Introduction

Arguments

The chief concerns of this book are eighteenth-century discourses on landscape and the nature of the authority which those discourses conferred upon their writers and readers. It will be my argument that these discourses have complex and at times conflicting ideological and political functions which criticism needs to explore if it is to understand the changing constructions of and relationships between poetic, critical, natural, and political power in the period, constructions which were instrumental in shaping a sense of national identity. First, a definition: by the term 'discourses on landscape' I shall refer not only to representation which claims simply to describe nature, but also to writing which uses the motifs and scenes of landscape-description in the course of critical and political arguments. I begin with Thomson as the first major poet to make an extended treatment of the British landscape in the post-Miltonic period, and I end with Wordsworth and Coleridge as the last to do so. But I shall not be treating their verse simply as a collection of prospect-views or picturesque scenes. Instead I shall try to put it in the contexts of contemporary debates in politics, aesthetics and criticism, to show that it was one of many efforts (with some of which it was in competition) to define the proper nature of moral and political authority for a nation whose physical and social organization was changing rapidly. And I shall suggest that we need to understand that the competition between these efforts occurred at the level of style as well as genre, so that the way in which landscape was organized by different forms of writing was less stable and harmonious than many eighteenth-century authors and some contemporary critics would have us believe. Within the polite and tasteful description of a scene in which natural (and national) order could be viewed was a struggle for authorial power that left its mark upon the description itself and on the shared taste to which the description appealed. This book will examine the different forms of that struggle for power within and between different writers on landscape in order to reveal how anxieties and tensions came to destabilize their discourse until it became a challenge to, as much as a reinforcement of, the hegemony of

gentlemanly taste. This destabilization made the work of the earlier writers studied here – Thomson, Cowper, Gilpin – available to the later – Wordsworth, Coleridge – for their explicit attack on the aesthetic and political values of gentlemen. This attack was made through landscape poetry that was itself unstable since its authors needed to gain popularity and reputation with a readership which still largely espoused the values they were criticizing. I shall not, it follows, be presenting the discourse on landscape as a progressive development in which the primitive forms of the earlier eighteenth-century writers reach sophisticated and self-conscious maturity in the works of the Romantics. On the contrary, I intend this book to provoke a reconsideration of Wordsworth and Coleridge as writers who, if they were able to make explicit what largely remains implicit in earlier landscape poetry, were nevertheless similar to their predecessors both in their vexed relationship with a public sphere over which gentlemanly values held sway and in their effort to depict in nature patterns of order on which a harmonious Britain could be founded. British nature, whether the landscaped estates of the Whig gentry, the woods of rural Buckinghamshire, the hills and valleys of the Lake District, or the wilds of Scotland toured by several of the writers studied here, had a complex and changing political significance in debates within and about the nation.

Contexts

Nature's political significance emerged clearly at the start of the eighteenth century in relation to the consolidation of the landed interest. The constitutional settlement of 1688 and the development of a system of patronage in the hands of the King's ministers, most notably Sir Robert Walpole, created what J.H. Plumb has called 'a paradise for gentlemen, for the aristocracy of birth'.[1] Power remained predominantly in the hands of the landed nobility and gentry, many of whom increased their wealth and influence by investment in commercial activities in the City and on their estates (iron, stone, coal, timber). But it was the possession of an independent income from heritable property, giving both freedom from labour and a continued stake in the country, that was seen as conferring upon the landed interest their legitimacy as legislators. Walpole himself, at the height of his power, wrote 'it can never be conceived but that a gentleman of liberal fortune and tolerable education is fitter to serve his country in parliament than a man bred to a trade, and brought up in a shop'.[2]

For such gentlemen the proper source of power and stability in the nation

[1] J.H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England 1675–1725* (London, 1967), p.187.
[2] Sir Robert Walpole, draft of a pamphlet, quoted in J.P. Kenyon, *Revolution Principles: The Politics of Party 1689–1720* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 206.

