International conference: “Monarch of All I Survey:” Literary Posterity and Cultural Legacies

20-21 November 2025 – ENS de Lyon

https://monarch2025.sciencesconf.org/

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The international conference “‘Monarch of All I Survey:” Literary Posterity and Cultural Legacies’ was held on November 20-21, 2025, at the ENS de Lyon, France, and was co-organised by **Vanessa Guignery** (ENS de Lyon), **Julien Nègre** (ENS de Lyon), and **Emmanuelle Peraldo** (Aix-Marseille University). The symposium aimed at exploring the protean afterlives of the well-known opening line of a poem written by William Cowper and inspired by the adventures of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor who spent five years as a castaway on a desert island in the Pacific Ocean. The British poet describes a ‘monarch’ figure, standing alone on a promontory and gazing upon the world which spreads (literally and symbolically) at his feet:

> *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).

Cowper’s poetic formulation of the link between gazing, surveying, and power has become a recurring trope in the English-speaking world since its initial publication in 1782. Indeed, as the co-organisers indicated in the symposium’s Call for Papers, numerous writers have since reappropriated Cowper’s ‘monarch’ figure, ranging from Jane Austen in nineteenth-century England to Derek Walcott in the postcolonial Caribbean, including abolitionist voices in the United States, among many others. It is precisely this variety of perspectives which the symposium sought to delineate. Through a diachronic, multidisciplinary programme spanning over two days, thirteen speakers thus mapped out the various textual, visual, and conceptual resonances of Cowper’s ‘monarch of all I survey’ trope, illustrating how a single line could outlive the bounds of its original context and pave the way for multiple (re)interpretations. Several key themes emerged from the presentations, among which colonialism and imperialism, mapping and the literary space, intertextuality and intermediality, the gendering of the ‘monarch’ gaze, as well as issues of surveying and surveillance.

Thursday, November 20, 2025

The first day of the symposium opened on a presentation by **Emmanuelle Peraldo** (Aix-Marseille University), who foregrounded the links between literature and geography through an analysis of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) – a figure which, despite predating Cowper's lines, has emerged as the archetypal 'monarch of all he surveys' in literary and cultural history. From a historical standpoint, Crusoe's surveying of an uninhabited island echoed the geopolitical context of the early eighteenth century, as the expansion of the British Empire stressed the need for mapmaking in order to attract potential investors. In Defoe's novel, cartography also becomes a writing style, as the words themselves encapsulate the protagonist's fantasy of control over the land. Yet, the paper also pointed to an early rewriting (or remapping) of this colonial gaze in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), which subverts and undermines the Crusoean motif. This hint at the fallibility, or incompleteness of the almighty gaze embodied by Robinson Crusoe was then developed by **Julia Kühn** (University of Groningen) in her keynote lecture. Drawing on nineteenth-century South American travel accounts by Alexander von Humboldt, Charles Darwin, and Marianne North, Kühn delineated two different ways of seeing the world, each exemplified in the work of the three travellers. On the one hand, the 'monarch of all I survey' trope, conceptualised by Mary Louise Pratt in her seminal book *Imperial Eyes* (2008), denotes both a hierarchy and a detachment between the gazing eye and the land. On the other hand, the metaphor of the 'meshwork', developed by Tim Ingold in essays such as *Being Alive* (2011) and *The Life of Lines* (2015), refers to a form of conscious entanglement between the subject and the world – a less monarchical, yet more cosmic perspective. These two ways of seeing are not mutually exclusive but should rather be read as a spectrum, thereby laying the conceptual groundwork for the panels which followed.

The first panel, chaired by **Julia Kühn**, centred on the 'monarch of all I survey' rhetorics in the works of nineteenth-century British explorers who travelled to Eastern regions. **Arman Martirosyan** (University of Strasbourg and Sorbonne University) examined the ambivalent functions of the 'monarch' trope in James S. Bell and John A. Longworth's 1840 accounts of their journeys to Circassia. Their thorough depiction of their surroundings allowed them to denounce the barbarousness of Russian imperialism in the region and insist on the resilience of the Circassian people, thereby humanising the land and archiving imperial violences in the face of potential erasure. Nonetheless, their declared willingness to help the Circassians with their narratives overlapped with their own imperial intentions: indeed, the two explorers' detailed travel accounts also served as a means to gather knowledge (and power) about the region for the military interests of the British empire. While Bell and Longworth can be characterised as archetypal, masculine 'monarchs' in this sense, **Floriane Reviron-Piégay** (University Jean Monnet Saint-Étienne) shed new light upon Cowper's *topos* through the figure of a female 'monarch', Isabella Bird, who travelled extensively across the Asian continent. Bird explicitly refers to the 'monarch of all I survey' phrase twice in her travel accounts – first in *The Golden Chersonese* (1883), then in her *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan* (1891) – to describe situations of solitude in the wild. Under her pen, the 'monarch of all *she* surveys' is no longer on a promontory but on flat ground, and yet still reaches metaphorical heights. Indeed, the mere ability to be alone in a foreign land allowed Bird to challenge the Victorian-era social expectations of female domesticity and

substitute the *topos* of the angel in the house for that of a powerful female monarch. Her writings thereby exemplify how gender can influence the perception of power inherent in Cowper's trope.

