

CHAPTER XV

THE FIRST GREAT NATURE POET

I BELIEVE that you all remember how English nature poetry — at least the modern form of it — began with James Thomson, the first of the two English poets of that name. You would not be quite right in thinking, however, that Thomson actually invented something entirely new. The great mistake of historians of English literature used to be in not sufficiently insisting upon the fact that new forms of literature are not suddenly invented. Everybody is taught to remember the name of Thomson associated with the beginning of the English Romantic Movement, and the statement is so far true that it really serves very well to keep in memory the date of a strongly marked change. But the student should not forget that this change, though strongly exemplified by the work of Thomson, was not really sudden. Before Thomson there were poets who struggled in the same direction; but none of them happened to be men of great genius, and their work was not perfect enough to make a great example. Enough to say that for many years before Thomson there had been growing up gradually a new feeling about nature, a fresh desire for the expression of that feeling, a reaction against the constraint of false classicism, a wish in fact for freedom to return to that kind of natural sentiment which is properly a part of the English race character, and can be studied even in the great Anglo-Saxon poem of “Beowulf.” When a genius appeared, a great example was given of how the thing should be done. He was the first really great modern poet who did the thing in a grand way; and therefore it is not wrong to consider him as the *first great* pioneer in the

Romantic direction. But please remember that he did not exactly invent it; he only expressed with much genius the best poetical sentiment of his time.

Thomson is not now studied,—not in Japan at least, as much as he deserves to be. But I think that you all know something about his work. It contains only two poems of the highest importance; and I suppose you know that one of them is “The Seasons” and the other “The Castle of Indolence.” If you do not know much about the rest of Thomson’s works, that makes no difference. Some of them are very poor—not because the writer’s intellect was at any time weak; but because he did yield that moment to the artificial literary conventions of the age—the age of Pope. When Thomson only did what his own genius impelled him to do, he was very great. But when he tried to do as fashion in literature required him to do, he became of no consequence.

Well, the two great works by which he belongs to literature—by which he influenced almost every poet that came after him, and very particularly Tennyson and Wordsworth—are “The Seasons” and “The Castle of Indolence.” The first is a series of pictures of nature painted in blank verse. The second is a charming allegory, full of magical landscape views. It is interesting to know that Thomson was a grandson of a professional gardner; and it is probable that he inherited his love of natural beauty from his grandfather. He was born in 1700—a date very easy to remember—and died in 1748. As a child he passed some years among the Cheviot Hills on the Scottish Border and there he seems to have found much of the material for his pictures of the different seasons. He was well educated, and of his own will determined to trust to literature alone for success in life,—though his family had wished him to adopt a profession. On the whole his life was decidedly fortunate. His genius was recognized very early; and he obtained from the government an easy position,—a well-paid sinecure which enabled him to devote much of his time to literary study

Unfortunately he was naturally lazy; and his success in life did not help to make him energetic. He might have written very much more; for all his good work was done before he was 30 years of age. During the last 18 years of his life he seemed to have been very lazy indeed. But he was such an amiable and kindly person that everybody who knew him liked him. Remember that it was an age of literary hatreds and venomous envies; and that Thomson could have lived in the society of that time without making a single enemy is a very extraordinary fact. He had, however, one misfortune—the woman whom he loved would not love him. He never married, and the indolence of his last years may have been due to this disappointment.

That is all which is necessary to remember about Thomson,—the fact that he was a grandson of a gardener, and its bearing upon the direction of his artistic production and the remarkable amiability of his character. Also it will be well to remember that he was a very lazy person—for that fact has something to do with his wonderful poem—"The Castle of Indolence." We shall speak of that later. It is less important to remember that the great quatrain of "The Seasons" was not produced in the form which it now assumes; but it is worth mentioning. In the book the seasons follow the usual order "Spring," "Summer," "Autumn" and "Winter." But really "Winter" was first written and separately published,—then "Summer"—then "Spring"—and lastly, "Autumn." By good critics the poem "Winter," though the earliest of the series, is still the best. But all are good. The differences in the poetical value of the four poems of the composition really depend altogether upon the amount of *personal observation* introduced by Thomson. The only reason why "Winter" happens to be superior to the other three, is because Thomson put more of his own personal study of nature into that poem. It contains his recollections of the Cheviot Hills. In the same way the best parts of "Autumn," of "Summer," and of "Spring" are those treating of subjects which the poet had studied with his eyes and his

heart—not studied in books. Finally the verse of Thomson is something about which a few remarks ought to be made. That of “The Seasons” is in blank verse,—of which the beauty and the strength should remind you of Wordsworth or of Tennyson rather than anybody else. That is probably because both Wordsworth and Tennyson passionately studied him, but is it not almost startling, after feeling this resemblance, to remember that the verse was written about 175 years ago? There is scarcely a word, scarcely a line, which might not have been written to-day. There is nothing whatever strange or obscure in Thomson. He is one of the very easiest of all poets to read,—and if there be any characteristic fault, it is only a certain fondness for Latin words, probably inspired by the study of Milton, but according too much with the classic spirit of his time. Nevertheless the blemishes are very few and the beauties very great.

