

5 CRITICS DISCUSS

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT

(1794-1878)

"The bard of river and wood [who stood] among the first in the world."

Walt Whitman

"A superb poet, always and still undervalued."

Harold Bloom

"William Cullen Bryant's career spans the whole period from Freneau's flourishing to the beginning of Emily Dickinson's....Wanting a new national literature, he chided his contemporaries for thinking that it would come easily or soon, without its practitioners' devoting themselves to essentially formal disciplines. Yet he refused to believe that the amorphous structure of American society--its lack of traditions, classes, and the like--necessarily ruled out the probability of literary achievement. He came to believe that poets of the new nation might best emulate the spirit, not the substance, of the British and European Romantic poets whom he loved so well....Poetry had a cosmic ground, and might lead its American readers to understand their special place, as a nation, in the cosmos.

Poetry mediated between the contemplative and the active life. This doctrine teetered on the edge of the essentially radical thinking of Emerson: that in poetry, and only in poetry, man could come to know himself, so as then to make of himself what he would. But Bryant, attending always to the actual conditions of American life, searching always for some ultimate orthodoxy, could scarcely go so far. Here, for all his love of Wordsworth and his kind, his essential rationalism took over. The ground of the moral sentiment lay not in man but in Nature--Nature apart from man. In the end, poems about Nature were lessons learned, not experiences lived through. The teacher was God; and the poet went to this greatest of teachers in His classroom of Nature so that he could become a teacher. In the midst of all his liberal political activities, in all his bravery and nobility as a person, Bryant could only assure his readers--who were students of Nature too, only less advanced than he--that whatever was somehow right because somehow in the nature of Nature.

He sought to read the lesson of history as the lesson of progress. Yet he read it only in Nature, where even as it was exemplified, expounded, and confirmed, it was given a certain stability and balance; so that his poems again and again are, in effect, exercises which rationalize the fate of Americans and their culture. He interprets the American dream--inevitably set in natural surroundings--in a way intended to strengthen the character of the dreamers....

Bryant was...not catering to his readers' dubieties, for their dubieties were his own. He could assure them as a father, even a young one, assures his children, still mindful of his own childish fears. Bryant wanted above all to be at once a teacher and a family man. His nation was at once his class and his family."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 206-7

"The chief charm of Bryant's genius consists in a tender pensiveness, a moral melancholy, breathing over all his contemplations, dreams, and reveries, even such as in the main are glad, and given assurance of a pure spirit, benevolent to all living creatures, and habitually pious in the felt omnipresence of the Creator. His poetry overflows with natural religion--with what Wordsworth calls the religion of the woods. This is strictly applicable to 'Thanatopsis' and 'Forest Hymn,' but Washington Irving is so far right that Bryant's grand merit is his nationality and his power of painting the American landscape, especially in its wild, solitary and magnificent forms. His diction is pure and lucid, with scarcely a flaw, and he is a master of blank verse." Professor Wilson, review of first book of poetry by Bryant published in England (1832), quoted online; full citation unknown

"Thanatopsis"--the bridge over which the youthful poet moved from Pope toward Wordsworth... Ignoring Christ and Calvin, conversion and immortality, Cullen stoically announced in 'Thanatopsis' [1815]...that every man shall go to the grave serene in his own particular faith--and what that faith is, the poet does not particularize. Here he broke with the more rigorous aspects of the religion of [his parents], accepted the deistic elements in Peter Bryant's religion, and turned...from mankind to nature....Then [later in 1815--December] his eye was caught by a waterfowl sharply defined against the evening sky--nature's confirmation of the existence of omnipotent Goodness. Deeply moved, Bryant put himself into the keeping of nature's Deity:

He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.

Thereafter he was a religious liberal, associating himself particularly with the Unitarians, who to...most New Englanders, were a Christless lot.

He condemned the American Augustans for their 'balanced and wearisome regularity.' And in his own poetry he had long since freed himself from the chains of Pope and was now exploring, with true romantic delight, the varied resources of meter. No American during the twenties matched Bryant in the diversity and the refinement of his measures....'The Ages'--a pedestrian defense of the doctrine of human perfectibility. In heavy Spenserians, he traced the progress of mankind from the early days of barbarism, through the glory of Greece, and the darkness of the Middle Ages, on into modern times, and at last to America, where man shall come to ultimate fulfillment....

In Massachusetts comment was often unfavorable, for Bryant was an American scion of the Lake School of poets and the Lakers were still anathema to most Bostonians....In Bryant's last years his emotions did indeed atrophy under this rigid self-discipline, until the man whom Harte met in the seventies was truly a cold and silent iceberg....During his early years in New York, Bryant turned his hand to prose tales on romantic themes which he had earlier treated in verse: Indians and pioneers in the manner of Cooper.... Bryant was also a pioneer in American literary criticism; his was our earliest systematic study of the nature of poetry....He consistently defined poetry in the same familiar terms: morality, imagination, originality, emotion, simplicity....[His poems] are marked now by a quiet charm and again by a dignity unsurpassed, of their kind, in American poetry."

Tremaine McDowell
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1963) 295-304

"Bryant wrote a dozen or so memorable poems, all of them very early in his life and most of them dark poems. None of the progressive opinions held by the liberal editor of the *New York Post* appear in any of them. They begin a New England tradition in poetry that gets its best expression in Dickinson, Robinson, Frost, and Robert Lowell. "The Journey of Life" is typical. In it we may see foreshadowings of Robinson's "Credo" and Frost's "Desert Places."...The voice here is that of one of the children of the night whose fate Robinson was later to describe and suffer....

All his life Bryant continued to believe in nationalism, democracy, science, and Progress, to re-express the message of Barlow, in fact. But in his early years, until he got his feelings under control and ceased to write memorable poems, he also felt life in terms not too different from Edward Taylor's. The imagistic incoherence that has often been noted in his poems parallels if it does not reflect the incoherence of vision of a poet who could write "The Ages," celebrating Progress, yet propose a return to Nature as the cure for the 'guilt and misery' of which he found the world full. Bryant reflected too completely and uncritically the thought of his age to write more than a few fine poems. But in those few he is the worthy initiator of a tradition still with us."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 34-5, 42

Michael Hollister (2014)