



CRITICISM

VOLUME

189

Poetry Criticism

*Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 189

Lawrence J. Trudeau
Editor

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Poetry Criticism

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators.

This series was developed in response to suggestions from librarians serving high school, college, and public library patrons, who had noted a considerable number of requests for critical material on poems and poets. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, librarians perceived the need for a series devoted solely to poets and poetry.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, PC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research.

Approximately three to six authors, works, or topics are included in each volume. An author's first entry in the series generally presents a historical survey of the critical response to the author's work; subsequent entries will focus upon contemporary criticism about the author or criticism of an important poem, group of poems, or book. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from critics who do not write in English whose criticism has been translated. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a PC volume.

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Each PC entry consists of the following elements:

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections, book-length poems, and theoretical works by the author about poetry. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. In the case of authors who do not write in English, an English translation of the title is provided as an aid to the reader; the translation is either a published translated title or a free translation provided by the compiler of the entry. In the case of such authors whose works have been translated into English, the **Principal English Translations** focuses primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting those works most commonly considered the best by critics.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems, poetry collections, and theoretical works about poetry by the

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Citations conform to recommendations set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (2009).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** describing each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *PC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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Linkin, Harriet Kramer. "The Language of Speakers in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." *Romanticism Past and Present* 10.2 (1986): 5-24. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 79-88. Print.

Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." *Interpreting Blake*. Ed. Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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“Thanatopsis”

William Cullen Bryant

(Also wrote under the joint pseudonym Francis Herbert) American poet, essayist, journalist, orator, short-story writer, and travel writer.

The following entry provides criticism of Bryant's poem “Thanatopsis” (1817). For additional information about Bryant, see *PC*, Volume 20.

INTRODUCTION

“Thanatopsis,” by William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878), is a somber and consolatory meditation on the inevitability of death and the solace of nature. Often characterized as an American variation on some of the distinctive themes of a group of mortality-focused eighteenth-century English writers known as the Graveyard Poets, “Thanatopsis” was also inspired by the early Romantics, in particular William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). First published in 1817 in the *North American Review* after having been written sometime during the previous several years, “Thanatopsis” later appeared in a revised and expanded version in Bryant's first poetry collection, *Poems* (1821). Widely lauded in Bryant's time, “Thanatopsis” was instrumental in establishing him among his era's preeminent poetic voices, and it now stands as one of the few examples of his work that continues to enjoy a wide readership.

SUBJECT AND FORM

In its most complete form, “Thanatopsis” comprises eighty-two lines of blank verse, an unrhymed verse form generally composed in iambic pentameter. Bryant did not adhere strictly to this structure, however, and the poem contains many metrical variations on traditional blank verse. “Thanatopsis” begins by noting the various types of comfort the contemplation of nature offers, depending on the psychological state of the viewer: “for his gayer hours / She has a voice of gladness, and a smile / And eloquence of beauty.” Nature ameliorates the observer's bleaker meditations “with a mild / And healing sympathy, that steals away / Their sharpness, ere he is aware.” Bryant then advanced to the poem's principal subject, the inevitability of death, and the role of nature in helping humans prepare to face it. He urged

the reader, when discouraged by thoughts of mortality, to listen to nature “while from all around— / Earth and her waters, and the depths of air— / Comes a still voice.” The remainder of the poem issues from the perspective of this voice.

The voice of nature acknowledges that death awaits the reader, whose corporeal form will decay and “mix for ever with the elements, / To be a brother to the insensible rock.” Readers are consoled, however, with the understanding that they will not be alone in this fate; they will instead join kings, sages, and all manner of other deceased personages, “All in one mighty sepulchre.” Bryant maintained this conceit at length, characterizing earth's varied and majestic geographical features—hills, woods, rivers, oceans, and so forth—as “but the solemn decorations all / Of the great tomb of man.” He also incorporated celestial bodies such as the sun and planets into this vision.

The poem then expands upon the notion that the vast multitudes of the dead reposing together far outnumber the living: “All that tread / The globe are but a handful to the tribes / That slumber in its bosom.” The dead are ubiquitous, and countless people rest in even the most seemingly isolated areas. Bryant exhorted his readers to take comfort from this fact and reassured them that, even if they die friendless and unmourned, they will be joined in death by those currently living. Everyone, young or old, “Shall one by one be gathered to thy side / By those, who in their turn shall follow them.” The poem ends by urging the reader to approach death serenely, calm in this knowledge of common fate: “By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave, / Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch / About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.”

