

Mediating Vision: Wordsworth's Allusions to Thomson's *Seasons* in *The Prelude*

Abstract: The importance of James Thomson's poem *The Seasons* to Wordsworth's *The Prelude* has been systematically underestimated by critics, who take at face value Wordsworth's dismissals in his prose writings of Thomson's diction. In fact *The Prelude* contains a large number of allusions to and direct borrowings from *The Seasons*. Examining three of the most significant of these allusions, this essay argues that Wordsworth turned to Thomson in order to find a language that could express communion with the external, natural world, and specifically a communion that is mediated by the 'bodily eyes', with all their flaws and susceptibility to misapprehension. As well as assisting Wordsworth to articulate the mediated character of his encounters with nature, Thomson's language acts as a mediating presence itself, both facilitating and impeding Wordsworth's relationship with another great predecessor, Milton.

Keywords: Wordsworth, Thomson, allusion, mediation, vision, Milton

The unsigned 'Memoir of William Wordsworth, Esq.', published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1819, and based mainly on information from the Wordsworths' apothecary, Richard Scambler, gives an anecdote about Wordsworth's childhood reading:

Before the morning hour of repairing to school, he has been often seen and heard in the sequestered lane... repeating aloud beautiful passages from Thomson's *Seasons*, and sometimes comparing, as they chanced to occur, the actual phenomena of nature with the descriptions given of them by the poet.¹

We might infer that Wordsworth was impressed by the accuracy and realism of James Thomson's natural description, by his 'Communion more direct and intimate / With Nature'.² This has been the standard critical reading of Thomson's *The Seasons* (published and revised between 1726 and 1746) and of its

influence on Wordsworth. As early as 1829, C. H. Townsend wrote that ‘Thomson, in his *Seasons*, had already dared to use nothing but a pencil and pallet, and his own eyes, in delineating nature... Wordsworth went a step farther, —he stripped her naked.’³ In the twentieth century, many critics like Karl Kroeber agreed that ‘The realism of the earlier poetry resides in its descriptiveness, its representation of what nature looks like’, but argued that Wordsworth moves beyond this realism: ‘He differs from his Neoclassical predecessors in that landscape gives form to his self-expression rather than serving as the subject of his contemplation.’⁴ Similarly Herbert Drennon wrote of Thomson that ‘He describes as he sees, and he takes pain to see what is actually there’, and that ‘to Wordsworth it was left to infuse with passion the themes which Thomson had treated, to enrich his treatment of them with the powers of imagination’.⁵

I wish to challenge the assumption that Thomson is, and was read by Wordsworth as, a poet of realism and immediacy, whose poetry attempts to show nature as it ‘actually’ is. Townsend’s acknowledgement of ‘eyes’, and Kroeber’s assessment that Thomson and his contemporaries represent ‘what nature looks like’ rather than simply ‘nature’, unwittingly hint at the true complexity of Thomson’s version of realism. ‘Reality’ in its common sense, referring to an external state of affairs that is known through empirical science and reason but is prior to and independent of perception, is undoubtedly present in *The Seasons*, such as in its accounts of the ‘unseen’ inhabitants of air and water and the ‘unseen’ microscopic shapes of frost crystals.⁶ It is also a feature of Wordsworth’s own poetry, who as Thomas A. Vogler convincingly argued does not invest in ‘complete subjectivity in that a primary mode of existence is attributed to the external object.’⁷ However, the accuracy of Thomson’s poetry does not always lie in delineating nature as it exists according to objective, empirical reason. Frequently Thomson’s accuracy lies in the precision with which he describes the eye’s perception of nature, with all the distortion that is involved in that act of perception.

When the young Wordsworth compared ‘the actual phenomena of nature with the descriptions given of them by the poet’, perhaps he was impressed not by their similarity but by the subtle transformations that the ‘phenomena’ had undergone in the poet’s vision. In *The Prelude*, where

Thomson's presence is less overt than in Wordsworth's earlier poetry, the language of *The Seasons* is repeatedly put to use in order to articulate an 'intermitting prospect' (*Prelude*, XII. 304), and the '[i]mpediments' between the external world and the mind, which may or may not 'make [the poet's] task more sweet.' (*Prelude*, IV. 270) For Wordsworth, Thomson represented not immediacy, but its opposite, mediation.

This will be demonstrated through examination of several key allusions to Thomson's *Seasons* in *The Prelude*. These key allusions are the stalking shepherd episode in Book VIII, the 'jutting eminence' episode in Book II, and the drowned man episode in Book V.

In borrowing Thomson's language to express the natural and sensory forms of mediation that affect perception, Wordsworth invokes another kind: the mediation of his own experience through his past reading. Walter Jackson Bate argued that the Romantics wrote about nature because they felt that 'the poet who turns bravely and directly to nature, to external reality, will tap a perennial mountain of subject matter', and will discover a source of originality, instead of writing 'poetry produced largely from the soil of past poetry.'⁸ That is, confronting nature directly was a way for Romantic poets to avoid confronting their predecessors. When the poet of *The Prelude* 'turns bravely and directly to nature, to external reality,' however, he discovers not only that the mediation of his mind and senses prevent truly 'direct' communion, but that what communion he can achieve is already shaped by his past reading. Thomson's language helps Wordsworth to articulate forms of mediation, but becomes itself another such form, interposing between Wordsworth and nature, and also between Wordsworth and another of the great external forces whose influence he both desires and fears: Milton.

