Seasons and Similes in the Aeneid

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Richard Heinze's *Vergil's Epic Technique* declares that seasons in the *Aeneid* "are mentioned where they are needed to motivate the action, but not to lend colour or mood to events." Perhaps the eminence of the critic has allowed that pronouncement to pass unchallenged, for it would be surprising if a poet as attentive to symbolic resonance as Vergil invoked seasons without any attempt to exploit their potential significance. Vergil’s choice to end *Aeneid* 1 with the song of the bard Iopas, who teaches his Carthaginian and Trojan audience the ways of the sun, moon, and constellations throughout the year, provides an internal model—and perhaps an invitation for us—to reflect upon the epic's seasonal landscape. Looking to an external model, readers or listeners might intuit the inspiration of Homer’s *Odyssey* for the thematic importance of seasons in epic, especially in the *Aeneid*'s Odyssean first half. This essay works from what John Robert (Háj) Ross called "the Assumption of Total Significance" to argue that the explicit naming of seasons in the *Aeneid* may serve not just to mark chronology, but also to add resonance. It focuses on a set of seasonal allusions in the poem that manifestly does not serve to motivate the action but rather to lend color and mood to events, to wit, on the explicit naming of seasons within the similes. The similes are, as Lombardo remarks in the introduction to his translation, "semi-independent poetic events that illuminate the main action." With them Vergil interrupts the progress of the narrative and uses allusive language to introduce or modulate tone. Vergil’s invocations of seasons in similes tend not to qualify the experience of the moment; rather, they tend to indicate the onset or termination of a season, and thereby signal transitions, imminent change, growth, or decay. Since most of the seasonal

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1 Heinze 1993:267. Heinze observes that although winter figures prominently in the narrative because of its effect on seafaring, especially in Book Four, “the landmarks in the story are the sunrises.” Knapp 1923 is little more than a report of quotations from Geikie 1912, whose eleventh chapter (236-56) dutifully collects scattered passages on seasons from several poets.

2 Austin 1975:239-53 adeptly charts the way in which Homer coordinates the return of Odysseus to Penelope with the transition from winter to spring. Heinze, observing that “we are not told the season in which the action of the *Iliad* unrolls,” is dismissive of “the cosy, bourgeois tone” of the seasonal allusions in the *Odyssey* (267).

3 Ross 1985:187 derives this interpretative strategy from a statement of William Blake comparing literary and visual arts: “Not a line is drawn without intention...as Poetry admits not a Letter that is insignificant.”

4 Hornsby 1970:7 observes that 85 of the 116 similes in the poem draw upon the natural world but does not examine seasonal similes as a group. Although Briggs’ study of similes in *Georgics* and the *Aeneid* focuses on bees, snakes, storms, and other natural features, it does not explore seasonal allusions.

5 Lombardo 2005:xii.

similes point forwards or backwards from the moment, they thereby harmonize or dislocate within a cosmic order the human events that they describe.

Perhaps as a reflex of working on an academic calendar, I shall begin with autumn. *Autumnus* appears only once in the *Aeneid*, and it does so neither as a chronological marker for the narrative nor as a happy reflection on fall’s rich harvests. Rather, autumn appears in the underworld amidst a pair of similes whose tonal considerations invite us to look both forwards and backwards in the seasonal calendar:

*huc omnis turba ad ripas effusa ruebat,*

*matres atque uiri defunctaque corpora uita*

*magnanimum heroum, pueri innuptaeque puellae,*

*impositique rogis iuuenes ante ora parentum:*

*quam multa in siluis autumni frigore primo*

*lapsa cadunt folia, aut ad terram gurgite ab alto*

*quam multae glomerantur aues, ubi frigidus annus*

*trans pontum fugat et terris immittit apricis.* (6.305-312)

To this place the whole throng was rushing, streaming to the banks, mothers and husbands and the bodies of great-souled heroes, life completed, boys and unwed girls, and youths placed on pyres before their parents’ eyes: as many as the leaves drop and fall in the forests at the first frost of autumn, or as many as the birds flock to land from the whirling deep, when the chilly season chases them across the sea and sends them into sunny lands.  

