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THE GENESIS OF "THANATOPSIS"

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT, II

THE date of William Cullen Bryant's marriage to Frances Fairchild, "Fairest of the Rural Maids," has been erroneously reported by his biographers as June 11, 1821. It is high time that this error, as well as others more fundamental to an intelligent estimate of Bryant's life and work, be corrected. For in January, 1822, the young couple became the parents of a daughter. This unfortunate mistake in dating has been underlined ludicrously by the frequent publication, as an example of Yankee humor, of a letter from the bridegroom to his mother. In this he wrote:

I hasten to send you the melancholy intelligence of what has lately happened to me. Early on the evening of the eleventh day of the present month I was at a neighboring house. . . . A gentleman with a hooked nose then muttered certain cabalistical expressions which I was too much frightened to remember, but I recollect that at the conclusion I was given to understand that I was married to a young lady of the name of Frances Fairchild, whom I perceived standing by my side. . . . They trapped me before I was aware, and now I am married in spite of myself.

The records of the town clerk in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, show that the wedding took place on *January* 11, 1821.

Equal confusion has existed over the date of the composition of "Thanatopsis" since that poem was first published in the *North American Review* for September, 1817. The author contributed to this confusion, and in trying to draw a picture of artistic precocity his biographers have extended it. They have placed "Thanatopsis" at the beginning instead of at the end of a series of inferior poems in which the genesis of the greater work can be traced. They have made it appear that a masterpiece was produced accidentally, and that the author afterwards returned to imitative experimentation.

Students of Bryant's early life agree that he wrote "Thanatopsis" during the summer or fall of 1811 shortly after he had left Williams College to prepare for transfer to Yale, before he had reached his seventeenth birthday.¹ They see the inspiration of the poem in either a "fit of despair because his father could not send him to Yale College,"² or the "horrible fear of death which pursued the boy Cullen."³ Yet we know that Bryant was still hoping to enter Yale in 1812,⁴ and there is no evidence that he was brooding over death before the spring of 1813.

One writer suggests that while Bryant was reading the poems of Robert Blair, Beilby Porteus, and Henry Kirke White in 1811, he decided to write an academic answer to the question, "How shall a man face death?"⁵ This theory stems from the final paragraph of an autobiographical fragment published as the first chapter of Godwin's *Biography*. In this reminiscence written in his eighty-first year the poet was hazy about dates. The last datable reference is to his leaving Williams in May, 1811, to prepare to enter the junior class at Yale. He went home and studied for several months, only to learn from his father that he must give up the idea of a full college course because of the expense. While he was studying he did experiments in chemistry, read botany and medicine, and devoured all the poetry he could find. Then, he adds:

About this time my father brought home, I think from one of his visits to Boston, the "Remains of Henry Kirke White," which had

¹ See Parke Godwin, *A Biography of William Cullen Bryant . . .* (New York, 1883), I, 89, footnote; Tremaine McDowell, "Bryant's Practice in Composition and Revision," *PMLA*, LII (June, 1937), 481; Tremaine McDowell, *William Cullen Bryant, Representative Selections . . .* (New York, 1935), xxv, 389-390. Bryant was born on November 3, 1794, at Cummington, Massachusetts.

² Cited by Willis F. Johnson in "Thanatopsis, Old and New," *North American Review*, CCXXIV (November, 1927), 572.

³ *PMLA*, LII, 487.

⁴ See letter from Bryant to John Avery dated January 9, 1812, in Tremaine McDowell, "William Cullen Bryant and Yale," *NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY*, III (October, 1930), 709.

⁵ *Representative Selections*, xxv.

been republished in this country. I read the poems with great eagerness, and so often that I had committed several of them to memory, particularly the ode to the Rosemary. The melancholy tone which prevails in them deepened the interest with which I read them, for about that time I had, as young poets are apt to have, a liking for poetry of a querulous cast. I remember reading, at this time, that remarkable poem, Blair's "Grave," and dwelling with great pleasure upon its finer passages. I had the opportunity of comparing it with a poem on a kindred subject, also in blank verse, that of Bishop Porteus on "Death," and of observing how much the verse of the obscure Scottish minister excelled in originality of thought and vigor of expression that of the English prelate. In my father's library I found a small, thin volume of the miscellaneous poems of Southey, to which he had not called my attention, containing some of the finest of Southey's shorter poems. I read it greedily. Cowper's poems had been in my hands from an early age, and I now passed from his shorter poems, which are generally mere rhymed prose, to his "Task," the finer passages of which supplied a form of blank verse that captivated my admiration.⁶

