

# The Politicization of Landscape: William Cowper's *The Task*

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Indeed the usual process for putting further meanings into the pastoral situation was to insist that the shepherds were rulers of sheep, and so compare them to politicians or bishops or what not; . . . . (Empson 12)

From the moment that no pastoral poetry seems to be thinkable without the relation to political ideology, pastoralism, so I safely say, is translatable to politics, whether intentionally or not. Even if I had not referred to William Empson, it would be justified to interpret pastoral from the viewpoint of power relation. In spite of Empson's study of the politico-pastoral tradition, however, politics is, I think, not always ideological, contemporary, social, but often economic, anachronistic, individual. So it should be especially for the subject being in front of a pastoral landscape of the country, or being possessed with the obsession that s/he may go mad. I choose the word "subject" to evince my point at issue. I would like to focus upon the politicized landscape, the landscape to be politicized, the way of politicization in which landscape is dominated, rather than the relation between a pastoral poem and its politico-ideological background. Perhaps, such an interpretation will give a critical space to the politics of subject, about subject, and for subject. Poems of William Cowper, though they do not guarantee a fecundity of interpretations, are useful enough to delve into these problems, especially from the viewpoints of madness, religion, and

home economics.

## I

William Cowper's identification with "a stricken deer that left the herd" (*The Task* 3 : 108) proves that he was precipitated into the imminence between the subject and numinous experiences. This cursed experience of what makes it possible for him to identify with an imagery of being stricken rather than with a deer, more or less, affected his poetics, retreat into a rural refuge, and politics, indeed the politics which the pastoral subject engenders. Perhaps it is in this point that Cowper's identification, though it is no rare thing, provides us with a nodal problem. The identification with "a stricken deer" is an experience, that is, the retroactive reference to the past. Apparently, Cowper says that "I was a stricken deer." In spite of his constative description, however, this confession always remains effective in the present subject. Without this effectiveness, no poetics, no politics, seems possible. It is the experience and present menace at the same time. As far as the possibility that latent menaces may be present, be coming, and be the future-to-come, can not be deniable, Cowper's pastoral retreat and his writing of poetry become thinkable. The frequency of such experience, or rather experience as such, keeps him writing and makes him a pious evangelist.

After due deliberation of the possibility that the past is going to be present retroactively, the constative description that "I was a stricken deer" must involve, in principle, the performative sense that I may be a stricken deer in the future-to-come, whether it is foreseeable or not. Constative and performative are inseparable, regardless of the biographical fact of Cowper's life, in the right of language.<sup>1</sup> A writing has already displayed its performativity on the assumption that it would have been read. In the

moment that, as soon as, the phrase “I was a stricken deer” is articulated, it produces performative senses in each context of articulation. In Cowper’s mode of writing, namely writing itself, the experience that I was stricken can come back to be present, the present life, the present subject. For Cowper, writing is not only the recurrence of the experience, but also the condition of repeatability that it may be the future-to-come. His cursed identity as a stricken deer recurs in the imagery of a drowned man in “The Cast-Away” and of a damned man in “Hatred and Vengeance, My Eternal Portion.”

What makes it possible for Cowper to identify with a stricken deer, as we know, derives from the mental depression, namely so-called madness. It is well known that Cowper was often vexed by madness in fact. Why is madness so remarkable? The discourse of madness, about madness, is confined not only to a pathological field. Madness, mental illness, as Michel Foucault points out, is also problematic to psychology, phenomenology, and ontology: “Nothing could be more false than the myth of madness as an illness that is unaware of itself as such” (46). Awareness of madness, sooner or later, proves to be useful in working out a heuristics of recovery. Without such an awareness, there is no illness for the subject, insofar as it is concerned with mentality. Foucault’s assertion is cogent enough to refute the myth of pathological discourse about madness: “The way in which a subject accepts or rejects his illness, the way in which he interprets it and gives signification to its most absurd forms, constitutes one of the essential dimensions of the illness” (47). Here, he does not balk at declaring an *ex post facto* approval of madness. Awareness of madness is impossible to the subject who is in the midst of madness, but possible to the recovered subject, for whom the problematic is not madness itself, but the revenant of madness, madness as such, the possibility that madness may appear in the future-to-come. Exactly, the subject is always threatened with the possible

revenant of madness.

The subject is always delayed by the revenant of madness. What the subject interprets as the experience of madness is not the substance of madness, *de facto* madness, but the simulacrum of madness, representation as such. In this way, the metaphor of the “stricken deer” must be, in principle, translatable to another metaphor by means of another interpretation. “The Cast-Away” literally narrates the story of shipwreck; meanwhile, it divulges the subject as a “reprobate” in the Christian discourse. The plot is a teleology. In the beginning of the poem, a wretch is already destined to drown without any rescue: he is a “destin’d wretch” (“The Cast-Away” 3). He is coming to a destination to come, an absolute *telos*, which he has to receive, whether hopefully or not, though it is the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Indeed, there is no deviation from the path to becoming a reprobate. However, questions remain. Which of the men, the wretch or the narrator, is a wrecked man? Which is a reprobate? The wretch seems to be, as the title shows, shipwrecked; on the other hand, the narrator “I” seems to become a surrogate of a reprobate whose role the wretch should play:

No voice divine the storm allay'd,  
 No light propitious shone,  
 When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,  
 We perish'd, each, alone;  
 But I, beneath a rougher sea,  
 And whelm'd in deeper gulphs than he.                    (“The Cast-Away” 61-66)

Because both of them are wrecked and made reprobate, in consequence, the comparison between them makes a difference. The deeper the wretch sinks, the more the subject “I” becomes reprobate instead of the wretch.

