THE MAJOR THEMES OF WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT'S POETRY

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the University of North Texas in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Denton, Texas
December, 1969
This thesis explores the major themes of William Cullen Bryant's poetry. Chapter II focuses on Bryant's poetic theory and secondary criticism of his theory. Chapter III addresses Bryant's religious beliefs, including death and immortality of the soul, and shows how these beliefs are illustrated by his poetry. A discussion of the American Indian is the subject of Chapter IV, concentrating on Bryant's use of the Indian as a Romantic ideal as well as his more realistic treatment of the Indian in The New York Evening Post. Chapter V, the keystone chapter, discusses Bryant's scientific knowledge and poetic use of natural phenomena. Bryant's religious beliefs and his belief in nature as a teacher are also covered in this chapter.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878), whom Van Wyck Brooks referred to as "The Father of American Song," is known to us today primarily as a poet; however, in his time he was probably better known as the editor of The New York Evening Post since he served in that capacity for nearly fifty years and distinguished himself as a spokesman for political and social causes as well as the arts (Quinn, 146). Bryant's literary career was launched at the age of thirteen when his satire entitled The Embargo: Or Sketches of the Times, a Satire, by a Youth of Thirteen was published in 1808 (McLean, Jr., William Cullen Bryant, 20; Quinn, 148). The satire concerned Thomas Jefferson's Embargo Bill. Bryant wrote "Thanatopsis" in 1811 and published volumes of poems in 1821, 1847 and 1876, as well as translations of The Iliad (1869) and The Odyssey (1870) (Taylor, 102).

According to Van Wyck Brooks, Bryant "was the first American poet who was wholly sympathetic with the atmosphere and feeling of the country and who expressed its inner moods and reflected the landscape, the woods and the fields as if America itself were speaking through him" (195). As far as his early poetry is concerned, Alfred Kreymborg writes that
"Thanatopsis" was the "entrance of a new note in American poetry: the deeply serious concern with Nature and death and full acceptance of man's place among men" (29). To create a place in literary history, Bryant, along with Emerson, Longfellow, Cooper, Irving, and many others, felt the need for and urged the writers of the time to create some version of a national literature that was not dependent upon imitation of European (mainly English) literature (Kreyemborg, 29).

During his lifetime, Bryant was familiar with writers from the various fields of literature. He knew personally or reviewed the works of such poets as James Kirke Paulding, James G. Percival, Fritz-Greene Halleck, Joseph Rodman Drake, Nathaniel P. Willis, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, Walt Whitman, and Bret Harte and prose writers such as James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville (Spencer, Quest for Nationality, 77). Bryant was also familiar with the literature of South America, Cuba, and Mexico and worked to strengthen ties between the United States and those countries. He even included a translation of Heredia's "The Hurricane," among others from South America, in his poetical works (Van Doren, 262).

During his early years, Bryant was influenced by many people and literary works. Bryant derived the basis for his
reflective poetry from the writings of Edward Young and Hugh Blair, the "Graveyard Poets." Bryant's appreciation for nature in poetry was a result of studying William Wordsworth (McLean, Jr., William Cullen Bryant, 67). His religious beliefs were influenced by the Bible, the liberal religious beliefs of his father and the conservative Calvinistic doctrine of his maternal grandfather, Ebenezer Snell (his main influence) and the area in which he was born, and Reverend Robert Blair (Brooks, 189). It seems, however, that except for the influences of the Bible and his religious beliefs, the poetry that Bryant wrote was a product of his own creative imagination. His poetry can be divided into three major categories, two of which are easily identifiable and one which is not. The two most obvious groupings are those poems which express the moral aspects of humanity and interpret the language of nature. Other poems, those which "breathe the spirit of universal humanity, and speak a language intelligible to every human heart," cannot be placed in an easily definable category (Peckham, 4, 5; Brown, 12, 13, 58, 63; Donovan, 505; Taylor, 103, 104).

Bryant's literary career lasted some seventy years and, according to George Stillman Hillard, at the waning portion of his years Bryant was "as sensitive to the touch of beauty as at twenty" (48). Bryant wrote approximately thirteen thousand lines of poetry in his lifetime, of which approximately one-third were written early in his career by 1829.
(Hilliard, 45). His poetry from 1811 to 1832 contained the essential Bryant, the poems on nature and human life, how he envisaged and imagined life and nature, how he dealt with life and nature in intellect and character, and how he gave them expression (Bigelow, 117). Though Bryant may not have been as prolific a poet in his later years as earlier, he was still a powerful poet throughout his lifetime, especially as shown in "The Flood of the Years," written in 1876.

George Arms, in The Fields Were Green, refers to Bryant as a "School-room Poet" because he has been and still is a staple of the curriculum of the schools (1). A good argument for Bryant's poetry is that it has longevity. Nearly every student of literature has read "Thanatopsis." Bryant's poetic ability is not the question. To rank him as one of the all-time major American poets seems incorrect, but if we could judge him in his own time, he would be recognized as a major American poet. Bryant would not refer to himself as a great poet, not because of his lack of ability, but because he had less time than he felt was necessary to practice being a poet, as illustrated in his poems "I Broke the Spell That Held Me Long" and "I Cannot Forget With What Fevered Devotion." When asked if it was an easy task to write, Bryant replied,

No, very far from it. The composing of verse, in particular, on nearly every occasion which I can recall, has been a work of real labor with me, though
when I have been in a right frame of mind, or, as some term it, when I have been in the proper mood, I have found it much less a work of toil. (Lovejoy, 172).

One finds in Bryant's poetry that two major topics are nature and death. Walt Whitman wrote of Bryant,

Bryant pulsing the first interior verse--throbs of a world--bard of the river and wood, ever conveying a taste of the open air, with scents as from hayfields, grapes, and birch-border--always lurkingly fond of threnodies--beginning and ending his long career with chants of death, with here and there through all, poems, or passages of poems, touching the highest universal truths, enthusiasms, duties--morals as grim and eternal, if not as stormy and fateful, as anything in Eschylus (32).

Edmund Clarence Stedman referred to Bryant as "the Druid of our forest, the high-priest of Nature in her elemental types" (47). Poetry was the outflow of that love of nature. In the poem "I Broke the Spell That Held Me Long," Bryant states that it was being in the midst of nature that compelled him to write poetry; he had no choice.

Bryant's knowledge of nature was scientific as well as philosophical. He was versed in geology, chemistry, medicine, and above all, botany (Ringe, "William Cullen Bryant," 507; Bryant II and Voss, 75). He became one of the most accomplished horticulturalists of his generation and secured rare plants from other countries and experimented with their culture at his home in Cedarmere, Long Island (Bryant II and Voss, 185). This scientific knowledge was carried over into his poetry, an example being "The Fountain," a poem which describes an ordered world and the geologic changes that occur in it (Ringe, "William Cullen
Bryant, nonetheless, did not let the reality of the sciences overshadow his philosophical remarks (the phenomenal aspects) concerning nature (Stedman, 69).

Bryant interpreted nature as a moral force. Nature suggests some rules of conduct for mankind which chastize, soothe, encourage, and ennoble him. There is a parallel between the conduct of nature and the conduct of mankind (Thayer, 268). Whereas the moralists went to nature for a symbol to personify a moral statement, Bryant went to nature for symbols to express to the reader the ideals of a great race in a time of transition (Thayer, 262-263). In describing some of his poetic concepts, Bryant used the various aspects of nature, some of which are flowing bodies of water, mountains, trees, clouds, and flowers. He utilized the image of the hunter in the wild to describe the poet's search for creativity. The poet as hunter is illustrated in the poem "The Hunter's Dreams" in which Bryant writes about himself as the hunter sitting on a mountain dreaming that the mountain was talking to him and showing him the loved ones that he had known in his childhood. The important lines are those in which he refers to his sister,

And there was one who many a year
       Within her grave had lain,
A fair young girl, the hamlet's pride--
His heart was breaking when she died:
       (Works, 256)

Bryant must have been fascinated by the concept of death, for he writes on the subject throughout much of his
poetry. "Thanatopsis" is his most notable poem on death. Death and change for mankind are inevitable in Bryant's view as mentioned in "The Prairies" and "The Indian at the Burial Place of His Father." However, Stanley Brodwin believes that Bryant's poetry about Death is a rejection of Death or, as he phrases it, a form of "symbolic immortality, i.e. poems that communed through Nature with a Divinity who would ensure life after death" (115).

Throughout the majority of his poems, a notable exception being "Thanatopsis," Bryant either refers to God or gives a moral lesson. Augustus Story states,

William Cullen Bryant was a Christian. He declared his entire reliance on Christ for salvation... He knew his own weakness and insufficiency, and he trusted in what God would do for him, in Jesus Christ (31).

Bryant recognized the existence of nature, God, and Christ. In the poem "The Ages," Bryant refers to the birth of Christ and the priests that killed him. In the poems "The Ages" and "A Forest Hymn," Bryant separates God from nature, placing nature beneath God. Being of a faith based in Puritanism, Bryant was not above subtly attacking the Catholic Church. In "The Lament of Romero," he refers to Catholic priest and how they live off the work of others: "fleeces for monk and grapes for the convent feast... fields for the pandered Lord and priest" (Works, I, 46, 37, 42). Bryant sometimes felt that society may have lost something in becoming civilized, mainly the relationship between
God and nature, and he expresses this sentiment in his references to the American Indian, as seen in "The Ages" and in "The Indian at the Burial Place of His Father."

My study of Bryant consists of five major chapters and the conclusion. Chapter Two concerns Bryant's "Lectures on Poetry." I explore such subjects as Bryant's poetic theory, the criticism on his poetry, and whether he followed his own poetic theory, and I analyze his poetry that deals with the creative process. "The Poet," of course, is a focal poem for major discussion on Bryant's concept of poetry.

Chapter Three concerns Bryant's religious beliefs and his religious poetry. Understandably there will be overlapping between this chapter and the following one which is about Bryant's nature poems, but this chapter focuses upon the foundations of his religious beliefs. I discuss relevant poems that express Bryant's Christian and, at times, possibly pagan beliefs and any change in them over time. I discuss Bryant's concept of Death and the question of an afterlife.

Chapter Four concerns Bryant's familiarity with the American Indians and his poetic use of them. Since Bryant was trying to create an American literature and mythology, all that was available at the time was the American Indian. I discuss also Bryant's political and poetical involvement with the Indian as well as analyze his poetry concerning the Indian.
Chapter Five, which is the main focus of this work, concentrates on Bryant's nature poetry. In Bryant's poetry one sees nature lovingly treated in both her creative and destructive aspects. He did see different facets of nature at different times, but always with a positive attitude, and these viewpoints are discussed in the body of this chapter. Several poems concerning nature are explicated and discussed at length. Bryant employed several symbols (all natural phenomena) which he used repeatedly, such as flowing bodies of water, mountains, trees, and flowers. These are identified and discussed. Also considered is Bryant's concept of an indifferent nature toward mankind and the changes that will come about in mankind's lifespan.
CHAPTER II

BRYANT, THE POET

Bryant was a transitional poet in American literary history with little native poetic tradition on which to rely (Rio-Jelliffe, 134; Donovan, 520). William Aspenwall Bradley states that Bryant made "his mark as the first poet with an imaginative self-consciousness in America" (Bradley, 214). Bryant wrote "Lectures on Poetry," which William J. Free calls "the first significant, unified theory to appear in America" (687). The lectures contain four essays which are entitled "On the Nature of Poetry," "On the Value and Uses of Poetry," "On Poetry in Its Relation to Our Age and Country," and "On Originality and Imitation." The main ideas of these essays fall into five categories that explain Bryant's conceptions of poetry and the poet. Excerpts from his poetry illustrate these concepts, and critical commentary mentioned below, favorable and unfavorable, helps put them into perspective.

Bryant discusses poetry as a "suggestive art" as his first category. Poetry should affect the mind instead of being an imitation of the object in words. Poetry, therefore, by the use of words, suggests both the sensible object and its suggestive association. The suggestive
object and its suggestive association. The suggestive symbol should be as unlike the real image as possible. The use of the suggestive symbol is what differentiates poetry from painting and sculpture, which use concrete imitations of objects. Obviously, the suggestive image affects the readers’ minds differently. For the image to affect the mind, it is important that it be clear and vivid. This image is made clear by the use of a detailed, descriptive language, though that language in its descriptive function be used only to hint at its true meaning. The poem should have only a hint of an outline, which allows the reader to use his or her imagination. It is the poet’s purpose to guide the reader’s imagination along the paths that he wants the reader to follow. If the reader’s emotions are not affected by the imagination of the writer, then the poem is just an intellectual exercise, nothing more. Bryant, always concerned with the creation of an American literature, writes that the American language is suitable for American expressions. It is a language full not only of picturesque expressions but also of technological expressions. The use of a wholly American language is good, for it allows the American imagination to grow and express itself in American terms (Bryant, 5, 6, 7, 15, 34, 35).

Among the poems written by Bryant, two poems, "To a Waterfowl" and "The Prairies," stand out as excellent examples of the use of the imagination, both by the poet and
the reader. In "To a Waterfowl," Bryant draws a picture of a man watching a solitary waterfowl flying in the wide expanse of the sky. Anyone can appreciate this picture. It is well drawn. The reader does not have to strive to imagine the setting of the poem. In "The Prairies," Bryant paints a picture of himself, alone, against the wide expanse of rolling terrain that forms the prairie. This image, especially to anyone who has seen a western movie, is easy to picture. In "Green River," a poem of his love of nature and also his poetic ability, Bryant discusses the river in the lines,

Yet, fair as thou art, thou shunnest to glide,
Beautiful stream! by the village side;
But windest away from haunts of men,
To quiet valley and shaded glen; (Works, I, 32, 24-27)

One can see the river approaching the village and then turning away. The use of the river is a symbol of the poetic inspiration of Bryant. In associating the two, he illustrates his own theory that poetry should use the sensible object (the river) and the suggestive image (the poetic inspiration). Bryant states that he needs to be in a tranquil nature, mentally and physically, in order to write poetry, a theme repeated in "The Poet," which discusses the poet's inspiration in the lines,

Seek'st thou, in living lays,
To limn the beauty of the earth and sky?
Before thine inner gaze
Let all that beauty in clear vision lie;
Look on it with exceeding love, and write
The words inspired by wonder and delight. (Works, II, 136, 37-42)
Bryant replied to P. G. Burton, in April, 1846, in response to the poetry Burton sent him, that Burton's style was not suggestive—a necessary element of true poetry, in Bryant's opinion (Bryant II and Voss, I, 432).