Here, the fragment as published comes to an end, and were it necessary to rely wholly on this account it might not be unreasonable to assume that the program of reading outlined here was completed in the summer of 1811 and that the poet, guided by the mood of "The Grave" and the metre of "The Task," soon began to write "Thanatopsis." But we do not have here all of the evidence. In an extant manuscript there is an additional paragraph, in which Bryant wrote:

I cannot say precisely whether the poem entitled *Thanatopsis* was written in 1811 or 1812, probably the latter—before I had completed my eighteenth year. I find that I was at Cummington at that time, and that and the Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood were written about the same time. My father found these two poems at Cummington while I was living at Great Barrington, took them with him to Boston, and had them published in the *North American Review*, then a magazine, in the year 1817. By some misunder-

⁶ Godwin, I, 37.

standing it happened that the *Thanatopsis* was taken for my father's till I afterward claimed it.⁷

In 1869 the poet had written to his friend and biographer, James Grant Wilson: "I am not certain that the poem entitled '*Thanatopsis*' was not written a year earlier than you have made it; indeed, I am much inclined to think it was in my eighteenth year."⁸ Earlier he had told another friend: "It was written when I was seventeen or eighteen years old—I have not now at hand the memorandums which would enable me to be precise—and I believe it was composed in my solitary rambles in the woods."⁹

Since Bryant felt inclined to date the poem earlier as he grew older, we should look elsewhere for evidence offering a sounder basis for judgment. The manuscripts at Roslyn include what seems to be the earliest assignment of a date. On a paper marked "Copy of a Memorandum found among Mr. Bryant's Papers—Mrs. Bryant's Handwriting," are the entries:

Thanatopsis. C[ummington]. 1813
Chorus of Ghosts. 1812. . . .¹⁰

⁷ Quoted from the original manuscript at Roslyn, Long Island, with the consent of the Minna G. Goddard Estate and Mr. Conrad Goddard. Of further significance is Bryant's statement that these two poems were written at about the same time, for no critic has ever suggested that the "Inscription" was composed earlier than 1815 (see, for example, Godwin, I, 142; *The Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant*, edited by Parke Godwin, New York, 1883, I, 24; *Representative Selections*, xliii, 7). Bryant's comment that he was living at Great Barrington when his father found the poems suggests that they were not discovered until 1817, the year of their publication. (Bryant moved to Great Barrington from Plainfield in October, 1816. See Godwin, I, 145.) This makes more sense than Godwin's unsubstantiated statement: "While his son was yet at Bridgewater, [Dr. Bryant] had discovered the manuscripts of '*Thanatopsis*,' the '*Fragment*,' and a few other poems carefully hidden away in a desk." (Godwin, I, 149.) Since Bryant left Bridgewater in August, 1815, we have previously had to assume that his statement, "My father found the fragment among some manuscripts which I had written several years before and left at Cummington," meant that the poem was written several years before 1815, rather than before 1817. (See letter to an unidentified correspondent quoted by Tremaine McDowell, in "Bryant and *The North American Review*," *American Literature*, I, March, 1929, 15, note 11.)

⁸ *Bryant, and his Friends* . . . (New York, 1886), 36, footnote.

⁹ Letter to S. N. Halliday dated March 15, 1855, quoted in *Poetical Works*, I, 329-330.

¹⁰ The final entries on this memorandum record the composition of several

More significant than the dates is the clear indication that, long before his first public statement on the subject, Bryant had told his wife that "A Chorus of Ghosts," which is called "Chorus of Shades" in the manuscript, was composed *before* "Thanatopsis." For the manuscript of "Chorus of Shades" is dated February 2, 1814.

By establishing a time sequence in which "A Chorus of Ghosts" antedates "Thanatopsis" we see the whole period from 1811 to 1815, during which the poet grew from adolescence to maturity, take form. With the exception of "Thanatopsis" itself, almost all the poems of this period exist in dated manuscripts, many of them never published. In these the poet reflects an emotional upheaval caused in turn by religious doubts, uneasy first love, and a real fear of death from disease. When we compare Bryant's poems of this period with those of the British writers by whom they were patently inspired it seems probable that the course of reading outlined in the autobiography was actually extended over two or three years.