MAJOR THEMES

Thematically central to “Thanatopsis” is the inevitability of death and the importance of overcoming the fear it engenders. Bryant acknowledged that the human contemplation of mortality generally leads to despondency, noting that such musings “come like a blight” and “Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart.” The poem is largely devoted to soothing these anxieties, in part by calling attention to death's role as a universal, equalizing force. All

living things, regardless of their worldly station, will come to the same final rest, erasing all social boundaries and class distinctions: "Thou shalt lie down / With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings, / The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good." The eternal state of death is contrasted with the trivial impermanence of life, wherein "the solemn brood of care / Plod on, and each one as before will chase / His favorite phantom." Any sadness the dying individual might experience in leaving the living behind is leavened by the fact that "all these shall leave / Their mirth and their employments, and shall come / And make their bed with thee."

The poem's posthumous vision entirely eschews Christian notions of the afterlife. Bryant made no mention of hell, nor did he suggest that mortals encounter varied fates after dying. Although the language of the poem does not preclude a traditional heaven, its evocation of "that mysterious realm, where each shall take / His chamber in the silent halls of death" does not articulate the belief system of a major modern Western religion, a fact that occasionally led to controversy during the nineteenth century. The consolatory role that might otherwise have been occupied by God is instead assigned to nature.

An abiding reverence for nature is the most salient feature of the worldview expressed in "Thanatopsis." Throughout the text, Bryant repeatedly emphasized the power of nature's beauty to improve the outlook of its beholders, and he encouraged readers to be receptive to the wisdom of the natural world: "Go forth, under the open sky, and list / To Nature's teachings." He presented the intermingling of the human body, upon death, with the natural world—when "The oak / Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould"—as a state of glorious communion, not only with one's fellow dead but also with the majesty of nature. In "Thanatopsis," humans' awareness of their place within the natural order of life and death is what provides them with the psychological means to face mortality with equanimity rather than fear.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

"Thanatopsis" was well received on its initial publication and has retained a largely positive reputation ever since. Although some earlier commentators—notably the Congregationalist minister Henry Ward Beecher, who accused Bryant of paganism—disparaged the poem for the absence of strongly Christian themes in its treatment of the afterlife, most critics praised it as a serene and lovely meditation on human mortality. "Thanatopsis" played a key role in Bryant's ascendancy as a leading American poet of his time, and, by the middle of the nineteenth century, it was

taught extensively in American schools and was well known abroad.

Despite a general decline in Bryant's poetic reputation in the latter part of the century, the poem retained its standing, and in 1878 it was still sufficiently renowned to appear by itself in a lavishly illustrated gift-book edition. A review of the edition published in the *Academy* (1878) demonstrates the canonical status of the work. The anonymous reviewer referred to the poem as Bryant's "masterpiece" and described it as "grave and reflective" but devoted the remainder of his comments to the accompanying illustrations, implying that the poem's merit was so universally accepted that a detailed discussion of its form or content would be superfluous. This reception has, for the most part, endured to the present day. Although Bryant is now regarded as a relatively minor poet, "Thanatopsis" continues to be read and anthologized.

Much scholarship on the poem focuses on its composition. Willis Fletcher Johnson (1927) compared the 1817 text to the expanded 1821 version, asserting that the lines Bryant added to the beginning and end of the work "seem to me so consistent with the whole tenor of the poem that it is difficult to realize that they were written not at the same time with the rest of it but years afterward." Johnson acknowledged, however, that their high quality "suggests their origin at a time when Bryant's powers were more matured." Tremaine McDowell (1937) incorporated an analysis of the poem's various drafts and revisions into a broader discussion of Bryant's compositional process, noting that his revisions were "more numerous, perhaps, than those of the average poet of his century, but not so numerous as to leave no room for creation. What he achieved, then, may be credited jointly to inspiration and to persistent effort." In an attempt to establish a probable date for the poem's composition, William Cullen Bryant II (1948), a collateral descendant of the poet, cited textual and biographical details refuting the common notion that it was written in 1811. In his assessment, evidence that Bryant "started to compose 'Thanatopsis' as late as the fall of 1815 is not inconsiderable."

