NATURE IN WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT'S POETRY

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NATURE IN WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT'S POETRY

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PREFACE

Materials for this study have been drawn primarily from Bryant's Poetical Works, Roslyn Edition, and from Parke Godwin's The Life and Works of William Cullen Bryant, in six volumes. No complete edition of Bryant has been published since the standard edition by Parke Godwin sixty years ago. There has been relatively little biographical and critical material published recently concerning Bryant; therefore, in the main, the writer's treatment and her conclusions are original.

Bryant was studied from four points of view; namely, his family and social background, his treatment of external nature, his philosophical interpretation of nature, and his use of romantic elements in his nature poetry.

The purpose has been to discover from the study of Bryant's life and poetry the extent to which his work was influenced by nature and how he interpreted it.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td></td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>THE LIFE OF BRYANT IN RELATION TO NATURE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>BRYANT'S TREATMENT OF EXTERNAL NATURE</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>NATURE IN RELATION TO BRYANT'S PHILOSOPHY</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>BRYANT'S TREATMENT OF NATURE AS AN EVIDENCE OF HIS ROMANTICISM</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.</td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td></td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

THE LIFE OF BRYANT IN RELATION TO NATURE

Nature has been interpreted by great thinkers in different ways. Man's view of nature depends partly upon the time and place in which he lives and partly upon his individual temperament. For our present purpose we may consider nature from three different points of view: that of the primitive man, that of the scientist, and that of the romantic philosophical poet.

The primitive man's interpretation of nature was a great mass of superstitions growing out of ignorance and fear. Primitive man believed that in the forces of nature there was destructive as well as healing power. He conceived the winds as spirits who brought happiness and good wishes to mankind. He thought of trees as living beings who might injure or protect him. He identified the violence of storms with the power of supernatural beings. According to Germanic mythology, "Thor is the god of thunder and is the strongest and bravest of gods."¹ This being his belief, he thought that "Thor launched the thunder, presided

over the air and the seasons, and protected man from lightning and evil spirits."\(^2\) These primitive beliefs, which attributed natural phenomena to the agency of lawless powers, are contrary to the natural laws of science.

While superstition holds the human mind in bondage to blind magic and fear, science brings increasing freedom through comprehension and rational use of natural forces.\(^3\)

So, with the progress of science and education, superstition has rapidly given way before demonstrable fact. "To the scientist," says John Dewey, "Nature is the domain of vigorous law."\(^4\) In other words, the scientist conceives the universe as bound together by mighty forces which he calls laws of nature. This universe, we are told, would be dissolved into mere atoms should these laws of nature be broken. The universe, being bound together by the laws of nature, exists as a unit for the mind that sees into things. In the romantic philosophy the ultimate reality is somehow connected with the unity in nature. Joseph Warren Beach, interpreting the romantic concept of nature, tells us that the "mere scientific faculty is incapable of apprehending this ultimate reality and that it becomes the concern of romantic poets to 'see into the life of things.'"\(^5\)

\(^2\)Ibid. \(^3\)Article on "Superstition," ibid., p. 2077. 
That is, the poet perceives imaginatively the spiritual basis of reality. Inasmuch as science is incapable of providing this spiritual principle in nature, it becomes the poet's duty to reveal it to us. The romantic poet, as in the case of Wordsworth, often assumed not only that nature is imbued with spiritual power, but that there is an impulse, latent at least, in every man which is, he sometimes feels, in unison with the spirit in nature. When this sense of unity is strong, it seems to him that the wisdom of the universal Being flows into him. Thus is he divinely taught through nature. A consequence of this relationship between man and nature is that, to the seer, nature appears to be the image of his own mind, and it is almost as if he created what his senses perceive.

With the dawn of a new nation came the early colonists who lived a life of simple nature. Nature held full sway over them because it was impossible for them to live unrelated to it in a new world where nothing existed except untamed nature. Isolated from their mother country and separated from each other by vast wildernesses, the colonists were forced to depend upon their own initiative to accomplish their purpose in life. Thus they set out to establish "a new society based upon the Puritan ideals of democracy and righteousness." The growth of a new society

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6William J. Long, American Literature, p. 4.
meant time and effort on the part of each colonist. In this new world, with its simplicity of nature, there was a call for action, not literature. The colonists found that their time and effort were spent in clearing land, building homes, finding food, and protecting themselves against the Indians. These efforts were the beginning of this new society. While the colonists were mainly concerned in making a living, they probably kept in mind their Puritan ideals, and also dreamed of a time in which they might be able to assert themselves in literature. With no leisure, no democracy, and only a practical view of life, the cultural type of literature was denied them. Hence we have from them only that type of literature which interprets and reflects their lives in the colony. Although colonial literature was merely an interpretative view of colonial life, it is true that with them we have the beginning of our nature literature in America. With these forerunners of nature came not only the beginning of nature literature, but also a feeling of independence and a desire for freedom of worship.

After more than a century of colonial experience, our nation witnessed a period of change. This period, known as the Revolutionary Period, brought with it a social, political, religious, and literary upheaval. It brought a decided change upon our nation because it gave us freedom of
worship, political and economic independence, and the beginnings of a national literature. With social growth came a demand for newspapers and magazines, and with the turmoil of the war for independence came a demand for oratory, ballads, and satires. After the war was won, man began to assert his rights as an individual because he saw life in a different light. With all this reform came the development of a new type of literature which brings us something more practical, more creative, and more national.

This type of literature found its way into America through the forerunner of American poetry, who was none other than Philip Freneau. Even though Freneau witnessed an age of turmoil, which he found an opportune time to write political satire, he soon turned to nature poetry which reflected the life of America. Perhaps Freneau did not encounter the obstacles encountered by Thomson and Cowper in England, for he was living in a New World with new ideas, devoid of the formal type in early English literature. He found favor in America because his poetry appealed to humanity and he took a decided stand in the romantic movement. His poems entitled "The Indian Burying Ground" and "The Wild Honeysuckle" reflect the age in which he lived; therefore people were ready to accept his poetry. Freneau was speaking to American people in his own manner, a way in which he could be understood by his own nation.
Thus we may conclude "that this romantic movement in American literature had an independent origin in this country."\(^7\)

With the close of the Revolutionary Period, with all its turmoil and with the beginning of romantic literature, came the National Period, in which the nation was being more closely unified by such new developments as the national road, which extended from Chesapeake Bay to the Ohio River, the steamboat, the Baltimore and Ohio Railway, and the rapid increase in territory and population. With all this unification came a growth in democracy accompanied by an industrial development in which there was an increase of wealth and education. "This age in literature is remarkable for two things: for the establishment of democracy in government, and for the triumph of romanticism in literature."\(^8\) This romantic age was an opportune time for such writers as Irving, Cooper, and Bryant because there was a demand for literature that showed originality, harmony with nature, and patriotism.

Irving's influence as a writer came through his contact with the natural surroundings and through his contact with the Dutch descendants, not through his ancestry. His father was a Scotchman from the Orkney Islands, and his mother was born in England. Irving, we are told, was born

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\(^7\)Ibid., p. 143.  
\(^8\)Ibid.
in New York City in 1783, when the place was a picturesque
country town. Through Irving's contact with the Dutch de-
cendants, he gained a knowledge of many traditions and pe-
culiarities of the Dutch people which he later used in his
writings. Like almost all boys he enjoyed hunting, explo-
ing the Hudson, and watching ships go out to sea. "It was
given to Irving to make clear to his countrymen that Ameri-
cans were competent not merely to organize a state, but to
produce literature."9 Perhaps this statement is true, be-
cause we find in his writings the original atmosphere mixed
with his romantic imagination. In his famous short story
entitled "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" he uses as a back-
ground the Sleepy Hollow region on the Hudson where he
used to make frequent explorations. In this story he de-
scribes the Indian summer, calls our attention to the
whistling quail, makes mention of the bubbling brook among
the alders and dwarf willows, and paints for us a picture of
the clouds floating in the sky.10 In still another of his
famous short stories entitled "Rip Van Winkle" we have some
more of his vivid description mingled with romantic imagina-
tion. Poerster says, "Irving, as well as later men, per-
ceived the beauty and sublimity of the natural setting for

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10 Reuben Post Halleck, History of American Literature, pp. 119-120.
American civilization."\textsuperscript{11} Thus we may conceive Irving as our first romantic prose writer.

Like Irving, Cooper was drawn to nature in early childhood. He was born in New Jersey, but he spent most of his life in central New York, where his father founded a village which came to be known as Cooperstown. This village was located near Otsego Lake, where Cooper enjoyed much of nature's beauty. Through his contact with natural surroundings and his acquaintance with early settlers, trappers, and Indians, he found material for his novels. A further knowledge of sea life came through Cooper's training and experience on a naval vessel for one year. Through these sources of information, he was able to write of the Indian, the pioneer, the forest, and the sea. Cooper tells us in The Leather-Stocking Tales much concerning the conquest of the wilderness, the romantic forest life, and the wonders of the sea. With his minute descriptions of the forest and sea and his vivid portrayal of the American pioneer and the American Indian, we can readily see that he was a prose romancer of a truly native type. The Last of the Mohicans, which is a favorite of many among this group, "brings us face to face with the activities of nature and man in God's great out of doors."\textsuperscript{12} Cooper found his best inspiration

\textsuperscript{11}Norman Foerster, *Nature in American Literature*, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{12}Halleck, *op. cit.*, p. 132.
for writing when he entered the forest alone.

(Among our early writers, none was more thoroughly representative of native American culture than William Cullen Bryant, and in none were more happily fused the qualities of both the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. His ancestry was of Puritan stock, and he was recognized as a descendant of John and Priscilla Alden. His mother was of the Puritan type, that is, "after the type of woman described in Proverbs XXXI." ¹³ She went about doing good, attending to her home duties, bringing up her children in the paths of righteousness, and caring for the sick, not only in her own household, but also in her neighbors' homes. She even devoted much of her time to the teaching of her children, as schools were comparatively scarce in those days. Through the influence and teaching of this Puritan mother, Bryant's character was molded and his religious ideas were formed. In this home, as well as in other Puritan homes, children were brought up to have a reasonable understanding of the Bible. They were taught the necessity of prayer by all the family assembling for prayer daily. With these home influences and practices, it is no wonder that Bryant remained the poet he did and lived a life beyond reproach. Even though Bryant's mother rightly deserved all the credit bestowed upon her for his character.

¹³John Bigelow, William Cullen Bryant, p. 6.
and religious training, it was Bryant's father who influenced him most in his early attachments to nature. His father, being a country physician after his times and having a knowledge of botany, helped his son to attain a better understanding of nature. Not only through his knowledge of botany was he influential, but also through his love of books and poetry. They made frequent strolls together about the countryside. Through these strolls, Bryant gained the knowledge of both plant and animal life which he uses so effectively in his poems. Through his mother's careful guidance and through his father's teaching of the love of nature, Bryant was well prepared to understand his natural surroundings. Having been born in Cummington, Massachusetts, among all the natural beauty of the scenic Berkshire Hills, Bryant was afforded wonderful opportunities for developing his love of nature. According to various authorities, this New England country resembled the English Lake Country in which Wordsworth was born and where he formed his early attachment to nature. Through this scenic country, with its mountains, forests, and lakes, Bryant wandered with his father. Through this contact with the hills and woods, and through his contact with the unsophisticated rural inhabitants, he came to know nature in somewhat the same sense as did Wordsworth.

Since Bryant lived, as a youth, rather isolated from
city dwellers and even from neighbors, he had to provide for his own entertainment. Not being able to resort to sports, theaters, or other entertainments, he found early contentment and pleasure in his natural surroundings. Perhaps Bryant found some pleasure at school with other boys, but his school days were few because the term of the village school in that day was short. Even when he was in school, he found more pleasure in the woods and along the streams than he did in play or study. Yet the Bryant boys were brought up to know the hardships of country life, and they were taught to bear their part of the labors of the farm. When they were not in school nor working on the farm, they delighted in exploring surrounding fields for themselves. Bryant's son-in-law, who wrote his most authoritative biography, writes:

Day after day they scoured the depths of the woods, climbing the hills or descending into the ravines until there was not a thicket, a precipice, a brooklet, or even a tree, with which they were not as well acquainted as they were with the objects of their own house. 14

The same authority says further:

Their real objects when they went abroad, if they had any beyond the joys of mere physical exercise, were squirrels, birds' nests, wood-chucks, rabbits, and fruits and nuts in their seasons. 15

14 Parke Godwin, A Biography of William Cullen Bryant, I, 63. The two volumes of this biography constitute Vols. I and II of The Life and Works of William Cullen Bryant.

15 Ibid.
Like Wordsworth's, Bryant's rambles through the woods in his childhood days were not made merely for scenery alone, but also for the sheer joy of bodily activity. Both Bryant and Wordsworth found pleasure in shooting squirrels and rabbits, robbing birds' nests, and stealing fruits and nuts, according to the seasons. Wordsworth's theory was that the moral effect of such deeds somehow passes into the bloodstream through memory and permanently influences the moral life. If this theory be true, Bryant's love of natural beauty as a moral force was infused in childhood. Like Wordsworth, in later life "Bryant evinced a vehement repugnance to all kinds of needless life-taking." It is quite obvious that Bryant's feeling of guilt toward these boyish lapses from the moral law, like Wordsworth's, led to a feeling of remorse, and finally to repentance. Thus the sins of childhood may be justified as experience through which we develop our moral nature. In like manner, temptations are justified because without them we have no obstacles to overcome. Fear of sin and struggle against temptations help to form character and promote spiritual growth.