In December, 1811, Cullen went to nearby Worthington to study law in the home of Judge Samuel Howe. An examination of the poetry he wrote in 1812 makes it seem unlikely that he could have composed so mature a work as "Thanatopsis" in the previous year. A month after reaching Worthington he played the shepherd's pipe in a mode that would scarcely have done credit to a minor poet of the early eighteenth century:

AD MUSAM

So long neglectful of thy dues
 And absent from thy shrine so long,
 Say, wilt thou deign, Immortal Muse,
 Again to inspire thy votary's song? . . .¹¹

In March he gave further evidence that he had been thus far

poems in 1820. It seems probable that Frances started the record at about the time of her marriage, discontinuing it when her husband's first collection of poems was published in September, 1821.

¹¹ MS dated January, 1812. Quoted in Godwin, I, 103-104.

untouched by the Romantic influences which were soon to revolutionize and vitalize his writing:

A warmer sun, a brighter day
Announce the close of winter's sway. . . .
Yet still is heard along the way
The merry bell of frequent sleigh
Where the coy maiden guards with care
Her blushes from the fresh March air
Whose envious gale 'tis said will paint
The lily cheek with swarthy teint.¹²

On the Fourth of July he trumpeted against Napoleon in the same vein of childish patriotism that had inspired "The Embargo" four years earlier:

No! by our Fathers' ashes,
And by their sacred cause,
The Gaul shall never call us slaves,
Shall never give us laws;
Even let *him* from a swarming fleet
Debar his veteran host,
A living wall of patriot hearts
Shall fence the frowning coast. . . .¹³

In August his poetic horizon was still limited to the period antedating the early English Romantics:

Let no rude sound be uttered nigh,
Be heard no step profane,
While tempered to the heaven-taught lyre
I pour the sacred strain. . . .¹⁴

At the time Bryant moved to Worthington, a bitter struggle was beginning between factions in the local Congregational Church, whose minister, Jonathan Pomeroy, opposed the new

¹² MS dated at Worthington, March, 1812. In his early manuscripts, particularly, Bryant used little or no punctuation.

¹³ The third of three stanzas quoted in Godwin, I, 106-107. The New York *Evening Post* for June 13, 1878, has "An Ode for the Fourth of July, 1812," in eight stanzas, of which this is number six.

¹⁴ Roslyn MSS, Stanza One. See also Godwin, I, 108-109.

Unitarian movement. Although Pomeroy condemned the "introduction of certain novelties technically called 'New Measures' " which he called "pernicious in their effects," revivals were frequent and popular, and hundreds of young people were brought into the church to take sides in the controversy. At one time emotionalism shook the congregation so violently that when the progressive faction succeeded in having stoves installed in the church building, several ladies of the opposite party were overcome by heat on the first Sunday thereafter, although the stoves had not been lighted!¹⁵

Into this agitated community, in the winter of 1812-1813, swept a scourge which cracked the surface of Cullen Bryant's imperturbability. On March 27, 1813, the poet described in a letter to John Avery the epidemic which had recently struck Worthington:

... A strange species of the typhus accompanied in most but not all cases with an infection of the lungs—whether symptomatic of the disease or arising from the sudden changes of the weather I cannot determine—has visited us with the most alarming ravages. Three or four die in a week nor does the disorder seem much to abate. It is the same fever that has swept off so many of our soldiers in the camp where it originated.¹⁶

The parish records reveal that young men and women were particularly susceptible to this disease. While the death rate was at its peak in April, 1813, another tragedy shocked the little village. A young honeymooner from Boston named Chamberlain, stopping with his bride overnight at the Mills Hotel, shot himself the following morning.¹⁷

This unexplained suicide must have struck Bryant with bitter irony. He had just composed an epithalamion for a friend, Jacob Porter, who had been married in March. The

¹⁵ [Rice, J. C.] *History of the Town of Worthington* (Springfield, 1874), 58-59, 101-102.

¹⁶ Quoted by McDowell, "William Cullen Bryant and Yale," *NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY*, III, 715.

