

Bryant's Practice in Composition and Revision

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### XXXI

#### BRYANT'S PRACTICE IN COMPOSITION AND REVISION

WHENEVER a poet allows us to follow his creative processes, we are grateful—even though he may be no supreme artist but merely a solid craftsman. An account of the manner in which William Cullen Bryant composed his poems will therefore interest students not only of American letters but of poetry at large. From youth to old age, Bryant believed that great poetry and indeed all true poetry has its origin in the emotions of the poet. His own early ecstasy, out of which came such poems as “Thanatopsis,” he described in these lines:

I cannot forget the high spell that enchanted,  
Nor the visions that brightened my earlier days,  
When verse was a passion, and warmly I panted  
To wreath my young brows with unwithering bays.

And I bowed to the impulse with fervid devotion,  
And gave my whole soul to the love of the lyre;  
Each gaze at the glories of earth, sky, and ocean,  
To my kindled emotions was wind over fire.

Then throbbed his young veins and beat his young bosom while over him rushed “the wild spirit of song”:

Till I felt the dark power o'er my reveries stealing,  
From his throne in the depth of that stern solitude,  
And he breathed through my lips, in that tempest of feeling,  
Strains full of his spirit, though artless and rude.<sup>1</sup>

In the same year, 1826, Bryant announced in prose his mature acceptance of the romantic doctrine which Poe was to advocate in the next decade—the doctrine that, because “the most beautiful poetry is that which takes the strongest hold of the feelings,” no poet can strongly move the feelings unless he himself is profoundly stirred by emotion.<sup>2</sup> Thirty-eight years later, Bryant was still of the same mind, for he then declared that the poet who would “touch the heart or fire the blood” must write only when his own “lips quiver” and his “eyes o'erflow.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Stanzas,” *New-York Review*, II (1826), 216–217.—Better known is the revised text of this poem published in 1832 as “I Cannot Forget with What Fervid Devotion.” This later version is less emotional in tone and less personal in its revelations.

<sup>2</sup> “Lectures on Poetry” (delivered in New York in 1826), *Prose Writings* (New York, 1884), I, 8, 10.

<sup>3</sup> “The Poet,” *Thirty Poems* (New York, 1864), p. 208.—Bryant's romantic conception

How literally Bryant in 1826 meant the reader to take his account of a "dark power" which breathed through his lips, no one now knows.<sup>4</sup> It is entirely possible, however, that as he looked back at the lad of sixteen writing the first draft of "Thanatopsis," he saw there literal inspiration. At the age of sixty-eight, he cautiously admitted something of the sort:

I cannot say that in writing my poems I am directly conscious of the action of an outside intelligence on my mind, but I sometimes wonder whence the thoughts come, and they seem to me hardly my own. Sometimes in searching for that adequate expression it seems suddenly darted into my mind, like a ray into a dark room, and gives me a kind of surprise.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, he learned that creation, even though it may be stimulated from without, exacts a heavy price from the mind and the heart within. Explaining why he was translating the classics in his last years rather than writing original poetry, he said:

Whatever requires invention, whatever compels one to search both for new thoughts and adequate expressions wherewith to clothe them, makes a severe demand on the intellect and the nervous system—at least I have found it so.<sup>6</sup>

A poet who emphasized the emotional origin of art and admitted the possibility of external inspiration naturally concluded that, once a poem is envisioned by its creator, correction and alteration should be undertaken with the utmost caution. He wrote in 1833:

The truth is that an alteration ought never to be made without the mind being filled with the subject. In mending a faulty passage in cold blood, we often do more mischief, by attending to particulars and neglecting the entire construction and sequence of ideas, than we do good.<sup>7</sup>

And in 1864 he warned his brother poets:

Touch the crude line with fear,  
Save in the moment of impassioned thought;

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of poetry is summarized in *William Cullen Bryant: Representative Selections*, ed. Tremaine McDowell (New York, 1935), p. lvi-lxiii.

<sup>4</sup> The "dark power" of this poem is, of course, not poetic inspiration in general but the particular inspiration which comes from external nature.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Bronson C. Keeler, New York, August 12, 1863, quoted in Parke Godwin, *A Biography of William Cullen Bryant* (New York, 1883), II, 386-387.—Bryant went on to say: "I don't invoke the Muse at all. . . . It appears to me that inspiration has no more to do with one intellectual process than another." He concluded less rationally: "I am not prepared to say that there cannot be a direct action of mind upon mind without the interposition of a bodily presence."

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Professor Joseph Alden of Lafayette College, quoted in *idem*, II, 270-271.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Richard Henry Dana, Sr., New York, November 11, 1833, quoted in *idem*, I, 297.

Then summon back the original glow, and mend  
The strain with rapture that with fire was penned.<sup>8</sup>

When an author generalizes in this dogmatic fashion, his readers at once ask whether his practice coincides with his theories. What were Bryant's methods in composing and in emending? Did he write only in moments of emotion? How extensively and how successfully did he revise? These questions can, of course, be answered only by actual examination of original drafts and later revisions of his poems.

Material for such a study has heretofore been scanty, because Bryant made relatively few important changes in his published work,<sup>9</sup> and because even less has been known concerning his revisions before publication. He printed as a literary curiosity a preliminary draft, in six-line stanzas, of the blank-verse poem "Earth";<sup>10</sup> and Parke Godwin printed from manuscript an additional stanza of "The Evening Wind."<sup>11</sup> Bryant's letters and Godwin's notes to the collected poems occasionally show that the poet toiled over a poem before giving it to the world; but specific details are usually lacking. From such scanty evidence no conclusions can be drawn. Now, however, adequate material is at last available. A remarkable collection of preliminary drafts of Bryant's verse has been preserved by his heirs, forming a valuable record of the growth of many of his better-known poems and of numerous minor compositions. In fact, the documents offer one of the most complete files of early texts and revisions of a poet's work thus far known to students of American literature. The manuscripts are sometimes readily legible, but more often they are so confused by cancelled words and deleted lines, by uncompleted alterations and stray entries of half-formulated thoughts that they are to be deciphered only with difficulty. Entire poems appear in two, three, or even four versions; individual stanzas or lines appear in two, four, eight, or more forms. With the generous permission of the Minna G. Goddard Estate and Mr. Conrad Godwin Goddard, the preliminary drafts of several representative poems are used, together with early printed texts, as the basis of the following discussion.

The boy Bryant began to make rhymes, it appears, when he was eight. Then, as in his mature years, he frequently composed the first draft of a poem as he walked in wood or by stream. When at the age of ten or eleven he showed that this interest in poetry was permanent, his father became his exacting critic. Doctor Peter Bryant was a versifier himself and a close disciple of Pope. Far from allowing fatherly pride to blind

<sup>8</sup> "The Poet."

<sup>9</sup> The changes in his poems made by Bryant after publication are recorded in the notes to *Poetical Works*, ed. Parke Godwin (New York, 1883), and to *Representative Selections*.

<sup>10</sup> See *Poetical Works*, I, 351-352.

<sup>11</sup> *Idem*, I, 349.

his eyes to the defects in his son's early efforts, he ridiculed them and predicted that Cullen "would be ashamed of his verses when he grew up." Bryant in old age thus recorded the reception of one of his compositions: "My father read it, and told me that it was nothing but tinsel and would not do. There were only four lines among all that I had written which he would allow to be tolerable."<sup>12</sup> It is true that the manuscripts of these early poems show few alterations;<sup>13</sup> but they are fair copies, in some instances made not by the boy himself but by his Aunt Charity. Before these finished drafts were achieved, Cullen had revised long and diligently under his father's direction. More than sixty years later, the three stages through which the boy's poetry passed were thus recorded by the poet:

He murmurs his own rude verses  
As he roams the woods alone;  
And again I gaze with wonder,  
His eyes are so like my own.

I see him next in his chamber,  
Where he sits him down to write  
The rhymes he framed in his ramble,  
And he cons them with delight.