was the possession of land, and the organization of the prospect-view was an expression of their authority over the national landscape which they owned. It was also a patriotic celebration of the resultant stability given to Britain, a stability itself seen as the foundation of trading and imperial success. Through landscape-gardening, through painting, and through the descriptions of prose writers and poets, views of the landscape owned by gentlemen became representations of the legitimacy of their power and the benefits it brought the nation. Such representations were not wholly new; as James Turner has shown, since Sir Philip Sidney poets had been adapting classical forms of topographical poetry to present prospects of the British landscape.[3] But with the civil war over and with the blank verse of *Paradise Lost* as an example, eighteenth-century writers were able to rework Virgilian epic and georgic into a panegyric on the national benefits deriving from a landscape 'naturally' productive of wealth, viewed from the commanding position of the noblemen and gentlemen who owned it. Nature, in such representations, predominant in eighteenth-century culture, was a ground on which the legitimacy of gentlemanly power and taste could be tested and confirmed, above that of 'a man bred to trade' and despite particular political disputes that might occur within the landed interest. The country estates were enlarged and remodelled in the century to an unprecedented extent. As Stephen Daniels has noted, the paintings and poems that represented them did not eclipse their owners' economic and political interests; 'rather they codified these interests in terms of landscape'.[4]

Crucial to that codification was the semblance of disinterest given to the owner/viewer of the prospect by means of the appeal to taste. Through the prospect-view, the propertied classes were able to present their political dominance as confirmed by the natural scene. The ability to distinguish and possess shared standards independent of self-interest (standards of aesthetic value or taste) in agreement about the beauty and sublimity of landscape seemed not only a mark of the viewer's gentlemanliness but a criterion for the exercise of legitimate social and political power. And that ability was itself seen to depend upon the capacity of the observer to take a distant, extensive and detached view of the scene, to be above self-interest. Bishop Berkeley discussed the matter in 1712:

> It is true, he who stands close to a palace can hardly make a right judgment of the architecture and symmetry of its several parts, the nearer ever appearing disproportionably great. And if we have a mind to take a fair prospect of the order and general well-being which the inflexible laws of nature and morality derive on the world, we must, if I may say so, go out of it, and imagine ourselves to be distant spectators of all

[3] James Turner, *The Politics of Landscape: Rural Scenery and Society in English Poetry 1630–1660* (Cambridge, MA, 1979).

[4] Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 80.

that is transacted and contained in it; otherwise we are to be deceived by the too near view of the little present interests of ourselves, our friends, or our country.[5]

The ability to take a distant prospect of nature, which depended in practice upon the freedom from labour that came with land ownership (the master looking down on his domains rather than working within them), was offered as a criterion of the disinterest regarded necessary for proper government of 'ourselves, our friends, or our country'. Adam Smith made the most careful formulation of the argument in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Distinguishing between those with sufficient revenue to be men of leisure and those compelled to labour, he used metaphors of viewing to suggest the importance to the nation of the former:

> These varied occupations present an almost infinite variety of objects to the contemplation to those few, who, being attached to no particular occupation themselves, have leisure and inclination to examine the occupations of other people. The contemplation of so great a variety of objects necessarily exercises their minds in endless comparisons and combinations, and renders their understandings, in an extraordinary degree, both acute and comprehensive. Unless those few, however, happen to be placed in some very particular situations, their great abilities, though honourable to themselves, may contribute very little to the good government or happiness of their society.[6]

Representations of landscape, which offered such varied contemplation and commanding prospects at secondhand, also reproduced the detached view in that they asked to be read and seen as 'just representations of general nature' (*JW*, vol. VII, p. 61), to be judged disinterestedly as reflections of the scene rather than approved as rhetorically persuasive social or political argument. They appealed to taste and defined it as they did so as a capacity for disinterested judgement, possession of which in the aesthetic realm legitimized the exercise of authority in the nation at large.