ALLUSION

There is clear evidence that Thomson's poetry was important to Wordsworth, and not only in his earlier years when poems like *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* bore a superficial resemblance to Thomson's style. We know that Wordsworth did not cease to read Thomson as he got older. Between

1809 and 1811 he read the 1730 edition of *The Seasons*, when it was given to him by a friend.⁹ He continued to praise Thomson in his letters; he carried into the 1820s an idea to write ‘a short life of [Thomson], prefixed to a Volume’ of Thomson’s poetry.¹⁰ Yet Wordsworth’s linguistic indebtedness to Thomson has been systematically underestimated by critics, probably in part due to Wordsworth’s notorious critique of eighteenth-century ‘poetic diction’ in his ‘Preface to the Lyrical Ballads’,¹¹ and his ‘Essay, Supplementary to the Preface’ in which he criticises Thomson’s ‘vicious style’ and ‘false ornaments’.¹² Critical editions of *The Prelude* refer only to the handful of very overt allusions to Thomson, such as the reference to ‘the Bard, who sang / of the Enchanter Indolence’ (*Prelude*, VI. 180-1). Yet Edwin Stein, in his study of 1,300 of Wordsworth’s allusions, counts thirty-five to Thomson—far fewer than the 550 to Milton, but the same number as to Coleridge and more than to Virgil, Pope, Collins, Cowper, or Burns.¹³ There remains much work to be done in analysing Wordsworth’s use of this important source.

Before going on to examine the allusions to *The Seasons* in *The Prelude*, it is necessary to address some potential methodological issues. Another possible reason for the neglect of Wordsworth’s use of Thomson’s language is Thomson’s close association with other poets who appear similar. Whereas ‘Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton are special cases,’ Stein writes, ‘whose relationship to Wordsworth is particularized and dialectical, richly allusive in the primary sense of invoking an interplay of contexts... Thomson, Gray, Collins, and Coleridge... are often subsumed into the glancingly reminiscent, collegial, yet self-distancing and evolutionary relationship that Wordsworth had with the eighteenth century.’ (Stein, 14) Similarly, Carol Landon and Jared Curtis warn that ‘common features’ that occur in the works of Thomson and Wordsworth ‘tend to be ones that are familiar in rural and topographical poetry in general and should not be overstressed.’¹⁴ In searching for and analysing allusions to Thomson, I have been mindful of those moments when the Thomsonian language is itself mediated by later eighteenth-century poetry (notably Akenside and Collins).¹⁵ All the same, I want to make the case for the particular importance of Thomson, not just as a representative of a past style of poetry, but as a crucial source for

Wordsworth's understanding of the relationship between mind and nature, and between himself and Milton.

There is also the question of Wordsworth's consciousness of his own allusive practices. Following Lucy Newlyn, I use the terms "allusion" and "allusiveness" as general rather than technical terms, covering both conscious and unconscious usage', and furthermore agree that allusions 'that are unconscious are no less valid or interesting to the reader.'¹⁶ Yet it is worth asking how much we ought to make of any specific allusion: is Wordsworth alluding to Thomson and what he stands for in a general sense, or to precise moments in Thomson's poetry for precise reasons? Stein notes that 'Wordsworth's... reputation as a writer relying on Romantic inspiration, gropings guided by feeling, and unintellectual coherence makes him more vulnerable to accusations of unconscious self-undermining. Yet despite the justice of some of these accusations,' Stein argues that Wordsworth 'was a highly self-conscious maker of poems, aware of the vast majority of literary echoes in his poems at some stage in their passage from birth to final form.' (Stein, 4) When we accept that Wordsworth's use of Thomson's language is carefully crafted and considered, the layers of contradiction as well as corroboration that are brought into play by the allusions are found to contribute important and sophisticated meanings to Wordsworth's poetry.

THE STALKING SHEPHERD

For both Thomson and Wordsworth, the mind's relation to the external world of nature is mediated by the senses, and particularly by the faculty of sight. A medium both facilitates and impedes access; sight allows the poet to perceive and engage with nature, but it also has its limitations. These are exacerbated when nature confounds and misleads the sense with its own obscurities such as mists, dim light, or deceptive shapes: 'A faint erroneous Ray, / Glanc'd from th' imperfect Surfaces of Things, / Flings half an Image on the straining Eye' ('Summer', 1687-9).

