix pell-mell the movements of individuals (Gerbert’s repeated escapes, several routes to and from Rome), cultures in contact (Gaul, Spain, ancient and medieval Rome, Italy, England, different pasts and presents, religious contexts and institutions), technical devices and objects (the abacus that Gerbert introduces to Gaul, the stolen book, the Roman statue, the golden world, the fortune-telling head), institutions, and interpersonal contacts (the Saracen and his daughter, Christian scholars, Gerbert’s royal and imperial pupils, and so on). By describing these multiple stages of verification, William establishes the knowledge that Gerbert both transports and transforms as an “immutable mobile” (Latour, *Inquiry* 77)—a term intended to remind us that “objective, instrumented, and corrected knowledge” is a complex and fragile product, for all that it may seem self-evident and self-supporting once established.

William follows the same procedures in testing his own knowledge about Gerbert as he does in assessing the knowledge that Gerbert acquires. The refashionings to which Gerbert’s career is subjected (youthful adventures in Spain, mature ones in Rome, the old monk’s Italian experiences and his Apuleian/Augustinian tale, the German miracles) are all

links in a chain that allows William to refine his understanding of the legends about Gerbert.<sup>3</sup> He transmits to his readers not only these legends, but also the processes and criteria by which he evaluates them. Discursive passages interspersed with anecdotes provide further examples that help the historian reflect on Gerbert's story. William cites the example of Boethius to show that obscure knowledge need not be sacrilegious, and that of Solomon, to demonstrate that power over demons may be exercised by righteous men. William stresses that these examples do not prove that Gerbert was righteous, only that he may have been. William's digression on Gerbert, then, stages a demonstration of his own historical methodology—his manner of collecting, reflecting critically on, and evaluating sources. This demonstration in turn asserts the claim of the *Gesta* as a whole to be considered “objective, instrumented, and corrected knowledge,” adequate to the demands of [REF] as William conceives them (Rollo 1–31; Otter 93–128).

William's refigurations of and reflections on Gerbert constitute what AIME calls the “putting into form” of nuggets whose potential as pieces of historical evidence is thereby both revealed and produced; through this “transformation” process, these anecdotes become “information” (*Inquiry* 89). Putting into form is, in AIME, an essential tool in the production and maintenance of [REF], in which context “form” has two constructive meanings. One is precise and concrete: form can be “an object (an instrument, a document, an image, an equation) that allows *putting into form*, or *shaping*, because it ensures the *transition* between the ‘tails’ side of the coin, closer to the original raw materials, and the ‘heads’ side, which brings us closer to the stage of putting into words or calculations” (Latour 107–8). AIME's examples include specimen drawers, labels, geometry, and Cern's detectors; each processual step in the production of knowledge “transforms” the object into something more evidential than it was previously. The anecdotes and comparisons that William piles onto Gerbert's story are “forms” in this sense, steps in the production of historiographical material.<sup>4</sup>

However, “form” in AIME has a second sense, equally necessary to [REF] but more difficult to grasp: “a *form* is what is maintained through a series of *transformations*” (*Inquiry* 107). “Form” here seems to mean an item of knowledge as product or outcome, especially in a fully theorized version (see “Immutable”; “Perilous”). Such an item may in fact be unknown, so long as it has a defined, justified place in the jigsaw of disciplinary knowledge. By the end of William’s digression, both his account of Gerbert and Gerbert’s own obscure knowledge have been situated epistemologically: “formed” in this second sense, their respective truth-claims evaluated and established. This more abstract variety of form depends, riskily, on “forms” in the first sense, for an inaccurate transcription, a missing leaf in a manuscript, or an imprecise comparison (or in another context, a loose screw or fault in calculation) can undermine a whole edifice of knowledge. (William’s confusion over Gerbert’s pontifical name and dates is perhaps an example.) When such intermediaries function successfully, we forget their role. But this success is, for AIME, potentially disastrous because it may lead to a third, undesirable sense of “form”: that crossed with Double Click, a shorthand, short-sighted device which understands abstractions and end-results to be free-standing and self-supporting. Thus [REF•DC] sponsors a notion of “form” that overlooks the infrastructure necessary to any instance of “constructed knowledge.” If treated in this superficial way, Gerbert’s and William’s knowledge may appear equally valid (or invalid); but as we shall now see, the digression’s detailed performance and analysis of “putting into form” (sense 1) teaches readers how to evaluate whether either may be considered “objective, instrumented, and corrected,” properly “formed” (sense 2) knowledge.