Criticism of Bryant and his poetic theory is mixed. Albert F. McLean, Jr., states that even though Bryant claimed to be an authority on the role of imagination in literature, his own creations were only restatements of old truths and resolutions of contemporary crises (William Cullen Bryant, 131). William Bradley, on the other hand, states that one did not have to visit a place Bryant wrote about because the descriptions were so good that the reader could see it in his mind's eye. William Bradley further states of Bryant, "No American poet has had so high a degree of imaginative description. It is this that gives his impressions of American landscapes such vitality and power" (208). Walter Fuller Taylor writes, however, that even though Bryant's descriptions are good, his imagination lacks intensity (109). Gaines McMartin agrees with Taylor on Bryant's descriptive power, which is found in Bryant's theory of the art of suggestion:

If Bryant does not present much specific detail, or define exactly the sensory aspects of what he describes, he does by careful selection provide an outline of the scene. Not an outline placing things in relation to one another in a specific way, but one defining the extent of the scenes of sight, sound, and smell, in a manner that clearly reminds us of what is involved—none of Bryant's descriptions leave
us with a sense of confusion, they have clarity throughout. (106-107)

George Arms agrees with Gaines McMartin that when Bryant does not focus on the image, he achieves success as an imaginative poet (10). Carl Van Doren adds, "No American poet, except Whitman, had an imagination at all like Bryant's, or, indeed, except Whitman and Emerson, as great as Bryant's" (271).

The second category of Bryant's ideas on poetry is emotional inspiration and response. In his lectures, Bryant discusses the need of the poet not only to write emotionally, but to appeal to the emotions of the reader. He states that poetry that touches the emotions of the reader is poetry in its highest sense. Language, i.e. the symbols of passion, is to be used in poetry only to convey and extract emotion between the poet and the reader. Symbols of passion without this interaction are symbols for themselves alone, and, therefore, are not beneficial to the poet or the reader. Bryant does warn, though, that the passion of the poet must not offend the reader, that is, it must not degrade or take away from the moral elevation of the reader. The poet must attempt to inspire compassion in the reader (Bryant, 8, 10, 13, 15, 16, 17, 21). In his essay "Poets and Poetry of the English Language," Bryant states, "The proper office of poetry is filling the mind with delightful images and awakening the gentler emotions" (147).
In his poem "I Cannot Forget With What Fevrid Devotion," Bryant makes use of his emotion when he discusses the inspiration and enthusiasm (with expansive and active images) that nature gives him in writing in poetry:

I Cannot forget with what fevrid devotion  
I worshipped the visions of verse and of fame;  
Each gaze at the glories of earth, sky, and ocean,  
To my kindled emotions, was wind over flame.

(Works, I, 165, 1-4)

In delineating his theory of poetry, Bryant discusses the use of passionate language; the opening lines contain such words as "fevrid" and "kindled." He further illustrates his theory that "emotion is the great wellspring of poetry": "How thrilled my young veins, and how throbbed my full bosom, /When o'er me descended the spirit of song" (Works, I, 165, 7-8). This theme is repeated in "The Poet" when he writes,

The secret wouldst thou know  
To touch the heart or fire the blood at will?  
Let thine own eyes o'erflow;  
Let thy lips quiver with the passionate thrill;  
Seize the great thought, ere yet its power be past,  
And bind, in words, the fleet emotion fast.

(Works, II, 136, 19-24)

Even in the revision of the poem, about which later, Bryant cautions the poet:

Then, should thy verse appear  
Halting and harsh, and all unaptly wrought,  
Touch the crude line with fear,  
Save in the moment of impassioned thought;  
Then summon back the original glow, and mend  
The strain with rapture that with fire was penned.

(Works, II, 136, 25-30)
As one can see by reading the above lines, Bryant felt that emotion was a necessary part of poetry, and he attempted to achieve that effect. His success, as seen by critics, was not total, however. Walter Fuller Taylor states that Bryant's own emotions were restrained by two possible influences, a classical sense of form and a Puritan moral code, influences that rendered his emotional poetry calm and dignified (108). Edmund Clarence Stedman, who thought of Bryant as a cold, stern man, wrote that his most emotional poetry concerns friendship and filial and fraternal love. The emotion of his intellect was always restrained, even when moved by patriotism or religion. It could not be said that Bryant faked emotion in his poetry. Stedman says he was incapable of falsifying emotion (70, 77). Charles Leonard Moore and Augustus Hopkins Strong held that Bryant's emotions lack the spark so necessary for the finest poetry. The expression of the emotion found in his poetry is greater than the feeling of emotion that Bryant expressed in his own life (224; 47).

A broad background in the study of poetry and language is a third important category of Bryant's discussion on poetry (Bryant, 10, 13). Bryant himself knew several languages (German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Latin, Greek, and Provencal) and knew the literature of the Greeks, Romans, Italians, Spanish, and the British poets, especially the Romantics (McLean, Jr., William Cullen Bryant, 19;
Sedgwick, Jr., 547). Bryant believed the greater poets had a wide literary background, whether derived from their experience or from books. He further stresses that originality is everything in art which is timeless. This is not to say, however, that the poet can create without the works of those that have preceded him or his contemporaries. Bryant felt that part of the poet's intellectual background is to study his precursors in poetry, both ancient and modern. Nor does the poet have to study the great only. Although not an emphatic point in his lectures, Bryant felt that a minor poet may have something useful to say. The poet must continually try new things in order to expand his or her poetic horizons. In the study of his or her field, Bryant felt, the poet must study all the schools of thought, but should never ally oneself with one school only (Bryant, 23, 32, 35, 36, 39, 40, 41). On the occasion of Bryant's seventieth birthday, Ralph Waldo Emerson said of his poetic training,

This native, original, patriotic poet. I say original: I have heard him charged with being of a certain school. I heard it with surprise, and asked, What school? For he never reminded me of Goldsmith, or Wordsworth, or Byron, or Moore. I found him always original,—a true painter of the face of this country, and of the sentiment of his own people. (Stedman, 66).

In "The Poet," three stanzas deal with originality and revision. Bryant tells the novice poet to become a part of what he or she is writing about:
Of tempests wouldst thou sing,
Or tell of battles--make thyself a part
Of the great tumult; cling
To the tossed wreck with terror in thy heart;
Scale, with the assaulting host, the rampart's height,
And strike and struggle in the thickest fight.

(Works, II, 137, 43-48)

These lines are also a reminder of Bryant's comments upon emotion in poetry. Once a poem is written, according to Bryant, it needs to be revised. On revision of the original idea, Bryant says,

Then, would thy verse appear
Halting and harsh, and all unaptly wrought,
Touch the crude line with fear,
Save in the moment of impassioned thought;
Then summon back the original glow, and mend
The strain with rapture that with fire was penned.

(Works, II, 136, 25-30)

In a letter to Richard H. Dana in 1833, Bryant wrote, "The truth is that an alteration (of a poem) 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 ... than good" (Bryant II and Voss, 384). Bryant may have been influenced in his idea of revision in "cold blood" from Dana who wrote to him in September 1821, saying, "I believe that a poet should not be allowed to alter in cold blood--he grows finical" (Bryant II and Voss, 111). Tremaine McDowell writes that Bryant revised entire poems as many as four times and individual lines eight or more times (476).

If the novice poet does all that Bryant has mentioned in his lecture, then he or she shall
frame a lay
That haply may endure from age to age,
And they who read shall say;
"What witchery hangs upon this poet's page!
What art is his the written spells to find
That sway from mood to mood the willing mind!"
(Works, II, 137, 49-54)

Bryant discusses the elements of his theory, which are
timelessness, the poet as leader, originality, and emotions
in the concluding lines of "The Poet." The written poem
should also uplift the reader, an idea to be discussed
below.

Albert F. McLean, Jr. states that judged by his own
poetic theory and poetry, Bryant did not achieve the
"distinctive originality" of the great poets (William Cullen
Bryant, 131). Stedman phrases it differently, but with the
same concept in mind. According to Stedman, Bryant, in his
eyearl years, had the essentials of being a great poet, but
he reached a certain point and became stationary. When he
found time again to write, in his later years, his audience
had changed in their taste for poetry, and he was not aware
of that change (70, 75). Hyatt H. Waggoner places Bryant in
a better light. He states that Bryant was successful in his
eyearl years because he said nothing that did not contradict
something else he said (95). In his later years, Bryant was
aware of what he want to say, and, therefore, fewer contra-
dictions are found in his later poetry. Tremaine McDowell
states, on the matter of revision, that Bryant pointed out
other poets' errors, whereas he often did not correct his
own. McDowell further states that Bryant did not revise his lines with the "original glow" that he so emphasized in "The Poet" (497, 501).

Bryant's discussions of moral principles and poetry constitute a fourth category of his ideas about poetry. He asserted in his lectures that the elements of moral truth are few and simple, but when placed with human emotions, the potential applications are unlimited in poetry. Eloquence in poetry is attained when verse contains moral perceptions. Bryant implies that eloquence and morally uplifting poetry are synonymous. The spirit of poetry is to aspire to "superhuman" beauty, which is akin to virtue. True poetry never degrades the human spirit or the spirit of anything of beauty. To Bryant everything was beautiful because it was a part of God's creation and manifest plan. All the uninteresting lessons of morality are left to prose. Poetry, by describing the beauty of God's creation, teaches us humility. The poet who claims to be an atheist and serves Nature is really serving the Divinity and his plan for mankind. When one reads poetry, one should be elevated to a moral plane where there are no egos or strife. Natural objects are usable, in poetry, to heighten a moral sentiment. They are pure and innocent, not like the world (Bryant, 11, 13, 15, 16, 18, 19). Bryant himself goes to nature for images to illustrate moral lessons. He recognizes, however, that nature has a destructive side
People see material comforts gained from the application of science, but it is poetry that shows people the spiritual aspects of life. The poet should strive always to make his poetry noble and beautiful and glorify the works of God (Bryant, 24, 40).

One of the best examples of a morally uplifting poem by Bryant is "Waiting by the Gate." Bryant discusses a gateway (death) that people must enter, but when they are on the other side, Christ is waiting for the righteous souls as they enter eternal life in Heaven. The descriptions of nature are beautiful, and one is aware of Bryant's conviction and emotion as he wrote the poem. Augustus Hopkins Strong points out that Bryant revered God's works in nature more than he revered God's work in man (46). On the other hand, Bryant is optimistic about God's plan for mankind and sees nature supplying the evidence for that belief. He uses nature to illustrate the potential for mankind in God's world. Nonetheless, as Henry Sedgwick, Jr., writes, humans need to be constantly reminded of a moral law, and poets perform this function beautifully. Bryant did so well, even though his poetic powers were uneven (542).

The function and history of mythology in poetry is the final category apparent in Bryant's essays on poetry. Bryant states that mythology fostered poetry, and after mythology declined poetry preserved the myth as the
superstition of later years. He felt mythology does stir the imagination; therefore, it is a suitable parent of poetry. Bryant further states that when we analyze mythology, the more answers we find the greater number of questions we ask. If poetry should have a mysterious quality, any mythology used to symbolize the mystery is a detriment. If the answer to any question is mythology which is unexplorable, what is there left to explore that is so mysterious? Bryant felt that mythology should remain in the old world which understands and is better for it; it is not suitable for America. A new and young America should have a new mythology which is little understood. He states further that today the use of mythic images stirs the imagination, but without feelings; thus the poetry of the ancients is beautiful, but unproductive to us. Bryant believes that humans are the subject most fit for poetry. Thus, if a poet does use mythology, let it have a religious association and state the goodness that mankind is capable of. If we take away ancient mythology from poetry, we find ourselves men and women in a more sublime vision of God’s creation. Bryant believes also that those ages that did use the supernatural remnants of mythology were not those that spawned the noblest specimens of poetry. He concedes that traditional mythological beings may be used if they affect the reader. The only way that the poet can know if he or she is successful in the use of the mythological beings is
whether or not the reader accepts the images. Bryant felt that America does not need supernatural beings in its poetry even though it has the literary background for them. The poet may use supernatural images from the past if he finds none in his age (Bryant, 27, 28, 29, 30, 34).

Albert F. McLean, Jr., states that Bryant exploited to its fullest the speculation of the native American mythology that his theory allowed him. Bryant suggested that beginning poets use the American Indian legends as the source of their mythology, but to be sure to "retain the freshness and purity of the primitive imagination" (William Cullen Bryant, 129). Bryant used the Mound-Builders and Native American spirits (the Manitou of the flowers in "The Painted Cup" and the white-footed deer in the poem by the same name) in his poetry dealing with America. He was closely familiar with Greek and Roman mythological creatures because of his translations of Homer and his knowledge of Latin literature. He wrote a series of unpublished lectures on Greek and Roman mythology. It is possible that some of the themes he illustrated in his flower poetry are derived from his knowledge of Greek mythology. There is only one possible reference to a knowledge of Norse mythology, found in "The Hurricane." The aspects of the cloud are similar to the chariot of Thor, the God of Thunder.
No better summary of Bryant's poetic abilities exists than Edgar Allan Poe's evaluation of Bryant as a poet. Poe wrote,

Mr. Bryant's position in the poetical world is, perhaps, better settled than that of any American. There is less difference of opinion about his rank . . . still for some time past there have been a growing tendency to underestimate him. . . . How few are willing to admit the possibility of reconciling genius with artistic skill! Yet this reconciliation is not only possible, but an absolute necessity. It is mere prejudice which has hitherto prevented the union . . . The greatest poems will not be written until this prejudice is annihilated; and I mean to express a very exalted opinion of Mr. Bryant when I say that his works in time to come will do much towards the annihilation (of that difference) . . . . It will never do to claim for Bryant a genius of the loftiest order, but there [has] been latterly . . . a growing disposition to deny him genius in any respect. He is now commonly spoken of as "a man of high poetical talent, very 'correct,' with a warm appreciation of the beauty of nature and great descriptive powers, but rather too much of the old-school manner of Cowper, Goldsmith, and Young." This is the truth, but not the whole truth. Mr. Bryant has genius, and that of a marked character, but it has been overlooked by modern schools, because deficient in those externals which have become in a measure symbolical of those schools. (Stedman and Woodberry, 105, 108, 109, 110).