Cowper's vigilance against the revenant of madness is present sometimes *as against* the stricken deer, sometimes *as against* a reprobate. At any rate, it is the vigilance against the future-to-come *par excellence*, the Calvinistic predestination. The counteraction of madness coincides with the faith in Christianity, Calvinistic evangelicalism. Besides, the theme of reprobate is tangible in "Hatred and Vengeance, My Eternal Portion" which is called "Lines written during a Period of Insanity." At a loss of what to do in front of the cursed sentence, the narrator, "Encompass'd with a thousand dangers, / Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors" ("Hatred and Vengeance" 13-14), falls into the reticence of absolute passivity. The subject participates in his own burial: "I, fed with judgments, in a fleshy tomb, am / Buried above ground" ("Hatred and Vengeance" 19-20). This "I" is a subject, of course. Can the subject experience his own burial, namely death? The point is not simple, because death is just the rhetorical metaphor to signify the experience of insanity, precisely the *experienced* insanity. At any rate, it is in the midst of madness that the present subject, the living subject, experiences death.

So far as the subject is concerned, the experience of burial, death, is a crisis of identity. It is the experience that I cannot be what I was, what I am, what I will be: I was a "stricken deer," "whelm'd in deeper gulphs," and "Buried above ground." The revenant of madness is furtively wandering around the subject, and it is latent but serious behind the subject. Thus, the anxiety of becoming a reprobate becomes an repetition compulsion. For the Calvinistic evangelist Cowper, in other words, the intolerable menace of becoming a reprobate is the condition of such repeatability. Why so? In a sense, it is easy, too easy, to give a specious excuse. That is to say, Cowper was, so I answer, one of evangelical Christians whose conviction was that "they were members of a small band of the Elect, chosen by God for salvation and Heaven" (Rosen 126). Therefore, "Cowper's belief in predesti-

nation drove him to madness with despair that he was not of the elect” (Speck 172). Inevitably the Calvinistic evangelical doctrine of the elect conflicts with the effect of madness. *The Task* proves Cowper’s devotion to the Calvinist doctrine of God’s elect:

He stabilishes the strong, restores the weak,  
Reclaims the wand’rer, binds the broken heart,  
And arm’d himself in panoply complete  
Of heav’nly temper, furnishes with arms  
Bright as his own, and trains by ev’ry rule  
Of holy discipline, to glorious war,  
The sacramental host of God’s elect. (*The Task* 2 : 343-49)

In consequence, madness, which precludes the identity of the subject, the sameness of the self, “acts as a criticism of Calvinism” (Rosen 126). Who should be chosen as God’s elect is none other than the subjective “I,” indeed, neither a stricken deer, nor a drowning man, nor a buried man.

Indicating the feature of madness as the simulacrum, the condition of repetition compulsion, and the identity crisis, I have called the revenant of madness. The word “revenant” derives from French “revenir,” which means “to return.” Madness is always and already standing by for a chance to return; therefore the effect of madness cannot be reduced to the simple alternative between normal and abnormal in pathological classification. The way of translation in which Cowper interprets and articulates madness is likely to incline toward the religious matter, the aberrant conjuncture at which he will be omitted from God’s election in the future-to-come. The point at issue is that the compulsion, which, imposing a passivity on the subject, comes from beyond Cowper’s project toward the future-to-come, in the name of other, as an absolute other, is always present. It is no concern

of the subject. The fundamental topos of "I" from which Cowper articulates is already contaminated with others, whether they are named a stricken deer, or a drowning man, or a buried man. By this logical process, Cowper fashions himself as a Calvinistic evangelist. Consequently madness as the experience of absolute other helps to construct the identity of a Calvinistic evangelist Cowper.

By discussing the revenant of madness, I seem to enter into phenomenological, ontological, thanatology. Now I feel the need to discuss madness again, vis-à-vis thanatology, by means of thanatology, because no discourse about subject, identity, and desire, seems to be possible without the relation to death, what is to return, what is wandering. When madness corresponds to a metaphorical death, a more cursed experience than biological death, that is, the experience that I am no longer what I am, the point at issue for Cowper is not the simple binary opposition between life and death but whether his life is happy or not: "He is the happy man, whose life ev'n now / Shows somewhat of that happier life to come" (*The Task* 6 : 906-07). Cowper's interest is whether he is happy in the future-to-come, the life-to-come, even the life after death, or not. Life and death assume a symbolic sense in terms of his religious faith. In order for him to be happy in the life to come, Cowper must keep the *proper* identity, *topos*, which God gives:

And God gives to ev'ry man  
The virtue, temper, understanding, taste,  
That lifts him into life, and lets him fall  
Just in the niche he was ordain'd to fill. (*The Task* 4 : 789-92)

For Cowper, the binary opposition between life and death depends on the promise God gives. In the experience of madness, he found (always the past

tense) the breaking of such a promise.

