Melancholy’s Ends: Thomson’s Reveries
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About two-thirds of the way through Autumn, the last installment in his four-part georgic poem The Seasons (1726-1730), James Thomson’s speaker becomes caught up in a feeling that simultaneously enhances and arrests his poetic vision. This feeling, which Thomson personifies as “Philosophic Melancholy,” comes upon the speaker as he watches the leaves fall, and it inspires a universal love for humanity, a desire to relieve the suffering of others, and “Ten thousand thousand fleet ideas” (Au, 1014) that allow the mind to ascend to heavenly knowledge. If this description of Thomson’s melancholy sounds nebulous, that’s because it is. William Wordsworth famously wrote that The Seasons teaches “the art of seeing,” but when Thomson’s speaker indulges his philosophic melancholy, he seems unable to describe what he sees. And at just the moment when Thomson’s speaker worries that his gloom is becoming “too much” (Au, 1037) for him to handle, he chooses to move on from his melancholy and instead returns to the descriptions of natural harmony that he is best known for. This particular moment in Autumn produces a melancholy that extinguishes the humanitarian impulses it seems to set in motion.

Thomson famously wanted The Seasons to communicate a “moral Sentiment” through a sustained attention to “the Works of Nature.” But The Seasons also expound a parallel commitment to the solitary reverie—made legible in scenes of retirement and genial melancholic reflection—that seems to upend the ideals of social engagement and humanitarian sympathy for which The Seasons is known. The poem’s “moral Sentiment” appears at many points to immobilize itself under the weight of melancholic solitude. How might we account for
Thomson’s interest in cultivating a feeling that seems to obscure his relation to the social world, especially when the poem as a whole works so hard to inspire humanitarian sympathy?

In this piece, I’m going to argue that the language of melancholy in *The Seasons* gives voice to a ponderousness that is the sign of a burgeoning humanitarian spirit but that also figures the difficulty of translating that spirit into actual social change. The feeling of melancholy marks the limits of what poetry can do to counter the damage imposed on the poor amidst the newly commercialized landscape that characterized eighteenth-century Britain, but melancholy also indexes poetry’s value: for Thomson, the poetry of “moral Sentiment” attempts a more livable and sustainable future for Britain’s most vulnerable subjects—rural swains, orphans, prisoners—but sometimes, its attempt at grasping that future is most powerful for its dramatization of the difficulty of doing so. For Thomson, the solitary and genial melancholic reverie stages both the power of feeling and the potential immobilization of the poem’s famous “social sense.” But, as we shall see, Thomson also suggests that such immobilization is sometimes part of the process of thinking one’s way toward that better future.

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In *Lives of the Poets*, Samuel Johnson wrote that *The Seasons* is about the power of poetic vision. For Johnson, Thomson writes “with the eye which Nature bestows only on a poet; the eye that distinguishes, in everything presented to its view, whatever there is on which imagination can delight to be detained.” Johnson says that *The Seasons* places the poet’s self front-and-center. Johnson’s claim, though, raises a question that still elicits varying answers from readers of *The Seasons*: who, or what, is the subject of *The Seasons*? Is it “external nature”? Or is it the poet’s “own thought and feeling,” to use a phrasing invoked by one prominent twentieth-century reader of Thomson? Put differently, is this a poem about nature as it is, or is it a poem
about a poet looking at nature from his own point of view and using nature as a way of talking about his own “thought and feeling”?

At stake in this question seems to be the problem of the poet-speaker’s role in his own poem. If *The Seasons* is merely an expression of one poet’s “thought and feeling,” then the poet’s feelings might efface the descriptions of hard labor and rural life that the poem’s georgic sensibilities purport to represent, and would thus mirror the ways in which both the commercial class and the landed gentry erase the plight of the laboring poor. One strain of critical responses to the poem, characterized by John Barrell’s *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, would suggest that the landscapes that comprise much of the poem are masking agents. What seems in the poem like pure nature is actually a front for something more sinister. The supposed purity of nature occludes realities of rank and status divisions in a newly commercialized Britain. Landscape conceals its ideological function, but this practice of concealment is also part of its ideological function. One could only arrange the landscape in the way one wanted if one had the appropriate social status. If the poem focuses on the ideas that a poet might have upon seeing a landscape, then the centrality of the poet-speaker to the poem’s action assumes an ideological valence. The poet assumes center stage and provides cover for the projects of commerce and gentrification via the coded language that a turn to nature provides.

More recent criticism, though, has suggested that Thomson’s attempts to see the world do not obscure that world but illuminate it. Where some have seen the poem’s ideal of social order as a front meant to obscure the evils of a burgeoning commercial world that accumulates profit at the expense of the poor, others readers the poem’s “art of seeing” in more sympathetic terms, either as a mode of “consumer protest” that keeps in view the atrocities of the slave trade and the poverty of rural laborers, or as a description of a cooperative interplay between the human
and nonhuman realms that enables a broad “social harmony.” The point is that Thomson criticism has historically organized around a faultline, with readers suspicious of the ideological inflections of Thomson’s “art of seeing” on one side and with readers who understand Thomson’s vision more sympathetically on the other.  

The longstanding debate about The Seasons’ ideological resonances is one about the nature of its vision of social organization, and hinges on a question of mobility: some of The Seasons’ more skeptical readers point to the immobilized character of the poem’s sympathetic impulses. In this piece, I argue that the nuanced attunement to his historical present that animates much of Thomson’s poem and to which more recent critics have pointed is also an attunement to the possibility of the immobilizing character of sympathetic identification, and that the melancholic reverie is the sign of the complexities of that attunement. The poem’s potential failures to mobilize itself toward meaningful social change, in other words, are possibilities that the poem’s melancholic moments account for. The poem hopes for a better social future, but also stages the difficulties of mobilizing that hope. To draw out this argument, I will first describe the historical context that frames Thomson’s melancholic reflections; I will then describe the tradition of melancholic thinking that inspires Thomson, before moving on to an extended analysis of some of The Seasons’ more melancholic moments.

