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MELANGE**Collective Longing; Private Numbers**

In 1898, Edward Silsbee, an elderly American sea captain and self-proclaimed Percy Bysshe Shelley enthusiast, purchased a beautifully crafted Italian guitar that the poet once owned. Many people care about objects that once belonged to Shelley, and many objects that once belonged to Shelley have been lovingly preserved. There are Shelley watch fobs and Shelley snuffboxes, a Shelley baby rattle and a Shelley raisin plate, Shelley hair and Shelley doodles. There may also be extant, or so it has been hoped, a volume of Keats's poems found in the drowned Shelley's pocket. ...

But neither the tragedy-laden Keats volume nor the surfeit of Shelley effluvia surpasses the Shelley guitar installed in the same fleece-lined wooden box in which it was encased when an infatuated Shelley gave it to Jane Williams. When Edward Silsbee bought the guitar from Jane Williams's grandson, he was asked to donate it to a British institution. And so Silsbee promised the instrument to Oxford, the university from which Shelley had been expelled. ...

All the Romantic relics have been impounded by now, or nearly so. You might still be able to pick up a lock of Shelley's hair at auction, but most such objects were in the hands of their last private owners by the 1920s. In the catalog of his collection, Thomas Wise writes, "To collect such a Shelley Library again will be impossible," and he was probably right. ...

It may not matter that we no longer handle Romantic poets' hair or ashes or musical instruments — at least not without gloves and a curator standing by — or that we no longer set eyes on the eyes of someone who once knew them, and believe that something could be transmitted by that person's mere gaze. We are getting further and further away from these objects, speeding into a digitized future that makes the photographs Walter Benjamin feared would strip objects of their auras take on a numinous quality of their own.

These days, if you want to see Shelley's guitar, which Silsbee bestowed on the Bodleian Library, you will be encouraged to purchase a Shelley relic filmstrip in the library gift shop. This photographic vestige of Shelley's personal belongings vies with souvenir bookmarks and Bodleian T-shirts for the visitor's trade. The filmstrip in the library gift shop attests to the relics' ongoing allure. Both tourists and scholars still long to communicate with physical remains of Romantic poets, even through the obsolete tracery of the filmstrip. In so doing, and at this late moment in time, these library visitors re-enact the Romantic-era fascination with collected objects.

— *Judith Pascoe, associate professor of English at the University of Iowa, in The Hummingbird Cabinet: A Rare and Curious History of Romantic Collectors, published by Cornell University Press*

An entirely new economic arrangement has appeared in mathematics and its offspring, computer science. Before, we were free to do whatever our abilities allowed, since mathematical and

computational results were in the public domain — nobody could own an idea. This arrangement worked to bring us the mathematical and computationally advanced world we live in today. But in the past decade, a new set of rules has been imposed: An individual can own a mathematical result that he or she has discovered and can sue those who do not ask permission to use that result — even if the other person independently derived it.

The ownership of mathematical algorithms is truly a new concept and engenders one of the main questions underlying economics and law: What can a single human being claim ownership of? Although people sometimes describe property ownership as "natural," it is clearly a social invention, designed to overcome economic and social problems. ...

The reader has no doubt been exposed to more than enough rhetoric about the fact that we live in an information age and our economic progress depends on the efficient movement and processing of information — and efficient information usage depends on better mathematical algorithms. But does inventing (and enforcing) the concept of ownership of a mathematical theorem make for a better economy? ...

This question is not about the metaphysics of ownership, but about economic practicalities: Because individuals can own the results of their research, they are more likely to innovate, but when you can't use the math without permission, implementing and using the innovations become more costly. Since the new protections are not unambiguously a plus, we have to do the cost-benefit analysis to determine whether the new innovation they bring about is worth the trouble they cause.

— *Ben Klemens, guest scholar at the Brookings Institution, in Math You Can't Use: Patents, Copyright, and Software, published by Brookings Institution Press*

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