

The background is a painting of a desolate, rocky landscape. In the foreground, there are jagged, light-colored rocks and a small, dark boat. A gnarled, leafless tree stands on the right side. The sky is a mix of warm, golden and pale blue tones, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

**‘CENTRE AND
CIRCUMFERENCE’: THE
STATUS OF THE OBJECT
AND THE FORMATION OF
AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE
IN SHELLEY’S “ALASTOR”
AND “MONT BLANC”**

By Elena Rotzokou

A close-up portrait of Percy Bysshe Shelley, showing his face and upper torso. He has dark, wavy hair and is wearing a white, high-collared shirt. The background is dark and out of focus.

ARGUMENT

- My departmental honors thesis makes a case for Percy Bysshe Shelley's ambivalently materialist aesthetic.
- I argue that through a close reading of two of his early poems, "Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude" (1815), and "Mont Blanc" (1816).
- I contend that the type of aesthetic experience both of these poems seek to attain acknowledges rather than elides the object even as it valorizes its susceptibility to the subject's transformative control. By an "object" I understand that which lies beyond consciousness and is, therefore, ontologically inaccessible.

A painting of a man sitting on a rock in a landscape, holding a book. The man is wearing a dark coat and a white shirt. He is looking towards the viewer. The background shows a landscape with trees and a building. The title 'SHELLEY'S AMBIVALENCE' is written in large, white, bold letters across the top of the image.

SHELLEY'S AMBIVALENCE

- On the one hand, Shelley's belief in the subjective nature of reality and the linguistic sign's arbitrariness liberate the idealist drive underlying much of his work, including the two poems I examine; if external reality and linguistic signifiers are valid insofar as a human percipient wills their hypostasis, then the lyric subject can fashion its aesthetic experience independently.
- On the other hand, it is paradoxically Shelley's conceptualization of language as expressive yet not referential, and of reality as constituted through individual perception that justifies the poet's quest to represent aesthetically rich objects; for to the extent that objects are inaccessible and language a manmade construct, a poet has the liberty to represent as material any materiality that is inaccessible and, by extension, unrepresentable.

CO-DEPENDENCY OF SUBJECT AND OBJECT IN AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

- Although it is true that, if valid, the latter position salvages idealism in its purport to foreground materialism, part of my argument is that idealism is inextricable from Shelley's materialist aesthetic, and that subject and object are co-dependent in his poetry.
- I explain the above two ideas by putting Shelley's thought on poetry, language, and reality in conversation with that of the German Romantic poet Novalis, whose fragmented, philosophical prose powerfully critiques Fichtean – and Kantian – subjectivism by insisting on this precise co-dependency between the objective and the subjective.



ALASTOR; OR, THE SPIRIT OF SOLITUDE (1815)

- Rather than dramatizing a quest for a transcendental signified, a wholly ideational absolute, the poem centers on a search for an aesthetic object that is subjectively aestheticized but that nonetheless remains an independent object.
- The poem privileges individual perception on an epistemological level, but shows perception welcoming rather than completely eliding the object.

A Romantic-style landscape painting. In the foreground, a small stream flows through a lush, green valley with several large, detailed trees. In the middle ground, a calm lake reflects the surrounding scenery. The background is dominated by towering, rugged mountains with sharp peaks, some partially shrouded in mist or low clouds. The overall atmosphere is one of natural grandeur and beauty, characteristic of 19th-century landscape art.

ALASTOR

- The quest is manifest on two levels:
 - 1) The Poet's (i.e., the protagonist's) search for a material language that can represent abstract ideas, thereby bridging the gap between signifier and signified.
 - 2) The Poet's effort to aestheticize the landscape he traverses on his journey.
- Both quests fail because the subject seeks to prevail over the object even as it seeks to foreground the latter in its quest for an aesthetic experience.

MONT BLANC (1816)

- A more overtly materialist aesthetic than that sought by “Alastor.”
- Two competing drives throughout:
 - 1) A centrifugal drive toward textuality, where the mountain is a thoroughly aesthetic creation isolated from any “actual mountain.”
 - 2) A centripetal drive seeking to represent the actual Alpine landscape.

MONT BLANC

A painting of a snowy mountain landscape. In the foreground, several figures are visible, some standing and some sitting, looking towards the mountains. The middle ground is dominated by a large, snow-covered mountain slope. In the background, more jagged mountain peaks are visible under a pale sky. The overall style is impressionistic, with visible brushstrokes and a focus on light and color.

- The tension between the two drives eventually subsides into an effort to “represent” materiality.
- This search is complicated by an awareness that any “materiality” is inaccessible and therefore unrepresentable.
- The poem self-reflexively signals its desire to represent the Alpine landscape at the same time that it points to its awareness that it cannot represent any “actual” object.

CRITICAL BACKGROUND

- The research I pursued in developing my thesis exposed me to two opposing critical camps that have dominated and continue to dominate the landscape of scholarship on Shelley and the British Romantics in general. My thesis partially aligns itself with recent, object-oriented approaches – represented by Greg Ellermann and Anne C. McCarthy, among others – that critique the inordinate valorization of the aesthetic characterizing the older critical tradition – represented by the likes of M.H. Abrams and Harold Bloom.
- Nonetheless, it does not subscribe to object-oriented, or speculative realist, approaches uncritically.

CRITICAL BACKGROUND

- Although my interest in the status of the “object” in Shelley’s poetry is indebted to the speculative realist turn in Romantic criticism, I depart from it in three ways:
 - 1) I do not claim that Shelley’s poems often verge on achieving a total suspension of subjectivity
 - 2) rather than substitute a material for an ideational absolute, I dispense with absolutes altogether
 - 3) and I insist on Shelley’s staunch interest in the aesthetic as truth – an interest that consciously accommodates the fact that he is disabused of the notion that poetic language is referential. Notwithstanding our differences, my wider interest in the aesthetic is largely shared by speculative realist critics, as is my opposition to historicist critics’ relegation of the Romantic aesthetic to an ideology.

IMPLICATIONS

- The work I performed for my thesis has made me aware of two larger implications of my argument.
- Firstly, and in light of recent developments in the environmental humanities, I have become attentive to the urgency of re-evaluating and repurposing the role of the object in our inquiry into the formation of aesthetic experience in literature. Though my thesis employs deconstructive and formalist rather than ecocritical interpretive tools, it is closely attuned to the recent posthumanist turn in the humanities.
- Secondly, my engagement with a German Romantic has made me cognizant of the extent to which we can benefit from an approach to Romanticism – whether one regards it as a conceptual or a historically-dependent category, or both – as a transnational movement.