Through the way in which Cowper interprets madness, we find that the subject, the identity, and the life are constructed, as the word “niche” shows, by topographical discourse. The “I” is the proper topos that the subject receives from God. In this topography, to keep the topos, to maintain the *status quo*, is the happiness of life; on the other hand, to deviate from the topos is the metaphorical death of madness. Besides, for Cowper, such a topos is an object of gift-giving, the possibility of giving and taking. Just in this point, the topography is quite problematic. In spite of Cowper’s simplicity in the dualistic classification between life and death from the religious viewpoint, however, his topographical idea of subject jeopardizes the topos itself in the relation to death or madness. Death, as Jacques Derrida points out, conditions the irreplaceable singularity of subject: “Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, ‘given,’ one can say, by death” (*The Gift of Death* 41). Insofar as I must die my death in my place, death is the condition of my identity. Nobody can receive my death, my madness. It is nobody else but “I” who was a “stricken deer,” “whelm’d in deeper gulphs,” and “[B]uried above ground.” Madness arrives at the topos which Cowper himself should occupy.

While death is the condition of identity, paradoxically, “I” cannot experience properly my death. Death belongs to nobody. It is the inevitable arrival that comes from beyond the project of subject. Death is a gift impossible to give and take: “*death can neither be taken nor given*” (*The Gift of Death* 45). Death as the arrival without possession makes it possible for one to identify with oneself: “The sameness of the self, what remains irreplaceable in dying, only becomes what it is, in the sense of an identity as a relation of the self to itself, by means of this idea of mortality as irreplaceability” (*The Gift of Death* 45). This irreplaceability according to the



gift that is impossible to exchange paradoxically stabilizes the identity.

In the same way as that logic, for Cowper, madness is a gift without possession: he is confronted with an absolute passivity. It, “neither taken nor given,” arrives at him beyond his project toward the future-to-come, against his intention, without any symptoms. This topographical irreplaceability of madness affects Cowper’s identity retroactively, especially his identity as an evangelist. Let me juxtapose his response to madness with the evangelical interpretation of the lost sheep, the lost silver piece, and the profligate son in the gospel of St. Luke. Evangelical interpretation converges on the cliché that “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth” (Luke 15 : 10). In these parables, evangelists underscore the conversion: “Starting from a conviction of man’s sinfulness, Evangelicals stressed the importance of the conversion experience and individual spiritual life which could be transformed by an infusion of grace” (*Family Fortunes* 83). By the performative response by which Cowper retroactively interprets the experience of madness as God’s reprobation, he acquiesces to the virtue of conversion according to the constative interpretation, and tries to be a pious evangelist. Thus the performative interpretation draws him to evangelicalism in terms of the virtue of conversion.

Death and madness both give the irreplaceability of subject topographically, but the difference between them is the possibility to return. Death can never come back; therefore it gives the singularity to the self. Meanwhile, madness may return ; therefore it is a revenant. In principle, it will come back many times. This plurality of the possibility that the revenant may come back keeps him attempting to be an evangelist. It is in this plurality that variations in his interpretation of madness crop up: he was sometimes a stricken deer, sometimes a drowning man, sometimes a reprobate man. Over the possibility of plurality, Cowper continues to interpret madness. Of course, he does this in order to stabilize himself. The

menace to madness, madness itself, is retroactively reduced to the latent revenant of madness by the performative act of interpretation. Derrida's analysis of madness epitomizes this relation between madness and subject in terms of language:

any philosopher or speaking subject . . . who must evoke madness from the *interior* of thought (and not only from within the body or some other extrinsic agency), can do so [remove madness] only in the realm of the *possible* and in the language of fiction or the fiction of language. Thereby, through his own language, he reassures himself against any actual madness . . . and can keep his distance, the distance indispensable for continuing to speak and to live. (*Writing and Difference* 54)

Cowper distances himself from madness in the fiction about a stricken deer, a drowning man, and a buried man.

## II

Cowper, being haunted by the revenant of madness, sought pastoral refuge in the country. Could the rural scene be effective as a panacea to emancipate him from madness? Perhaps both yes and no. Yes, in the sense that he could write *The Task* with the "public form of the poem" (Feingold 121). No, in the sense that he was always possessed with the revenant of madness. I, focusing upon the relation of his identity to his interpretation of madness, have pointed out the performativity in the act of interpretation. It also proves that the identity is an *ex post facto* construct, and, in other words, that his religious faith is *posteriori*. The chance of anachronism which retroactively intervenes in the subject makes it possible to interpret and have the religious faith; therefore one can establish a relation to others.

Incidentally, does religion inscribe constative God in its faith? I would like to suppose that religion itself is always and already *ex post facto*. That is, religion itself is also under restrictions of performative interpretations; therefore no God ever seems to be constative. Theogony should be re(de)-constructed in terms of writing, language, and speech-act.