¹⁷ See *Vital Records of Worthington, Massachusetts, to the Year 1850* (Boston, 1911), 124.

poet's shaky prayer was a challenge to life's uncertainty in that unhealthy springtime:

... And wheresoe'r in life thy lot be cast,
 For life at best is bitterness and guile—
 Still may thy own Eliza cheer the waste,
 Soften its weary ruggedness the while,
 And gild thy dreams of peace, and make thy sorrows smile. . . .¹⁸

Three months later the bride died of the disease most dreaded by New England youth, tuberculosis, and Bryant tried to console his friend in verse:

Alas! When late for thee I twined,
 And thy lost love, the bridal wreath,
 I little thought so soon to bind
 The cypress round the urn of death.¹⁹

This unpublished poem seems to be the first Bryant wrote that is seriously concerned with death. Its tone and imagery are strongly influenced by Henry Kirke White, as we see by comparing these opening lines with passages from White's "Written at the Grave of a Friend" and "To the Herb Rosemary":

Yet here alone, unheeding time, I lie,
 And o'er my friend still pour the plaintive lay.
 Oh! 'tis not long since, George, with thee I woo'd
 The maid of musings by yon moaning wave. . . .

Sweet scented flower! who art wont to bloom
 On January's front severe, . . .
 Come, thou shalt form my nosegay now,
 And I will bind thee round my brow;
 And as I twine the mournful wreath,
 I'll weave a melancholy song;

¹⁸ From "To a Friend on His Marriage," first stanza, included in *Representative Selections*, 349. This was first published at Cambridge in 1813, by Jacob Porter, in a pamphlet entitled *To the Memory of Mrs. Betsy Porter*.

¹⁹ From the first stanza of an untitled poem in nine stanzas, Roslyn MSS, dated July, 1813.

And sweet the strain shall be, and long,
The melody of death.²⁰

Equally suggestive is the parallel between White's melancholy in "Written in the Prospect of Death" and Bryant's wishful refutation of its hopelessness. White found no promise of being remembered after death:

... Yet a little,
And the last fleeting particle will fall
Silent, unseen, unnoticed, unlamented. . . .
... And it is hard
To feel the hand of death arrest one's steps,
Throw a chill blight o'er all one's budding hopes,
And hurl one's soul untimely to the shades,
Lost in the gaping gulf of blank oblivion.²¹

Bryant, less personally moved, was able to offer a doubtful optimism:

I cannot think when life retires
From this frail pulse of doubt and fear
The soul forgets its wonted fires
And all it loved and cherished here.
It soothes me to believe that still
The spirits of each dear lost friend
With forms of peace my dreams to fill
And watch my lonely walks attend.

He told us in his autobiography that he had committed several of White's poems to memory, "particularly the ode to the Rosemary." If we recall, as well, his statement that when White's poems came to his attention he read them with greater interest because he already had "a liking for poetry of a querulous cast," it seems probable that his reading of the "Graveyard" poets was begun in this epidemic year, 1813, rather than in 1811.

²⁰ *The Poetical Works of Henry Kirke White* (Edinburgh, 1856), 165, 149-150.

²¹ White, *Poetical Works*, 71-72.

In this first death poem Bryant foreshadowed the fear with which he later tormented himself until he worked out the stoical confidence of "Thanatopsis." For the better part of a year this morbid concern was dormant. He wrote no more melancholy poetry until sometime before February, 1814, when in the "Chorus of Shades" he tried to calm his own dread of death. A fragment written about this time leads into the "Chorus of Shades" with such interlocking sense and imagery that it must have been intended as an introduction to the longer poem:

Could I but know that when at length
 The bitterness of death I sip
 My last faint sighs of failing strength
 Would tremble on a Christian's lip.
 Or were I sure, that then no more
 Might sense awake her watch to keep
 And all beyond that sable shore
 Were emptiness and endless sleep
 Oh I would pray that not an hour
 Might pass across this weary head
 Ere thy cold hands, terrific power!
 My couch of iron rest had spread.²²

CHORUS OF SHADES

Come to thy couch of iron rest!
 Come share our silent bed!
 There's room within the grave-yard's bounds
 To lay thy weary head. . . .
 Midst scenes from nature's solitude
 Won by assiduous toil,
 Thy bones shall find a pleasant grave,
 And sleep in virgin soil. . . .
 Why shudder at that rest so still
 That night of solid gloom?

²² Roslyn MSS. This fragment, dated at Worthington, April, 1814, may be a revision of an earlier introduction to the "Chorus of Shades."

If refuge thou would'st seek from woe
 'Tis in the dreamless tomb.

