

Introduction

Thinking through the Seasons

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No one, to my knowledge, has observed the minute differences in the seasons . . . A book of the seasons, each page of which should be written in its own season and out-of-doors, or in its own locality wherever it may be.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, June 11, 1851

The Role and Relevance of the Seasons

We are living in a time in which we are likely more alienated from seasonal rhythms than in any other period of history. During long winter nights, we switch on electric lights and thus, as it were, artificially extend the day. Through indoor heating and air-conditioning, we sequester ourselves from the bitter cold of winter or the oppressive heat of summer. Modern technology enables us to control the temperature of our homes, shops, public buildings, and transport vehicles. This seeming ability to separate ourselves from the enviroing atmosphere is, in a deeper sense, a dangerous illusion. The fluorocarbons used in air-conditioning, for instance, are released into the environment and in turn contribute to global climate change. Ironically, when we cool ourselves in this manner we promote the further warming of the atmosphere. Of course, humans have always sought ways to cool their

dwellings in summer and warm them in winter. Gas heating, for example, has replaced the hearth. The shady courtyards and fountains of Arabic architecture were actually very effective in providing cool sanctuaries in the summer. But these earlier forms of temperature regulation involved a closer connection to the elements—wood, fire, water, and the courtyard’s exposure to the outdoors—than those of modern technology.

Our apparent ability to detach ourselves from the climate—through the production of artificial micro-climates—is emblematic of wider problems connected with Western subjectivity and the unfolding ecological crisis. Through the assumptions of modern philosophy and the growth imperatives of our economic systems, we have thought and acted as though we human beings can exist separately from the natural world. Nature has been conceived as a realm that is radically divided from human experience and self-consciousness, and humans have treated the environment as a mere resource for industry and the manufacture of commodities. In the current era of the Anthropocene, we are—all too slowly—becoming aware that human life is dependent on and interdependent with the earth’s dynamic, interconnected, and fragile ecosystems; that our exploitation of natural resources is unsustainable; and that human activity is adversely affecting the entire biosphere.

In the context of our modern global economy, we can shop at supermarkets where mangoes and strawberries—transported from thousands of miles away—are available on the shelves in the middle of winter. Whereas many small-scale and organic farmers continue to collaborate with seasonal cycles and there are environmental limits to what can be grown in a particular region at particular time of year, most of us now reside in cities and large towns where we are typically disconnected from the rhythms of agrarian life. Moreover, industrial agriculture is largely mediated by modern technologies and the capitalist economy; short-term yields and the maximization of profits are prioritized, rather than a sustainable collaboration with natural cycles.

Reflecting on these issues, environmentalist Bill McKibben opines, “The seasons don’t matter to most of us anymore except as spectacles. In my county and in many places around this part of the nation, the fair that once marked the harvest now takes place in late August, while tourist dollars are still in heavy circulation.” He asks rhetorically, “Why celebrate the harvest when you harvest every week with a shopping cart?”¹

Modern forms of transportation not only convey goods and produce across great distances, they also enable individuals to travel to the other side of the earth within a day. Travelers who fly from one hemisphere to another experience a disruption from the geographical specificities and continuities

of seasonal change; they also experience a complete reversal of the seasons themselves. Such occurrences remind us that the earth's two hemispheres exist in a polar relationship to one another, but they also bring about a rupture in the sense of seasonal time, while plane travel exacerbates global warming.

Particular cultural imaginaries can be sources of seasonal alienation as well. In Australia, where I (Luke) grew up, there is confusion that derives from a displaced European conception of the seasons. In the process of colonization, a European model of the four seasons was imported to a hemisphere and applied to ecologies where it does not fit.² Aboriginal cultures that became deeply attuned to ecological nexuses across Australia over tens of thousands of years have discerned between two and nine seasons. Moreover, the symbols associated with specific holidays often relate to seasons in the Northern Hemisphere and are incongruous with Australian seasons; for example, many Christmas songs and symbols invoke winter imagery that is misplaced in the summer months of December and January in Australia (though more fitting seasonal adaptations to Christmas in summer have also emerged).

In the rural East Coast of North America where I (David) grew up, the seasons have tended historically to be marked by relatively clear and even dramatic transformations. In my youth, I associated certain family tasks with the reliable arrival of distinct periods of the year: raking leaves and chopping wood in autumn; shoveling snow in winter; preparing the garden or cleaning out the house in spring; and cutting grass or picking strawberries and blueberries in summer. There seemed to be a larger unwritten but trustworthy calendar that told me the appropriate or “pre-appointed” time for ice skating on the frozen ponds and sledding on the snow-ballasted hills (winter); hiking the newly thawed stream and waterfalls near our scouting retreat (spring); swimming in and canoeing on the tributaries of the Susquehanna River (summer), or camping out when the nights were cooler and the leaves changed color (autumn). As I glance back now, I believe these recollections are not mere wistfulness on my part—a painful search for a lost home, as the word *nostalgia* suggests. Rather, there were (and still are) larger rhythms and deeper ecological changes at work. I mention these experiences because seasonal disruption has been occurring at a faster rate over the last several decades, and our human senses are often able to pick up on warning signals. It is, moreover, to these ancient, enduring, and increasingly altered rhythms that we should arguably be attending.