A kindly figure enters,  
A man of middle age,  
And points to a line just written,  
And 'tis blotted from the page.<sup>14</sup>

Then, if the poem found its way into print, there sometimes followed a fourth process—revision of the published text. Examples are his extensive additions to "The Embargo"<sup>15</sup> and his frequent changes in a translation from Simonides.<sup>16</sup> In the name of Augustan correctness, Doctor Peter Bryant thus fixed on his youthful son habits of minute and persistent revision—habits inconsistent with the mature poet's romantic theory of inspiration.

Of all Bryant's revisions, most interesting is his work on "Thanatop-

<sup>12</sup> Autobiographical fragment by Bryant, printed in Godwin, I, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Examples are the manuscripts of "The Late Eclipse," "On the Last Judgment," "The Endless Knot," "A Poem Addressed to Mr. A. Bryant," "A Version of a Fragment of Simonides," "Part of a Chorus of Sophocles Translated"—all composed before Bryant wrote "Thanatopsis." <sup>14</sup> "A Lifetime."

<sup>15</sup> See Tremaine McDowell, "The Juvenile Verse of William Cullen Bryant," *SP*, xxvi (1929), 109-111.

<sup>16</sup> *Hampshire Gazette*, April 23, 1817; *Pittsfield Sun*, April 20, 1818; *North American Review*, vi (1818), 382-383.

## THANATOPSIS

[*Not that from life, and all its woes  
The hand of death shall set me free;  
Not that this head, shall then repose  
In the low vale most peacefully.*]

5 *Ah, when I touch time's farthest brink,  
A kinder solace must attend;  
It chills my very soul, to think  
Of that dread hour when life must end.*

10 *In vain the flatt'ring verse may breathe,  
Of ease from pain, and rest from strife,  
There is a sacred dread of death  
Inwoven with the strings of life.*

15 *This bitter cup at first was given  
When angry justice frown'd severe,  
And 'tis th' eternal doom of heaven  
That man must view the grave with fear.]*

20 *————— Yet a few days, and thee,  
The all-beholding sun, shall see no more,  
In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,  
Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,  
Nor in th' embrace of ocean shall exist*

It was his better genius that was wont  
To steal upon the bard what time his steps  
Sought the repose of nature, lone and still  
And unfrequented walks—and in his ear  
To whisper things of which it irks the mind  
That clings to the dear fallacies of life  
To think:—and gravely with his graver hours  
Oft the benevolent and heedful one  
Would thus commune—"Yet a few days, and thee  
The all-beholding sun shall see no more  
In all his course nor yet in the cold ground  
Where thy pale form was laid with many tears  
Nor in the embrace of ocean shall exist

- Thy image—Earth that nourished thee shall claim  
 Thy growth to be resolved to earth again.  
 And lost each human trace—surrendering up  
 Thine individual being thou shalt go  
 To mix forever with the elements,  
 To be a brother to the insensible rock,—  
 And to the sluggish clod which the rude swain  
 Turns with his share and treads upon: the oak  
 Shall send his roots abroad and pierce thy mould.  
 Yet not to thine eternal resting-place  
 Shalt thou retire alone—nor could'st thou wish  
 Couch more magnificent—thou shalt lie down  
 With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings  
 The powerful of the earth—the wise—the good  
 Fair forms and hoary seers of ages past  
 All in one mighty sepulchre.—The hills  
 Rock-ribbed, and ancient as the sun—the vales  
 Stretching in pensive quietness between—  
 The venerable woods—the floods that move  
 In majesty—and the complaining brooks  
 That wind among the meads and make them green,  
 Are but the solemn decorations all  
 Of the great tomb of Man.—The golden sun  
 And when he sets, the infinite host of heaven  
 Are gleaming on the sad abodes of death  
 Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread
- 25 Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim  
 Thy growth, to be resolv'd to earth again;  
 And, lost each human trace surrend'ring up  
 Thine individual being, *shalt thou go*  
 To mix forever with the elements,  
 To be a brother to th' insensible rock  
 And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain  
 Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak  
 Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.  
 Yet not to *thy* eternal resting place  
 Shalt thou retire alone—nor couldst thou wish  
 Couch more magnificent. Thou shalt lie down  
 With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings  
 The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good,  
 Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,  
 All in one mighty sepulchre.—The hills  
 Rock-ribb'd and ancient as the sun,—the vales  
 Stretching in pensive quietness between;  
 The venerable woods, the floods that move  
 In majesty,—and the complaining brooks  
 That wind among the meads, and make them green,
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- The globe are but a handful to the tribes  
That slumber in its bosom. Take the wings  
Of morning, and the Barcan desert pierce  
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods  
That veil Oregon where he hears no sound  
Save his own dashings—yet the dead reign there  
And millions in those solitudes since first  
The flight of years began have laid them down  
In their last sleep—the dead reign there alone.
- Thus shalt thou rest—and what tho' thou shd'st  
Unheeded from the living and no one [steal  
Take note that thou art gone—they too must share  
In this dread pause of being.
- 50 The globe are but a handful to the tribes  
That slumber in its bosom.—Take the wings  
Of morning—and the *Borean* desert pierce—  
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods  
That veil Oregon, where he hears no sound  
Save his own dashings—yet—the dead *are* there,  
And millions in those solitudes, since first  
The flight of years began, have laid them down  
In their last sleep—the dead reign there alone.—  
So shalt thou rest—and what *if thou shalt fall*  
*Unnoticed* by the living—and no friend  
Take note of *thy departure? Thousands more*  
*Will share thy destiny.*—*The tittering world*  
*Dance to the grave.*
- 60
- 65 *The busy brood of care*  
*Plod on, and each one chases as before*  
*His favourite phantom.*—*Yet all these shall leave*  
*Their mirth and their employments, and shall come,*  
*And make their bed with thee!*—



sis." He began the poem while he was still sixteen, as he walked in the autumn of 1811 among the hills near his birthplace in Cummington.<sup>17</sup> The first draft of the poem does not appear to have survived; but among the Bryant papers is a fair copy of fifty-two lines, put on paper at some time between 1811 and 1817—on the evidence of the handwriting, between 1813 and 1815.<sup>18</sup> This text clearly antedates that published in the *North American Review* in September, 1817, heretofore known as the earliest form of the poem. These two versions are printed above, with changes introduced in 1817 set in italics and the lines numbered to conform with the completed text of 1821. The first sixteen lines in the *North American Review* are in reality a separate poem by Bryant, in error printed by the editors as part of "Thanatopsis."<sup>19</sup>

These versions are interesting at two points. The poem is much improved by the omission of the conventional introduction which appears in manuscript A, but it is not bettered by the unauthorized addition of the poem, "Not That from Life, and All Its Woes." The latter is perhaps smoother verse than the lines which it replaces, but its ideas are equally hackneyed and its tone utterly contravenes the high stoicism of "Thanatopsis" itself. It has been suggested that Bryant may have been responsible for printing "Not That from Life" in this position; but the hypothesis is untenable.<sup>20</sup>

After 1817, Bryant continued to expand and reshape "Thanatopsis." There survives another manuscript in his autograph, done at some time between 1817 and 1821—on the evidence of the handwriting, between 1818 and 1820. Here the full text of the poem first appears, together with a preliminary draft of lines 59–75. Then in 1821 came a fourth version in *Poems*, Bryant's first collected volume. These texts are given below, with

<sup>17</sup> The birth of "Thanatopsis" has been variously dated; but it is now clear that Bryant began the poem in September or October of 1811, before his seventeenth birthday (*Representative Selections*, pp. 389–390).

<sup>18</sup> Bryant's hand changed so considerably between 1811 and 1817 that it is difficult to set an exact date for this manuscript.

<sup>19</sup> Since Bryant's father copied both the sixteen-line poem and "Thanatopsis" before leaving them with the editors of the *Review*, their mistake was a natural one. For details of the first publication of "Thanatopsis," see Tremaine McDowell, "Bryant and *The North American Review*," *American Literature*, I (1929), 15–18.