There is no tie that binds to life,
 No charm that wins thy stay;
 To-morrow none will recollect
 That thou didst live to-day. . . .²³

Bryant did not include these poems in any edition of his works. When he did use "A Chorus of Ghosts" in 1826 to fill space on the poetry page of the *New York Review*, of which he was the editor, he disguised his authorship by signing the initials "Z. Z." instead of his customary "B." One can easily understand that the author of "Thanatopsis" should not wish to be identified in the public mind with the first, awkward version of his masterpiece, for there can be little doubt that here lies the raw material for his best known poem.

To understand Bryant's poetical development during these years, we must turn again to the events of his life. He was unhappy in Worthington. He had finally abandoned his hope of going to Yale at about the time of the epidemic. He begged his father to send him to Boston to complete his clerkship. Meanwhile, he read poetry instead of pleadings and lounged around the local stores and taverns. Samuel Howe's new wife, Sarah, vivacious daughter of the lieutenant governor and until recently a popular member of Boston literary circles, found her husband's law clerk a shy boy who was so afraid of her that he failed to sense an artistic kinship with her. Sarah Howe wrote of Cullen some time later: "He was quiet, reserved, and diffident, so that I formed but little acquaintance with him. . . . My husband feared that Bryant would be backward about speaking, and, I think, wrote to him afterward to accustom himself to the practice. I doubt if he ever satisfied himself in that branch of his profession."²⁴

²³ The manuscript, dated February 2, 1814, has nine stanzas, of which those quoted are the first, fourth, seventh, and eighth. As "A Chorus of Ghosts," the poem was published in the *New York Review*, II (March, 1826), 297, without the eighth stanza, and in Godwin, I, 114-115, with the fourth omitted.

²⁴ Quoted in Godwin, I, 103, from manuscript reminiscences by Mrs. Howe.

In June, 1814, Cullen went to live near his grandfather, Dr. Philip Bryant, in Bridgewater, about twenty miles south of Boston. His father could not afford to send him to Boston to study, but the young student found his new tutor, Judge William Baylies, an intelligent, tolerant man, and the life of this large town pleasant after his confinement in Worthington. "My situation here is perfectly agreeable," he wrote to a former fellow student. "As for old Worthington, not the wealth of the Indies could tempt me back to my former situation. I am here very much in my old way, very lazy, but something different in being very contented."²⁵

Sometime before he left Worthington, in the spring of 1814, Cullen began to write of love. Parke Godwin found evidence that these verses were inspired by a young lady from Rhode Island who visited the family in Cummington and "fascinated the poet, so that for some time afterward they maintained an earnest correspondence." A study of these poems convinced Godwin that this affair soon took an unhappy turn, "and the end proved very painful for some reason or other."²⁶ There is evidence for such an interpretation in a sequence of fragments starting in April, 1814, although Godwin weaves into this romance poems covering four or five years of composition and including translations from Virgil, Theocritus, and Paulus Silentarius!²⁷ But there is too much evidence. To escape the charge of fickleness, Bryant would have had to meet the young lady in April, lose her to a rival in May, say farewell in August, swear undying devotion in October, and kneel by her grave in November! The more plausible explanation is that after he had moved to Bridgewater there were several objects of his passion, and this is suggested in a letter he wrote to a Worthington friend in September describing the happy time he was

²⁵ From a letter written about August 30, 1814, to Elisha Hubbard, quoted in Godwin, I, 123-124.

²⁶ Godwin, I, 107-108.

²⁷ See Godwin, I, 108-114.

having with a "whole army" of beautiful girls who were under his "almost sole protection."²⁸

The influence of Byron on this love poetry has been discussed elsewhere.²⁹ The importance of Bryant's experimentation at this time in a mood different from that of his dirges is twofold. By freeing his rhythms from the stiff iambics he had worked with heretofore, it prepared him for transition to a variety of metres and finally to blank verse. And by offering him, in the real or imagined death of a sweetheart, a poetic theme which forced him into a personal relationship with death, it intensified his self-pity just before he had reason to fear that he was going to die. In September the rains brought illness and death again into his consciousness. "How does the Southern autumn agree with your constitution?" he wrote to Baylies in Washington. "I hope it has not given you the fever and ague which we who dwell on the salubrious sands of the old colony dread so much."³⁰ In November Bryant went home to his family in Cummington suffering from a lung infection. A fragment written at this time of year pictures the dreariness of his surroundings:

The cloudless heavens are cold and bright,
The shrieking blast is in the sky,
And all the long autumnal night
Whirl the dry leaves in eddies by. . . .