If “The Seasons” has not attracted, so far, the attention of Japanese poets to the same degree that other and more modern poems have, I imagine that it must be due to certain peculiarities in the construction of the poem—for instance, the introduction of little stories which are but indirectly related to the subject;—and still more to the fact that the student is too apt to trust to foreign direction in reading, instead of searching for himself. Naturally, the foreign critic is most likely to praise those parts of Thomson’s description which are particularly true of English or Scotch scenery. Now it just happens that some of the favorite English selections from Thomson could not please the Japanese scholar, because they deal with matter about which he has no personal knowledge—unless indeed he should have had the real chance to sojourn through the seasons in rural England. For example, Thomson has a charming picture of the sheep-washing, and the panic of the fish in the little river into which the sheep are driven to be washed. Here we have no sheep-washing; and I believe that one must travel at least to the Hokkaido in order even to see a flock of sheep grazing. Then again, many of Thomson’s birds are

only English birds—birds not known in Japan at all—so that his description of them is all lost upon the reader. But if you should select for yourselves those parts of “The Seasons” in which natural facts, common to Japan and to England, are portrayed, you would begin to enjoy the beauty of him in quite a new way. Descriptions of human nature also are to be found in Thomson which are more or less of a universal character. Of these you could not but see the merit,—they make one think of experiences not English at all. Suppose we take a little narrative about a man caught in a snow storm, and dying of cold, while his family are vainly making the house comfortable for his return. This is an incident that might happen anywhere; and you will appreciate it. The study of the man’s thoughts and fears will not be found the least powerful part of the composition. The peasant is described as having lost his way in his own field;—for the driving snow so blinds him, and so hides everything, that he can have no idea where he is. He—

sees other hills ascend,
Of unknown joyless brow; and other scenes,
Of horrid prospect, shag the trackless plain;
Nor finds the river nor the forest, hid
Beneath the formless wild; but wanders on
From hill to dale still more and more astray,
Impatient flouncing through the drifted heaps,
Stung with the thoughts of home. The thoughts of home
Rush on his nerves, and call their vigour forth
In many a vain attempt. How sinks his soul!
What black despair, what horror fills his heart
When, for the dusky spot which fancy feigned
His tufted cottage rising through the snow,
He meets the roughness of the middle waste,
Far from the track and blest abode of man,—
While round him night resistless closes fast,
And every tempest, howling o’er his head,
Renders the savage wilderness more wild!
Then throng the busy shapes into his mind

Of covered pits unfathomably deep,
 A dire descent! beyond the power of frost;
 Of faithless bogs; of precipices huge,
 Smoothed up with snow; and—what is land unknown,
 What water—of the still unfrozen spring,
 In the loose marsh or solitary lake,
 Where the fresh fountain from the bottom boils.
 These check his fearful steps; and down he sinks
 Beneath the shelter of the shapeless drift,
 Thinking o'er all the bitterness of death,
 Mixed with the tender anguish Nature shoots
 Through the wrung bosom of the dying man—
 His wife, his children, and his friends unseen.
 In vain for him the officious wife prepares
 The fire fair-blazing and the vestment warm;
 In vain his little children, peeping out
 Into the mingling storm, demand their sire
 With tears of artless innocence. Alas!
 Nor wife nor children more shall he behold,
 Nor friends nor sacred home.*

Another famous passage of “Winter” is the description of a gathering about the fire in the evening to hear ghost stories:—

Meantime the village rouses up the fire;
 While, well attested and as well believed,
 Heard solemn, goes the goblin story round,
 Till superstitious horror creeps o'er all.†

This little picture is as true of peasant life in the country to-day as it was in the last century; and equally true is the pretty description which follows of the home games on winter evenings, and the dancing and the love-making of these happy and simple people. Another celebrated passage describes the fate of the first Englishman who attempted to find the North-East passage. That was Sir Hugh Willoughby, who during the reign of Edward VI in 1553 was caught in the ice, and frozen to death with his crew. As a matter of fact, the North-East passage—that is,

* *Winter*, ll. 279—317. † *Ibid.*, ll. 617—20.

the passage from Europe to the Pacific Ocean by way of Northern Asia—was not discovered until 1891, twelve years ago, by the Danish navigator Nordenskjold* :—

Miserable they,
Who, here entangled in the gathering ice,
Take their last look of the descending sun;
While, full of death, and fierce with tenfold frost,
The long long night, incumbent o'er their heads,
Falls horrible. Such was the Briton's fate,
As with first prow (what have not Britons dared?)
He for the passage sought, attempted since
So much in vain, and seeming to be shut
By jealous Nature with eternal bars.
In these fell regions, in Arzina caught,
And to the stony deep his idle ship
Immediate sealed, he with his hapless crew,
Each full exerted at his several task,
Froze into statues,—to the cordage glued
The sailor, and the pilot to the helm.†

This description is said to be historically true. Navigators in those days had little experience in guarding themselves against the cold of the polar seas; and the captain and crew were actually found standing about the frozen ship in the attitude of working—some holding in their frozen hands the frozen ropes at which they were pulling, and the pilot grasping the tiller, but frozen to it, and himself a statue of ice.