<sup>20</sup> W. F. Johnson, "Thanatopsis Old and New," *North American Review*, CCXXIV (1927), 556–572.—Neither in his manuscripts nor in his collected poems does he give any hint that he intended to incorporate the poem in "Thanatopsis." Secondly, it is clear that the concluding section of the poem (beginning "Thus shalt thou rest . . .") is still fluid in his mind—here he is still composing rather than revising. In manuscript A it runs only to three lines and part of a fourth, added, to judge from the handwriting, after the body of the poem has been set down. Then in 1817 he revises these lines, adds a few more, but does not complete the poem.

## Manuscript B (1818-1820)

## Poems (1821)

## THANATOPSIS

- It was his better genius that was wont  
To steal upon the bard what time his steps  
Sought the repose of nature—lone and still  
And unfrequented walks—and in his ear  
To whisper things of which it irks the mind  
That clings to the dear fallacies of life  
To think: and gravely with his graver hours  
The heedful and benevolent spirit oft  
Would thus commune.—“Yet a few days and thee  
The all-beholding sun shall see no more  
In all his course nor yet in the cold ground  
Where thy pale form was laid with many tears  
Nor in the embrace of ocean shall exist  
Thy image earth that nourished thee shall claim  
Thy growth to be resolved to earth again  
And lost each human trace surrendering up  
Thine individual being *thou shalt go*  
To mix forever with the elements  
To be a brother to the insensible rock  
And to the sluggish clod which the rude swain*
- To him who in the love of Nature holds  
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks  
A various language; for his gayer hours  
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile  
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides  
Into his darker musings, with a mild  
And gentle sympathy, that steals away  
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts  
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight  
Over thy spirit, and sad images  
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,  
And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,  
Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart;—  
Go forth under the open sky, and list  
To Nature's teachings, while from all around—  
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air,—  
Comes a still voice—Yet a few days, and thee  
The all-beholding sun shall see no more  
In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,  
Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,  
Nor in the embrace of ocean shall exist  
Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim  
Thy growth, to be resolv'd to earth again;  
And, lost each human trace, surrend'ring up  
Thine individual being, *shalt thou go*  
To mix forever with the elements,  
To be a brother to th' insensible rock  
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain*
- 5
- 10
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- Turns with his share and treads upon the oak  
 Shall send his roots abroad and pierce thy mould.  
 Yet not to *thine* eternal resting-place  
 Shalt thou retire alone nor could'st thou wish  
 Couch more magnificent—thou shalt lie down  
 With patriarchs of the infant world,—with kings  
 The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good—  
 Fair forms and hoary seers of ages past  
 All in one mighty sepulchre. The hills  
 Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun—the vales  
 Stretching in pensive quietness between  
 The *dark hoar forests*  
 the complaining *streams*  
*That make the meadows green and poured round all*  
*Old ocean whose grey melancholy waste*  
*Of surges weeps and murmurs on his shores*  
 Are but the solemn decorations all  
 Of the great tomb of Man. The golden sun  
 The planets all the infinite host of heaven  
 Are glowing on the sad abodes of death  
 Through the still lapse of ages—all that tread  
 The globe are but a handful to the tribes  
 That slumber in its bosom. Take the wings  
 Of morning—*traverse Barca's boundless sands*  
 Or lose thyself in the continuous woods  
*Through which rolls Oregon and hears no sound*  
 Save his own dashings—yet the dead are there  
 And millions in those solitudes since first  
 The flight of years began have laid them down  
 In their last sleep—the dead reign there alone—  
 So shalt thou rest and what *though* thou *should'st*  
*Unheeded from the living and no friend* [steal
- Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak  
 Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.  
 Yet not to *thy* eternal resting place  
 Shalt thou retire alone—nor couldst thou wish  
 Couch more magnificent. Thou shalt lie down  
 With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings  
 The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good,  
 Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,  
 All in one mighty sepulchre.—The hills  
 Rock-ribb'd and ancient as the sun,—the vales  
 Stretching in pensive quietness between;  
 The *venerable woods*—*rivers that move*  
*In majesty, and the complaining brooks*  
 That make the meadows green; and pour'd round all,  
 Old ocean's *grey and melancholy waste*,—
- 45 Are but the solemn decorations all  
 Of the great tomb of man. The golden sun,  
 The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,  
 Are *shining* on the sad abodes of death,  
 Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread  
 The globe are but a handful to the tribes  
 That slumber in its bosom.—Take the wings  
 Of morning—*and the Barcan desert pierce*,  
 Or lose thyself in the continuous woods  
*Where rolls the Oregon*, and hears no sound,  
 55 Save his own dashings—yet—the dead are there,  
 And millions in those solitudes, since first  
 The flight of years began, have laid them down  
 In their last sleep—the dead reign there alone.—  
 So shalt thou rest—and what *if* thou *shalt fall*  
 60 *Unnoticed* by the living—and no friend

- Take note of thy departure *all that live*  
*Must* share thy destiny—the tittering world  
 Dance by and look not on thy grave—the earth  
 Still rings with busy sounds the brood of care  
 Plod on and each one chases as before  
 His favourite phantom yet all these shall leave  
 Their mirth and their employments and shall come  
 And make their bed with thee. *All through the march*<sup>21</sup>  
*Of ages yet to come the sons of men,*  
*The youth in life's fresh prime, and he who [died]*  
*In manhood's ripest strength, matron and maid*  
*And the sweet babe, and the grey headed man*  
*Crippled and bowed with many years shall all*  
*Shall one by one be gathered by thy side*  
*By those who in their turn must follow them.—*  
*So live that when thy summons comes to join*  
*The innumerable caravan, in crowds each day*  
*Descending to the earth, and lay thee down*  
*In thy chamber in her dark and silent halls—*  
*Thou go not like the quarry-slave at night*  
*Scourged to his dungeon—But sustained and soothed*  
*In th' extreme agony that nature dreads*  
*By the kind hope that mercy will accept*  
*Perfect the imperfect duties of thy life*  
*And pardon all thy errors [?] approach thy grave*  
*Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch*  
*About him and lies down for pleasant dreams.*
- Take note of thy departure? All that breathe  
 Will share thy destiny. The gay will laugh  
 When thou art gone,                    the solemn brood of care  
 Plod on, and each one as before will chase  
 His favourite phantom; yet all these shall leave  
 Their mirth and their employments, and shall come,  
 And make their bed with thee. *As the long train*  
*Of ages glide away, the sons of men,*  
*The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes*  
*In the full strength of years, matron, and maid,*  
*The bow'd with age, the infant in the smiles*  
*And beauty of its innocent age cut off, —*  
 Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,  
 By those, who in their turn shall follow them.  
 So live, that when thy summons comes to join  
 The innumerable caravan, that moves  
 To the pale realms of shade, where each shall take  
 His chamber in the silent halls of death,  
 Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,  
 Scourged to his dungeon, but sustain'd and sooth'd  
 By an unflinching trust,
- Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch  
 About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

<sup>21</sup> The passage beginning "All through the march . . ." and ending ". . . must follow them" appears only in a preliminary draft of Manuscript B. It is here inserted at the proper point in the final draft.

changes from the text immediately preceding indicated by italics. Deleted words and lines are not included in these transcripts.

An examination of these texts reveals that the poet has written a new introduction, retouched the body of his poem at a few points, and completed the final section. Even after "Thanatopsis" appears in the *North American Review*, Bryant is not yet willing to part with his original introduction, for he injudiciously restores it in manuscript B. The passage may even have been retained in "Thanatopsis" when he journeyed to Cambridge to read his Phi Beta Kappa poem, "The Ages," and there discarded, perhaps at the suggestion of one or another of his sponsors on the staff of the *Review* (Edward T. Channing, Jared Sparks, Willard Phillips, or more probably Richard Henry Dana, Sr.). In any case he swiftly composed the present introduction in Cambridge in 1821, making the speaker nature rather than his own better genius. It has been pointed out that the words thus hastily put into the mouth of nature are not always in character. She tells man, for example, that at death he shall "go," not "come," to her.<sup>22</sup>

The poet's minor changes in the body of the poem are always for the better. In manuscript B he adds a passage on the sea:

*and poured round all  
Old ocean whose grey melancholy waste  
Of surges weeps and murmurs on his shores.*

This is trite; in 1821 he wisely condenses the passage thus:

and pour'd round all,  
Old ocean's *grey and melancholy waste.*

The poet is still hard pressed to make a choice between Barcan and Borean deserts (line 52). In manuscript B he reworks the entire phrase: "traverse Barca's boundless sands." And in 1821, he reverts to the reading of manuscript A. Still struggling with "Oregon," he improves line 54: "Through which rolls Oregon and hears no sound." Best is his final reading, a combination of earlier attempts: "Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound." In 1817 he brought in his unfortunate "tittering world" dancing to the grave; in manuscript B the titterers still dance but they "look not on thy grave"; in 1821 they have become "the gay" who "laugh when thou art gone."