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The poets of the mid-eighteenth-century had much to say about the socioeconomic transformations encoded in Britain’s “birth of a consumer society” and its ever-increasing demand for luxury goods. Thomas Gray, for one, some 20 years after the publication of The Seasons, famously condemns a personified Ambition for “mock[ing the] useful Toil” of rural farmers; he criticizes the hardening social divisions of mid-eighteenth-century life but also seems
resigned to their inevitabilities. And in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, Samuel Johnson condemns the modern tendency toward reckless ambition, stating at one point that an excess of luxury items makes food “tasteless” and wine “joyless.”

Thomson himself personifies Luxury in the closing lines of *Winter* as the producer of “unreal Wants” (*Wi*, 1059), and is often as suspicious of the vices of a burgeoning consumer society as those who came after him, including Gray and Johnson. But Thomson ultimately maintains a faith in the power of Whiggish ideals to redeem commerce, and one of his tasks in *The Seasons* is to balance a critique of human vices with an endorsement of commercial life. This balancing act, as we will see, is a difficult one to pull off. In *Autumn*’s opening, for instance, Thomson worries that, despite the efforts of labor to harvest the earth’s bountiful plenty, “Corruption still,/ Voracious, swallow’d what the liberal Hand/ Of Bounty scatter’d o’er the savage Year” (*Au*, 54-56). But Thomson still holds firm in the belief that industriousness ideally yields social improvement through the medium of commerce (*Au*, 118-140, for instance). Even if commerce can be corrupted through greed and exploitation, its basic drive is pure—the natural effect of earth’s abundance and of the human labor that harvests it. Thomson’s overall vision is one of social harmony: earth’s plenitude, labor, commerce, and solitary reverie each commingle under an overarching vision of order—manifesting in a dream of an all-encompassing “complex stupendous Scheme of Things” (*Sp*, 858). In Thomson’s mind, *The Seasons* participates in the development of a capacious “social sense” (*Su*, 24) that fuses poetic inspiration with public virtues such as liberty and equality. This social sense is key to his poetic vision, and idealizes benevolence and humanitarian generosity, as we will see. Thomson’s social sense ultimately remains committed to the social force of Whiggish commerce without downplaying its problems.
But Thomson also suggests that this “social sense” achieves its fullness in moments of solitary pensiveness. When Thomson talks in *Autumn* of his aim to learn what he calls the “moral song,” for instance (*Au*, 672), he tells us that this is a project undertaken in solitude (*Au*, 669) and learned from the “Book/ Of Nature, ever open” (*Au*, 670-71). Solitude is the state in which one’s awareness of each element of that “stupendous Scheme”—nature, society, cosmos, moral thought—all converge. To be alone, Thomson believes, helps one to meditate on the best ways to live in a commercialized culture that, while not perfect, is still worth preserving. Even when he is not indulging explicitly in melancholic feeling, Thomson’s depictions of social life are often conditioned by his insistence on solitude. Across *The Seasons*, moments of direct address to prominent Whig politicians are offset by descriptions of retreat into nature. And in *Spring*, the virtues of identification with the laboring class merge with the pleasures of solitary enjoyment of nature’s dominion: a recognition of the labor of the “Shepherd on the grassy Turf” segues unproblematically into a description of the joy of an “abstracted” tour “thro’ the Philosophic World” and a trek into “the long Extent of backward Time” (*Sp*, 833, 922, 923, 927). Under the sign of the georgic, labor, solitary reverie, and earthly life coexist in harmonious tandem.

Thomson’s overall aspiration is to produce poetry with the power to “awake […] moral sentiment,”17 and this kind of sentiment is often best roused, Thomson suggests, in “Retirement, and Solitude,” in the presence of the “wild romantic Country.”18 *Spring* famously opens with a stunning description of the connections between the “roll[ing]” of “the bounteous Sun” (*Sp*, 26), the toil of “laborious Man” (*Sp*, 48), the patriotic appeal to the exceptionalism of “Ye Generous Britons” (*Sp*, 67), and the poet’s own impulse to reflect in solitude on the life and energy with which he is surrounded. Thomson’s poet-speaker is driven in *Spring*’s opening to wander out of
the village and to meditate on the vibrancy that characterizes both natural life and the labor that attends it:

[...] Now from the Town
Buried in Smoke, and Sleep, and noisom Damps,
Oft let me wander o’er the dewy Fields,
Where Freshness breathes, and dash the trembling Drops
From the bent Bush, as thro’ the verdant Maze
Of Sweet-briar Hedges I pursue my Walk (Sp, 101-6)

In this passage, the poet-speaker’s departure from the town and into the “dewy Fields” figures the cosmic interconnectedness that he so powerfully observes. Town, meadow, and forest are interlinked by the civilizing influences of labor and commerce; such interconnectedness supports human life and human society. But Thomson is able to meditate most movingly on these connections when he leaves the town and the people in it behind.

In this moment, and in many moments in The Seasons, Thomson’s solitude conditions his capacity for such close attention to the world around him, and it also helps him to articulate his “social sense.” But Thomson’s solitude is not always so unproblematically approving of social life. It is sometimes an occasion to reflect on the problems of poverty and abuse of power, and in these moments, Thomson’s solitude, as we will see, inspires a weighty if genial melancholy—a pensiveness that seeks to reject the world’s more abusive characteristics.

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For many thinkers throughout Western history, stretching back at least to Aristotle’s Problems, melancholy was the evidence of genius as well as of the pain that accompanied its cultivation, but it could also sometimes be a genial druglike ecstasy. John Milton’s 1632 Il Penseroso (a poem with a rich critical afterlife in the eighteenth century) is perhaps the most influential example of a genialized melancholy for Thomson and his contemporaries. For Milton,
melancholy enlarges the imagination; melancholic flight can even “bring all heaven before [one’s] eyes.”