Speaking of *The Task*, it can be said that it is pastoral poetry, whether generically or not. One sentence in *The Task* elucidates the virtue of the pastoral retreat: "God made the country, and man made the town" (*The Task* 1 : 749). His eulogy epitomizes the purport of the poem straightforwardly. All kinds of binary oppositions in the poem (country and town, nature and art, wisdom and knowledge, and so on) are settled easily according to the moral and ethical standard of God. God "trains by ev'ry rule / Of holy discipline, to glorious war, / The sacramental host of God's elect." This duality in his rhetoric, whether *The Task* is regarded as public or private, has often been problematic. Certainly the poem presents the duality between the public, which Feingold emphasizes, and the private, which Hazlitt emphasizes<sup>2</sup>: the duality which P. M. Spacks calls "the opposition between conventional and personal" (167), and Vincent Newey calls "the gap that has opened up between public world and the poet as locus of value" (131). Informative though they are, at any rate, the pursuit of the alternative only makes an aporia, indeterminacy, double bind explicit. It is nonsense to try to determine which is important. *The Task* cannot be only private purely, insofar as it consists of language: "as soon as one speaks, as soon as one enters the medium of language, one loses that very singularity" (*The Gift of Death* 60). On the other hand, it cannot be only public purely, insofar as it is written by somebody. Now we should postulate not the hegemony but the relation. I shall try to prove that the poem includes the confession of religious faith behind the constative mode of pastoral.

Cowper finds virtues in the country and vices in the town. The denuncia-

tion derives from his repugnance over the excess<sup>3</sup>:

Now basket up the family of plagues  
That waste our vitals. Peculation, sale  
Of honor, perjury, corruption, frauds  
By forgery, by subterfuge of law,  
By tricks and lies as num'rous and as keen  
As the necessities their authors feel;  
Then cast them closely bundled, ev'ry brat  
At the right door. Profusion is its sire.

.....

Profusion deluging a state with lusts  
Of grossest nature and of worst effects,  
Prepares it for its ruin. . . .

(*The Task* 2 : 667-74, 688-90)

His denunciation should not be regarded as a reactionary idea, the reaction against rural virtue. Whatever the denunciation is, as a nationalist, he cannot abandon his country: "England, with all thy faults, I love thee still / My country" (*The Task* 2 : 206-07). His moral satire develops not outside but inside the state, involving both of country and city. Far from being abandoning, he hopes to keep in contact with the outside not only literally but figuratively: "He comes, the herald of a noisy world, / With spatter'd boots, strapp'd waist, and frozen locks, / News from all nations lumb'ring at his back" (*The Task* 4 : 5-7). A noisy world is literally the outside of the country where Cowper lives, and figuratively the outside which can be informative only through a postman.

The distinction between country and city can no longer conceal its aridity. Indeed, from that moment, a contamination prevails, in both the country and in Cowper himself. In spite of his idea/ideal of virtuous countries, he finds that they are already contaminated with vices, "Fell

Discord" (*The Task* 4 : 482). Impeachable vices thrive throughout the country: "a whiff / Of stale debauch forth-issuing from the styes / That law has licensed" (*The Task* 4 : 469-71). Besides, country workers are all drunken and lethargic (*The Task* 4 : 472-78). Compared with the rhetoric in the eulogy of moral virtues and the denunciation of excess, oddly enough, the denunciation against the decline of countries is cut off with cold and distant attitude. Is not the decline impeachable? Or is it a sign of lethargy, Cowper's lethargy? If it is so, it will be effective enough to spoil the logical structure concomitant to the shibboleth that "God made the country." As for the lethargy, however, its rhetoric is based on the pastoral mode of writing rather than Cowper himself. This attitude corresponds to his nostalgic mode of pastoral<sup>4</sup>:

Would I had fall'n upon those happier days  
That poets celebrate. Those golden times  
And those Arcadian scenes that Maro sings,  
And Sydney, warbler of poetic prose.

.....

Vain wish! those days were never. Airy dreams  
Sat for the picture. And the poet's hand  
Imparting substance to an empty shade,  
Imposed a gay delirium for a truth. (*The Task* 4 : 513-16, 525-28)

Cowper's insistence is the absence of the golden age that Arcadia is no more, or rather it never was. It is, according to him, only a fiction created by poets. There is neither actual provenance, nor vestige: "Vain wish." The pastoral world is already and always lost. Cowper's adhesion to the virtuous country is quite imaginary. It is, as Feingold says (157), not the absence of Arcadia but the lethargy of imaginations, the absence of "gay delirium," that Cowper deplores: "Grant it. I still must envy them an age /

That favor'd such a dream, . . . ." (*The Task* 4 : 529-30). In this way, the constative mode of pastoral offers the way to what Spacks calls the "quality of perception directed within" (165).

The time is ripe for me to enter the religious realm in Cowper. The constative mode carries Cowper's performative attitude toward religion simultaneously. The tendency to within, inside, introspection, reveals the divinity within, which is omnipresent in nature:

From dearth to plenty, and from death to life,  
Is Nature's progress when she lectures man  
In heav'nly truth; evincing as she makes  
The grand transition, that there lives and works  
A soul in all things, and that soul is God.           (*The Task* 6 : 181-85)

The divinity within seems to be, though it is an oxymoron, omnipresent — insofar as it assumes the transcendental feature, such as *epoche*, *via negativa*, *aporia* — obviously whenever it reveals itself, and appears without being present to us as an epiphany. The way to God comes to a dead end, *epoche*, at the limit of human wisdom: "God never meant that man should scale the heav'ns / By strides of human wisdom" (*The Task* 3 : 221-22).