Bryant in his late years stated that not only the beginning but the conclusion of "Thanatopsis" was added at Cambridge in 1821, "when I

<sup>22</sup> Carl Van Doren, "The Growth of Thanatopsis," *Nation*, CI (1915), 432-433.—This excellent article is more concerned with the growth of Bryant's thought than with the actual writing of the poem.

went there to deliver my poem 'The Ages'."<sup>23</sup> He is in error concerning the conclusion, for his manuscripts reveal that it was a slow growth from 1811 onward. The first writing and the subsequent reworking of this section may be envisioned by a first-hand, word by word comparison of the four drafts above: lines 59–62 of manuscript A, lines 59–69 of the *North American* text, lines 59–88 of manuscript B, and the same lines in the text of 1821.<sup>24</sup> In these texts, in cancelled passages in the manuscripts, and in later published revisions, one can follow the poet as he toils over the smaller units of his creation—lines, brief phrases, and even single words. Three particularly unruly passages deal with the progress of mankind to the grave. Old age first appeared as “the grey headed man/Crippled with years.” The poet then crossed out “with years” and wrote, “and bowed with many years.” In 1821, the wording was still awkward: “the bow'd with age.” At last, in a later edition of his poems, Bryant wisely contented himself with half of his original phrase: “the gray-headed man.” Similar is the poet’s treatment of two lines in which the dead are brought to burial by the living. He began: “All gathered to thy side.” Then for the last phrase he substituted, “one by one.” Making a fresh start, he continued:

Each in his time be gathered to thy side  
By those who in their turn shall follow them.

For “shall” he wrote “must,” then set off on a new tack:

Shall slumber with thee in the lap of earth.

Dissatisfied, he ran his pen through this line, and at last hit upon adequate expression for his thought:

Shall one by one be gathered by thy side  
By those who in their turn must follow them.

The first movement of his innumerable caravan was equally inconclusive and stumbling. The poet wrote: “The innumerable caravan, each day.” This he altered to read “. . . in crowds each day.” He went on:

Descending to the earth, and lay thee down  
Silently with the worm in thy low cell.

But this would never do. Resolutely striking out the last line, he substituted “In thy silent . . . ,” deleted “silent,” and continued uncer-

<sup>23</sup> Unpublished passage in manuscript of autobiographical sketch printed, with omissions, by Godwin and cited above.

<sup>24</sup> Even here the record of the poet’s toil is incomplete, for it has not been possible to include cancelled readings in these transcripts.

It was his better genius, that was wont  
To steal upon the bard, what time his steps  
Sought the repose of nature, lone and still,  
And unfrequented walks - and in his ear  
To whisper things of which it irks the mind  
That clings to the dear fallacies of life  
To think: and gravely with his graver hours  
Of the benevolent and heedful one  
Would thus commune - "Yet a few days, and thee  
The all-beholding sun shall see no more,  
In all his course nor yet in the cold ground  
Where thy pale form was laid with many tears  
Nor in the embrace of ocean shall <sup>claim</sup> his  
Thy image - Earth that nourished thee shall  
thy growth to be resolved to earth again,  
and lost each human trace - surrendering up  
Thine individual being, thou shalt go  
to mix forever with the elements  
To be a brother to the insensible rocks,

And to the sluggish clod which the rude swain  
Turns with his share and rears upon the oak,  
Shall send his roots abroad and pierce thy mould

~~And send to~~ thine eternal resting-place  
Shalt thou retire alone, nor couldst thou <sup>wish</sup>  
Couch more magnificent, thou shalt lie down  
With patriarchs of the ~~infernal~~ <sup>infernal</sup> world - with  
The powerful of the earth - the wise - the good  
Fair forms and hoary seers of ages past,  
All in one mighty sepulchre. - The hills  
Rock-ribbed, and ancient as the sun - the vales  
Stretching in fensive quietness between -  
The venerable woods - the floods that move  
In majesty - and the complaining brooks  
That wind among the meads and make the <sup>green</sup> ~~green~~  
Are but the solemn decorations all  
Of the great tomb of Man. - The golden sun  
And when he sets, the infinite host of heaven  
Are gleaming on the sad abodes of death



Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread  
The globe are but a handful to the tribes  
That slumber in its bosom. Take the wings  
Of morning, and the Sarcas deserts pierce  
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods  
That veil Oregon where he hears no sound  
Save his own dashing - yet the dead reign <sup>there</sup>  
And millions in those solitudes since first  
The flights of years began have laid them down  
In their last sleep - the dead reign there alone.

Thus shalt thou rest - and what tho' thou shalt steal  
Unheeded from the living and no one  
Take note that thou art gone - they too must share  
In this dread pause of being.

They shall they rest and what though thou should'st start  
~~in~~ ~~from~~ ~~the~~ ~~living~~ ~~and~~ ~~no~~ ~~friends~~ ~~part~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~world~~  
 Take note of thy departure all that live -  
 All that share thy destiny. The living world  
~~by~~ ~~look~~ ~~not~~ ~~on~~ ~~the~~ ~~grave~~. The path  
~~leads~~ ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~grave~~. ~~The~~ ~~living~~ ~~world~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~grave~~  
 still rings with busy sounds the brood of care  
~~that~~ ~~on~~ ~~and~~ ~~last~~ ~~one~~ ~~chases~~ ~~as~~ ~~before~~  
 his favorite phantom yet all these shall leave  
 their minds and their employments and shall come  
 and make their beds with thee. All through the march  
 of ages yet to come the sons of men,  
 the youth in life's fresh prime, ~~and~~ ~~he~~ ~~who~~ ~~thine~~  
 the manhood's robust strength, matron and maid  
 and the sweet babe, and the grey-headed man  
~~and~~ ~~young~~ ~~and~~ ~~many~~ ~~years~~ ~~shall~~ ~~all~~  
 Crippled with years, ~~all~~ ~~gathered~~ ~~to~~ ~~thy~~ ~~side~~  
~~Each~~ ~~in~~ ~~his~~ ~~turn~~ ~~be~~ ~~gathered~~ ~~to~~ ~~thy~~ ~~side~~  
~~By~~ ~~those~~ ~~who~~ ~~in~~ ~~their~~ ~~turn~~ ~~shall~~ ~~follow~~ ~~them~~  
 Shall flumber with thee in the lap of earth  
 Shall one by one be gathered by thy side  
 By those who in their turn must follow thee. -

70  
 60  
 61  
 60  
 61  
 61

THANATOPSIS, Preliminary Draft of Manuscript B (1818-1820)

(One page only. The first ten lines on this page appear elsewhere in the manuscript in a revised form, which is followed in the transcript on page 483-484, ll. 59-68. The remaining lines reproduced above were not again altered; and the transcript on page 484, ll. 69-75, therefore follows this text.)

tainly: "In thy chamber in her dark and silent halls." By 1821, he had found more suitable but not ideal phrasing:

The innumerable caravan, that moves  
To the pale realms of shade, where each shall take  
His chamber in the silent halls of death.

Finally, these echoes of eighteenth-century diction disappeared when, in a later edition, Bryant wrote simply:

The innumerable caravan, which moves  
To that mysterious realm . . .

More numerous than these recalcitrant passages were lines and words which, yielding readily to alteration, were perfected at a single revision. Three such, out of many, will illustrate. In the first and second texts of "Thanatopsis," Bryant maintained a neutral attitude toward Christianity. But in the third text, he turned for a moment toward the orthodoxy of his ancestors, bidding man go to the grave sustained

By the kind hope that mercy will accept  
Perfect the imperfect duties of thy life  
And pardon all thy errors.

