JAMES THOMSON
1700–1748

An Ode on Aeolus’s Harp¹

Ethereal race, inhabitants of air,²
Who hymn your God amid the secret grove,
Ye unseen beings, to my harp repair,
And raise majestic strains, or melt in love.

Those tender notes, how kindly they upbraid!
With what soft woe they thrill the lover’s heart!
Sure from the hand of some unhappy maid
Who died of love these sweet complainings part.

But hark! that strain was of a graver tone,
On the deep strings his hand some hermit throws;
Or he, the sacred Bard,³ who sat alone
In the drear waste and wept his people’s woes.

Such was the song which Zion’s children sung
When by Euphrates’ stream they made their plaint;
And to such sadly solemn notes are strung
Angelic harps to soothe a dying saint.

Methinks I hear the full celestial choir
Through Heaven’s high dome their awful anthem raise;
Now chanting clear, and now they all conspire
To swell the lofty hymn from praise to praise.

Let me, ye wandering spirits of the wind,
Who, as wild fancy prompts you, touch the string,
Smit with your theme, be in your chorus joined,
For till you cease my muse forgets to sing.

1748

¹ The Aeolian Harp, or Harp of the Wind God, a stringed instrument that plays chords when touched by a current of air, was popularized by Thomson’s friend James Oswald, the “Scotch Orpheus.” Thomson described its effects in The Castle of Indolence, and the spontaneous, naturally inspired music of the harp later became a favorite Romantic theme (see Coleridge's The Eolian Harp and Dejection: An Ode).
² The winds, whose god is Aeolus.
³ The prophet Jeremiah is supposed to have written the book of Lamentations, in which the Jewish people (“Zion’s children”) mourn their captivity in Babylon (“by Euphrates’ stream”).
From The Seasons

From Summer

[DAWN]
Young day pours in apace,
And opens all the lawny prospect wide.
The dripping rock, the mountain’s misty top
Swell on the sight and brighten with the dawn.
Blue through the dusk the smoking currents shine;
And from the bladed field the fearful hare
Limps awkward; while along the forest glade
The wild deer trip, and often turning gaze
At early passenger. Music awakens,
The native voice of undissembled joy;
And thick around the woodland hymns arise.
Roused by the cock, the soon-clad shepherd leaves
His mossy cottage, where with peace he dwells,
And from the crowded fold in order drives
His flock to taste the verdure of the morn.

[SWIMMING]
Cheered by the milder beam, the sprightly youth
Speeds to the well-known pool, whose crystal depth
A sandy bottom shows. Awhile he stands
Gazing the inverted landscape, half afraid
To meditate the blue profound below;
Then plunges headlong down the circling flood.
His ebon tresses and his rosy cheek
Instant emerge; and through the obedient wave,
At each short breathing by his lip repelled,
With arms and legs according well, he makes,
As humor leads, an easy-winding path;
While from his polished sides a dewy light
Effuses on the pleased spectators round.

[EVENING]
Confessed from yonder slow-extinguished clouds,
All ether softening, sober Evening takes
Her wonted station in the middle air,
A thousand shadows at her beck. First this
She sends on earth; then that of deeper dye
Steals soft behind; and then a deeper still,
In circle following circle, gathers round
To close the face of things. A fresher gale
Begins to wave the wood and stir the stream,
Sweeping with shadowy gust the fields of corn,
While the quail clamors for his running mate.
Wide o’er the thistly lawn, as swells the breeze,
A whitening shower of vegetable down
Amusive floats. The kind impartial care
Of Nature naught disdains: thoughtful to feed
Her lowest sons, and clothe the coming year,
From field to field the feathered seeds she wings.

His folded flock secure, the shepherd home
Hies, merry-hearted; and by turns relieves
The ruddy milkmaid of her brimming pail—
The beauty whom perhaps his witless heart,
Unknowing what the joy-mixed anguish means,
Sincerely loves, by that best language shown

Of cordial glances and obliging deeds.

Onward they pass, o'er many a panting height
And valley sunk and unfrequented; where
At fall of eve the fairy people throng,
In various game and revelry to pass

The summer night, as village stories tell.
But far about they wander from the grave
Of him whom his ungentle fortune urged
Against his own sad breast to lift the hand
Of impious violence. The lonely tower
Is also shunned; whose mournful chambers hold,
So night-struck fancy dreams, the yelling ghost.

Among the crooked lanes, on every hedge,
The glowworm lights his gem; and, through the dark,
A moving radiance twinkles. Evening yields

The world to Night; not in her winter robe
Of massy Stygian woof, but loose arrayed
In mantle dun. A faint erroneous ray,
Glanced from the imperfect surfaces of things,
Flings half an image on the straining eye;

While wavering woods, and villages, and streams,
And rocks, and mountain-tops that long retained
The ascending gleam are all one swimming scene,
Uncertain if beheld. Sudden to heaven
Thence weary vision turns; where, leading soft

The silent hours of love, with purest ray
Sweet Venus shines; and, from her genial rise,
When daylight sickens, till it springs afresh,
Unrivaled reigns the fairest lamp of night.

From Winter

[A SNOWSTORM]

The keener tempests come: and, fuming dun
From all the livid east or piercing north,

Thick clouds ascend, in whose spacious womb

1. Amusing—i.e. (according to Johnson's Dictionary), "entertaining with tranquility."
2. Flocks secured for the night within the sheepfold.
3. Wandering, irregular.
A vapory deluge lies, to snow congealed.
Heavy they roll their fleecy world along,
And the sky saddens with the gathered storm.
Through the hushed air the whitening shower descends,
At first thin-wavering; till at last the flakes
Fall broad and wide and fast, dimming the day
With a continual flow. The cherished fields
Put on their winter robe of purest white.
Tis brightness all; save where the new snow melts
Along the mazy current. Low the woods
Bow their hoar head; and, ere the languid sun
Faint from the west emits his evening ray,
Earth’s universal face, deep-hid and chill,
Is one wild dazzling waste that buries wide
The works of man. Drooping, the laborer-ox
Stands covered o’er with snow, and then demands
The fruit of all his toil. The fowls of heaven,
Tamed by the cruel season, crowd around
The winnowing store, and claim the little boon
Which Providence assigns them. One alone,
The redbreast, sacred to the household gods,
Wisely regardful of the embroiling sky,
In joyless fields and thorny thickets leaves
His shivering mates, and pays to trusted man
His annual visit. Half afraid, he first
Against the window beats; then brisk alights
On the warm hearth; then, hopping o’er the floor,
Eyes all the smiling family askance,
And pecks, and starts, and wonders where he is—
Till, more familiar grown, the table crumbs
Attract his slender feet. The foodless wilds
Pour forth their brown inhabitants. The hare,
Though timorous of heart, and hard beset
By death in various forms, dark snares, and dogs,
And more unpitying men, the garden seeks,
Urged on by fearless want. The bleating kind
Eye the bleak heaven, and next the glistening earth,
With looks of dumb despair; then, sad-dispersed,
Dig for the withered herb through heaps of snow.

4. Genus, class.

1726