Other criticism is devoted to situating the poem within literary history. Selden L. Whitcomb (1894; see Further Reading) characterized it as a transitional work within the evolution of nature depictions in early-American literature, noting that it makes use of the New England landscape while remaining heavily indebted to British poetry. Alan B. Donovan (1968; see Further Reading) argued for Bryant's significance within the American poetic tradition and portrayed "Thanatopsis" as a challenge to traditional Christian afterlife conceptions. Timothy Morris (1994)

traced the development of Bryant's status within American literature, observing that he "remains canonical because it would still be impossible to conceive of an American poetic tradition without him. The habit of reading 'Thanatopsis' as an outstanding literary event has persisted ever since 1817." In an introduction to an edition that includes "Thanatopsis" and another poem by Bryant, John White Chadwick (1893) provided a short biographical sketch of Bryant and briefly discussed the work's influences and significance, emphasizing that "one cannot say which is more admirable,—the splendid movement of the whole poem, or the absolute sobriety and fitness and felicity of each separate phrase."

James Overholtzer

Academic Advisor: Amber M. Jenkins,
Elizabeth City State University

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

The Embargo; or, Sketches of the Times: A Satire, by a Youth of Thirteen. As Anonymous. Boston: Purchasers, 1808. Rev. and enl. ed. *The Embargo; or, Sketches of the Times: A Satire . . . together with The Spanish Revolution and Other Poems.* Boston: House, 1809. Print.

**Poems.* Cambridge: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1821. Print.

†*Miscellaneous Poems Selected from the United States Literary Gazette.* Boston: Cummings, Hilliard/Gray, 1826. Print.

Poems, by William Cullen Bryant, an American. New York: Bliss, 1832. Enl. ed. Boston: Russell, Odiorne, and Metcalf, 1834. Enl. ed. New York: Harper, 1836. Enl. ed. New York: Harper, 1839. Rev. and enl. ed. Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1847. Enl. ed. 2 vols. New York: Appleton, 1855. Print.

The Fountain and Other Poems. New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1842. Print.

The White-Footed Deer and Other Poems. New York: Pratt, 1844. Print.

Hymns. N.p.: n.p., 1864. Print.

Thirty Poems. New York: Appleton, 1864. Print.

The Iliad of Homer. Trans. William Cullen Bryant. 2 vols. Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1870. Print.

The Odyssey of Homer. Trans. William Cullen Bryant. 2 vols. New York: Osgood, 1871-72. Print.

Poems. New York: Appleton, 1876. Print.

The Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant. Ed. Parke Godwin. 2 vols. New York: Appleton, 1883-84. Print.

Other Major Works

An Oration, Delivered at Stockbridge. July 4th 1820. Stockbridge: Webster, 1820. Print. (Speech)

‡*The Talisman.* As Francis Herbert. With Robert Sands and Gulian Verplanck. Ed. William Cullen Bryant. 3 vols. New York: Bliss, 1827-29. Print. (Essays, poetry, and short stories)

Popular Considerations on Homoeopathia. New York: Radde, 1841. Print. (Essay)

A Funeral Oration, Occasioned by the Death of Thomas Cole, Delivered before the National Academy of Design, New-York, May 4, 1848. New York: Appleton, 1848. Print. (Speech)

Letters of a Traveller; or, Notes of Things Seen in Europe and America. New York: Putnam, 1850. Print. (Travel essays)

Reminiscences of the Evening Post: Extracted from the Evening Post of November 15, 1851, with Additions and Corrections by the Writer. New York: Bryant, 1851. Print. (History)

A Discourse on the Life and Genius of James Fenimore Cooper. N.p.: n.p., 1852. Print. (Speech)

Letters of a Traveller: Second Series. New York: Appleton, 1859. Print. (Travel essays)

A Discourse on the Life, Character and Genius of Washington Irving, Delivered before the New York Historical Society, at the Academy of Music in New York on the 3d of April, 1860. New York: Putnam, 1860. Print. (Speech)

Letters from the East. New York: Putnam, 1869. Print. (Travel essays)

A Discourse on the Life, Character, and Writings of Gulian Crommelin Verplanck. New York: Society, 1870. Print. (Speech)

Picturesque America. Ed. William Cullen Bryant. New York: Appleton, 1872-74. Print. (Essays)

Orations and Addresses. New York: Putnam, 1873. Print. (Speeches)

A Popular History of the United States, from the First Discovery of the Western Hemisphere by the Northmen, to the End of the First Century of the Union of the States. With Sidney Howard Gay. 4 vols. New York: Scribner, 1876-81. Print. (History)

The Letters of William Cullen Bryant. Ed. William Cullen Bryant III and Thomas G. Voss. 6 vols. New York: Fordham UP, 1975-92. Print. (Letters)

*Includes the poem "Thanatopsis," first published in the *North American Review* in 1817.