The criteria that William deploys in evaluating his own and Gerbert’s knowledge differ considerably from the criteria for evaluating knowledge that AIME attributes to Modernity. In the Modern version of [REF] described in AIME, referential knowledge is dominated by the natural sciences, widely considered to have direct access to “reality,” while

other knowledges are commonly construed as secondary, metaphorical, or just plain wrong. In William's scientific practice, too, "facts" are paramount. Referring to one of Gerbert's more implausible adventures, William comments,

Sed haec uulgariter ficta crediderit aliquis, quod soleat populus litteratorum famam ledere, dicens illum loqui cum demone quem in aliquo uiderint excellentem opere. (282)

Some people may think this mere popular fiction; for public opinion often wounds the reputation of learned men, maintaining that one whom they have seen to excel in some department converses with the Devil. (283)

Should Gerbert's adventures turn out to be "uulgariter ficta," then they would fail to meet [REF]'s felicity conditions. William, however, asserts emphatically, "et factum est" (282–83; and so it happened), and explains his reasoning: "Michi uero fidem facit de istius sacrilegio inaudita mortis excogitation" (282–83; But I am encouraged to credit the story of Gerbert's sacrilege by the thought of his strange choice of death). The target of his criticism is not the gullible, but the cynical, that is, someone who dismisses *a priori* the possibility that Gerbert's learning may be diabolical. Though "factuality" bears a similar knowledge-positive value in William's and Modernity's versions of [REF], medieval history and modern science of course differ in how they distribute and treat the natural and the supernatural (Bartlett); supernatural phenomena do not stretch the medieval historian's credulity, and may even play an authenticating role. Moreover, for William, Christian right-thinking is another indispensable felicity condition of [REF]. Producing "objective knowledge" calls for both religious and scientific instruments and corrections, thus occurring at what AIME calls the [REF•REL] crossing. William's version of critical historiography may be considered a stage in the development of Modern methods, but it also represents a distinctively pre-Modern episteme: [REF•REL] criteria invalidate Gerbert's illusory, deceitful, and diabolical necromancy, and establish the soundness of William's historical account.

Adopting AIME's formulations, then, affords a conceptual rigor to medievalists' ongoing discussions over the truth-claims advanced by medieval historiography (Sønnesyn 259-72). We turn now to a second divergence between Modern and medieval ways of organizing [REF], in order to suggest that medieval historiography can contribute to AIME's critique of Modernity. This divergence concerns the boldness with which William treats literary and rhetorical forms ("figures," in AIME's preferred terminology) as scientific, processual "forms," confident in their ability to advance knowledge and to refine historiographical methodology. A characteristic example appears in the passage quoted above, in which William raises the possibility that Gerbert's adventures may be considered "uulgariter ficta." It is not the appeal to untruth that makes this [FIC]; as AIME asserts, "Fiction is not fictional in opposition to 'reality' (which in any case possesses as many versions as there are modes), but because as soon as those who are being displaced lose their solicitude, the work disappears entirely" (*Inquiry* 249). [FIC] demands close reading, care for textual detail; it is manifest here in the rhetorical maneuver by which William convicts of superficiality, ignorance, and [REF•DC] anyone who dismisses the stories as mere *ficta*. To keener analysts, Gerbert's choice to die by dismemberment indicates that he had some dreadful crime on his conscience—for instance, trafficking with the devil. Deftly executed, this "putting into form" succeeds both as [FIC] and as [REF], as rhetoric and as science, thus fine-tuning the critical awareness with which William wants us to evaluate historical evidence. Historiography here sits squarely on the [FIC•REF] crossing.