As I said, critics generally give the preference to Thomson's "Winter," by reason of the fine verse and the fine descriptions of nature under snow. But I cannot help thinking that "Winter" is rather a dreary book,—somewhat painful to read; it makes us shiver too much. I prefer myself the books of "Spring" and "Summer,"—which I think are considerably better even than "Autumn." The two subjects which particularly deserve attention in the book of "Spring"

* Hearn misread the following note to the poem by J. L. Robertson :—"The glory of discovering the passage was left to our own day: quite recently a Danish navigator, Nordenskjold, still living (1891), sailed completely round the Old World,"—which shows that it was really discovered 1878—1880.

† *Ibid.*, ll. 920—35.

are the pages about birds, and the little sketch of married life which closes the book. The description of birds begins at line 571 and continues to line 787. Almost every kind of bird known in England is mentioned and painted with surprising truth: the nightingale, the cuckoo, the lark, the thrush, the blackbird, the bullfinch, the linnet, the jay, the rook, the daw, and the stock-dove, as well as many others. Also the poet tries to teach us the reason of their song:—

'Tis love creates their melody, and all
 This waste of music is the voice of love;
 That even to birds and beasts the tender arts
 Of pleasing teaches. Hence the glossy kind
 Try every winning way inventive love
 Can dictate, and in courtship to their mates
 Pour forth their little souls. First, wide around,
 With distant awe, in airy rings they rove,
 Endeavouring by a thousand tricks to catch
 The cunning, conscious, half-averted glance
 Of their regardless charmer. Should she seem,
 Softening, the least approbance to bestow,
 Their colours burnish, and, by hope inspired,
 They brisk advance; then, on a sudden struck,
 Retire disordered; then again approach;
 In fond rotation spread the spotted wing,
 And shiver every feather with desire.*

How pretty this is, and how true for anybody who has watched the courting of birds! Next comes the description of the nest building after the mating has been done, and all the different kinds of nests are described and the way of making them. Some make them with sticks, some of sprigs and clay, some pluck hair from cows' and wool from sheep's back, some steal straw from the barn, to build their nests. Next the poet describes the hatching—how the male feeds his little wife as she sits upon her eggs,—and how the two parents afterwards take turns in feeding the fledglings, and teaching them how to fly. The swallow, the sparrow,

* *Spring*, ll. 613—29.

the plover, the wild-duck, the heath-hen, the nightingale—all are pictured for us in their parental life; likewise even the crow, cocks and hens, turkeys, peacocks, and pigeons. But the finest description is thought to be in the lines about the eagle:—

High from the summit of a craggy cliff
Hung o'er the deep, such as amazing frowns
On utmost Kilda's shore, whose lonely race
Resign the setting sun to Indian worlds,
The royal eagle draws his vigorous young,
Strong-pounced, and ardent with paternal fire.*

But these lines were even better in an earlier edition; but from that edition it is better to quote them:

High from the summit of a craggy cliff
Hung o'er the green, *grudging* at its base,
The royal eagle draws his young, resolved
To try them at the sun. Strong-pounced, and bright
As burnished day, they up the blue sky wind,
Leaving dull sight below, and with fixed gaze
Drink in their native noon.

The splendour of the first half of the 4th line in the above is owing to an expression used in falconing. When a hawk first is set free to catch a bird, the first triumph of his power is expressed in the same way: the falconer would say, "We tried him to-day at a heron." That is, we tried to see if we could overtake it and capture it. But the father eagle is spoken of as "trying his young ones *at the sun.*" The word *pounced* is also an expression in falconry, referring of course to the talons of the birds. The line which describes the eaglets as leaving dull sight below, means rising beyond the power of feebler human sight to follow them. The eagle is one of a few birds that can look at the sun; hence the poet's description of a young bird drinking in with their eyes the light of noon-day, and gazing fixedly at the sun

* *Ibid*, ll. 754—9.

itself. As soon as the birds become a little stronger, the parent eagle drives them away to take care of themselves:—

Now fit to raise a kingdom of their own,
He drives them from his fort, the towering seat
For ages of his empire; which, in peace,
Unstained he holds, while many a league to sea
He wings his course, and preys in distant isles.*

Any person who loves nature ought to study the lines of Thomson about birds not only because they are famous, but because they are very wonderful. And all of Thomson's descriptions are wonderful from the fact that they are so condensed. He does not say a great deal about any single subject; but he suggests everything in the fewest possible words. The other subject in "Spring," from which I am going to quote—the little picture of married life and parenthood—affords many a proof of this. After all, in literature, the men of many words are never able to say much. The master uses but few words, and yet is able to express everything. The lines I am going to quote treat merely of the pleasure of watching a little child grow up and of teaching it. Two of the lines, the 7th and 8th in my quotation, are now famous wherever the English language is used.