It might strike us as odd that Vergil has exported seasonal imagery into the underworld, whose milieu ought to remain static and unaltered by the progress of the upper world’s almanac. But in Vergil’s earlier poetry we find that same juxtaposition of terrestrial and subterranean in the story of Orpheus in *Georgics*, one which makes direct reference not to autumn but to winter.

This is one of three seasonal similes that draw upon *Georgics*, and in all three Vergil explicitly alters the season. In *Georgics*, Vergil compares souls to birds amidst leaves in the trees in winter; in the *Aeneid*, the souls themselves are likened to leaves in autumn. While the change of referent may suffice to explain the change of season, the consequence of the change is a significant enrichment of tone in two ways. First, Vergil enhances the retrospective and regretful mood of the *Aeneid’s* simile by directing our attention to the

*Translations are by the author.*

*4.471-477: at cantu commotae Erebl de sedibus imis / umbrae ibant tenues simulaque luce carentum, / quam multa in foliis avium se milia condunt / vesper ubi aut hibernus agit de montibus imber, / matres atque viri defunctaque corpora vita / magnanimum heroum, pueri innuptaeque puellae, impositique rogis iuuenes ante ora parentum...*
very instant at which the leaves fall in termination of their life cycle  
(lapsa cadunt), the moment of irreversible transition from life to death.  
The leaves are not, as in Georgics, still on the branches or scattered on  
the ground. Second, Vergil invokes autumn as a melancholy prelude  
to winter, focusing our attention on the first of many frosts to come  
(frigore primo). The prospect of the simile is thus confined to the barren  
winter which follows rather than extended to a more distant rebirth in  
spring. We might contrast the explicitly cyclical emphasis on seasons  
in the Iliadic antecedent:

Then in turn the shining son of Hippolochus answered:
“High-hearted son of Tydeus, why ask of my generation?  
As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity.  
The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the living core  
burgeons with leaves again in the season of returning spring.”
(6.144-148)

Whereas Homer has Glaucus speak of the “living core,” spring, and the  
birth of a new generation of leaves, Vergil keeps the focus squarely on  
the gloomier aspect of autumn as the harbinger of winter. The cheer­  
ier notion of green vitality in Vergil is found in the line that precedes  
the similes, where the old age of the divine Charon remains tough and  
green. Such a persistent core is the stock of the gods, not mortals.  
Vergil’s simile links the ineluctable death of foliage in autumn to the  
ineluctable death of the body, a clear example of a seasonal allusion for  
“colour and mood.”

Winter is perhaps the most important season in the epic, for it  
motivates the action and exacerbates the tensions in the affair of Dido  
and Aeneas in Book Four. A winter storm (1.122, 1.125) brings the Tro­  
jan fleet to Carthage; Dido urges the Trojans not to sail in winter (4.52,  
4.309); Fama whispers that the lovers heat up the winter (4.193). Those  
allusions are chronological markers essential to the narrative. But in  
two famous similes from Book Four Vergil invokes winter to expand  
our perception of events beyond calendrical time. First, the emergence  
of Aeneas for the hunt is likened to Apollo leaving his winter quarters  
to renew the dances on Delos:

qualis ubi hibernam Lyciam Xanthique fluent

8 Williams 1972:479 detects the wistful retrospective: “as for the leaves and the mi­
grating birds, the summer of their lives is past.”
9 Hornsby 1970:85 could be correct that the idea of migrating birds may connote  
the “cheerful” idea of souls reincarnated after transmigration, but that notion—at best  
secondary and implicit—would fit better on the other side of the Styx.
10 6.304: cruda deo viridisque senectus. Both viridis and cruda have horticultural over­
tones (Page 1894:465 glosses cruda as “full of blood, fresh, full of sap”).
As when Apollo abandons wintery Lycia and Xanthus’ streams and visits maternal Delos and renews the dances, and mingled around the altars, the Cretans, Dryopians and painted Agathyrsi roar: he himself treads the ridges of Cynthus and binds his flowing hair with soft foliage, fashioning it, and he braids it with gold; weapons rattle on his shoulders: no more sluggish went Aeneas, such grace shines from his noble face.