The discourse of divinity is inseparable from the discourse of revelation, namely enlightenment. There has already been the light. The light of revelation. The light of *via negativa*. Without any media of *via*, *by way of*, *through*, though it is always negative whether it is transparent or not, neither divinity, nor sanctity, nor omnipresence seems to be possible to think and believe. The light of revelation, as a form of *via negativa*, makes it possible to open the divinity: "All truth is from the sempiternal source / Of light divine" (*The Task* 2 : 499-500). The metaphor of light implies the invisibility of light source, namely the invisibility of divinity itself, of

noumenon. As the light flashes over the dark, as the sunbeam shines on the earth, the revelation brings matters to light:

'Tis Revelation satisfies all doubts,  
Explains all mysteries, *except her own*,  
And so illuminates the path of life,  
That fools discover it, and stray no more.

(*The Task* 2 : 527-30 [emphasis added])

The function of revelation, corresponding to the effect of light, is double: the illumination, the enlightenment, by which some opening occurs, and the concealment of light source, by which the source itself can remain transcendent. It can be said that the light source is a condition of the discourse about the revelation, the enlightenment, therefore religion.

Religion asks one to respond: the response is to the light of revelation. Cowper was also forced to respond to the revelation with the hope of salvation, in order to relieve himself: "'Tis liberty of heart, derived from heav'n, / Bought with HIS blood who gave it to mankind, / And seal'd with the same token" (*The Task* 5 : 545-47). The liberty of heart bought with the blood, which reminds us of the Atonement, seems to codify the entering into a contract with God by means of Christ's blood as collateral. As soon as the contract concludes, it gives birth to the responsible relationship of promise : "It [liberty of heart] is held / By charter, and that charter sanction'd sure / By th' unimpeachable and awful oath / And promise of a God" (*The Task* 5 : 547-50). When there is neither contract, nor promise, nor religion without any responses, perhaps there must be something responsible, respondent, responsive, as a starting point. The response to God is immediately attended with the proper responsibility, without which, no response is possible. Besides, no responsibility is derived without contract, oath,

promise.

First of all, Cowper must respond to the invisible divinity, the unknowable other, which imposes the responsibility to respond on him, and then promise the contract by “charter sanction’d sure” and “th’ unimpeachable and awful oath.” What responsibility? How to respond? Cowper’s God asks him to be pious:

It stands like the cærulean arch we see,  
Majestic in its own simplicity.  
Inscrib’d above the portal, from afar  
Conspicuous as the brightness of a star,  
Legible only by the *light* they give,  
Stand the soul-quick’ning words-*BELIEVE* AND LIVE.

(“Truth” 26-31 [emphasis added])

Again, the light, the light of revelation, the light of enlightenment, informs him of the logos, the promise, the words of the contract, which impose the responsibility of belief on him. This is the first logos. Cowper’s interpretation that “God never meant that man should scale the heav’ns / By strides of human wisdom” is derivative, secondary. The untranslatable “BELIEVE” calls him to religion. Indeed, it is untranslatable because it is a performative utterance that orders him to believe. Who believes? Believe what or whom? We should distinguish the discourse of religion from the discourse of belief. The phrase, “I believe you,” is possibly not religious. The response to the first, a priori, and original logos forms the basis of beliefs.

The radicalness, originality, of logos is no longer in the injunction of “shall not” in the Ten Commandments, but in the calling to respond with responsibility, as Derrida points out, interpreting Abraham’s God in the



context of Judaeo-Christian tradition:

God decides to suspend the sacrificial process, he addresses Abraham who has just said: “Here I am.” “Here I am”: the first and only possible response to the call by the other, the originary moment of responsibility such as it exposes me to the singular other, the one who appeals to me. “Here I am” is the only self-presentation presumed by every form of responsibility: . . . . (*The Gift of Death* 71)

In the point that the discourse of belief partakes in the relation to other, absolute other, the discourse of religion is removable to the relation between subject and other. So, in this point, “I was a stricken deer” can be connected to the Calvinistic doctrine of God’s elect. “I was a stricken deer” is a confession, a reply to God, to prove his conversion. The response to the call by the other (God) makes the subject “I” (Cowper as a Calvinistic evangelist) possible. In the same way as the case of Abraham, Cowper could not help engendering God, more or less mechanically, perhaps because of the experience of madness. God is a kind of prosthesis. It is the prosthesis of origin. At any rate, the pursuit of theogony attains the economy of subject : the subject seeking the stability of itself, that is, the identity. Under such an economy, “I was a stricken deer” is, seeking a stability, withdrawn to the experience of madness as the reprobation, *as such*. The performativity in belief, the act of believing, engenders God *as* the constative, anachronistically. Thus, religion was, is, and will be, inherited, repeating the procedure of renewal: the renewal by performative interpretations.

