

INTRODUCTION



William Cullen Bryant

(1794-1878)

William Cullen Bryant became a famous poet with a single poem he began composing as a teenager—“Thanatopsis” (1817). From the start, he had the voice of a wise old philosopher, yet he continued to evolve. He embodied the cultural history of America: transitioning from Puritanism through Neoclassicism into Romanticism. Washington Irving promoted Bryant in Britain, where in 1832 he won international recognition as the major poet in America. Bryant went on to become a progenitor of New England Transcendentalism and the favorite poet of Walt Whitman. He was the first American writer to seek divine metaphysical truth in Nature, establishing a pantheistic tradition later embodied in Emerson and Thoreau and dramatized by Melville in *Moby-Dick* (1851).

BIOGRAPHY

Bryant’s maternal ancestors came to America on the *Mayflower* in 1620. Bryant was born in a log cabin in Massachusetts in 1794, soon after the American Revolution. Like New England, he was raised a Calvinist. He grew up reading the classics, the *Bible* and 18th century English literature. At the age of 13 he published a long satire of the Jeffersonian party for imposing an embargo on American shipping. He attended Williams College for awhile, dropped out for financial reasons and in 1815 became a lawyer, but he disliked that profession.

“Thanatopsis” (1817)

His father found some of his early poems in a drawer and published them, including “Thanatopsis.” Suddenly famous, Bryant gave up the law to write and edit for magazines. He was modest, reverent and patriotic. Like New England, he turned liberal and identified with the Unitarian church, serving as a hymnist. He was hired in 1826 by the *Evening Post*, the major newspaper in New York. He rose to become Editor, then part owner and eventually the leading citizen of New York City, a liberal advocate of the working class who opposed slavery, celebrated the violent abolitionist John Brown as a martyr, helped found the Republican party and in 1860 gave a speech introducing Abraham Lincoln that is credited with elevating Lincoln to the nomination and then to the presidency. Once, after conversing with Bryant in New York after a speech, Lincoln said, “It was worth a journey to the East merely to see such a man.”

POETRY

Bryant wrote his best poems in early youth, influenced first by Alexander Pope, then by Southey, Thomson, Cowper and the “graveyard school” of English poetry including Edward Young and Thomas Gray, then finally by Wordsworth. Critics later judged his “Thanatopsis” superior to all its English models except Gray’s famous “Elegy.” Bryant individuated beyond the rationalism of Pope and Freneau, from a vertical into an holistic mode of consciousness, becoming a precursor of Emerson and Thoreau. At the same time, he retained a Neoclassical dimension, as indicated by the fact that he devoted his last years to translating Homer into blank verse. Late in life, he lectured on Cooper, Irving, Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott. Bryant evolved from a Puritan into a Victorian comparable in his values to Irving and Hawthorne, as indicated in the second of his *Lectures on Poetry*:

"Poetry cherishes patriotism, the incitement to vigorous toils endured for the welfare of communities. It luxuriates among the natural affections, the springs of all the gentle charities of domestic life. It has so refined and transformed and hallowed the love of the sexes that piety itself has sometimes taken the language of that passion to clothe its most fervent aspirations."

DEATH

A famous Romantic painting by Asher Durand, *Kindred Spirits*, depicts Bryant standing on a cliff in the wilderness beside his friend the painter Thomas Cole. Bryant promoted the creation of Central Park on Manhattan and in 1884, at 42nd Street and 6th Avenue, Bryant Park was named in his honor. Ironically, he died as a result of falling down in Central Park during a ceremony honoring someone else.

Michael Hollister (2015)

“When William Cullen Bryant died in 1878 at the age of eighty-three, his fame was universal. Newspapers across the country and Europe ran extensive obituaries on America’s great poet and principled editor. Flags flew at half-mast throughout Manhattan....He had not wanted a public funeral but got one nevertheless, with friends, dignitaries and citizens filling the pews and overflowing into the street....Bryant was the first major American poet to experience celebrity--a public exposure and adulation so sustained that only Robert Frost rivals him in this regard.”

Gilbert H. Muller
William Cullen Bryant: Author of America
(SUNY, Albany 2008) vii

“Three dozen poems chosen from the hundreds he produced reveal him as a revolutionary of prosody seeking refuge from Calvinism in a pantheistic God...Gado argues that Bryant is the Founding Father of American poetry. As a poet of Nature, Bryant played a literary role comparable to the influence on art exercised by his good friend Thomas Cole, founder of the Hudson River School. But perhaps even more important was the example Bryant set for Walt Whitman.”

online ad for
William Cullen Bryant: An American Voice
(U Press of New England 2006), Frank Gado

BEST POEMS

“Thanatopsis”: analysis
“The Prairies”: analysis
“To a Waterfowl” (most often anthologized)
“The Ages” (most ambitious)
“Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood”
“A Forest Hymn”
“The Death of the Flowers”
“To the Fringed Gentian”

“Song of the Marion’s Men”
“The Battle-Field”
“Oh Mother of a Mighty Race”
“The Flood of Years”