In this vein, the essayist and novelist Pico Iyer speculates that the seasons can lead us to appreciate “an order higher than ourselves, or nation, or

ideology” insofar as they “rescue us from our private winters and admit us to a larger rhythm, as unanswerable as the dawn.” They help us to see processes that are “more universal than New Year” but “more flexible than moons.”³ They encourage us to understand transitions and to accept the idea that there are some things that should remain beyond our reach to alter in a significant way.

Anthropogenic climate change is not only disrupting our individual and cultural senses of the seasons but also the seasons themselves. Record high temperatures are occurring in diverse regions. We experience “summery” days in fall, spring, and even winter. We experience unprecedented heat waves in summer. Such temperature shifts affect times of plant growth, flourishing, and fruition, the lives and migration patterns of animals, and human behavior and activities—we swim at the beach or eat lunch on the balcony on a “winter’s” day. One telling marker of climate change is the occurrence of “unseasonal” phenomena within a particular season.⁴ A discomfiting trend in many locations around the planet is the emergence of frequent flooding during traditional dry seasons. In Australia, an increasing number of bushfires (wildfires) occur not only in summer, but also in spring and winter. The most devastating bushfires ever recorded in Australia began in June (winter) 2019 and peaked in December 2019 and January 2020. The fires burned close to 19 million hectares and destroyed almost 6,000 buildings. At least thirty-four people and 1.25 billion animals were killed (over 3 billion animals were impacted by the fires).⁵

Human existence is entangled with, and responsive to, seasonal phenomena even in our endeavors to escape from the weather by means of technology (air conditioning and heating, for example). And despite our relative alienation from the seasons, they continue to inform our lives in significant ways, from agricultural produce (locally grown fruit and vegetables tend to be fresher and riper) to holidays and festivals, to calendars of all kinds, to sporting activities, and to fashion. Moreover, in our time of climate change and seasonal alienation, attending to the seasons could both better our understanding of the natural environment and contribute toward healing our estrangement from it. As literary critic Lawrence Buell puts it, “seasonal representations tease us toward awareness of ourselves as environmental beings,” and reflections upon seasonal change can serve “to make ourselves more aware of how phenomena signify and how, beyond that, even our suburbanized, attenuated lives are subtly regulated—maybe even constituted—by the elements,” including “bees . . . trees, clouds, humidity, heat, light.”⁶

It is not only modern Western culture and society that are relatively alienated from the seasons but also Western philosophy in the course of its history. Whereas the seasons have historically played a crucial role in poetry, literature, art, religion, myth, and the life-worlds of human societies, they have been scarcely thematized within Western philosophy. While the discrepancy between the presence of the seasons in poetry and their absence from philosophy might appear as striking on first consideration, this discrepancy is not merely accidental. Seasonal phenomena affect our moods, sensibilities, and modes of embodiment, which have always been concerns of poetry and art.

Philosophy, by contrast, has tended to pursue disembodied forms of thought and dispassionate (“affectively neutral”) rationality. Thus, the absence of the seasons from philosophical reflection is hardly surprising. In its engagement with pre-theoretical modes of experience and embodiment, and in its emphasis on the primordial significance of moods, phenomenology opens up a significant philosophical approach to the seasons that can redress their historical neglect (as a number of essays in the present volume illustrate).⁷ The Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro authored a pioneering phenomenological study in this regard, in which he explicates how “climate”—including the seasons—is integral to our self-comprehension as human beings.⁸ At the same time as revealing their philosophical significance, phenomenological investigations of the seasons bring about a transmutation of philosophical thinking such that it comes nearer to poetic modes of being and writing.

It is perhaps even more surprising that the seasons have been relatively neglected within environmental thought. Environmental philosophy has, for example, given far more attention to place and space than to seasons and seasonality. However, just as space lacks a crucial dimension when regarded in abstraction from time, considerations of place and environmental regions are prone to abstraction and reification if they are not characterized in relation to seasonal time. While there has been a growing interest in “deep time,” especially in terms of mapping how past changes in climate might inform prediction of the imminent effects of anthropogenic climate change, there has been less attention to cycles of seasonal time.