After an initial focus on the colonial era, the second and third panels, chaired by **Vanessa Guignery** (ENS de Lyon) and **Christine Lorre** (University of Caen), gave centre stage to postcolonial reinterpretations of William Cowper's line. **Sreya Chatterjee** (University of Leeds) discussed the reorientation of the conventionally masculine, Eurocentric 'monarch' gaze in two travelogues by Indian women, *Across the Chicken Neck* by Nandita Haksar (2013) and *Shadow City* by Taran Khan (2019). Although both Haksar and Khan depict scenes of contemplation from a promontory perspective, the conquering 'monarch' *topos* is quickly subverted into a less vertical perception of the landscape. The imperial bird's eye view gives way to a more ethical gaze, as the writers display a clear awareness of their positionality as the seeing 'I' as well as a willingness to engage with (rather than dominate) the land around them. Travel then becomes a way to practice compassion rather than exert symbolic power. A similarly subversive remapping of the 'monarch' figure was expounded by **Mirac Ceylan** (Gaziantep University) in an analysis of *Foe* (1986), written by South African born novelist J. M. Coetzee. Just as Cowper's persona may be king of all he surveys but ultimately feels alienated in his solitude as he longs for 'the sweet music of speech', Coetzee's rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe* crystallizes the ambiguous dynamic between mastery and language which is at play in Cowper's poem. Whether it be Susan Barton, the female castaway who narrates the story but addresses her narrative to a man, Friday, the tongueless, enslaved black man, or Cruso, the master-turned-slave, all three protagonists ultimately lack both voice and agency. Subverting readers' expectations, the two white settler figures, Susan and Cruso, are no Crusoean 'monarchs' – instead, the blurring of the boundary between master and slave throughout the novel exposes them as impostor gods. In contrast, **Cédric Courtois** (University of Lille) showed how the 'monarch' stance could be co-opted into a source of empowerment in a postcolonial context with a study of Nigerian writer's Chioma Okereke's *Water Baby* (2024). The novel foregrounds a marginalised community's struggle for visibility and official recognition in Makoko, a floating slum in Lagos which becomes the subject of a drone-mapping project. The bird's eye view of the drones contrasts with the more embodied, ground-level spatial mapping used by the inhabitants in their everyday lives, and the novel hints at the potential risks entailed by the hypervisibility which comes along with this new map from above. Nevertheless, the 'monarchical' perspective offered by this newfound platform becomes a mode of resistance and a survival strategy: claiming space on a map enables the community to assert political and symbolic presence, in the face of a local government which refuses to acknowledge its existence.

Friday, November 21, 2025

The second day began with a step to the other side of the Atlantic, as the morning discussions offered a diachronic perspective on the resonances of the 'monarch of all I survey' in the United States. **Nicholas Spengler** (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) kickstarted the day with a keynote lecture in which he foregrounded two embodiments of William Cowper's poetics of solitude, the isolated 'monarch' and the observer comfortably peeping at the world through 'loop-holes of retreat' in 'The Winter Evening', and observed how these poetics shaped Transcendentalist and abolitionist writing in the antebellum United States. Analysing Harriet

Jacob's rewriting of the 'loop-hole of retreat' into a scene of racial and gendered sousveillance in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Henry David Thoreau's assumed preference for introspection and poetic surveying over land ownership in *Walden* (1854), and Sophia Peabody's ambivalent reckoning of plantation history in her 'Cuba Journal' (1833-1835), the paper highlighted the early political resonances of Cowper's work, through which these writers delineated and questioned the contours of settler colonialism and surveillance in the Americas.

