PERFECTION FRAMED: A VIEW OF THOMSON'S *THE SEASONS*

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Between 1730 and 1732, the Scottish poet James Thomson traveled in France and Italy with Charles Talbot, the dilletante son of the future Lord Chancellor of England. Despite finding the Grand Tour a bore, Thomson was struck by "scenes of human misery" on the Continent.[1] Afraid that foreigners might so conceive Britain, he expanded his great poem *The Seasons* into an encomium on a country where "wealth and commerce lift the golden head,/ And o'er our labours liberty and law/ Impartial watch, the wonder of the world."[2] Published in 1746, *The Seasons,* which influenced both Cowper and Wordsworth, elaborates less on the mechanics of the universe or the secrets of Nature than on Britain as "perfection framed".

The technique of framing a scene was in vogue during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was 'de rigueur' for those without a talent for drawing to carry a Claude-Glass. This plano-convex mirror of four or so inches in diameter enabled the viewer to stand with his back to a scene and frame the whole prospect in a tiny picture. The perimeters of a pool are the frames in *Summer*:

> Cheered by the milder beams, the sprightly youth
> Speeds to the well-known pool, whose crystal depth
> A sandy bottom shows. A while he stands
> Gazing the inverted landscape, half-afraid
> To meditate the blue profound below;
> Then plunges headlong down the circling flood.

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[1] Letter to the Countess of Hertford, dated October 10, 1731. Quoted by A.D. McKillop in "The Background of Thomson's *Liberty*," *Rice Institute Pamphlet*, No. 38 (July, 1951) p. 24.

[2] All citations are to *The Seasons and The Castle of Indolence*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: 1972).

With an upside-down scene already reflected in the water, the boy breaks the surface and alters irrevocably the original composition. The "pool" has become a metaphor for the Claude-Glass, while the poet, whose muse allows an optical manipulation of the landscape, has become the "youth". Such license is Thomson's prerogative as the Britain of the poem is perfected with both variety and intricacy.

The introduction of figures into the landscape is the symbol of natural harmony in a God-created world. Countess or shepherd, such figures demonstrate an active and peaceful co-existence with the divine order of things. In this, Thomson differed from the stylized landscapes of Claude and Rosa who framed their respective worlds in lifeless picturesques. Whatever the picture framed in Thomson's Britain, there is life or evidence of man's enthusiastic activity. Only occasionally does the poet intrude on his own landscape. When he does, it is as a "favoured soul," an ominiscient guardian determined to protect Nature by keeping from its "recess each vagrant foot/ And each licentious eye." Seen with the "sacred eye/ Of faithful love", Nature harmonizes the poet's heart and empowers him to bring that "harmony to others." This resolution, which undoubtedly influenced the early books of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, is one of the dominant themes in *The Seasons*.

"From the lower to the higher," in accordance with the Chain of Being, Thomson begins his framing of Britain in Virgilian style:

> Joyous the impatient husbandman perceives
> Relenting Nature, and his lusty steers
> Drives from their stalls to where the well-used plough
> Lies in the furrow loosened from the frost.
> There, unrefusing, to the harnessed yoke
> They lend their shoulder, and begin their toil,
> Cheered by their simple song and soaring lark.
> Meanwhile incumbent o'er the shining share
> The master leans, removes the obstructing clay,
> Winds the whole work, and sidelong lays the glebe.

In this scene, the reader is asked to accept the willing co-operation of all things: a working harmony between man and

Nature. The farmer gives order to his fields and exemplifies his industriousness by working as hard as his animals. In this, and in the sheep-shearing picturesque in *Summer*, man is the methodizer of Nature: he institutes the "social feeling," the necessary "mingling" between the two.

This co-existence is complemented aesthetically in the ordering of "the finished garden" and in the prospect of Amanda in "fair profusion." The former is a composition in which the perspective is precisely measured to the word-painting that emerges:

> At length the finished garden to the view
> Its vistas opens and its alleys green.
> Snatched through the verdant maze, the hurried eye
> Distracted wanders; now the bowery walk
> Of covert close, where scarce a speck of day
> Falls on the lengthened gloom, protracted sweeps;
> Now meets the bending sky, the river now
> Dimpling along, the breezy ruffled lake,
> The forest darkening round, the glittering spire,
> The etherial mountain, and the distant main.

From vista to sea-shore, Thomson's picture is one of deliberate symmetry in which man's presence is evident. The prospect is alive because man has consciously designed such a scene to please the eye. Similarly, Amanda's presence in the same garden is framed with florid enthusiasm, and the reader is drawn into the picture at the poet's invitation:

> Long let us walk
> Where the breeze blows from yon extended field
> Of blossomed beans. Arabia cannot boast
> A fuller gale of joy than liberal thence
> Breathes through the sense, and takes the ravished soul.
> Nor is the mead unworthy of thy foot,
> Full of fresh verdure and unnumbered flowers,
> The negligence of Nature wide and wild,
> Where, undisguised by mimic art, she spreads
> Unbounded beauty to the roving eye.

While parts of *The Seasons* are conventional descriptions of what the Scottish rhetorician Hugh Blair called "impression[s] of sublimity," the matter of Britain is always

in place.[3] In the descriptions of Stowe, Eastbury, and Hagley Park, Thomson, like Pope before him, saw true order in variety. These three country houses were owned by enlightened Whigs whose views, Thomson believed, enhanced Britain's greatness.