By the end of the century the argument had become more explicitly ideological. Defending gentlemanly taste (and the landscape gardens it enjoyed) against corruption from within and attacks from the increasingly political self-representations of the 'lower orders', Humphry Repton wrote that the man of good taste

> Knows that the same principles which direct taste in the polite arts, direct the judgement in morality; in short, that a knowledge of what is good, what is bad, and what is indifferent, whether in actions, in manners, in language, in arts, or science, constitutes the basis of good taste, and marks the distinction between the higher ranks of polished society, and the inferior orders of mankind, whose daily labours allow no

[5] *Passive Obedience*, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. T.E. Jessop, 9 vols. (London, 1948–57), vol. VI, pp. 32–3.
[6] *The Wealth of Nations* (Oxford, 1976), bk. v, ch. i, fol. 51.

leisure for other enjoyments than those of mere sensual, individual, and personal gratification.

And he continued by quoting Kett's *Elements of General Knowledge* to show that the possession of extensive views depended upon the possession of taste, which in turn depended upon freedom from labour: 'the department of taste is consequently confined to persons enlightened by education and conversant with the world, whose views of nature, of art, and of mankind, are enlarged and elevated by an extensive range of observation'.[7] Aesthetic criticism itself, as well as landscape gardening, helped to set out the ideological and social importance of such observation. Such criticism not only defined the rôle of taste but often discussed the representation of landscape directly (as when Johnson discussed Thomson's poetry). William Enfield, writing of artistic representations of landscape, declared

> whatever is grand or beautiful in nature; whatever is noble, lovely, or singular, in character; whatever is surprising or affecting in situation; is by the magic power of genius brought at pleasure into view, in the manner best adapted to excite correspondent emotions. A rich field of elegant pleasure is hereby laid open before the reader who is possessed of a true taste for polite literature, which distinguishes him from the vulgar.[8]

Enfield's vocabulary reveals the exclusive circularity of the languages of criticism and art at this historical juncture: he uses metaphors drawn from the observation of landscape to describe the aesthetic, moral and social distinction conferred upon the reader by art which is itself an observation of nature. For Enfield, then, a polite education in aesthetics is a matter of acquiring a critical vocabulary which reproduces, rather than challenges, that of the art it examines. Criticism comes to share the ideological function of an art that serves the interests, as it views the estates, of the leisured landed classes – as Sir Joshua Reynolds put it: 'a hundred thousand near-sighted men ... that see only what is just before them, make no equivalent to one man whose view extends to the whole horizon around him'.[9]

The authority conferred by the prospect-view was to greater and lesser degrees always precarious. The representation of landscape was never simply a disguised ideology presenting gentlemanly aesthetic judgement as naturally, and by implication socially and politically, valid. It was also a discourse in which that judgement could be redefined, challenged and even undermined – as it was in much of the work of Johnson and Wordsworth that deliberately confronts the contemporary aesthetic conventions. For Thomson, Cowper and Coleridge landscape-description was, I shall suggest, also a means of making interventions in current political debates. Each of these writers

[7] Humphry Repton, *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (London, 1803), p.11.
[8] William Enfield, 'On Reading Works of Taste', in *The Speaker* (London, 1799), p. xxxiii.
[9] In F.W. Hilles (ed.), *Portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London, 1952), p.129.

explicitly politicizes natural scenes in order to gain authority for his arguments about the government of the nation. Often, I shall suggest, such scenes stand in conflict with the apparently unpolitical representation of natural power that occurs elsewhere in the text, leaving it divided as the readership detects the writer imposing a partisan political argument on the landscape as well as deriving a moral pattern from it. Explicitly political scenes threaten to undermine the hidden politics of apparently purely natural scenes by suggesting that landscape-description is not an observation of a natural order but an imposition of a party line. Such texts are, as a result, indeterminate, having both an apparent reinforcement of gentlemanly authority and a destabilization of it encoded within them. As such they should serve to remind us that forms as varied and complex as these discourses on landscape were never simply means to perpetuate an ideology, but constituted a place in which ideologies were proposed and contested. They formed part of the debates by which a nation defined itself, challenged its definitions and changed.

