

THE SEASONS

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The Seasons by James Thomson

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JAMES THOMSON

THE SEASONS

THE
SEASONS BY THOMSON.



J. Wood, R.A. del.

Chubb's sc.

Breath the year still long over the rosy hour,
1820.

LONDON:
PUBLISHED BY JOHN SMITH.
1820.

THE
S E A S O N S.

BY

JAMES THOMSON.



LONDON:
PRINTED FOR JOHN SHARPE,
DUKE STREET, PICCADILLY;
BY CHARLES WHITTINGHAM, CHISWICK.

M DCCC XXIV.

CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS.

WHEN the Author of the SEASONS came to London in pursuit of patronage and fame, his first want, as his biographer informs us, was a pair of shoes. "For the supply of all his necessities, his whole fund was his WINTER, which for a time could find no purchaser; till, at last, Mr. Millar, a bookseller in the Strand, was persuaded to buy it at a low price; and this low price he had for some time reason to regret." We are not informed what estimate Thomson himself had formed of this production: whether with self-supported confidence he anticipated the reception it would eventually meet with from the public, or whether he was satisfied to dispose of his unproductive treasure for a sum that provided for the wants of the moment—as he would have disposed of a precious stone of uncertain value to the first lapidary who would set a price upon it. In his most sanguine and ambitious moments he could not have ventured to hope, that the poem would ultimately not only amply reward its purchaser, but take its rank among productions which are considered as eras in our literature, and become identified with the language.

The 'SEASONS' is one of those rare and original productions, in which, at distant intervals in the progress of literature, genius appears to burst forth in distinct individuality of character, in spite, it may

be, of the bad taste or prevailing mediocrity of the period. There is in the human frame a perfect but indefinable correspondence, which extends to every joint, to the very hair of the head: the artificial violation of this harmony is immediately perceptible. Something of this kind exists with respect to the productions of real genius. As models, they will be found exceedingly defective. They would mislead, as much as they defy imitation. But there is in them, as a whole, a certain homogeneousness of expression, which rescues even their faults from impropriety. They please or affect us, not so much by particular qualities of excellence as by the force of character diffused through the production, and by that Promethean power which the poet appears to possess of making his words glow and breathe with instinctive life. Milton and Thomson, although immeasurably dissimilar, may yet be adduced as two remarkable instances of poets whose chief works have attained an almost equal degree of popularity, and have produced a powerful effect on our literature; and yet, in point of style and diction, they elude all attempts at successful imitation: the one, by a severe majesty of manner, which ill befits an inferior subject or the productions of an inferior mind; the other, the Johnson of poetry, has a gait of natural pomp, which it is mimicry to adopt; the moment it appears to be artificial it becomes ridiculous.

The causes which have contributed to the universal popularity of this original poem are, we do not scru-

ple to say, not more its merits than its Subject and its Defects. How much is due to the Subject might be presumed from the circumstance, that this alone of Thomson's poems has maintained itself in public favour, although, in the opinion of competent critics, it is not his best. Few titles have been found less attractive than "The Poetical Works of James Thomson," at the very time that his SEASONS are circulating in every form the press can give them. Dr. Johnson's sentence upon LIBERTY and BRITANNIA has never been reversed (for once, as a critic, he was just): and even the castle of Indolence is more praised than read. Thomson's subject was a happy one; but what rendered it particularly so, was, that when he wrote, it was a subject altogether open to a poet who wished to succeed by novelty. Spenser was obsolete; Milton had been generally neglected; Addison having then only recently done himself the honour of introducing the *Paradise Lost* to the notice of the public. With these great exceptions, there existed little descriptive poetry worthy of the name. The principal use which had been made of natural scenery was, as an eternal storehouse of similes for the inditers of heroics, or of love elegies and madrigals. The absurdities of many of our town-bred or scholastic verse-men, in what then passed for descriptive poetry, form a standing subject of ridicule. In vain shall we look among the works of the best of our poets, from the time of Elizabeth to this period, for any traces of accurate observation, or genuine feeling

in reference to the beauties of Nature. "From Dryden to Thomson," a very competent authority has remarked, "there is scarcely a rural image drawn from life to be found in any of the English poets except Gay." Pope, who in his Windsor Forest seemed to have taken Denham as his model, as if ambitious of excelling in descriptive poetry, discovers much of the same French taste, the same want of native and appropriate feeling, which are chargeable on his predecessors. A poet then had only to copy the every day beauties of nature, in the language of a genuine lover of nature, to be original. Thomson, partly from early habits, partly perhaps from accident, struck into this path. In his schoolboy days, with Virgil in his hand, he walked abroad, amid scenes sufficient to awaken all the enthusiasm he possessed, which was that of an artist. He saw, as Johnson remarks, every thing with the eye, though he does not appear to have felt every thing with the heart, of a poet. His subject was a fortunate choice. It admitted of being treated in that desultory manner which best suited the character of his mind. There was abundant scope for all the diffuseness of sentimental description, and for all the gorgeoussness of colouring. Throughout the Seasons, it is to the senses, however, rather than to the heart, that the appeal is made. It is as much a painting as a poem.

As, when Thomson published his Winter, the subject had the advantage of novelty; so the SEASONS still preserves its rank, as the first descriptive poem

in the language. It is one among our earliest favourites which serve to awaken a sensibility to the beauties of external nature. We read it with avidity, and perhaps with enthusiasm, at the period when our imagination first begins to exercise itself on the objects of poetry; and it retains much of its interest in after life, from being associated with the scenes of our youthful pleasures.

When we attribute the popularity which this poem has obtained, in some degree to its Defects, we allude not only to the faults of the style, but to the very cast of thought, and the intellectual quality of the sentiments, by which the poem is characterized. A contemporary critic has remarked, that "There are few minds in which the love of poetry does not form a sort of intellectual instinct; an instinct often blind and indiscriminating, yet having reference to something nobler than the wants of the physical being, and valuable as connected with the first development of the imagination and passions. The poetry which aims at popularity must be adapted to that numerous class of readers in whom this instinctive feeling exists, but who have stopped short at a very low degree of mental cultivation, or whose imagination has been neglected amid the pursuits of after life." There is nothing in Thomson that requires any painful exercise of the faculties, that calls for any of the higher exertions of the imagination, or that soars beyond the experience of the humblest intellect. His style is indeed learned and ornate. But Burke has shown that words may the most powerfully affect the mind, when their