Poe points out a previously mentioned aspect of Bryant's poetical credo. Bryant was labeled a man "of little genius" by some nineteenth-century critics because he followed no school of literary thought. We remember, however that Bryant cautioned against the poet following any literary school of thought, and he was condemned for following his own advice (Bryant, 36). Mark Twain exemplifies the grudging respect that the young literary masters of his time
had for Bryant. When Twain was to present a lecture in New York in 1876, he saw Bryant in the audience. Even though his friends told him he delivered one of his better lectures, Twain replied that it was not true. He knew that Bryant noticed every mistake that he made and as far as he was concerned, Bryant had ruined that night’s lecture (Bryant II, 1).
CHAPTER III

BRYANT’S VIEWS ON RELIGION, DEATH, AND THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

Religion

As Bryant recollects his childhood, he states, "My mother and grandmother had taught me, as soon as I could speak, the Lord’s Prayer and other petitions suited to childhood, and I may be said to have been nurtured on Isaac Watts’ devout poems composed for children. The prayer of the Publican in the New Testament was often in my mouth" (Banks, 211). From his childhood, Bryant was surrounded by marked religious influences; furthermore, the Bryant home was visited frequently by the clergymen of Cummington and other neighboring towns (Bailey, 1).

Along with the Calvinistic background, there were other religious influences upon Bryant’s life, of which the major ones were the Bible, the promptings of his own soul, and Nature (Bailey, 19; Strong, 25). God, to Bryant, despite being the omnipotent Creator of the Universe, is a personal God who recognizes that mankind consists of individual lives and touches them with love (Bailey 21; Strong, 22, 29). God’s respect and love for the individual is best expressed in Bryant’s poem "To a Waterfowl," the poem that speaks of...
the individual, like the bird, being guided by God. Bryant saw Christ as the supreme model for mankind and considered the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper as the crowning service of the Church as illustrated in the poem "The Song of the Sower" (Bailey, 23). He discussed his feelings about Christ in the preface to Thoughts on the Religious Life, written by Dr. Joseph Alden.

This character of which Christ was the perfect model is in itself so attractive, so "altogether lovely," that I cannot describe in language the admiration with which I regard it; nor can I express the gratitude I feel for the dispensation which bestowed that example on mankind, for the truths which he taught and the sufferings he endured for our sakes. I tremble to think what the world would be without him. Take away the blessings of the advent of his life and the blessings purchased by his death, in what an abyss of guilt would man have been left? It would seem to have been blotting out the sun from the heavens--to leave our system of worlds in chaos, frost, and darkness.

In my view of life, the teachings, the labors, and the sufferings of the blessed Jesus there can be no admiration too profound, no love of which the human heart is capable too warm, no gratitude too earnest and deep of which he is justly the object. It is with sorrow that my love for him is so cold and my gratitude so inadequate.

The religious man finds in his relations to his Maker a support to his virtue which others cannot have. He acts always with a consciousness that he is immediately under the eye of a Being who looks into his heart and sees his inmost thoughts and discerns the motives which he is half unwilling to acknowledge even to himself. He feels that he is under the inspection of a Being who is only pleased with right motives and purity of intention and who is displeased with whatever is otherwise. He feels that the approbation of that Being is infinitely more to be valued than the applause of all mankind and his displeasure more to be feared and more to be avoided than any disgrace which he might sustain from his brethren of mankind. (Banks, 217-218)
Bryant saw God in the sublime manifestation of Nature through a Puritan's eyes; the beauty of ideal nature represents the moral beauty in mankind (Strong, 22; Bradley, 209). Charles Sanford writes, "Sublime nature was held up to the civilized world as a visible token of God's covenant with a favored people" (439). Bryant considered Nature as sinless. Man brought evil into the world, and even though Nature shares the same realm with man, she remains as pure as when she came from the Creator (Bradley, 210; Strong, 23, 25) Interestingly, Bryant mentions the Holy Spirit only once or twice in his poetry, and Elmer James Bailey explains the infrequent references on grounds that Bryant chose not to discuss or elaborate on the doctrine of the Third Person of the Trinity (21-22).

Elmer Jones Bailey states, "Though religion with him [Bryant] was never a passion, . . . though it never became mysticism . . . it never failed throughout his life to be to him a strong, informing power" (12). Bryant's attitude toward specific sects within the Christian belief was liberal and tolerant. He went to Sunday services with the Congregationists in New England, the Presbyterians on Long Island, and the Unitarians in New York, and when at home on Sundays, he read prayers and a chapter from the Bible (Strong, 19, 20; Banks, 215). Sounding an ecumenical note, Bryant wrote to his wife, Frances, on May 24, 1825, from New York:
I am now boarding at Mons. [Francis] Evrard's... Mons. E. is a bigoted Catholic and is taking great pains to convert me to the true and ancient faith. I have been so far wrought upon by his arguments that I went yesterday to Vespers in Saint Peter's Church; but my convictions were not sufficiently strong to induce me to kneel at the elevation of the host. As I have great respect for family prayer among all denominations of Christians, I intend asking Mons. Evrard the favour of being permitted to attend his. On these occasions, it is said he utters with inconceivable rapidity a long list of such petitions as the following--

Sainte Marie, priez pour nous.
Chaste Vierge, priez pour nous.
Mere adorable, priez pour nous.
Mere de Dieu, priez pour nous.
Maison doree, priez pour nous.

This is good, at all events, as a Calvinistic or a Trinitarian prayer and as I have been able to swallow those I do not see why I should stick at this.-- (Bryant II and Voss, 179)

Bryant again writes Francis about Mons. Evrard later, June 3, 1825, and says this about Evrard:

It is almost impossible to conceive of a man of more goodness of heart and rectitude of principle than Mons. Evrard. He is very religious--very charitable--and very honest--a proof of the utter folly and presumption of all those who arrogate to their own sect the exclusive title Christians. Here is a bigoted Catholic--a man who believes that miracles are wrought by good men at this day--who kneels to the consecrated wafer as to the body of God himself--and who invokes saints and angels to pray for him--yet his religion, mistaken as it is in these points, is as full of piety towards God and kindness to his neighbours, as that of any man I ever knew, while it is much more amiable and cheerful than that of many sects. --On the whole, I think that a good Catholic is quite as good, and much more amiable than a good Calvinist. (Bryant II and Voss, 187)

For one who professed to love Christ so much, it is interesting to note that Bryant wrote five hymns for a Unitarian songbook, in which he paid no special tribute to
Jesus as the divine Son of God. (Though he did revise the hymns later and include references to Christ's divinity) (Brown, 93; Peckham, 64). In the conclusion of his most memorable poem, "Thanatopsis," Bryant did not show a Christian faith in immortality (Peckham, 31), and in his will he did not make any mention of God (Jones, 29). Even though Bryant considered himself a Christian, he did not undergo the rite of baptism until he was sixty-four in 1858 (Jones, 290; Banks, 210).

In his body of poetry there are six poems by Bryant that best illustrate his religious beliefs: "To a Waterfowl," "Hymn of the Waldenses," "A Forest Hymn," "Hymn of the City," "The Crowded Street," and "The Flood of the Years." An examination of key passages in these poems reveals Bryant's religious ideas and shows how they inform his poetry throughout his career.

Howard Mumford Jones writes that in "To a Waterfowl" (1818) Bryant refers only to an undefined Power which he hopes will guide himself and the waterfowl and that the image is not a Christian concept. I believe, to the contrary, this poem is the affirmation of Bryant's Christian faith. It illustrates the influence of his Calvinistic background which included the concept of predestination.

There is a Power whose care
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast--
The desert and illimitable air--
Lone wandering, but not lost.

..........................
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.

(Works, 26, 27, 13-16, 29-32)

The "Power," the reader assumes, is the Christian God because of Bryant's Calvinistic background. This poem is one of remarkable faith because Bryant realizes that God is watching over him. He brings God into the affairs of the individual's personal life (Strong, 29). Throughout his poetry, Bryant never mentions "God" per se because he is allowing the reader to select his own reading of the word, "Power." Bryant is not forcing his belief on anyone; rather he is just writing a personal poem for the reader to interpret. Donald Ringe states that Bryant uses specific terms such as "the desert and illimitable air" and "boundless" to suggest to the reader the greatness of God and how one should be aware that this great God is cognizant of each individual's life (The Pictorial Mode, 32). The poem, then, affirms Bryant's Calvinistic belief in a personal God without delving profoundly into theological thought.

Bryant's poem, "Hymn of the Waldenses" (1824), not only declares the justness of God as the righter of wrongs (Strong, 26), but also discusses what is necessary for one to live a Christian life in times of trouble. In this poem, Bryant tries to justify war and the evil in the world as God's design because God dashes nation against nation.
Bryant usually ends his poems on an optimistic note—peace will follow war, everything has a purpose to promote good and develop God's plan for mankind—but he is never overly optimistic in his poetry (Spencer, "The Melancholy Progressive," 101). An exception to this is "The Death of the Flowers," which I discuss later. In "Hymn to the Waldenses," Bryant writes,

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Hear, Father, hear thy afflicted flock
Cry to thee, from the desert and the rock;
While those, who seek to slay thy children, hold
Blasphemous worship under roofs of gold;
And the broad goodly lands, with pleasant airs
That nurse the grape and wave the grain, are theirs.

Yet better were this mountain wilderness,
And this wild life of danger and distress—
Watchings by night and perilous flight by day,
And meetings in the depths of earth to pray—
Better, far better, than to kneel with them,
And pay the impious rite thy laws condemn.

Thou, Lord, dost hold the thunder; the firm land
Tosses in billows when it feels thy hand;
Thou dashest nation against nation, then
Stillest the angry world to peace again.
Oh, touch their stony hearts who hunt thy sons—
The murderers of our wives and little ones.

Yet mighty God, yet shall thy frown look forth
Unveiled, and terribly shall shake the earth.
Then the foul power of priestly sin and all
Its long-upheld idolatries shall fall.
Thou shalt raise up the trampled and oppressed,
And thy delivered saints shall dwell in rest.
(Works, I, 100, 101, 1-24)
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Even in this poem Bryant returns to his belief in nature because it is in nature that the oppressed find havens of refuge, i.e. the mountains and caves. Also it is in "the depths of earth" where the refugees find a place to worship.
Bryant has made nature a refuge and a mediator for the oppressed. He returns again to the theme of the wilderness being a place close to nature and God, a theme found also in "A Forest Hymn."

Albert F. McLean, Jr. states that "A Forest Hymn" (1825) is a confession by Bryant rather than a credo (William Cullen Bryant, 58-59). The poem is an account of an individual searching for God through nature. Bryant also decries worshipping God only in a building because "The groves were God's first temples" (Works, I, 130, 1).

Should we, in the world's riper years, neglect God's ancient sanctuaries, and adore Only among the crowd, and under roofs That our frail hand have raised. (Works, I, 130, 131, 17-20)

The answer to the reader is an obvious "no." Bryant offers a hymn to the woods which he hopes God will find acceptable.

God transcends nature, which acts as a haven and teacher of God's lessons. There have been holy men who hid themselves

Deep in the woody wilderness, and gave Their lives to thought and prayer, till they outlived The generations born with them, nor seemed Less aged than the hoary trees and rocks Around them. (Works, I, 133, 91-96)

It is interesting to note that Bryant tells the reader that God needs to teach mankind about His power and existence through the use of the destructive forces of Nature. Bryant, however, feels that the people who recognize God through nature understand the lesson and asks that he and they be spared.
Oh, from these sterner aspects of thy face
Spare me and mine, nor let us need the wrath
Of the mad unchained elements to teach
Who rules them. Be it ours to meditate,
In these calm shades, thy milder majesty,
And to the beautiful order of thy works
Learn to conform the order of our lives.

(Works, I, 134, 113-119)

Acquiescence to God is Bryant's closing line and desire in the poem. The poem takes on an almost conservational tone. Today there are those that feel the environment is threatened and, viewed through today's eyes, Bryant is an excellent spokesperson for conservation of our natural resources.

The two poems "Hymn of the City" (1830) and "The Crowded Street" (1843) proclaim God's love for the individual (McLean, Jr., "Progress and Dissolution," 161; Strong, 27). Bryant states for the first time that one can find God in the city in the following lines of "Hymn to the City":

Not in the solitude
Alone may man commune with Heaven, or see
Only in savage wood
And sunny vale, the present Deity;
Or only hear his voice
Where the winds whisper and the waves rejoice.

Even her do I behold
Thy steps, Almighty!—here amidst the crowd

(Works, I, 223, 1-8).

In "The Crowded Street," we find that Bryant, probably unintentionally, has made use of the Calvinistic concept of predestination, similar in "To a Waterfowl" in the lines,

These struggling tides of life that seem
In wayward, aimless course to tend,
Are eddies of the mighty stream
That rolls to an appointed end.

(Works, I, 320, 41-44)
These poems are in contrast to Bryant's poem "Lines on Revisiting the Country" in which Bryant discusses returning to the countryside to refresh his mind as well as his body. In Bryant's opinion, man should remain in a pastoral, or rather a rural, state where he can find a Supreme Deity, peace of mind, a friend, and food. He refers to the city in "Lines on Revisiting the Country" as having "stifling heat, horrid sounds, and polluted air" (Works, I, 152, 19-20).

"Hymn of the City" and "The Crowded Street" are radical departures from Bryant's theme of man's place in nature, and they warrant close observation.

Elmer James Bailey writes that in "The Flood of the Years" (1876) Bryant assures us that there will be no pain or sorrow after the flood and loved ones will be reunited with loved ones (28). God pours forth time from an "exhaustless Urn" in the start of the poem. Time and Death are synonomous in this poem because both are eternal. Time slays because there is nothing immortal on Earth (Brodwin, 124). When Bryant looks into the past, he sees only broken hopes and the dead, regardless of who they were in life, and when he looks into the future, he sees the past being repeated with hope appearing and disappearing. Time rolls toward the mystic barrier which is the "Crossing the Bar" of Lord Alfred Tennyson. In the poem, Bryant asks if there is an afterlife, but does not receive an answer. Only good and wise men hypothesize the existence of an afterlife. No
deity promises it, but Bryant allows the reader to accept the statement by the good and wise as his belief and the promise of a deity. Bryant, rather than enter into a theological discussion, has the good and wise say that the ones who are worthy of love are carried by the tides into islands of happiness and beauty. Bryant allows the reader to assume that an afterlife filled with happiness exists. He ends the poem on a positive note with the following lines.

In the room
Of this grief-shadowed present, there shall be
A Present in whose reign no grief shall gnaw
The heart, and never shall a tender tie
Be broken; in whose reign the eternal Change
That waits on growth and action shall proceed
With everlasting Concord hand in hand.
(Works, II, 193, 146-152)

The companion poem to this one is entitled "A Lifetime" (1876) in which Bryant reviews his life. He ends the poem with negative imagery and the poem is only a vision.