By situating places in seasonal time, we become aware of the inherent dynamism of places and are less inclined to objectify them. Our attention is drawn to the environment not as a static entity but as an unfolding process. Rather than seeing the environment in terms of inert nouns, we come to

appreciate places as verbal manifestations of seasonal time. Just as Heidegger came to speak of the “thinging” of things and the “worlding” of the world, an attention to seasons reveals the “placing” of place, the “environing” of the environment, and the “naturing” of nature, in which the verbal dimension of being takes precedence over the substantive.⁹ The regularities, patterns, and features of a place come to resemble the waves and ripples in a river that are dynamically maintained and transformed within the flux of time. At the same time, in attending to the temporality of nature, human subjectivity becomes attuned to the environment. Rather than the opposition of subject and object—a discrete observer and an external place—there emerges a participatory relation between human temporality and the “placial” manifestations of seasons. Humans and other-than-human beings together take part and take place in seasonal time. Contemplation of the seasons is one significant way toward overcoming our alienation from the environment.

The premise of this volume is that philosophy, environmental thought, ecocriticism, and the environmental humanities can all benefit greatly from a deeper attentiveness to seasons and seasonality. This collection of essays begins an exploration of the seasons—the canonical “four seasons” commonly associated with temperate regions as well as the more-or-less-than four seasons identified by various cultures across the earth—focusing in particular on contributions that engage philosophical ideas and literary texts in relation to subjects such as climate, locality, affect, culture, ecology, natural change, and time.

Through an engagement with the seasons, we hope to generate interest in and attention to a range of questions and controversies that are relevant to philosophers, geographers, literary critics, and environmentalists, among others. What exactly is a season, and how might it be understood ontologically, metaphysically, or historically? Are the seasons the same as they were in former eras given rapid rates of ecological and climatic change? How do they play a role in our cultural imaginations, everyday life, and creative pursuits? In what ways do the seasons relate to or influence our senses of time, geographical place, and embodiment? What might they reveal about the elemental world or notions of the cold, the hot, the wet, and the dry? How do winter, spring, summer, and fall affect our use of language, psychology, views of the land, and social or political practices?

In these and other ways, conceptions and cycles of the seasons offer us sensuous alternatives or more specific supplements to the abstract notion of “nature,” and they open up new modes of envisioning sustainability and responding to ecological challenges.

Seasonal Complexity and the Need for Interdisciplinarity

What are the seasons and how do they arise? While the seasons are at once natural and cultural phenomena, it is helpful to begin to answer this question by limiting our focus to the physical dimensions of the seasons. Even in relation to this restricted focus, the seasons exhibit a complexity and fluidity that can only be understood through an interdisciplinary approach that draws on various sciences.

In the first instance, the seasons result from the relative relationship between the sun and the earth in the latter's yearly orbit. Due to the axial tilt of the earth in its orbital plane, for almost half of the year the Northern Hemisphere leans toward the sun and is exposed to longer, more direct, and more intense periods of sunlight in the earth's diurnal rotation. (At the same time, of course, the Southern Hemisphere leans away from the sun and experiences the opposite seasons.) As the days grow longer and the nights grow shorter in the Northern Hemisphere, the days grow shorter and nights grow longer in the Southern Hemisphere. The greatest extremes in the discrepancy between night and day occur in the North and South Poles respectively—also a result of the earth's axial tilt.

There are periods around the solstices in the Arctic Circle and Antarctic Circle when the sun never sets and respectively when the sun never rises—periods of extended night and extended day. At the North Pole, for example, there can be six months of polar day in a single year. The least amount of change occurs at the earth's equator, where the length of day and night are almost equal throughout the year. In terms of the purely astronomical relationship between the earth and the sun, there are no distinct seasons at the equator (there are often two seasons with regard to weather, a dry and a wet season), and there are four seasons in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres marked by the summer and winter solstices—when each of the hemispheres is respectively most tilted toward and away from the sun (around June 21 and December 21)—and the vernal and autumnal equinoxes when day and night are virtually equal in length in both hemispheres (around March 20 and September 22).

While the astronomical relationship between the earth and the sun is the central underlying factor of seasonal change, seasons can by no means be limited to the relative duration and intensity of day and night that results from this dynamic relationship. And while the dates of solstices and equinoxes can be accurately determined, they are not the only factors influencing the transition to a new season. Even if one only introduces the

additional factor of temperature, there is already, for example, a discrepancy between the longest day and the hottest day. Due to what is known as “seasonal lag”—the gradual time in which it takes the atmosphere to warm or cool as a result of longer or shorter days—the warmest days and coldest days of the year tend to occur about a month after the summer and winter solstices.

In addition to the above factors, the temperatures and weather in a particular region are affected by altitude, topographies, built-environments, cloud cover, winds, land masses, water bodies, ocean temperatures that are influenced by cycles such as the El Niño and La Nina, and vegetation. Thus, there are wide differences in temperatures and weather even in areas that share the same latitude. In addition to daylight, air temperature, and weather, the seasons are manifest in the specificities of flora in a given region and their particular responses to light, warmth, and water (or its absence). Animals likewise respond to light, warmth, vegetation, water, and each other. In other words, a season is marked by a great confluence and complexity of factors.

