

William Cullen Bryant

(1794-1878)

The Prairies (1832)

These are the garden of the Desert, these  
The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful,  
For which the speech of England has no name --  
The Prairies. I behold them for the first,  
And my heart swells, while the dilated sight  
Takes in the encircling vastness. Lo! they stretch  
In airy undulations, far away,  
As if the Ocean, in his gentlest swell,  
Stood still, with all his rounded billows fixed,  
And motionless for ever. Motionless? --  
No -- they are all unchained again. The clouds  
Sweep over with their shadows, and, beneath,  
The surface rolls and fluctuates to the eye;  
Dark hollows seems to glide along and chase  
The sunny ridges. Breezes of the South!  
Who toss the golden and the flame-like flowers,  
And pass the prairie-hawk that, poised on high,  
Flaps his broad wings, yet moves not -- ye have played  
Among the palms of Mexico and vines  
Of Texas, and have crisped the limpid brooks  
That from the fountains of Sonora glide  
Into the calm Pacific -- have ye fanned  
A nobler or a lovelier scene than this?  
Man hath no part in all this glorious work:  
The hand that built the firmament hath heaved  
And smoothed these verdant swells, and sown their slopes  
With herbage, planted them with island-groves,  
And hedged them round with forests. Fitting floor  
For this magnificent temple of the sky --  
With flowers whose glory and whose multitude  
Rival the constellations! The great heavens  
Seem to stoop down upon the scene in love, --  
A nearer vault, and of a tenderer blue,  
Than that which bends above our Eastern hills.

As o'er the verdant waste I guide my steed,  
Among the high rank grass that sweeps his sides  
The hollow beating of his footstep seems  
A sacrilegious sound. I think of those  
Upon whose rest he tramples. Are they here  
The dead of other days? -- and did the dust  
Of these fair solitudes once stir with life  
And burn with passion? Let the mighty mounds  
That overlook the rivers, or that rise  
In the dim forest crowded with old oaks,  
Answer. A race, that long has passed away,  
Built them; a disciplined and populous race  
Heaped, with long toil, the earth, while yet the Greek  
Was hewing the Pentelicus to forms

Of symmetry, and rearing on its rock  
The glittering Parthenon. These ample fields  
Nourished their harvests, here their herds were fed,  
When haply by their stalls the bison lowed,  
And bowed his maned shoulder to the yoke.  
All day this desert murmured with their toils,  
Till twilight blushed, and lovers walked, and wooed  
In a forgotten language, and old tunes,  
From instruments of unremembered form,  
Gave the soft winds a voice. The red-man came --  
The roaming hunter-tribes, warlike and fierce,  
And the mound-builders vanished from the earth.  
The solitude of centuries untold  
Has settled where they dwelt. The prairie-wolf  
Hunts in their meadows, and his fresh-dug den  
Yawns by my path. The gopher mines the ground  
Where stood their swarming cities. All is gone;  
All -- save the piles of earth that hold their bones,  
The platforms where they worshipped unknown gods,  
The barriers which they builded from the soil  
To keep the foe at bay -- till o'er the walls  
The wild beleaguers broke, and, one by one,  
The strongholds of the plain were forced, and heaped  
With corpses. The brown vultures of the wood  
Flocked to those vast uncovered sepulchres,  
And sat, unscared and silent, at their feast.  
Haply some solitary fugitive,  
Lurking in marsh and forest, till the sense  
Of desolation and of fear became  
Bitterer than death, yielded himself to die.  
Man's better nature triumphed then. Kind words  
Welcomed and soothed him; the rude conquerors  
Seated the captive with their chiefs; he chose  
A bride among their maidens, and at length  
Seemed to forget -- yet ne'er forgot -- the wife  
Of his first love, and her sweet little ones,  
Butchered, amid their shrieks, with all his race.

Thus change the forms of being. Thus arise  
Races of living things, glorious in strength,  
And perish, as the quickening breath of God  
Fills them, or is withdrawn. The red-man, too,  
Has left the blooming wilds he ranged so long,  
And, nearer to the Rocky Mountains, sought  
A wilder hunting-ground. The beaver builds  
No longer by these streams, but far away,  
On waters whose blue surface ne'er gave back  
The white man's face -- among Missouri's springs,  
And pools whose issues swell the Oregon,  
He rears his little Venice. In these plains  
The bison feeds no more. Twice twenty leagues  
Beyond remotest smoke of hunter's camp,  
Roams the majestic brute, in herds that shake  
The earth with thundering steps -- yet here I meet  
His ancient footprints stamped beside the pool.

Still this great solitude is quick with life.  
Myriads of insects, gaudy as the flowers  
They flutter over, gentle quadrupeds,  
And birds, that scarce have learned the fear of man,  
Are here, and sliding reptiles of the ground,  
Startlingly beautiful. The graceful deer  
Bounds to the wood at my approach. The bee,  
A more adventurous colonist than man,  
With whom he came across the eastern deep,  
Fills the savannas with his murmurings,  
And hides his sweets, as in the golden age,  
Within the hollow oak. I listen long  
To his domestic hum, and think I hear  
The sound of that advancing multitude  
Which soon shall fill these deserts. From the ground  
Comes up the laugh of children, the soft voice  
Of maidens, and the sweet and solemn hymn  
Of Sabbath worshippers. The low of herds  
Blends with the rustling of the heavy grain  
Over the dark-brown furrows. All at once  
A fresher wind sweeps by, and breaks my dream,  
And I am in the wilderness alone.