Realizing that such a passage was alien to the general tone of the poem, he substituted in the fourth text a noncommittal phrase, acceptable alike to pagan and Christian: ". . . sustain'd and sooth'd/By an unfaltering trust." Another ill-advised addition in the third version was "the busy brood of care," which he soon transformed into "the solemn brood. . . ." Slighter but equally significant was the poet's felicitous alteration of his last line, where he changed "lies down *for* pleasant dreams" to read, "lies down *to* pleasant dreams."

After 1821, Bryant's few changes in the text of "Thanatopsis" in his published poems are rarely important.<sup>25</sup> But at some time during the 1820's he undertook an elaborate "Hymn to Death," which was to include the poem published under that title, a completely rewritten version of "Thanatopsis," and other material. Since he finally decided to keep "Thanatopsis" essentially as it appeared in 1821 and definitely abandoned this revision, it does not now seem appropriate to print it in full. One passage will be sufficient to illustrate—Bryant's third introduction to "Thanatopsis." Here, in a significant passage never before published, he describes the horrible fear of death which pursued the boy Cullen when he began the poem in 1811, and here he once more makes the poem the utterance, not of nature, but of his own spirit:

<sup>25</sup> These revisions are enumerated in *Representative Selections*, pp. 391-392.

Such often in my solitary hours  
 Strange thoughts that weave involuntary verse  
 Will come till deeply moved the spirit grows  
 Familiar with the grave and dresses it  
 With a sad beauty. Then the last dread hour  
 That recollected in the midst of joy  
 Drives back the bounding blood on the sick heart  
 Affrights me not. Calmly and unafraid  
 I think to yield me to the common fate  
 And trust myself with millions. As I look  
 On the low airless dwellings in the earth  
 Of those who went before me to their rest  
 A voice not in the ear but at the heart  
 Like an articulate silence gravely thus  
 Communes with me.

From 1815 to 1824 Bryant was so busy with the law that he composed relatively few poems; but the few which he wrote were worked over with the utmost patience. It was during these years that he set down his later versions of "Thanatopsis" and wrote and revised "The Yellow Violet," "To a Waterfowl," "Oh Fairest of the Rural Maids," "Hymn to Death," "A Winter Piece," and "A Walk at Sunset." Here he slowly perfected his technique and gradually attained ease and proficiency in composing, as an examination of the manuscripts of three of these poems will illustrate. The first is "The Yellow Violet," which remained in manuscript for several years. Three versions survive in the poet's autograph: a rough draft of nine stanzas probably made in 1814 at the Bryant homestead in Cummington, a fair copy of these same stanzas showing several changes; and an expanded final draft made in 1818 for the *North American Review* but not then published because the editors had temporarily discontinued their department of poetry. The delightful opening line is a fortunate second thought, for Bryant first writes:

When, led his early loves to tell,  
 And woods the blue bird's warble know.

This he happily changes to read:

When beechen buds begin to swell  
 And woods . . .

Stanza two is carefully reworked in manuscript B:

**Manuscript A**

Nor till its meekeyed gems appear  
 Burst other buds or blooms unfold  
 And oft their slender forms they rear  
 Beside the snow-bank's edges cold.

**Manuscript B**

*Of all her flowers, the hands of Spring  
 First set thee in the unwarmed mould  
 And I have seen thee blossoming  
 Beside the snow bank's edges cold.*

Then Bryant rightly decides that stanza three should exchange position with the revised text of two. In manuscript C, he again emends the troublesome stanza: in the first line, he substitutes "train" for "flowers"; in the second line, "plant" for "set" and "watery" for "unwarmed." Then he inserts a new quatrain after stanza four:

Yet slight thy form, and low thy seat,  
And earthward bent thy gentle eye,  
Unapt the passing view to meet,  
When loftier flowers are flaunting nigh.

For stanza six, he uses a revision of what had been stanza five, where, it will be observed, he no longer breaks the violet from its stem.

#### Manuscript B

Oft in the misty April day [stem  
I've stooped to take thee from thy  
But 'midst the flaunting flowers of  
I heeded not thy modest gem. [May

#### Manuscript C

Oft, in the *sunless* April day,  
*Thy early smile has staid my walk;*  
But midst the *gorgeous blooms* of May  
*I passed thee on thy humble stalk.*

Since in manuscripts A and B there are only five stanzas, Bryant may not have at first planned a didactic conclusion. Now, however, he adds the two stanzas of preachment with which the poem still ends.

Another composition which lay in manuscript for some time is "Oh Fairest of the Rural Maids" (originally, ". . . Valley Maids"). Conceived in 1820, the lyric was retained by Bryant for five years and was finally published in perfected form late in 1825 in *The Atlantic Souvenir* for 1826. Unless the surviving drafts are deceptively incomplete, the lover wrote this tribute to Frances Fairchild more easily than others of his poems. Two passages, however, cost him infinite labor, namely, the opening lines of stanza two and of stanza four. Here his concern is as much with composition as with revision, for he seems to be struggling not for final perfection but for an acceptable first reading. Eight times he begins stanza two:

[1] There didst thou bloom an artless  
child  
A blossom of the sylvan wild  
[2] And thou didst bloom  
[3] Thy wanderings while a blooming  
child  
Were all amid the sylvan wild—  
[4] Thy sylvan wild thy carols heard  
[5] There were thy childhood's carols  
heard  
In the green wild a woodland bird

[6] Thy carols while an artless child—  
Were heard amid thy sylvan  
wild—  
[7] The green shade of the sylvan wild  
Did bound thy wanderings when  
a child  
[8] Thy sports, thy wanderings, when  
a child  
Were in the beauteous sylvan  
wild—

In the earliest printed text, he brings his labors to a graceful conclusion:

Thy sports, thy wanderings, when a child  
Were ever in the sylvan wild.

Working on stanza four, the lover essays no less than eight times aptly to compare Fanny Fairchild's eyes to crystal springs.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| [1] Thy eyes are chrystal springs that<br>break<br>Where shadowy boughs a twilight<br>make | That break where—Bryant Bryant<br>ant [ <i>sic</i> ]<br>That shine where   |
| [2] Thine eyes are chrystal springs<br>that  | [6] Thy eyes are sister springs that<br>break<br>Where twining boughs a twilight<br>make—                                      |
| [3] Twin fountains are thy modest<br>eyes<br>That in the forest twilight rise              | [7] Thy eyes are springs in whose<br>serene  |
| [4] Twin fountains are thy eyes that<br>break<br>Where twining boughs a darkness<br>make   | And silent surface heaven is seen<br>[8] Thy eyes are sister springs that<br>shine<br>When low the shadowing branches<br>twine |
| [5] Thy modest eyes are sister springs   |  |

At last he perfects the image and makes it worthy of his rural maid:

Thy eyes are springs, in whose serene  
And silent waters, heaven is seen.

The growth of a third and less successful poem, "A Walk at Sunset," may be followed from earliest inception to publication, in two manuscripts written in 1821 and the text printed in the same year by Richard Henry Dana, Sr., in his *Idle Man*. In the first manuscript, Bryant gropes about for a suitable opening:

In the sweet valley where I have my home.

He blots this out and writes:

No region sees the sun in glory set  
Like that sweet valley where I have my home.

For "in glory," he inserts "so glorious" but he is still unsatisfied. He begins for a third time:

Oh let me wander by the quiet stream  
Of the sweet valley where I have my home.

Apparently the cherished line is unmanageable; once he temporarily discards it, an acceptable substitute is found, and he moves on:

When insect wings are glistening in the beam  
Of the slow sun and mountain summits shine

Oh let me wander by the quiet stream  
 That  
 And ere the red breast's evening song is done—  
 Give me one lonely hour to hymn the setting sun.