We notice the emergence of spring in the thawing of a frozen lake, the presence of ducklings, newly sprouting leaves, unfolding flowers, longer days, increasing warmth, and so on. Seasons recur but not in an identical fashion; they possess a coherent complexity, a symphonic integrity, but not one that is mathematically determinable or strictly regular. Any mapping of the seasons (such as by almanacs) can be no more than a rough musical score; any actual occurrence of the seasons will play itself out in an individuated fashion and with much improvisation. It could even be said that each of the four seasons—to stick with this model for the present purposes—in fact contains a great multiplicity of seasons; each species of plant and animal in a given region has its specific seasonal cycles: different flowers blossom and fruit at divergent times, and different species of animals mate, lay their eggs, and migrate at distinct times.

The seasons involve ecological relationships of intersecting and divergent cycles and time scales. In this respect, any given season is an unfolding polyphony of numerous seasonal cycles. Skunk cabbages put forth leaves and flowers in the pre-spring, long before many plants, and thus draw insects earlier than other vegetation.¹⁰ In the mild winters in much of Australia, a variety of plants flower. In short, a season is a dynamic complex of astronomical, ecological, and meteorological factors. The complexity involved in understanding the seasons thus requires—like other environmental topics—interdisciplinary approaches.

However, understanding the seasons calls for more than the synthesis of various scientific disciplines. The seasons are deeply entwined with culturally specific factors such as calendars (solar, lunar, and lunisolar), nomadic and sedentary modes of life, myths, religious holidays and ceremonies, art, literature, and poetry. Seasons influence our behavior and psychology (for some autumn and winter incite a particular form of depression—“seasonal affective disorder”), and they are imbued with symbolic meanings. Seasons can thus be described as integrated phenomena of “natureculture”; understanding them requires interdisciplinary approaches that not only incorporate various physical sciences but also the humanities and social sciences—anthropology, sociology, psychology, art history, literary studies, religious studies, and philosophy, among others.

Seasons as Natureculture: Poetry, Literature, Art, and Myth

Many religious calendars and festivals—whether pagan, polytheistic, or monotheistic—are closely aligned with seasonal time. In ancient Greece, the myth of Demeter and Persephone offered a rich narrative of seasonal change, vegetative life, and cycles of death and rebirth. Persephone is forced to spend time in the underworld with Hades during the winter months and is reunited with her mother, Demeter, in spring. The myth played a central role in the initiation rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries, in which (according to some theories) the one who was initiated attained eternal life and joined the immortal company of the gods. In Judaism, Passover was originally a spring festival in which pilgrims traveled to the Temple in Jerusalem and made offerings of the “first fruits of the barley.” Easter, which takes place around the same time as Passover, is dated in accordance with the first full moon that follows the spring equinox in the Northern Hemisphere. In the tradition of Easter eggs, vernal manifestations of fertility become symbols of Christ’s death and rebirth—the eggs represent the empty tomb of Jesus (discovered by Mary Magdalene, to whom the resurrected Christ appears as a “gardener” [John 20:11–15]). Christmas closely follows the winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere—the “light of the world” is thus, for Christians, born on the earth as the daylight increases. In India, Hindu calendars identify six seasons (*Ritu*), which are closely tied to numerous religious festivals, as well.

The seasons have similarly played a central role in diverse literary traditions. In the poetic genre of haiku—which grew out of Zen Buddhism in

Japan and the earlier form of the renga—each three-line poem traditionally suggests a particular season. To offer two examples, here is an evocation of spring by a founder of the genre, Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694):

the old-lady cherry
 in bloom: a remembrance
 of her old age
 [*ubazakura / saku ya rōgo no / omoiide*]¹¹

And here is a more recent one by the African American writer, Richard Wright, which elicits a Buddhist theme:

I am nobody:
 A red sinking autumn sun
 Took my name away.¹²

Through the use of a specific “season word” (*kigo*), poets are able to link their sensual surroundings to the period of the year and open the listener’s mind to the beauty of everyday but extraordinary phenomena. In the Japanese art form of haiga, painted images that evoke the seasons are often integrated with haiku written in calligraphy, too. The image and words complement and enrich one another. These artforms draw attention to diverse ways in which human experience is entwined with the events of seasonal time.

Many English-language poets have thematized and celebrated the seasons. The prologue of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1400) opens with a depiction of spring as the time in which people like to start off on a pilgrimage:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures sote
 The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote,
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
 Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne,
 And smale foweles maken melodye,
 That slepen al the night with open yē
 (So priketh hem Nature in hir corages):

Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
 And palmers for to seken straunge strondes,
 To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes . . .¹³

[When April with his sweet showers has
 pierced the drought of March to the root,
 and bathed every vein in such moisture
 as has power to bring forth the flower;
 when, also, Zephyrus with his sweet breath
 has breathed spirit into the tender new shoots
 in every wood and meadow, and the young sun
 has run half his course in the sign of the Ram,
 and small birds sing melodies and
 sleep with their eyes open all the night
 (so Nature pricks them in their hearts):
 then people long to go on pilgrimages,
 and palmers long to seek strange shores
 and far-off shrines, known in various lands . . .]

