

James Russell Lowell

(1819-1891)

Bryant (1848)

There is Bryant, as quiet, as cool, and as dignified,  
As a smooth, silent iceberg, that never is ignifed,  
Save when by reflection 'tis kindled o' nights  
With a semblance of flame by the chill Northern Lights.  
He may rank (Griswold says so) first bard of your nation  
(There's no doubt that he stands in supreme ice-olation),  
Your topmost Parnassus he may set his heel on,  
But no warm applauses come, peal following peal on,--  
He's too smooth and too polished to hang any zeal on:  
Unqualified merits, I'll grant, if you choose, he has 'em,  
But he lacks the one merit of kindling enthusiasm;  
If he stir you at all, it is just, on my soul,  
Like being stirred up with the very North Pole....

Some scholar who's hourly expecting his learning,  
Calls B. the American Wordsworth; but Wordsworth  
May be rated at more than your whole tuneful herd's worth.  
No, don't be absurd, he's an excellent Bryant;  
But, my friends, you'll endanger the life of your client,  
By attempting to stretch him up into a giant:  
If you choose to compare him, I think there are two persons  
Fit for a parallel--Thompson and Cowper;  
I don't mean exactly--there's something of each,  
There's T's love of nature, C's penchant to preach;  
Just mix up their minds so that C's spice of craziness  
Shall balance and neutralize T's turn for laziness,  
And it gives you a brain cool, quite frictionless, quiet,  
Whose internal police nips the buds of all riot,--  
A brain like a permanent straight-jacket put on  
The heart that strives vainly to burst off a button,--  
A brain which, without being slow or mechanic,  
Does more than a larger less drilled, more volcanic;  
He's a Cowper condensed, with no craziness bitten,  
And the advantage that Wordsworth before him had written.  
But, my dear little bardlings, don't prick up your ears  
Nor suppose I would rank you and Bryant as peers;  
If I call him an iceberg, I don't mean to say  
There is nothing in that which is grand in its way;  
He is almost the one of your poets that knows  
How much grace, strength, and dignity lie in Repose;  
If he sometimes falls short, he is too wise to mar  
His thought's modest fullness by going too far;  
'T would be well if your authors should all make a trial  
Of what virtue there is in severe self-denial,  
And measure their writings by Hesiod's staff,  
Which teaches that all has less value than half.