[FIC] further assists self-reflection for other modes: "What fiction does for technology and metamorphoses—it folds and reprises them—will be done by all the other modes with the help of fiction" (Latour, *Inquiry* 249). The richer William's digression becomes as [FIC]—cutting cross-references and intertexts through vignettes, anecdotes, and deliberations—the more productive, reflective, and exploratory its status as [REF]. William's

practice actually exceeds AIME's account. Although AIME emphasizes that [FIC] is essential to [REF] (*Inquiry* 250–52), it does not always pursue this suggestion with enthusiasm and imagination; indeed, it occasionally hints at the same Modern, disciplinary mistrust of [FIC] that it generally criticizes. For instance, AIME articulates a key distinction between [FIC] and [REF] by claiming that whereas the purpose of [FIC] is to transport us into “other worlds” from which questions about returning or bringing something back are irrelevant, [REF] is dedicated to bringing information back (*refero*, I carry back) (*Inquiry* 250–52). This contention entrusts the terms of the distinction to science, relegating art to the mirror-image of science's preferred view of itself. Most of those to whom art matters (*Inquiry* 58) would, I believe, argue that art returns to and informs “our” world as much as science does, albeit differently. AIME seems to consider [FIC]'s orientation towards alternative worlds to be threateningly powerful and calls on [REF] to “fold or discipline or align” [FIC] to stop it carrying off the other modes (Latour, “Three Versions,” para. 2) (as fairies carry off knights in some medieval romances, such as Breton *lais*). Throughout AIME, “aestheticization” has both an ethically and epistemologically positive sense, in which “to aestheticize is to engender [. . .] a sensibility towards other existents,” as well as a negative one which “grasps in those existents only their multiple planes,” “as if this multiplicity were somehow the goal pursued by all the modes,” thus refusing the other modes independent validity, purpose, or being ([modesofexistence.org/aime/voc/149](http://modesofexistence.org/aime/voc/149)). AIME worries that [FIC] may transform everything into [FIC] for [FIC]'s sake. In contrast, William appears confident in [FIC]'s ability to advance [REF], and vice versa. Such literary and rhetorical strategies as *dispositio*, *compilatio*, figures of speech, and narration are among the “forms” by which William argues for what and how one can properly “know”—and write—about the past. This confidence is truer to AIME's project of flattening and combining the various modes than AIME itself always is.

Historiography for William thus engages both the [REF•REL] and [FIC•REF] crossings. A disadvantage of AIME is that it limits crossings to two modes. This is useful for definitional purposes: the distinctive features of each mode are more easily circumscribed by comparison with one other. We nonetheless need to be able to describe the complex situations that we encounter in the world. I suggest that in William's digression, we see a plaiting of three modes, whose mutual interferences must be appreciated. His repeated refigurations of Gerbert as Christian freebooter, respected teacher, avaricious treasure-hunter, or sage use [FIC] devices as "puttings into form" that gradually pinpoint the conditions of invalid and valid knowledge: thus [REF] obtains a "surprising trajectory of information by a cascade of transformations, of ambulation through aligned inscriptions" ([modesofexistence.org/aime/voc/441](http://modesofexistence.org/aime/voc/441), para. 2). Readers of William's digression follow such a "surprising trajectory of information," which proceeds from a French monastery to arcane learning acquired in an Islamic and Jewish space, then through Gerbert's distinguished teaching career in Christian Gaul, to necromancy in Rome; then to the old monk's Gerbert-like story, set in Aquitaine and Italy and told, years later, to a young boy in Malmesbury—a story in which some kinds of learning reminiscent of Gerbert's are exposed as (perhaps) only appearing to function—to the same monk's story of the (nongolden) ass, underwritten by a cardinal and a pope; to Gerbert's fatal deception by his own ingenious device; to two orthodox miracle stories set in northern European parts of the Holy Roman Empire that belong clearly to [REL]. As the sequence advances, Gerbert's knowledge is shown gradually to fail the felicity conditions set by the [REF•REL] crossing, therefore to fail also as [REF]. At the same time, William's own knowledge gains authority. His sources move from unlocalizable hearsay—"quae per omnium ora uolitant" (278–79; stories that are on all men's lips); to an identified, trustworthy, first-person witness—a monk known to William and to his community; to a further first-person account recorded in a letter from an archbishop; and