The sun is risen, but wan and chill
Wades through a broken cloud;
And in the woods that clothe the hill
November winds are loud. . . .³¹

Much undated verse of this period is concerned with the loss of a dear one and the poet's own premonitions of death. Sometime after mid-October he writes:

²⁸ From a letter to George Downes dated Bridgewater, September 19, 1814. Roslyn MSS. Godwin published the letter but omitted this portion.

²⁹ *Representative Selections*, xl-xliii.

³⁰ From a letter dated September 26 [1814], quoted in Godwin, I, 126.

³¹ Roslyn MSS, undated. Assigned to 1815 in Godwin, I, 141-142.

The only heart, the only eye,
 Had bled or wept to see him die,
 Had seen his mangled limbs composed,
 And mourned above his [. . . ?] stone;—
 That heart was burst, that eye was closed,—
 Yea, closed before his own.³²

He is more specific in another fragment:

Alone in the moonlight I knelt at the grave
 Where slumbered of Ellen the all that could die
 And the tears that to bitter remembrance I gave
 Gleamed mixed on the turf with the dews of the sky. . . .

And that stillness of Nature unbroken and dread
 Fell cold on my heart like the hand of Despair
 For it seemed that the iron repose of the dead
 Was abroad in that slumber of Earth and of Air.³³

And in November he stands again face to face with Death personified. The "Shades" of his young Worthington friends have been replaced by one more dear:

It was my love—that form I knew—
 The same that glazed unmoving eye;
 And that pure cheek of bloodless hue,
 As when she slept with those that die.

He is horrified that she should appear, not as "a seraph flushed with heavenly bloom," but with the cruel countenance of death:

But oh, that eye is ghastly bright,
 It glares with death, as mine will soon. . . .

He recoils from her invitation to follow her to the grave, crying

The cold clods press thy limbs above,
 And darkness and the worm are there.³⁴

³² Roslyn MSS. This fragment appears on the back of a rough draft of an October [?], 1814, letter to Baylies.

³³ Roslyn MSS, undated.

³⁴ Quoted from an untitled poem in eight stanzas dated November, 1814. Roslyn MSS.

Not until Blair, in the "Grave," showed him that even the Petty Tyrant

Shakes hands with dust, and calls the worm his kinsman;
Nor pleads his rank and birthright underground

was Bryant able to feel the democracy he expressed in "Thanatopsis":

. . . 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, . . .³⁵

That the poet's fear was not quieted by the ghosts of his friends is shown by an undated fragment which he seems to have abandoned in favor of the four stanzas commencing with "Not that from life" originally published with "Thanatopsis" in the *North American Review*. In these earlier lines he merely rejected the consolation offered in the "Chorus of Shades": "To-morrow none will recollect / That thou didst live to-day":

Tis not that when my days are done
And earth's dark arms my relics keep
The brilliance of the next day's sun
May dry the tears my death that weep

That when a few brief years are fled
Oblivion shall my memory claim
And eyes that pass my narrow bed
Glance cold on my forgotten name

Nor is it that in upper air
Revel shall shout and Love shall sigh
And Avarice weave his web of care
While I in shade and stillness lie.³⁶

His clarification of the problem in "Not that from life" was so simple a statement of the physical fear of the moment of

³⁵ Lines 8-12, 1817 version.

³⁶ Roslyn MSS.

death itself that no satisfactory answer occurred to him until he voiced the philosophic calm of "Thanatopsis" as it was first published in 1817, without the introduction on which he was working when his father took the manuscript to Cambridge. His categorical rejection of the reassurances offered by the Shades was complete:

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.

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

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.

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.³⁷

Bryant rejected two other blank verse introductions in favor of the introductory lines which he added to "Thanatopsis" in

³⁷ *North American Review*, v, 338-339. Several scholars have seen in these stanzas a rudimentary introduction to "Thanatopsis." Carl Van Doren suggests that they stand somewhere between Bryant's first mood toward death (after reading Blair, etc.) and the "firm ground on which he finally stood." ("The Growth of 'Thanatopsis,'" *Nation*, CI, October 7, 1915, 432-433.) W. F. Johnson feels that "Not that from life" makes sense, but not nearly so much as "To him who in the love of Nature," in which "you may find traces of the quatrains, refined and glorified." (*North American Review*, CCXXIV, 569.) Other critics have thought them unrelated to the longer poem. Bryant had only this to say (after terming the 1817 version of "Thanatopsis" a "fragment"): "The lines of which you speak, as being in a different metre, were another fragment, and were I suppose printed by mistake as part of Thanatopsis." (Quoted in *American Literature*, I, 15, Note 11, from a letter to an unidentified correspondent dated April 12, 1860, in the Huntington Library.)