I am gazing into the twilight
Where the dim-seen meadows lie,
And the wind of night is swaying
The trees with a heavy sigh.
(Works, II, 200, 145-148)

Bryant may appear to lose his faith in a deity but not in Nature; or else he has retreated into a world where his faith has become such a personal matter that he will only hint at it but not show it to the world. Bryant sees his past and hoped-for future because he sees the "dim-seen meadows"; however, Bryant believes that Nature has not
forgotten him because the trees sigh with him over his past and his dreams for the future.

Death

Bryant may be referred to as the Poet of Death because an uncommon amount of his poetry is dedicated to the phenomenon of Death (Jones, 30; Brodwin, 113). Howard Mumford Jones believes, however, that Bryant was a premature existentialist more than a poet of death or nature (32). Charles H. Brown states that Bryant was "appalled by the sense of death and gropingly sought some belief that would deny what he knew to be a universal truth, or if not this, a way in which men could approach it with equanimity" (59). Stanley Brodwin believes that Bryant, along with Walt Whitman, used poetic metaphors and symbols to render death terrorless (114-115). In his poetry, Bryant uses nature to commune with God in order to ensure life after death.

Bryant's poetry approaches death as a sacred institution through sacramental imagery and tone (Brodwin, 115). In his poem "On the Happy Temperament," Bryant seems to come to terms with change and death. His anxiety toward death, nature, change, and time may be summed up in Bryant's statement, "As awful as the prospect of death justly is, he, who has thought of it most, will perhaps recollect, that he has sometimes felt a thrill or wild and strange delight as he contemplated this great change of being" (Brodwin, 116, 117). Bryant, as a student and researcher of nature, saw
the lesson of death and rebirth that he was looking for.


Stanley Brodwin calls "Thanatopsis" (1821) "a fine and courageous attempt to deny death, a direct confrontation as it were" (119). Bryant asks how man faces his death alone. He places the concept of individual mortality in a vast space and time to illustrate its insignificance to nature (McLean, Jr., William Cullen Bryant, 70; Ringe, The Pictorial Mode, 213). Albert F. McLean, Jr. writes that for Bryant "Thanatopsis" was a solution to the philosophic problem of what happens to the human soul after death which was debated by the Calvinists and the deists ("Bryant's 'Thanatopsis,'" 475). The Calvinists believed in the soul, and the deists believed in an impersonal, natural law. The opening lines of "Thanatopsis" are the poet's dialogue with the reader. He is addressing the time in which one contemplates the advent of death "like a blight over thy spirit." It is Nature who brings solace to man, but it is a cold solace at best in its imagery (Arms, 15; Rio-Jelliffe, 136).

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, shalt thou go
To mix for ever 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.

(Works, I, 17, 18, 18-31)

Bryant then takes the reader from such a negative, personal view of death to a broader spectrum of death, which is the death of mankind. This universal view of death is more pleasant for the reader and is intended to ease his fear. Bryant saw no loss of dignity in death because one becomes part of a majestic earth which serves as a tomb of mankind, which he describes with such imagery as "nor couldst thou wish/Couch more magnificent" and "the venerable woods" (Jones, 37; Van Doren, 433). Man does not die a solitary death but with "millions," regardless of being rich, poor, young, or old. It is this transition from the personal to the general that allows "Thanatopsis" to succeed. Bryant is at his best when he describes the general. When one approaches death, and especially if one has listened to the voice of nature, one should approach death as one who "lies down to pleasant dreams" which was in contrast to the philosophy of Kirke White, "Written in the Prospect of Death," and others who faced death with dismay and foreboding (Van Doren, 433).

Carl Van Doren describes the closing lines of "Thanatopsis" as "didactic" and "falsifying Nature," even though
he praises Bryant for not promising eternal life because Nature could not make such a promise (433). He further states that in moving from the personal dread of death to a "view no longer obscured by the desires and prejudices of fearful mortality, but which, in its calm acquiescence in inviable law, was worth to be ascribed to Nature" (433).

In "Hymn to Death" (1825) Death is personified and avenges the wrongs done to mankind by atheists, tyrants, and evil-doers (Brodwin, 121; Arms, 16). Bryant praises Death and intends to teach the world of Death's triumphs. He asks who accuses Death of wronging people, and the obvious response is the living, those who have not passed the gates of death. Bryant praises Death as God's avenger, but neglects to mention that the oppressed die also. It is Bryant's intent, and he does it well, to show the transience of mankind on the face of the earth and how we cannot achieve immortality on this plane. He mentions that he has felt sorrow at some of death's conquests when he suddenly breaks the theme of the poem with the lines,

Alas! I little thought that the stern power,  
Whose fearful praise I sang, would try me thus  
Before the strain was ended. It must cease—  
For he is in his grave who taught my youth  
The art of verse, and in the bud of life  
Offered me to the Muses. (Works, I, 51, 133-138)

Bryant is referring to the death of his father. The lines appear to be written in anguish. However, George Arms states that Bryant calls his father someone evil in the poem
and now must justify the action. Bryant is not as upset as he appears to be in the poem (16). I am of another opinion. The lines about the death of his father are all positive, and he hopes that his father will sleep the "brief sleep of death" until he is resurrected (Brodwin, 121). Stanley Brodwin states that the closing lines reflect Bryant giving into despair, well wrought despair, but despair nevertheless: (121)

Shuddering I look
On what is written, yet I blot not out
The desultory numbers, let them stand,
The record of an idle revery. (Works, I, 52, 164-167)

Bryant makes his poem a hymn to death, and he states in the closing lines that he will not retract a word of that hymn. Even though he was put to a severe trial, he remained steady in his faith that Death is a part of God's plan for the universe. Otherwise, he could not, nor would he have written the closing lines to "Hymn to Death."

Even though the poem, "The Death of the Flowers" (1825), should be placed in the discussion on immortality of the soul, I have included it here because it is about the death of Bryant's sister (Works, I, 340, 344). Bryant states that there is only death and no hope of immortality. This is one of the few poems where Bryant gives voice to "resignation without hope" (Bailey, 25). The following lines best represent the theme of the poem.
Where are the flowers, the fair young flowers,  
that lately sprang and stood  
In brighter light and softer aris, a beauteous  
sisterhood?  
Alas! they all are in their graves, the gentle  
race of flowers  
Are lying in their lowly beds, with the fair and  
good of ours.  
The rain is falling where they lie, but the cold  
November rain  
Calls not from out the gloomy earth the lovely ones  
again.  
...  
In the cold moist earth we laid her, when the  
forests cast the leaf,  
And we wept that one so lovely should have a life  
so brief;  
Yet not unmeet it was that one, like that young  
friend of ours,  
So gentle and so beautiful, should perish with the  
flowers.  
(Works, I, 157, 159, 7-12, 27-30)

Bryant places the time of the funeral in November, which is  
a time of death for the flowers and the onset of winter.  
The implied approach of the winter is a forecast of Bryant's  
long lasting sorrow over the death of his sister. Since he  
cannot state how long he will sorrow, he uses the symbol of  
the approaching winter to emphasize that the sorrow will be  
long and a very cold, painful sorrow. Also by placing the  
funeral in November, there is no chance for a rebirth  
motif. If the funeral had been in the winter, spring would  
follow and, therefore, a time for rebirth. Truly this poem  
is a poem of sorrow and despair and one of the very few with  
no hope of the afterlife in it.
"The Hurricane" (1825) is a poem about the confrontation between on-coming Death in a hurricane and the poet. This poem is full of negative imagery concerning death. There is nothing of the placidity of death such as in "Thanatopsis" nor the glorification of death in "Hymn to Death." The poem concludes with the poet's accepting the fact that facing death is a solitary event. "And I, cut off from the world, remain/Alone with the terrible hurricane" (Works, I, 197, 49-50). The personification of death in the hurricane is fascinating. The imagery used to describe death is both powerful and limitless and Bryant's use of adjectives do nothing to make death appealing as in "Hymn to Death" or "Thanatopsis."

He is come! he is come! do ye not behold
His ample robes on the wind unroiled?
Giant of air! we bid the hail!--
How his gray skirts toss in the whirling gale;
How his huge and writhing arms are bent
To clasp the zone of the firmament,
And fold at length, in their dark embrace,
From mountain to mountain the visible space.
(Works, I, 196, 23-30)

The description of the hurricane, finally, is similar to the chariot of the god Thor in Norse mythology. This is the only, or one of the very few, times that Bryant uses Norse mythology in his poetry. He uses Grecian, some Egyptian, and tries to create an American mythology but very rarely uses Norse mythology.

And hark to the crashing, long and loud,
Of the chariot of God in the thunder-cloud!
You may trace its path by the flashes that start
From the rapid wheels where’er they dart,  
As the fire-bolts leap to the world below,  
And flood the skies with a lurid glow.  
(Works, I, 196, 33-38)

The purpose of this poem is to illustrate that the approach of death is a fearful concept; not that death is to be feared, but the manner in which one dies may be fearful. Thinking of the approach of death is cause enough to question one’s beliefs of a Supreme Deity and immortality of the soul. Bryant is stating that we have to overcome our fears in one way or another because death is inescapable and is a truly solitary event. No one can die for you at the end of your life, only you.

In "The Snow-Shower" (1855) Bryant invites the reader to stand by his side and watch the snowflakes fall into a "dark and silent lake." The lake is death, and the snowflakes are individual people. Bryant wisely selected the snowflake as his metaphor because no two snowflakes are alike. He blends effectively the specific with the general in the poem which he does so efficiently (Krapf, 11). The observers watch as friends, family, and others all enter the mystery of death. Norbert Krapf makes the point that there is no resolution at the end of the poem, only a glimpse of the mystery of life and death (11).

Yet look again, for the cloud divide;  
A gleam of blue on the water lies;  
And far away, on the mountain-side,  
A sunbeam falls from the opening skies,  
But the hurrying host that flew between  
The cloud and the water, no more is seen;
Flake after flake,  
At rest in the dark and silent lake.  
(Works, II, 36, 49-56)  

Bryant again approaches the event of death on a general level. He mentions only specific people when he talks about loved ones and friends that he and his companion knew in life. Bryant must have been aware of the increase of the population of America because in the poem he mentions that the snowflakes fall faster and faster and thicker. The question of immortality of the soul in the poem is left undiscussed as in "The Hurricane" and "Thanatopsis." There is a hint of hope of an afterlife for the dying even though he makes it a vague hope because he mentions the sunbeam coming from the opening skies. The sunbeam represents an end to death because Bryant states that the cloud and lake are not seen any more and that the dead are at rest in the lake. There is no more snowfall; therefore, death has stopped and for that matter, so has the world ceased to exist.

Immortality of the Soul

Bryant fluctuated on the Christian concept of the immortality of the soul; he expresses confidence, doubt, and denial in varying degrees in his poetry (Bailey, 24), but the dominantly recurring theme is that of confidence. This confidence appears most conspicuously in his love poems, usually addressed to his wife (Strong, 36). Bryant hoped for immortality and could see cause for that hope in nature,
which acted as a source and proof of that belief (Bailey, 26; Bradley, 210). Augustus Hopkins Strong states that Bryant believed in Christ; he, therefore, believed in the immortality of the soul and that he and his wife would not be separated after death (39). When questioned about his belief in the afterlife he described in "The Flood of the Years," Bryant wrote that he could not have written the lines without believing in the "everlasting life of the soul," and that it would be an improper gift if one did not recognize his or her friends in the afterlife (Brodwin, 124). Benjamin T. Spencer, however, views Bryant's belief in immortality is a result of his need to sustain a faith in an ultimate justice and quotes Bryant as saying "there is a morning beyond the night of Death" ("The Melancholy Progressive, 103).

There are four poems which most effectively express Bryant's thoughts on the immortality of the soul: "The Two Graves," "The Future Life," "The Cloud on the Way," and "The Dead Patriarch."

In "The Two Graves" (1826), the poet discusses the graves of an elderly man and woman that he found on one of his excursions in the forest on a hillock. The hillock was in a normally untraveled area so that Bryant came across the graves by accident. The theme of the immortality of the soul is contained in the last two stanzas. In the first of the two, Bryant asks why the soul should leave an area that
it knows. Bryant is implying that it would be unjust for God to remove the souls of the dead from an area that they love. In the last stanza he mentions that the dead shall arise on the appointed day. Bryant is discussing the religious belief that the dead sleep in the earth until Judgement Day. Since the soul does not arise until Judgement day, Bryant wonders why it cannot remain in a place that it loves.

'Tis said that when life is ended here,
The spirit is borne to a distant sphere;
That it visits its earthly home no more,
Nor looks on the haunts it loved before.
But why should the bodiless soul be sent
Far off, to a long, long banishment?
Talk not of the light and living green!
It will pine for the dear familiar scene;
It will yearn, in that strange bright world, to behold
The rock and stream it knew of old.

'Tis a cruel creed, believe it not!
Death to the good is a milder lot.
They are here,—they are here,—that harmless pair,

They sit where their humble cottage stood,
They walk by the waving edge of the wood,
And list to the long-acustomed flow
Of the brook that wets the rocks below,
Patient, and peaceful, and passionless,
As seasons on seasons swiftly press,
They watch, they wait, and linger around
Till the day when their bodies shall leave the ground.

(Works, 1, 178, 179, 51-74)

Bryant portrays nature's ambivalence to mankind in the poem because the brook is "Patient, and peaceful, and passionless," and the passage of time is illustrated by such phrases as "where their humble cottage stood" and "seasons on seasons swiftly press." Stanley Brodwin states that
Bryant is more interested in denying the separation of the souls of the two beloved than in establishing the Christian eschatology (123). Creeds and doctrine mean little in the face of death; only the heart does.

Bryant wonders in "The Future Life" (1839) if he will know his wife, Frances Fairchild, in the afterlife. In this poem, he restates his belief that one would be able to recognize his or her loved ones in Heaven because, without such a conscious reunion, there would not be perfect happiness in Heaven, a theme he mentions in "The Flood of the Years" (Bailey, 28). The poem begins with the question,

How shall I know thee in the sphere which keeps
The disembodied spirits of the dead,
When all of thee that time could wither sleeps
And perishes among the dust we tread.

(Works, 1, 280, 1-4)

And he concludes with the question,

Yet, though thou wear'st the glory of the sky,
Wilt thou not keep the same beloved name,
The same fair thoughtful brow, and gentle eye,
Lovelier in heaven's sweet climate, yet the same?

Shalt thou not teach me, in that calmer home,
The wisdom that I learned so ill in this--
The wisdom which is love--till I become
Thy fit companion in that land of bliss?
(Works, 1, 281, 29-36)

The theme of the poem is a simple one. Bryant asks if he and his wife will be together in the afterlife and will she choose to be with him. Bryant is not doubting an afterlife, but is questioning whether relationships on Earth will be the same in Heaven. Frances was Bryant's helpmate, lover,
and friend in life; he did not desire to lose that relationship in Heaven. In Bryant’s view, the marriage of two people on earth would be a mockery of the true spiritual love between the two because marriage is a heavenly tie and should exist after death. If nothing else, this poem is a statement of Bryant’s love for his wife and how he desires to hold that love after death, a beautiful sentiment in itself.