finally to local testimony about another, holy archbishop: “Multa illius acta constanter accolade predicant” (298–99; Many of his doings are constantly on the lips of the local people). Popular stories are here rescued from the condescension of uncritical interpreters; properly localized, contextualized, and underwritten by religious authority, they furnish reliable information. Unlike Gerbert’s knowledge, which fails the plaited felicity conditions of [FIC•REF•REL], William’s account brilliantly fulfils them. Thanks to this plaiting and to his multimodal exploitation of “form,” William returns us to the main chronicle narrative with our readerly confidence and sprightliness renewed.

### **[TEC•FIC•REF]**

The crossing [FIC•REF], when applied to brackets used in the layout of verse in medieval manuscripts, likewise suggests that we consider three-way plaiting: [TEC•FIC•REF]. If we follow William’s example and pursue [FIC] beyond AIME’s comfort zone, we might “aestheticize” the [TEC•FIC•REF] plaiting by highlighting the “multiple planes” of medieval brackets “as if this multiplicity were somehow the goal pursued.” I accept AIME’s invitation to venture into imaginary worlds with multiple possible interpretations, contexts, and circumstances, risking the consequences of “bad” aestheticization for the sake of exploring more fully those of the “good,” and trusting in [FIC] to produce insights into other modes. According to AIME, we perceive [FIC]

every time a little cluster of words makes a character *stand out*; every time someone *also* makes a sound from skin stretched over a drum. [...] If we attach ourselves to the raw material alone, the figure disappears, the sound becomes noise, the statue becomes clay, the painting is no more than a scribble, the words are reduced to flyspecks. [...] But—and this is its essential feature—the figure can never actually *detach* itself, either, from the raw material. It always remains held there. Since the dawn of time, no one has ever managed to *summarize* a work without making it vanish at once. (*Inquiry* 244)

In the aesthetic object, formal and material elements “vibrate” (248) in constant tension, endlessly trying but failing to separate from each other.

But what are the “materials” of literature? We can think of literary “materials” as the things that support the production and dissemination of literary works: pen and ink, a duty of prayerful work or of court service, a timetable, an economic system, the health of sheep. Alternatively, literature’s “raw materials” may be words, written and/or vocalized; languages, or language; narratives, genres, meters, topoi, and so on; or again, “content,” the other traditional partner of “form.” Literary “form”-ation—the putting into literary form—involves negotiating with all these “materials,” selecting, combining, and disposing them in different patterns and in accordance with their varying affordances. Nevertheless—and crucially, for AIME—the distinction between form and material remains far from clear-cut. Genres, meters, and so on are also literary “forms,” and works of art become “raw material” for future creations. Such hesitations and iterations over what constitutes “form,” what “matter,” and how or whether those can be distinguished, are themselves evidence of the “vibration” or “vacillation” between form and material. Thus AIME makes the problematic nature of the form-material distinction itself part of the being of [FIC].

