

James Thomson (1700 - - 48)

Another associate of the Burlington circle, Thomson, began issuing his poems on the four seasons with *Winter* in 1726; the first complete text, with fine illustrations by William Kent, appeared in 1730. A greatly revised and enlarged version of the poem appeared in 1744, and the text of these extracts is of that date: however, all but the first paragraph of the first extract had appeared in 1730, as had the first paragraph of the second. Lord Lyttelton's Hagley Park, which figures in the second selection, was where Thomson revised his poem and is thus an appropriate addition to the text of *Spring* in 1744. *The Seasons*, uneven as poetry, is nevertheless an important account of some early eighteenth-century attitudes towards landscape. The first passage here celebrates 'The Negligence of *Nature*' both in the open countryside and in the 'finish'd Garden'. Yet his eye for the former is inevitably conditioned by his education -- by his reading of Virgil ('the *Mantuan Swain*'), by his taste for painting and the assumption that a poet may imitate a painter's art, by his enthusiasm for Locke's psychological ideas -- and it is not always easy to adjudicate how 'pure' is his taste for unadorned scenery. Thomson probably represents very accurately that subtle attitude of the early landscape gardenists towards a nature whose beauties are discovered in and yet also brought to perfection only by means of Art. It is an attitude, however, that is quick to despise French gardens:

. . . those disgraceful piles of wood and stone;
Those parks and gardens, where, his haunts betrimm'd,
And Nature by presumptuous Art oppress'd,
The woodland Genius mourns. (*Liberty V*)

The English garden, by contrast, is a space of freedoms. Lord Lyttelton in the second extract is seen in his park, at liberty to choose from among various paths and scenery according to his mood. Both passages reveal Thomson's exploration of the connections between the external world of nature and the internal world of human mind and imagination: this was a theme of increasing importance. Among *The Seasons'* many ambitions, the celebration of the rise of the landscape garden figures prominently, and several other passages, including one on Stowe, could have been chosen. Kent's illustrations (Plate 70) provide an apt commentary upon the poem -- the deep, Claudian prospect into the country from some landscape decorated with buildings; the pastoral colouring of shepherds; the involvement of spectators in a thorough appreciation of the visual and scientific aspects of nature (see Kent's figure pointing us into the scene); even Thomson's occasional invocation of Baroque personifications is mirrored in Kent's descending deities.

from The Seasons (1730)

There let the Classic Page thy Fancy lead
Thro' rural Scenes; such as the *Mantuan Swain*
Paints in immortal Verse and matchless Song:
Or catch thy self the Landskip, gliding swift
Athwart Imagination's vivid Eye:
Or by the vocal Woods and Waters lull'd,
And lost in lonely Musing, in a Dream,
Confus'd, of careless Solitude, where mix
Ten thousand wandering Images of Things,
Soothe every Gust of Passion into Peace,
All but the Swellings of the soften'd Heart,
That waken, not disturb the tranquil Mind.

BEHOLD yon breathing Prospect bids the Muse

throw all her Beauty forth. But who can paint
Like Nature? Can Imagination boast,
Amid it's gay Creation, Hues like her's ?
Or can it mix them with that matchless Skill,
And lose them in each other, as appears
In every Bud that blows ? If Fancy then
Unequal fails beneath the pleasing Task;
Ah what shall Language do? Ah where find Words
Ting'd with so many Colours; and whose Power,
To Life approaching, may perfume my Lays
With that fine Oil, those aromatic Gales,
That inexhaustive flow continual round? ...

SEE, where the winding Vale her lavish Stores,
Irriguous, spreads. See, how the Lilly drinks
The latent Rill, scarce oozing thro' the Grass,
Of Growth luxuriant; or the humid Bank,
In fair Profusion, decks. Long let us walk,
Where the Breeze blows from yon extended Field
Of blossom'd Beams. *Arabia* cannot boast
A fuller Gale of Joy than, liberal, thence
Breathes thro' the Sense, and takes the ravish'd Soul.
Nor is the Mead unworthy of thy Foot,
Full of fresh Verdure, and unnumber'd Flowers,
The Negligence of *Nature*, wide, and wild;
Where, undisguis'd by mimic *Art*, she spreads
Unbounded Beauty to the roving Eye.