In the eighteenth century, a new tradition of melancholic thought emerges: seeing the feeling as a carrier for dignified and noble sentiments, this tradition absorbs the feeling within a framework of sympathy and moral sensibility. Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* is sometimes regarded as the exemplar of this form of melancholy because of its habit of associating Yorick’s narcissistic mode of sympathy with his melancholic stateliness, and Henry Mackenzie’s Harley, the protagonist of *The Man of Feeling* feels a relatively immobilized sympathy for the poor that is often coded as melancholic. In both novels, melancholic sentiment goes nowhere: Sterne’s Yorick doesn’t share anything with others except for his tears, as if those tears are a suitable substitute for charity, and Mackenzie’s Harley can donate shillings to the poor, but he cannot do anything more. This kind of morally upstanding melancholy also asserts itself in the period’s sentimental poets: in Thomas Warton’s insistence (inspired by *Il Penseroso*) that a solitary melancholy is more dignified than the “feeble bliss” of material possessions; or at the end of the century, in William Cowper’s deployment of the feeling as a means for speaking against the atrocities of the Atlantic slave trade. These poets arrive on the scene after Thomson, but their shared participation in a sentimental tradition that also carries traces of Miltonic influence speaks to the staying power of the kind of melancholic reverie that Thomson found so much inspiration in. For Warton, Cowper, and others, melancholic feeling becomes a way of responding to the vanities or moral evils of an emergent capitalist culture, but it infuses the moral obligations it encodes with an air of tragic resignation: melancholy is the evidence of one’s moral character but sometimes also the sign of the difficulty of activating that moral sense so as to be able to help others. Many of the eighteenth-century sentimental poets, after all, don’t really
turn their solitude into a recognizable program for political action. Its potentially inoperative nature has inspired one critic to call it a “bourgeois fad”—perhaps, one could even say, the very sign of bourgeois privilege itself. To associate melancholy with sensibility or moral fortitude is thus to run into a problem for which the eighteenth century has become notorious and which many critical accounts of the period have expounded: that of the mutually reinforcing relationship between sympathy or sensibility on the one hand and solipsism on the other.

For Thomson, as for other poets in the eighteenth century, melancholy is a performance of solitary reverie, and for Thomson it manifests as a deep and prolonged pensiveness: its solitude and reflectiveness is a response to unjust social conditions. But more so than poets such as Cowper, whose sympathetic drive is tempered by his anxieties about the potential insufficiency of his humanitarian beliefs, or Warton, who takes pleasure in having nothing to do with social life, Thomson seems unflinchingly committed to the power of solitary reverie and makes his melancholy an extension of his social spirit, however inoperative the social spirit encoded by the reverie might ultimately be.

Thomson’s frequent association of his “social sense” with the genial melancholic reverie poses the mobilization of genial melancholic conscientiousness as a question: does melancholic indulgence really possess the capacity to make one a social creature? The moments of solitary reverie that pervade The Seasons sit in uneasy relation with what Tobias Menely, for one, has referred to as the poem’s humanitarian sensibilities. Thomson’s aim, as Menely puts it, is to “convoke a public” by addressing public concerns to public officials, such as Arthur Onslow (Au, 9), George Dodington (Au, 655), and the Earl of Wilmington (Wi, 18), among many others, but the poem’s moments of overt petitioning work in uneasy tandem with its equally numerous moments of self-satisfied solitude. Thomson’s call for prison reform in Winter precedes, as we
will see, his wish to sit by a fire, safe from the raging winter storms (and also presumably safe from the social ills allegorized by those storms), “hold[ing] high converse with the Mighty Dead” (Wi, 432). At just the moments when the poem’s “social sense” becomes most self-righteous, it resolves that sense not by any kind of recognizable action, but in the bliss of retirement.

Thomson himself seems to recognize the potential pitfalls of melancholic pensiveness, at least in 1748’s The Castle of Indolence, which associates such pensiveness with the kind of “languishment” that the Knight of Arts and Industry must work to conquer. And in Winter, to which I turn in the second half of this piece, Thomson’s speaker indulges a melancholic reverie that treads dangerously close to such “languishment.” But if melancholy tends toward the immobilization of the poetic self, it makes that immobilization one of the conditions of socially conscious thinking, as we will see. And if critical accounts of eighteenth-century sympathy sometimes see sympathetic identification as a way of hiding one’s solipsism or complicity with the systems of oppression one purports to speak against, then Thomson’s association of melancholy with sympathy helps us to see the potential failures of sympathy or sensibility from a different perspective: melancholy becomes a way for the socially conscious poet to own—rather than conceal—the immobilizing character of that consciousness and to make it one of the signs of one’s sensitive consciousness. I turn briefly now to Autumn, because Autumn’s invocation of “Philosophic Melancholy” exemplifies Thomson’s interest in the melancholic reverie. Then, in the second half of this piece, I move on to Winter, where the melancholic reverie becomes a way both of accommodating a utopic impulse and of troping that impulse through the depiction of its limitations.

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Thomson’s invocation in *Autumn* of the feeling of “Philosophic Melancholy” with which I opened this piece is his attempt to identify with a forgotten and exploited laboring class. In *Autumn*, global commerce operates in tandem with (if also in tension with) an estate-based mode of social organization. That both systems coincide with one another in Thomson’s world bespeaks the eighteenth century’s status as a period of economic and social complexity. Both systems erase those of lower status. Raymond Williams suggests that one of Thomson’s achievements is his reflection on “the eighteenth-century ‘discovery’ by the educated upper classes […] that the poor are not simply a charitable burden, a weight on the economy, but the actual producers of wealth,” but that such a reflection is also accompanied by a struggle to know how best to support those laboring poor. When Thomson pines, “Oft let me wander o’er the russet Mead,/ and thro’ the sadden’d Grove, where scarce is heard/ One dying Strain, to chear the Woodman’s Toil” (*Au*, 971-73), he draws attention to the fact that the anonymous woodman’s plight is unacknowledged both by estate and commercial systems. The woodman can have no claim to the kinds of landed privilege signified by the retreats of Eastbury or Stowe, but he is also isolated from the bustle of urban commercial life.