When he looks ahead, stanza two is still nebulous and he can set down only fragments:

Thy march is full of glory—  
 Beautiful at morn, beautiful at noon—more glorious  
 in thy decline—  
 And therefore they who in the boundless groves of the  
 Hunted their prey some hundred years ago—  
 When gazing on thy setting deemed  
 They saw the dwellings of the blest [illegible]

Perfunctorily he scribbles "Andsoforth" and adds: "—Circle of splendour—morning noon & evening the same to the circle of light surrounded with coloured vapour—cloths of gold and purple.—" Then Bryant doggedly returns to the first stanza, forces his "valley stream" into the third line ("Oh let me by the beautiful valley stream"), and works his slow way through four more stanzas. In the second manuscript he makes a few changes (the troublesome stream appears thus: "Oh let me by our valley's lovely stream"),<sup>26</sup> blocks out three more stanzas, and begins a ninth. When he has written a tenth stanza, he immediately sends the manuscript to Dana. Here, it is evident, is a poem doubly handicapped. As Bryant tries to compose, his pen is heavy; and, his writing done, he fails to keep the lines by him to mature and ripen. They are occasionally charming only because his all-pervasive love of nature now and then breaks through to illuminate his formal diction and equally conventional meditations.

In 1824 nature and the editor of the *United States Literary Gazette* diverted part of Bryant's energy from law to poetry; and during 1824 and 1825 he published in that magazine a series of twenty-three poems, including several of his best things.<sup>27</sup> This was his most prolific period, for he now wrote two and occasionally three poems each month. Of these compositions, one had been undertaken in 1823—"The Rivulet." Over this poem Bryant worked at least four times. Although the final text runs only to ninety lines, manuscript drafts totaling more than two hundred and fifty lines have been preserved and others have perhaps been lost. Here is, first of all, additional evidence that Bryant was accus-

<sup>26</sup> The line now reads: "Oh let me by the chrystal valley-stream."

<sup>27</sup> "The Rivulet," "March," "Summer Wind," "After a Tempest," "Autumn Woods," "November," "To a Cloud," "Hymn to the North Star," "A Forest Hymn," and others.

tomed to polish the opening lines of his poems with particular care. In the first manuscript he puts down five tentative versions:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| [1] I marked the rills whose banks re-<br>newed<br>The memory of my infant days | [5] This rill whose current, fed among<br>The springs by yonder grove, oer-<br>hung<br>Leads down the slope its silver<br>train<br>And hides its course in groves<br>again |
| [2] I sought the rill along whose side<br>I loved to stray when life was new    |  |
| [3] I sought the rill where when a<br>child                                     |  |
| [4] How pleased I visit once again  |  |

In his second manuscript, Bryant makes progress:

This little rill that from the springs  
Of yonder grove, its current brings  
Plays on the slope awhile, and then  
Hides its bright stream in groves again  
Was once the haunt that pleased me best.

Then he changes the third line:

Goes prattling into groves again.

In the next manuscript, he continues:

Oft in my childhood days my feet.

Cancelling this, he writes in the margin:

Oft to its murmuring waters drew  
My little feet when life was new.

Finally, before the poem is printed in the *United States Literary Gazette* (May 15, 1824), he makes one last change:

Oft to its warbling waters drew  
My little feet . . .

Over the third section of the poem, now beginning "Years change thee not . . .," Bryant toiled longest. In what seem to be four separate manuscripts there are four quite distinct versions of the entire section and three additional readings of one difficult passage. Here, surely, is an unusual opportunity to watch a poet in his workshop. The first and second texts, with changes in the second indicated by italics, read as follows:



## Manuscript A

Time hath not changed thee—on yon hill  
 The reverend maples, [illegible] still  
 Yet speak in grandeur of decay  
 How swiftly glide the years away  
 Since first a child and half-afraid  
 I wandered in the forest shade—  
 Unchanged this little rivulet  
 Gurgles and laughs and dimples yet  
 And plays with dancing sands that pave  
 The windings of its silver wave.—  
 Year after year m[aj]ly pass for thee  
 Thou laughst in endless infancy  
 The same sweet sounds are in my ear  
 My early childhood loved to hear  
 As pure thy quivering waters run  
 As bright they sparkle in the sun  
 As fresh the herbs that crowd to drink  
 The moisture of thy       brink  
 Still bright in summer beauty there  
 The purple orchis scents the air  
 And quivering in the currents stress  
 Floats the scarce rooted water cress—  
 Still where descends the grassy steep  
 To form thy narrow glen and deep  
 Lulled by the musick of the brook  
 The groundbird builds in lowly nook

## Manuscript B

Time hath not changed thee—on yon hill  
 The tall old maples verdant still  
 Yet tell in grandeur of decay  
 How swift the years have passed away  
 5 Since first a child and half-afraid  
 I wandered in the forest shade.  
 Thy stream thou merry rivulet  
 Dimples and shines and gurgles yet  
 And plays with dancing sands that pave  
 10 The windings of its silver wave  
 Years vainly waste their power on thee  
 Thou laugh'st in endless infancy  
 The same mild sounds are in my ear  
 My early childhood loved to hear  
 15 As pure thy *limpid* waters run  
 As bright they sparkle to the sun  
 As fresh the herbs that crowd to drink  
 The moisture of thy *verdant* brink—  
 Still bright in summer beauty there  
 20 The orchis waves her purple hair  
 And quivering in the currents stress  
 Floats the scarce-rooted water-cress  
 And all along the grassy side  
 Of the green glen that holds thy tide  
 Lulled by the musick of the rill  
 25 The ground-bird builds and twitters still—

The orchis is so unruly that in the margin of manuscript B the poet continues to reshape lines 19 and 20:

The orchis *gives* her purple hair  
To wave in the soft summer air

As he revises, the two lines grow into four:

*There pale Chelone weeps & fair*  
*The rosy vest[ed] orchis there*  
*Through the long lashes of her eye*  
*Looks meekly on the summer sky.*

Once more he attacks the problem:

There pale Chelone weeps & fair  
*With blush and smile meek* Orchis there  
*Lifts* the long lashes of her eye  
*To gaze upon* the summer sky

When Bryant next works over the passage, he discretely gives up the orchid for a more tractable violet, omitting not only these four lines but lines 23 and 24 as well. These are his third and fourth texts:<sup>27a</sup>

<sup>27a</sup> For comparison with these four manuscript versions, the final published text is appended:

Years change thee not. Upon yon hill  
The tall old maples, verdant still,  
Yet tell, in grandeur of decay,  
How swift the years have passed away  
Since first, a child, and half afraid,  
I wandered in the forest shade.  
Thou, ever-joyous rivulet,  
Dost dimple, leap, and prattle yet;  
And sporting with the sands that pave  
The windings of thy silver wave,  
And dancing to thy own wild chime,  
Thou laughest at the lapse of time.  
The same sweet sounds are in my ear  
My early childhood loved to hear;  
As pure thy limpid waters run;  
As bright they sparkle to the sun;  
As fresh and thick the bending ranks  
Of herbs that line thy oozy banks;  
The violet there, in soft May dew,  
Comes up, as modest and as blue;  
As green amid thy current's stress,  
Floats the scarce-rooted watercress.  
And the brown ground-bird, in thy glen,  
Still chirps as merrily as then.

## Manuscript C

*Years cannot change thee; on yon hill*  
 The tall old maples verdant still  
 Yet tell in *proud and grand* decay  
 How swift the years have past away  
 Since first a child and half afraid  
 I wandered in the forest shade  
*But thou, bright merry rivulet*  
*Dost dimple play and prattle yet*  
 And *dancest on the sands* that pave  
 The windings of *thy silver wave*  
*Time vainly tries his power* on thee  
 Thou laughst in endless infancy  
 The same *sweet sounds* are in my ear  
 My early childhood loved to hear  
 As pure thy limpid waters run  
 As bright they sparkle to the sun  
 As fresh the herbs that crowd to drink  
 The moisture of thy *oozy brink*  
*The violet there in soft May dew*  
*Comes up as modest and as blue*  
 As green amid the currents stress  
 Floats the scarce rooted water cress  
  
*And the brown ground bird in thy glen*  
*Still chirps as merrily as then.*—

## Manuscript D

Years *change thee not. Upon yon hill*  
 The tall old maples verdant still  
 Yet tell in proud & grand decay  
 How swift the years have passed away  
 5 Since first a child & half afraid  
 I wandered in the forest shade  
 But thou *gay merry rivulet*  
 Dost dimple play & prattle yet  
 And *sporting with the sands* that pave  
 10 The windings of thy silver wave  
*And dancing to thy own wild chime*  
 Thou laughst *at the lapse of time*  
 The same sweet sounds are in my ear  
 My early childhood loved to hear  
 15 As pure thy limpid waters run  
 As bright they sparkle to the sun  
 As fresh the herbs that crowd to drink  
 The moisture of thy *verdant brink*  
 The violet there in soft May dew  
 20 Comes up as modest & as blue  
 As green amid *thy currents stress*  
 Floats the scarce rooted water cress  
  
 25 And the brown ground bird in thy glen  
 Still chirps as merrily as then.—

Still dissatisfied, the indefatigable poet corrects the passage after publication, making line 3 read: ". . . the grandeur of decay"; line 7: "Thou, ever-joyous rivulet"; lines 17 and 18:

As fresh and thick the bending ranks  
Of herbs that line thy oozy banks.