This happy and colorful simile forecasts the immediate pageant-ry and joy of the hunt. Again, Vergil’s seasonal imagery marks a point of transition, as Apollo has just abandoned (deserit, nicely enjambed) his winter’s sojourn and is now renewing (instaurat) the dances. Hornsby could be right that the simile symbolically looks backward upon the life of Aeneas up to his arrival at Carthage. Yet to the extent that we may emphasize the notion of departure, we may understand that the simile looks forward to forecast Aeneas’ imminent—though as yet uncontemplated—departure from his winter quarters at Carthage. To an audience knowing that Aeneas will leave, the mythological minutiae take on ominous overtones; and Dido soon will lament how he abandons her (deseris 4.323; deserta 4.330, deseruere 4.582). Moreover, the passage in which we find this mythological and seasonal simile is introduced by a mythological and astronomical marker: Oceanum interea surgens Aurora reliquit (4.129). Aurora abandoning Oceanus on the couch becomes more than an elaborate way of saying “dawn”; it becomes a cosmic reflection of Aeneas abandoning Dido, a synchronization of celestial and human activities.

Once Aeneas determines to leave Carthage in midwinter, Vergil shows us Dido’s view of the Trojans preparing their ships. A simile likens their activities to ants, mindful of winter, that plunder a pile of

11Page 1894:356, Williams 1972:345, and Austin 1955:64 canvass the nuances of “wintery Lycia” versus “Lycia in winter” or “winter dwelling in Lycia.” Austin remarks that Apollo’s move to Delos should come “when navigation became practicable,” framing the seasonal transition in terms of human activity.
12Hornsby 1970:93.
13We might compare the thematically significant opening line of Odyssey 5 (“And Dawn rose from the couch, by the side of noble Tithonus...”), where at last Odysseus will leave the side of Calypso.
... natat uncta carina, frondentisque ferunt remos et robora siluis infabricata fugae studio.
migrantis cernas totaque ex urbe ruentis: ac uelut ingentem formicae farris aceruum cum populant hiemis memores tectoque reponunt, it nigrum campis agmen praedamque per herbas conuectant calle angusto; pars grandia trudunt obnixae frumenta uemeris, pars agmina cogunt castigantque moras, opere omnis semita feruet. (4.398-407)

The caulked hull floats, and they carry from the woods leaf-sprouting oars and unfinished timber in their zeal for flight. You could see them wandering and rushing from the entire city: and just as ants, mindful of winter, plunder a huge pile of grain and store it in their lair, a black column goes through the plains, and they carry their loot through the grasses in a narrow file; some trudge bearing huge grains on their shoulders, others drive the ranks and chastise delays; the whole path seethes with work.

The simile is apt for its visual effects, conveying the organized bustling of workers viewed at a distance. Once again, the simile underscores imminent change, with the ants looking ahead to a season not yet present. But the simile also presents something of a disjunction. The reader or listener, invoked by the second person cernas, is made to assume Dido’s perspective. This is not simply a matter of optical distance: in her mind’s eye, the Trojans behave as if preparing to settle down for winter. But we know that the poem’s narrative has already taken us to midwinter. The disjunction between the simile and the narrative calendar reinforces Dido’s disorientation and isolation, for the subjective perception of her character is at odds with Vergil’s objective (though sympathetic) narration. Furthermore, the Trojans in their haste drag leaf-sprouting branches (frondentis remos) to depart in a season unfit for sailing. The greenery almost suggests that the vegetal world supports the Trojans and has prematurely risen from its winter slumber to urge them onward. In short, the narrative almanac is somewhere in midwinter; the simile adopts Dido’s perspective of winter not

14 Williams 1972:369: "We are invited to see the Trojans as Dido saw them from her palace, tiny, far-off, remote from her now."