### III

With the reference to madness and religion in Cowper, I have discussed,

as it were, the economy of subject, the way to stabilize himself. Now I should investigate how the economy of subject operates in front of the rural landscape, whether *The Task* is pastoral poetry or not. The way in which Cowper represents landscape suggests political aspects, such as law, *nomos*, and home economics, *oikos*. According to Cowper, domesticity, mundane life, which evangelists attach importance to, is the topos of God's performance: "All we behold is miracle" (*The Task* 6 : 132). As soon as mundane life assumes holiness, it should be a point at issue. What the relation between the secular and the sacred brings about inevitably is that human law, custom, and home economics are rhetorically consecrated as natural law. In this logic, the discourse concerning *nomos* and *oikos* can be replaceable to the one concerning *jus naturale*. When this replaceability keeps its plasticity, Cowper's eyes spread *nomos* and *oikos* as *jus naturale* on the prospect which they get from his retreat. This process is, as it were, the politicization of landscape, whether it is a political utterance or not. The sight helps to promote such a politicization.

In a sense, Cowper is a poet of sight. The observer takes a high place in order to get a prospect-view: "Now roves the eye, / And posted on this *speculative* height / Exults in its command" (*The Task* 1 : 288-90 [emphasis added]). The reduction of nature to materials of contemplation starts from the sight. The virtue of retreat is that it offers tranquillity suitable for contemplation:

Oh blest seclusion from a jarring world  
Which he thus occupied, enjoys! Retreat  
Cannot indeed to guilty man restore  
Lost innocence, or cancel follies past,  
But it has peace, and much secures the mind  
From all assaults of evil, proving still

A faithful barrier, not o'erleap'd with ease  
 By vicious custom, raging uncontroul'd  
 Abroad, and desolation public life. (*The Task* 3 : 675-83)

A “faithful barrier” of retreat makes a clear distinction between the inside and the outside. Under the security of such a barrier, the observer can panoptically get a prospect-view involving both the country life and city life. The retreat is the condition to build a panopticon. A panopticon involves the observer who commands a panoramic view, the scopophilic subject, and the control device which supervises a prospect-view systematically. A panopticon establishes and stabilizes the power relation between ruler and ruled.

Every observer is every observer. The tautology grasps a subtle position of Cowper. By retreating, Cowper does not hope to be a perfect stranger to the outside world. He wants to be an observer, but not to be an observed. Retreat gives a chance to observe without being observed. As for the virtue of retreat, the point at issue is the distance between the observer and the outside, namely the method of distancing. The distance makes it possible for the observer to build a panopticon. Indeed, the observer, distancing himself from the outside world, considers himself as a ruler:

'Tis pleasant through the loop-holes of retreat  
 To peep at such a world. To see the stir  
 Of the great Babel and not feel the crowd.  
 To hear the roar she sends through all her gates  
 At a safe distance, where the dying sound  
 Falls a soft murmur on th' uninjured ear.  
 Thus sitting and surveying thus at ease  
 The globe and its concerns, I seem advanced  
 To some secure and more than mortal height,

That lib'rates and exempts me from them all.

It turns submitted to my view, . . . .

(*The Task* 4 : 88-98)

As far as the scopophilic subject is concerned, the observation without being observed, the participation without being participated, ends up being the desire for getting power, namely the hegemony over the “jarring world”: “It turns submitted to my view.” Such a power seems to resemble the “sempiternal source / Of light divine” in principle. As the light source shed the light of revelation, the sight wields its power from “some secure and more than mortal height.” As soon as the sight catches a natural scene, nature as according to *jus naturale* enters the realm of *nomos*, *oikos*. As soon as he gets a prospect-view, at the same time, he comes to “depict nature not only as it is, but also as it might be” (Feingold 159), and “speaks from a landscape paced and measured in a verse that tries to reflect his own familiarity with the scene” (Fulford 58).

The codification of *jus naturale* by *nomos* and *oikos* often depends on the ability to establish a distance from objects, especially in order to codify properly, justly, legitimately, in the name of *jus naturale*. The distancing enables Cowper to judge and represent what comes into his view. In *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, George Berkeley discusses the importance of distancing in judging objects:

an object placed at a certain distance from the eye, to which the breadth of the pupil bears a considerable proportion, being made to approach, is seen more confusedly: and the nearer it is brought the more confused appearance it makes. . . . the greater confusion still implying the lesser distance, and the lesser confusion the greater distance of the object. (12)

The idea that the distance allows for a proper judgement, a judgement as

such, affects the power of sight in Cowper. The distancing makes the codification easier. It is at “a safe distance” that Cowper can reduce “the dying sound” to “a soft murmur.” In this way, the distancing is for Cowper not only a retreat, an escape, from the “jarring world,” but also a ruse, whether intentionally or not, in the power relation over hegemony. It can be proved by the fact that Cowper obviously enjoys, as the word “pleasant” shows, the information of the outside world.