Bryant was like Thomson in that his experience of the "familiar aspects of nature was direct and unimpeded, and the spectacles of books enlarged his range of vision."  

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16 Ibid., p. 64.

In addition to Bryant's little knowledge gained in the village school and his mother's home teaching, he had access to many worthwhile books in his father's library. His reading of books of botany from this source must have taught him much of plant life. Not only did Dr. Bryant's library contain books of botany, but also works of some of the greatest masters of English literature: Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Thomson, Burns, Cowper, Scott, Southey, and Wordsworth. The Bryants, being kept busy throughout the day with all the necessary farm chores, found it most convenient to do their reading at night before the birchwood fire. Pope was favored by Dr. Bryant and for a while by the children, but when later they became acquainted with Spenser, Pope was laid aside, because Spenser's stories of giants, knights, fairies, and fair ladies furnished them much better entertainment. Bryant, as a youth, did not seem to understand Milton; therefore he read little from him. Thus he turned to Cowper because "Cowper's plainer sense, coupled with an equally fervent religiousness, rendered him a more familiar companion."18 Our poet enjoyed Scott and Byron but not to the extent that he enjoyed Wordsworth. It seemed that Wordsworth appealed to Bryant more because he lived among similar scenery to that which

18 Godwin, op. cit., I, 62.
Wordsworth described. Wordsworth must have had a stronger appeal for Bryant than any other poet. Especially did his *Lyrical Ballads* appeal to Bryant. Dana, describing the effect of Wordsworth upon Bryant, says that "upon opening his book, a thousand springs seemed to gush up at once in his heart, and the face of nature, of a sudden, to change into a strange freshness of life."\(^{19}\)

Even though Bryant's ancestry, environment, and books had a wonderful influence upon his life in relation to nature, they did not, according to McDowell, instil in Bryant the love of nature. "His love of nature was instilled within him because his affection for the world about him was intuitive and spontaneous."\(^{20}\) In other words, it took both these natural surroundings and this natural affection for Bryant to become one with nature. With this natural affection, Bryant possessed a great discerning sympathy and a great observing power. "I was always," declared Bryant, "from my earliest years a delighted observer of external nature."\(^{21}\) His being a delighted observer of external nature probably caused him to deal more closely with the details of life than other poets have done. Even though he wrote


\(^{21}\) *Ibid.*
more poems of external nature than any other poet, let us not forget that he also found God in nature. "In everything about him he saw and felt something new of the goodness of God." 22 It is evident that Bryant must have spoken just as the Puritans in regard to God and nature in that they saw "God's power in the order of the universe and His wisdom in its government." 23 That is, Bryant not only saw the beauty of the universe, but he also felt the guidance of the Supreme Being.

After carefully considering Bryant's life in relation to nature and God, one becomes thoroughly convinced that he was a true nature poet. As a poet, he always excites the imagination, touches the heart, and appeals to the understanding. 24 "But if nature drew him to poetry, it is equally true that poetry drew him to nature." 25 In other words, Bryant found more pleasure in writing poetry than in doing anything else. His few years spent as lawyer proved rather unpleasant; therefore he gave up the profession and became editor of a literary magazine. Later he became editor of a

22 John Bigelow, William Cullen Bryant, p. 140.


24 William Cullen Bryant, Prose Works, I, 8, edited by Parke Godwin. (The two volumes of Prose Works constitute Vols. V and VI of The Life and Works of William Cullen Bryant, and hereinafter are referred to as Prose Works.)

daily newspaper, which place he filled the remainder of his life; but he was happiest writing poetry. His moments of ecstasy came not when he was with man in the crowded street, but when he was alone in some secluded place where he might commune with God and nature.
CHAPTER II

BRYANT'S TREATMENT OF EXTERNAL NATURE

"Nature, for Bryant, was an educative process made real to him by his living near it and receiving the instructions afforded by it in his youth. These instructions came through the daily observation of natural phenomena and adventurous pilgrimages among plants and animals in the woods and fields.

I was always from my earliest years a delighted observer of external nature -- the splendors of a winter daybreak over the wide wastes of snow seen from over windows, the glories of the autumnal woods, the gloomy approaches of the thunderstorm, and its departure amid sunshine and rainbows, the return of spring, with its flowers, and the first snowfall of winter."¹

Bryant's taste for botany was fostered early in his youth by his father. Both the country homes in which Bryant was reared were surrounded by nature's beauty. Through these natural surroundings and through his father's influence, Bryant came to know and to appreciate the botanical atmosphere to the fullest extent throughout his youth. Although Bryant was compelled to leave his home, surrounded by nature's beauty, to attend college, and, later, to take

up his editorial work, he never forgot the early experiences that had so deeply impressed him. Thus, as soon as he had accumulated sufficient money, after living in New York for several years as editor, he purchased a little farm, consisting of forty acres, at Roslyn, Long Island. On this farm he was again privileged to enjoy the pleasures of his boyhood days, such as cultivating his garden and taking long strolls, thus discovering more about plant and animal life. Through his untiring efforts and long hours of work he soon collected sufficient material with which to establish a scientific library for his own use. With his keen interest in botany and his eagerness to inform other people about it, he soon resorted to giving botanical lectures.

Evidence of this fact may be noted in his lecture entitled "Our Native Fruits and Flowers." The first plant of any consideration in this lecture is the rose, to which he refers as "Queen of Flowers."2 He tells us that the rose has been improved by the florist's taking the roses of warmer climates and crossing them with the roses of the colder climates. Thus, we have plants which endure our seasons and bloom from early spring until frost. The life of the peach tree, Bryant finds, is very short because the horticulturist has not sought means of improving its growth.

2William Cullen Bryant, Prose Works, II, 195.
The apricot, he discovers, seldom produces fruit in our country because the blossoms are usually killed by the early frosts. In Bryant's time, it is a fact, people were eating fruits cross-bred and improved by the Old World, but America was progressing slowly in the field of horticulture at that time. He frankly tells us that we neglect our native fruits because we have the productions of the Old World improved and placed in our hands. In connection with this thought he makes the following statement:

If we had only our native fruits to cultivate; if we had but the crabapple of our forest and the wild plum of our thickets from which to form our orchards; if we had only the aboriginal flowers of our woods and fields to domesticate in our gardens -- what haste would we make to mellow the harsh juices of the fruits and to heighten and vary the beauty of the flowers?

Excepting the improvement of the strawberry, blackberry, gooseberry, and rose, little had been done at this time toward improving the plant life of our country. So Bryant, keenly interested in plant life, urges the horticulturists of America to begin working to improve our plants. He further admonishes man to feel it his duty to improve plant growth by reminding him that "the earliest occupation of Man was to tend and dress the garden in which his Maker placed him." Man's interest in plant life, Bryant thought, would cause him to have purer thoughts, thus leading to

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3 Ibid., p. 199.  4 Ibid.  5 Ibid., p. 201.
good deeds. With this thought in mind Bryant says, "The sense of beauty, the grateful perception of harmony of color and of grace, and fair proportion of shape, enter the mind and wean it from grosser and more sensual tastes."\(^6\) Bryant comments the Horticultural Society as being worthwhile in that it seeks to improve all phases of plant life that have been placed before us for our own use and comfort.

Further evidence of Bryant's knowledge of botany may be noted in his lecture called "The Utility of Trees." In this lecture he discusses the value of trees and points out the need of forest conservation. No tree conservation laws were enforced at that time; therefore people felled trees for personal use whenever they saw fit to do so. This being true, Bryant began advocating the need for the government to pass laws whereby the trees of America might be preserved and protected. His earnest desire for this law to be enforced may be seen in the following statement:

We should see the highways skirted by double rows of trees, long lines of plantation following the courses of the railroads, belts of forest trees planted to break the force of the winds and shelter the tender crops and the orchards which bear fruit.\(^7\)

Trees are not only important for their scenic value, but also for their protective value. Trees serve as a protection in that they help keep the cold winds from

\(^{6}\text{Ibid.}\) \(^{7}\text{Ibid., p. 403.}\)
freezing fruit and tender crops of any kind, and they help protect animals that have to be out in the weather. Furthermore, trees help retain moisture in the earth. Where they are found the moisture remains longer because the sun does not strike the earth to dry it out. The fallen leaves of the trees in like manner preserve moisture because they absorb it, thus preventing the water from passing off so rapidly. This moisture, withheld by trees, gradually finds its way into the earth, part of it finally passing into springs and rivers, while a portion of the moisture finds its way into the roots of trees. Through a process, called osmosis, this moisture passes on through the various roots into the leaves, thus nourishing the tree. This moisture is finally "given off to the air from the leaves to form vapors, which are afterward condensed into showers."

In this lecture, as Bryant points out, we are made to see the value of trees as protection against droughts and extreme weather, and as an aid in retaining moisture in the earth.

After considering Bryant's attitude toward trees through a study of his prose writings, the writer finds it is still more interesting to notice his close observation of trees as found in his poems. As indicated in Bryant's poems, he was quite familiar with trees. The trees of his poetry

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8Ibid., p. 405.
number forty-three: namely, palm, oak, beech, hemlock, maple, pine, willow, yew, hazel, larch, sassafras, chestnut, elm, olive, birch, fig, pomegranate, lemon, cherry, cocoa, papaya, cypress, lime, orange, hemlock-fir, linden, tulip-tree, plum, plane, hickory, butternut, catalpa, cedar, fir, black-walnut, pear, apricot, aspen, poplar, alder, nectarine, cornel, and viburnum. The last three, which are less familiar, are commonly known, respectively, as a variety of the peach, the dogwood, and the black haw. Of this list of trees our poet repeats the oak twenty-six times, permitting the name to occur in twenty-two different poems. In three poems the oak appears more than once as indicated in the following poems: "Among the Trees" twice, "The Prairies" twice, and "The Little People of the Snow" three times. It is especially interesting to notice the different adjectives he uses to describe the oak, such as powerful, gray, old, tall, sturdy, and mighty. In his most famous poem, "Thanatopsis," he suggests the power of the oak when he says:

    . . . the oak
    Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.  

Here he shows that man goes back to earth from whence he came and there he will be mixed with the elements of the earth, while this oak takes in some of these elements

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9 William Cullen Bryant, The Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant, Roslyn Edition, p. 22. (Hereafter references to this source will be referred to as Poetical Works.)
through its roots. In "After a Tempest" he refers to the gray oak:

To the gray oak the squirrel, chiding, clung,
And chirping from the ground the grasshopper upsprung. 10

In "The Hunter's Serenade" he identifies the oak with age when he describes it thus:

Our old oaks stream with mosses,
And sprout with mistletoe. 11

Again, in "The Prairies," he calls attention to "the dim forest crowded with old oaks." 12 In "The Antiquity of Freedom" he refers to oaks as "tall oaks" 13 that grew in the early forests uncultivated. He refers to sturdy oaks in "Our Country's Call" in emphasizing the need of sturdy men. 14 Then he suggests the might of oaks in "Oh Mother of a Mighty Race" because he compares the might of man with oaks in the following lines:

What generous men
Spring, like thine oaks, by hill and glen. 15

But more vividly does Bryant identify the oak with might when he suggests to us his moments of ecstasy in "A Forest Hymn":

This mighty oak --
By whose immovable stem I stand and seem
Almost annihilated -- not a prince,
In all that proud old world beyond the deep,
E'er wore his crown as loftily as he

10 Ibid., p. 67. 11 Ibid., p. 119.
12 Ibid., p. 131. 13 Ibid., p. 198.
14 Ibid., p. 263. 15 Ibid., p. 214.
Wears the green coronal of leaves with which
Thy hand has graced him. 16

In a similar manner Bryant gives us vivid word pictures of the pine tree; however, he mentions it fewer times. He refers to the pine in eleven different poems, in various terms, such as "branching pine," "proud pine," "gnarled pines," "snow-loaded pines," "sighing pines," "huge pines," and "odorous pines." More especially does this last description appeal to the writer because it suggests Bryant's sense of smell. In two specific poems concerning pines, "Life" and "Castles in the Air," there is found the suggestion of the love of fragrant odors. In "Life" he refers to odors in the following manner:

This stream of odors flowing by
From clover-field and clumps of pine,
This music, thrilling all the sky,
From all the morning birds, are thine. 17

Again, he refers to odors thus:

... and then arose
Woods tall and wide, of odorous pine and fir,
And every noble tree that casts the leaf
In autumn. 18

The two other trees that Bryant mentions most frequently are the maple and the beech. He refers to them eight times each. Bryant's reference to maples in the "Rivulet" is particularly interesting to the writer because it suggests his

16 Ibid., p. 80. 17 Ibid., p. 174.
childhood days. In the following lines our poet suggests this idea:

Upon yon hill
The tall old maples, verdant still,
Yet tell, in grandeur of decay,
How swift the years have passed away,
Since first, a child, and half afraid,
I wandered in the forest shade. 19

In like manner Bryant refers to beeches in "The Green Mountain Boys." This poem suggests his boyhood pleasure in camping in the forest and using branches from the beech trees with which to build fires. Still in another poem entitled "Lines on Revisiting the Country" he refers to both the maple and the beech when he speaks of viewing the beechen forest and maple-boughs from his native hill.

As the writer has mentioned before, Bryant possessed a very keen sense of smell. This fact may be noted when he speaks of the fragrant birch in "The Murdered Traveller," the fragrance of lemon-groves in "Romero," the fragrance of willows in "The Arctic Lover," and the fragrance of the wild-plum in "The Strange Lady."