Chaucer places human behavior and psychology in a continuum with the vernal stirrings of vegetative and animal life. As the fowls sing and the flowers emerge, nature incites the hearts of humans to commence a journey on foot. The religious and cultural practice of pilgrimage is depicted in a way that suggests parallels to animal migration. Today, many people still make intentional journeys to witness seasonal events and phenomena: the changing colors of leaves, salmon returning home to spawn, or cherry blossoms bursting into view.

Shakespeare invokes the seasons throughout his sonnets and plays, too, including *The Winter's Tale*, *As You Like It*, *The Tempest*, and *Love's Labour's Lost*. He refers to spring "when proud pined April" has placed "a spirit of youth in everything"; compares a lover to a day in summer whose "lease hath all too short a date"; speaks of "teeming autumn" which bears "the wanton burden of the prime, / like widow'd wombs after their lord's decease"; and writes of the "freezings I have felt" and the "dark days seen" in the barren of winter.¹⁴ In *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, he alludes to how "the seasons alter":

hoary-headed frosts
 Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose,
 And on the old Hiems' thin and icy crown

An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
 Is, as in mockery, set. The spring, the summer,
 The childing autumn, angry winter, change
 Their wonted liveries, and the mazed world,
 By their increase, now knows not which is which.¹⁵

Here, Shakespeare suggests, perhaps presciently, that the seasons have all changed places due to vengeful winds, “contagious fogs,” and rising waters, and that this “progeny of evils” results from human actions—“our debate, from our dissension; / We are their parents and original.”¹⁶

John Keats, in his “To Autumn,” famously describes autumn as the “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness” and concludes with an evocation of the “gathering swallows [that] twitter in the skies,”¹⁷ about to begin their 6,000-mile migration from England to South Africa. The seasons, too, have long been linked closely with the periods of human life in the associations of spring with birth, summer with growth and development, autumn with maturity or decline, and winter with death. In his poem, “The Human Seasons,” Keats draws a strong analogy between the phases of human life and the four seasons as follows:

Four Seasons fill the measure of the year;
 There are four seasons in the mind of man:
 He has his lusty Spring, when fancy clear
 Takes in all beauty with an easy span:
 He has his Summer, when luxuriously
 Spring’s honied cud of youthful thought he loves
 To ruminat, and by such dreaming high
 Is nearest unto heaven: quiet coves
 His soul has in its Autumn, when his wings
 He furlerh close; contented so to look
 On mists in idleness—to let fair things
 Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook.
 He has his Winter too of pale misfeature,
 Or else he would forego his mortal nature.¹⁸

At the same time as connecting the seasons with the stages of life, Keats’ poem builds on a long tradition of associating the seasons with specific states of mind (“seasons in the mind of man”). The passion of youth is identified with spring, summer involves a maturation of thought, autumn is a time

of quietude and greater detachment from the world, and the winter of old age is aware of the imminence of death.

In pre-modern cosmology and physiology, the four seasons, the four humors (temperaments), the four elements, and the four bodily fluids were often regarded as interconnected. While authors differed on the precise correlations—whether, for example, winter is earth (thus melancholic) or water (thus phlegmatic) and so forth—they shared a sense of the deep interconnectedness of human embodiment, psychology, and seasonal characteristics.¹⁹ One widespread schema was as follows:

winter—phlegmatic—water—phlegm
 spring—sanguine—air—blood
 summer—choleric—fire—yellow bile
 autumn—melancholic—earth—black bile

Hippocrates, for example, argued that the seasons could help to predict if the coming year will be “healthy” or “unhealthy” based upon specific and detailed observations about elemental heat, rainfall, winds, dryness, and the like in relation to the human body. He observed that “changes of the seasons are especially liable to beget diseases, as are great changes from heat to cold or cold to heat in any season.”²⁰ Deep connections were thus found or forged between the human and the universe, the microcosm and the macrocosm, and the human dispositions and the four seasons.

Similar kinds of ties between affects and seasons continue to be drawn—though less systematically than in ancient and medieval humoral theory—by writers, artists, and filmmakers, even if they no longer directly inform approaches to science and medicine. Keats identifies autumn with a “mellow” and “idle” mood. George Eliot, in a letter from 1841, describes the “melancholy” of autumn as follows:

Is not this a true autumn day? Just the still melancholy that I love—that makes life and nature harmonise. The birds are consulting about their migrations, the trees are putting on the hectic or the pallid hues of decay, and begin to strew the ground, that one’s very footsteps may not disturb the repose of earth and air, while they give us a scent that is a perfect anodyne to the restless spirit. Delicious autumn! My very soul is wedded to it, and if I were a bird I would fly about the earth seeking the successive autumns.²¹