Cowper’s retreat from the public world does not always mean his hatred toward society. “Society” is a keyword in *The Task*. Cowper frequently adheres to society, and distinguishes it from the public world in town: “true worth and virtue, . . . may perhaps thrive only there [the soil of cultivated life], / Yet not in cities oft” (*The Task* 1 : 678-81). By using the metaphor of the flower, he discusses man in society, who “is like a flow’r / Blown in its native bed” (*The Task* 4 : 659-60). In spite of his frequency of reference to society, his idea of society is quite ambiguous. However, the virtue of domesticity, according to the evangelical doctrine, seems to be indispensable for man in society. It may be proved by his objection against the society, though the word “society” is not suitable, which consists of selfish relations between men:

But man associated and leagued with man  
 By regal warrant, or self-joined by bond  
 For interest-sake, or swarming into clans  
 Beneath one head for purposes of war,  
 Like flow’rs selected from the rest, and bound  
 And bundled close to fill some crowded vase,  
 Fades rapidly, and by compression marred  
 Contracts defilement not to be endured. (*The Task* 4 : 663-70)

The selfish relation between men, according to Cowper, no longer results in society. Can the country be called society? However, society is, needless to say, not present actually, but only a possibility in the future-to-come, an ideal, because “The town has tinged the country” (*The Task* 4 : 553).

Considering his terminology concerning domesticity in *The Task*, I cannot ignore the part of *oikos* in his idea of society. The imagery of family is often embedded in his rhetoric about society, whether it is good or bad. Let us remember the rhetoric about the genealogy of vices: “Now basket up the family of plagues / That waste our vitals. . . . Then cast them closely bundled, ev’ry brat / At the right door. Profusion is its sire.” The socio-political discourse merges with the discourse of *oikos*.<sup>5</sup> Cowper regards domesticity as an ideal way of life in society: “Domestic happiness, thou only bliss / Of Paradise that has survived the fall” (*The Task* 3 : 41-42). What I would like to notice in the metonymy of domesticity is that domesticity always consists of the members of family, there is no domesticity without family. Then, family consists of members, such as father, mother, and child (ren). Meanwhile, what members of the family does society consist of? Who plays the role of father? Who plays the role of mother? Rather, I should ask how to manage *oikos*. Another word for *oikos* is order, without which one cannot maintain a family. According to the order of productivity in family, profusion-as-father gives birth to plagues-as-brat, and manages the “family of plagues.”

The productivity in family serves as a model of society-as-*oikos*. The rhetoric, explicitly or implicitly, participates in the discourse of patriarchy, in which the ideas of father-as-patriarch, mother-as-moral embodiment, and child-as-inheritor are prevalent. The point at issue is always the relation of father and son, *par excellence*, the inheritance of patriarchal right from father to son, so that profusion is a father and plagues are sons. Thus, *oikos* consists of paternal law. Cowper speaks within the discourse of patriarchy.

What is the embodiment of the patriarch in society? For Cowper, God is worthy of being the authority of father, managing *oikos*: “The Lord of all, himself through all diffused, / Sustains and is the life of all that lives” (*The Task* 6 : 221-22). Cowper calls God “One Lord, one Father” (*The Task* 6 : 784), and men “sons of God” (*The Task* 5 : 821). His idea of society-as-family, society-as-*oikos*, inevitably fabricates the relation of God and man as the one of father and son. I choose the word “*oikos*” not only in the sense of domesticity but also in a political sense, *nomos*, so I can use the word “*oiko-nomia*” in that double sense. The father should have the authority to rule the family, to form *oiko-nomia*: “One spirit . . . *Rules* universal nature” (*The Task* 6 : 238-40 [emphasis added]). Cowper’s society is metaphorically the family of sons as inheritors of the father’s authority.

Who can the “sons of God” be? Perhaps they are Christians as God’s elect. Indeed, Cowper presents the genealogy of historical inheritance from God to sons:

Newton, childlike sage!  
 Sagacious reader of the works of God,  
 And in his word sagacious. Such too thine  
 Milton, whose genius had angelic wings,  
 And fed on manna. And such thine in whom  
 Our British Themis gloried with just cause  
 Immortal Hale! For deep discernment praised  
 And sound integrity not more, than famed  
 For sanctity of manners undefiled. (*The Task* 3 : 252-60)

The enumeration of Newton, Milton, and Hale evinces the genealogy of inheritance. For Cowper, they serve as “a father-figure through whose language the ultimate father, God himself, could be propitiated” (Fulford 46). Writing the poem as a confession of religious faith, though it is implicit,

he hopes to continue in the line of the “Newton-Milton-Hale-Cowper” inheritance.

In the discourse of patriarchy, woman is often regarded as the object, which embodies the virtue, status, moral quality of its possessor. *The Task*, according to the discourse of patriarchy, also represents woman as such. Cowper substitutes the corruption of virginity for the contamination of country by town, though country is already lost for him: “the stain / Appears a spot upon a vestal’s robe, / The worse for what it soils” (*The Task* 4 : 553-55). Besides, the moral quality is reduced to femininity: “Thou [domestic happiness] art the nurse of virtue. In thine arms / *She* smiles, appearing, as in truth *she* is, / Heav’n born and destined to the skies again” (*The Task* 3 : 48-50 [emphasis added]). In the point that domesticity, family, home serves as a topos in which woman attains virtue, the discourse of patriarchy is, in other words, the discourse concerning the confinement of woman to home, woman as moral embodiment, therefore woman as object. So the reduction is often emphasized in a critical context. Describing the contamination of country, Cowper personifies its disorder as a woman: “she, / Fell Discord, arbitress of such debate” (*The Task* 4 : 481-82).