In the moments leading up to Philosophic Melancholy’s entrance, Thomson’s “searching Eye” (*Au*, 785) had been able to scale the heights of the Alps (*Au*, 781) and of “Abyssinia’s Cloud-compelling Cliffs” (*Au*, 801). *Autumn*’s descriptions of the flight of Thomson’s poetic eye are among the most vivid and stunning moments in *The Seasons*. These descriptions of sublime wonder transition into descriptions of labor and social life, and Philosophic Melancholy is meant to enable Thomson’s sympathy for the poor:

> He comes! he comes! in every Breeze the Power Of Philosophic Melancholy comes! His near Approach the sudden-starting Tear, The glowing Cheek, the mild dejected Air,
The soften’d Feature, and the beating Heart,
Pierc’d deep with many a secret Pang, declare.
O’er all his Soul his sacred Influence breathes;
In all the bosom triumphs, all the nerves;
Infames Imagination; thro’ the Breast
Infuses every Tenderness; and far
Beyond dim Earth exalts the swelling Thought.
Ten thousand thousand fleet Ideas, such
As never mingled with the vulgar Dream,
Croud fast into the Mind’s creative Eye.
As fast the correspondent Passions rise,
As varied, and as high: devotion rais’d
To Rapture, and divine Astonishment;
The Love of Nature unconfin’d, and, chief
Of human Race; the large, ambitious Wish
To make them blest; the Sigh for suffering Worth,
Lost in obscurity… (Au, 1004-24)

These lines are flatter than the rich descriptions of sublime wonder that precede them. They are meant to signify sympathy for Britain’s suffering masses, but the speaker spends more time describing the features of his own face (1006-8) and the stars beyond (1013-14) than the supposed objects of his sympathy. That Philosophic Melancholy comes to Thomson “in every Breeze” (1004) is meant to signify the seamless relation between social life, natural order, and sympathetic identification. But as Thomson begins describing this feeling, the objects of his attention drift out of sight, and Thomson’s descriptions flatten. The vivid descriptions of nature dissipate into a series of trite and unfulfillable “wishes” to bless the suffering—wishes that vanish from the poem’s landscape as suddenly as they arrive. These lines more resemble the hackneyed “sentimental common-places”31 that Wordsworth said Thomson was inclined toward than they do the vivid state of receptivity that some critics have described as important to Thomson.32

Thomson’s attempt to identify with the forgotten and exploited is thwarted by the indulgence of feeling. The “swelling” mind is meant to be a sympathetic mind, but it overshoots
its target and soars toward the stars. By feeling melancholy, Thomson’s speaker indulges a “swelling Thought” that travels “Beyond dim Earth” (*Au*, 1012-13). And yet, the more Thomson’s mind expands, the less specific his descriptions become. Melancholy wavers between registering pity for Britain’s overworked and uncompensated masses in one sense and registering the general capacities of the mind to “swell” past earthly limits in another. Philosophic Melancholy generates in the speaker’s mind “Ten thousand thousand fleet ideas” (*Au*, 1014), but the ideas that the speaker generates quickly leave the venue of sympathetic identification. Before long, the speaker is back to describing “Voices more than human” (*Au*, 1035)—which is ironic, considering that Philosophic Melancholy is meant to inspire sympathy specifically for humans—and then back to the serene and isolated pleasures of Stowe Landscape Gardens (*Au*, 1042). If sympathetic identification depends on the generative capacity of the reverie, the possibility raised in *Autumn* is that such reverie can sometimes become *too* generative—it generates ideas that exceed human bounds and that thus thwart the task of sympathetic identification.

In a manner similar to Thomas Weiskel’s description of the cathexis of the Romantic sublime, itself a “sublimation [that] makes thought possible,” Thomson’s melancholy sublimates the hardships of social life into stylized feeling so as to stage both the difficult problems presented by the present and the difficulty of learning how to respond to those problems. Thomson’s melancholy (which finds here a corollary in certain depictions of the Romantic sublime) is meant to partner with sympathy, but the two seem instead to have a fraught relationship. In this manner, the humanitarian spirit that characterizes Thomson’s attention to the plight of Britain’s nameless laborers also registers how such melancholic sentiment might tend toward solipsistic reflexivity. As Thomson describes his melancholy, the “Woodman’s Toil” (*Au*, 973) falls out of focus: the spectacle of the mind swelling past earth overshadows the
sympathetic ideas that the melancholic mind was originally meant to accommodate. Melancholic performance signals the instability of sympathetic identification and of Thomson’s critique of greed and exploitation. In *Autumn*, it appears that philosophical melancholy names an overly stylized and ultimately stagnant performance. We go now to *Winter*, which is pervaded even more thoroughly by a feeling of philosophical melancholy, and there we will see that melancholy’s seemingly immobilizing character is in fact the source of much of its power.

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In *Winter*, the melancholic reverie becomes a way of trying to draw the contours of a utopic future and infuses Thomson’s “social sense” with an aspirational character. Thomson opens *Winter* with a description of the coming cold as an occasion “Sullen, and sad” (*Wi*, 2). Upon acknowledging winter’s darkness, Thomson’s speaker turns to the jussive register: “Be these my Theme,/ These, that exalt the Soul to solemn Thought,/ And heave only Musing. Welcome, kindred Glooms!/ Congenial Horrors, hail!” (*Wi*, 3-5). This movement, in which the mind is moved to “solemn Thought” by gloomy weather, calls to mind and is likely modeled on Milton’s *Il Penseroso*, in which reverie is occasioned by natural darkness. Thomson’s melancholic *Winter* requires that the pensive thinker “lay the meddling Senses all aside” (*Wi*, 208) so as to “mingle into solid Gloom” (*Wi*, 203) while the rest of the world sleeps.