15 Estevez 1978-1979:107 remarks how Vergil portrays the ants as not so much industrious as rapacious, plundering what they have not sown. For him, “[t]he image is the final stage in the metaphorical assault on Dido and Carthage.”
yet begun; the forest is already experiencing spring.\textsuperscript{16}

The intimation of resurgent spring amidst the dead of winter appears in two similes precisely linked to the winter solstice. Book Six offers an evocative simile about the Golden Bough:

\begin{quote}
quale solet siluis brumali frigore uiscum
fronde uirere noua, quod non sua seminat arbos,
et croceo fetu teretis circumdare truncos,
talis erat species auri frondentis opaca
ilice, sic leni crepitabat brattea uento. (6.205-209)
\end{quote}

Just as mistletoe in the woods is accustomed to grow green with new leaf in the winter solstice’s cold, which a tree not its own nourishes, and to gird the smooth trunks with yellowish growth, such was the appearance of the golden bough on the dark oak, thus the foil was twinkling in the gentle breeze.

Austin reminds us that \textit{brumali frigore} is “not simply ‘winter’s cold’, but the cold at the winter solstice (\textit{bruma}).”\textsuperscript{17} The term is polyvalent in perspective. In meteorological terms, \textit{bruma} pessimistically pins our attention to the coldest period of the year and the season of dormancy. In astronomical terms, \textit{bruma} presents an optimistic moment, marking the turning point of the year from which nights will begin to shorten and days will begin to lengthen. As the verdant mistletoe surprises us with fresh growth amidst winter, so, too, \textit{brumalis} suggests a waxing rather than a waning of the life force.\textsuperscript{18} This same notion underlies the simile of Pyrrhus emerging like a bloated snake that frigid winter has protected underground, in which we see again a seasonal reference inviting us to look backwards and forwards rather than pause to consider a static moment in time:

\begin{quote}
uestibulum ante ipsum primoque in limine Pyrrhus
exsultat telis et luce coruscus aena:
qualis ubi in lucem coluber mala gramina pastus,
frigida sub terra tumidum quem bruma tegebat,
nunc, positis nouus exuuiis nitidique iuuentu,
lubrica conuoluit sublato pectore terga
arduus ad solem, et linguis micat ore trisulcis. (2.469-475)
\end{quote}

By the very vestibule and on the outer threshold Pyrrhus

\textsuperscript{16}This disjunction could be understood as an example of the kind of suggestive and challenging inconsistencies explored by O’Hara 2007:77-103.

\textsuperscript{17}Austin 1977:101.

\textsuperscript{18}Cf. Hornsby 1970:83: “The point of the simile lies in the fact that the dark green foliage of the mistletoe, in the depths of winter, suggests life in the midst of death.
prances with arms and gleaming in flashing bronze, as when into the light a snake fed on poisonous herbs, which, bloated, frigid winter has protected underground, now with its slough set aside, renewed and gleaming in youth, it uncoils its slippery back, with chest upraised high to the sun, and from his mouth darts a forked tongue.

Although the explicit verbal focus is upon winter, *bruma*, that phase is well under way, perhaps even reaching its completion (*tegebat*). Spring is at hand (*nunc*), implicit and imminent in *nouus exuuiis nitidusque iuuenta*. As with the first simile discussed, Vergil draws upon *Georgics* and makes a pointed seasonal variation. In *Georgics*, the season is high summer and the snake has left its young or eggs; in the *Aeneid*, Vergil has pushed the season back from warm, lively summer to chilly, lifeless winter, as befits the mood of the catastrophe of Priam's murder and Troy's fall. The choice of *bruma* over *hiems* is significant, for the winter solstice, as said above, marks the turning point at which the days will begin to lengthen. At this moment, the longest and darkest night of Aeneas' life, could a precise seasonal reference intimate that the fortunes of Troy have reached their nadir and that, amidst the ultimate dark destruction, the spark of a Trojan renaissance persists?

