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Departmental Honors Thesis Abstract – English Department

‘Centre and Circumference’: The Status of the Object and the Formation of Aesthetic Experience
in Shelley’s “Alastor” and “Mont Blanc”

My departmental honors thesis makes a case for Percy Bysshe Shelley’s ambivalently materialist aesthetic through a close reading of two of his early poems, “Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude” (1815), and “Mont Blanc” (1816). In other words, I argue 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.

Far from approaching Shelley’s aesthetic as object- rather than subject-centered, though, I contend that it stages a tension in spite of itself. 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. 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.

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. 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.

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.