The writer particularly finds pleasure in reading Bryant's little poem called "The Planting of the Apple-Tree" because from her reading she knows that he was well acquainted with apple trees. In fact, "William Cullen Bryant and his brothers under their mother's direction had

19Ibid., p. 51.
planted near the Bryant homestead, apple trees which survived for several decades."\(^{20}\)

Some forty years later, Bryant himself was planting trees on his estate at Roslyn and meditating: "Hereafter, men, whose existence is at present merely possible, will gather pears from the trees which I have set in the ground, and wonder what old covey ... of past ages planted them."\(^{21}\)

From these thoughts, we are told, came Bryant's inspiration for writing the above-mentioned poem. To the writer, this poem is very suggestive of Bryant's knowledge of plants as well as his love of nature. In the first stanza he points out his care for plants when he says:

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There gently lay the roots, and there
Sift the dark mould with kindly care,
And press it o'er them tenderly,
As, round the sleeping infant's feet,
We softly fold the cradle-sheet;
So plant we the apple-tree.\(^{22}\)
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Then he thinks of the apple-tree as a home for the thrush, as well as a protection for man from the sun and shower. He is also mindful of the fragrance of apple blossoms for his favorite insect, the bee, as well as for the sick girl. Here, too, is a suggestion of Bryant's sense of taste when he speaks of the fruit of the apple-tree being enjoyed by the children. After considering the benefits derived from planting the apple-tree, Bryant becomes somewhat pensive because age lays waste to the tree as it does to all forms


\(^{21}\)Ibid.

\(^{22}\)Poetical Works, p. 222.
of nature.

Along with Bryant's consideration of specific trees, it is worthwhile to notice five of his poems which deal with trees from a general standpoint. In "Autumn Woods" he points out for us a colorful landscape picture. He says the trees

Seem groups of giant kings, in purple and gold,
That guard the enchanted ground. 23

The foliage of the trees "twinkles, like beams of light," 24 says Bryant, when the rays of the sun shine upon the leaves and when the breezes softly blow them to and fro. He regrets that so soon the beautiful hues of the forest must disappear with the approaching winter.

In his "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood" there seems to come an invitation to everyone who is weary of the toils of life to enter the wood and commune with nature. Here in this wood the soft breezes that blow through the green branches seem to stir your emotions. The sweet singing of the birds and the merry chirping of the insects bring joy to your heart, while the babbling stream, warmed by the sun from a clear sky, calls your attention to many movements caused by nature. Among all these soothing forms of nature, Bryant seemed to feel a consoling power.

In a similar manner Bryant points out the soothing

23 Ibid., p. 68. 24 Ibid., p. 69.
power of nature in his "Green River." In this poem he expresses his desire to get away from study and care and view the woodland scenes where he may partake of nature as he did in his early years. The tree that our poet particularly refers to in this poem is the plane-tree, which he describes thus:

And the plane-tree's speckled arms o'ershoot
The swifter current that mines its root,
Through whose shifting leaves, as you walk the hill,
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.25

In his poem "Among the Trees" Bryant more poetically describes trees than he does in his poem called "Autumn Woods." Here he points out how trees are interwoven with other phases of nature to make them even more attractive by saying:

Oh ye who love to overhang the springs,
And stand by running waters, ye whose boughs
Make beautiful the rocks o'er which they play,
Who pile with foliage the great hills, and rear
A paradise upon the lonely plain,
Trees of the forest, and the open field;26

However, the most exquisite description of trees in this poem is the one which tells us that when autumn comes "the kings of the earth, arrayed in all their majesty, are not arrayed as the trees with red and gold."27

Then in Bryant's beautiful poem "A Forest Hymn," he recognizes what God did for nature when he made the tree.

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25 Ibid., p. 28.  
26 Ibid., p. 321.  
27 Ibid., p. 323.
Father, thy hand
Hath reared these venerable columns, thou
Didst weave this verdant roof. Thou didst look down
Upon the naked earth, and, forthwith, rose
All these fair ranks of trees. 28

Here Bryant perceives trees as clothing the earth, protecting other phases of nature, and adding beauty and joy to nature for everyone. So it is that Bryant asks that these trees of the forest be preserved not only for nature's sake, but also for man's. Unlike Whittier, Bryant found that among the trees under an open sky was the best place for meditation. Whereas Whittier found closer communion with God in the closed church, Bryant found it under the groves of trees.

In like manner Bryant was as close an observer of flowers as of trees, for he mentions at least forty-four different species. The violet is mentioned more often than any other of his flowers; there are altogether nineteen references to it. Foerster is in error in asserting that no other flower is mentioned more than twice, for the present writer found the rose mentioned ten times, the lily four times, and the gentian three times. Bryant's references to violets indicate that he associates them with the coming of spring, that he is particularly fond of them, that he is familiar with the places where they grow, and that he enjoys their perfume. In "The Rivulet" he speaks

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28 Ibid., p. 79.
of the violet "in soft May dew"; in "The Yellow Violet" he refers to it as "peeping from last year's leaves below"; and in "A Rain Dream" he declares the friendly clouds drop down spring violets. Evidence of Bryant's choice of flowers is found in his poem "A Sick-Bed," in which he says:

Beside me, where I rest,
Thy loving hands will set
The flowers that please me best --
Moss-rose and violet.

In "An Indian Story" he lets his reader know where the young violet grows and how dear it is to him. He notices the violet's fragrance in "The Yellow Violet":

Sweet flower, I love, in forest bare,
To meet thee, when thy faint perfume
Alone is in the virgin air.

In like manner Bryant was interested in roses. The rose, it seems, he likes to associate with the month of June. Perhaps his reason for this is that he favored June as a month and the rose as a flower. In "The West Wind," in "Spring in Town," and in "In Memoriam" he associates roses with June. His most exquisite lines referring to the rose appear in his poem, "A Scene on the Banks of the Hudson":

The rose that lives its little hour
Is prized beyond the sculptured flower.

To the gentian, as to his favorite violet, Bryant devoted one entire poem, "To the Fringed Gentian." It seems

29 Ibid., p. 52.  30 Ibid., p. 23.
31 Ibid., p. 227.  32 Ibid., p. 243.
33 Ibid., p. 23.  34 Ibid., p. 116.
to the writer that Bryant sympathized with the gentian more than with any other flower because it appeared so lonely; yet he praised it for its beauty, especially its color of blue, and for its coming when all other flowers have hidden themselves from autumn's dew.

The other flower to which Bryant devoted a whole poem is the painted cup. In his poem "The Painted Cup" he tells us of a flower that is common to the prairie folk. The point of particular interest to the writer in this poem is the fact that Bryant is thinking of the insects, especially the thirsty bee, that might like to drink from the cups of this flower.

Bryant is less familiar with insects than with flowers, as he indicates in his poems, for he mentions only seventeen different kinds of insects. The bee seems to be his favorite insect because he refers to it twenty-five times in twenty-five different poems. What interested the writer most in Bryant's treatment of insects was his use of adjectives in describing the bee. He referred to the bee as the wild bee,\textsuperscript{35} the mummering bee,\textsuperscript{36} the laden bee,\textsuperscript{37} the

\textsuperscript{35}"Green River," \textit{ibid.}, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{36}"The West Wind," \textit{ibid.}, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{37}"An Indian Story," \textit{ibid.}, p. 56.
merry bee, the humming bee, the toiling bee, the diligent bee, the weary bee, and the wandering bee.

The only other insect that occurs with any frequency whatsoever is the butterfly, and it is mentioned only four times. In like manner it is quite interesting to notice the different references to the butterfly. In "After a Tempest" he conceives the butterfly as "a living blossom of the air"; in "June" he refers to "the idle butterfly"; and in "A Rain Dream" he tells us "the butterfly hides under her broad leaf"; and in the same poem he writes:

Gay troops of butterflies shall light to drink At the replenished hollows of the rock.

The only insect to which Bryant devotes an entire poem is the mosquito. In his poem "To a Mosquito" he gives a vivid picture of the horrid creature because he refers to him as having threadlike legs, blood-extracting bill, and filmy wing, and as murmuring in pitiless ears. This poem

38"Romero," ibid., p. 94.
39"To the River Arve," ibid., p. 127.
41"The Twenty-seventh of March," ibid., p. 231.
42"May Evening," ibid., p. 326.
43"Our Fellow-worshippers," ibid., p. 349.
44Ibid., p. 67. 45Ibid., p. 84.
48Ibid., p. 89.
also contains a touch of Bryant's unusual humor, because he welcomes the mosquito to the town, but he insists that he not bother him, as he needs all his blood. Thus he says:

Try some plump alderman, and suck the blood
Enriched by generous wine and costly meat;
On well-filled skins, sleek as thy native mud,
Fix thy light pump and press thy freckled feet.
Go to the men for whom, in ocean's halls,
The oyster breeds, and the green turtle sprawls. 49

However, the most notable characteristic concerning Bryant's references to insects is found in his association of them with other phases of nature. In "Green River" he associates bees "with blossoms and birds";50 in "An Indian Story" "he only hears on the flower the hum of the laden bee";51 in "After a Tempest" "bees were heard about the flowers";52 in "Romero" "the locust chirps unscared beneath the unpruned lime";53 in "The Green Mountain Boys" they want to get water from the brook "where the fire-flies light the brake";54 and in "Noon" Bryant refers to the dragon-fly shooting over the rivulet's pool and the water-beetles running to and fro in the pool.55 There are many other poems in which Bryant associates insects with other phases of nature, but the above mentioned are some of the outstanding ones.

49 Ibid., p. 91. 50 Ibid., p. 28. 51 Ibid., p. 56.
52 Ibid., p. 67. 53 Ibid., p. 94. 54 Ibid., p. 179.
55 Ibid., p. 205.
Apparently Bryant was more interested in birds than in insects, for he mentions more than thirty different ones. Of this number he speaks most frequently of the sparrow, the eagle, and the humming bird. To be more exact, he refers to the sparrow eleven times, to the eagle six times, and to the humming bird four times. No doubt the sparrow was Bryant's favorite bird because he associates it with his native home in his "Song":

And yet I pine to see
   My native hill once more
   And hear the sparrow's friendly chirp
   Beside its cottage-door. 56

The eagle, with which Bryant associates the firmament or skies, is very vividly described in the following lines:

   The eagle soars his utmost height
   Yet far thou stretchest o'er his flight. 57

Again he refers to the eagle: "Skies, where the desert eagle wheels and screams." 58 Humming birds, it seems, Bryant associates with flowers as he often does his insects. This thought is indicated in "The Painted Cup" and in "May Evening." He says of them:

But leave these scarlet cups to spotted moths
Of June, and glistening flies, and humming-birds,
To drink from, when on all these boundless lawns
The morning sun looks hot. 59

56 Ibid., p. 241.
57 "The Firmament," ibid., p. 87.
58 "To the River Arve," ibid., p. 127.
59 Ibid., p. 196.
Again he says:

Now sleeps the humming-bird, that in the sun,
Wandered from bloom to bloom;60

"Birds, whose music rather than beauty of color attracted him, he used in his verse more than any other American poet save Whitman."61 Bryant's intense feeling for the melody of birds may be noticed in some of his poems. In "A Winter Piece" he speaks of the twittering snow-birds; in "A Walk at Sunset" he describes the wood-thrush as piping his evening lay; in "I Cannot Forget with What Fervid Devotion" reference is made to the screaming kingfisher; in his "Song" he suggests the sweet and happy song of the mocking-bird; in "Among the Trees" the song-sparrow tells you of spring; and in "Waiting by the Gate" he breathes more calmly: "I hear the wood-thrush piping one mellow descent more."62

Four birds -- the old-world sparrow, the song sparrow, the bobolink, and the waterfowl -- are themes of separate poems. Bryant, in his poem "The Old-World Sparrow," welcomes the sparrow to America because he knows that he will eat the insects and pests that have been destroying their crops and gardens. In rejoicing over this bird's arrival,

60Ibid., p. 326.
61Norman Foerster, Nature in American Literature, p. 10.
62Poetical Works, p. 260.
Bryant speaks of the advantages that both man and bird derive from its being here. In other words, the bird does not have to fear the hunter nor poisoned grain, and it has access to a home in trees where it may find food and shelter.

In "The Song Sparrow" Bryant praises the bird because he comes nearer singing all the year than any other bird does. He says that he only fails to sing when there is a snowstorm. Our poet quickly notices that even among the greatest sorrows the sparrow continues to sing. The following lines are quite significant of Bryant's view of this bird:

Ever thus sing cheerfully on,
Bird of Hope! as in ages gone;
Sing of spring-time and summer shades,
Autumn's pomp when the summer fades,
Storms that fly from the conquering sun,
Peace by enduring valor won.63

"Robert of Lincoln" is, perhaps, Bryant's happiest poem because it is so musical and gay. It is also his best humorous satire. In the poem Bryant perceives a happy bobolink and his mate safely nestled in their home among the flowers. Here he describes the bobolink as gayly dressed in a beautiful black wedding-coat. He is, indeed, proud of his attire. Of his mate he says she is "pretty and quiet, with plain brown wings."64 His mate, he thinks, should have no fear

63 Ibid., p. 376.  
64 Ibid., p. 229.
of thieves and robbers while he is near. Boasting of his
bravery, he says:

Never was I afraid of man;
Catch me, cowardly knaves, if you can!65

He admits that he is a braggart, whereas his mate is very
modest and shy. Here, he boasts again of his being able to
go out and enjoy himself while his good wife remains at home
and keeps house. But with the coming of little ones, the
bird finds that some hungry mouths must be fed; hence he
lays aside "his holiday garment."66 Thus, he leads a
sober life, working and caring for his family. Within a
few fleeting days the birds are grown; however, he does not
enjoy the "fun and frolic"67 he once knew, and so he flies
away.

