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James Thomson *The Seasons* "Summer"

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The history of James Thomson's *The Seasons* is one that has been a bit romanticized over the years. As a young Scottish poet, Thomson came to London not with a copy of "Winter" in his pocket, but merely the idea for a religious-didactic poem about nature and the goal of gaining a patron. Although he did not make much money from this first poem, it was well received and soon the next three seasons followed. All four poems focus on the sensuous description of the seasons' effect on a rural landscape, some reflection on philosophy and morality, and Newtonian science in blank verse. In the poem "Summer," and in the minds of many readers, the main symbol of this season is the Sun. In this poem the Sun is followed during its migration through the sky, honored in a Hymn about its powers and compared to the glory of Philosophy. In "Summer," Thomson presents some of his most powerful praises of Newton's natural science in conjunction with a personification of nature to present a powerful portrayal of the Sun and all that it symbolizes.

After the introduction of the subject and the invocation, the subject of the poetic verse is the Sun. The first image is the dawn of day with light beginning to come over the horizon, and this is followed by a description of the beauty of "Sun-rising." In this beginning part of the poem, the Sun is getting its first descriptions as the "powerful King of Day" (81). The representation of the Sun as a powerful being, an immortal or royalty, is a theme that is continued throughout Thomson's piece. After this reference there is a personification of the landscape becoming glad at the appearance of the Sun, and a portrayal of light as being "Of all material beings first, and best!" (91). Through this personification Thomson establishes a sensuous description of nature. Although short,

the first section of the poem associates the Sun with the mythical Sun god, recognized by Grecian or Roman mythology as a powerful figure.

The second excerpt, the “Hymn to the Sun” contains some of the most powerful scientific themes of the poem. In the description of the gravitational power and the power of over the seasons and life, the commanding effect that Newtonian science had on Thomson is apparent. In the lines “Tis by thy secret, strong, attractive force/ As with a chain indissoluble bound/ Thy system rolls entire” (97-99), a clear reference is made to Newton’s work on the gravitation of natural bodies. In the next paragraph the lines, “Without whose quickening glance their cumbrous orbs/ Were brute unlovely mass, inert and dead/ And not, as now, the green abodes of life!” (105-107) show the power that the Sun has to create life on the Earth. Following this paragraph Thomson writes “The vegetable world is also thine/ Parent of Seasons!” (112-113). Here the Sun is revered as holding power over all of the seasons, the subject of these series of poems, the Summer being the season where it holds the most power. Although the Sun features as a symbol many times in this particular poem, in the few lines that form the “Hymn to the Sun” Thomson presents scientific observations about the universal powers of the Sun, the energy and force it has to control the planets. This section, following directly after the “Sunrise,” introduces the duality between the universal and the personalized interpretations of the Sun, a feature that serves to highlight the power of each individually and as a whole.

The next section that focuses intently on the Sun is the section about “Noonday,” where the power of the Sun’s heat is emphasized. In the opening lines of this section the

power and heat of the Sun are compared to a heavy rain of fire beating down upon the countryside:

‘Tis raging noon; and, vertical, the sun
Darts on the head direct his forceful rays.
O'er heaven and earth, far as the ranging eye
Can sweep, a dazzling deluge reigns; and all
From pole to pole is undistinguish'd blaze. (432-436)

In this section a new physical power of the Sun is called to attention, the heat, one that is more easily realized by even the basest living things, and difficult to escape in the summer months. There is some escape from the heat attempted, but even after the narrator throws himself into the “covert of the grove,” (450) he exclaims, “All-conquering Heat, oh intermit thy wrath!” (451), for it is inescapable. The heating power of the Sun in this excerpt is a physical property that ties the universal, the warming of the planet and production of seasons and storms, and the personal, since each living thing feels this power during the hot summer months.