The fourth panel, chaired by **Caroline Hildebrandt** (Grenoble Alpes University), further explored the literary and political legacies of Cowper's 'monarch of all I survey' in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States. **Emilia Le Seven** (Sorbonne Paris Nord University) focused on the rewriting of the Crusoean motif in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Crater* (1849) and its echoes with the geopolitical context of the United States. The novel depicts the rise and fall of a settler colony in the Pacific Ocean. In true 'monarch' fashion, the protagonists begin their colonial endeavour by surveying an island, on which they create a commercial empire. Nonetheless, all this eventually ends as the new residents, brought from the United States, depose their governor – only for a violent earthquake to engulf the archipelago, leaving effectively no trace of this settler paradise. This ending betrays Cooper's anxieties about the environmental viability of the 'monarch' *ethos*, but also about the political feasibility of his own democratic ideals and of United-Statesian imperialism more broadly, in a decade marked by an overarching belief in Manifest Destiny. Traces of such initial hope and subsequent disillusionment in the *ethos* of the 'monarch' can similarly be found in the writings of Jack Kerouac, as **Julien Nègre** (ENS de Lyon) demonstrated. The twentieth-century writer himself was well accustomed to mapping: not only did he draw several maps of the United States in preparation for *On the Road* (1957), his *magnum opus*, but his cartographic practice (and monarchical eye over the American territory) also directly informed his writing style in the latter novel. Yet, the two occurrences of the 'monarch of all I survey' phrase in Kerouac's work, both linked to the author's months spent alone on Desolation Peak, showcase a gradual dismantling of his identification with the 'monarch' stance. The trope as it is used in *The Dharma Bums* (1958) still retains traces of the author's confidence, whereas *Desolation Angels* (1965) displaces the 'monarch' gaze onto a distant celestial body and depicts the failure of panoramic vision, signalling Kerouac's distancing from earlier representations and modes of writing.

The fifth and final panel of the conference, chaired by **Héloïse Lecomte** (Sorbonne University), broadened the shapes of the 'monarch' by bringing into focus non-textual forms of mapping and surveying. Given the central place of the eye (or poetic 'I') in Cowper's poem, it comes as no surprise that the 'monarch of all I survey' *topos* should resonate with visual practices. Accordingly, **Marie Gueguen** (ENS de Lyon) laid emphasis on the connection between aesthetics and control in Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012) – a connection which is crystallised by Aritomo, a Japanese gardener living in occupied Malaysia, who comes to embody Japanese imperialism through his physical and symbolic control over his surroundings. His use of *shakkei*, a traditional method consisting in the creation of a 'borrowed scenery' in zen gardens, allows him to capture the landscape and curate it into a specific view. Besides, he also symbolically captures and designs the body of Yun Ling, his Malay lover, by tattooing a map of the landscape on her back. While Cowper's poetic persona passively looks at the land below him, Aritomo therefore stands out as a 'monarch' who physically and actively reshapes the Malaysian land and body into his own aesthetic vision, imbued with imperialist undertones. Moving beyond

the eye of the gardener onto that of the photographer, **Christine Lorre** (University of Caen) examined the ambiguous positionality in the bird's eye view pictures of Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, who travelled the world to document the Anthropocene in a style which he described as 'industrial sublime'. Through a case study on Burtynsky's 2016 Nigeria series, the paper highlighted the issues raised by the merging of documentary ambitions with aesthetics: indeed, the monarchical perspective chosen by the photographer creates a form of distance which, though typical of the sublime, risks reducing the Anthropocene to a form of aestheticized abstraction, all the while obscuring local histories and real catastrophe happening on ground level. In this case, the vertical relationship between the photographer's eye and the world he surveys hints at a power dynamic which does not allow for any form of reciprocity between surveyor and surveyed; however, **Ela İpek Gündüz** (Gaziantep University) focused on a case of reciprocal gazes between the 'monarch'-like artist and the muse in Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019). Set in a castle, on an island in Britanny, the movie establishes an initial power dynamic between Marianne, the painter, and Héloïse, her unwilling subject; nonetheless, Marianne's 'monarch' position dissolves as love grows between the two women and Héloïse returns her lover's gaze. Within the heterotopic setting of the castle, which is physically far apart from the mainland and symbolically distant from the patriarchal order, the two protagonists subvert the typically masculine, hierarchical gaze encapsulated in Cowper's 'monarch' and form a bond based on egalitarian reciprocity instead. Through their forbidden love, Marianne and Héloïse reach a form of sublimity which is no longer associated with monarchical distance but with the powerful blurring of boundaries between surveyor and surveyed, 'monarch' and subject, or artist and muse.

Over the course of five stimulating panels, the speakers explored the multiple legacies of William Cowper's eighteenth-century 'monarch of all I survey' up to the present day. Breaching disciplinary and temporal boundaries to confront multiple perspectives on the titular trope, the far-reaching scope of the symposium allowed for enlightening discussions between scholars specialising in very different fields. Through this ambitious methodological approach, the conference successfully put forward kaleidoscopic points of view drawing on varied media and theoretical backgrounds, rather than a single, fossilizing, monarchical gaze on the topic at hand.

Although Cowper's lines may seem distant to twenty-first century onlookers, the participants shed light on the topical resonances of the 'monarch of all I survey' figure, as the link between gazing, (in)visibility, and power nowadays continues to be remapped with the ever-increasing presence of visual media and surveillance devices around the world. It appears more urgent than ever, then, to keep identifying and questioning the identities and shapes not only of the surveying eye – invisible through it may seem – but also of those being surveyed. The reflections which emerged in this conference could thus be of interest to (and could be expanded by) scholars in the fields of visual culture, surveillance studies, and invisibility studies, to name only a few other potential afterlives for Cowper's 'monarch'.