Thinking about literary forms and materials raises questions about techniques and technologies. AIME wants to strip away the familiarity that causes us to consider the beings of [TEC] unremarkable, and to restore their constitutive uncertainty; in every artifact, change and innovation always jostle established conventions. This contention is well illustrated by medieval manuscripts, in whose usage of graphic, paratextual, and linguistic elements there are systems but not systematicity—that is, we can often detect local systems, but these systems are rarely implemented with the consistency that we today ascribe to the term “systematic.” For manuscript producers and consumers, technologies of writing and reading were dynamic, open to innovation. AIME stresses the difficulty of interpreting historical

[TEC]: “Technical beings leave behind them complex frameworks and combinations of associations which appear difficult to understand once left to themselves, without the folding motion and the detours which enabled them” ([modesofexistence.org/aime/voc/547](https://modesofexistence.org/aime/voc/547), para. 2). Considered in light of AIME’s creative presentism, the brackets used to present verse in some medieval manuscripts resist being pinned down not only because they are nowadays “left to themselves,” but also because, like all beings of [TEC], they are inherently dynamic and unstable—and were so even when the manuscripts were produced and used. The use of brackets highlights how technical and literary concerns interact—[TEC•FIC]—and how both contribute to questions of knowledge: [TEC•FIC•REF]. Brackets mark, produce, and package literary forms while also “putting into form” informational material; both procedures help it produce “equipped, instrumented, and rectified knowledge.”

Brackets, or braces as they are sometimes called, are found in insular manuscripts presenting verse in Latin, French, or English, from at least the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. Scholarship occasionally addresses these brackets from a paleographical viewpoint; they are often mentioned as forms of punctuation, but only rarely discussed in detail (Parkes 97–114; Kerby-Fulton, Hilmo, and Olson 39–151). Some brackets are in red ink; some were apparently supplied by the scribe; some were added later; and some were never added although the *mise en page* calls for them. They perform various functions on the [TEC•FIC] crossing, often relating it to other modes. For instance, brackets in music manuscripts instruct singers how to reconcile words and notes. In the propagandistic Agincourt Carol recorded in the fifteenth-century Trinity Carol Roll (Cambridge, Trinity College, MS O.3.58, recto part 7), the brackets link the stanza on the left to the refrain on the right (see Fig. 1). Alternatively, brackets may indicate the analytic and interpretative relationship between text and gloss. Thus, in Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg.1.1, f. 264r (early fourteenth century), brackets link each word of the Latin Ave Maria, on the right in red, to the French quatrain

that elaborates it (see Fig. 2; Dean and Boulton no. 816). The use of brackets connects the layout of these verses to that of other kinds of knowledge-discourse; for instance, with genealogies, as in a mid-fourteenth-century diagram of the descendants of St Margaret of Scotland (London, British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius E I, f. 12v; O’Loughlin Bérat), where brackets link the older generation on the left to the younger on the right.

Brackets, then, provide technical support for arguments about social, moral, cosmic, religious, and intellectual structure and order that engage with AIME’s other modes. These assertions are presented in ways that also owe much to [FIC]. Brackets matter both as literary forms and as “putting into form” different kinds of knowledge, among them [REF] and [REL]. For example, Pierre de Langtoft’s chronicle in French alexandrine laisses includes short lyric passages often thought to represent contemporary political songs; in several manuscripts, the layout of these lyrics includes brackets, as in the late fourteenth-century Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS français 12154, f. 98r (see Fig. 3). For many modern readers, the lyrics’ aabccb rhyme scheme and the distinctive layout (shown in the bottom part of both columns) carry connotations of “popularity” through their association with Middle English “popular romances,” supporting the impression that Langtoft’s lyrics represent an unprocessed “people’s voice.”<sup>5</sup> Seen against the learned background of analytic bracketing in medieval manuscripts, however, the brackets in fr. 12154 actually demonstrate technical sophistication and literary reflectiveness. This is especially noticeable when the manuscript’s graphic presentation varies to highlight differences in the lyrics (the upper part of the left-hand column shows a different layout of the same tail-rhyme scheme; the two lines preceding the graphic shift in the right-hand column offer further variants). The brackets therefore present these lyrics as valid elements of (or in) knowledge, beings of [REF]. If they emanate from the people, they are not therefore mere *uulgariter ficta*; like William’s stories

about the archbishop of Cologne in the *Gesta*, Langtoft's lyrics are presented as furnishing reliable historical evidence.