Like *Autumn*, *Winter* is filled with references to swelling thoughts, which seem to be the effect of a “Philosophic Melancholy” that locates ecstasy in solitary reflection. But what is Thomson’s speaker thinking about while the world sleeps? In one instance, Thomson meditates on the fate of a nameless shepherd who dies in the cold: “…down he sinks/ Beneath the Shelter of the shapeless Drift/ […] His Wife, his Children, and his Friends unseen” (*Wi*, 305-310). This episode bespeaks the disjunction between the suffering of the rural poor and the lack of concern
from the commercial gentry who benefit from their labor (Wi, 323). In another instance, Thomson takes us “Into the Horrors of the gloomy Jail; […] where Misery moans;/ Where Sickness Pines; where Thirst and Hunger burn” (Wi, 361-63). Here, the guilty party is a negligent jailer. But while Thomson condemns the gaps between rich and poor or between advantaged and exploited, he does not linger for long. What is most striking about these examples is the speed with which Thomson moves away from them and back to shelter: “Now, all amid the Rigours of the year,” he says, “In the wild Depth of Winter, while without/ The ceaseless Winds blow Ice, be my Retreat/ […] A rural, shelter’d, solitary, Scene” (Wi, 424-29). The whiplash effect enacted by these quick transitions from persons to nature resembles the self-indulgence of Autumn’s Philosophic Melancholy. Suffering persons seem not to be persons so much as metonyms for the melancholic mood itself.\(^{35}\)

This problem compounds itself when we consider that Thomson’s solution to suffering is to retreat deeper into nature to speak with ghosts. Across the span of 125 lines, Thomson speaks with Socrates, from whom he learns how to stand firm in his conviction even “Against the rage of Tyrants” (Wi, 441); with Solon, “who built his Common-Weal/ On Equity’s wide Base; by tender Laws/ A lively People curbing” (Wi, 446-48); with Tully, who kept the riotous passions of the Romans at bay with his “powerful Eloquence” (Wi, 521); and with half a dozen or so others, all of whom have something to teach about the importance of moral fortitude and civic virtue in uncertain times. The point here is supposedly that the heroes of the past can teach us something about our civic duties to the present. The moral example provided by the dead offers a corrective to the problems of the present: they “sing their Influence on this lower World” (Wi, 529), but they also signify a “Retreat” (Wi, 426) from the world of the “gay licentious Proud,/ Whom Pleasure, Power, and Affluence surround” (Wi, 322-23)—a world that can spare neither thought
nor charity for the victims of rural poverty or of urban corruption. While the ghosts “sing their influence,” they also offer an escape from the world they purport to influence. In 1759, Adam Smith would cite these lines from Winter as an example of what he saw as the uselessness of the indiscriminate sympathy espoused by those “whining and melancholy moralists” who claim that one can sympathize with people one has never and will never meet—even people who live on the moon. To try to sympathize with people one will never meet, Smith suggests, is to neutralize one’s sympathetic impulses. Thomson speaks with ghosts because he thinks that a trip to the past will help him to solve some of the problems brought on by commerce and gentrification in the present (concentrated in some of the specific examples of suffering and inequality depicted earlier in Winter). But, as Smith would later worry, to make one’s sympathy so thoroughly capacious is also to make it inoperative.

This glimpse into the past gives way to an equally vexed attempt to peer into the future. After speaking with the dead, Thomson’s speaker tells us that, “in some deep retirement” (Wi, 572), he peers into the “Void of Night” (Wi, 576) and that “Hence larger Prospects of the Beauteous Whole/ Would, gradual, open on our opening Minds” (Wi, 579-80). Here, Thomson’s speaker admits that, to have one’s mind opened, one must look into the dark. But for all of Thomson’s interest throughout the poem in describing the natural world and the virtues of labor in painstaking detail, this section seems evacuated of concrete description. The best that a pensive reverie can offer is a hazy anticipation of future beauty:

Then, even superior to Ambition, we
Would learn the private Virtues; how to glide
Thro’ Shades and Plains, along the smoothest Stream
Of rural Life: or snatch’d away by Hope,
Thro’ the dim Spaces of Futurity.
With earnest Eye anticipate those Scenes
Of Happiness, and Wonder; where the Mind
In endless Growth and infinite Ascent,
Rises from State to State, and World to World.
But when with These the serious Thought is foil’d,
We, shifting for Relief, would play the Shapes
Of frolic Fancy … (Wi, 600-11).

This passage, in which the eye “anticipates” a future utopia that accelerates infinitely, puts a lot of weight on the power of melancholic reflection to see into the future. But what does the future-oriented mind see? This portion of Winter seems to figure both the power of vision and a corresponding inability to describe that vision. The melancholic mood, in which a natural gloom enables a spiritual reverie, is an instrument for depicting a world of “Happiness, and Wonder” that contrasts with the plight of the shepherd or the prisoners from earlier in Winter, but this vision also seems sanitized of the social problems to which it seems to respond.

In the mid-eighteenth-century, Thomson is not alone in his deployment of poetic reverie to try to talk about a future he has trouble seeing. Edward Young, for instance, offers a similarly capacious meditation on the solitary poet’s penchant for seeing into the future:

Driv’n by the Whirlwind, lighted by her Beams,
I widen my Horizon, gain new Powers,
See Things invisible, feel Things remote,
Am present with Futurities. 37

These lines associate poetry with a capacity for seeing that which cannot be seen or feeling that which cannot be felt by the human body: poetry allows the poet to transcend the corporeal body’s limits. 38 To be “present with Futurities” is to feel a future that is beyond the capacity of representation. Young’s attempt to talk about heaven unfolds in the context of death; it dramatizes the poet-speaker’s attempts to transcend matter and to become spirit, a process that reaches its apex with death, and which coincides with the poet-speaker’s aim to convert the rakish Lorenzo to a similarly heaven-oriented view. 39 Thomson’s vision of a bright future, like Young’s, thwarts poetry’s attempts to represent it, but for Thomson, the vexed attempt to see an
unseeable future is connected more explicitly with the all-pervasive “social sense” that animates the entirety of The Seasons and that must find a way to incorporate the social world into its vision, even as it seems at points to overshoot it.