In contrast to "Robert of Lincoln" is Bryant's famous
poem, "To a Waterfowl." Here is portrayed something of
Bryant's calmer nature as he views the lone waterfowl in
its distant flight. It was one cold evening when Bryant was
walking across the Massachusetts hills that he beheld the
bird in the beautiful sky. Looking at this bird, Bryant de-
cided it must be lost from its flock which was moving south-
ward. In the fifth stanza our poet thinks of the waterfowl
as having flown all day in the cold atmosphere at a very
far height; yet he urges the bird to continue her course for

65 Ibid., p. 230. 66 Ibid., p. 230. 67 Ibid.
fear a hunter might kill her. Then in the sixth stanza he encourages her by saying that her wearisome journey will soon be ended when she reaches her sheltered nest in the South.

The animals in Bryant's poems indicate his keen knowledge of forest life. "The deer, indeed, if one may judge by the number of poems in which it appears, was to him a symbol of the great forest that had kindled his youthful imagination." Of the thirty-four different animals with which Bryant seems quite familiar, he mentions the deer about twenty times, the wolf nine times, and the squirrel eight times. Bryant definitely associates the deer with the forest and with hunting, as he indicates in his poems. In the "Song" he says:

The hunter of the West must go In depth of woods to seek the deer.

In "The Ages" he perceives that the

Trees waved, and the brown hunter's shouts were loud Amid the forest; and the bounding deer Fled at the glancing plume.

Bryant exemplifies his familiarity with the deer when he has the strange lady say, "I know where most of the pheasants feed, and where the red-deer herd." Still more familiarly

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68 Norman Foerster, Nature in American Literature, p. 10.
70 Ibid., p. 18.
does Bryant speak of the deer when he declares:

The deer, too, left
Her delicate footprint in the soft moist mould,
And in the fallen leaves. 72

Our poet's deep sympathy for the deer is clearly demonstrated in "A Walk at Sunset" when he points out:

For ages, on the silent forest here,
Thy beams did fall before the red man came
To dwell beneath them; in their shade the deer
Fed, and feared not the arrow's deadly aim. 73

The wolf, the next animal to which Bryant refers with any frequency, is described as a yelling animal. Hence he points out in "The Ages," "the gaunt wolf yelled near"; 74 and in "Rizpah" he speaks of "The jackal and wolf that yelled in the night." 75 He also identifies the wolf as a blood-thirsty animal when in his poem, "The Strange Lady" he wonders "whether famished evening wolves had mangled Albert so." 76 Then again in "Tree Burial" he says:

There the greedy wolf
Might break into thy grave and tear thee thence,
And I should sorrow all my life. 77

As with the deer, Bryant shows himself familiar with the wolf:

There, when the winter woods are bare,
Walks the wolf on the crackling snow. 78

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72 "The Fountain," ibid., p. 186.
73 Ibid., p. 38.
74 Ibid., p. 16.
75 Ibid., p. 48.
76 Ibid., p. 174.
77 Ibid., p. 330.
78 "The Maiden's Sorrow," ibid., p. 201.
The other animal to which Bryant refers quite often is the squirrel. It is quite interesting to note that his references to the squirrel are associated with trees. In "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood" he points out:

the thick roof
of green and stirring branches is alive
And musical with birds, that sing and sport
In wantonness of spirit; while below
The squirrel, with raised paws and form erect,
Chirps merrily. 79

In "A Winter Piece" he says:

From his hollow tree
The squirrel was abroad, gathering the nuts
Just fallen. 80

In "After a Tempest" he states: "To the gray oak the squirrel, chiding, clung." 81 In "A Rain Dream" he perceives that

the squirrel in the forest seeks
His hollow tree. 82

In "Among the Trees," where Bryant so vividly describes the squirrel, we have him saying:

ye fling
Your nuts to earth, and 'the brisk squirrel comes
To gather them, and barks with childish glee,
And scampers with them to his hollow oak. 83

Of Bryant's many animals he devotes only one entire poem to an animal; this is entitled "The White-Faced Deer."

79 Ibid., p. 25.  
80 Ibid., p. 31.  
81 Ibid., p. 67.  
82 Ibid.  
83 Ibid., p. 323.
About a hundred years ago a wild-deer with white feet and silvery white on her forehead was used to eating beneath a hill where she was protected from the wind. She came to this place by night when no hunter was out. Here she enjoyed eating the fresh leaves while the whippoorwill sang. In mid-summer she ceased to be alone, for there was born to her a spotted fawn.

The mother at a cottage near by had enjoyed watching the friendly deer more than ten years. Thus, she warned her son never to aim his rifle at her while he was out hunting. Hence the son went on his way hunting elsewhere. However, finding no game one day, he was returning home very discouraged when he viewed the pretty deer eating in the moonlight. He fired a shot which frightened the deer so much that she ran into the neighboring woods. From that day on nothing was ever seen of the deer. Then the Indians burned the cottage and killed both the mother and son. As years went on, the woods grew up around the place, and nothing but the hawk and the fox could be seen.

Besides Bryant's interest in plant and animal life, he was very much interested in the elements of nature. "Of the many aspects of external nature which brought delight to Bryant, he wooed most persistently the wind, the rain, and the tempest."\(^\text{84}\) Bryant's interest in the wind is quite


The west wind, to him, was a "wind of joy, and youth, and love." In the west wind he exclaimed for joy because it gave him a feeling of rejuvenation. The summer wind breathes a cooling breath upon the scorched earth and fainting flowers. He shouts with joy at its arrival, for it brings with it the fragrance of flowers and the music of the birds in which Bryant found pure delight. In "The Evening Wind," Bryant believes, there breathes a refreshing atmosphere for everyone. Not only, says Bryant, does the evening wind bring refreshment to the scorched land, the withered flowers, and the weary bird, but also to the sick and the aged. The evening wind seems to have a great effect upon nature in that it breathes a spirit of peace and rest to the weary. In "The Winds" Bryant refers to the wind as wild, raging, flinging, scooping, and mad. He points out to us how winds may be destructive as well as helpful in that mountains are made to shudder, homes put to ruins, weary fowls made to lose their lives in their

\[^{85}\text{Poetical Works, p. 33.}\]
uncertain flights, and man made to shudder and grow pale with fear. Bryant questions the destructive nature of the winds because he knows that winds are free to blow where they will. In "The Voice of Autumn" Bryant finds the wind in a calmer stage. Here he describes the breeze as blowing so softly through the weeds and trees that you can barely see the movement of them. Bryant grows somewhat melancholy in the autumn breeze because he knows that the wind must pass on, leaving many beautiful forms of nature behind. At this point notice might be made of Bryant's sensitive feeling as he speaks of the wind lightly touching and stirring the trees. In like manner we may notice his sense of hearing when he calls attention to the repining sound, the moaning sound, the shouting sound, and even the uneasy sound. Again, in "The Wind and Stream," he refers to the wind as "wandering from the sky as lightly as the whispers of a dream." However, the most fascinating appeal in Bryant shows the effect of the wind on the course of the stream. Here he describes the stream as a bashful stream, a flattered stream, a little stream, an unreluctant stream, a livelier stream, a simpering stream, a silly stream, a cheated stream, a lonely stream, a hopeless stream, and a mourning stream. In "May Evening" Bryant seems to feel the breath of spring as he inhales the fragrant

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86 Ibid., p. 235.  
87 Ibid., pp. 235-236.
perfumes of flowers in the refreshing May breeze. This breeze he tenderly welcomes; yet in its soft caress he finds a bit of sadness because with the coming of the flowers he is reminded of the dead that do not return. Hence he urges the May wind to pass on to people more cheerful than he, to the tired student and to the tiller of the soil so that they may feel its refreshing breath. Bryant, it seems, always felt some joy in the wind, whether it was harmful or unharmful.\textsuperscript{88} Thus, in his poem called "The Hurricane," there came a thrill to him; however, there also came the moments of depression to him when he saw the ruins inflicted upon all phases of nature by the wind.\textsuperscript{89} But, in "After a Tempest," our poet seems somewhat elated in that after the storm comes a calm in which all aspects of nature resort to former duties. When Bryant beheld the landscape scene after the tempest, the great sun shone upon the green where rain drops still clung, giving an appearance of bright, shining diamonds. Here he refers to the birds warbling around and to the bees among the flowers. Upon his beholding such peaceful scenes after the tempest, Bryant was made to wonder why nations could not dwell in peace as did nature.\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{88}\textsuperscript{Ibid.}, pp. 325-327. \textsuperscript{89}\textsuperscript{Ibid.}, pp. 116-118. \textsuperscript{90}\textsuperscript{Ibid.}, pp. 66-68.
Perhaps the above-mentioned wind poems are most characteristic of Bryant; yet in his poem "Green River" he seems to find in the wind a calm healing power. This thought he suggests in the following lines:

When breezes are soft and skies are fair,  
I steal an hour from study and care,  
And hie me away to the woodland scene,  
Where wanders the stream with waters of green,  
As if the bright fringe of herbs on its brink  
Had given their stain to the waves they drink;  
And they, whose meadows it murmurs through,  
Have named the stream from its own fair hue.  \(^{91}\)

However, in his poem "Life" he seems to feel a closer communion with the wind when he exclaims:

Oh Life! I breathe thee in the breeze,  
I feel thee bounding in my veins,  
I see thee in these stretching trees,  
These flowers, this still rock's mossy stains.  \(^{92}\)

Even though wind seemed to be Bryant's predominating theme, it is quite fascinating to examine his specific poems on several months of the year. But poet was probably made to observe the seasons and months of the year more closely through his mother's influence because she always kept a diary. Nevertheless, we find him writing about each of the following months: March, May, June, October, and November.

March, referred to as a stormy month, was welcomed by Bryant. With its arrival he felt the nearness of spring, at which time he knew he would be privileged to see clear

\(^{91}\)ibid., p. 27.  \(^{92}\)ibid., p. 174.
skies and beautiful flowers brought forth by the refreshing showers.

The month of May, accompanied by the perfumes of various flowers, comes as the breath of spring. For our poet there seems to be sadness in the cool May air because the dead do not return with the flowers, as has already been indicated in the present chapter. For this reason Bryant tells the wind to move on and refresh someone who is more happy than he. Especially does he wish that the tiller of the soil may have a promise of the earth's being rejuvenated with the return of spring.

As indicated in his poem by that title, June must have been Bryant's favorite month. He tells us that he would like to die in June, when nature would be most beautiful. He pictured in his mind how beautifully the flowers would bloom around his grave with a lovely carpet of green grass spread over it. Again, he imagined the insects busy among the flowers while the birds were rehearsing their beautiful melodies. With all phases of nature at their best around his grave, he felt that his friends might be induced to linger longer there. These scenes, he knew, he could not witness; yet he wanted to die in June, knowing that nature would ever be present while he silently slept beneath the sod.
Although June was Bryant's favorite month, he welcomed October with its cool crisp breeze. He delighted in seeing the forests painted with different hues. For Bryant the leaves of many colors were beautiful to gaze upon in the autumn breeze. With the cool breezes of October came cooler nights for rest. In this poem, as well as in others, Bryant refers to the soothing power of the winds.

As October silently passes away, November approaches with her winds more crisp and her ripened nuts. However, the meadows grow bare, and the trees lose all their pretty foliage. For Bryant the most beautiful flower left blooming at this time of year is the gentian. In October Bryant seems to have a feeling of sadness, for he knows that everyone must prepare for the bitter winter months ahead.

His joy in river and forest persisted amid the vigors of the various seasons for, with remarkable persistence, he pursued nature through the calendar, from windy March to May and June, through the droughts and thundershowers of mid-summer, on into mellow October and November, and back again to the harsh storms of January.  

For Bryant nature was ever changing, bringing with it both sadness and happiness; yet he found complete satisfaction through his sense perception. All of Bryant's sense perceptions were highly developed with the exception of taste, concerning which the writer has very little information. Bryant's senses of seeing and smelling were highly

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developed, "whereas Whittier's eyes were color-blind and Wordsworth's nose was an idle promontory projecting into a desert air." For him," meaning Bryant, "as for Wordsworth, the rocks breathed tranquillity and the trees shed contentment; the sky radiated joy and the clouds played gaily in space." 

In his presence, flowers smiled and rivulets laughed continually; squirrels chirped in merriment and birds sported in wantonness of spirit; leaves and shadows danced; and even insects experienced their daily gladness.

External nature appeals to Bryant, it seems to the writer, more than to any other American poet. His lines are natural, his descriptions are vivid, and his poems abound in beauty, value, and truth.

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94 Norman Poerster, Nature in American Literature, p. 80.
95 McDowell, op. cit., p. xxxvi.
96 Ibid.
CHAPTER III

NATURE IN RELATION TO BRYANT'S PHILOSOPHY

Man's conception of nature in relation to philosophy depends largely upon his environment and his ideals of conduct, art, and religion. For our present discussion we may consider Bryant's philosophy of nature as it was modified by three major influences: that of Calvinism, that of deism, and that of Unitarianism.