Many early naturalists attuned themselves, in turn, to the poetic and mythological romance with the seasons. Thoreau's first known work was an essay entitled "The Seasons," composed when he was only eleven or twelve years old. In the piece, he inquires, "Why do the Seasons change? And why / Does Winter's stormy brow appear? / It is the word of him on high, / Who rules the changing varied year."²² Thoreau's love of winter, spring, summer, and fall developed more fully in later works, especially his *Journal*. Echoing, altering, and expanding upon the well-known lines in Ecclesiastes, Thoreau observes:

There is a season for everything, and we do not notice a given phenomenon except at that season, if indeed, it can be called the same phenomenon at any other season. There is a time to watch the ripples on Ripple Lake, to look for arrowheads, to study rocks and lichens, a time to walk on sandy deserts; and the observer of nature must improve these seasons as much as the farmer his . . . We must not be governed by rigid rules, as by the almanac, but let the season rule us.²³

Thoreau reminds us that we have to be attentive to the specificities of a season in its actual unfolding. While a season is manifest in recognizable patterns, its manifestations are not strictly regular or predictable.

The seasons are one of many natural rhythms, including the pulse of circulation, the oscillation of breathing, the ebb and flow of tides, and the 25,772-year period of the Great Year (the rotation of the earth's axis). Given the importance of rhythm, recurrence, and variation, as well as affect, to the artform of music, it is not surprising that the seasons have been explored in rich and evocative ways in various musical genres, from the late medieval round "Sumer is icumen in" to Gershwin's "Summertime," from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, Schubert's *Winterreise*, to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. There are also countless children's songs that address and celebrate the seasons and weather, and through which children learn about the phenomena that express seasonal change (for example, "Five Little Ducks," "I Like the Flowers," "Colchiques dans les prés," "Alle Vögel sind schon da," "Schneeglöckchen Weißröckchen," and the Arabic song "Al Fousoul al Araba'a" [*The Four Seasons*] by Elias Rahbani).

The seasons have been important as both a setting and a topic for films. The South Korean film, *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . and Spring*, tells the story of a monk who dwells on an island monastery in the middle of a

lake and helps to heal the sick. The film links the outer world of changing seasons with the inner lives of the characters, particularly the aging monk, who becomes a kind of *bodhisattva* or Buddha-figure himself, passing into the embracing cycles of the biological world. Eventually, he becomes selfless and “no one” (like a *sannyasin* or an ascetic in Hinduism) rather than a distinct “someone” with a clear identity and self, as he is dissolved into the very processes of seasonal change and extinguished in a conflagration on the lake. Each of the seasons is tied tacitly to one of the Four Noble Truths in Buddhism: spring becomes the time of *dukkha* (suffering); summer explores *tanha* (bodily desires and the cause of suffering); fall announces a cure in the form of *nirvana* (liberation from the finite remains of the self); and winter is positioned as the treatment for the pains of existence (the eightfold path).

In David Hockney’s recent video artwork, *The Four Seasons, Woldgate Woods* (*Spring 2011, Summer 2010, Autumn 2010, Winter 2010*), four screens respectively show footage of a narrow road through the Woldgate Woods in East Riding of Yorkshire, England, in one of the four seasons, highlighting how much the manifestations of a place are transformed by seasonal time. Hockney’s video art recalls Claude Monet’s *Haystacks*, twenty-five paintings that render the “same” stack of harvested grain during different seasons, weather, and times of day.

The seasons have been a perennial theme in the visual arts, from Greek and Roman depictions of the Horae as goddesses to Giuseppe Arcimboldo, who in the sixteenth century imaginatively created portrait heads composed of vegetables, flowers, fish, and fruit to portray both the cycles of the four seasons and the four elements. Thus, his “Spring” painting is made entirely of flowers while “Winter” is assembled out of tree roots. In cobbling together these profiles, Arcimboldo not only shows a fascination with the grotesque, the imperial, and the surreal, but also reveals a close aesthetic kinship between humans and the encompassing natural world.

The contemporary artist Andy Goldsworthy works closely with seasonal time, especially as it is tethered to or emergent from unique places. He uses ice, stone, sticks, snow, light, and soil that is marked and transformed by the revolving wheel of the year to show how the seasons disappear, endure, or sequester themselves underground or out of sight. One of his “earth works” involved creating and transporting thirteen one-ton snowballs (which he kept refrigerated for months) into the busy streets of London on a warm summer night. When the city awoke the next morning, people were treated to the fascinating sight of his “sculptures” and offered a charming, if evanescent, link to a different seasonal time and place: the vanished winter

and the distant outlying countryside. As the great balls of snow melted over the next five days, their interiors revealed a colorful and textured mix of feathers, barbed wire, stones, wool, seeds, pinecones, and branches, much to the delight of the public.²⁴

The above reflections offer just a few examples of the perennial appeal and significance of the seasons for myth, poetry, literature, and art, which, at the same time, bring into relief their striking absence from philosophical discourse. These reflections also serve to elaborate further ways in which seasons defy any neat boundaries. We apprehend the seasons not only through synthesizing various natural-scientific perspectives, but also through the creative and interpretative practices embodied in diverse genres, media, and cultures. Ultimately, the task of understanding the seasons calls for interdisciplinary approaches that draw on the natural sciences, the humanities, and the creative arts.