Few other poems of 1824–25 are reworked as elaborately as "The Rivulet"; the majority appear among the Bryant papers only once or twice.<sup>28</sup> But these poems are not notably inferior in finish to those of earlier years when more extensive revision was the custom. These facts suggest, first, that when Bryant was writing poetry regularly he did not find it necessary to warm himself to the task by jotting down preliminary drafts and, secondly, that practice had now made him more expert and more fluent in composing.

His habits of writing and rewriting thus established, Bryant during the half-century which followed continued to work much as he had in 1824–25, making several drafts of an occasional poem but more commonly reworking only once or twice. The pressure of editorial duties on the New York *Evening Post* left less time for frequent revisions; and increasing proficiency in verse writing made them less necessary. But now and then the aging Bryant revised a poem in his earlier manner. Manuscripts of one such, "The Tides" of 1860, fell into the hands of a friend, who recorded with respect: "there were five copies, written on five separate pieces of paper. In each successive copy there were changes in every stanza except the first one. That seems to have assumed a form satisfactory to the author before he committed it to paper. It appeared in each copy, in the same form in which it was printed. Every other stanza received many changes. Sometimes a form of expression appeared in one copy, and was discarded in the next copy, and restored in the third; and many of the stanzas were written over more than five times—the last one, seventeen times, before it was allowed to stand as it was printed."<sup>29</sup> This account, with the slightest of changes, would serve to describe his reworking of numerous poems: "Life" (written, according to Sturges, in 1835) survives in six drafts; "The Future Life" (1839) and "The Old Man's Counsel" (1840), in three each; "An Evening Revery" (1840) and "The Return of Youth" (1840), in five each; "The Planting of the Apple Tree" (1849), in several incomplete versions; "The Conqueror's Grave" (1853) and "The New and the Old" (1859), in six each; "The Song of the Sower" (1859), in five drafts and several fragments;

<sup>28</sup> Exceptions are "The Old Man's Funeral" and "I Broke the Spell That Held Me Long," both elaborately reworked during these years.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Godwin, II, 271–272, footnote.

“A Tale of Cloudland” (1862) and “Castles in the Air” (1863), in a confused mass of manuscripts; “A Legend of the Delawares” (1872) and “A Lifetime” (1876), in three versions.

Bryant made no formal enumeration of the matters with which he concerned himself in revising. What they were may be deduced from his practice, his critical writings, and his correspondence (particularly with his friend Richard Henry Dana, Sr., and with poets who asked him to correct their verses). As for changing the thought of a poem, he sometimes made such a suggestion to others but he did not frequently alter the ideas in his own verses. A rare instance is the deletion of three lines of Christian philosophizing from manuscript B of “Thanatopsis” (lines 83–85) and the substitution of a non-committal phrase: “sustain’d and sooth’d by an unfaltering trust”—in what, he does not state. Apparently the poet always knew, at least in a general way, what he meant to say before he put pen to paper.

In technique, Bryant was accustomed to point out certain errors in the lines of others which he did not often correct in his own work. One such flaw was bad word order (particularly from excessive inversion), which he corrected in the poems of Dana<sup>30</sup>—but which appeared only occasionally in his own. Another was the intrusion of prosaic words, an infelicity which he observed in a poem submitted to him by Richard Henry Stoddard<sup>31</sup> but which he did not find in his own manuscripts: Bryant fell into flatness and feebleness, but he nevertheless made a distinction between the language of prose and that of poetry. Likewise, he noted violations of grammar in others;<sup>32</sup> yet there were few lapses of that nature in his own compositions. Finally, while he detected bad rhymes and bad metres in the poems of his fellows,<sup>33</sup> he was assured of the correctness of his own metre and rhyme. The *Edinburgh Review* could not persuade him to abandon an identical rhyme (“boughs” and “bows”); nor could Dana, whose own verses were rough, convince him that “bosom” and “blossom” form an imperfect rhyme.<sup>34</sup> Lists of rhyme words on the margins of his manuscripts suggest that in Massachusetts, at least, Bryant owned no rhyming dictionary; but only once is there evidence that he was hard pressed—when he searched for triple rhymes for “The Ages.”<sup>35</sup> With the metre of several of his lines, reviewers found

<sup>30</sup> *Idem*, I, 303.

<sup>31</sup> Very pointed are Bryant’s suggestions in a letter commenting on this poem sent him by Stoddard—the last letter which Bryant wrote (May 27, 1878; quoted in *idem*, II, 398–399). <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>33</sup> *Idem*, I, 303; II, 398. <sup>34</sup> *Idem*, I, 297–298.

<sup>35</sup> For example, as rhymes for *lake*, he jots down *bake*, *ache*, *break*, *cake*, *flake*, *lake* [*sic*], *make*, *opaque*, *quake*, *rake*, *stake*, *slake*, *take*, *wake*. From them he selects *break* and *flake*. Only rarely does he mistake eye for authentic rhymes, as when he sets down as rhymes for *cowl*: *bowl*, *hole*, *pole*, etc.

fault—sometimes justly. Nevertheless, no American poet before Poe had a sounder mastery of both the theory and the practice of versification; and the exacting Poe himself admitted that Bryant was “the most generally correct of our poets” in the “minor morals” of prosody.<sup>36</sup> Although no harm would have resulted if Bryant had scrutinized his own manuscripts more carefully for these five errors, the infrequency of his corrections of such flaws is due primarily to their relative scarcity.

If these matters did not particularly concern Bryant, it becomes evident by the process of elimination that his chief interests must have been diction and imagery. Changes in single words are not numerous in his manuscripts, nor are they of major importance: “thy” for “thine,” “so” for “thus,” “friend” for “one,” “if” for “though,” “shall” in several instances for “must,” and, in a line of “Thanatopsis” already discussed, “to” instead of “for” (“ . . . lies down *to* pleasant dreams”). But many of his more extended emendations also have their origin in the desire to alter one word—something which, of course, he could rarely do in metre without changing additional words or an entire line. In making these improvements he looked for what all poets seek, the exact and appropriate word, and for what he himself particularly sought, the simple word. With him, verbal exactness was a passion—a passion which made him famous as a precisionist in diction during fifty years as editor of the *New York Evening Post*.<sup>37</sup> In poetry, he was equally insistent on “propriety” in language. Carefully he explained to Dana why in his “Forest Hymn” he wrote “wisdom disappeared” rather than “. . . vanished”: “Disappeared is used nearly in the sense of *vanished*, *departed*, *passed away*; but with more propriety than *vanished*, since that relates to a sudden disappearance.”<sup>38</sup> Seeking accuracy as he perfected “Thanatopsis,” he changed youth’s “fresh prime” to “. . . green spring” and “speak . . . how” to “tell . . . how.” Seeking propriety, he changed “gleaming” to “glowing” to “shining”—the last being the least vivid but the most appropriate for the light which the planets cast on “the sad abodes of death”; “all that live” to “all that breathe”; “grand decay” to “the grandeur of decay”; and many more.

