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LINDA PASTAN

Rereading "Thanatopsis"

In Roslyn, Long Island
where I didn't know
the poet had lived,
my uncle fresh from World War Two
built a ranch house
with an all electric
kitchen where I cooked eggs
for my small cousins and memorized
Bryant's poems for the eighth-grade teacher.
The only Waterfowl

I had seen
was drawn on the wing
of my uncle's fighter plane,
and I never guessed,
now that the war was won,
that "the last bitter hour"
was more than syllables
I had to learn
or could come so soon to tongue tie
even my razzle-dazzle uncle.

PHILIP APPLEMAN

After "Thanatopsis"

Black on black, from Maine to California:
the starshine is too precious now to keep.
I'm staking all my luck on one more morning
while everyone I love is sound asleep.

Suppose tomorrow were the last gold dawning,
painting the sky with rainbows of desire,
the last pale cloud, the last bright seagull soaring,
before the last red blossoming of fire —

the last green pine, the final blue wave breaking,
the long farewell in one last robin's song,
teaching us the truest kind of aching,
to love that well which we must leave 'ere long:

they'd feel it coming on in Kiev and China,
the poison rain, and murder in the snow,
the endless winter, birdless and benighted,
and sickness in the fields, where nothing grows.

From Paumanok it's black to the Pacific:
a nightbird says too late, you're in too deep.
Red telephones are jangling their dark traffic
while everyone I love is sound asleep.

Yvor Winters, Wallace Stevens, and "Thanatopsis"

IT WAS YVOR WINTERS in the nineteen-fifties at Stanford, as I recall, who taught me to appreciate Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis." The grand curmudgeon liked very little American poetry, aside from Emily Dickinson and Robinson and the work of his students, but he had ambiguous, if not complicated, responses to Wallace Stevens; and it was in connection with Stevens that Winters pointed out that "Sunday Morning" was the best blank verse since "Thanatopsis." He asked us to read the poem carefully, if we never had, study the movement of the verses, and notice the resemblances: "When thoughts/Of the last bitter hour come like a blight/Over thy spirit, and sad images . . ."

I entered "that mysterious realm, where each shall take/His chamber in the silent halls of death" with a considerable reluctance. True enough, Bryant's vision was a good deal more coherent than Stevens', but also more grim, almost leaden, it seemed to me. Winters was always recommending these grim leaden figures to supplant my heroes. He called Whitman a "second-rater absolutely" and Hart Crane was discussed in terms of his homosexuality, not necessarily his poetry. Was the great Yvor, whom I then hated and feared, using Bryant to reproach Stevens for his cosmopolite sophistications, or sophistries? I loved "Sunday Morning" and so did Winters, he claimed, adjourning his love for the poet only after the first couple of volumes began to produce work of a feckless "hedonism."

With Winters you never knew if he really believed "Thanatopsis" was the only truly great American poem of the first half of the nineteenth century, or if that was a way of telling his scholarly and

critical friends in American Studies et cetera that they wouldn't know their own toe if they were eating it.

At various times Winters also used "Thanatopsis" to beat up on the blank verse of T. S. Eliot, and Hart Crane, and even Robert Lowell, so it, eventually, became a sort of obligation with me to know and remember the poem, for its easy movement of the caesura, and its variable imagery, its diction which is never fustian nor inverted:

The hills

Rock ribbed 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, poured round all,
Old Ocean's grey and melancholy waste, —

Bryant was first, last and always an editorial writer, so he editorialized a bit with words like "venerable," "majesty," "melancholy," but he does manage to convince us with wonder and power of the process whereby the earth is "the great tomb of man." Bryant's poem has considerable force as an elegant, though truistic, statement about death.

Winters is long ago buried in that great tomb, and probably some of the earth Bryant was evoking is now neither cemetery nor wilderness but a housing tract. And, perhaps, on warm Sunday mornings, one of the local ladies takes coffee in her peignoir on the patio, and "dreams a little of that dark catastrophe." Would it comfort her to know that "matron, and maid/And the sweet babe, and the grey-headed man —/Shall one by one be gathered to thy side . . ."?

RICHARD EBERHART

Memory of Learning Bryant's "Thanatopsis" in Youth

WHEN I WAS ABOUT FIFTEEN OR SIXTEEN in the old red brick high school at Austin, Minnesota, our teacher asked the class to write a poem. I went home and found in our library the works of Alfred Lord Tennyson which I devoured with fascination and immediate enthusiasm, falling in love with the musicality of his lines and the perfection of his rhymes. I imitated Tennyson and instead of bringing one poem to class, as did my classmates, I always brought in several, maybe even half a dozen. It was a sheer joy to write lines of verse similar to the joy of running the hundred-yard dash.

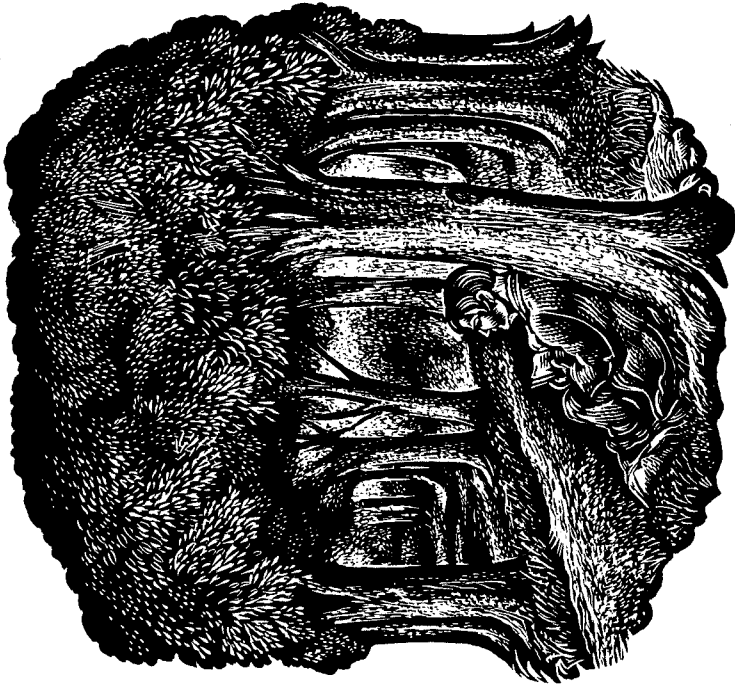
At this time I encountered Bryant's "Thanatopsis" and learned it by heart. I used to repeat it over and over with total absorption. It has been with me ever since. I knew nothing of his life at the time and did not know other poems of his. The magnificent lines were engraved on my mind. The other night I partly awoke and the whole poem came to me almost intact sixty-five years later. Later in college I studied the problem of the ending and had such severity of judgment that I thought these added lines were wrong. After decades I concluded that they were justified, they added to the totality of the experience.

I do not know when I first read "To a Waterfowl" and "To a Fringed Gentian," which I enjoyed, but for reasons unknown was not compelled to learn them by heart. "Thanatopsis" remains as a profound experience of poetry when I was very young. Its power has not diminished with time.

RICHARD EBERHART

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Was it not Pound who said that to be remembered a poet must have two, meaning at least two, memorable poems? You do not have to read all of Marvell but everybody knows his "Coy Mistress" and "The Garden." Bryant wrote one great poem and he wrote it when he was very young. Pound's dictum should be revised downward in his case.



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