Puritans, who held to the Calvinistic doctrine, believed that "God is infinitely high, that man is infinitely low, and that by the grace of God some few of mankind are predestined to eternal life."¹ Bryant, who was brought up under the strict Calvinistic teachings, never wholly departed from its influences. The Calvinists conceived God as a personal God, working through nature. "They spoke habitually of seeing God's power in the order of the universe and His wisdom in its government; it was all one to them whether nature proclaimed the power or the wisdom."² Upon this philosophy the Puritans based many of their deepest religious thoughts.

¹Norman Foerster, American Poetry and Prose, p. 6.
In Jonathan Edwards we find a champion of Calvinism. His philosophical training at Yale led to his sober mind; hence he became a Calvinistic minister. Jonathan Edwards held that "the beauties of nature are really emanations or shadows of the excellency of the Son of God."\(^3\) In like manner Bryant conceived nature as a symbol of God's power, goodness, love, and beauty.

Whereas the Puritans conceived God as a personal Being, working through nature, the deists thought of Him as an impersonal God who "exists wholly outside and apart from the physical universe, of which man is a part, and that his action upon this universe is altogether impersonal and mechanical."\(^4\) Hence, their philosophy was rational because they relied upon reason as the basis for the establishment of religious truths. Apparently their motive was to draw man's attention to social problems rather than to God.

Benjamin Franklin was an important figure in the eighteenth-century deistic movement because he reasoned out his own religious beliefs. "In his day philosophy was a word used to refer to what we now call 'natural science' and it was in this sense that Franklin was a philosopher."\(^5\)

\(^3\)\textit{Ibid.}, p. 162.

\(^4\)Floyd Stovall, \textit{American Idealism}, p. 16.

Like Franklin, Thomas Paine was a deistic philosopher because he held to rationalism. In The Age of Reason Paine states:

I believe in God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life.
I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy.  

To this group of deists we may also add Thomas Jefferson; however, he was more original in his thinking than either Franklin or Paine because he was more widely read. "Political and social questions interested him first; but he was also interested in natural science, art, history, and religion." Jefferson held that man should be wise and well-disciplined, and that a good government should strive to secure such men. Furthermore, he practiced what he advocated by living in accord with his own recommendation of virtues. Thus we may consider Jefferson a greater philosopher than either Franklin or Paine because his reasoning seemed more sound.

It is not enough to say that these deistic views existed only in the minds of late eighteenth-century American thinkers; they were also prevalent in all the colleges at that time. It was through Bryant's father's influence and

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7Townsend, op. cit., p. 68.
the deism of the faculty and students of Williams College that Bryant was led to adopt a more liberal attitude in his religious beliefs. His views were liberalized not only through association with deistic thinkers in the college, but also through his reading of ancient classical poetry. However, his father, being a natural scientist, perhaps influenced him more than did his college life.

To the deists, laws of nature existed for man, and it was left entirely to him to determine these laws so that he might adapt his conduct to them in such a way that he might live a happy life. From this point of view the deists had an interest in the laws of science as discovered by Bacon and Newton. With all these new scientific discoveries, came an age of progress in which man became interested in social problems; and this interest eventually led to the development of natural rights in the nineteenth century. Thus we may say that these philosophical ideas had their part in helping develop our nation socially, politically, and religiously. "Bryant was not only a link between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but a remarkably perfect representative of the American spirit through all stages of its development."9

The Calvinistic doctrine still prevailed in this age;

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8Tremaine McDowell, William Cullen Bryant, Introduction, p. xxiv.

9Stovall, op. cit., p. 34.
however, there was a falling away of supporters because many had turned to the Unitarian belief, as, eventually, did William Cullen Bryant.

Unitarianism has appealed chiefly to those in whom the intellect is a more active force than the emotions, and especially to the intellectual classes in the neighborhood of Boston in the early decades of the nineteenth century. 10

Even though religion as a whole had been placed somewhat in the background until the early part of the nineteenth century because of national affairs, it had never wholly disappeared; and in 1825 there seemed to be a revival of religion. William Ellery Channing was a dominant figure in this movement because he used his influence in promoting this Unitarian movement that was prevalent among the intellectual classes around Boston. It was through his debating, writings, and sermons that he became such an influential figure for Unitarianism.

Doctor Peter Bryant was well acquainted with many of these early Unitarians of Boston, and he was a subscriber to their religious journals. 11 Hence, it was through William Cullen Bryant's reading of these journals and through his listening to debates and sermons of the Unitarians that he was led to turn away in part from the orthodox belief of Cummington. As the writer has indicated in the beginning

of this chapter, Bryant never entirely departed from the early influences of Calvinism; that is, he kept some of the spirit of Calvinism; however, he never returned to the Calvinism of his youth.

Bryant, adhering to the spirit of Calvinism as did all Puritans, saw in nature a symbol of God's power, goodness, love, and beauty. In "A Forest Hymn" Bryant recognizes the groves of trees as "God's first temples." Bryant saw the trees, the wind, the sky, the flowers, and the birds as emanations of God. Through the majesties of nature Bryant was able to understand the meaning of eternity. In the decay of nature he saw how man might die, yet live again. For Bryant, storms, which bring about devastation, are justifiable because they demonstrate the tremendous power of God of which man is so forgetful. Bryant asks that he may be spared from the tremendous power of God, for he enjoys the milder power of nature where he may meditate.

In like manner Bryant describes both the tremendous and mild power of God in "A Hymn of the Sea." In the first stanza he identifies the goodness of God with the power of the sea. Here he sees that the waves of the sea obey God's will, and in due time rain is produced whereby the earth receives its moisture, which in turn gives us abundant harvests. The calm breeze, Bryant notices, bears the ships

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12 Poetical Works, p. 79.
safely home. However, the tempest on the sea is justifiable, he thinks, when it destroys the armed fleet that seeks to wage war upon some nation unaware. The ruins caused by the tempest are visible, whereas the formations of nature taking place in the depths of the sea are invisible; yet these formations of nature benefit man.

But in his poem "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood," Bryant thinks of the wind as a soothing power of nature. Here he feels in the presence of nature that the cares of the world no longer bother him because the gentle breeze seems to heal his broken spirits.

In like manner in "The Evening Wind" Bryant feels the calm gentle breeze as a soothing power. Here as before he seems to find complete satisfaction in the calmness of the soft wind, which seems to breathe to him the soothing power of God. "If anything in nature is endowed by Bryant with spirituality, it is the wind -- 'heaven's life-breathing wind'; the breath of God."13

Not only does Bryant see a demonstration of God's power in the wind, but also in a bird's flight. As he views the lonely waterfowl in its solitary flight, he tells us that the bird continues its course alone happily because it is unaware of the hunter's presence. This bird, he says, is

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safely anchored at the close of day by some unknown power. So Bryant reasons that if God directs the uncertain flight of a bird He will surely direct his own uncertain steps through life. This assurance he declares in the following lines:

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.\(^{14}\)

This poem expresses Bryant's strengthening faith in a guiding Power.

Not only does Bryant recognize God's power and goodness working through nature, but also His infinite love and beauty. In "The Song of the Stars" Bryant witnesses the beauty of God's handiwork as he watches the stars by night spread a gleam of light over the universe, making visible "the path of the gentle winds."\(^{15}\) Hence he bids the heavenly spheres to continue dancing in their beauty because he identifies them with God's smile when he speaks of

The boundless visible smile of Him To the veil of whose brow your lamps are dim.\(^{16}\)

Inasmuch as Bryant conceived God as a giver of life, of love, and of beauty, he found much inspiration in nature among the trees. Here in this poem he is conscious of the fact that trees have no sense of being as does man, for

\(^{14}\) "To a Water Fowl," Poetical Works, p. 27.  
\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 78.  
\(^{16}\) Ibid.
they do not enjoy pure air, sunshine, bursting buds, fragrant flowers, and melody of birds, nor do they feel any pain of sorrow when they are destroyed. Yet our poet perceives imaginatively that trees must have a dim sense of being as he suggests in "Among the Trees":

Nay, doubt we not that under the rough rind,
In the green veins of these fair growths of earth,
There dwells a nature that receives delight
From all the gentle processes of life,
And shrinks from the loss of being. Dim and faint
May be the sense of pleasure and of pain,
As in our dreams; but, haply, real still.17

Bryant again rejoices in the beauty of nature when he takes his walk at sunset. He glories in listening to the chirping of the insects and the melody of the birds as he views the colorful clouds that tint the sky with various hues at the close of day. With the passing of the day, however, Bryant grows somewhat melancholy because of his thoughts of the brave dead who once enjoyed the beauties of nature as he is enjoying it.

In "The Firmament" Bryant reveals to us the beauty of God. He thinks of the beautiful firmament as a vault over the earth. Here he gives us an excellent picture of the heavenly spheres when he describes them thus:

The sun, the gorgeous sun is thine,
The pomp that brings and shuts the day,
The clouds that round him change and shine,
The airs that fan his way.
Thence look the thoughtful stars, and there
The meek moon walks the silent air.18

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17 Ibid., p. 322.
18 Ibid., p. 87.
He speaks of the purity as well as the beauty of these heavenly spheres. When man grows weary, says Bryant, of the cold earth, he turns to heaven for peace and comfort.

Bryant stressed loving-kindness as the most outstanding attribute of God. So Bryant's God was a God of love as he bears witness of Him:

And send thy love, the love that bears
Weakly with hate, and scorn, and wrong,
And loads itself with generous cares,
And toils, and hopes, and watches long. 19

In contrast with the beauty and love of nature, Bryant sets before us the sinfulness of mankind in his poem called "The Ages." Here he shows how man, busy with the cares of life, fell prey to other gods, thus forgetting the power of the Omnipotent One. Again, we realize that Bryant is conscious of the sinning world when he tells us in his "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood,"

that the world
Is full of guilt and misery. 20

Still further Bryant recognizes the impurity of mankind when he exclaims:

Ha! How the murmur deepens; I perceive
And tremble at its dreadful import. Earth
Uplifts a general cry for guilt and wrong,
And heaven is listening. 21

Here Bryant realizes that those who labored, suffered, and died for mankind are forgotten; yet God is mindful of all

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19"Except the Lord Build the House," ibid., p. 355.
20Ibid., p. 24.
injustices done to man.

Not only does Bryant refer to the sinfulness of humanity in general, but also to his personal sin as he relates in "The Future Life":

For me, the sordid cares in which I dwell
Shrink and consume my heart, as heat the scroll;
And wrath has left its scar -- that fire of hell
Has left its frightful scar upon my soul.22

Then in "The Yellow Violet" Bryant confesses his forgetfulness:

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.23

Bryant's references to the guilt, misery, sorrows, and cares of mankind clearly indicate his Calvinistic theology.

"But Bryant in maturity never accepted the belief that man is by nature utterly evil or that the race is destined for destruction."24 His philosophy, then, is that good will triumph over evil and that "man will eventually be perfected."25 Bryant realizes in his poem "The Ages" that man has witnessed murder, robbery, warfare, and neglect of sick; yet he knows that

a thousand cheerful omens give
Hope of yet happier days, whose dawn is nigh.26

22Ibid., p. 183.  
23Ibid., p. 24.  
25Ibid.  
26Poetical Works, p. 13.
Bryant believes that man reaches perfection through "the circle of eternal change" just as nature does. Thus he says of the perfected man:

He who has tamed the elements, shall not live
The slave of his own passions; he whose eye
Unwinds the eternal dances of the sky,
And in the abyss of brightness dares to span
The sun's broad circle, rising yet more high,
In God's magnificent works his will shall see
-- And love and peace shall make their paradise with man. 28

In the "Hymn of the Waldenses" Bryant is conscious of the afflicted flock which has been witnessing danger from its persecutors. Rather than to forsake the will of God, Bryant knows it is far better to suffer persecution. Although Bryant was devoted to Protestantism, he did not fail to see the tyranny which oppressed the Catholics. 29 Hence he petitions God to touch the hearts of their persecutors and bring peace to the world. Thus he asserts his faith in a God of justice:

Thou shalt raise up the trampled and oppressed,
And thy delivered saints shall dwell in rest. 30

"The Death of Slavery" indicates that Bryant was a true democrat. Here Bryant shows us that man is entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Bryant recognizes that slavery is contrary to God's will, and that good eventually triumphs over evil.