In examining the part which these discourses played in these debates I shall place poetry, aesthetic theory, literary criticism and the prose tour narrative in the context of contemporary politics. In particular, I shall be concerned with the arguments made repeatedly through the century and developed by Wordsworth and Coleridge as young radicals, that the independence and disinterest on which depended the gentry's and nobility's legitimacy as the people's representatives in parliament was being undermined. As early as 1709 Sir John Pakington had articulated the fears of Tory squires when he spoke of the danger of 'the moneyed and military men becoming lords of us who have the lands'.[10] During the ascendancy of Walpole (1721–42) such fears were greatly increased as a system of placemen, pensioners and patronage was perfected, producing in parliament large numbers of men who were indebted to the Crown and ministry for their own, their family's and their friends' income and status. Independent country gentlemen, of both Tory and Whig leanings, felt that parliament, a necessary counterweight in the constitutional balance against arbitrary rule by Court and/or army, was being compromised. Whilst Walpole was still able to retain the support of many of these backbench MPs by playing on their fears of aiding, or appearing to aid, disloyal Jacobitism, he was increasingly opposed by members of the landed interest who felt that it was being corrupted from within by the blandishments of pay and patronage offered by him. By the mid-1730s the necessary disinterest of the landed gentry in parliament was seen to have been threatened by corruption, and an opposition emerged which sought to replace Walpole with a ministry defined neither by its use of

[10] Quoted in Geoffrey Holmes, 'The Achievement of Stability: the Social Context of Politics from the 1680s to the Age of Walpole', in John Cannon (ed.), *The Whig Ascendancy: Colloquies on Hanoverian England* (London, 1981), pp. 1–22 (p.18).

corrupt means nor by its party nature. The 'Patriot' group, assembled around Bolingbroke, Chesterfield and Lyttelton, attempted to appeal beyond the Tory/Whig denominations to the gentry's loyalty to the nation as a whole. The nation was to be safeguarded by a parliament of disinterested and patriotic gentlemen free from corrupt links to the ministry and Court.

The 'Country' ideology of the Patriot opposition has been the subject of much scrutiny by historians of the period. I shall be examining two of the aspects revealed by that scrutiny in the course of this book. First, following the arguments made by J.G.A. Pocock and the modifications made of them by John Brewer and by Isaac Kramnick, I shall suggest that Country ideology, and the seventeenth-century Commonwealthsman arguments that it adapted, continued to shape opposition to the power of ministry and Court until the end of the century – that it, as much as rationalist and natural rights arguments, shaped radical thought in the 1790s.[11] Coleridge and Wordsworth were, as the Patriots had done before them, modifying a tradition of anti-monarchical radicalism found in Harrington and Algernon Sidney – a modification which was itself a recognized motif of eighteenth-century radicalism. This tradition emphasized the inherent danger to liberty stemming from the natural tendency towards corruption. Such danger could only be averted by a balanced constitution, in which the tendency of each power group to despotism was checked by the others. In Britain this meant opposition to a standing army, to arbitrary monarchy, to the manipulation of parliament by Court and ministry through bribery, placemen and pensions. An independent parliament, a popular militia and regular elections were necessary checks, as was a restraint on the financial interests of the City. The Roman republic and Hebrew commonwealth were idealized by contrast with Walpole's Britain.