#### ANALYSIS

Two of Bryant's younger brothers traveled out west to Illinois as homesteaders in 1830. The poet visited them out there in 1832, the year Abraham Lincoln made his first run for the state legislature. He rode horseback, saw the prairies and gathered impressions that inspired his poem. Cooper already had dramatized the westward movement in *The Prairie* (1827) and ten years after Bryant's poem was published, the wagon trains of pioneers began rolling further west to Oregon.

In "The Prairies" Bryant conveys a panoramic historical vision together with his recurrent Romantic themes of (1) the brevity of human life and (2) ancient ruins evincing the comparable organic history of empires, analogous to the cycles of Nature. The first line evokes the mythic Garden of the West with the oxymoron or paradox of "the garden of the Desert." Like Cooper, Bryant also compares the prairie to an ocean and renders the vast grassland with sonorous lines pantheistic in spirit, making a "magnificent temple of the sky." His pastoralism becomes sentimental when "The great heavens / Seem to stoop down upon the scene in love"... "of a tenderer blue" than in the East. During his brief excursion, the poet clearly did not encounter any Indian war parties.

Bryant's idealization illustrates how powerful the myth of the Garden in the West was as Americans moved westward across the continent--the dream of a better future that has always been the meaning of America. Throughout American literature, the West represents hope for the future, as it did to the pioneers. The second stanza of the poem surveys the history of the prairies and speculates on the builders of the intriguing earthwork mounds of the Mississippi Valley. There are said to be 10,000 such mounds in Illinois alone. Recent discoveries have revealed that some of the mounds near present-day St. Louis, which Bryant examined, were built by people who practiced human sacrifice. Bryant and Cooper subscribed to a theory popular in their time: "A race, that long since has passed away, / Built them "--a civilization of people more advanced than the ancient Greeks," who eventually got "butchered" by Indians "warlike and fierce." Now the Mound Builders have been replaced by gophers. In her novel *The Professor's House* (1925) Willa Cather similarly idealizes the Indian builders of Mesa Verde.

Bryant is like Cooper in seeing Indians as primitive humans, both good and evil. They contrast with Freneau in "The Indian Burying Ground," Longfellow in "Hiawatha" and many romantic environmentalists today who idealize Indians, perpetuating the sentimental myth of the Noble Savage. Bryant and Cooper

both believe in the advance of civilization and the replacement of barbarism with a government of laws. Bryant's genocidal Indians are merciful to a lone survivor of their massacre: "Man's better nature triumphed then." Small triumph. The survivor never forgets his first wife "and her sweet little ones, / Butchered, amid their shrieks, with all his race." Bryant never forgets the "greatest cruelties" in the natural world he worships. He transcends the barbarism with a longterm perspective and a "trust" in divine Nature comparable to the stoicism of Indians.

Bryant's majestic tone, the voice of the seer, is Platonic in the line, "Thus change the forms of being." His view of Nature is dynamic in the tradition of Heraclitus, who saw everything as being in constant flux. Though his pace is slow, paradoxically his historical perspective on the rise and fall of civilizations speeds up and condenses time, inducing a sense of the brevity of a human life. His organic view of history, his fascination with the past and his dreamy melancholy are Romantic.

Bryant's pantheism is expressed by identifying humans with earth and with other animals in a divine natural order. He parallels the westward movements of Indians, beavers, bison and humans: "the advancing multitude / Which soon shall fill these deserts": The settlers are agrarian pastoralists bringing civilization to the wilderness: "From the ground / Comes up the laugh of children, the soft voice / Of maidens, and the sweet and solemn hymn / Of Sabbath worshippers." They are peaceful farmers and their families. They come up "from the ground" like plants. They are compared to bees, creating the sweetness of pastoral civilization with a "domestic hum." It is just as natural for them to be moving west as for the bees "with whom he came across the eastern deep"--across the ocean from Europe. His reference to "sweets, as in the golden age" evokes a potential land of milk and honey, the mythic Garden of the West. To Bryant, "Manifest Destiny" was moral, progressive and according to divine Nature. He did not need to mention to his audience in the 19th century that fulfillment of Manifest Destiny was also necessary to avoid war against Great Britain over its claim to the West. Sentimental liberal academics in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century sided with the Indians, who would not have given them tenure.

The final lines of the poem have been greatly admired: "All at once / A fresher wind sweeps by, and breaks my dream, / And I am in the wilderness alone." Solitude in the wilderness is a characteristic of literature in the transcendental mode. Bryant here is the visionary bard of his nation, celebrating the American Dream, the entire westward movement and the glorious destiny of America, in advance of Walt Whitman. The lines are still thrilling to a reader who believes in the country.

Michael Hollister (2015)