30 Poetical Works, p. 62.
"Oh Mother of a Mighty Race" is a poem in which Bryant glorifies America. He boasts of the bravery of the American race when he says that the American will give his life for his country. Hence he assures us that nothing short of rest and freedom awaits us in America. He further implies his optimistic view of a better age when he exclaims:

Oh, fair young mother! on thy brow  
Shall sit a nobler grace than now.  
Deep in the brightness of the skies  
The thronging years in glory rise,  
And, as they fleet,  
Drop strength and riches at thy feet.31

In "The Antiquity of Freedom" Bryant reveals to us in a very optimistic manner his "mature faith in the immortal spirit of democracy."32 Here he recognizes the fact that freedom existed in the world before tyranny; yet people as a whole seem to obey tyranny far more than freedom. However, in due time Bryant assures us that freedom will conquer tyranny, though he warns:

Oh! not yet  
Mayst thou unbrace thy corslet, nor lay by  
Thy sword; nor yet, 0 Freedom! close thy lids  
In slumber; for thine enemy never sleeps,  
And thou must watch and combat till the day  
Of the new earth and heaven.33

In "The Battle-Field" Bryant gives us a picture of the world at peace after the battle had been fought. Here he

31Ibid., p. 215.  
33Poetical Works, p. 200.
reveals that all is calm save the wonders of nature. The battle cry is heard no more, and those who fought find rest. Yet he knows that those

who minglest in the harder strife
For truths which men receive not now,
Thy warfare only ends with life. 34

Still further Bryant gives us his optimistic view of truth and freedom when he says:

Truth, crushed to earth, shall rise again;
Th' eternal years of God are hers;
But error, wounded, writhe in pain.
And dies among his worshippers. 36

Inasmuch as Bryant recognizes freedom and truth as ruling agents of God, he knows that only God is able "to banish, from the growing earth, all forms of tyranny and wrong." 36 Bryant's deity, then, was not so much a God of anger as a champion of justice and liberty and truth — "the truth that made our fathers free." 37

Nature for Bryant was not static, but ever changing. "Contrary to the theology of his youth, he did not in maturity view the creation of the universe as a completed fact." 38 In "A Forest Hymn" he seems somewhat awe-stricken when he thinks of the changes of nature taking place around him. It seems to him that some great miracle is being wrought. However, he is conscious of the fact that nature

34 Ibid., p. 182. 35 Ibid.
36 "Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land," ibid., p. 358.
37 McDowell, op. cit., Introduction, p. xxviii.
38 Ibid., p. xxix.
does not remain the same when he considers that it must decay. Yet with the decay and change of nature, Bryant perceives that it loses none of its beauty. Hence he realizes that the "perpetual work" of God's creation, though finished, is "yet renewed forever." 39

In "The Fountain" Bryant presents a beautiful picture of nature as he views it "from the shores of Massachusetts to the prairies of the great West." 40 Here Bryant lets the reader know that he beholds the great changes of nature as he gazes upon it. The question that arises in his mind, however, is whether man will seek to change the beauty of the landscape in future ages.

In "An Evening Revery" Bryant conceives the whole movement of the universe as a great change or "Flight of Time." 41 With the law of change, Bryant reasons that progress will be made. Hence he believes that

\[
\text{the old shall glide} \\
\text{Into the new; the eternal flow of things,} \\
\text{Like a bright river of fields of heaven,} \\
\text{Shall journey onward in perpetual peace.} \ 42
\]

In speaking of the evening wind, Bryant tells it to go refresh the sick and weary; yet he realizes that because of

\[
\text{the circle of eternal change,} \\
\text{Which is the life of Nature,} \ 43
\]

the wind does not tarry long at any place.

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39 Poetical Works, pp. 80-81.  
40 McDowell, op. cit., p. 405, Godwin's note.  
41 Poetical Works, p. 195.  
42 Ibid.  
43 "The Evening Wind," ibid., p. 125.
Even though Bryant becomes somewhat pensive in his poem, "A Walk at Sunset," when he beholds the changes that have taken place, he consoles himself by realizing that the evening light will return and shine on other changes. With this thought in mind, that nature must change, Bryant says in "Mutation":

Weep not that the world changes -- did it keep
A stable, changeless state, 'twere cause indeed to weep. 44

Like Tennyson, Bryant knows that the "old order changeth,
yielding place to new." However, Bryant acknowledges that the eternal change of nature "waits on growth." 45

As in nature change must continue, so it is with man; for God created man as He did the earth with all its forms of nature. Thus we may understand why death is appointed to man. Bryant was ever mindful of death, especially in his youth because of his early environment. We are told that "the first five years of Bryant's life were spent in a log house whose windows looked across the road upon the stone-walled village burying-ground." 46

Perhaps, Bryant's somber attitude toward death caused him to write his most famous poem, "Thanatopsis." Here he points out that man goes back to dust from whence he came,

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44 Ibid., p. 70. 45 "The Flood of Years," Ibid., p. 348.
46 Augustus Hopkins Strong, American Poets and Their Theology, p. 44.
to be mixed with the elements of the earth. In death, Bryant points out there are no exceptions, for he perceives that the poor and rich, the good and evil alike must lie down in death together. Each living person continues his work after the loved ones are buried; yet in the course of time each must follow in his turn. Some authorities think that this poem suggests a non-Christian attitude. It is true that he does not express his delight in a future life; yet his last stanza on the preparation for death is evidence that he did believe in a future life when that part of the poem was composed and afterwards.

In a "Hymn to Death" Bryant indicated that those who live a life of guilt by disobeying God have need to fear death. Thus he says:

The curses of the wretch
Whose crimes are ripe, his sufferings when thy hand
Is on him, and the hour he dreads is come,
Are writ among thy praises.47

But those who have been guided in such a way as to live an upright life need have no fear of death, thinks Bryant. At this point he indicates his belief in a future life:

Rest, in the bosom of God, till the brief sleep
Of death is over, and a happier life
Shall dawn to waken thine insensible dust.48

In like manner Bryant believes there is no reason to

47 Poetical Works, p. 39.
48 "Hymn to Death," ibid., p. 43.
weep for him who has lived his allotted years and completed his purpose in life. With this optimistic view toward death Bryant asks:

Why weep ye then for him, who, having won
The bound of man's appointed years, at last,
Life's blessings all enjoyed, life's labors done,
Serenely to his final rest has passed;
While the soft-memory of his virtues, yet,
Lingers like twilight hues, when the bright sun is set?49

Bryant consoles himself, it is true, in the death of an old person if he has lived uprightly; yet he grieves to think that a person's life is taken in youth. For this reason Bryant is sad when the autumn days come because with the death of the flowers in autumn he is reminded of his sister,

who in her youthful beauty died,
The fair meek blossom that grew up and faded by my side.50

As the writer has indicated, Bryant sees no reason for those who have lived their allotted number of years uprightly to fear death. On the other hand, however, he seems to think that those who have not lived a Christian life have reason to dread death. Apparently Bryant thinks that man should be ready to meet death at any time when he says:

49 "The Old Man's Funeral," ibid., p. 50.
50 "The Death of the Flowers," ibid., p. 93.
Man foretells afar
The courses of the stars; the very hour
He knows when they shall darken or grow bright;
Yet doth the eclipse of Sorrow and of Death
Come unforewarned.51

Bryant's knowing that Christ died that we might live
again assured his faith in a future life; therefore he never
seemed to fear death at any time. "In Christ the poet saw
the Great Exemplar, saw Him drawing all from the tomb, saw
Him descending into Heaven, saw Him as One upon whose Body
we in our hearts may truly feed by faith; and of whose
Blood we may as surely drink, in remembrance of that hour
when He made a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice,
oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world."52
Although Christ suffered and died for our sins, he came
forth victorious from the grave; as Bryant says:

He who returning, glorious, from the grave,
Dragged Death, disarmed, in chains, a crouching slave.53
Therefore, Bryant believes that God is the God of the liv-
ing, but not of the dead. He further believes that God will
be the ruler of a better age:

An age when, in the eternal strife between
Evil and Good, the Power of Good shall win
A grander mastery.54

51"An Evening Revery," ibid., p. 195.
52Elmer James Bailey, Religious Thought in the Great
American Poets, p. 23.
54"Among the Trees," ibid., p. 325.
In Bryant's poem entitled "The Future Life," addressed to his wife, we find something of our poet's philosophy concerning eternal life. Here he questions how he shall know his wife. Again in his poem "Life" he asks:

\[\text{When we descend to dust again,}
\text{Where will the final dwelling be}
\text{Of thought and all its memories then,}
\text{My love for thee, and thine for me?}^{55}\]

"Bryant apparently retained something of his youthful uncertainty concerning the exact conditions of the future life."^{56} Yet, in his concluding stanza of "The Future Life," he seems to affirm his hope in eternal life when he refers to a "calmer home" where he may learn "the wisdom which is love."^{57}

In "The Journey of Life" Bryant seems to grow somewhat pensive when he meditates upon life and considers its pitfalls; yet he consoles himself because of his faith in a future life.

\[\text{And, like another life, the glorious day}
\text{Shall open o'er me from the empyreal height,}
\text{With warmth, and certainty, and boundless light.}^{58}\]

However, "The Flood of Years" will bring at length the consummation of all our hopes.\(^{59}\) Here Bryant gives us a picture of eternity where there will be no grief and sorrow,

\(^{55}\text{Ibid., p. 175.}\) \(^{56}\text{McDowell, op. cit., p. 405.}\)

\(^{57}\text{Poetical Works, p. 184.}\)

\(^{58}\text{"The Journey of Life," Ibid., p. 137.}\)

\(^{59}\text{Strong, op. cit., p. 43.}\)
no heartaches, and no tender ties broken, a place where
eternal bliss will reign supremely, and

in whose reign the eternal change
That waits on growth and action shall proceed
With everlasting Concord hand in hand.\textsuperscript{60}

Bryant, it is true, lived longer than his allotted
years, and he loved life; yet he had no fear of death, for
he was thoroughly convinced that he would live again. Thus
he says:

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.\textsuperscript{61}

His strong faith in eternal life gave him tranquillity;
hence he never returned to the dogmatic doctrine of his
youth. Neither did he care for any particular religious
creeds; however, he always found a place where he might
worship God according to the dictates of his own heart.

Finding the groves God's true temples, he worshipped
there; when it was inconvenient to pray beneath the
sky, one meeting house was as acceptable as another
-- in Great Barrington, he sat among the Congregation-
lists; in Roslyn, among the Presbyterians; in New
York, among the Unitarians.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{60} Poetical Works, p. 348.
\textsuperscript{61} "Waiting by the Gate," \textit{ibid.}, p. 261.
\textsuperscript{62} McDowell, \textit{op. cit.}, Introduction, p. xxxi.
CHAPTER IV

BRYANT'S TREATMENT OF NATURE AS AN EVIDENCE OF
HIS ROMANTICISM

Bryant's conception of nature poetry was in keeping
with that of the romanticists: he believed that poetry
should excite the imagination, touch the heart, and appeal
to the understanding.\(^1\) He conceived nature as being imbued
with spiritual power, and the poet as one who is able, with
the help of that power, to "see into the life of things."\(^2\)
Therefore, we may examine Bryant's poems to find out how
he was influenced by the English romantic poets, including
members of the "graveyard" school.

In his father's library Bryant became acquainted with
the poetry of Henry Kirke White and Robert Blair. He grew
so fond of White's poems that he memorized several of them.
Of White's poems he says: "The melancholy tone which pre-
vails in them deepened the interest with which I read them,
for about that time I had, as young poets are apt to have,

\(^1\)Prose Works, I, 8, 10.

\(^2\)William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," The Complete
a liking for poetry of a querulous cast." Bryant further says, "I remember reading, at this time, that remarkable poem, Blair's 'Grave,' and dwelling with great pleasure upon its finer passages." He read these poems in autumn, the melancholy time of year, when nature was in the season of decay and Bryant himself was in a somewhat pensive mood. As he walked through the bare woods, he thought of the death of nature as well as the death of man. "He asked himself, as the thought expanded in his mind, what, indeed, is the whole earth but a great sepulchre of once living things; and its skies and stars, but the witnesses and decorations of a tomb?" While Bryant was still meditating upon death, we are told that he hurried home and began writing a portion of "Thanatopsis." Blair's poem bears an especially close resemblance to "Thanatopsis," because, like Bryant, Blair describes the horror of the tomb and the terror and universality of death. The following lines from "The Grave" are similar to "Thanatopsis":

'tis here all meet.
The shivering Icelander and sunburnt Moor,
Men of all climes who never met before,
Men of all creeds, the Jew, the Turk, the Christian.

4Ibid.
5Parke Godwin, A Biography of William Cullen Bryant, I, 98.
Here the proud prince, and favorite yet prouder,
His sovereign's keeper and the people's scourge,
Are huddled out of sight.\(^7\)

We may also compare Bryant's poems "The Past" and "The
Death of Slavery" with Kirke White's poem "Time," because
they deal with "the past as a place, an underworld, dim
and tremendous."\(^8\) In speaking of the past Kirke White asks
in his poem:

Where are conceal'd the days which have elapsed?
Hid in a mighty cavern of the past,
They rise upon us only to appal,
By indistinct and half-glimpsed images.\(^9\)

Again, there seems to be a resemblance between Bryant's
poem "June" and White's poem "Lines on Recovery from
Sickness." Here Kirke White seems to voice Bryant's opinion
when he says:

\[
\text{I would lie}
\]

\[
\text{Beneath a little hillock, grass o'er grown,}
\text{Swath'd down with oziers, just as sleep the cotters.}
\text{Yet may not undistinguish'd be my grave;}
\text{But there at eve may some congenial soul}
\text{Duly resort, and shed a pious tear.}\(^{10}\)

Although there is no specific account of Bryant's
poetry in relation to the poetry of Thomas Gray, there seems
to be a kinship between them. Bryant's "Thanatopsis" and

\(^7\) Text of The English Poets, edited by Thomas Humphrey Ward, III, 220.

\(^8\) The Cambridge History of American Literature, I, 270.


\(^{10}\) Ibid., p. 40.
Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" resemble each other in that both poems have nature as a background and both indicate the universality of death. Of this Gray says:

The boasts of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Await alike th' inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.11

Like Bryant, Gray describes in the same poem the coldness of death:

Can honor's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or flattery soothe the dull cold ear of death?12

Again there appears to be a resemblance between Bryant's poem "Green River" and "Lines on Revisiting the Country" and Gray's poem "On the Spring." Here Gray, like Bryant, seems to prefer being away from the crowd, down by a beautiful stream. Concerning this thought, he says:

Beside some water's rushy brink
With me the Muse shall sit, and think
(At ease reclined in rustic state)
How vain the ardor of the crowd,
How low, how little are the proud,
How indigent the great!13

Thomson was one of the first English poets to break away from the strict limits of neo-classicism, and turn to nature

12Ibid.
13"On the Spring," Ibid., p. 3.
for his themes.