†Includes twenty-six poems by Bryant.

‡Bryant, Sands, and Verplanck published this work under the pseudonym Francis Herbert.

CRITICISM

Academy (review date 1878)

SOURCE: Rev. of "Thanatopsis," by William Cullen Bryant. *Academy* 21 Dec. 1878: 580. Print.

[In the following review, the anonymous commentator offers an enthusiastic assessment of an 1878 illustrated gift-book edition of "Thanatopsis," referring to the poem as Bryant's "masterpiece" and praising the engravings provided by W. J. Linton.]

The American publishers possess quite a *spécialité* in the production of these elegant quarto editions of single poems. Last Christmas we commended the form in which the latest of Mr. Bryant's works, *The Flood of Years*, was issued by the same firm and illustrated by the same hand that now present us with the poet's masterpiece, originally published one-and-sixty years ago. The designs in the present instance are exceedingly fine and imaginative; Mr. Linton acknowledges that for many of the ideas he has been indebted to David Scott, that noble visionary artist whom we lost nearly thirty years since, and whose imagination has informed so many succeeding creations of painter and poet. The incomparable beauty and elevation of such of David Scott's later designs as *The Procession of Unknown Powers*, point him out as a man specially gifted to illustrate or to inspire the illustrator of so grave and reflective a poem as *Thanatopsis*. Besides indebtedness acknowledged to David Scott, Mr. Linton frankly admits the acceptance of ideas from William Blake and from Isaac Taylor, the author of *The Natural History of Enthusiasm*. Mr. Linton's own powers, whether as an engraver or as a designer, are shown in the delicacy of such fragments of luminous cloud, pierced with sunlight, as adorn the headline of the second page. Such a volume as this does honour to every name connected with it; it reaches the highest standard of purity and distinction in taste, and the verse, the drawings, the engraving, all down to the paper and the cover, are the best that can be provided.

Youth's Companion (essay date 1883)

SOURCE: "Origin of 'Thanatopsis.'" *Youth's Companion* 56.20 (1883): 206. Print.

[In the following essay, the anonymous writer relates a story of how Bryant came to compose his poetic "view of death" while still a teenager, and how his father's discovery and sharing of the poem with an editor eventually led to its publication. The writer stresses that the work was immediately recognized as exceptional by leading figures in the American literary scene.]

"Rhymes of boys are but songs of the mocking-bird," says Mr. George W. Curtis, referring to the fact that poetry written by the young is usually imitative. Yet the imitative intellect of a boy of seventeen produced a poem whose genuine originality made an epoch in American literature. We refer to Bryant's "**Thanatopsis**," which the poet Stoddard calls "the greatest poem ever written by so young a man." The story of the origin of the poem, as told by Mr. Godwin in his biography of the poet, shows the boy, already the author of many-verses, walking in the woods one autumn day. He had been reading Blair's poem of "The Grave," and Kirke White's "Melodies of Death."

The gray sky, the brown earth heaped with sere and withered leaves, the hollow-sounding ground, the loneliness of the forest, and the prostrate, mouldering trees suggested the thought that the vast solitudes were filled with the sad tokens of decay.

What, indeed, he asked himself, as the thought expanded in his mind, is the whole earth but a great sepulchre of once living things; and its skies and stars but the witnesses and decorations of a tomb?

He hurried home and endeavored to paint his thought to the eye, and render it in music to the ear. When he finished his task, he coined for it a name from the Greek, "**Thanatopsis**," or a view of death.

Usually, he took his poems to his father for criticism, or read them aloud to his brothers. But he hid "**Thanatopsis**" away in a pigeon-hole of his father's desk, on which it had been written.