"The Cloud on the Way" (1860) is a dialogue between the poet and a fellow traveller about the path of life unto death. The reader assumes that Bryant is talking to his wife because he asks, "Which of us shall be the soonest folded to that dim Unknown?" This implies a close relationship between the two. Bryant is promising the fellow traveller peace and freedom from worry at the end of the path, even though the path is rugged and the nature around it beautiful. Bryant also alludes to Christ, whom the traveller shall meet:

See, beneath its sullen skirts, the rosy morning glimmers through.
One whose feet the thorns have wounded passed that barrier and came back,
With a glory on His footsteps lighting yet the dreary track.
Boldly enter where He entered; all that seems but darkness here,
When thou once hast passed beyond it, haply shall be crystal-clear. (Works, II, 81, 30-34)

Bryant finishes the poem with the promise that all whom the fellow traveller has known and cared for shall be with him
or her in the afterlife.

Till, beyond the border where that brooding mystery bars the sight,
Those whom thou hast fondly cherished stand with thee in peace and light. (Works, II, 82, 41-42)

Bryant is using the beautiful images of nature to illustrate that an earthly existence is hard to leave. He is referring to one's fear of death which is one of the themes in "A Hymn to Death." The path of life is rugged, but there is the promise of a great reward, eternal life, at the end of it. Bryant neglects to mention, in the poem, the people who have done evil in this life in the poem. He is a Romantic, or else has a specific group in mind, in this poem because everyone on the path is a friend or a loved one. Bryant implies also that those who travel the path should live a Christian life.

The poem "The Dead Patriarch" (1876) concerns the birth and death cycle in Nature that Bryant found so necessary for his religious belief in the immortality of the soul. The "dead patriarch" is a tree, and the poem ends with the following stanza which promises life from death.

Thou wert a sapling once, with delicate sprays,
And from that mould another sapling tree
May rise and flourish, in the coming days,
When none who dwell on earth remember thee.
(Works, II, 345, 17-20)

This poem can be interpreted on many levels of which there are three major ones, the physical, the spiritual, and the literary. In the physical interpretation of the poem,
Bryant is stating merely that life feeds and grows on death, the continual cycle of birth and death. Spiritually, Bryant is stating his belief that after death there is an afterlife and one must die before he or she can achieve it. The interesting interpretation is the literary one. Bryant was established as "the Father of American Song" by this time, and he knew exactly where he stood in literary circles. This poem is his hope that the poetry and poetic philosophies that he wrote would take root and help create an original American literature. The young sapling that arises from the "dead Patriarch" represents the poets who will carry on after his death. Bryant intentionally used the imagery of the "patriarch," which represents himself because, at the time he wrote the poem he was considered to be a patriarch. Metaphorically speaking, the tree and Bryant are one; figuratively, Bryant and Nature, represented by the tree, are one.

"Waiting by the Gate" (1860)

"Waiting by the Gate" best expresses many of the facets of Bryant's views on religion, death, and immortality. Bryant describes a "massive gateway" which people enter, but from which they never return. He is saddened by seeing the people enter and never return, but he turns away, listens to Nature, and is not saddened anymore. The description of Nature in this poem is very beautiful and alive with such lines as "I muse while still the wood-thrush sings down the
golden day." Bryant mourns the coming of death for mankind as they enter the gate of death,

O glory of our race that so suddenly decays!
O crimson flush of morning that darkens as we gaze!
O breath of summer blossoms that on the restless air
Scatters a moments sweetness, and flies we know not where!  

Works, II, 84, 21-24)

Bryant mentions Christ, the "Sinless Teacher," and states that some shall see their loved ones after crossing the gateway in the following lines.

And some approach the threshold whose looks are blank with fear,
And some whose temples brighten with joy in drawing near,
As if they saw dear faces, and caught the gracious eye
Of Him, the Sinless Teacher, who came for us to die.  

Works, II, 84, 37-40)

Bryant is aware of sin in the world and tells the reader that the sinners shall be punished after death because "some approach . . . whose looks are blank with fear." Nature to him is sinless; he uses neither a sorrowing or repentant image when discussing nature. He adheres to the Puritan concept that man brought sin into the world.

Bryant watches all and is patient. In nature he is patient, awaiting his appointed time to enter the gate. Bryant neither fears death nor is eager to depart this life. I suggest that Bryant is soothed in his acceptance of death by the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination. He is confident in his life, his religious beliefs, and immortality of the soul, a state of mind illustrated in the last
line of the concluding stanza.

I mark the joy, the terror; yet these, within my heart,
Can neither wake the dread nor the longing to depart;
And, in the sunshine streaming on quiet wood and lea,
I stand and calmly wait till the hinges turn for me.

(Works, II, 85, 37-40)

"Waiting by the Gate" is Bryant's affirmative statement of his religious beliefs. He has learned the lessons of Nature, and in Nature he awaits the final moment of his Christian triumph, death, which is only the gate to eternal life with God, his loved one, and friends.
CHAPTER IV

BRYANT'S INDIAN POETRY

Bryant wrote approximately twelve poems with the American Indian as subject matter (Keiser, 178). Yet, the Indian poems are an important part of the Bryant canon. The Indian served as a poetic vehicle for Bryant representing the passage of civilization, a time when man was closer to God and Nature, and the state nature before the White man entered America (Baxter, 15; Moriarty, 221; Ringe, The Pictorial Mode, 126). The Indian also provided Bryant a source of American mythological images (McLean, Jr., William Cullen Bryant, 129). Bryant viewed Indians as exotic, mysterious, savage, and admirable, always accoutred with feathers and a tomahawk (Baxter, 19; Russell, 643). He wrote to his friend, Richard H. Dana, in 1821 about using Indians in his poetry.

You see my head runs upon the Indian--The very notion of them once used to make me sick--perhaps because those who undertook to make a poetical use of them have made a terrible butchery of the subject--I think however at present, a great deal might be done with them. (Bryant II and Voss, 1, 111)

It is doubtful that Bryant had any contact with Indians prior to 1832 when he made his first trip to the West, and then the only Indians he met were on reservations and hardly the subject matter for romantic poetry (Baxter, 19). He did
speak well of them, though, in his letters home. Bryant supported Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Bill of 1830 because he sincerely believed that, by moving the Indians west of the Mississippi, the ultimate eradication of their race would be impeded. After the Indian Removal Bill passed, Bryant ignored the Indians as poetic material until the later years of his life (Baxter, 19). It was well for Bryant's poetic Indian to raise the war cry against the White man in Bryant's poetry. When the Indians actually took to the war trail, however, he used the powerful platform of the New York Evening Post's editorial page to condemn their barbarism (Baxter, 20).


The poem "A Walk at Sunset" (1821) recounts for the reader all that the sun has seen. Bryant talks about the forest, which is similar to the Garden of Eden, before the Indian came. He tells of the rise and fall of civilizations that the sun has seen and the eradication of the Indian race. When Bryant first mentions the Indians, he discusses their concept of immortality in the lines,

They who here roamed of yore, the forest wide
Felt, by such charm, their simple bosoms won;
They deemed their quivered warrior, when he died,
Went to bright isles beneath the setting sun;
(Works, I, 44, 19-22)

He then mentions the sun watching the arrival and departure of the Indian.

Then came the hunter tribes and thou didst look,
For ages, on their deeds in the hard chase,
And well-fought wars; green sod and silver brook
Took the first stain of blood; before thy face
The warrior generations came and passed,
And glory was laid up for many an age to last.
(Works, I, 44, 37-42)

Bryant laments the passing of the Indians and how their monuments are treated by the settlers:

Now they are gone, gone as thy setting blaze
Goes down the west, while night is pressing on,
And with them the old tale of better days,
And trophies of remembered power, are gone.
Yon field that gives the harvest, where the plough
Strikes the white bone, is all that tells their story now.
(Works, I, 45, 43-48)

His regret at the eradication of the Indian and the loss of innocent nature is stated in the last two lines of the poem.

But never shalt thou see these realms again
Darkened by boundless groves, and roamed by savage men.
(Works, I, 45, 59-60)

Not just the death of the American Indian culture, but the death of cultures in general, is the subject of the poem.

This death of civilizations often appears in Bryant's poetry. He is sympathetic to the Indians of this poem.
Their concept of immortality is his own. Bryant implies that the whole Indian race achieves immortality after death because they have gone west to the "bright isles beneath the setting sun."
The forest (nature) that the sun watches has an Eden-like quality which the first inhabitants lived in peacefully. Then the "hunter tribes" arrived and, with them, warfare. Sin (murder, warfare) enters and offends nature which is expressed in the lines "green sod and silver brook/Took the first stain of blood." Death is a result of and punishment for the sin which results in the entrance of a new civilization. The death and rebirth of civilizations, a common theme for Bryant, is the death and rebirth illustrated in nature.

"Monument Mountain" (1824) is a poem that relates the aboriginal tale of a beautiful maiden's illicit love for her cousin and how she threw herself from a precipice because of that love. She was buried where she fell, and a monument of stones was placed over her grave by the members of the tribe, hence the name the Mountain of the Monument (Monument Mountain) (Keiser, 179-180; Russell, 646). Bryant describes the theme of the maiden's love as:

She loved her cousin; such a love was deemed,  
By the morality of those stern tribes,  
Incestuous, and she struggled hard and long  
Against her love, and reasoned with her heart,  
As simple Indian maiden might.  
(Works, I, 104, 60-64)

The maiden's love for her cousin is a pure and innocent love. The society that she lives in, however, deems it unnatural. Bryant is posing the question of how a pure and innocent love can be unnatural. The maiden's struggle with
herself is not unseen by the tribe's women. Bryant describes their foresight when he writes,

The keen-eyed Indian dames
Would whisper to each other, as they saw
Her wasting form, and say, "The girl will die."

(Works, I, 105, 78-80)

When the maiden casts herself off the cliff, the place the Great Spirit walks, the attendant tribe is in their ceremonial costumes. Thus, the suicide takes on a ritual aspect. Only through death can the maiden become an integral part of the tribe as well as that of the state of nature in which the tribe lives (McLean, Jr., 54). The maiden, the mountain, nature, and the Indian tribe are interwoven together in this poem. The girl and the mountain are one because the mountain is named after the site of her death. She symbolizes Nature because she is pure and innocent. It is civilization who judges her immoral; neither Nature nor God does so. The fact that the Indians allow the girl to commit suicide only reinforces, to Bryant, society's uncaring attitude toward the destruction of nature. The death of the natural maiden foreshadows the death of the Indian tribes who lived in nature by the White man who destroys nature by cutting down trees and plowing the fields. Bryant may have another viewpoint well-hidden in the poem. In his opening lines, he tells the reader to climb the mountain for the enlargement of his vision where "God/Doth walk" (McLean, Jr., William Cullen Bryant, 54).
He who climbs the mountain (Parnassus) will probably receive the poetic vision from the Divinity.

"The Indian at the Burial-Place of His Father" (1824) is a poem in which Bryant discusses the death of the Indian’s culture, the White man’s treatment of the remains and artifacts of the Indian, the Indian’s antiquity, and the future of the American settlers. The Indian in "An Indian at the Burial-Place of his Father" is standing at the site of his father’s grave observing the difference between his and the settlers’ view of it. The settler would see the site as a "lovely spot" after landscaping it. The Indian would rather see it in its natural state with trees growing, a monument to undisturbed nature. The Indian considers the spot sacred because he says, "This bank, in which the dead were laid,/Was sacred when its soil was ours" (Moriarty, 220). It is not sacred to the settler because his plow has left an arm bone lying in the sand among the wheat. At the graveyard the Indian sees the destruction of his race and the planting of the settler’s crops on it as the pollution of nature and hopes the pollution will destroy the white race:

But I behold a fearful sign,
To which the white men’s eyes are blind;
Their race may vanish hence, like mine,
And leave no trace behind,
Save ruins o’er the region spread,
And the white stones above the dead.
The rivers, by the blackened shore,  
With lessening current run;  
The realm our tribes are crushed to get  
May be a barren desert yet.  
(Moriarty, 221; Works, I, 95, 96, 61-70)

Bryant gives substance to the Indian's terrifying vision by the mention of the "white stones above the dead." He portrays a bleak future for the White man because the world will become a veritable city of the dead for him (Moriarty, 220).

The poem "The Disinterred Warrior" (1827) has several themes similar to "The Indian at the Burial-Place of His Father." Bryant discusses the treatment of the graves of the Indian, the oneness with nature, and the death of the tribe. He begins the poem by asking that the relics and the graves of the dispossessed Indians be spared (Keiser, 179). Bryant then tells of the ancestry of the Indian and how much closer he was to the Divinity and nature.

For he was fresher from the hand  
That formed of earth the human face,  
And to the elements did stand  
In nearer kindred than our race.  

(Works, I, 191-192, 17-20)

Bryant laments the passing of the Indians and their replacement by the American settlers.

A noble race! but they are gone,  
With their old forests wide and deep,  
And we have built our homes upon  
Fields where their generations sleep.  

(Works, I, 192, 33-36)

The first two lines of the above stanza reflect the intertwining relationship between the Indian and nature. The
Indians dwelt in a wilder, purer nature than the white man does today. Bryant implies that the Indian is wilder and purer than the White man. He also implies, a point he later states emphatically in the conclusion of the poem, that the settlers are desecrating the graves of the Indians by building homes upon them. Bryant is making the appeal to his reader as a human being and a Christian to respect the Indian graves. People, regardless of what creed, should respect the dead. After all, we are all going to die, and someone might not respect our graves either.

"The Strange Lady" (1836) is a poem concerning a supernatural woman in the guise of an Indian maiden. Albert, a hunter, meets her and accompanies her for the night where they can hunt the next day. During the night a terrible storm occurs and the next day a broken, bloody body is found by Albert's friends. They believe the body to be Albert's, and Bryant hints that this is true but never states so in the poem. The strange lady is described as

A dark-haired woman from the wood comes suddenly in sight;  
Her merry eye is full and black, her cheek is brown and bright;  
Her gown is of the mid-sea blue, her belt with beads is strung,  
And yet she speaks in gentle tones, and in the English tongue.  
(Works, I, 258, 5-8)

She lightly wounds Albert in the hand and heavily in the heart because he decides to go with her to stay the night at her summer lodge so they can hunt the next day. The
description of the flowers that surround the summer lodge is beautiful. The storm, the coming of death, in the poem is terrible and forceful and described with bold and active imagery.