More so than Young, Thomson’s speaker is possessed of a heart that “swells” for “Patriot-Virtues” (Wi, 657) and for a distinctly social equality. Thomson’s pensive speaker fantasizes about a utopic future, the sight of which is so wondrous that it eclipses the process by which one might get to that future. The pensive mind “Rises from State to State, and World to World” (Wi, 608) and, in a move that calls to mind Autumn’s Philosophic Melancholy, it expatiates past the social problems to which it bears witness. Thomson sees his poem participating in a vision of an equitable Britain, but the melancholic vision that frames the poem is grounded in the idea that true equity will have to wait for a future that is both unrepresentable and potentially unmoored from the problems it purports to fix.

The melancholic reverie figures the heights of thought and the potential incapacitation that accompanies the mind’s ascension to such heights. If Thomson’s melancholic odyssey through past and future resembles Marshall Brown’s famous rendering of the “urbane sublime”—a mode of thought that characterizes pre-Romantic attempts to unite the human spirit with what appears like an “artificial and inflated rhetoric” but whose broad sweeping gestures are necessary for accommodating all ranges of human experience—then it also exemplifies the ways in which the movements of the urbane sublime abstract and aestheticize the problems they address. What Brown describes as “inflated rhetoric” manifests in Thomson, as we have seen, as the persistence of a “swelling” mind, which thinks itself into the past and future as a strategy for addressing hard material problems of human suffering. The swelling mind figures the ways in which conscientious thought can think itself past the world to which it tries to speak, but it also
figures the ways in which the picture of a better future persists as an ideal in spite of the mind’s inability to represent it fully. The vision of universal harmony that melancholy enables aestheticizes sociohistorical problems both as a way of talking about those problems and as a way of depicting the uneven process by which one learns how to talk about them.

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But what is the point of a utopic vision that expounds itself in disjunction with the social present? The end of Winter gives us a hint. The poem’s closing lines, I will suggest, raise the possibility that such unmoorings are the very condition of utopic dreaming. Winter’s end offers what might look like an unconvincing claim that someday, somehow, things might get better:

[...] Ye good Distrest!
Ye noble Few! who here unbending stand
Beneath Life’s Pressure, yet bear up a While,
And what your bounded View, which only saw
A little Part, deem’d Evil is no more:
The Storms of Wintry Time will quickly pass,
And one unbounded Spring encircle All. (Wi, 1003-9)

These lines give the most thorough look into that dim future referenced 400 lines earlier, but it’s still not much. The social problems that Thomson has represented earlier in the poem—cathedced in the examples of the dying swain whose plight is lost amidst the bustle of urban commercial life, or of the suffering prisoners who are the victims of corrupted power—are here oversimplified in an exhortation to the “good Distrest” (1003) to stand firm beneath “Life’s Pressure” (1005). To reclassify social problems as vague “pressures” of living seems to evacuate suffering of its sociopolitical resonances. The penultimate line gestures weakly to the future with its use of the modal verb “will,” and this deployment of an unrepresentable future seems enough for Thomson to justify his encouragement to “bear up a While” (1005) under hardships. To tell
readers to wait for things to get better is potentially to ignore the sociohistorical conditions that created some of “Life’s Pressure” in the first place.

One of the more bizarre elements of Winter’s overly sanitized conclusion is its sudden transition out of extended reverie and into a future-oriented invocation of hope. The Il Penseroso-esque wandering that had characterized much of Winter resolves into a sudden exhortation to “Ye noble Few” to “yet bear up.” The ghosts with whom Thomson spent a large portion of Winter conversing with vanish in the poem’s conclusion to give way to a broader sense of hope and patience. But the poem’s transition from reverie to patience seems to maintain a sense of quietism about poetry’s relation to social problems, and thus opens on to a broader question about the utility of melancholic thinking more generally. If The Seasons is animated by a belief that poetry is capable of, in Tobias Menely’s words, “transforming the public,”41 then it is unclear how either Winter’s melancholy or its closing exhortation to patience can contribute to such transformation. How can one know that the utopic future that one waits for will actually arrive? From one perspective, the poet’s melancholic reverie, instead of resembling a virtuous social consciousness, might begin to resemble the lazy and nonindustrious ease that Thomson condemned in The Castle of Indolence. For the Thomson of The Castle of Indolence, the solitary thinker is susceptible to the threat of passivity: the “pensive melancholic Mind” is “Here lull’d” by a “certain Musick” (I.XL.352-53) and in the process, “The listening Heart [forgets] all Duties and all Cares” (I.XL.351). In The Castle of Indolence, the melancholic mind, rather than enabling a critique of Winter’s personified Luxury and its forming of “unreal Wants” (Wi, 1059), risks succumbing instead to Luxury’s seductions. The quietist note on which the poem ends would seem to confirm the readings of critics who find Thomson’s poetry to be not up to the task of ideology critique.42 The melancholic mood signifies the ecstasy of thought along with its
incapacitation: future-oriented thinking is potentially dead on arrival. Is this all that melancholy can offer?

In some ways, I think that yes, the melancholic mood as depicted in *The Seasons* does not offer immediate or thorough solutions to social problems, but I also think that its perceived insufficiency is part of the point. Melancholic thinking is not for Thomson the solution to social problems; rather, melancholic thought stages the difficult process by which a humanitarian spirit finds its footing. My claim is that Thomson’s exhortation to patience at the end of *Winter*—the hope that someday, things might improve for the impoverished widow or for the exhausted swain, even if there is no clear program for that improvement—stages a set of questions inherent to the vexed “social sense” that so thoroughly pervades the entirety of *The Seasons*. While the poem cannot resolve those questions, it fashions that irresolution as the venue in which the poem’s utopic drive is preserved, however imperfect that mode of preservation might be. Thomson’s turn to patience invokes poetry both as a response to specific social problems and as an acknowledgement of the challenges of resolving them. If Thomson’s “social sense” is an individual feeling about a social collectivity, then the poem’s invocation of a beautiful but unrepresentable future asks how individual feelings and social formations resolve into one another. How can individual feelings do anything to alleviate the suffering and inequality glossed in *Winter*’s end as “Life’s Pressure” (*Wi*, 1065)? *Winter*’s melancholic reverie is testament both to the power of feeling to produce poetic visions of a better future and to the limits of those feelings when it comes to the matter of bringing that better future about. The task of Thomson’s reverie is to draw the outline of a utopic future toward which it aspires, but which it also does not claim to be able to achieve on its own. To see the possibility of “one unbounded Spring
encircled All” (Wi, 1069) is also to come to terms with the fact that one might not be able to bring that spring about by oneself: the spring will come whether one says it will or not.