My reading of Thomson—and, I suggest, Wordsworth's reading of Thomson—is an alternative to the one offered by Patricia Meyer Spacks in *The Poetry of Vision*.¹⁷ Spacks also challenges the standard

view of Thomson as a poet of accurate visual description, arguing that he recognises the limitations in language, in the physical sense of vision, and in the capacity of the imagination to form a real picture of nature. But Spacks argues that Thomson ‘solved the problem’ by diverting his attention from the visual to the mental; from sight to insight; from vision in its literal, physical sense, to the ‘visionary’, in its poetic sense of imaginative and unreal (Spacks, 47). Spacks is right to note that at times, Thomson’s descriptions are not as visual or detailed as readers often assume. However, for the sake of her argument she underplays the real visual richness and the detail of physical description that are features of Thomson’s poetry at other points. Thomson registers the limitations of sensual vision not only in retreats into the abstract and philosophical, but in his depictions of flaws, distortions, or disturbances in vision. The importance of this quality of *The Seasons* for the development of Romantic subjectivity in nature poetry has not been properly addressed.

The first allusion that I want to examine is one in which natural and sensory forms of mediation are explicit. The ‘stalking shepherd’ scene in Book VIII is one of the few Thomsonian allusions that has been noted by editors, though the sheer density of quotations from *The Seasons* in this section of *The Prelude* has not been acknowledged. The whole of Wordsworth’s panegyric on shepherds is couched in Thomsonian language: ‘awful Solitudes’ (222) is taken from ‘Summer’, where ‘great *Nature* dwells / In awful Solitude’ (702-3) (Akenside had turned this into the plural ‘awful Solitudes’ in the revised version of his 1744 blank-verse poem *The Pleasures of Imagination*);¹⁸ ‘And when the Spring / looks out’ (229-30) recalls Thomson’s ‘Look’d out the joyous SPRING, look’d out and smil’d’ (‘Winter’, 16); ‘His staff portending like a Hunter’s Spear’ (246) takes us back to ‘Advancing full on the protended Spear’ (‘Autumn’, 462); then we reach the moment of climactic (remembered) vision:

By mists bewildered, suddenly mine eyes
 Have glanced upon him distant a few steps,
 In size a Giant, stalking through thick fog,
 His sheep like Greenland bears; or, as he stepped

Beyond the boundary line of some hill-shadow,
 His form hath flashed upon me, glorified
 By the deep radiance of the setting sun[.] (VIII. 264-70)

These ‘spots of time’ in *The Prelude* (XII. 208) are the moments when, in Harold Bloom’s words, we most feel the poetry’s ‘strong sense of being alone with the universe, with no myth or figure to mediate between ego and phenomena’.¹⁹ But though Wordsworth dismisses other literary sources, claiming his shepherd to be ‘Far more of an imaginative Form / Than the gay Corin of the groves’ (284-5), there has been another figure stalking the poetry since the first allusive moment when we were told, ingenuously, of ‘him who treads, / Companionless, your awful Solitudes!’ (221-2) That figure is James Thomson, from whose ‘Autumn’ Wordsworth’s stalking shepherd descends:

Indistinct on Earth,
 Seen thro’ the turbid Air, beyond the Life,
 Objects appear; and, wilder’d, o’er the Waste
 The Shepherd stalks gigantic. Till at last
 Wreath’d dun around, in deeper Circles still
 Successive closing, sits the general Fog
 Unbounded o’er the World; and, mingling thick,
 A formless grey Confusion covers all. (724-31)

Thomson shows Wordsworth ways of representing several forms of mediation. One is caused by external nature itself, as it obscures or distorts other elements of nature. It is the mists, the fog, the uncertain light. Elsewhere in *The Seasons*, as Marjorie Hope Nicolson observes, extreme light and heat have the same effect (‘The too resplendent Scene / Already darkens on the dizzy Eye; / And double Objects dance’ (‘Summer’ [1727 edn], 338-40)).²⁰ Snow can also have this effect, as Mary A. Favret has

explored.²¹ Jonathan Kramnick has shown with his masterful close readings how Thomson is alert to the three-dimensional spatial quality of images, and to the mediation of air itself: ‘Thomson’s eye moves along the surface of crowded space, so even air teams [*sic*] with bugs, dust, and droplets’, such as the passage in ‘Autumn’ in which the ‘blueish mist of animals’ shades and shapes the view of the plum behind it (670).²² ‘The various mists that drift through the poem,’ writes Kevis Goodman, ‘might alert us to Thomson’s self-consciousness about sensory mediation and to the possibility that his grasp of other kinds of mediation and extension may be more complicated than it has seemed.’²³

These natural, external forms of mediation complement and enhance another: the senses’ distortion of reality, and the mind’s accompanying misjudgment. Here, it is the effects of the dim light and fog combined with the eyes’ inability to deal with them that transforms the shepherd into a giant: nature, eye, and mind might work together sometimes to reveal truth, but at other times they collaborate to mislead, or at least to produce a different kind of truth from ‘the actual phenomena’ of external reality. Goodman’s analysis of mediation in *The Seasons* teases out the complex relationship between external and internal acts of mediation: in her reading, it is the multiplicity of reality (e.g. the millions of organisms that are revealed by the microscope to exist everywhere) combined with the limitations of both mind and senses in processing information on this scale that brings about the disjunction between two versions of reality—that which is known to be ‘real’, and that which is perceived.