That night upon the woods came down a furious hurricane,
With howl of winds and roar of streams, and beating of the rain;
The mighty thunder broke and drowned the noises in its crash;
The old trees seemed to fight like fiends beneath the lightning flash. (Works, I, 260, 33-36)

Bryant leaves the whereabouts of Albert in mystery. Is Albert in the grave, with the lady hunting, or with her in spirit? Bryant suggests that the last option is the most desirable for the reader. The poem illustrates a use of Bryant's poetic theory. If a new and fresh country does not have an original mythology, it may borrow one from another country as long as it is understood by the reader (Bryant, 34). The "strange lady" is reminiscent of the Greek Goddess of the Hunt, Artemis. Bryant has taken a mythological image from one country and applied it, in the correct setting, to another. He has also given the strange lady the image of nature. She lives far away beyond the mountains and is surrounded by beautiful nature. It is interesting to note the death of Albert in the poem. Bryant needed grand, elemental images of death to reinforce the supernatural being of the strange lady. He follows Milton in this aspect because in "Paradise Lost" Milton had to make Satan larger
than life so that God would have a worthy adversary.

"The White-Footed Deer" (1844) is a poem in which Bryant attempts to create a wholly American mythological story. He relates the tale about a youth who, against the advice of his mother, injures or kills the white-footed deer which is sacred to the Indians. In retaliation the Indians kill the mother and son and burn down the cottage (Russell, 646). This poem is the only one in which the Indians exact a price for the destruction of their traditions. The scene is peaceful, and the deer is described only as:

White were her feet, her forehead showed
A spot of silvery white,
That seemed to glimmer like a star
In autumn's hazy night. (Works, I, 321, 13-16)

As the reader can see, there is nothing supernatural in the description of the deer. Bryant implies that the deer is supernatural by allowing the narrator to describe it as a "thousand moons" old. Further respect is implied in the comment that the Indian did not hunt where the deer feeds. The youth obeys his mother until he comes home one night with no game. The deer is too much of a temptation, and he succumbs. He fires at the deer, but does not kill it.

Bryant says only that

Away, into the neighboring wood,
The startled creature flew,
And crimson drops at morning lay
Amid the glimmering dew.
Next evening shone the waxing moon
As brightly as before;
The deer upon the grassy mead
Was seen again no more.  (Works, I, 323, 57-64)

Whether the deer is killed or not is not important to the
theme of the poem. The Indians' prestige of having the
white-footed deer in their country is insulted. In
retaliation, they kill the lady and her son and burn down
their cabin. Bryant describes the site of the burned cabin
and graves in negative imagery.

Now woods have overgrown the mead,
And hid the cliffs from sight;
There shrieks the hovering hawk at noon,
And prowls the fox at night.  
(Works, I, 324, 69-72)

"The White-Footed Deer" is one of Bryant's few negative
poems. There is no positive note in the ending. He even
separates nature and the Divinity in the poem. Nature is
cold and indifferent to the wounding of the sacred deer, an
attitude illustrated in the lines "shone the waxing moon/As
brightly as before." After reading the above-mentioned
lines, the reader is left in a quandry by Bryant's imagery
of the Indian and nature. He separates his images of the
Indian and nature on one hand and then uses them inter-
changably on the other. Nature appears to be indifferent to
the plight of the wounded deer, but the Indians are not.
The Indians, who represent nature, kill the mother and child
in retaliation for the wounding of the deer, and nature
populates their cabin site with the "shrieking hawk" and the
fox. It is possible that Bryant separates the two images only for poetic effect. He leaves the reader with another unanswered question which is "What happened to the fawn which Bryant only mentions in one line?" Bryant did much better in "The Painted Cup" and "The Strange Lady" when he incorporated European mythology into American terms. His attempt to create an American mythology, or at least this attempt, is unsuccessful.

Among the things that Bryant uses the American Indian to illustrate is the passage of time and civilizations, the replacement of the original wild state of nature with organized society, and the creation of a mythological perspective for American literature. He believed the American Indian to commune and live in the nature that he loved so much. He felt, perhaps, that the Indians were closer to the deity that transcended nature than he was. Along with his discussion of the Indian and nature, he mentions his apprehensions of the forthcoming changes for America and the environment. Such fears are as valid today as they were in Bryant's time.
BRYANT AND NATURE

Bryant, an amateur scientist who understood the principles of geology, medicine, chemistry, and botany, used his knowledge in his poetry (Ringe, "William Cullen Bryant," 507). His background for understanding the sciences was a result of studying Linnaeus and botany as a young man. As editor of The New York Evening Post, he was aware of the geological theories of William Smith, Charles Lyell, and Charles Darwin (Brooks, 199; Donovan, 511; Glicksburg, 91; Ringe, "William Cullen Bryant," 508, 510). According to William Cullen Bryant II, one of Bryant’s passions was horticulture, and as a young man he studied with Amos Eaton, a noted naturalist, at his home, Roslyn, in New York (5). Bryant grew varieties of gooseberries, strawberries, blackberries, currants, grapes, pears, apples, cherries, figs, plums, peaches, apricots, persimmons, pawpaws, Portuguese quince, and different flowers such as marigolds, phlox, roses, peonies, pansies, and hollyhocks (Krapf, 7). Bryant’s descriptions of the flora and fauna is so accurate that a person untutored in botany could get a good idea of plant life on earth from them (Van Doren, 272).
In his study of science, Bryant found order; in his study of nature he found the manifestations of his religious belief (Ringe, "William Cullen Bryant," 512; Bradley, 210; Strong, 22; Sedgwick, Jr., 542; Stedman, 67; Sanford, 434). Bryant considered nature to be without sin, and pure in her inception. After the original sin, however, the curse that God placed on the earth concerned nature in its relationship to man. Nature remained pure in her inception, but was tainted only when in contact with man (Giovannini and Gieresch, item 40). Bryant’s poetry is a statement of his experience, or rather, his communion with nature. This experience formed Bryant’s natural philosophy. He did not carry his conclusions about nature as far as Emerson did in his Transcendental philosophy (McLean, Jr., William Cullen Bryant, 57, 58). He did not study the microcosm of nature, but preferred the general aspects and ranges of her powers (Stedman, 69; Foerster, 9).

Faced with the conflict of science and religion, Bryant, never a fundamentalist, accepted the evidence of scientific discovery and incorporated that evidence into his own liberal religious philosophy (Ringe, "William Cullen Bryant," 514). He apparently saw no incompatibility between evolution and the Primal Cause (Glicksburg, 96). In Bryant’s religious philosophy, nature is a teacher that tries to influence mankind toward a moral and virtuous life.
Bryant believed that nature uplifted man morally, chastised him, soothed, and ennobled him (Van Doren, 269; Stedman, 67). Nature's lesson for Bryant is the continual cycle of death and rebirth, a manifestation of Bryant's religious belief. (McLean, Jr., "Progress and Dissolution," 157).

The nature in Bryant's poetry is sublime and he sees it through a Puritan's eyes: sublime Nature represents moral beauty (Taylor; 208, 209; Donovan, 507). Even though Bryant experienced moral elevation in nature, he was aware of nature's destructive aspects (Donovan, 518). He believed the new and young world of America represented a new and sensitive spirit for nature, far from Europe's debilitating atmosphere (Bradley, 212). In his poetry, Bryant's forests, fields, rivers, and mountains are new in spirit and totally American (Taylor, 104).

Bryant went to nature to meditate, to escape from civilized life. Nature, during this time of meditation, is meant for the individual only (Baxter, 23). David Baxter states of Bryant's poetry that

Bryant's view of nature was more pastoral and picturesque than primitive and wild, and because the antithetical to man is the primitive, Bryant tried to bring man and nature into a tenous harmony. . . . With Bryant it was never all man versus nature, or nature versus man. He longed for a balance with all civilized men living in contact with nature. (24)

According to Bryant's philosophy, those that truly worshipped nature become such a part of her that nature
would not betray them; in their worship, they became as one with nature (Duffey, 8).

Edmund Clarence Stedman refers to Bryant's poetry as having an "elemental quality." Bryant delighted in writing poetry about the earth, wind, and water, and extraterrestrial bodies (81). Stedman also could have added to the list plants and animals. The remainder of this chapter is a discussion of Bryant's use of external nature as imagery to symbolize the world around him. The chapter concludes with an explication of "The Fountain" which is a poem that summarizes Bryant's use of symbols of external nature.

Animals are used by Bryant as images, but not as much as plants. Insects are not a major focus of Bryant's poetry (Foerster, 10), although he mentions the bee twenty-five times in twenty-five poems (Littlejohn, 31). In "The Prairies," the bee symbolizes the settlers moving westward, and Bryant associates the bee with the dawning of a new age and country (Miller, 231). He devotes a whole poem, "To a Mosquito," to that tiny insect. He describes the mosquito in a friendly manner, but more importantly, he makes social, poetic, and political comments using the mosquito as a foil. Bryant comments upon the use of cosmetics by asking,

What sayest thou--slanderer!--rouge makes thee sick?  
And China bloom at best is sorry food?  
And Rowland's Kalydor, if laid on thick  
Poisons the thirsty wretch that bores for blood?  

(Works, I, 155, 43-46)
He makes a comment about poets by asking the mosquito not to bite "a brother poet, gaunt . . . [where] the pale-eyed sisters in my cell, /Thy old acquaintance, Song and Famine dwell" (Works, I, 155, 56, 59-60). The politician and the businessman are referred to in the lines,

Try some plump alderman, and suck the blood
Enriched by generous wine and costly meat,
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Go to the men for whom, in ocean's halls
The oyster breeds, and the green turtle sprawls.
(Works, I, 155, 61-62, 65-66)

It seems that Bryant did not care for politicians or businessmen, in this case men who made their living from the sea.

Bryant mentions some thirty species of birds in his poetry, the most notable being the "nameless waterfowl" (Foerster, 10). In "The Old Man's Counsel," the old man draws an analogy between the love-call of the grouse (partridge, pheasant) and the life of man. Bryant describes the love-call of the grouse:

He beat
His barred sides with his speckled wings and made
A sound like distant thunder; slow the strokes
At first, then fast and faster, till at length
They passed into a murmur and were still.
(Works, I, 295, 50-54)

The old man says of the call,

"There hast thou," said my friend, a fitting type
Of human life. 'Tis an old truth I know,
But images like these revive the power
Of long familiar truths. Slow pass our days
In childhood, and the hours of light are long
Betwixt the morn and eve; with swifter lapse
They glide in manhood, and in age they fly.
(Works, I, 295, 55-61)

Bryant concludes the poem by saying that every time he hears the grouse's love-call, he remembers the old man's lessons. In "The Return of the Birds," Bryant asks why the birds, which usually return in spring, arrive at his house during the winter. The answer is the Civil War. Bryant uses the disturbance of the birds to point out the disturbance of war on nature and mankind.

Bryant houses enough mammals in his poetry to fill a zoo. Of the wolves, panthers, squirrels, and other assorted animals, he uses the deer most often. The deer, in Bryant's imagination, symbolize the great forests in which they live (Foerster, 10). As previously mentioned, he uses also the deer in "The White-Footed Deer" as a supernatural being to represent an American Indian myth. The wolf is the next animal mentioned with any prominence, portrayed mainly as a scavenger. In "Tree-Burial," the Indian mother places her son in a tree to keep his body safe; otherwise "the greedy wolf/Might break into thy grave and tear thee thence" (Works, II, 171, 10-11). Also in "Rizpah," he relates how Rizpah keeps away the wolf and jackal "that yelled in the night" by throwing burning brands at them (Works, I, 77, 31-32).

Of the life forms found on earth, Bryant refers to plants the most. This is not unusual since he was an
amateur botanist. He used approximately thirty different types of trees in his poetry, many of which appear repeatedly (Foerster, 10). His favorite is the oak, which he describes as powerful, gray, old, tall, sturdy, and mighty (Littlejohn, 22). He uses trees to symbolize various concepts in his poetry such as God's temples, death, soothing power of nature, and political comments (Christensen, 29, 30; Littlejohn, 27, 28). In "A Forest Hymn," Bryant refers to the trees as "God's first temples," implying the antiquity of the forest also (Works, I, 130, 1). He is more explicit in this thought in "A Walk at Sunset" when he states, "For ages, on the silent forests here, /Thy beams did fall before the red man came" (Works, I, 44, 31-32). In "Thanatopsis," he uses the imagery of the tree's roots to create an atmosphere of fear and disgust in the lines "The oak/Shall send his roots abroad and pierce thy mould" (Works, I, 18, 30-31). God clothes the world in trees in the following lines from "A Forest Hymn,"

Father, thy hand
Hath reared these venerable columns, thou
Didst weave this verdant roof. Thou didst look down
Upon the naked earth, and forwith, rose
All these fair ranks of trees.
(Littlejohn, 29; Works, I, 131, 24-28)

Trees have a soothing effect on an individual in "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood" in the lines, "The calm shade/Shall bring a kindred calm" (Works, I, 23, 7-8).

Bryant compares the might of men to the might of oaks in "Oh
Mother of a Mighty Race" by stating, "What generous men/Spring, like thine oaks, by hill and glen" (Littlejohn, 23).

In "The Planting of the Apple-Tree," Bryant uses the aged apple-tree as a political question mark for the future in the stanza,

And time shall waste this apple-tree.
Oh when its aged branches throw
Thin shadows on the ground below,
Shall fraud and force and iron will
Oppress the weak and helpless still?
What shall the tasks of mercy be,
Amid the toils, the strifes, the tears
Of those who live when lengths of years
In wasting this little apple-tree?
(Works, II, 22,64-72)

If the weak and helpless are no longer oppressed, then mankind has advanced. This advance is partly through greater wisdom and partly through time. If the weak and helpless are still oppressed, then the planting of the apple tree is just that. There is no hope for the future (Poger, 105).

In "Among the Trees," Bryant uses the trees to focus upon three concepts: the personification of the trees, nature's indifference to man, and the destruction of the trees as the advancement of civilization. He asks if they breathe, feel pain, and have emotions and answers that somewhere far under the ground, the trees feel and do as humans do, an almost mystical answer to the question. He discusses also nature's indifference to man, in the line
"Our sorrows touch you not" (Works, II, 163, 40). In the poem, he mentions that only one oak has been spared by the settler and the oak represents time immemorial.