Alas, not so in seasonal terms. It is remarkable that the word *ver*, springtime, which is so prevalent in *Eclogues* (twice) and *Georgics* (17 times), never appears in the *Aeneid*. Within the similes, spring appears only obliquely at the edge of the temporal horizon, as with the snake leaving its hibernaculum in winter or Apollo leaving wintery Lycia. Proponents of a pessimistic reading of the poem might seize upon the conspicuous absence of allusions to spring as evidence for a gloomier outlook. The *Aeneid*'s seasonal imagery does not suggest a rebirth of Troy and dawn of a new era.

With no mention of spring and only one mention of autumn, the epic's seasonal landscape vacillates between winter and summer. Summer appears rather often in the narrative as a temporal marker for the Trojans' exile (1.265, 1.756, 3.8, and 5.626), but it is never enjoyed by Aeneas and his men. Nor do Vergil's similes ever bring the Trojans into...

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19 3.437-439: *...cum positis nouus exuuiis nitidusque iuuenta/ uoluitur, aut catulos tectis aut oua relinquens/ arduus ad solem et linguis micat ore trisulcis*. The passage comes at the end of a narrative explanation (not a simile), explaining how snakes stay in the wet swamp throughout spring (*ver*, 429), but leave amid the heat of summer.

20 "Servius was on the right track but did not indicate the next step (2.472): *bruma id est hiemps. dicta autem *bruma* quasi brachu emar, id est brevis dies."

21 Knox 1950:395 reaches such a conclusion in his study of the simile's serpent imagery: "the cycle of winter hibernation and spring renewal, death and rebirth, though applied specifically to the re-appearance of Achilles in his son, is not so limited in the reader's imagination...Troy too is to be reborn...[Priam's] death is part of a birth."
the restful realm of summer. Summer is reserved for those whom Aeneas and the Trojans can only watch. For example, in Book Six, Aeneas can only behold from afar the blessed souls in the Elysian Fields, who hover like bees on a clear summer day:

hunc circum innumerae gentes populique uolabant:
ac ueluti in pratis ubi apes aestate serena
floribus insidunt uariis et candida circum
lilia funduntur, strepit omnis murmure campus. (6.707-709)

Around this innumerable tribes and peoples hovered, and just as when in meadows in clear summer bees land on multicolored flowers and pour around white lilies and the whole ground buzzes with their murmur.

Back above ground, we find a similar image when, before the Trojans’ eyes, the Carthaginians construct their city like bees working amidst flowery meadows during the young summer:

qualis apes aestate noua per florea rura
exercet sub sole labor, cum gentis adultos
educunt fetus, aut cum liquentia mella
stipant et dulci distendunt nectare cellas,
aut onera accipiunt uenientum, aut agmine facto
ignauom fucos pecus a praesepibus arcent:
feruet opus, redolentque thymo fragrantia mella. (1.430-436)

Just as their task stirs bees in early summer through flowery fields beneath the sun, when they lead out the tribe’s full-grown offspring, or when they press flowing honey or bulge the combs with sweet nectar or receive the burdens of those arriving, or, with a line formed, they drive the drones—lazy herd—from the hives: work seethes and fragrant honey is redolent with thyme.