The second aspect to be examined concerns the strain which Country ideology revealed at the heart of the hegemony of the landed interest. Chesterfield claimed that the Patriots stood for loyal gentlemen as a whole, men who, valuing independence against the encroachments of ministry and monarch, were preservers of British liberty. Yet this claim, and the very existence of the Patriot opposition, emerged from a division in the landed interest. In face of Walpole's continued majorities in the Commons, obtained with the votes (votes bought and freely given) of backbench Country gentlemen, Chesterfield could not simply speak for all the landed indepen-

[11] See J.G.A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (London, 1972), pp. 125–33 and *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 257–61. See also Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge, MA, 1959). Pocock's reading of all opposition in the eighteenth-century as essentially 'Country' in its Commonwealthsman neo-classical republicanism has been modified by John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 250–63 and Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca and London, 1990), pp. 164–97.

dents against the corruption of the Court. His claims seemed to reveal a gentry and nobility deeply split – the argument that on the basis of the disinterested views given them by land ownership they could discern the best interests of the whole nation was threatened by its appearance in partisan campaigns against Walpole and his supporters. These disinterested and extensive views appeared too shaped by party politics for the nation's best interests to be agreed upon or mutually discerned. And furthermore, the Patriots seemed to many to be appealing to the virtues of disinterest for reasons of self-interest – from their own desire to supplant Walpole and enjoy power.

The results of these splits and tensions on the representation of landscape were far-reaching. They were evident in the magnates' organization of their estates. Walpole's own improvements to his house and lands at Houghton were funded by the diversion of public money: to Harley in 1732 they epitomized the tainting of gentlemanly values by financial corruption, showing 'very great expense without either judgement or taste'.[12] Cobham, one of Walpole's opponents, included a headless statue of him in the ruinous 'Temple of Modern Virtue' built in his gardens at Stowe. The representation of landscape had become a means of symbolizing a ruling class divided in its view of the proper scope and nature of its power – in Cobham's hands a means of criticizing a resultant decline in moral and imperial authority. For Thomson, as a poet patronized by the Patriots in the 1730s and 1740s, landscape poetry ceased to represent an uncontroversial ground of liberty in which a providentially arranged natural order could be observed at leisure, thus perpetuating the taste and disinterest by which the gentry might reproduce that liberty and independence in wise government. It became instead a means of making particular political arguments: the freely owned land upon which taste might be exercised was shown as falling prey to invasion and tyranny. Cowper was influenced by Thomson's verse and was himself an independent Whig. Suffering a mental breakdown at the prospect of public office he retired from London to a country retreat, whence he perpetuated this Country treatment of England's fields. He used Virgil's Roman exile as a model for a poetry that criticized Court from the country. But in arguing that the country was itself subject to the self-serving corruption of a newly commercial gentry, he developed Thomson's critique of the extension of Court patronage over the land as a whole. Johnson's Tory idealization of the vanishing independence of the Scottish clans and, later, Uvedale Price's, Humphry Repton's and William Gilpin's rural paternalism can all be seen too as critiques from supporters of the landed gentry of its corruption from within by financial self-interest.

Critiques of this kind could only be made at a cost – the critic had to bear

[12] Quoted in Nigel Everett, *The Tory View of Landscape* (New Haven and London, 1994), p. 47.