1821. One of these takes up the problem presented in "Not that from life." The opening lines clearly refer to earlier compositions such as the poems discussed above:

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. . . .³⁸

In the lines finally adopted for publication, the "voice at the heart" which attends man in his last dread hour has become the voice of Nature, gliding

Into his darker musings with a mild
 And gentle sympathy, that steals away
 Their sharpness, ere he is aware. . . .³⁹

and the poet comforts his reader with the "kinder solace" which he has finally found:

. . . 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,

³⁸ Roslyn MSS, undated. Tremaine McDowell (*PMLA*, LII, 487-488) supposes this to have been written after the 1821 introduction, presumably because the manuscript is in a later handwriting. However, many of Bryant's earlier manuscripts were copied by him after he went to Great Barrington. Some of these carry early dates.

³⁹ Lines 6-8, 1821 version.

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, . . .⁴⁰

Philosophically, Bryant had gone far between "Not that from life" and the blank verse introductions to "Thanatopsis," but the continuity of diction is clearly evident. The "dread hour when life must end," becomes the "last dread hour," then the "last bitter hour." It was the most morbid and melodramatic of his death poems, "It was my love," that supplied a transitional idea between the earlier attempts and "Thanatopsis." The final stanza takes an optimistic turn quite out of keeping with the rest of the poem:

Yet a few hours, and Nature's hand
 Itself shall sorrow's balm apply;
 And I shall bless the kind command
 That cools this brow and seals this eye.

When this thought had pushed itself into his consciousness, Bryant must have realized that he had reached a higher poetic conception and stopped to ponder. Why should not Nature, which offers the balm of sleep, come as well during consciousness with a gentle sympathy? Even the initial phrase is worked into the opening lines of the 1817 poem: "—Yet a few days, and thee, / The all-beholding sun, shall see no more."

In his autobiography, Bryant wrote of his progress through the poetry of Blair, Southey, and Cowper to the latter's "The Task." His debt to Cowper's conception of Nature as healer and comforter has been lost sight of in the repeated suggestions that Wordsworth influenced "Thanatopsis." The earliest extant copy of this poem, written in Bryant's hand about 1815, shows that he had already begun a blank verse introduction. This eight-line passage is strongly suggestive of Cowper's stricken deer that left the herd and

⁴⁰ Lines 8-15, 1821 version.

withdrew

To seek a tranquil death in distant shades.⁴¹

In his wanderings through the Cummington woods Bryant sought similar tranquillity in the face of death:

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. . . .'⁴²

There are several parallels between the third book of "The Task" and "Thanatopsis," particularly between Cowper's lines 124-127, 133-136:

I see that all are wanderers, gone astray
 Each in his own delusions; they are lost
 In chase of fancied happiness, still woo'd
 And never won. . . .
 . . . The million flit as gay
 As if created only like the fly,
 That spreads his motley wings in th'eye of noon,
 To sport their season, and be seen no more.

and Bryant's 1817 version of lines 60-66:

. . . Thousands more
 Will share thy destiny.—The tittering world
 Dance to the grave. 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!

⁴¹ "The Task," Book III, lines 110-111.

⁴² Roslyn MSS. That Bryant was reading "The Task" in 1815 is suggested by a quotation from Book III of that poem written on the back of this manuscript.