Of this old tree, which has outlived so long
The flitting generations of mankind.
(Works, II, 163, 103-104)

In two lines, Bryant writes of the oak's indifference to mankind, the rise and fall of empires, and the longevity of nature. The longevity of nature is tempered with the knowledge that it is the only tree left on his land.

As previously discussed in Chapter Three, in the poem "The Dead Patriarch" the tree represents Bryant's poetic inspiration and the immortality of the soul. In "A Forest Hymn," he relates the tale of how holy men live in the "woody wilderness" to learn the lessons of nature. Trees are a major focus of Bryant's plant images, but the imagery associated with flowers is also important.

Bryant used approximately forty-five species of flowers in his poetry (Foerster, 10). Flowers primarily represent the transience of beauty, as in "A Scene on the Banks of the Hudson," and immortality of the soul. In "The Child's Funeral," Bryant uses the flowers for three expressed purposes which are to describe an idyllic scene, the decorations for a funeral, and to signify rebirth. The implied purpose of the flowers is to illustrate the "Christ" motif which is done by intertwining the flowers used in the decorations for the funeral and the awakening of the child. The
parents place a "crown of roses" on Carlo's head. Just before the funeral, Carlo wakes up,

And there he sits alive and gayly shakes
In his full hands the blossoms red and white,
And smiles with winking eyes, like one who wakes
From long deep slumbers at the morning light.
(Christensen, 33; Works, I, 252, 45-48)

The blossoms (flowers) are now associated with immortality (Christensen, 33). The crown of roses (roses have thorns) and the awakening of Carlo imply the reanimation of innocence and purity (embodied in the child) which Bryant associates with Christ.

In "The Painted Cup," Bryant makes a comment on the poet. He describes the flower, the painted cup, and then states, "Now, if thou art a poet, tell me not/That these bright chalices were tinted thus/to hold the dew for fairies" (Works, I, 303, 7-9). If the poet desires to describe the flowers in a poetic fashion, then let him write that the "gentle Manitou of flowers" drinks the dew from the painted cup (I, 304). Bryant uses the poem as a vehicle to create an American mythological creature because the Manitou, an Algonguin omnipotent spirit, drinks from the flower like the fairies (Waldman, 54).

Bryant discovers the analogy between the moral and the natural world in "The Mystery of the Flowers" (Christensen, 33). He further states that the poet proclaims the lessons learned from the flowers.
And well do poets teach
Each blossom's charming mystery; declare
In clear melodious speech,
The silent admonitions penciled there;
And from the Love of Beauty, aptly taught,
Lead to a higher good, the willing thought.
(Works, II, 344, 13-18)

In the concluding lines, Bryant mentions the source of inspiration, the Love of Beauty, and the purpose of poetry which he discusses in his "Lecture on Poetry."

"The Yellow Violet" is a poem with a dialogue between the poet and the flower (McLean, Jr., William Cullen Bryant, 47). The concluding three stanzas are the focal point of the poem.

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

So they, who climb to wealth, forget
The friends in darker-fortunes tried.
I copied them--but I regret
That I should ape the ways of pride.

And when again the genial hour
Awakes the painted tribes of light.
I'll not o'erlook the modest flower
That made the woods of April bright.
(Works, I, 22, 21-32)

Albert F. McLean, Jr. asks the question, "Does the violet remind the poet of guilt incurred in his social relations, or does the metaphor of the social climber serve to explain man's neglect of the humble beauties of nature?" (William Cullen Bryant, 47-48). Bryant is confessing his sin of pride and presenting a moral as well. He did not recognize someone socially as he achieved prominence and expresses his
guilt and regret in the poem. He is not like others who climb to prominence, however. He regrets his sin. The concluding stanza is a promise that in the next life he will recognize the person whom the yellow violet represents. This guilt may be why Bryant avoided the so-called respectable people and felt more at ease with the humble people (Brooks, 203). There is more to the interpretation because the violet looks earthward and is nourished by nature. The person that Bryant overlooked is apt to be one who instructed him in the lessons of nature, probably as a child or younger man, and it seems one lesson did not take.

As previously discussed in Chapter Three, in "The Death of the Flowers," Bryant draws a comparison between the death of the flowers and his sister. He even refers to her as "the fair meek blossom" (Works, I, 159, 26). In "Innocent Child and Snow-White Flower," he compares the child to the flower. Initially both are innocent, but as they grow older the child loses his innocence. Bryant asks that the child, in his later years, not forget the flower and its lessons. Bryant hopes to meet death with as much serenity as the fringed gentian meets the winter in the poem "The Fringed Gentian."

I would that thus, when I shall see
The hour of death draw near to me
Hope, blossoming within my heart,
May look to heaven as I depart.

(Works, I, 221, 21-24)
The flower symbolizes Hope in the poem. Bryant hopes to be in the same cycle of death and rebirth (in Heaven) as the flower is in nature (McLean, Jr., *William Cullen Bryant*, 49). He finds also from the fringed gentian the lesson of death and rebirth in nature that he applies to his religious belief. The best representation of immortality by a flower is found in "A Forest Hymn."

That delicate forest flower,
With scented breath and look so like a smile,
Seems as it issues from the shapeless mould,
A visible token of the upholding Love,
That is the soul of the great universe.

(*Works*, I, 132, 64-69)

The forest flower symbolizes the manifestation of God's love on earth (Christensen, 34).

Benjamin T. Spencer writes that Bryant uses the sun and planets as the primary transcendent forces which impel and guide human progress ("The Melancholy Progressive," 101). This thought is apparent in "The Song of the Stars," which is a poem that celebrates the creation of the universe by God.

When the radiant morn of creation broke,
And the worlds in the smile of God awoke,
And the empty realms of darkness and death
Were moved through their depths by his mighty breath
And orbs of beauty and spheres of flame
From the void abyss by myriads came--

(*Works*, I, 127, 1-6)

Bryant concludes the poem by telling the stars to continue their "dance that measure the years": 
Glide on in your beauty, ye youthful spheres,  
To weave the dance that measure the years;  
Glide on in the glory and gladness sent  
To the furthest wall of the firmament—  
The boundless visible smile of Him  
To the veil of whose brow your lamps are dim.

(Works, I, 129, 41-46)

To Bryant, the stars symbolize the manifestations of the creation of the universe by God, and if the stars are dim in comparison to God, how small is man in comparison to God (Ringe, *The Pictorial Mode*, 33). Bryant wrote two other poems about the stars, "Hymn to the North Star" and "The Constellations." In both poems, the stars symbolize guiding lights. In "Hymn to the North Star," the North Star is a guiding light for mariner, sage, hermits, and bards of old. Bryant does mention, however, that flowers are the stars of earth. He compares, also subtly, the poet and the North Star in the lines,

> And thou dost see them rise,  
> Star of the Pole! and thou dost see them set.  
> Alone in thy cold skies,  
> Thou keep'st thy old unmoving station yet,  
> Nor join'st the dances of that glittering train,  
> Nor dipp'st thy virgin orb in the blue western main.

(Works, I, 122, 13-18)

The poet must live a life outside of society and must watch and learn for his poetic inspiration and knowledge. Bryant compares himself to the North Star because he often presents himself as being alone, as in "The Prairies" and "The Hurricane." In the concluding lines, he states that the North Star is "an eternal beacon" for the "voyager of time" (Works, I, 132, 42). Bryant looks at "The Constellations"
and complains how dim the constellations are. A voice seems to whisper in his ear that the mist hides the stars from his sight. The constellations are there, bright and fiery as ever. Bryant then regrets his vain complaints because the stars were there to guide the good and great in the past and are there to guide the future good and great. The meaningful, concluding lines to the poem are,

Lights of this work, though, to my clouded sight,
Their rays might seem but dim, or reach me not.

(Works, I, 88, 59-60)

Bryant believes that his inspiration and thoughts are from a Divine being, and is above earthly thoughts. Support for this may be seen in the use of the words "great" and "good." The use of "great" and "good" have religious overtones, and their use can be found in "Waiting by the Gate" and "The Flood of the Years."

Bryant uses the image of the moon to symbolize opposite aspects of life. In "The New Moon" he tells the reader all the joyous things that occur during the new moon, including poetic inspiration and deep religious thought. On the other hand, in "The Waning Moon," he uses the moon to symbolize death and the loss of the poetic inspiration. The two poems are opposite, except in "The Waning Moon" Bryant promises the coming of "The New Moon."

In "The Conjunction of Jupiter and Venus," the conjunction of the two planets symbolizes better events for mankind—the end of drought, pestilence, and the time for marriages.
Bryant then changes subjects and discusses Greece in the concluding portion of the poem.

Thine is a war for liberty, and thou
Must fight it single-handed. The old world
Looks coldly on the murderers of thy race,
And leaves thee to the struggle; and the new,--
I fear me thou couldst call a shameful tale
Of fraud and lust of gain;--thy treasury drained,
And Missolonghi fallen. Yet thy wrongs
Shall put new strength into thy heart and hand,
And God and thy good sword shall yet work out,
For thee, a terrible deliverance.

(Works, I, 183, 83-92)

It appears that even though the conjunction of Jupiter and Venus provided a beneficent influence for mankind, the actual path of freedom for Greece is a long and bloody one, "a terrible deliverance."

The Earth is described literally and figuratively in Bryant's poetry. It is mentioned in over half of his poems. The Earth is seen as the sepulchre for the dead in "Thanatopsis." Death and war are watched by the Earth who shudders in horror at war's atrocities in "The Ages."

thou didst make thy soil
Drunk with the blood of those that loved thee best;
And thou didst drive, from thy unnatural breast,
Thy just and brave to die in distant climes;
Earth shuddered at thy deeds, and sighed for rest
From thine abominations; after-times
That yet shall rend the tale, will tremble at thy crimes! (Works, I, 59, XVI, 138-144)

Bryant uses the image of a blood-soaked earth in Greece as evil, but in Stanza XXVI in the same poem, earth is pure. The theme of earth crying out against war is repeated in "After the Tempest" (Christensen, 15).
In "Earth," Bryant asks "Mother" Earth if she sorrows for her children, mankind. The reply is that she cries out for redress for the wrongs done her and her children. The mother image is repeated in "Earth's Children Cling to Earth." In "Hymn to the Waldenses," the mountains symbolize safety and refuge from oppression. The symbol is repeated in "The Lament of Romero," which is about Romero's flight to the mountain for safety from the Spanish lords. On the other hand, in "Upon the Mountain's Distant Head," the cold, icy mountains represent death. This is an unusual image for Bryant. Usually the valleys or plains represent war, bloodshed, and death.

The wind represents a source of life and the touch of God to Bryant (Arms, 18; Foerster, 12, 13). The wind is mentioned specifically in the title of nine poems, and appears throughout several other poems also (Foerster, 11, 12; Littlejohn, 42). Bryant refers to the wind by other names such as zyphers, airs, breezes, gales, tempests, hurricanes, and tornadoes (Christensen, 24). Storms represent war and clouds death (Ringe, The Pictorial Mode, 440; Van Doren, 270).

In "The West Wind," Bryant compares the west wind to "our wayward race" when all is well (Works, I, 41, 25). The wind brings freshness and life to the whole earth, in "Summer Wind." In "The Hurricane," discussed in Chapter Three, Bryant describes the hurricane as if it were a
chariot and Death, the god Thor. The evening wind represents a calming influence on nature and man in the poem "The Evening Wind" (Littlejohn, 42). The winds represent two extremes in "The Winds." Bryant asks that Freedom come like the spring wind which brings forth the promise of life.

But may he (Freedom) like the spring-time come abroad. Who crumbles winter's gyves with gentle might, When in genial breeze, the breath of God, The unsealed springs come sprouting up to light; Flowers start from their dark prisons at his feet, The woods, long dumb, awake to hymnings sweet, And morn and eve, whose glimmerings almost meet, Crowd back to narrow bounds the ancient night, (Works, I, 291, VIII, 57-64)

and not come like the storm which is mad and destroys with no reason. He questions the wind as to why it has become a storm:

Why rage ye thus?—no strife for liberty Has made you mad; no tyrant, strong through fear, Has changed your pinions till ye wrenched them free, And rushed into the unmeasured atmosphere; For ye were born in freedom where ye blow; (Works, I, 289-290, 33-37)

Bryant does not understand why war, pain, or anything evil can exist for no reason. In his rationalization for war, pain, and evil, he states that it is a part of God's plan and cannot be understood by mankind.

The cool wind in "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood" greets the stranger who is retreating from a hostile world (Christensen, 24). Life is the key word for the wind in "Life," when Bryant writes
O Life! I breathe thee in the breeze,
    I feel the pounding in my veins,
    I see thee in these stretching trees,
(Christensen, 25; Littlejohn, 45; Works, I, 262, 1-3)

The air that Bryant breathes gives him life, but he and it are still a part of nature that gives them both life. In "After the Tempest," the tempest symbolizes the clash of arms that exist upon the face of the earth, which she so cries against.

In "To a Cloud," Bryant fantasizes what he would do if he were a cloud. He states that he would travel the world and see Italy and Greece, especially Greece. He interrupts his fantasy, however, with a question of the cloud's fate:

    Bright meteor! for the summer noontide mode!
        Thy peerless beauty yet shall fade.
    The sun, that fills with light each glistening fold,
        Shall set, and leave thee dark and cold:
    The blast shall rend thy skirts, or thou mayst frown
        In the dark heaven when storms come down;
    And weep in rain, till men's inquiring eye
        Miss thee, forever, from the sky.
(Works, I, 119, 33-40)

Bryant is asking what will happen to his dreams. Will they be as he desires or will they fade in the night? The term "night," as used here, has a connotation of evil and the destroyer. Bryant is happier in the sunlight, the beam of God's love. The rain in "A Rain-Dream" is similar in theme to the cloud. Rain causes both plants and animals to seek shelter from it, but Bryant mentions that the rains form life-giving waters also. Bryant identifies with the "Wind of night" that "makes/The journey of life alone" (Works, I,
Bryant has used the image of himself being alone other times in his poetry such as in "To a Waterfowl" and "The Prairies."

"The Snow-Shower" has been discussed previously in Chapter Three. The snowflakes represent individual lives. The image of the cloud symbolizing death is found in "A Cloud on the Way." The cloud is massive and cannot be seen through. Not only is the cloud a symbol of death, but also the symbol of mystery. After death, is there immortality of the soul? To answer that question, one must pass through the cloud.