Some months later, the father, while his son was absent from home, discovered "**Thanatopsis**" and a few other poems. He was so much delighted with them that he carried them to Boston to subject them to the examination of his friend Phillips, then engaged in editing *The North American Review*.

As "**Thanatopsis**," in the first draft, was full of erasures and interlineations, Dr. Bryant, the poet's father, had

transcribed it, but left the other pieces in their original state. Mr. Phillips was not at home when he called, and so he left the package with his name.

Mr. Phillips was so much pleased with the poems that he hastened to Cambridge to read them to Richard H. Dana, who as a critic was an acknowledged authority in literature.

"Ah, Phillips," said Dana, with a quiet smile, at the close of the reading, "you have been imposed upon; no one on this side of the Atlantic is capable of writing such verses."

"I know," answered Phillips, with some spirit, "the gentleman who wrote the best of them, at least, very well; he is an old acquaintance of mine—Dr. Bryant—at this moment sitting at the State House in Boston as Senator from Hampshire County."

"Then," responded Dana, "I must have a look at him," and, putting on his clogs and his cloak, he trudged over to Boston. "Arrived at the Senate," said Mr. Dana, in a conversation afterwards, "I caused the doctor to be pointed out to me. I looked at him with profound attention and interest; and while I saw a man of striking presence, the stamp of genius seemed to me to be wanting. 'It is a good head,' I said to myself, 'but I do not see **"Thanatopsis"** in it,' and went back a little disappointed."

The poem was published in the *Review*, and immediately excited the praise of cultured readers. But it required Dr. Bryant's strongest affirmation to convince them that his son Cullen had written, when but seventeen years of age, the best poem that had then been published in the United States.

John White Chadwick (essay date 1893)

SOURCE: Chadwick, John White. Introduction. *Thanatopsis and A Forest Hymn*, by William Cullen Bryant. Boston: Knight, 1893. 5-8. Print.

[In the following essay, Chadwick provides a brief introduction to "Thanatopsis"; a biographical sketch of Bryant's youth, career, and composition of the poem; and a description of the poem and its influences and merits.]

Cummington, Mass., where William Cullen Bryant was born Nov. 3, 1794, was a hill-town, but it became a valley-town long since. The church upon the hill was moved so many times before it finally showed any staying quality, that the New England proverb, "Sot as a meetin' house," was not made good in its experience, and the house where Bryant was born was near its final rest,—a lovely situation, even finer than that of the present "Bryant Place," to which

Bryant's father moved in 1799. Here the poet's grandfather Snell had come, an early settler of the town, in 1774, and his next neighbor was the Rev. James Briggs, the hero—for surely we may so call him—of one of Bryant's noblest early poems, "**The Old Man's Funeral**." The poet's father was the village doctor, and his office was an addition to his house, which ultimately, obedient to the "moving accident" which seems to have been a common "trade" in Cummington, was detached from the main building and sent two miles down the hill. The difficult and triumphant passage was a great event, some score of oxen alternately dragging and retarding the heavy-timbered building on its way over the frozen snow. Its present situation is on the pleasant valley-road from Cummington to the west village. It is now occupied by a large family of colored people; and at least one pickaninny can generally be seen standing in the doorway, as in our head-piece illustration, as the traveller goes by.

There is no other building in America so sacred in its associations with the beginnings of our literature as this. It should be as dear to us as Shakspeare's house in Stratford is to Englishmen, and Burns's house in Ayr to the perfervid Scots. For in this little domicile, when it was Dr. Peter Bryant's office, young Bryant wrote "**Thanatopsis**" in its original form, and hid it in his father's desk. This was, apparently, in the fall of 1811, soon after the end of Bryant's half course in Williams College, when he was not quite seventeen years old. He could have had no apprehension of the significance of his achievement, for he allowed the poem to remain untouched for several years. It was first printed in 1817, in the September number of the "North American Review"; and I am sorry for the reader who can read it there without some trembling of the heart. Dr. Bryant was a State senator at Boston at the time, and having transcribed "**Thanatopsis**" for the *Review*, he got the credit of writing it; whereupon Willard Phillips, one of the editors of the *Review*, took the elder R. H. Dana round to the State House to see the poet who had written what Dana assured him no man in America could write. "A good head," said Dana, "but I do not see '**Thanatopsis**' in it."