By degrees
The human blossom blows, and every day,
Soft as it rolls along, shows some new charm,
The father's lustre and the mother's bloom.
Then infant reason grows apace, and calls
For the kind hand of an assiduous care.
Delightful task! to rear the tender thought,
To teach the young idea how to shoot,
To pour the fresh instruction o'er the mind,
To breathe the enlivening spirit, and to fix
The generous purpose in the glowing breast.†

The book of "Summer" is more interesting perhaps to

* *Ibid.*, ll. 760—7.

† *Ibid.*, ll. 1145—55.

English readers than to Japanese readers because of the descriptions of sheep and sheep-washing and sheep-shearing which it contains, — also perhaps because of a pretty but somewhat artificial story about a young girl bathing in a river while her lover secretly peeps at her from the bank. But there is one part of this book that you ought to read — the charming account of insects, which begins at the 241 line and runs to the 351. The whole of these 100 lines are not, however, about insects alone. The poet has inserted some moral and religious considerations which seem to us a little commonplace and even ridiculous to-day. But these didactic lines number only 20; — it is the remaining 80 that ought especially to be read. We must remember that in Thomson's time there was really no entomology at all, and no good microscope; very little indeed was known about insects. So little was known even about bees, that English farmers were stupid enough to kill all their bees with sulphur smoke every autumn in order to get the honey — a cruel folly which nobody would be guilty of to-day. So Thomson could write of insects only as he saw them, and his study about them is of the most general kind only. He considered them chiefly in relation to the season that gives them birth; describes their sudden apparition; their innumerable shapes, and the fates which they encounter — finding destruction in fire or water or from the fishes leaping up to catch them. He does not forget to observe the spider, spinning its web in every nook to catch victims and the crying or buzzing of the victim when caught. Neither does he forget to remind us that besides the millions of insects which you can see there are creatures innumerable which we cannot see and that a single drop of water is full of life. But his explanation is that if we could see what is in our water and our food we should probably be afraid to eat or to drink.

The book of "Autumn" contains a story — the story of Lavinia which is a very widely known story because it used to be published separately as a school text, many

years ago. It is not taught much to-day—being an attempt to tell a story like that of Ruth not in the modern English way as Tennyson would have told it, but in that pseudo-classic fashion which Pope affected. However, the story is appropriately introduced; for the subject of the first part of the book is harvest—and of course the history of a gleaner fits that subject. I do not know that you much care for the descriptions of the harvest—an English harvesting is something so different from harvesting in this country. But when the poet comes to speak of the fading of the woods and the falling of the flower and the melancholy of the season, then you would understand him better and like him more. However you would discover that even the colours of an English autumn are not like those of a Japanese autumn:—

But see, the fading many-coloured woods,
 Shade deepening over shade, the country round
 Imbrown,—a crowded umbrage, dusk, and dun,
 Of every hue from wan declining green
 To sooty dark. These now the lonesome muse,
 Low-whispering, lead into their leaf-strawn walks;
 And give the season in its latest view.*

There is a play upon the words “shade” and upon the word “umbrage”—the first meaning ghost as well as shadow, and the second a gathering of ghosts as well as a gathering of shadows. But the suggestion is classic and very lightly given. Autumn is a ghostly kind of season and the poet wants to suggest the fact of autumn by hinting of this. You will observe that the tones are not those of a Japanese landscape altogether—though we can understand them. Tennyson describes the English landscape as yellowing in autumn; Thomson speaks of it as becoming brown. But in Thomson’s time brown also signified a light tint—a yellowish brown; and he meant exactly what Tennyson meant. There are no maples of the kind that makes a beautiful

* *Autumn*, ll. 950—6.

crimson foliage; and there are very few evergreens. But if we imagine a Japanese landscape without evergreens and maples in autumn, we will find that the landscape really does yellow or imbrown as Thomson calls it. I would also suggest that Thomson's attention to melancholy and autumn is worth observing. Poets in our own time speak of this melancholy better than he did — Rossetti, for example, who wrote an exquisite poem on the subject. But remember that Thomson was really the first to make a complete description of the seasons in this way and that he had no models to help him. If this short notice of him should induce you to study his best pages, I think that you would be surprised to find in them many things commonly supposed to be of 19th century growth.