The essays in the present volume explore many examples of the seasons as phenomena of an integrated “natureculture” as well as cases in which nature and (seasonal) culture exist in a discordant relation. Our use of the term “natureculture” here can thus be regarded as both descriptive and prescriptive. Descriptive in that culture and seasonal phenomena are always, to some extent, entwined. Prescriptive in that modern Western societies are characterized by a historically unprecedented degree of discord—and its devastating ecological consequences—between human culture and the environment. In the latter respect, there is an urgent need for creative reintegrations of nature and culture.

Philosophical, Literary, and Environmental Perspectives

Each of the essays in this volume reveals the seasons in a fresh vocabulary and illuminating way. The contributors explore the seasons from interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives that shed new light on their significance for philosophy, environmental thought, ecology, aesthetics, poetics, and post-colonial studies. Synopses are provided under the headings of the sections in which they appear.

ENVIRONMENTAL TIME

One fundamental issue at the very heart of questions about the seasons involves the nature of time and how different conceptions or experiences of it affect

our interactions with the environment. While all of the essays in this collection consider time in some respect, David Macauley's and Craig Holdrege's essays are exemplary entry points into this topic. Macauley's essay draws attention to the way in which the seasons shed light on large-scale questions about temporality, whereas Holdrege's essay highlights how each species has a unique manner of participating in and contributing to seasonal time.

In "The Four Seasons and the Rhythms of Place-Based Time," Macauley examines the perennial idea of the four seasons in relation to notions of place and time. He also shows the philosophical and environmental importance of emphasizing the periods of winter, spring, summer, and fall. After clarifying the Western view of a season, he considers the seasons in the Eastern world. He then identifies and articulates different views and scales of seasonal time in relation to place, including ideas associated with repetition, *kairos*, *chronos*, and mythic temporality. Macauley looks in turn at possible challenges to the four-seasons model and discusses seasonal disruptions and discontinuities. He concludes by setting forth the values of a seasonal framework in terms of both providing an alternative to the idea of "nature" and contributing to sustainable living, noting the roles of seasonal festivals, storytelling, gardening, food preparation, the elements, walking, and everyday aesthetics.

In "The Seasons Embodied: The Story of a Plant," Holdrege shows that plants are highly context-sensitive organisms. One of the key contexts in which they are embedded is the rhythmical transformation of seasons. Our idea and experience of the seasons—including what they can reveal to us as we interact with the rest of nature—is greatly influenced by changes in plant life such as the colors of fall foliage. Plants embody and express the qualities of the seasons. Holdrege applies a Goethean phenomenological method in order to follow and participate in the life histories of plants, thus permitting us to gain a more subtle and specific understanding of the very meaning of the time of the seasons. In particular, Holdrege examines and portrays skunk cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*), an unusual wetland plant that is the first plant to flower in the northeastern part of the United States. As Holdrege vividly illustrates, this plant both gives expression to and, in unique ways, helps to usher in the spring.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND POETICS

As discussed earlier, one valuable approach to understanding seasonality is through the philosophical field of phenomenology, which explores the central

structures of experience and phenomena as they appear in the world. As many recent philosophers have shown, there are interesting affinities between phenomenological and ecological thought or perception. In “A Poetic Phenomenology of the Seasons,” Luke Fischer draws on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, key ideas in the writings of the poet and scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a phenomenological conception of affects, and poems that address the seasons to outline a poetic phenomenology of the four seasons often associated with temperate regions. He aims to unite a poetic sensibility for seasonal phenomena with a structured phenomenological approach. In doing so, he presents the seasons as a meaningful polyphony in which human beings also participate. Fischer gives a non-reductive account of how the human experience of the seasons is closely connected to natural seasonal phenomena and indicates ways in which we can deepen our understanding of, and participation in, the seasons.

Paola-Ludovika Coriando’s essay, “Hölderlin, Heidegger, and Seasonal Time” focuses on the late Heidegger’s thinking of the four-foldness of the world (as earth, sky, mortals, and divinities) and Hölderlin’s “latest” poems. Written during the long period of his mental derangement, these poems primarily thematize the seasons. In the context of this conversation between thinking and poetry, Coriando demonstrates that the everyday experience of the cycle of the seasons should not be merely regarded as a subtopic of phenomenological philosophy but rather as a primary philosophical concern. Coriando contrasts the dispositional attunement to the seasons that is reflected in Heidegger and Hölderlin with the alienation from the seasons that characterizes the technological mindset of modernity and with the rationality of classical Western philosophy, which, in its striving for an objective knowledge that is “emotionally neutral,” has failed to bring to light the fundamental significance of seasonal experience. Coriando concludes her essay with some indications of how philosophy might transform itself in connection with a deeper appreciation of the seasons.