In essential qualities of thought, he was at one with the taste of his day; and, if his talent was most happily exercised in the observation and delineation of nature, his point of view was the very antithesis of that emotional treatment of the subject which marked the ultimate revolt against the limitations of the eighteenth century conventions. ¹⁴

Thomson, like Bryant, was a close observer of external nature, and he won an early attachment to it through his close contact with all phases of plant life, his careful study of earth and sky, his continual study of the seasons, and his association with rural scenery. Apparently Thomson's use of sounds in his poetry was similar to that of Bryant, which was "chiefly to give emphasis to quiet and solitude."¹⁵ In Thomson's poems "man is introduced only so far as he forms a telling feature in the landscape."¹⁶ Like Bryant, he conceived of God as a personal being working through nature. In like manner Thomson and Bryant each loved and glorified his native land.

Cowper, who was another of the early English romantic poets, was interested, as were Thomson and Bryant, in the external aspects of nature. His love for nature developed through his early surroundings in his native countryside. "For him, it is enough that things he sees are beautiful

¹⁴ The Cambridge History of English Literature, X, 104.
¹⁵ Ibid., p. 112.
¹⁶ Ibid.
and dear; he does not ask for anything more."\textsuperscript{17} Like Wordsworth, Cowper's close contact with man and nature in his own countryside led from his love of nature to his love of man. "The love of man for man, the love of man for animals, for the meanest thing that lives -- this is the principal moral message in 'The Task.'"\textsuperscript{18} Although Cowper's poems have a moral message and a religious atmosphere, they are not mystical. Bryant preferred Cowper rather than Milton because "Cowper's plainer sense, coupled with an equally fervent religiousness, rendered him a more familiar companion."\textsuperscript{19} Cowper, like Bryant, was a close observer of nature; therefore, his greatest success came through his vivid descriptions of commonplace aspects of nature. Of Cowper's poems Bryant says:

Cowper's poems had been in my hands from an early age, and I now passed from his shorter poems, which are generally mere rhymed prose, to his "Task," the finer passages of which supplied a form of blank verse that captivated my admiration.\textsuperscript{20}

Bryant found much in Thomson and Cowper that he admired and much that proved helpful to him; yet he found a greater delight and influence in Wordsworth. Upon reading his nature poetry with its beautiful descriptions, the

\textsuperscript{17}\textit{Ibid.}, XI, 96. \textsuperscript{18}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 97.

\textsuperscript{19}Parke Godwin, \textit{A Biography of William Cullen Bryant}, I, 62.

Bryant boys discovered that Wordsworth's countryside bore
a close kinship to their own surroundings. Of Wordsworth's
influence upon them, Parke Godwin says:

The mountain scenery he describes so lovingly was lying
in all its substantial features before them, and, as
they climbed the hills or roamed the woods together
declaiming his more impressive passages, they were en-
abled to attest his fidelity to real life, so far as
it was known in their humble sphere.21

Wordsworth, like Bryant, knew much about external nature; yet
Bryant surpassed him in the knowledge of plant and animal
life. Both Wordsworth and Bryant found a healing power in
nature, but Bryant never reached the realms of mysticism
in nature that Wordsworth reached. Wordsworth came to love
man through his love of nature, whereas Bryant's love of
nature led to his reverence for God. Speaking of the in-
fluence of Wordsworth's early work, The Lyrical Ballads, on
Bryant, Dana says, "It introduced him to a kindred mind --
to one endowed, like himself, with pure and simple tastes,
and exquisitely alive to all the sweet and gentle influences
of external nature."22

Bryant, like Wordsworth, had early experiences that
helped to develop his imagination. In "The Rivulet" Bryant
recalls his childhood days when he slipped off from home to
wade in the brook and explore the woodland scene. There he

21 A Biography of William Cullen Bryant, I, 62.
22 Ibid., p. 104.
picked violets and listened to the song of the brown thrasher. As he grew into boyhood, he found himself indulging in such sports as were common among boys in his day. These sports he refers to in his Autobiography as "a remnant of the original wild nature of man." He found pleasure in such wild nature as a youth, but in maturity he seemed to regret his boyhood pranks. Of his boyhood pleasures he writes:

And when the days of boyhood came,
And I had grown in love with fame,
Duly I sought thy banks, and tried
My first rude numbers by thy side.
Words cannot tell how bright and gay
The scenes of life before me lay.
Then glorious hopes, that now to speak
Would bring the blood into my cheek,
Passed o'er me; and I wrote, on high,
A name I deemed should never die.  

As Bryant views the old maples upon the hill in the same poem he thinks how quickly have passed the years since he was a child wandering through the woods. He even recalls his sense of fear as he roamed the woods. So vivid in Bryant's imagination were the memories of his childhood that he seemed to hear the sounds with which he was familiar in early years. The violets that grew by the brook and the merry chirps of the birds brought back pleasant memories of

his enjoyable days in the woods. He seems to regret that his youthful days are past; yet he consoles himself by saying:

I've tried the world -- it wears no more The coloring of romance it wore. Yet well has Nature kept the truth She promised in my earliest youth.25

Bryant further recalls his boyhood experiences in his poem "The Green Mountain Boys" when he tells of his camping in the woods and using the beechen branches to build their fires. It is true that the branches with which they made their fire had been torn from the trees by storms; yet he knew their pranks in the woods would prove even more detrimental to nature than the wind.

There seems to be a similarity between Bryant's poem, "Lines on Revisiting the Country," and Wordsworth's poem, "Tintern Abbey." Both poems seem to bear on early experiences that have led in developing the imaginations of both Bryant and Wordsworth. Here Bryant, like Wordsworth, gives a vivid description of the scenery of his native home. Here Bryant says that he has taught his young daughter to behold the mountains, the skies, the clouds, and enjoy the waters and wind so that she might find pleasure in nature as he had found. Bryant seems to feel spiritually as does Wordsworth in his poem, and he wants his daughter to feel that

25 Ibid., p. 52.
same spiritual power through nature. Similarly, Wordsworth tells his sister, Dorothy, in "Tintern Abbey," that she is feeling the spiritual power that he has already experienced.

Again Bryant recalls experiences in nature that led in developing his imagination in such poems as "Green River," "A Winter Piece," and "A Scene on the Banks of the Hudson." In "Green River" when Bryant looks upon the beautiful water and hears the sweet melodies of the birds, he wishes that he might be free to enjoy nature as in his youth so that he might escape from the cares of the world. To this stream Bryant enjoys coming because in it he says

An image of that calm life appears  
That won my heart in my greener years. 26

In "A Winter Piece" Bryant feels so close to nature that he almost experiences moments of ecstasy. Here he perceives the sunshine as a friend and the hills and dells as a soothing power. Of this experience he says:

While I stood  
In nature's loneliness, I was with one  
With whom I early grew familiar, one  
Who never had a frown for me, whose voice  
Never rebuked me for the hours I stole  
From cares I loved not, but of which the world  
Deems highest, to converse with her. 27

Also, in "A Scene on the Banks of the Hudson," Bryant recalls pleasant memories of the great Hudson. Here he

26 Ibid., p. 29.
thinks of the shades, the silence, and the clear still waters over which came the sound of the church bells. The river, he says, is "an image of the glorious sky"; yet with the tide he realizes it must change its course.

Particularly interesting is Bryant's poem, "The Old Man's Counsel," in which the old white-haired man, the poet's grandfather in reality, impresses upon Bryant the value of nature in youth. As we may note, this poem is somewhat Wordsworthian. "The rural philosopher, for example, who appeared in 'The Old Man's Counsel' might easily be mistaken for an English farmer of the Lake Country." Here in the poem Bryant is rejoicing in all the beauty of nature surrounding him while the grandfather, Deacon Ebenezer Snell, is calmly gazing upon it. Somewhat astonished, Bryant questioned the old man's melancholy attitude toward nature. His reply was that Bryant was young with nature and could enjoy it, but that for himself, because of his age, nature had lost the glory of its beauty. Thus the old fellow pleads:

"Wisely, my son, while yet thy days are long,  
And this fair change of seasons passes slow,  
Gather and treasure up the good they yield —  
All that they teach of virtue, of pure thoughts  
And kind affections, reverence for thy God  
And for thy brethren; so when thou shalt come

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28"A Scene on the Banks of the Hudson," ibid., p. 115.

Into these barren years, thou mayst not bring
A mind unfurnished and a withered heart. 30

From this great lesson of the old rural philosopher Bryant
must have profited because he remained an ardent lover of
nature throughout life. Another Wordsworthian poem, "Oh
Fairest of the Rural Maids," which is similar to "Three
Years She Grew in Sun and Shower," indicates Bryant's re-
fective type of poetry because in the natural scenery he
saw a reflection of the rural maid's beauty as he points
out to us:

And all the beauty of the place
Is in thy heart and on thy face.
The twilight of the trees and rocks
Is in the light shade of thy locks. 31

Similarly Wordsworth points out to us the reflective type
of poetry:

and she shall lean her ear
In many a secret place
Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face. 32

Of the romantic themes about which Bryant chose to
write, the Indian appeared to be the most interesting. Al-
though there were no Indians or Indian stories connected
with Cummington, the Indian traditions had remained in the
minds of the old people through whom Bryant was able to

30 "The Old Man's Counsel," Poetical Works, p. 192.
31 Ibid., p. 82.
of the arrow. 36

"The Indian Girl's Lament" reveals the sorrow of an Indian maiden as she was sitting near the grave of her lover, who had been killed in battle. Here Bryant recounts how the maiden prepared her lover's burial clothes and placed his weapons and his favorite food in the grave. This portion of the poem resembles Philip Freneau's poem, "The Indian Burying Ground," because both indicate the Indian custom of burying with their dead the weapons they used. The lover in Bryant's poem, he says, is made happy in meeting his father's ghost; yet his thoughts go back to his earthly love, whose spirit he awaits. 37

In "An Indian Story" Bryant tells us a legend of Maquon, an Indian, who goes hunting for a red deer and leaves his wife at home. His wife, being a very beautiful woman and popular among the Indians, was stolen in his absence. Upon returning to his wigwam, Maquon found his wife gone with only signs of her struggle to get away. The husband lost no time finding the ravisher who stole his wife. Then he killed the ravisher and carried his wife home.

In "An Indian at the Burial-Place of His Fathers" Bryant gives us an account of the red man visiting the graves of his fathers. The Indian notes the changes that

36 Ibid., p. 38.
have taken place in his race. Here, the Indian thought, was a much nobler place when it was inhabited by his race. He recalls the Indian as a hero of the forest who hunted the deer, the wolf, and the bear. To him the soil in which they placed their dead seemed sacred. Here as before he indicates the Indian custom of burying trinkets and weapons with their dead. The Indian seems to retain a faint idea that the white man will eventually be driven from the land when he says:

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. 38

In "The Disinterred Warrior" Bryant seems to sympathize with the Indian as a departed race. "The earth to him was a theatre on which the great drama of human life was being played, and in this drama the aboriginal was an important actor." 39 Thus Bryant says of the Indian:

A noble race! but they are gone,
With their old forest wide and deep,
And we have built our homes upon
Fields where their generations sleep,
Their fountains slake our thirst at noon,
Upon their fields our harvest waves,
Our lovers woo beneath their moon,
Then let us spare, at least, their graves. 40

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38 Ibid., p. 60. 39 Russell, op. cit., p. 645.
40 Poetical Works, p. 107.
In "Monument Mountain" our poet relates an old Indian legend in which the Indian maid fell deeply in love with her cousin, but she was unable to marry him because such a marriage was considered unlawful among the Indians. She continued grieving for her lover until she grew tired of living. So at the close of day, just as the sun was setting, she jumped from a precipice where she killed herself. She was buried in the same place where she fell, arrayed in the same clothes with which she dressed herself before leaping from the precipice. Upon her grave her friends placed stones as they passed by. These stones soon formed a monument for her grave, and the mountain became known as the "Mountain of the Monument." 41

As has been indicated in the second chapter of this study, the story of "The White-Footed Deer" is significant for consideration along with other poems of Bryant's concerning customs and traditions. As the narrative of the poem has been presented elsewhere, it is necessary here only to point out the bare outline of the story. In the poem a boy against his mother's wishes kills the white friendly deer which the Indians prized very much. In revenge the Indians, according to custom, burned the cottage and killed both mother and son.