Omitting brackets in a manuscript often has a destabilizing effect. Brackets were intended but never supplied at the beginning of the Proverbs of Hending in Gg.1.1, f. 476v, leaving the right-hand lines stranded (see Fig. 4). The brackets' failure to manifest complicates the relationships between the lines of text and aerates this didactic work by opening it to less predictable readings. Alternative possibilities tremble within present as well as missing brackets. Approaching these medieval brackets in light of AIME's characterization of [TEC] shows us not only why they look strange nowadays when "left to themselves" and shorn of their original cultural context, but also that they have always constituted a formal resource conveying strangeness and innovation, and enabling both system-shaking and system-building.

This essentially ambiguous role of brackets is illustrated by a French Ave Maria, also in Gg.1.1. (f. 392v; Dean and Boulton no. 817). Brackets are used to identify groups of three lines of verse, where each pair of lines on the left rhymes, and the three lines on the right all rhyme with each other (see Fig. 5). For a reader familiar with what Rhiannon Purdie calls "graphic tail-rhyme" (*Anglicising* 7), this layout encourages the orthodox reading:

Dieu *vous* sauue marie .  
de grace replenie .  
Li sires est en *uous* .

(God save you Mary  
Full of grace  
The lord is in you)

The brackets work to smooth the potentially hazardous transition between Latin and Romance cultures, but that very smoothing imparts an element of risk. For if our eyes simply follow the bracket-lines to and fro between the columns, we read:

Dieu *vous* sauue marie .  
Li sires est en *uous* .  
de grace replenie .

(God save you Mary  
The lord is in you  
Full of grace [as you are])

This alternative rhyme scheme, abacbcd, gives a syntactically acceptable reading throughout the poem's nine lines, potentially leading readers into heterodox pronouncements. Brackets highlight the translations and transformations involved in the text's passage into and out of manuscript, between languages, and between clerical and lay milieus; they draw attention to the constant possibility of failure, on which AIME insists as a condition of existence. The jagged, almost interrupted nature of many brackets emphasizes how the connections and processes to which they point involve hiatus, risk, and transformation.<sup>6</sup> These hiatuses are especially obvious where vernacular literacy is concerned, since vernacularity activates innovative potential in graphic conventions that may have been more settled in Latin. The risks incurred are obvious in this French Ave Maria, where the passages between technologies and techniques of writing, orality, and language engage readers' knowledge of social apparatuses such as spirituality, kinship, and sexuality. Appropriately, however, that normative knowledge is challenged by the Incarnation, itself a primary locus of transformation, translation, and risk. As AIME affirms, "If it were not possible to be at the same time and in the same respect one thing and another, nothing would be" ([modesofexistence.org/aime/voc/567](http://modesofexistence.org/aime/voc/567), para. 4). The hesitation over orthodoxy produced by the brackets in this manuscript graphically conveys the Christian enigma: [TEC•FIC•REL].

AIME itself supplies a modern example of the productively ambiguous use of brackets as a means of "putting into form," and of the risks of translation. Square brackets around the names of the modes and crossings mark them as technical terms requiring

specially informed and trained interpretation: [TEC]. These brackets do not conform to any established scientific practice, but function as a rhetorical indication of AIME’s aspiration to “scientific” status, [REF]; crudely put, they look “techie.” This does not mean that they only mimic “real” science, however; AIME repeatedly stresses that scientific practice cannot proceed without such [FIC] devices. By foregrounding the ontological plurality that is the project’s key insight, AIME’s square brackets work to stop us from falling back into thinking of a solely “real” economic and materialist base, with all other phenomena secondary. AIME warns that “bracketing the reality” (*Inquiry* 147) of the different modes would mean failure to accept its radical challenge to Modernity, and the wreck of its political ambitions. In the English publication, this statement confuses—surely bracketing supports AIME’s project? In French, however, “bracketing the reality” is “mettre entre parenthèses la réalité” (*Enquête* 155): round brackets (*parenthèses*) signify AIME’s failure, in contrast to the square brackets (*crochets*) that shore up its claims. The crucial distinction between good and bad ontologies, and between good and bad economies, is made using a combined graphic-linguistic device which risks getting lost in the move to English, thus exemplifying the flexibility and fragility that AIME regards as translation’s strength and weakness.

