William Cullen Bryant

(1794-1878)

Thanatopsis (1817)

To him who in the love of Nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language; for his gayer hours
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
Into his darker musings, with a mild
And healing sympathy, that steals away
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
Over thy spirit, and sad images
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,
And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart; --
Go forth, under the open sky, and list
To Nature's teachings, while from all around --
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air --
Comes a still voice -- Yet a few days, and thee
The all-beholding sun shall see no more
In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,
Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,
Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist
Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix for ever with the elements,
To be a brother to the insensible rock
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak
Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.

Yet not to thine resting-place
Shalt thou retire alone, nor couldst thou wish
Couch more magnificent. Thou shalt lie down
With patriarchs of the infant world -- with kings,
The powerful of the earth -- the wise, the good,
Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,
All in one mighty sepulchre. The hills
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun, -- the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
The venerable woods -- rivers that move
In majesty, and the complaining brooks
That make the meadows green; and, poured round all,
Old Ocean's gray and melancholy waste, --
Are but the solemn decorations all
Of the great tomb of man. The golden sun,
The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,
Are shining on the sad abodes of death,
Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread
The globe are but a handful to the tribes
That slumber in its bosom. -- Take the wings
Of morning, pierce the Barcan wilderness,
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound,
Save his own dashings -- yet the dead are there:
And millions in those solitudes, since first
The flight of years began, have laid them down
In their last sleep -- the dead reign there alone.
So shalt thou rest, and what if thou withdraw
In silence from the living, and no friend
Take note of thy departure? All that breathe
Will share thy destiny. The gay will laugh
When thou art gone, the solemn brood of care
Plod on, and each one as before will chase
His favorite phantom; yet all these shall leave
Their mirth and their employments, and shall come
And make their bed with thee. As the long train
Of ages glides away, the sons of men,
The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes
In the full strength of years, matron and maid,
The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man --
Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,
By those, who in their turn shall follow them.

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

1815?, 1817, 1821

ANALYSIS

Bryant probably completed "Thanatopsis" (meditation on death) in 1815 when he was about 20 years old. His Calvinist upbringing disposed him to somber themes. Both the subject and the blank verse of his poem were influenced by Thomas Gray and William Cowper in the "graveyard school" of 18th-century English poetry. Freneau before him displayed the same influence in his "The House of Night" (1779), in the Gothic tradition of Poe. In American cultural history, "Thanatopsis" is most original for its pantheism and its implicit disbelief in the immortality of the soul. The reader should bear in mind that later in life Bryant became a conservative Unitarian who expressed faith in immortality in hymns such as "Blessed Are They that Mourn" and "The Earth Is Full of Thy Riches."

In the first lines, the poet loves Nature and personifies her as a maternal female who gave birth to the earth and all visible forms. Mother Nature offers him "communion" like a Victorian angel outside the house, with a "mild and healing sympathy." She inspires the poet to exhort the reader: Whenever you think of death as "the last bitter hour" and the grave as "the narrow house,"—"Go forth, under the open sky, and list / To Nature's teachings..." Here young Bryant sounds like Wordsworth. He has liberated himself from the Puritanism of his parents, who maintained a "narrow house." Once out of their house, he is "under the sky"--in direct contact with the transcendent, manifest in Nature as the archetypal Good Mother, in a pastoral mode. His pantheism consists in worshipping this idealized Nature and interpreting her "teachings" in a pagan yet genteel spirit.

Nature speaks to him with "a still voice." This oxymoron conveys a sense of paradox, evidence of a transcendental mode of consciousness. However, in this poem transcendence is wisdom, not salvation or immortality. In religious outlook here, Bryant is close to Melville. Early in life he attained the serenity of acceptance, whereas Melville struggled in torment most of his life before he resigned himself to the tragic vision expressed in *Billy Budd*. The first stanza of "Thanatopsis" ends with a comparable rebellion against prevailing religious faith, an assertion of mortality without redemption, which is implied by (1) equation of the human soul with "insensible rock" and "the sluggish clod"--without spirit; (2) use of the terms "last sleep" and "eternal resting place," often euphemisms for annihilation; (3) advising the reader to live so as to attain "trust" in the natural order and to approach death as if it is no more than "pleasant dreams," not as if it is an eternal afterlife; (4) lack of any reference to God or immortality, which Christian readers at the time would expect.

In "The Wild Honey Suckle" (1786) the Neoclassical deist Freneau affirms mortality as a poignant aspect of the perfect order created by God. In contrast Bryant is melancholy about death like most Romantics. He deifies Nature without uniting with it as Walt Whitman does in "Song of Myself" (1855). Whitman embraces All, reconciling negatives with positives in the mystical whole of himself as humanity evolving through time, whereas Bryant stands aloof on a cliff in the wilderness observing Nature, as in the Romantic painting of him with his friend Thomas Cole by Asher Durand.

The second stanza of "Thanatopsis," with dignified cadences and majestic eloquence, consoles us that death is the great leveler. Bryant exemplifies the "pathetic fallacy," but not naively, when he refers to "pensive" vales and "complaining" brooks: In the experience of "communion" with her, he *consciously* projects feelings into Nature, as he explains in the second of his *Lectures on Poetry* (1824): "Among the most remarkable of the influences of poetry is the exhibition of those analogies and correspondences which it beholds between the things of the moral and of the natural world. I refer to its adorning and illustrating each by the other--*infusing a moral sentiment into natural objects*…" [italics added]

Today many environmentalists and poets do much the same. In this poem Bryant is aware that in the end, his death, his inevitable return to the womb of earth—"the great tomb of man"--will be "bitter." The final stanza is a rebuttal to the Puritan sermons to which he was subjected in his youth "like the quarry-slave at night, / Scourged to his dungeon." Having rejected the hellfire of Calvinism, then Christianity and even faith in immortality, young Bryant now feels "sustained and soothed / By an unfaltering trust." He feels redeemed from bitterness by a wisdom that comes from faith in the natural order. As he grew older he came to realize that the natural order was created by God.

Michael Hollister (2015)