Here their delicious Task the fervent Bees,
In swarming Millions, tend. Around, athwart,
Thro' the soft Air, the busy Nations fly,
Cling to the Bud, and, with inserted Tube,
Suck it's pure Essence, it's ethereal Soul.
And oft, with bolder Wing, they soaring dare
The purple Heath, or where the Wild-thyme grows,
And yellow load them with the luscious Spoil.

AT length the finish'd Garden to the View
It's Vistas opens, and it's Alleys green.
Snatch'd thro' the verdant Maze, the hurried Eye
Distracted wanders; now the bowery Walk
Of Covert close, where scarce a speck of Day
Falls on the lengthen'd Gloom, protracted sweeps;
Now meets the bending Sky, the River now
Dimpling along, the breezy-ruffled Lake,
The Forest darkening round, the glittering Spire,
Th' ethereal Mountain, and the distant Main ...

In these green Days [i.e. of Spring],
Reviving Sickness lifts her languid Head;
Life flows afresh; and young-ey'd Health exalts

The whole Creation round. Contentment walks
The sunny Glade, and feels an inward Bliss
Spring o'er his Mind, beyond the Power of Kings
To purchase. Pure Serenity apace
Induces Thought, and Contemplation still.
By swift degrees the Love of Nature works,
And warms the Bosom; till at last sublim'd
To Rapture, and enthusiastic Heat,
We feel the present DEITY, and taste
The Joy of GOD to see a happy World.

THESE are the Sacred Feelings of thy Heart,
Thy Heart inform'd by Reason's purest Ray.
O LYTTTELTON, the Friend! thy Passions thus
And Meditations vary, as at large,
Courting the Muse, thro' HAGLEY-PARK you stray,
Thy *British Tempe!* There along the Dale,
With Woods o'er-hung, and shag'd with mossy Rocks,
Whence on each hand the gushing Waters play,
And down the rough Cascade white-dashing fall,
Or glean in lengthen'd Vista thro' 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: the Herds the Flocks, the Birds,
The hollow-whispering Breeze, the Plaint of Rills,
That, purling down amid the twisted Roots
Which creep around, their dewy Murmurs shake
On the sooth'd Ear. From these abstracted oft,
You wander through the Philosophic World;
Where in bright Train continual Wonders rise,
Or to the curious or the pious Eye.
And oft, conducted by Historic Truth,
You tread the long Extent of backward Time :
Planning, with warm Benevolence of Mind,
And honest Zeal unwarp'd by Party-Rage,
Britannia's Weal; how how from the venal Gulph
To raise her Virtue, and her Arts revive.
Or, turning thence thy View, these graver Thoughts
The Muses charm: while, with sure Taste refin'd,
You draw th' inspiring Breath of antient Song;
Till nobly rises, emulous, thy own.
Perhaps thy lov'd LUCINDA shares thy Walk,
With Soul to thine attun'd. Then Nature all
Wears to the Lover's Lover's Eye a Look of Love;
And all the Tumult of a guilty World,
Tost by ungenerous Passions, sinks away.
The tender Heart is animated Peace;
And as it pours it's copious Treasures forth,
In vary'd Converse, softening every Theme,
You, frequent-pausing, turn, and from her Eyes,

Where meeken'd Sense, and amiable Grace,
And lively Sweetness dwell, enraptur'd, drink
That nameless Spirit of etherial joy,
Inimitable Happiness ! which Love,
Alone, bestows, and on a favour'd Few.
Meantime you gain the Height, from whose fair Brow
The bursting Prospect spreads immense around;
And snatch'd o'er Hill and Dale, and Wood and Lawn,
And verdant Field, and darkening Heath between,
And Villages embosom'd soft in Trees,
Of rising Smoak, your Eye excursive roams :
Wide-stretching from the *Hall*, in whose kind Haunt
The *Hospitable Genius* harbours still,
To Where the broken Landskip, by Degrees,
Ascending, roughens into ridgy Hills;
O'er which the *Cambrian* Mountains, like far Clouds
That skirt the blue Horizon, doubtful, rise.