But what sustains the poetic vision of Winter’s final lines is its very insistence that the “unbounded Spring” will indeed come. “The Storms of Wintry Time will quickly pass” (Wi, 1068), and whether poetry has a hand in ending those storms or not, it persists as the venue in which their end is promised. Poetry invokes the culmination of a “stupendous Scheme of Things” (Sp, 858), but leaves its own involvement in that culmination hazy: it can promise a future, but by attributing that future to the natural passing of one season into the next—“The Storms of Wintry Time will quickly pass,” it reminds us—it admits the vexations of its own involvement in that passing. Winter’s closing lines are curiously upfront about their minimal efficacy. The utopic future will come (just as the spring does), but how it comes or what it looks like remains unclear. Winter’s end gives us a poetic voice whose intervention in social life does not and perhaps need not extend beyond the mere voicing of a promise. The melancholic reverie offers a way of promising that such a future will come, but it does not make itself directly responsible for anything further than the burden of making that promise. Winter’s end suggests that hope sometimes does not need to be instrumentalized: it survives without having to be accompanied by the demand for immediate individual action.

Thomson’s melancholy is more than just what Raymond Williams describes, with reference both to The Seasons and to Oliver Goldsmith’s “The Deserted Village,” as the transformation of poverty into an overly sanitized poetic theme. It is also the staging of an encounter between the broader material conditions that structure an emergent commercial modernity and the individual feelings that respond to those social changes. By transforming melancholic reverie into the medium through which the poetic mind predicts a better social
future encoded as an “unbounded Spring,” Thomson’s poet-speaker associates the feeling with the “social sense” that has characterized his broader poetic vision. He presents reverie thus as a social feeling—part of the harmonious relation between God, nature, labor, and life. But in tying that social feeling to the claim that the best response to suffering is patience, Thomson’s poet-speaker also suggests that this broader social sense is underwritten by a quietist drive. If later writers such as Sterne and Mackenzie would tie the feeling of sympathy to direct acts of charity—the giving of money to the poor, for instance (acts that carry important weight in both *A Sentimental Journey* and *The Man of Feeling*)—Thomson seems less concerned with the instrumentalization of his socially oriented reverie. For Thomson, such feelings are more capacious utopic, and their capaciousness means that their connection to instrumentalized personal acts is provisional. Thomson is more interested in the cultivation of audacious future-oriented vision, and such audaciousness cannot be easily instrumentalized. The poem’s “structure of feeling” is one that binds hope to the contingency that frames it. Melancholic reverie is the language of such contingency: the collision of individual conscience with a set of material conditions the unfolding of which exceeds the capacity of the individual to confront directly on their own except through poetry.

The reverie is Thomson’s attempt to think himself beyond the material conditions of his present moment but it is also his way of depicting his “social sense” as ultimately aspirational: it proceeds out of the world as it is but tries to think itself forward into a world that has not yet arrived. The melancholic reverie opens up an understanding of the social sense as a desire for social harmony that proceeds out of and is conditioned by a separation from others. James Sambrook has suggested that *Winter’s* conclusion is about Christ’s second coming,⁴⁴ but the poem itself is not as forthcoming about this, and if Thomson sees pensiveness as a way of
looking forward to life after death in the same way that a poet such as Edward Young might, he does not state the deathbound orientation of his reverie as straightforwardly. For Thomson, the future is the culmination of an idealized social sense—a set of harmonious social relations that “encircle[s] all” (Wi, 1069). Its texture and its venue remain—perhaps necessarily—unclear. While the poem can promise a utopic future for all, it does not need to make promises about where this utopia will be located or how it will come about.

And thus out of Thomson’s indulgence in the pleasures of melancholic reverie there emerges a question: whether that feeling will lapse into a languor reminiscent of the laziness that Thomson critiques in *The Castle of Indolence*, or whether it will pave the way for the meaningful social harmony to which the speaker of *The Seasons* so often gestures. The lack of resolution to this question is part of the reason why melancholy persists as such a powerful feeling for Thomson: it dramatizes the weight and the difficulty of some of the most urgent issues that frame social life. One thing that Thomson’s strange invocation of poetic melancholy might teach us is that, even in optimistic visions of a better future, the role of morally inflected personal feeling in bringing that future into view remains up for debate. If *The Seasons* is a poem centered on the poet’s “thought and feeling,” to return to James Sambrook’s phrasing as mentioned in this piece’s opening,45 then *Winter*’s vexing resolution to the melancholic reverie suggests that the poem is also about the contingent role that such feelings assume in relation to the larger sociohistorical movements that they respond to. Thomson’s invocation of melancholic feeling suggests that sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference between feeling that produces change and feeling that doesn’t, and that sometimes there’s little discernible difference between conscientiousness and solipsism. This indiscernibility, the end of *Winter* suggests, might be one of the features of being a historically situated and morally sensitive subject. To be a
conscientious subject in *Winter* is to risk lapsing into solipsism: the pensive reverie can aid both states. Melancholic feeling exemplifies some of the vexations of poetic conscientiousness. It is the staging of the question of how best to improve social life, and while it offers no clear answer to that question, its attempts to ask it both limn a utopic dimension to poetic thought and temper that utopic impulse with an acknowledgement of the instrumental limitations that frame utopic thought. Sometimes, poetry’s power resides in its staging of the question of its social force.