AIME’s bracketing practice parallels that of the manuscripts examined above inasmuch as it adapts graphic conventions [TEC] with links to existing scholarly practices of knowledge [REF]. Square brackets are one in a small armory of formal practices which both streamline and interrupt AIME’s presentation of content, advancing its inquiry by interfering with it. Another example is the single font family (Novel Pro, [www.atlasfonts.com/about-atlas/](http://www.atlasfonts.com/about-atlas/)) used across the various platforms of the AIME project, emphasizing its overall coherence. Yet the different versions of AIME—French and English, print and online—defy integration. Any reader who attempts to use more than one finds disagreements in content, tone, and orientation. Translation between platforms or languages transforms both form and

content—as it should, according to AIME. Thus, the same graphic forms (font, square brackets, and so on) that construe AIME as a coherent unit also draw attention to its centrifugal generation of alternative possibilities: like a medieval manuscript, it is not a closed system but an open network, flexible and precarious.

Adapting and extending AIME’s terminology through the study of premodern culture allows us to move past some of its current limitations while profiting from its potential and even contributing to its project. I have here developed three such adaptations: arguing for greater confidence in the [FIC•REF] crossing; seeking to show that tracing the plaiting of more than two modes may afford greater analytical flexibility than does the restriction to binary “crossings”; and suggesting that the multimodal aspects of “form” bear much more exploitation in light of medieval manuscript practices. Finally, it is worth experimenting with classifying “form” as a mode of existence, [FOR]. Talking about “the beings of [FOR]” would allow us to highlight how such features as shape, pattern, and rhythm contribute to the production and maintenance of other modes, and to explore the different functions that “putting into form” performs in those modes. [FOR] may bring to light new connections—and new possibilities for both scholarly and political action. Medieval historiographical and graphic practices show that we can afford to have more confidence in “aestheticization” and in multimodal forms to make legible “the multiplicity of mediation planes,” not “as if this multiplicity were somehow the goal,” but in order to expose both the possibilities of inventiveness and alterity, and the efforts that go into constructing sameness and continuity across the hiatuses—both of which, for AIME, are features of all modes of existence.

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<sup>1</sup> Latour's ideas on the character of "Modernity" are elaborated in *We Have Never*.

<sup>2</sup> Otter points out that in William's version, the head is a trap of Gerbert's own making (109).

<sup>3</sup> Augustine discusses Apuleius and the illusory nature of metamorphoses in *City of God* 18.18.

<sup>4</sup> Compare Michel-Rolph Trouillot's assertion that "Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)" (Trouillot 26).

<sup>5</sup> On bracketing as an insular practice, see especially Nuttall; Purdie, *Anglicising* 66–92; Magnani, 194–205. On brackets in manuscripts of "Sir Thopas," the tail-rhyme romance that Chaucer allots himself in *The Canterbury Tales*, see Brantley; Purdie, "Layout"; Tschann. A similar practice is found in Italian manuscripts: Storey; Parkes, "Medieval Punctuation". Even-Ezra discusses scholastic bracketing, specifically thirteenth-century horizontal tree diagrams analyzing narrative function in commentaries on the *Book of Job*. On the liturgical Latin Sequence and its influence on or analogues in vernacular lyric (including tail-rhyme), see Brittain 1–61 (14–16).

<sup>6</sup> I owe this point to Lise Groenvold, student on the MA in Comparative Literature at University College London.