Stowe, Lord Cobham's country home in Buckinghamshire, was a "fair majestic paradise" in which Vanburgh and Kent had sought "the purest truth/ Of Nature" by attempting a pre-lapsarian garden. Eastbury, with its house and gardens designed by Vanburgh, was the Dorset estate of George Bubb Doddington. It was "a boundless prospect - yonder shagged with wood/ Here rich with harvest, and there white with flocks." Hagley Park, Lord Lyttelton's "British Tempe" in Worcestershire, was visited by Thomson in 1743, shortly before he took up the sinecure of the Surveyor-Generalship of the Leeward Islands:

> There along the dale
> With woods o'erhung, and shagged with mossy rocks
> Whence on each hand the gushing waters play,
> And down the rough cascade white-dashing fall
> Or gleam in lengthened vista through the trees,
> You silent steal; or sit beneath the shade
> Of solemn oaks, that tuft the swelling mounts
> Thrown graceful round by Nature's careless hand,
> And pensive listen to the various voice
> Of rural peace -

Evident in the 'beau désordre' of Hagley Park is the designing hand of man. The prospect is carefully composed and presented as foreground (the Hall), middle-distance (hills, fields, villages, heathland), and background (the Black Mountains of Wales):

> Meantime you gain the height, and from whose fair brow
> The bursting prospect spreads immense around;
> And, snatched o'er hill and dale, and wood and lawn,
> And verdant field, and darkening heath between,
> And villages embosomed soft in trees,
> And spiry towns by surging columns marked
> Of household smoke, your eye excursive roams-

[3] *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal* (London: 1763), p. 24.

> Of household smoke, your eye excursive roams-
> Wide-stretching from the Hall in whose kind haunt
> The hospitable Genius lingers still,
> To where the broken landscape, by degrees
> Ascending, roughens into rigid hills
> O'er which the Cambrian mountains, like far clouds
> That skirt the blue horizon, dusky rise.

Thomson's frame is not complete, however, without the placing of Lyttelton and his new bride Lucy Fortesque in a prospect of "rough cascade" and "rural peace", their souls "attuned" to Nature, to "Britannia's weal," and to "the present Deity" of "a happy world."

Since Thomson's poem is concerned with ordering Britain into a visual synthesis, a "full perfection to the astonished eye," he was obliged to focus that vision under the deistic dome of a "varied God." First, however, the poet must experience a reverie similar to Wordsworth's on Snowden. While the route to Richmond Hill has been a piecing together of different experiences and sensations, the "eminence"[4] that Thomson receives on the top allows his "raptured eye" to focus London and "the matchless vale of Thames" into one "boundless landscape." Unlike a Claude picturesque in which the scene is often brush-stroked into hazy grey, Thomson's vision magnifies into

> Happy Britannia! where the Queen of Arts,
> Inspiring vigour, Liberty, abroad
> Walks unconfined even to thy farthest cots,
> And scatters plenty with unsparing hand.
> Rich is thy soil, and merciful thy clime;
> Thy streams unfailing in the Summer's drought;
> Unmatched thy guardian oaks; thy valleys float
> With golden waves; and on thy mountain flocks
> Bleat numberless; while, roving round their sides,
> Bellow the blackening herds in lusty droves.
> Beneath, thy meadows glow, and rise unquelled
> Against the mower's scythe. On every hand
> Thy villas shine. Thy country teems with wealth;
> And Property assures it to the swain,
> Pleased and unwearied in his guardian toil.

4 Wordsworth's word. *The Prelude*, (1805-6), III, 170.

His eye "exalting" from the garden of England to the city of London, Thomson eulogises the "joy" of urban labor. Focusing "even Drudgery himself" into the perfect circle of his metaphorical Claude-Glass, he expands the view so that the "Power of Cultivation" can see "the wonders of his toil." Gazing intently down the Thames with the same enthusiastic pleasure that the critic John Dennis brought to an object that aroused his wonder, Thomson praises Britain's "generous youth" on imperial duty overseas in a panegyric worthy of Pliny. Finally, in a direct address to God, in "whose almighty nod the scale/ Of empire rises, or alternate falls," Thomson prays that his "Island of bliss" be accorded "the saving Virtues" of peace, love, charity, truth, dignity, courage, temperance, chastity, industry, activity, and zeal.

With the virtues assured, Thomson is then able to compose Britain beneath the sheltering protection of a God whose benevolence is behind "every form of cultivated life." It is God's "poweful language" and "unremitting energy" which "pervades/ Adjusts, sustains, and agitates the whole." Consequently, it seems appropiate that if birds are protected by "their domes. . . in artful fabric laid" and bees are safe within their "still-heaving hive," then the British should live safely beneath "the lighted dome" of God. Similarly, it is significant that Agriculture, Commerce, and Industry have raised "the pillared dome magnific" so that "British thunder" can pour out her "glittering stores" beneath that "ample roof."

Thomson's "calm, wide survey," with its Kantian implications of "endless growth and infinite ascent" was intended "to scan the moral world" to compose a picture of Britain in which "the great eternal scheme,/ Involving all" was arranged in "a perfect whole." His seminal concern in *The Seasons* was not Newtonian explanation or the intellectual enquiries of the Royal Society, still pools or classical landscapes, imaginary banditti or frozen figures in the Arctic ice, but with the "pictured life" in which all was human activity and wonder, in which "one unbounded Spring encircle[d] all," in which Britain was perfection framed.