In *The Prelude* Wordsworth is suspicious of ‘the bodily eye’, calling it ‘[t]he most despotic of our senses’ (XII. 128-9), and condemning the Thomsonian ‘microscopic view’ as ‘a taste / Less Spiritual’ (XII. 90-1). Statements like these have led some readers to identify overly simplistic dichotomies in Wordsworth’s poetry, between sight and insight, or between sight and other senses that seem more pure and trustworthy. Adam Potkay, for example, contrasts the mediated nature of sight (its supposed corruption by physical phenomena like mist, but also by culture, class, and literature) and its ‘appropriative’, dominating relation to nature, with the more immediate and receptive faculty of hearing.²⁴ However Wordsworth’s poetic ‘vision’ is involved with physical vision, with sight as well as insight, to the extent that the two cannot be properly distinguished, let alone severed. Here in *The Prelude* the

‘glory’ of the poetic vision is the result of the visual distortion. The allusions to Thomson’s poetry alert us to an important source for Wordsworth’s understanding that sight could offer material for poetic vision even, or perhaps most, when it did not present to the mind ‘the actual phenomena of nature’.

Another Romantic poet who may be called to mind here is Keats, whose use of mists and mistiness has recently been explored in this journal by Alexandra Paterson.²⁵ I would suggest that Thomson is an important influence for Keats as well as Wordsworth, and adds a useful dimension to Paterson’s argument that, for Keats, mist acts as both ‘inhibitor’ and ‘facilitator for thought’ (260), and as a ‘meeting place for Keats and the authors, times and places he is displaced from’ (264). Wordsworth was just as alert to the potential power of mediating mists, and mediating relationships with other writers, and it is through his poetry that we get the clearest view of Thomson’s place in the development of Romantic vision.

THE JUTTING EMINENCE

The poetic vision that is produced out of the eyes’ inaccurate vision is fundamentally ambivalent, revealing simultaneously the mind’s power over nature and its weakness. This ambivalence is captured best in Book II of *The Prelude*, when Wordsworth recalls how as a child

[I] sate

Alone upon some jutting eminence
 At the first gleam of dawn-light, when the Vale,
 Yet slumbering, lay in utter solitude.
 How shall I seek the origin, where find
 Faith in the marvellous things which then I felt?
 Oft in these moments such a holy calm
 Would overspread my soul, that bodily eyes
 Were utterly forgotten, and what I saw

Appeared like something in myself, a dream,
 A prospect in the mind. (343-53)

This appears to be a description of *unmediated* communion with nature, in which Wordsworth absorbs the external scene so utterly that it seems ‘like something in myself’. He rejects ‘bodily eyes’, the primary vehicle of poetry in *The Seasons*. Yet if the allusion in this passage is followed to its source, Wordsworth’s experience appears in a different light. ‘Jutting eminence’ is taken from Thomson’s ‘Summer’:

Day after Day,
 Sad on the jutting Eminence he sits,
 And views the Main that ever toils below;
 Still fondly forming in the farthest Verge,
 Where the round Ether mixes with the Wave,
 Ships, dim-discover’d, dropping from the Clouds.²⁶
 At Evening, to the setting Sun he turns
 A mournful Eye, and down his dying Heart
 Sinks helpless[.] (941-9)

Thomson describes the way in which nature’s own obscurities (the blurred changeability of clouds and waves, the dying of the light at evening) combine with the weakness of man’s vision (the straining of his sight at the horizon) and mind (his hopes and fantasies) to impose dream-images upon reality. There is in one sense a close communion with nature, in the world’s receptiveness to be imposed upon, and in the pathetic fallacy between the setting sun and the sinking heart. At the same time, however, a disjunction is highlighted between man’s perception and external reality; nature and the senses are sympathetic to man’s feelings, but also deceptive, leading him away from reality into solipsism.

What does it mean for Wordsworth to use ‘jutting eminence’ here, to allude to a sorrowful and troubling episode of *The Seasons* when he is claiming to have forgotten ‘bodily eyes’ and is framing this as positive evidence of power? Wordsworth is decontextualising Thomson’s language and suppressing the melancholy aspect of Thomson’s passage, which is about the delusive potential of Man’s and nature’s ‘ennobling interchange’ (*Prelude*, XIII. 374). Yet we know that Wordsworth was aware of this passage’s point about the dangers and deceptions of solipsism, since he echoes it in Book III in the simile of ‘a lone shepherd on a promontory, / Who, lacking occupation, looks far forth / Into the boundless sea, and rather makes / Than finds what he beholds.’ (516-19) Wordsworth’s quotation of ‘jutting eminence’ is an encoded meaning, and the ghosts of Thomson’s false forms haunt Wordsworth’s question, ‘where [shall I] find / Faith[...]?’ Reading Wordsworth’s lines in the context of their Thomsonian source draws our attention to the self-delusion that is present in the later passage: whereas Thomson’s man mistakes the products of his imagination for external reality, Wordsworth mistakes the external world of nature for a product of his own imagination. Binding the internal and external together, mediating the complex ‘communion’ between nature and the mind, and producing the disturbing yet powerful poetic visions in each of these passages, are the ‘bodily eyes’. Wordsworth may *forget* his ‘bodily eyes’, but he does not dismiss or deny the role they play; it is his eyes’ response to the uncertain ‘dawn-light’ that gives the prospect its dream-like quality, as much as any creative power in Wordsworth’s mind.