The simile is one of joy and hope and accomplishment, but not for the Trojans, who will not found a city within the scope of the Aeneid.22 Once again we have an image borrowed from Georgics,23 and once again we have a change of seasonal perspective, for at Georgics 4.156 the bees in

22Hornsby 1970:49 explores how the simile suggests Aeneas’ self-pity.
234.162-169: aliae spem gentis adultos / educunt fetus, aliae purissima mella / stipant et liquido distendunt nectare cellas. / sunt quibus ad portas cecidit custodia sorti, / inque vicem spectantur aquas et nudila caeli / aut onera accipiunt venientum aut agmine facto / ignavum fucos pecus a praesepibus arcent. / fervet opus, redolentque thymo fragrantia mella.
summer are mindful of winter (uenturæque hiemis memores aestatem la­
borem). In Georgics, the bees are looking ahead, laboring to prepare for a
harsher future. In the Aeneid, summer has just begun (noua aestate), and
the simile suggests that what lies ahead in the minds of the Carthagin­
ians is not the trials of winter but the glories of full summer.24

All the seasonal similes to this point have come from the first six
books of the Aeneid. In the lone example from the second half of the
epic, troops rally around Pallas like scattered flames when a herdsman
burns stubble in summer:

ac uelut optato uentis aestate coortis
dispersa immittit siluis incendia pastor,
correptis subito mediis extenditur una
horrida per latos acies Volcania campos,
ille sedens victor flammas despectat ouantis:
non aliter socium uirtus coit omnis in unum
tequ teque iuuat, Palla. (10.405-411)

And just as in summer, with winds roused to his plea, the
shepherd sets scattered fires in the woods, with the interven­
ing areas suddenly ignited, a bristling fire line is stretched
unbroken through the broad plains, he as victor sits and looks
down on triumphing flames: not otherwise all the courage of
the allies comes together and aids you, Pallas.

Although the image is applied to the activities of the Etruscans
rather than the Trojans', it does serve to place the Trojan labors within
a rational seasonal context. These fires are not random nor a result
of spontaneous combustion. Their destructive potential is restrained
by human planning, augmented by providential wind, and directed to­
wards the greater agricultural good of clearing unproductive tracts for
new planting or pasturing.25 The absence of seasonal imagery in the
latter half of the Aeneid perhaps reflects an increasingly tighter tempo­
rnal focus, as events occupy days rather than months or years. The latter
books, Iliadic in subject matter, adopt the iliad's concentration on days
and nights rather than seasons.

24Hornsby 1970:49-50 and Estevez 1978-1979:106-7 connect this image of the Tyrians
as bees with that of the Trojans as ants discussed above. Estevez notes how the similes
"stand at opposite ends of a season: in the first, all redolent of good beginnings, the bees
labor aestate noua, and the lines are packed with words suggestive of life, growth, and
fullness...in the second, the season has ended, the harvest is in...and winter lies ahead."
25Harrison 1991:176 adduces epic parallels for the comparison of armies to fires and
suggests that aestate refers to the burning of pastures at the end of the summer grazing
season. Williams 1973:348 observes that winds in summer are uncommon, hence the ne­
cessity of the shepherd's plea.
This study has examined only the explicit allusions to seasons in similes to demonstrate how they do lend color and mood to the ambient narrative. If we accept this premise rather than Heinze’s presumption quoted at the outset, we are invited to reconsider the seasonal references within the narrative proper as potentially significant. Although the narrative outside the similes does explicitly invoke seasons (summer or winter, but never autumn or spring!) primarily as temporal markers, some of those invocations could convey a shade of color to the narrative. For example, chronology surely is less important than mood when we learn that Palinurus has floated tris hibernas noctes at 6.355: hibernas serves to reinforce the chill, isolation, and pathos of the death at sea rather than to provide an almanac. The degree to which one accepts the naming of seasons as more than temporal markers will depend upon individual judgment, taste, and a willingness to work from the Assumption of Total Significance.

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26 Another study might venture further into the tonal qualities conveyed by the many implicit allusions to seasons in winds, constellations, and meteorological phenomena (e.g. nix, nius, gelidus; Servius, remarkably, can detect densely comprehensive allusion to all four seasons at 8.429-430).

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