In “Toward a Phen(omen)ology of the Seasons: The Emergence of the Indigenous Weather Knowledge Project,” John Charles Ryan argues that the Western calendar insufficiently accounts for the seasonal subtleties and the multiple notions of time in Australia. Working with the recent proposal to revise the four-season model, he tracks the Western calendar in Europe and its institutionalization in Australia. Ryan explores the Indigenous Weather Knowledge Project as a partnership between Aboriginal communities and the Bureau of Meteorology, one that can potentially preserve and promote knowledge of the endemic seasons of regions in Australia. He further examines

the six-season Nyoongar calendar of the southwest of Western Australia. The calendar is premised upon meteorological conditions and ecological time—as well as upon the obtainment of food, the maintenance of cultural knowledge, and the performance of ceremonies. Ryan suggests that through the union of phenomenological—experiential, sensory, place-based, actual—and phenological—cognitive, visual, enumerative, digital—approaches, the native seasons of Australia can be better appreciated in their true depth and extent.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE ARCTIC

“To restore any place,” observes ethnobiologist Gary Nabham, “we must also begin to re-story it, to make it the lesson of our legends, festivals, and seasonal rites.”²⁵ Toward this end, two essays in the volume engage the often-overlooked polar regions in relation to the seasons.

In “Arctic Summer”—composed in a mixed-genre style like a vivid travel diary interspersed with philosophical and anthropological reflections—Alphonso Lingis evocatively explores the Scandinavian Arctic and the changing of the seasons, which the Sámi experience as eight in number. Visitors to this region find summer in the valleys and find winter both in the mountains and in the permafrost underfoot. As Lingis reveals, summers spent in motion encourage us to understand the very force of movement and both our sedentary and nomadic instincts. The seasonal migrations of reindeer and the periodicity of lemming years invite comparison with human movements. Lingis shows how an understanding of seasonal places and displacement, including rock paintings in Alta, Norway, and the Esrange Space Center in Kiruna, Sweden, extend the span of our own historical comprehension—from humans assembled at the foot of a retreating glacier 7,000 years ago to recent travel beyond the earth itself.

Joseph Ballan likewise looks at polar regions. In “Seasonal Affective Order: The Passage of Sense in Circumpolar Religion,” he points out that in Inuit society, there exists a rhythm between their collective religious life in winter and their more profane life in summer. In this rhythm, changes in the natural world are wedded to alterations in social and emotional life. In a classic study of seasonal changes among the Inuit, Marcel Mauss and Henri Beuchat investigate this relationship between natural conditions and cultural distributions. These researchers revealed a close connection between extreme seasonal changes in nature and the patterns of human social and religious life in circumpolar regions. Focusing on these issues, Ballan provides some needed revisions to Mauss and Beuchat’s ideas by reconsidering social

morphology in light of recent ethnographic and historical research and the theoretical contributions of Henri Lefebvre and Augustin Berque. Taken together, Lefebvre and Berque offer a way of understanding how physical changes in the environment assume meaning and affective qualities for both individuals and communities.

EVERYDAY AESTHETICS

As noted earlier, the seasons have long been linked with artistic representations and ideas about beauty. Forms of aesthetic engagement both give expression to and facilitate our understanding of the seasons. Jo Law's "The Almanac Projects: Modeling the Seasons through the Material World" investigates the almanac as a medium or forum for engaging and enacting a vital materialist practice. In the process, she addresses a number of key environmental questions: What elements should we include in our considerations of climate, weather, and the seasons? What possibilities open up when we view weather and the seasons from non-human perspectives? And what are the results of these new ways of thought? Law draws upon Jane Bennett's conception of "vital materialism" in reflecting upon the seasons as human and non-human assemblages of activity. She also offers her own almanac projects as a creative engagement with both living and non-living worlds that participate in seasonal changes. Law argues that the medium of the almanac possesses the potential to make visible an inclusive ecology that helps to articulate our multi-dimensional experiences of the seasons.

In "The Cycle of Seasons: The Temporal Structure of Fashion," Yvonne Förster explores the temporality of fashion and its ever-changing character, which is perhaps the only constant and continuous dimension of it. In her view, fashion is marked by the changing of the seasons and the sense of anticipation tied to these transformations. Förster contends that the phenomenal qualities associated with spring, summer, autumn, and winter do influence local developments in fashion, but the industry is now global in scope so that at the larger scale, every season is, in some sense, present at all times of the year. Thus, one must be critical about the way in which the seasons are defined. Förster also considers the relationship of seasonal qualities to social and cultural contexts. This relationship is the basis of the anticipatory character of fashion famously formulated by Walter Benjamin, whose theory she takes up. In short, Förster investigates the basic temporal aspects of fashion such as seasonal changes, the relation of anticipation and memory, and the connections between temporality and eternity.