There is another kind of mediation, alongside this interplay of external, sensory, and psychological prisms, that is invoked through these allusions to Thomson. This is the mediation involved in the act of allusion itself, when the poet’s experience, or his articulation of experience, is filtered through another poet’s language. In the phrase ‘Alone upon some jutting eminence’, the presence of Thomson is at once proclaimed, in the quotation, and declaimed, in the assertion of solitude. In the lines that follow this passage, Wordsworth reiterates his claim to independence:

‘Twere long to tell

What spring and autumn, what the winter snows,

And what the summer shade, what day and night,
 Evening and morning, sleep and waking thought
 From sources inexhaustible, poured forth
 To feed the spirit of religious love,
 In which I walked with Nature. But let this
 Be not forgotten, that I still retained
 My first creative sensibility,
 ...

An auxiliar light

Came from my mind which on the setting sun
 Bestowed new splendor; the melodious birds,
 The fluttering breezes, fountains that run on
 Murmuring so sweetly in themselves, obeyed
 A like dominion; and the midnight storm
 Grew darker in the presence of my eye;
 Hence my obeisance, my devotion hence,
 And hence my transport. (353-77)

Wordsworth prevaricates over the sources of his vision, acknowledging the seasons' influence, then insisting on his 'plastic power' and 'forming hand' (363, 364), before admitting that these are '[s]ubservient strictly to external things' (368), then declaring again that these external things obey the 'dominion' of his mind and senses. Hanging underneath this passage, the shadow of the ambiguous relationship between Wordsworth and nature which is treated explicitly, is his ambiguous relationship with Thomson. Given that Wordsworth quoted Thomson's 'jutting eminence' just nine lines earlier, it is not a bold leap to read these lines on the seasons as partially about *The Seasons*, or the 'setting sun', upon which Wordsworth's mind bestows 'new splendor', as Thomson's 'setting sun' in his own 'jutting

eminence' passage. Wordsworth recognises the influence of *The Seasons* upon the 'spirit' of his bond with nature, just as he recognises the influence of nature upon his mind, but he insists upon his own autonomy and originality. The seasons are rejected as a subject for his poetry and *The Seasons* displaced as a first cause in Wordsworth's development. Not only is Thomson's passage rewritten, his 'setting sun' apparently improved upon, but Wordsworth's 'creative sensibility' is—provocatively, under the circumstance of heavy reference to an older poet—called 'first'.

THE DROWNED MAN AND MILTON

The fear stimulating these insistencies is not only that his prior reading of *The Seasons* has affected his writing, compromising his claims to linguistic originality, but that it might have mediated the original experience itself, which Wordsworth is now remembering and which is the subject of his writing. This would compromise his claims to original vision as well as original articulation. Wordsworth knew this to be a real possibility, as we see in this third major allusion. Wordsworth remembers how, as a young boy, he witnessed the dragging of Esthwaite to recover the body of a drowned man:

The succeeding day,
 Those unclaimed garments, telling a plain tale,
 Drew to the spot an anxious Crowd; some looked
 In passive expectation from the shore,
 While from a boat others hung o'er the deep,
 Sounding with grappling irons and long poles.
 At last, the dead Man, 'mid that beauteous scene
 Of trees and hills and water, bolt upright
 Rose, with his ghastly face: a spectre shape
 Of terror, yet no soul-debasing fear,

Young as I was, a Child not nine years old,
 Possessed me; for my inner eye had seen
 Such sights before, among the shining streams
 Of fairey land, the forest of romance;
 Their spirit hallowed the sad spectacle
 With decoration and ideal grace;
 A dignity, a smoothness, like the works
 Of Grecian Art, and purest Poesy. (V. 444-61)

Despite the twilight and shadows, Wordsworth claims that he sees 'distinctly' (438), and that the reality of the situation is 'plain'. Yet as the man's body is raised, 'a spectre shape / Of terror', the boy's natural response is modified for his 'inner eye had seen / Such sights before' in books. His vision at the time was mediated by the memories of reading, as these memories 'hallowed the sad spectacle'. In addition, his memory and later articulation of this vision is mediated by books he has read, for as the dead man is raised, so too is the 'spirit' of Thomson.