The poem as printed in the *Review* is not the poem which the modern reader knows. That had forty-nine lines, and this has eighty-one; and the changes in the original part—some of them important, and all of them for the better—number eleven. The additions, which are the Prologue and Epilogue, are not finer than the original part, which began with "Yet a few days," and ended with "their bed with thee."

Henry Kirke White's "Ode to the Rosemary," Bishop Porteus's "Death," and Blair's "Grave," all helped to shape the

mood out of which “**Thanatopsis**” came. Blair’s help was the most direct, and Bryant’s poem is an expansion of a phrase in his lugubrious monody,—

What is this world?

What but a spacious burial-field, unwall’d,
Strewn with death’s spoils?

But beyond this Blair profited him nothing. It was not a case of Thomas Fuller’s plain cloth made velvet by the handsome wearing of it; but one of gaudy fustian changed to cloth-of-gold. The judgment of the poet Stoddard that it is “the greatest poem ever written by so young a man” is not likely to be set aside. Stedman’s is quite as just: “No one of like years ever composed a single poem that had so continuous and elevating an effect upon the literature of a country.” When, a few years ago, many literary people were making lists of our poets in the order of their excellence, and some English critics were for giving Poe a leading place, Dr. Hedge wrote to me: “Emerson our first poet; ‘**Thanatopsis**’ our first poem; Poe nowhere.” One cannot say which is more admirable,—the splendid movement of the whole poem, or the absolute sobriety and fitness and felicity of each separate phrase.

The “**Forest Hymn**,” which follows “**Thanatopsis**” in these pages, is also one of Bryant’s earlier poems, and one of the most perfect of them all. He was not yet thirty when it was first published in the “United States Literary Gazette.” It breathes, if not a loftier, a more cheerful spirit than “**Thanatopsis**,” though it is the best expression of Bryant’s favorite contrast of the permanence of Nature with the fleetingness of our mortality.

Helen Archibald Clarke and Charlotte Endymion Porter (essay date 1894)

SOURCE: Clarke, Helen Archibald, and Charlotte Endymion Porter. “A School of Literature: How to Study Bryant’s ‘**Thanatopsis**.’” *Poet-Lore* 6.1 (1894): 520-26. Print.

[In the following essay, Clarke and Porter, writing under their joint pseudonym P. A. C., ask readers to consider the imagery that Bryant employs, the identity of the speaker of particular lines, and whether there is “a gap in the argument of the poem.” Clarke and Porter quote from other well-known poetic works and dramatic expressions, inviting readers to compare Bryant’s perspective on death and nature to that of other writers.]

The “various language” which Nature speaks to him who in love of her “holds communion with her visible forms” is the subject of the preface of ‘**Thanatopsis**’ (first sixteen

lines). Is it exemplified in the sequel of the poem? Is her “voice of gladness” for his “gayer hours” the theme, or her voice of “healing sympathy” that steals away the sharpness from his darker musings?

When thoughts of death come, and under the open sky you listen to the still voice that comes “from Earth and her waters and the deeps of air,” what is the “healing sympathy” it offers?

First, the certainty that Nature shall in a short time reabsorb “thine individual being” and every “human trace” be lost in her elements, and converted, moreover, to her own new growths and uses; for the oak shall pierce thy mould with his roots, and the ploughshare turn thee up as but one in substance with the “insensible rock” and “sluggish clod.”

Second, that thy fate shall have innumerable companions; and that a more magnificent couch could not be desired.

An expanded description follows of those various and innumerable companions, and of the “solemn decorations of the great tomb of man.” Is any additional phase of the thought itself given, or is the rest an expansion merely of the same two ideas,—the universality of death, and the splendor of the universal tomb?

In the concluding nine lines is it the voice of Nature or of the poet that urges you so to live that you may go to death not like a scourged galley slave to his dungeon, but “Like one who wraps the draperies of his couch about him and lies down to pleasant dreams”?