In Bryant's imagery, water usually symbolizes the river of life, immortality, the poetic inspiration, and death (Christensen, 16). Water, representing the river of life, is illustrated in "The Old Man's Counsel" and "The Stream of Life." In "The Old Man's Counsel," the river of life is described as swiftly moving waters and the individual in the river of life as a canoe:

Ah! I seem
As if I sat within a helpless bark,
By swiftly running waters hurried on
To shoot some mighty cliff. Along the banks
Grove after grove, rock after frowning rock,
Bare sands and pleasant homes, and flowery nooks,
And isles and whirlpools in the stream appear
Each after each, but the devoted skiff
Darts by so swiftly that their images
Dwell not upon the mind, or only dwell
In dim confusion; faster yet I sweep
By other banks, and the great gulf is near.

(Works, I, 295-296, 65-76)
As the canoe glides on the water, it sees dangers (whirlpools) and troubles in the progression of life. The windings and wanderings of Bryant's rivers are recurrent characteristics that represent the course of human time (Scheick, 205). The great gulf which is near is the death that we all must face (Christensen, 17).

Bryant compares the life spans of a stream and the stream of life in "The Stream of Life." The life that surrounds the stream is continually reborn after the seasons, but not so for the stream of life. It only has one season. Implied in this poem, is the indifference of nature to man. Bryant concludes the two-stanza poem on the stream of life,

Oh Stream of Life! the violet springs
But once beside thy bed;
But one brief summer, on thy path,
The dews of heaven are shed.
Thy parent fountains shrink away,
And close their crystal veins,
And where thy glittering current flowed
The dust alone remains.  (Works, II. 11, 9-16)

The imagery and the analogy of the dried up stream is well done. Bryant was perceptive in his use of the imagery. It is a scene that everyone can understand.

Immortality of the soul is the theme and symbol of the river in "An Evening Revery." Bryant writes

Gently--so have good men taught--
Gently, and without grief, the old shall glide
Into the new; the eternal flow of things,
Like a bright river of the fields of heaven,
Shall journey onward in perpetual peace.
(Works, I, 299, 63-67)
Bryant states his personal belief in immortality in other poems, but none quite so perfect as in "An Evening Revery" (Christensen, 21).

The stream representing the poetic inspiration is illustrated in "Green River" (Arms, 13). The sudden flash of the poetic inspiration, mentioned by Bryant in his "Lecture on Poetry," is illustrated in the following lines,

```
The quivering glimmer of sun and rill
With a sudden flash on the eye is thrown,
Like the ray that streams from the diamond-stone.
(Works, I, 31, 16-18)
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Bryant refers to the retreat of the poet from society into a pure nature:

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Yet, fair as thou art, thou shunnest to glide,
Beautiful stream! by the village side;
But windst away from haunts of men,
To quiet valley and shaded glen. (Works, I, 32, 25-28)
```

He identifies with the stream in the conclusion of poem.

```
And gaze upon thee in silent dream.
For in thy lonely and lovely stream
An image of that calm life appears
That won my heart in my greener years.
(Works, I, 33, 61-64)
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"Green River" is a beautiful poem that intertwines the symbols for the poet and poetic inspiration with the natural images of the river.

Bryant illustrates an unchanging, uncaring nature in "The Rivulet." He says, "Thou changest not--but I am changed/Since first by thy pleasant banks I ranged" to illustrate how mankind changes, not nature (Works, I, 84, 52-53). He concludes the poem by saying that the rivulet will
continue to exist long after mankind has perished from the face of the earth. Bryant's stream in "The Rivulet" represents a transcendent dimension of earthly time which Bryant usually attributes to all his streams (Scheick, 206).

The poem "The Snow-Shower," as previously discussed, contains a lake that represents death. Similar in theme, but slightly different is the river in "A Scene on the Banks of the Hudson." The river returns to the sea, and Bryant returns to the world of men. The sea does not represent a physical death for Bryant, but a form of the death of his dreams. He is re-entering the world of men (society and the law profession) which is a world he does not care for.

The ocean in "The Tides" is the symbol of the soul constantly striving to reach immortality. It is a story of the trials and tribulations that an individual goes through in life. All people fall short of the glory of god (They sin.), but in the final analysis the good finally triumph. The sea water achieves triumph by becoming clouds which rise into the God's sky (heaven). "The Tides" is a reverent poem upon the human striving for immortality told in active, forceful imagery.

A summation of Bryant's use of external nature can be found in his poem "The Fountain" (1839). Among the topics found in the poem that have been discussed in this chapter and others are the images of water, earth, animals, plants, the American Indian, and the indifference of nature to man.
An important aspect of this poem is Bryant's combining his religious beliefs and the theory of dynamic change in geology. The central theme of "The Fountain" is that man can recognize fundamental change within order by observing nature (Ringe, "William Cullen Bryant," 510). To Bryant, the aspect of an ordered change fits well into his religious belief that he had derived from his study of nature.

The fountain, which represents the changing world in an unchanging order, arises from the depths of the earth (Ringe, The Pictorial Mode, 167). The stream of water flowing from the fountain is pure, as made by the Creator, and it arises from a dark and filthy world, "red mould" and "slimy roots" (Works, 1, 282, 6). Bryant states that "Thus doth God/Bring, from the dark and foul, the pure and bright" (Works, 1, 282, 9-10). The garden that the fountain is in represents Eden. In lines 32-35, Bryant presents a hint of what is to come when he writes that the wolf crushes a "sanguinaria" from which red drops like blood fall. The sin that the crushing of the sanquinaria foretells is more explicit in the next stanza where an Indian warrior who has been stabbed is crawling toward the fountain. Evil has entered the garden of Eden. Bryant further states that man is tainted with evil when he refers to the Indian warriors who have "faces stained like blood" (Works, 1, 284, 50). He compares a short fight to a whirlwind in the poem. The dead remain, but an impassive nature looks on. He further
illustrates this by having a shower wash away the tokens of the fight. Peace again reigns in the forest where an Indian tribe hunts only animals as is their right as decreed by God. The displacement of the Indian occurs by the encroachment of civilization which is shown in the following lines:

\[
till the white man swung the axe  
Beside thee--signal of a mighty change.
Then all around was heard the crash of trees,  
Trembling awhile and rushing to the ground,  
The low of the ox, and shouts of men who fired  
The brushwood, or who tore the earth with plows;  
\textit{(Works, 1, 285, 80-85)}
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Trees for Bryant represent the last stand against civilization by nature (Sanford, 441).

The agricultural society replaces the forest, a change illustrated by the white cottages, the barnyard and barnyard animals, the pastures, horses, sheep, and the change in grasses (McLean, Jr., \textit{William Cullen Bryant}, 100). In his description of those who stop by the stream flowing from the fountain, Bryant is referring to the continual passage of humanity in nature. Nature remains, but it is mankind that changes, a similar theme found in "The Rivulet." By referring to all the people passing by the fountain's stream, he makes the point that the stream is losing its importance in civilization (Mclean, Jr., \textit{William Cullen Bryant}, 100). However, some recognize the importance of the stream. In the following lines, Bryant states that those who study even the minutest portions of nature, can find the
eternal principles of order bounded only by the process of change.

Here the sage,
Gazing into thy self-replenished depth,
Has seen eternal order circumscribe
And bound the motions of eternal change,
And the gushing of thy simple fount
Has reasoned to the mighty universe.
(Ringe, "William Cullen Bryant", 511, 512; Works, 1, 286, 117-122)

Bryant questions the future of the stream. He wonders if mankind will find some way to deform and ruin the stream and the land around it (Ringe, The Pictorial Mode, 185). This fear is most relevant today with our concern about pollution, and the current oil spill in Alaska.

Bryant mentions the geological possibilities for the stream:

Haply shall these green hills
Sink, with the lapse of years, into the gulf
Of ocean waters, and thy source be lost
Amidst the bitter brine? Or shall they rise,
Upheaved in broken cliffs and air peaks,
Haunts of the eagle and the snake, and thou
Gush midway from the bare and barren steep?
(Works, 1, 287, 131-137)

In the above lines, Bryant presents the dynamic view of the geological theories of the time (Ringe, "William Cullen Bryant," 511). More important, he gives the reader a clue of how he feels about change. The slow process is the better of the two. It is gentle and not described in any negative terms except for the "bitter brine" which may refer also to the "bitter sting of death." The imagery connected with the violent change of the earth is negative. He uses
such words as "upheaved," "broken," "haunts," "bare," and "barren." The cliffs that result from the upheaval are populated by the eagle, representing solitude, and the snake, representing the serpent in the garden of Eden.

"The Fountain" is a poem that expresses change, not only in nature, but in mankind. Bryant sees the fall of man from the garden of Eden, and questions what will be his fate. The poem does not end in Bryant's usual optimistic outlook, or even a pessimistic outlook. Bryant ends the poem with an unanswered question. Therefore, I suggest that Bryant did not know what he felt about the outcome of mankind's sojourn on earth. Bryant knew where he was going in his life and after death, but he did not know the answer for future generations.

Bryant expresses the geological theory of dynamic change in "The Fountain." Only in one other poem, "A Hymn of the Sea," can one find imagery of the geological theory of dynamic change of the earth. Bryant accepts it, and it does not interfere with his religious convictions although he, himself, prefers the Christian concept of the creation and change in the world.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

William Cullen Bryant considered poetry an expression of inner feeling that he had no choice but to release, as he states in "I Cannot Forget With What Fevrid Devotion." In his "Lectures on Poetry," Bryant stated that poetry should appeal to the imagination and emotions of the readers as well as uplift them. Bryant's poetry is a successful statement of his beliefs. One can see the lone waterfowl in the sky as Bryant describes it in "To a Waterfowl" or be alone with nature like Bryant in "The Prairies." Although Albert F. Mclean, Jr., asserts that Bryant only restates old truths in his poetry (William Cullen Bryant, 131), he does so in his own distinct manner, as in "Thanatopsis." Bryant was a visionary about nature in his poetry. He expresses his concern for the future of nature in "The Fountain." Today with oil spills, nuclear weapons, and atmospheric pollution, his fears are well founded. In many respects, Bryant is a poet of today because his interests were those that Americans have faced since the beginning of urbanization in this country.

Bryant can be called the Poet of American Nature. He considered nature as the teacher of humanity. Bryant
learned one major lesson from nature, the assurance of immortality of the soul. He saw rebirth in nature, especially in the flowers, which illustrated the spiritual concept of rebirth. Early in his career he had his moments of doubt, but by the time he wrote "Waiting by the Gate," he had achieved the deepest and profoundest religious belief in the immortality of the soul. Nature was Bryant's escape from the life of the city. He followed the Romantic philosophy that Nature was a teacher and a haven for man from the noise and pollution of the city. His religious view of Nature was that nature was transcended by God even though Nature and God may represent the same thing at times in his poetry.

Although Bryant travelled abroad, his descriptions of nature are best when discussing America. As an amateur biologist, especially a botanist, he was aware of the American species of plants and animals. As the editor of The New York Evening Post, he kept up with the scientific discoveries and philosophies of the time, and translated some of these into his poetry, as illustrated in "Hymn to the Sea" and "The Fountain."

Bryant's imagery drawn from nature suggests various concepts. His streams represent the flow of life and the poetic inspiration. Trees represent the last stronghold of nature against the encroachment of the advancing civilization of the Americans. Flowers represent rebirth and
immortality of the soul. Mountains are places of refuge and a source of the poetic inspiration. One pervasive element in Bryant's imagery is that of nature's indifference to man. It is something of a paradox that Bryant could rely on nature to be his teacher but state that nature really does not care for man. Nature to him is not a personal nature like his god. Rarely will Bryant discuss his personal philosophy of nature, and if he does, it is only as poet or persona. In this belief Bryant is closer to the British seventeenth-century philosophers than to the British romantics. Like that of the romantics, Bryant's nature was a religious and moral teacher, but he was too orthodox in his approach to religion to be a full-fledged romantic where nature is concerned.

As previously mentioned, Bryant was concerned for the future of nature in civilization's hands. He was aware of the technological advances of his time and could foresee the trend that they would take. His belief in the geological change of the earth was tempered by his religious views. He was willing to accept new theories, but always viewed them with suspicion when they challenged his religious beliefs. Bryant did mix science and religion as long as there was no major conflict between them. In many of his poems, the reader sees that Bryant accepts scientific theory and religious belief with equanimity.
The American Indian, to Bryant, symbolized a time when man was closer to both Nature and God. In Bryant's opinion, the Indian was closer to nature and God spiritually than the white man. Bryant frequently uses the image of the Indian when discussing periods of change in civilizations, as illustrated in "An Indian Warrior at the Burial-Place of his Father." The state of nature in which the Indian lived was purer and wilder before the white man entered America. These points find expression in Bryant's romantic concept of the Indian. In actuality, Bryant drew a line between the Indian as a romantic ideal and the real Indian in contemporary affairs. If the Indians did not do as the Congress ordered in the treaties, Bryant condemned their actions from the editorial page of The New York Evening Post.

Howard Mumford Jones states that Bryant could be called the Poet of Death because an uncommon amount of his poetry is dedicated to the phenomenon of Death (30). Bryant had an almost obsessive quality when discussing death. Stanley Brodwin is much closer to the truth when he writes that Bryant's poetry is his rejection of death. On the other hand, Bryant wrote about what every person must face. In "Hymn to Death" and "Thanatopsis," Bryant tells us to face death with confidence. Bryant himself faced death with confidence. In "Waiting by the Gate" and "The Flood of the Years," it is Bryant who is confident of entering a place of serenity which will be populated by the good and the great,
his friends, his parents, his wife, Christ, and, most important, the Omnipotent Creator of the Universe. Death, for Bryant, is only the beginning of a new and wonderful existence—truly the passageway into another life.

It is surprising that Bryant was overlooked in the cultural revolution in the 1960's in America. His concern for the environment, for political freedom, his stand on slavery, and his anti-war outlook should have made him popular in the 1960's. If there is a condemnation of Bryant, and it is a mild one, it is that he lacked the forcefulness of character to carry his ideas to extremes such as Henry David Thoreau did by going to Walden's Pond. He also lacked the time. While he was the editor of The New York Evening Post, Bryant was trying to re-establish the popularity of the magazine because the editor before him had made several unwise decisions and the circulation of the magazine was down. It is no wonder that Bryant had to sacrifice his poetic career at times. He himself writes in a letter to Richard Dana,

Mean time I have no leisure for poetry. The labors in which I am engaged would not be great to many people, but they are as great as I can endure with a proper regard to my health. (Bryant II and Voss, 101)

Bryant may have continued to write poetry for himself during the some fifty years he edited The New York Evening Post, but he did not publish it for spans of three years or more at times.
Bryant is a poet for everyone. He discusses thoughts that were as relevant in his time as in ours. His poetry is simple, but powerful, and at times prophetic. Only when he is read and studied widely will Bryant's relevance as a poet for modern America be fully recognized.
WORKS CITED