At some time around 1831 or '32, Wordsworth added to this episode the phrase 'hung o'er the flood', then altered 'flood' to 'deep' (448). 'Hung o'er the deep' is a direct quotation from both 'Spring' ('High from the Summit of a craggy Cliff, / Hung o'er the Deep, such as amazing frowns / On utmost *Kilda's* Shore' (755-7)), and 'Autumn' ('Hung o'er the Deep, / That ever works beneath his sounding Base' (796-7)). That the 'Autumn' passage should have stuck in Wordsworth's mind is unsurprising: it is a powerful one beseeching mankind's 'Genius' to 'trace the secrets of the dark abyss!' (777-8) The 'Spring' passage describes a father eagle pushing his young from the nest to fly for themselves. A Freudian or perhaps Bloomian reading of Wordsworth's attraction to this episode suggests itself. More importantly, these lines from 'Spring' refer back to another line by Milton, which describes the border between Earth and Heaven: 'The rest was craggie cliff, that overhung'.²⁷ Wordsworth has taken Thomson's reworking of this line for his own poem rather than the original, but the Miltonic line and the

fact of its mediation through years of poetry between are real presences in Wordsworth's poem too. Thus, the raising of the drowned man from the dark lake ought to be read, in part, as an allegorising of what is going on in Wordsworth's poetry at the level of intertextuality. All these lines of poetry form layers, lurking somewhere beneath the surface of Wordsworth's own lines, which melt into one another and melt too into the experience itself, so that seeing, being, reading, and writing become almost inseparable.²⁸

The image of 'hanging' is a crucial one in *The Prelude*. It has been examined extensively (most so by Paul de Man in his 1967 lecture on 'Time and History in Wordsworth')²⁹ so it is all the more surprising that no-one has recognised its Thomsonian pedigree. Wordsworth wrote at some length on the word 'hangs' in his 'Preface to Poems' of 1815, but he wrote of its use by Virgil, Shakespeare, and Milton, particularly Milton's figurative depiction of Satan flying: 'As when farr off at Sea a Fleet descri'd / Hangs in the Clouds' (*Paradise Lost*, II. 636-7). 'Here', Wordsworth writes of Milton's usage, 'is the full strength of the imagination involved in the word, *hangs*... taking advantage of its appearance to the senses, the Poet dares to represent [the fleet] as *hanging in the clouds*'.³⁰ We are reminded of Thomson's ships 'dropping from the Clouds' in his 'jutting eminence' passage—a passage, like Milton's, in which the 'appearance to the senses', notably different from objective reality, dictates the literary presentation of those ships.

On 28th August 1811, in a letter to Sir George Beaumont, Wordsworth remembered the strength of this image and in his expression of it, Milton's passage and Thomson's are imperceptibly blended together:

It was about the hour of sunset, and the sea was perfectly calm; and in a quarter where its surface was indistinguishable from the western sky, hazy, and luminous with the setting Sun, appeared a tall sloop-rigged vessel, magnified by the atmosphere through which it was viewed, and seeming rather to hang in the air than to float upon the waters. Milton compares the appearance of Satan to a *fleet* descried far off at sea; the visionary grandeur and beautiful form of this *single* vessel,

could words have conveyed to the mind the picture which Nature presented to the eye, would have suited his purpose as well as the largest company of vessels[.]³¹

The magnifying effect of the mist from Thomson's stalking shepherd passage, the hazy horizon from his 'jutting eminence' passage, and the setting sun from both these episodes, filter Wordsworth's interpretation of his own vision that was already involved with Milton's writing. (Thomson must have been in Wordsworth's mind as he wrote this letter: he had quoted six lines from *The Castle of Indolence* earlier in the same paragraph.) As he struggles for words to convey what he saw, he turns to Thomson's words, and Thomson's thoughts, who was most able of all poets to translate into poetry 'the picture which Nature presented to the eye', even when the picture which nature presents is not that of objective, external reality. Whether the poetry of his predecessors is assisting Wordsworth in finding 'words to convey' his own original vision, or whether it is acting as a prism that predetermines or distorts the 'appearance to the senses', is impossible to tell. The latter is a definite possibility, as Wordsworth described in the drowned man episode the power of past reading to shape his perception at the moment of experience, not just at the moment of articulation.

Wordsworth does not mention Thomson in his eulogy on the word 'hangs' in the *Preface*, but when he remembered the men dragging the lake and envisioned them 'hanging' from their boats, it was to Thomson, not Milton directly, that he turned. Just as Wordsworth alludes to Thomson in order to express the eye's vision in all its mediated complexity, he alludes to Thomson in order to invoke Thomson himself as a mediating presence in Wordsworth's relationship with Milton.

The strongest reading of Wordsworth's use of allusion has, I believe, been that of Sharon M. Setzer. Her approach reconciles the two opposing approaches to Wordsworth's allusions, which see either the poetry of Milton as the single dominant source text, or the 'concept of the labyrinth' of multiple sources as 'a new interpretive center, an essentialist foreconceit to which everything that matters in Wordsworth's poetry must be referred.'³² I agree with Setzer's conclusion: that Milton's poetry does not provide a stable source of meaning for Wordsworth, but nor is his very real influence lost in a Daedalian

mess of source material to which we can lazily give up our search for meaning. It is necessary at least to try to follow Wordsworth's allusions to their sources, even when the route is convoluted, in order to understand the poetry; 'to do more to come to terms with those moments when the Miltonic subtext contributes to the multiplicity of that something else.' (Setzer, 368) Setzer notes that 'the lines of influence leading from Milton to Wordsworth and Coleridge are complicated by numerous eighteenth-century Miltonic imitations', and offers David Mallet as an example of a poet whose 'transformations' of Milton 'established a precedent' for Wordsworth in his use of the same Miltonic material. (373-4) Taking up Setzer's suggestions for how to read Wordsworth's allusions, I would argue that Thomson is a primary mediating figure in the model that she outlines.