Is the soothing and sustainment spoken of shown in the poem to be a consequence of listening to Nature’s voice? Does it follow of necessity from the fact of Death’s universality, and from the perception of the beauty of the tomb universal? Or is there, do you think, a gap in the argument of the poem? Do you consider companionship in death and the beauty of the entombment of man in Nature, as here set forth, to be facts sufficiently cheering in themselves to warrant an “unfaltering trust”? Is either one of these facts, as expressed in this poem, more persuasive to comfort than the other, and why? Do you think that the fact that all humanity has shared your fate, or will share it, offers sustainment, or that the other fact is soothing, that the material universe in which you shall be buried is beautiful? Would these facts be strengthened in sustaining and soothing power if to the first be added the element of personal affection for the dead or human brotherhood with them, and to the second an element of a perfecting purpose visible in Nature and so supplementing the material beauty of the earth with an innate intellectual and spiritual beauty? But does Bryant intimate any such additions?

Mr. J. W. Chadwick, who, in his article in the September *Harper's* entitled 'The Origin of a Great Poem,' finds in this passage from Blair the germ which Bryant expanded in '*Thanatopsis*,' speaks of the thought as suffering a sea-change in Bryant into something passing rich and strangely beautiful. What is the difference, do you think, between Blair's thought as follows—

What is this world?
What but a spacious burial-field unwall'd,
Strew'd with death's spoils, the spoils of animals,
Savage and tame, and full of dead men's bones!
The very turf on which we tread once lived;
And we that live must lend our carcasses
To cover our own offspring; in their turns
These too must cover theirs—

and Bryant's? Does the superior charm of Bryant's poem reside solely in its finer verbal and metrical expression? Or does the secret of it lie in his perception in death's universality of its lawfulness, and hence of its strength and sustenance; and in the engulfment of man in matter of the beauty that results in spite of that, and hence of its peace?

Compare the two opposite dramatic expressions by Shakespeare of the same ideas of physical death as those on which Bryant dwells; that is, on the fatal side, the inevitableness of death to every one, and on the physical side, decay and reabsorption into matter.

Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear;
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come.

[...]

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribb'd ice;
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds;
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world; or to be worse than worst
Of those that lawless and uncertain thoughts
Imagine howling!—'tis too horrible!
The weariest and most loath'd worldly life,
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on Nature, is a paradise
To what we fear of death.

Is there either expression or implication in '*Thanatopsis*' of a spiritual side to death, or is the thought bent wholly on the physical and fatal sides, as in Shakespeare?

Is the early date of the poem (1811-1821), before the theory of evolution was established, responsible for its treatment of Nature as having no relation to the human or the

spiritual, and as being an outside element separable from man and one to which he is subordinate? Contrast this treatment of Nature with that of poets of a more modern spirit who were strongly imbued with the idea of evolution and with a view of Nature as closely akin to man and leading up to him. For example, with Tennyson's lines:—

Contemplate all this work of Time
The giant laboring in his growth;
Nor dream of human love and truth,
As dying Nature's earth and lime;

But trust that those we call the dead
Are breathers of an ampler day
For ever nobler ends. They say,
The solid earth whereon we tread

In tracts of fluent heat began,
And grew to seeming-random forms,
The seeming prey of cyclic storms,
Till at the last arose the man;

Who throve and branch'd from clime to clime,
The herald of a higher race,
And of himself in higher place
If so he type this work of Time

Within himself, from more to more.

Or with Browning's poetry of evolution in '*Paracelsus*':—

The centre-fire heaves underneath the earth,
And the earth changes like a human face;
The molten ore bursts up among the rocks,
Winds into the stone's heart, outbranches bright
In hidden mines, spots barren river-beds,
Crumbles into fine sand where sunbeams bask—
God joys therein. The wroth sea's waves are edged
With foam, white as the bitten lip of hate,
When, in the solitary waste, strange groups
Of young volcanoes come up, cyclops-like,
Staring together with their eyes on flame—
God tastes a pleasure in their uncouth pride.
Then all is still; earth is a wintry clod:
But spring-wind, like a dancing psaltress, passes
Over its breast to waken it; rare verdure
Buds tenderly upon rough banks, between
The withered tree-roots and the cracks of frost,
Like a smile striving with a wrinkled face;
... Thus God dwells in all,

From life's minute beginnings, up at last
To man—
... whose attributes had here and there
Been scattered o'er the visible world before,
Asking to be combined.

... Not alone
For their possessor dawn those qualities,
But the new glory mixes with the heaven
And earth; man, once descried, imprints forever
His presence on all lifeless things.

Topic for Debate: Is there a quality in Bryant's '*Thanatopsis*' which marks the poem as a connecting link between