the tension of having been seen to abandon the sustaining convention that tasteful observation of landscape could speak uncontroversially for a united British nature properly represented by the gentry for the nation. Later politicians accepted that cost as the price of retaining integrity in face of a corrupt parliament, in a way Bolingbroke and Chesterfield did not. As Charles James Fox began to think of secession from a House of Commons dominated by the alliance of Pitt and George III, he quoted Cowper's conscious choice of a position of marginality, longing 'for a lodge in some vast Wilderness'.[13] Fox had learnt from Cowper that gentlemanly independence could only be preserved by withdrawal from arenas in which all opposition, however principled, was construed as self-interested. He was able from his rural retreat (as Cowper also was) to generate a powerful critique of the corruption of gentlemanly independence. He had, however, no arena other than parliament in which the power of a disinterested landed interest could be revived. A meeting of 4 June 1793 suggests the value still placed by his supporters on this disinterestedness: they raised money to pay Fox's debts, arguing that 'it deeply concerns and may effectually promote the service as well as the Honour of the Nation that the example of disinterestedness held out to the future by Mr F–'s publick conduct, should not descend to posterity unaccompanied by some evidence of the general impression it has made & the sense which His Country entertains of it'.[14] That disinterestedness, made possible by the subscriptions which ensured Fox did not need place or pension, was itself seen more cynically by the increasingly articulate radicals who sought the reform of a parliament of landed gentry. Francis Place later saw Fox's meetings with such radicals as an insincere attempt to win support enough from a new constituency to get himself a place in power again. Cowper had been able to persuade a readership of his continued disinterest by an uncompromising rejection of corrupting influences which left him, however, anxiously and vulnerably presenting views of a shrinking rural refuge in which liberty and independence might still be observed. Fox, a politician rather than a poet, was neither content with the cold comforts of so isolated an integrity nor able to make common cause with radicals who campaigned outside parliament for representation to be open to other classes than the traditional ruling elite. He returned to the Commons in 1801.

By 1801 the pressure upon the values and authority of the landed interest was seen to have intensified, as a result both of the increasing commercialization of the gentry and of the radicals' campaigns for reform. I shall be reading the debate about the picturesque that raged at this time in the context of this pressure, suggesting that the Country ideology of independent Whigs was redefined by it, as were Cowper's vision of landscape and the prose tour narrative. The picturesque responded also to the changing

[13] *The Task*, bk II, line 1 quoted in L.G. Mitchell, *Charles James Fox* (Oxford, 1992), p.132.
[14] Philip Francis, quoted in Mitchell, *Charles James Fox*, p.105.

relations between the landowner, his tenants and the labourers on the land. As enclosure, improvement and more commercial estate management replaced a more traditional paternalist authority, those wishing to preserve that authority idealized the old-fashioned squire. And they tried to compensate for his disappearance by institutionalizing the watchful and disinterested view he had taken of his lands and those who lived on them. What had been presented as an attribute of the gentleman essential for a government protective of national liberty, was now seen, in the work of Thomas Gilbert, as a requirement of committees convened to oversee the potentially rebellious poor:

> The district committee, standing thus upon a vantage-ground, from whence they may ascertain, at one view, the necessities of the whole district, are the proper persons to pronounce what sum of money is requisite for carrying on the maintenance and employment of the poor.[15]

This argument shows the disinterested and commanding view available to gentlemen as no longer either purely aesthetic or an emblem of their personal paternal authority over their estate. The prospect-view is instead made a justification of an official and institutionalized supervision, by which the poor are as much controlled as relieved, a justification which shaped the presentation, visible in Repton, Malthus and Bentham, of workhouse and prison as models of paternal superintendence.

For writers less uncompromising in their country independence than Cowper the representation of landscape involved anxieties that their own authority would be undermined by their use of poetry for less worthy motives than disinterested appeals to taste. This anxiety took the form of vexed relationships with patrons and with the market. These relationships, difficult for the majority of the writers studied here, will be a recurrent theme of my discussion. Smith had argued that it was the leisured man's freedom from labour that gave him the opportunity for varied contemplation. But the disinterested and extensive views of a gentleman were, in the cases of the writers who represented them, endangered both if they were labourers for the market, and if they were responsible to a patron. In the former case, as Wordsworth and Coleridge found, manly independence of view could be compromised by the self-interested need to conform, for money and fame, to fashionable taste. In the latter, independence was threatened by the need, for the sake of continued support, to conform to the patron's view. What might be accepted as a disinterested view if held by Chesterfield might, as Thomson found, seem self-interested and insincere if espoused in the hope of patronage. This difficulty was exacerbated in Thomson's case since Chesterfield's appeal beyond party divisions to patriotism was seen by some as self-serving. The

[15] Thomas Gilbert, *Considerations on the Bills for the Better Relief and Employment of the Poor* (London, 1787), p. 30.