

**CALL FOR PAPERS**  
**“Monarch of All I Survey:” Literary Posterity and Cultural Legacies**  
International Conference

Date: Nov. 20-21, 2025

Venue: [ENS de Lyon, France](#)

**Keynote speakers:**

- **Julia Kühn (University of Groningen, The Netherlands)**
- **Nicholas Spengler (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain)**

*“I am monarch of all I survey,  
My right there is none to dispute,  
From the center all round to the sea,  
I am lord of the fowl and the brute.”*

William Cowper, “Verses, supposed to be written by Alexander Selkirk, during his solitary Abode in the Island of Juan Fernandez” (1782).

*“I am now alone in the Library, Mistress of all I survey”*

Letter by Jane Austen, 23 September 1813.

*“I am Monarch of Nought I Survey.”*

Abolitionist satirical poem, *Signal of Liberty*, 1842.

*“The Crusoe thing is inevitable because of his two conditions. One is the elation of being ‘the monarch of all he surveys.’ We are Crusoes: as poets, as novelists, as playwrights, we survey islands, and we feel they belong to us—not in a bad, godlike manner, but with that sense of exhilaration, of creative possession. The other side is the despair of Crusoe, the despair of always being alone. That is our true condition as writers.”*

Derek Walcott, interview by Edward Hirsch, *Contemporary Literature* 20.3 (Summer 1979): 292.

*“It is hard to think of a trope more decisively gendered than the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene. Explorer-man paints/possesses newly unveiled landscape-woman.”*

Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), p. 213.

We invite submissions for an international conference exploring the literary posterity of the phrase “I am monarch of all I survey” from William Cowper’s 1782 poem. Cowper’s lines have echoed through centuries of literature and criticism, embodying themes of imperial control, sight, and isolation, while remaining notably ambiguous. How has this ambivalence been reinterpreted across different cultural contexts and literary genres, from British Romanticism to contemporary postcolonial discourse? This conference

seeks to engage with the far-reaching impact of Cowper's words across a wide array of literary and theoretical frameworks.

### Key Themes and Topics:

- **Imperialism and Colonialism:** Cowper's phrase emerges in a historical context dominated by British imperial expansion and colonization. How do his words reflect and critique this period, and how have subsequent texts engaged with this legacy?
- **Surveying and the Gaze:** The word "survey" in Cowper's line carries multiple meanings, from observation to domination, echoing across abolitionist texts, travel literature, and colonial narratives. We welcome papers exploring the performative aspects of the gaze, cartography, and their relation to literary representations of space, landscape, and control (Tally 2013, 45).
- **Ambivalence and Rewriting:** While the first line of Cowper's poem suggests control and mastery, the later stanzas reveal deep disillusionment and isolation. How have authors adapted or [parodied](#) (Hamilton) these lines to explore themes of solitude, loss, and power in their own works?
- **Mapping and Literary Space:** This conference aims to bridge literature and geography, inviting discussions on how authors act as cartographers, mapping landscapes both literal and symbolic. How does Cowper's phrase relate to the tension between the zenithal view of the colonizer and the embodied perspective of the traveler or fugitive (Besse)?
- **Gender and the Gaze:** How does the appropriation of space via the gaze intersect with questions of gender, race, and identity? Mary Louise Pratt's critique of "explorer-man" and other gendered readings of imperialism may be useful lenses to explore variations of this trope in women's travel writing or postcolonial rewritings.
- **Robinson Crusoe and Literary Archetypes:** As James Joyce noted, Robinson Crusoe (Defoe, 1719) stands as a foundational figure of colonial mastery over nature ("I was king and lord of all this country indefensibly, and had a right of possession"). We encourage discussions of how Cowper's monarch trope is echoed in other literary texts that grapple with control, isolation, and the desire to map and own unfamiliar landscapes.
- **Intermedial Perspectives:** Beyond the written word, Cowper's legacy extends into visual art and photography (see Reviron-Piégay on Isabella Bird). Papers might consider intermedial interpretations, from the *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (Friedrich, 1818) to contemporary representations of landscape in photography and film.

### Possible Approaches:

- Historical and literary contextualization of Cowper's lines within British imperialism, enclosures (Marzec), and 18<sup>th</sup>-century natural philosophy.
- (Geo)critical approaches to the tension between surveillance, mapping, and "sousveillance" (Ross) in abolitionist or colonial texts.
- Comparative readings that trace the phrase's appearance in both anglophone and francophone contexts.

- Eco-critical readings of how this trope has been deployed in narratives of environmental control and exploitation, especially in relation to indigenous landscapes.
- Explorations of the phrase’s parodic potential and use in satire or abolitionist discourse (see *Signal of Liberty*, 1842, and Hamilton’s 1888 collection).
- Cartography and its relation to the literary imagination: how do texts and maps interact to shape our understanding of space and power?
- The intersection of literary and visual representations of domination and isolation, such as the tension between the sublime and the picturesque.

We invite proposals for papers that engage with these themes and beyond, considering the long literary and cultural legacy of Cowper’s words. Submissions can explore a range of texts, from poetry and travel narratives to novels, as well as visual or cartographic representations of space. We particularly encourage interdisciplinary approaches drawing from literature, geography, postcolonial studies, gender studies, and environmental humanities.

**Please send an abstract (300 words) and a brief biography to [vanessa.guignery@ens-lyon.fr](mailto:vanessa.guignery@ens-lyon.fr), [julien.negre@ens-lyon.fr](mailto:julien.negre@ens-lyon.fr) and [emmanuelle.peraldo@univ-cotedazur.fr](mailto:emmanuelle.peraldo@univ-cotedazur.fr) by April 15, 2025. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by May 15, 2025.**

We look forward to a stimulating exchange of ideas on how a single poetic line can resonate across centuries, continents, and disciplines.

Organizing committee:

Amanda Benmouloud (ENS de Lyon, IHRIM)  
 Vanessa Guignery (ENS de Lyon, IHRIM)  
 Julien Nègre (ENS de Lyon, IUF, IHRIM)  
 Emmanuelle Peraldo (Université Côte d’Azur, CTELA)  
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Scientific committee:

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**Further extracts**

“Colonel Builder and Sir Thomas Clubber exchanged snuff-boxes, and looked very much like a pair of Alexander Selkirks—‘Monarchs of all they surveyed.’”  
 Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), ch. 2.

“I am Monarch of all I survey.”

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854.

“If I, if I were King! Just King  
Each rabbit would show respect to him  
The chipmunks genuflect to him  
And his wife would be queen of the mane  
And I’ll be monarch of all I survey.”

“If I Were King of the Forest” (song of the Cowardly Lion), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

“There he was, my chipmunk, in the bright clear windy sunny air staring on the rock; hands clasping he sat up straight, some little oat between his paws; he nibbled, he darted away, the little nutty lord of all he surveyed.”

Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 1958, ch. 34.

“[The moon] is Lord and Master Lesbian King of all the blue and purple survey of her ink kingdom.”

Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 1965, ch. 39.

“So now I am His Honor Lt. Colonel C. F. Rey, Monarch of all I Survey—what a joke!”

Sir Charles Rey, *Bechuanaland Diaries, 1929-1937* (1988).

“One rose hearing two languages, one of the trees, one of school children reciting in English:

*I am monarch of all I survey,  
My right there is none to dispute;”*

Derek Walcott, Nobel Prize lecture, Dec. 9, 1992.

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