Frequently it has been observed that 'Wordsworth believed he could show that Paradise need be no distant and disabling myth but could be recreated in the individual's living relationship to the world around him/her',³³ that 'Wordsworth salutes the immediate possibility of this earthly paradise naturalizing itself in the here and now.' (Bloom, *Visionary Company*, 121) Not only Milton's Paradise but his Satan is subtly altered in Wordsworth's allusions to *Paradise Lost*; it is the 'visionary grandeur and beautiful form' of Milton's Satan, rather than his evil, that lingers in Wordsworth's mind and writing. Christopher Ricks identifies a central characteristic of Wordsworth's allusions as 'his particular gift for reversing an ugly or unlovely impulse into a dignified chastening one.'³⁴ But it is not precisely correct to say that Wordsworth is 'reversing' the impulses of Milton's poetry. Rather he is fulfilling an evolutionary process that Thomson (along with other eighteenth-century poets) had already set in motion. Identifying the intermediary presence of Thomson in Wordsworth's use of 'Hung' in the drowned man episode helps us to understand how Milton's Satanic use of 'hangs' has become, for Wordsworth, something noble though still ambivalent: an expression of the mind's potential transformative power. Recognising Thomson's place in the story adds some much-needed nuance to the critical commonplace that, in Bloom's words, 'Milton is the ancestor; Wordsworth, the great revisionist.'³⁵

The modification of Milton's poetry by Thomson's is a pattern that can be seen repeatedly in *The Prelude*. This was not unusual at the time of Wordsworth's composition; one can consider a work like the

libretto to Haydn's *Die Schöpfung* (1798), ostensibly based on Book VII of *Paradise Lost* but owing at least as much to *The Seasons*' natural description, to perceive Thomson's insidious influence on contemporary readings of Milton.³⁶ Thomsonian allusions tend to crop up at moments of *The Prelude* where Milton's presence is most felt. Even the overtly Miltonic vision in Book XIV, when Wordsworth 'rose / As if on wings, and saw beneath me stretched / Vast prospect of the world which I had been / And was' (381-4), has a debt to Thomson. As well as alluding to several of Milton's 'stretched' prospects (*Paradise Lost*, V. 86-9, XI. 380; *Paradise Regained*, III. 253-4), these lines take 'vast' from 'Summer': 'Plains immense / Lie stretch'd below, interminable Meads, / And vast Savannahs, where the wandering Eye, / Unfixt, is in a verdant Ocean lost.' (690-3) Thomson's 'immense' is of course a quotation from Milton's episode of Eve's dream (V. 88), 'plain' and 'verdant' are allusions to the passage from *Paradise Regained*, and 'stretched' is taken from all three of Milton's episodes; the connection between Thomson's and Milton's passages was already made for Wordsworth to notice and develop. From Thomson's interpretation of the episode, Wordsworth has taken 'vast', but also the softening of the elements of evil and fear in Milton's passages to the more subtle sense of being dazzled by the extent of the poetic task at hand.

Is Thomson's example something positive for Wordsworth, showing him the way to hidden potential positivity in Milton's language, and allowing Wordsworth to exert his own will upon his predecessor's words? Or does Thomson tempt Wordsworth to misreading, in which either Milton's poetry is emptied of its original meaning, or those original, darker meanings lurk uncontrolled beneath the surface of Wordsworth's verse? Thomson is acting as a mediator and his poetry as a medium, in both senses of the words: simultaneously facilitating and impeding access. In articulating his relationship with Milton, as with nature, Thomson offers Wordsworth a language that both expresses the power of his own mind and suggests some kind of error in perception.

The error, though, is fruitful: it is the source of poetic vision, the point at which the mind can be seen to respond to a powerful influence, but also to act upon it. Mediation may prevent 'Communion more direct and intimate', but whether it numbs the child Wordsworth to the sight of a drowned man or

divests Milton's poetry of its Satanic meaning, the mediated character of his communion with the external world also allows Wordsworth to create 'new splendor'. It is the fact of their being false visions of reality that invests the giant shepherd, the idealised drowned corpse, and the hanging ships, with their importance, and that demonstrates the creative and receptive power of the poet's vision.

This essay is adapted from my doctoral dissertation at Cambridge University: 'Reading Time in *Paradise Lost*, *The Seasons*, and *The Prelude*'. This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

¹ Anon., 'Memoir of William Wordsworth, Esq.', *New Monthly Magazine*, 11 (1819), 48-50, 48. Quoted by Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading, 1770-1799* (Cambridge, 1993), 136.

² William Wordsworth, *The Fourteen-Book Prelude*, ed. W. J. B. Owen (Ithaca, 1985), XI. 29-30. Subsequent references will be incorporated parenthetically in the text.

³ C. H. Townsend, 'An Essay on the Theory and the Writings of Wordsworth. Part III', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 26 (1829), 774-88, 781.