The general confusion, which was not dispelled until Bryant's first important biographer announced that "Thanatopsis" had been written in the poet's seventeenth year, was reflected by orators and editors at the time of his death. No two statements about the composition of the poem agreed.⁴³ There was unanimity only in the absence of a suggestion that Bryant wrote the poem in 1811 at the age of sixteen! One article related circumstances which agree substantially, in everything but date, with what seems likely to have been the fact:

He began the study of law in the office of Judge Howe, of Worthington, but afterwards completed his reading with William Baylies, of Bridgewater. . . . His father changed his fate. While at home for a season, away from his studies at Bridgewater in 1813, he had written "Thanatopsis." Two years afterwards his father, then a member of the Legislature, when rummaging over some papers, had found it and read it to a neighbor, . . .⁴⁴

Bryant did not go to Bridgewater until June, 1814. His first season at home thereafter was in November and December, 1814, when he was ill with lung trouble, and when he wrote "It was my love" and, presumably, "Not that from life." We cannot be certain that the first draft of "Thanatopsis" did not follow immediately but, if so, a complete change in diction, versification, and philosophical outlook was made more rapidly than seems probable. Would the poet have achieved so optimistic a mood during his illness? The shift from gloomy vision to comfortable stoicism seems more likely to have occurred after his recovery and return to Bridgewater.

After his lung trouble in November-December, 1814, and after his father had been cured of a critical illness in March, 1815,⁴⁵ there is only one indication that Bryant was concerned

⁴³ See, for example, John Bigelow's oration in *Bryant Memorial Meeting of the Century* (New York, 1878), 23; George W. Curtis, *The Life, Character, and Writings of William Cullen Bryant* (New York [1879]), 19; Obituaries in the *New York Evening Post*, and *The Sun*, June 13, 1878.

⁴⁴ *New York World* obituary, June 13, 1878.

⁴⁵ See letter from Samuel Howe to Bryant dated March 1, 1815, in the Bryant-Godwin Collection, New York Public Library.

with the subject of death during the following year. In July, 1815, he wrote two Spenserian stanzas which, while they reflect, as Godwin says, "more natural views of the great enemy, Death," than his 1814 compositions, are closer to these in attitude and imagery than to "Thanatopsis."⁴⁶

If death was no longer threatening, Bryant's fear of professional failure was strong during the months just prior to his admission to the bar in August, 1815. As Mrs. Howe suggested, he was inordinately afraid of having to speak in public. This obsession grew during the last year of his studies until he tried almost frantically to persuade his father to let him join the army, or at least to postpone applying for admission to the bar until he had reached his majority. The first alternative would enable him to finish his studies later without further help, he argued, and "I should then come into the world . . . with my excessive bashfulness and rusticity rubbed off by a military life."⁴⁷ Two months before he became a licensed attorney he wrote to a fellow student: "The day when I shall set up my gingerbread-board is to me a day of fearful expectation. The nearer I approach to it the more I dread it."⁴⁸ Before hanging out his "gingerbread-board" at Plainfield in December, 1815, Bryant, in his own words, "lounged away" three months at his father's. Evidence that he started to compose "Thanatopsis" as late as the fall of 1815 is not inconsiderable. This was his first period fruitful of mature poetry: "The Yellow Violet," "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood," and "To a Waterfowl" were composed during the summer and fall.⁴⁹ If we accept his statement that the "Inscription" and "Thanatopsis" were composed at about the same time we have, with "To a Waterfowl," three important poems reflecting an affirmative mood toward life and death composed within the space of three or four months.

⁴⁶ See Godwin, I, 132, note.

⁴⁷ From a letter to Dr. Bryant dated October [15], 1814, in Godwin, I, 130.

⁴⁸ From a letter to George Downes dated Bridgewater, June [?], 1815, in Godwin, I, 138.

⁴⁹ Godwin, I, 142-144.

During this autumn vacation in the Cummington hills the poet seems to have overcome an inner negation and achieved a calm, if not confident, view of the future. In the "Inscription" he offered solace to the sick heart:

Stranger, if thou hast learnt a truth which needs
Experience more than reason, that the world
Is full of guilt and misery; and hast known
Enough of all its sorrows, crimes and cares
To tire thee of it—enter this wild wood,
And view the haunts of Nature. The calm shade
Shall bring a kinder calm, and the sweet breeze
That makes the green leaves dance, shall waft a balm
To thy sick heart. . . .⁵⁰

In "To a Waterfowl" he reassured himself that

He, who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.⁵¹

And in "Thanatopsis" he brought to bear upon the thought of a "stern agony, and shroud, and pall, and breathless darkness" which had clouded his spirit for two long years, the warmer, kinder light furnished by a new confidence in life. It was in this light that he dispelled forever his fear of the "last bitter hour" when a man must feel the muscles of his heart relax and the blood drain away from his arm and his brain.

⁵⁰ Lines 1-9, first published version, in *North American Review*, v, 340.

⁵¹ *North American Review*, vi (March, 1818), 384, last stanza.