Bryant’s defence of simplicity in his introduction to *A Library of Poetry and Song* of 1871 is familiar: “To me it seems that one of the most important requisites for a great poet is a luminous style.” Less familiar is his early attack on ornate diction (1824): “An elaborate magnificence of diction, . . . is like a load of costly drapery about the limbs of a com-

<sup>36</sup> Review of Bryant, *Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book*, xxxii (1846), 182–186.

<sup>37</sup> For comments on Bryant’s insistence on purity of diction and for a copy of his *index expurgatorius*, see Allan Nevins, *The Evening Post* (New York, 1922), pp. 347–349.

<sup>38</sup> Godwin, I, 297.

petitor in a foot race."<sup>39</sup> Although he did not rout all the tags of poetic diction which drifted into his lines from the eighteenth century, he pursued them faithfully: "meekeyed gems" is changed to "her flowers," "modest gem" to "humble stalk," "blooming child" to "artless child" to "child," "chrystal springs" to "twin fountains" to "sister springs" to "springs," "pale realms of shade" to "that mysterious realm," and the like. Bryant's limpid style has heretofore seemed so natural and so easy that literary historians have perhaps given him too little credit for its achievement. When they realize that his simplicity, even in such unpretentious poems as "The Yellow Violet" and "Oh Fairest of the Rural Maids," was dearly won after long battle with eighteenth-century conventions, Bryant should command their increased respect.

Most important of all was Bryant's perfecting of his images. Although he was not as eloquent concerning the image-making duties of the poet as was Emerson, he announced as early as 1826 that poetry does not employ "tangible imitation" but "arbitrary symbols."<sup>40</sup> Evidence that Bryant clearly visualized and carefully evaluated his images appears in his discussion of a line in "To a Waterfowl" which first read, "As, darkly painted on the crimson sky"; next, "limned upon"; then, "shadowed on"; and finally, "seen against." When Dana begged for the restoration of the first reading, Bryant thus defended himself: "I was never satisfied with the word 'painted,' because the next line is

'Thy figure floats along.'

Now, from a very early period—I am not sure that it was not from the very time that I wrote the poem—there seemed to me an incongruity between the idea of a figure painted on the sky and a figure moving, 'floating,' across its face. If the figure were painted, then it would be fixed. The incongruity distressed me, and I could not be easy until I had made the change. I preferred a plain prosaic expression to a picturesque one which seemed to me false."<sup>41</sup> Occasionally he wasted time in revising bad images, as the seductive orchid which he finally had the good sense to omit from "The Rivulet" and a most unfortunate metaphor of a babe and a bosom which originally formed the fourth stanza of "I Broke the Spell That Held Me Long."<sup>42</sup> Commonly, however, his imagery was

<sup>39</sup> Review of Henry Pickering, *North American Review*, XIX (1824), 427.

<sup>40</sup> "Lectures on Poetry," *op. cit.*, I, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Cummington, August 11, 1870, in Godwin, II, 289. Bryant restored the first reading in *A Library of Poetry and Song* but not in his collected poems.

<sup>42</sup> In collecting the poem Bryant wisely dropped this stanza, in which poetry (the mother) woos him (the babe) to return from the practice of law (the cliff). There are five manuscript drafts of the stanza, which, illustrated by a detailed engraving, appeared in the following form in *The Atlantic Souvenir* for 1826:

fundamentally sound and his emendations were excellent—designed either to make the original figure more vivid or to substitute something even more effective.

It should now be possible to make some reply to the questions which prefaced this examination of Bryant's manuscripts. How literally did he adhere to the dogma that poetry shall be written only when the poet's lip quivers and his eye o'erflows; and how extensively and how successfully did he revise? These questions cannot be answered with complete exactness, because the line between composing and emending is not always clear. Furthermore, not all the manuscript drafts of his poems have survived; and the evidence is therefore fragmentary. However, the main trends of Bryant's practice are obvious. First, his custom usually but by no means always exemplifies his theory that the poet shall compose solely in moments of emotion. His themes and his ideas evidently come to him at such times; he does not strain after them; he does not force them. Here dogma and reality coincide. But fit words and images for the expression of his thoughts do not come as easily; occasionally they are "suddenly darted" into his mind as by inspiration, but more often they are the objects of long and industrious pursuit. His search is cheerful and willing, but it is impossible to believe that it is always moist-eyed.

As for Bryant's revising, it is evidently very extensive—so extensive, in fact, that an observer is at first inclined to attribute the poet's success entirely to industry and not at all to genius. But such a verdict is unjust—its basis is ignorance of the practice of other poets. Wordsworth, it is said, spent as much time in reworking as in composing his "Prelude."<sup>43</sup> More is known concerning the textual emendations made by Keats, by Byron, and by Coleridge after publication than concerning their work over their manuscripts; but it is clear that before they printed, they frequently revised.<sup>44</sup> In America, Poe toiled nervously and self-consciously over his lines, making more alterations in his published

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Thus where the cliff, abrupt and steep,  
Looks down upon the sullen deep,  
Far from his mother's side, the child  
Sat playing on the verge, and smiled:—  
She laid her bosom bare, and won  
From the dread brink her truant son.

<sup>43</sup> *The Prelude*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (London, [1925?]), "Introduction," p. xliii.

<sup>44</sup> *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. Buxton Forman (Oxford, 1906), "Introduction" and notes; *The Works of Lord Byron. Poetry*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (London, 1898–1904), introductions to poems, notes on manuscripts, and collations of editions; *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (London, 1912), footnotes.



work than any other native writer.<sup>45</sup> So little is known concerning the methods of writing and revising employed by nineteenth-century poets that any generalization is dangerous; but it is probable that the majority owed more to revision and less to divine madness than their readers commonly assumed. Viewed in this perspective, Bryant's emendations are still numerous—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.

Finally, did Bryant revise too much? Dana believed that his friend too often altered his poems after they had been printed: "I must scold a little, that . . . you have in cold blood turned critic upon your printed works, the control of which was gone when you handed them over to the public; and yet you have treated them just as if you supposed there was still the same interflow of the warm life-blood that there was before the severance."<sup>46</sup> Bryant himself even feared at times that he labored too long over his unpublished manuscripts: "I have sometimes been conscience-smitten at wasting so much time in making a crabbed thought submit to the dimensions of the metre . . . I fear that the process has been attended with a loss of vigor and freshness in the composition."<sup>47</sup> If the romantic declarations concerning the relations between emotion and emending are to be taken with complete literalness, his smittings of conscience might at first glance seem to be justified. Superficially, his practice in revision far exceeds his theory. But in reality, frequent as his emendations are, they are neither forced nor perfunctory. Rather, they are made in accordance with Bryant's sane precept that alterations shall be undertaken when the mind is "filled with the subject." Of his proposals for self-criticism, he violates only his impracticable demand that the poet in revising shall summon back all his "original glow" and mend "with rapture" what "with fire was penned." Here he conforms more often to his father's Augustan notion of correctness than to his own romantic creed. But, cool or impassioned, his revisions are in the end fortunate. He may momentarily wander down blind alleys of poetic diction or bad imagery, but he always returns. His goal is the perfection through patient labor which Wordsworth sought:

In that considerate and laborious work  
That patience which, admitting no neglect  
By slow creation, doth impart(s) to speech

<sup>45</sup> *The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Killis Campbell (Boston, [1917]), "Introduction" and textual variants.

<sup>46</sup> August 3, 1870, quoted in Godwin, II, 288.

<sup>47</sup> To Dana, May 9, 1834, quoted in *idem*, I, 305.

Outline and substance even, till it has given  
A function kindred to organic power,  
The vital spirit of a perfect form.<sup>48</sup>

Less impressively worded but equally idealistic is Bryant's own statement of his aims in revising: "to frame a couplet or a stanza, so that the tune of it perfectly pleased my ear, at the same time that the expression, the thought, was the most perfect that I could command."<sup>49</sup> Since the results were good wherever the poet revised and since blemishes still remain to be corrected, one could wish, not in detraction but in recognition of what Bryant accomplished, that he had emended not less but more.

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted by de Selincourt, *op. cit.*, p. xliii, footnote.

<sup>49</sup> Godwin, I, 305.