Cowper’s idea of society, namely his idea of family, consists of the triumvirate of father, mother, and son. As far as *oiko-nomia* is concerned, of course, father, or rather something paternal, comes to power. In such a patriarchy, mother, something maternal, is reduced to the embodiment of domesticity and virtue, and son, something filial, is an inheritor obedient to father. This model of patriarchy seems to correspond to the power relation I have discussed in the problems of madness, religion, and sight. In spite of the constative phrase “I was a stricken deer,” Cowper hopes to be a legitimate son of God, God’s elect, in his performative interpretation. It is the right of inheritance that he wants to get. His description of nature clearly brings out the power of sight, the identification of himself with the father.



“It turns submitted to my view” parallels the paternal power ruling sons. By describing landscape from “some secure and more than mortal height,” Cowper-as-father subdues the prospect-view-as-son. In the moment of description, or perception, he codifies landscape by means of *nomos*, *oikos*, especially patriarchy. Whenever he perceives, interprets, and describes landscape, the codification politicizes landscape in terms of *nomos*, *oikos*, patriarchy. *The Task* offers a topos at which various discourses intersect.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida points out the difficulties in Austin’s categorization of the constative and the performative:

3. Differing from the classical assertion, from the constative utterance, the performative’s referent (although the word is inappropriate here, no doubt, such is the interest of Austin’s finding) is not outside it, or in any case preceding it or before it. It does not describe something which exists outside and before language. It produces or transforms a situation, it operates; and if it can be said that a constative utterance also effectuates something and always transforms a situation, it cannot be said that this constitutes its internal structure, its manifest function or destination, as in the case of the performative. (“Signature” 321)

<sup>2</sup> William Hazlitt reads “effeminacy” in Cowper’s poetry, and comments that Cowper is “evidently more solicitous to please himself than the public” (*Lectures on the English Poets* 91).

<sup>3</sup> Vincent Newey points out the excess in the political realm. Power is necessary for kings. In the same way, liberty is necessary for their subjects. This is always to be in a double bind which seeks to be in equilibrium. The excess of either is the ruin of both. Therefore, “there were special reasons to fear such ‘excess’” (123).

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Pope relates the historical end of pastoral, the origin as being lost: “The original of Poetry is ascribed to that age which succeeded the

creation of the world: . . . the most ancient sort of poetry was probably pastoral” (23). So the pastoral is an image of Golden age. “So that we are not to describe our shepherds as shepherds at this day really are, but as they may be conceiv’d then to have been” (25).

<sup>5</sup> Vincent Newey, pointing out that the idea of nation as family derives from the context of contemporary politics, regards Cowper as a moderate Whig like Burke: “the idea of nation-as-family. . . was one of the major strands of Whig interpretation of the Settlement of 1689” (128).

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## Synopsis

The Politicization of Landscape: William Cowper's *The Task*

By Kenji Fujita

No pastoral poetry seems to be thinkable without the relation to political ideology, politics, and power relations. The phrase "politico-pastoral" gives a starting point and a *telos* of this essay simultaneously. Politics is, I think, not only ideological, contemporary, social, but also economic, anachronistic, individual. So it should be especially for the subject being in front of the pastoral landscape of the country. Based on such a premise, I focus upon politics in the relationship between the subject and the landscape. It is in the discourse about the subject that I would like to focus upon the politicized landscape, the landscape to be politicized, the way of politicization in which landscape is ruled, rather than the relation between a pastoral poem and its politico-ideological background. Poems of William Cowper are useful enough to delve into these problems, especially from the viewpoints of madness, religion, and home economics.

The problem of madness makes the identity of Cowper problematic: problematic, not because madness jeopardizes Cowper, but because it serves as a double-edged sword. That is, madness is a menace to his identity and, at the same time, an impelling force for him to be a pious evangelist. Focusing upon the process in which Cowper retroactively distances himself from madness, I find the connection between madness and his way of stabilization. Besides, religion as well as madness is indispensable for Cowper's identity. Religion gives him a chance to be one of God's elect. At a glance, religion seems to inscribe the name of God in the constative description, but God is a prosthesis of origin. This prosthesis makes Cowper devote himself to his religious faith. Thus the reference to madness and religion shows the economy of subject at work in Cowper.

The third point is the economy of subject from the viewpoints of home economics, *nomos*, and *oikos*. As far as the subject is concerned, the way in which Cowper describes landscape is political. It is proved by his rhetoric about family. Through the metaphor of family, nature as according to *jus naturale* enters the realm of *nomos*, *oikos*. This is a codification of nature by means of *oiko-nomia*, which exposes Cowper's tendency to patriarchy. By the patriarchal virtue of *oiko-nomia*, Cowper-as-father tries to rule landscape-as-son. Then, the distancing from objects and the taking of a high place make it easy for him to rule landscape. In consequence, Cowper politicizes landscape in the discourse of patriarchy, *oiko-nomia*.