In the last section, though it is the shortest, the power of the Sun again is addressed in a symbolic depiction. In this section there is very little emphasis on the physical science described earlier, but there is again reference to the Sun as the god of the sky, being treated with god-like honors and coming to rest among the goddess of the sea and nymphs. At Sunset, “The shifting clouds/ Assembled gay, a richly gorgeous train/ In all their pomp attend his setting throne” (1620-1622); and as he descends he is welcomed “As if his weary chariot sought the bowers/ Of Amphitritè, and her tending nymphs” (1624-1625). This “Sunset” section, richly descriptive poetry is combined with brevity of lines and a godly subject. As this section is very similar to the “Sunrise” both images act

to bookend the main action of the poem, and provide a balance in this scientific poem to the strict observations of nature that permeate.

The scientific aspect of the Sun is presented most clearly in the “Hymn to the Sun” where the physical and universal powers are given their most solid description and the gravitational and energetic powers are discussed. In “Hymn to the Sun” and “Noonday” the Sun is referenced in a form not related to mythology, idealized or personified. When the Sun is referenced as the Sun god, it supports the idea of the Sun as a “powerful” figure, but in a different form than the scientific observation. Throughout the poem, Thomson presents a duality, on one side an abstract and universal scientific world that relates most to Newton’s work in the *Principia* and on the other a personalized, personified and sensuous world that relates to Newton’s work in the *Optics*. This duality is preserved in the juxtaposition of the scientific and mythical presentations of the Sun. Though religion is never explicitly addressed, the presentation of a god-like figure in the Sun that presides over the natural world presents the psychosociological ideal - that the order and harmony of nature is something that is a result of the order and harmony of God’s work, an idea that was a common thread in scientific poetry admiring Newton. It is clear that this poem is Thomson’s strong bid to be placed as the leader of natural poetry by balancing a praise and internalization of the science and reason of Newton with an imaginative description of nature’s daily miracles.

The power of the Sun rules over the summer and gives the Sun its god-like stature in the poem. At the beginning the Sun’s power is presented in both a mythical sense and the scientific sense; the Sun is the power that holds the solar system together, sustains life on Earth and changes the seasons. In the middle the power of the Sun controls the

temperature and comfort of all living things on the planet, from which there is little escape. At the end of the poem the mythical power of the Sun is again emphasized, and after “Sunset” a new power is addressed that can be symbolized by the powers of the Sun, but acts on man through his powers of reason.

The poem ends with “Praise of Philosophy.” In this section the powerful Sun is tied with the most important power of human reason. In this passage philosophy is described with many of the same phrases and praised with many of the same metaphors that have been used to portray the Sun for the majority of the poem:

With thee, serene Philosophy, with thee,
And thy bright garland, let me crown my song!
Effusive source of evidence, and truth!
A lustre shedding o'er the ennobled mind,
Stronger than summer-noon; and pure as that,
Whose mild vibrations soothe the parted soul,
New to the dawning of celestial day. (1729-1735)

In this last section of the poem, the correlation is made between the Sun and philosophy. The Sun is the light of the world – it provides the power to keep things in order within the solar system and on the Earth. Philosophy is the light of civilization, it provides order to the human race and without it humanity would be have no guidance in the darkness. Further, as beings endowed with a power that sets them apart from the rest of living things, it is our duty to keep some semblance of balance and harmony both internalized and in the world at large.

Throughout the poem, the various powers of the Sun are addressed and used to emphasize of the scientific and literary aspects of the poem. As it is the scientific poet’s role to balance reason and imagination, observations and descriptions of the Sun in “Summer” can be divided between those that treat the Sun as a personified god-like

figure and those that treat it as a universal power affecting all. Both descriptions focus on the Sun as a powerful figure in the physical world. This poem also asserts that Philosophy is a powerful human tool to set us apart from other animals and draws a very strong analogy at the end of the poem between the power that philosophy gives to man and the power that the Sun exerts over the Earth. In this masterful work by Thomson, he has proven himself to be a worthy advocate of Newton's science as well as an impressive scientific poet in his own right.

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