Melancholy emerges for Thomson as a way of thinking about the question of how social change takes shape: whether morally inflected feelings aid in the process of social reform or whether they detract from it; whether the material conditions of the historical present can accommodate visions of a utopic future, or whether they can’t. The melancholic reverie poses those questions and figures the impossibility of the poet’s being able to resolve them on his own or by his own actions. If melancholic reverie points at a horizon of utopic possibilities, it also raises its utility as a question. It is, in other words, the troping of the utopic impulse—both its expression and the demarcation of its potential limits. The melancholic reverie is the venue in which the social sense is preserved in its most insistently utopic form, even if that utopic impulse is shrouded beneath a veil of quietist inaction. Melancholy’s persistence within *The Seasons* and its association with solitary meditation on the character of social life suggests in one sense that such inaction is the price to pay for the preservation of this utopic spirit. But the poem’s gesture toward a coming “unbounded Spring” also holds open the possibility for a future—it remains unclear, perhaps by necessity, how that future is realized—in which one might not have to make that trade. If the spring is “unbound,” after all, then there are no limits to what it might make possible and what kinds of life it might make livable. If melancholic reverie cannot create that future on its own, it can at least promise its arrival. The modal “will” of the poem’s penultimate
line, “The Storms of Wintry Time will quickly pass” (Wi, 1068) in this reading assumes a palpable force: it encodes the future’s promise and the contingency of the process of getting there.

Thomsonian melancholy draws out some of the vexations of social critique more generally. In recent years, the project of critique has come under scrutiny for its supposed dogmatic sensibilities, but Thomson shows us that critique is not so much a project of mastery but of tentativeness and contingency. The danger of social critique, made visible by Thomson’s melancholy, is that the more one thinks on the object of one’s critique, the closer one runs toward stasis and the further one gets from meaningful humanitarian action. My suggestion is that Thomson’s melancholy, like the melancholy of other eighteenth-century writers, including Gray, Collins, Young, and the Warton brothers, dramatizes the difficulty of mobilizing socially conscious thought. Thomson’s melancholy figures this challenge in a way that precedes and is in some ways now, in our own historical moment, eclipsed by other, more overtly revolutionary strains: for both Thomson and for more radical political thinkers of succeeding generations, socially conscious thinking is a wager on the capacity of the mind not to think past its object. If the melancholic impulse makes legible Thomson’s drive toward social criticism, then it also makes legible his struggle to navigate between active social criticism and a corresponding if also conflicting quietism that the static melancholic posture seems to enable. Poets such as Thomson found melancholy such a powerful feeling because it gives a way of talking about a form of benevolent thought the value of which resists instrumentalization.
Notes

1 James Thomson, Autumn, in The Seasons, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), line 1005. Subsequent references to The Seasons will be cited parenthetically in text and will be abbreviated as follows: Sp for Spring, Su for Summer, Au for Autumn, Wi for Winter.


5 In his “Introduction” to The Seasons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), James Sambrook comes down on Johnson’s side: “The poet is his own subject. Standing alone, he finds in the shapes and sounds of unconscious external nature the self-conscious life of his own thought and feeling” (xxxiv).

6 John Barrell, The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 1-63. See also Tim Fulford’s Landscape, Liberty and Authority: Poetry, Criticism and Politics from Thomson to Wordsworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 18-38. In Fulford’s reading of Winter, the poet minimizes the violence
done to the rural poor by seeing their suffering as the fault of the natural elements and not of the commercial gentry whose exclusionary practices are really such suffering’s root cause.

7 In Tita Chico’s phrasing, the prospect view laid out in the poem is not objective, but is rather “the ideological product of an aristocratic subject position.” The Experimental Imagination: Literary Knowledge and Science in the British Enlightenment (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 156.

8 Raymond Williams points out that landlords in Thomson’s day were concerned to “arrange” their landscapes in such a way that landscape became synonymous with the landowner’s power. The Country and the City (London: Vintage, 2016), 178-79.

9 For Williams, Thomson provides one of the most fitting examples of this drive for landed power when, in Spring, he writes in awe of “the Height, from whose fair Brow/ The bursting Prospect spreads immense around” (Sp, 950-51, qtd. in Williams, Country, 180). The person who has the privilege of standing at such heights uses their sight as a sign of privilege.

10 Goodman, Georgic Modernity, 66.


16 Thomson follows up his invocation of the term “social sense,” for instance, with an invocation to Dodington (*Su*, 29) and with a statement of “active Zeal/ For Britain’s Glory, Liberty, and Man” (*Su*, 27-28).

17 “Preface to Winter,” 305.

18 “Preface to Winter,” 305.


Nersessian, 83.

Thomsonian melancholy can include sympathetic identification with others, but it can also extend beyond ordinary sympathy (which has a rich genealogy of its own in the eighteenth century) by its capacity to detach itself from persons and instead to pervade an entire setting. While sympathy depends on one person feeling a particular feeling directed toward another person, melancholy is more expansive, encompassing the object of one’s sympathy while also registering a general gloom about the entire setting upon which one reflects—or even about the entire universe.

Regarding Cowper, Tobias Menely suggests that “[He] was ambivalent about the rhetorical efficacy of literary sensibility.” The Animal Claim: Sensibility and the Creaturely Voice (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 158.


Williams, Country, 100.

Williams writes that, “Thomson does not, of course, resolve this range of attitudes [toward the poor], or question their contradictions” (Country, 100).


See, for instance, Koehler’s Poetry of Attention, 12.


As Tim Fulford puts it, in these instances, Thomson risks turning exploitation into a mere feature of nature (*Landscape*, 24-28).


Dustin Stewart’s *Futures of Enlightenment Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) describes how eighteenth-century poets, including Young and Thomson, staged a complex negotiation between matter and spirit. Gestures toward futurity occasion debates about the place of the human body in the afterlife.

*Preromanticism*, 24.


See Barrell’s *Ideology of Landscape*, for instance. Keenleyside takes up this question in relation to these particular lines, suggesting that what looks like disingenuousness is in fact a rendering of a near-utopic “social order that would include everything under the sun” (“Personification,” 466).

Williams, *Country*, 101, 111.