⁴ Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Landscape Vision: Constable and Wordsworth* (Madison, 1975), 88-9.

⁵ Herbert Drennon, 'Scientific Rationalism and James Thomson's Poetic Art', *Studies in Philology*, 31.3 (1934), 453-71, 468, 471.

⁶ James Thomson, *The Seasons*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford, 1981), 'Summer', 311, 'Winter', 717. Subsequent references will be incorporated parenthetically in the text.

⁷ Thomas A. Vogler, *Preludes to Vision* (Berkeley, 1971), 65.

⁸ Walter Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (London, 1971), 112-3.

⁹ Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading, 1800-1815* (Cambridge, 1993), 226.

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, 'To Alexander Dyce, 12 January 1829', in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ed. De Selincourt, 2nd edn, *The Later Years, Part 2, 1829-1834*, ed. Alan G. Hill (Oxford, 2000), 3.

¹¹ William Wordsworth, 'Preface and Appendix to Lyrical Ballads', in *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, ed. W. J. B. Owen (London, 1974), 68-98, 74.

¹² William Wordsworth, 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface', in *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, 192-218, 204.

¹³ Edwin Stein, *Wordsworth's Art of Allusion* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1988), 10. Stein admits that his study is inexhaustive; I believe there to be a far greater number of allusions to Thomson in Wordsworth's poetry.

¹⁴ *Early Poems and Fragments, 1785-1797*, eds Carol Landon and Jared Curtis (Ithaca, 1997), 417.

¹⁵ An example of Collins's involvement in the relationship between Wordsworth, Thomson, and Milton is demonstrated by Stein. Stein shows that Wordsworth's poem 'Remembrance of Collins' engages with Milton's 'Il Penseroso', and that this engagement is 'mediated' not only by Collins's poem 'Ode on the Death of Mr. Thomson' but by the mediating figures—the Wartons, Thomson, Phillips—that shaped Collins's own reading of Milton. (Stein, 22)

¹⁶ Lucy Newlyn, *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion* (Oxford, 1986), ix, vii.

¹⁷ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Poetry of Vision* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967).

¹⁸ *The Poetical Works of Mark Akenside* (2 vols, Philadelphia, 1804), ii. I. 691

¹⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (London, 1961), 129.

²⁰ Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Newton Demands the Muse: Newton's Opticks and the Eighteenth-Century Poets* (Princeton, 1946), 96.

²¹ Mary A. Favret, 'Still Winter Falls', *PMLA*, 124.5 (2009), 1548-61.

²² Jonathan Kramnick, 'An Aesthetics and Ecology of Presence', *European Romantic Review*, 26 (2015), 315-27, 320.

²³ Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2004), 41.

²⁴ Adam Potkay, *Wordsworth's Ethics* (Baltimore, 2012), 14.

²⁵ Alexandra Paterson, “‘A Greater Luxury’: Keats’s Depictions of Mistiness and Reading”, *Romanticism*, 198.3 (2012), 260-9.

²⁶ Wordsworth used ‘dim-discover’d’ in his 1793 *Descriptive Sketches* (it had come via Collins’s *Manners* (l. 2) and *Ode to Evening* (l. 37). The original *Sketches* describe herds of sheep ‘Hung dim-discover’d on the dangerous steep’ (l. 427)—another instance of the word ‘Hung’ being associated with Thomson, as this essay explores.

²⁷ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Oxford, 2007), IV. 547. Subsequent references will be incorporated parenthetically in the text.

²⁸ Recognition of this intertextuality adds another dimension to Susan Wolfson’s point that ‘the image of the drowned man, its sad spectacle seemingly lodged in the safe house of books [...is] revealed to play within the mind in an endless spectacle of reading and rereading.’ (‘Revision as Form: Wordsworth’s Drowned Man’, in *William Wordsworth’s The Prelude: A Casebook*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 2006), 73-121, 108.)

²⁹ Paul de Man, *Romantic and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. E. S. Burt, Kevin Newmark, Andrzej Warminski (Baltimore, 1993), 74-94. De Man also proclaims the significance of ‘hangs’ for Wordsworth in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, though goes into less detail than in the lecture (New York, 1989), 88-9.

³⁰ ‘Preface to Poems’, in *Wordsworth’s Literary Criticism*, 175-91, 180-1.

³¹ William Wordsworth, ‘To Sir George Beaumont, 28 August 1811’, in Christopher Wordsworth, *Memoirs of William Wordsworth* (2 vols, London, 1851), i. 278.

³² Sharon M. Setzer, ‘Excursions in the Wilderness: Wordsworth’s Visionary Kingdoms and the Typography of Miltonic Revision’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 30 (1991), 367-89, 367.

³³ Robin Jarvis, *Wordsworth, Milton and the Theory of Poetic Relations* (London, 1991), 81.

³⁴ Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford, 2002), 108.

³⁵ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1997), 34.

³⁶ See for detailed analysis of Thomson's mediation of Milton in Haydn's adaptation Neil Jenkins, 'The Libretto of Haydn's "The Creation". New Sources and a Possible Librettist', *Haydn Society Journal*, 24.2 (2005), 2-84.