In "Tree Burial" Bryant reveals to us the Indian

41 Ibid., p. 66.
mother's custom of wrapping her dead child in furs, blankets, and bark, and placing it on the branching limb of some tree where animals could not find it. The Indian mother did not want to place her child in the cold ground but where the breeze and sunshine might strike it. 42

In "A Legend of the Delaware" Bryant tells the story of Onetho, an Indian youth, who finds a bow beneath a tree that had been struck by lightning. Onetho's father, who was chief of an Indian tribe, begged him not to use the bow. Contrary to his father's advice, he went on his way and used it so that he became a great hunter. As a result he was eventually struck by lightning, and his bow disappeared. Especially interesting in this poem is the manner in which the Indian women mourn for their dead. Of this Bryant says:

But in their homes the women bide;  
Unseen they sit and weep apart,  
And, in her bower, Onetho's bride  
Is sobbing with a broken heart. 43

In 1832, we are told, Bryant visited Illinois, where he wrote "The Prairies." Upon viewing the prairies he says in a letter to Richard H. Dana:

They looked to me like fields of a race which has passed away, whose inclosures and habitations had decayed, but on whose vast and rich plains, smoothed and levelled by tillage, the forest had not yet encroached. 44

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42 Ibid., p. 330.  
43 Ibid., p. 336.  
44 Parke Godwin, A Biography of William Cullen Bryant, I, 286.
In "The Indian Spring" Bryant reveals to us an interesting story of his dream about an Indian who followed him through the woods one summer day. Here Bryant describes the Indian thus:

His countenance had that expression which has been so often remarked upon as peculiar to the aborigines of our country -- a settled look of sullenness, sadness, and suspicion, as if when moulded by nature it had been visibly stamped with the presentiment of the decline and disappearance of their race.\(^{45}\)

According to authorities, Bryant had little contact with the real Indian, but he learned much about their traditions and customs from the old inhabitants of Cummington.

In his poetry he preserved their traditions, he mourned the passing of the Red race, he wrote of the noble savage who avenged the wrongs of his kindred and believed that retribution would follow wrongdoing; in the main he had the romantic rather than the realistic conception of the aborigine.\(^{46}\)

Another romantic theme about which Bryant chose to write was the prairie and the pioneers. Bryant's interest in this particular theme developed through his frequent trips to Illinois visiting his brothers. Of this country Bryant writes in a letter to Dana:

These prairies, of a soft fertile garden, and a smooth undulating surface, on which you may put a horse to full speed, covered with high, thinly growing grass, full of weeds and gaudy flowers, and destitute of bushes and trees, perpetually brought to my mind the idea of their once having been cultivated.\(^{47}\)

\(^{45}\)Prose Works, I, 180.

\(^{46}\)Russell, op. cit., p. 649.

\(^{47}\)Parke Godwin, A Biography of William Cullen Bryant, I, 286.
Being inspired by the western scenery, Bryant exclaims:

Ay, this is freedom! -- these pure skies
Were never stained with village smoke:
The fragrant wind, that through them flies
Is breathed from wastes by plough unbrok.

For here the fair savannas know
No barriers in the bloomy grass;
Wherever breeze of heaven may blow,
Or beam of heaven may glance, I pass.48

Bryant became so fond of the great West that he devoted several poems to the country and its inhabitants. In "The Hunter of the Prairies" Bryant gives us an account of the pioneers hunting on the prairies. Here he hunts the deer, the bison, the elk, and the wolf. He pictures the brave pioneer riding horseback all day, listening to the "aged past," and finally riding home in late evening to receive a welcome reception. In "The Hunter's Serenade" he tells how the hunter goes into the great West to seek the duck on the stream, the prairie fowl, the wild-swan in the distant sky, and the leaping panther from whose hide he wishes to make a beautiful carpet.49 In "The Maiden's Sorrow" Bryant relates a story of a hunter who sought game in the far West. This hunter's fate was death, and he was buried on the prairie far from home as cowboys are when they are killed on a ranch away from home. Again, we may refer to "The White-Footed Deer," in which the youthful

49 Ibid., p. 119.
hunter, after hunting all day without killing any game, wandered back home and killed the white deer that he had been forbidden to harm. In "The Arctic Lover" Bryant relates the bravery of a young man who goes out to seek game. Of his bravery the hunter says:

While I, upon this isle of snow,
Seek and defy the bear.
Fierce though he be, and huge of frame,
This arm his savage strength shall tame,
And drag him from his lair.50

In speaking to his sweetheart, the arctic lover promises that he will spread the floor with skins and that the white fox shall play by her couch.51 From Bryant's interest in writing poems about the West, we may understand why he admired it so much. Furthermore, he expresses his own thoughts, concerning the westerners, in the following lines:

What cordial welcomes greet the guest
By thy lone rivers of the West;
How faith is kept, and truth revered,
And man is loved, and God is feared.52

Besides Bryant's interest in the Indian and the pioneer, he seemed very much interested in the history and legends of his own country. His respect for the Pilgrims may be indicated in his poem, "The Twenty-second of December." Here he says that the Pilgrims thought their coming to America was of little importance. His highest esteem for the Pilgrims may be noted in the following lines:

50Ibid., p. 136.  
51Ibid.  
52"Oh Mother of a Mighty Race," ibid., p. 214.
Green are their bays; but greener still
Shall round their spreading fame be wreathed,
And regions, now untrod, shall thrill
With reverence when their names are breathed.53

Again, in "The Song of Marion's Men," Bryant shows
great respect for the brave heroes who fought in the Ameri-
can Revolutionary War. In this poem our poet indicates
the bravery of the Americans by saying that the British
tremble with fear when Marion, the American general, is men-
tioned. Here we find that Bryant points out that Marion's
men are true to him and respect him as their leader. The
ladies show their appreciation for Marion's band by always
welcoming it. Of the ladies Bryant says:

For them we wear these trusty arms,
And lay them down no more
Till we have driven the Briton,
Forever, from our shore.54

Bryant's poem "Not Yet," we are told, was addressed
to those good friends in Europe who would willingly have
witnessed our overthrow.55 This thought he conveys in the
following lines:

Not yet the hour is nigh when they
Who deep in Eld's dim twilight sit,
Earth's ancient kings, shall rise and say,
"Proud country, welcome to the pit."56

"Our Country's Call" was written at the beginning of

53 Ibid., p. 129. 54 Ibid., p. 135.
56 Poetical Works, p. 262.
the Civil War, urging men to cast aside their labor and bear arms. This poem "was a thrilling appeal for recruits, which, as it rang through the glades and over the mountains, helped to fill the ranks of the army, and to inspire them with fortitude, trust, and endurance." 57

Bryant's treatment of death and horror as a romantic theme came when he wrote of the tragic fate of Indians, travelers, and hunters. 58 In "The Murdered Traveller" Bryant tells the story of a traveler who was murdered in the Berkshire Hills. It was reported that the traveler had stopped at an inn to inquire the way to Stockbridge and to pay the inn-keeper a debt he owed him when he was seen by two strange-looking men. These men, we are told, set out on their journey at the same time the traveler started from the inn. In the meantime two other strange fellows were seen that winter at this place; however, they seemed to have plenty of money. Later, it is recorded that a criminal in Canada confessed having murdered a traveler in Stockbridge for his money, but no one knew whether the traveler in this poem was the same man, because the murdered one was never identified. 59 In emphasizing the horror of this poem Bryant says:

58 Tremaine McDowell, William Cullen Bryant, Introduction, p. 11.
The mountain-wolf and wild-cat stole
To banquet on the dead. 60

In like manner Bryant presents to us another story of horror in his poem "The Strange Lady." Here Bryant relates the story of a dark-haired woman who persuaded Albert to permit her to accompany him on his hunting trip. Albert, knowing that the wilderness after night was no place for a woman, discouraged her going. However, she insisted that she knew where to find game and that she had a summer lodge in the woods; so both went on their way hunting. Nothing more of Albert was heard as Bryant indicates:

Next day, within a mossy glen, 'mid mouldering trunks were found
The fragments of a human form upon the bloody ground;
White bones from which the flesh was torn, and locks of glossy hair;
They laid them in the place of graves, yet wist not whose they were.
And whether famished evening wolves had mangled Albert so,
Or that strange dame so gay and fair were some mysterious foe,
Or whether to that forest-lodge, beyond the mountain blue,
He went to dwell with her, the friends who mourned him never knew. 61

In "The Hunter's Vision" Bryant recalls a tale of horror in which the hunter met death through a dream. The background of the dream is that this hunter's sweetheart had died many years ago. The hunter, probably weary from hunting, lay down to sleep by a steep craggy precipice. While

60 "The Murdered Traveller," ibid., p. 73.
61 Ibid., pp. 173-174.
he was sleeping, he dreamed that this maid beckoned to him with outstretched arms and smiling face; at which time he leaned too far to catch her and fell from this steep precipice and was killed instantly. 62

From Bryant's prose works, reference may be made to "The Skeleton Cave" to show a comparison of his horror in it with that of his poetry.

In a similar manner he presents to us a very vivid picture of grotesque horror. Here three people, Father Ambrose, Le Maine, and Emily, his niece, are entombed in a tomb with a skeleton. For want of food and water they became so nearly famished that Le Maine asks, "Would it not be better for you and Emily that I were dead? -- is there no way? -- look at my veins, they are full yet; and the muscles have not shrunk away from my limbs. Would you not both live the longer if I were to die?" 63

Turning now from Bryant's treatment of Indians, pioneers, hunters, and travelers, let us consider his love of solitude. We are told that Bryant never engaged in lengthy conversations, but dispensed with the subject under consideration as quickly as possible, so that he might go about his own business. He went on frequent strolls alone because he enjoyed nature more than human society. In the solitude of nature Bryant finds a means of escape from the toils and cares of life, as he indicates:

The calm shade
Shall bring a kindred calm, and the sweet breeze
That makes the green leaves dance, shall waft a balm
To thy sick heart. 64

64 "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood," Poetical Works, p. 24.
In a similar manner in "A Summer Ramble" Bryant seems to desire escaping from man and the world. In nature he seems to conceive purity and peace. Here he says:

Beneath the open sky abroad,
Among the plants and breathing things,
The sinless, peaceful works of God,
I'll share the calm the season brings.65

Bryant finds pleasure in rural solitude not only because he escapes from his worries, but also because he feels in close communion with God. As he views nature alone from the tops of rocky mountains, he feels a close kinship with God. Of this experience he writes:

There, as thou stand'st
The haunts of men below thee, and around
The mountain-summits, thy expanding heart
Shall feel a kindred with that loftier world.66

In like manner Bryant feels a nearness to God in "A Forest Hymn." Others there are who do not care to worship in the woods, yet he says:

But let me often to these solitudes
Retire, and in thy presence reassure
My feeble virtue.67

No matter whether Bryant was alone in the forest, on the mountain top, or on the prairie, he found something in nature that pleased him. This thought he conveys in the following lines:

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65 Ibid., p. 114.  
66 Ibid., p. 63.  
67 Ibid., p. 81.
Still this great solitude is quick with life
Myriads of insects, gaudy as the flowers
They flutter over, gentle quadrupeds,
And birds, that scarce have learned the fear of man,
Are here, and sliding reptiles of the ground,
Startlingly beautiful.68

In the quiet of the village, where no footstep nor
even a sound of wind is heard, Bryant rejoices in the soli-
tude of the earth. In referring to the earth he says:

I lie and listen to her mighty voice:
A voice of many tones -- 69

In the beauty of the soft cloud Bryant exclaims:

Beautiful cloud! I would I were with thee
In thy calm way o'er land and sea;
To rest on thy unrolling skirts, and look
On Earth as on an open book.70

However, much as Bryant prefers communing with God in
solitude, he believes that man can also commune with Him in
the crowded city. In other words, he is aware of the fact
that God is ever present for those who let Him lead in their
lives. Yet, in the quietness of the city, Bryant says:

It breathes of Him who keeps
The vast and helpless city while it sleeps.71

The massive rather than the minute aspects of nature
appealed to Bryant. As he beholds the vast prairies, he
thinks of a whole departed race. Here in "The Prairies"

70"To a Cloud," ibid., p. 72.
71"Hymn of the City," ibid., p. 130.
he sees the beauty of spacious fields, masses of grass, many flowers, herds of cattle, and a multitude of insects. In "A Hymn of the Sea" Bryant conceives of the massiveness of nature when he speaks of the cloud watering the great earth. Then he perceives the tornado destroying an entire fleet. In the following lines he plainly conveys the thought of massiveness in nature:

> These restless surges eat away the shores Of earth's old continents; the fertile plain Welters in shallows, headlands crumble down, And the tide drifts the sea-sand in the streets Of the drowned city.  

In speaking of the coral-worm he indicates "the idea not only of spaciousness but of endless duration." Of the coral-worm he says:

> From age to age,  
> He builds beneath the waters, till, at last,  
> His bulwarks overtop the brine, and check  
> The long wave rolling from the southern pole  
> To break upon Japan.

We may also note that there is not so much of single trees in Bryant's poetry because he speaks of them as "groves of trees," "ranks of trees," forests, and woods. Another example of his use of massive forms in nature is found in

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72 Ibid., p. 203.  
73 Ibid.  
74 Ibid., p. 204.  
77 "A Forest Hymn," *ibid.*, p. 79.  
78 Ibid.
"The Firmament" when he beholds the "boundless firmament." Again, in "The Hurricane," he speaks of the "boundless arch of heaven" through which the hurricane comes. Also, in "Monument Mountain," he says that

The beauty and the majesty of earth, Spread wide beneath, shall make thee to forget The steep and toilsome way.

In "The Song of the Stars" Bryant again deals with the massive forms of nature when he describes the innumerable stars that deck the skies at night:

Look, look, through our glittering ranks afar, In the infinite azure, star after star, How they brighten and bloom as they swiftly pass! How the verdure runs o'er each rolling mass! And the path of the gentle winds is seen, Where the small waves dance, and the young woods lean.

In like manner in "Summer Wind" Bryant suggests to us his idea of the greatness of nature. Here he first thinks of the effects of the intense heat upon the flowers, plants, and insects about him. Then his thoughts ascend to the high hills that are scorching in the terrible heat and even to the

... Bright clouds, Motionless pillars of the brazen heaven.

Especially characteristic of Bryant is his use of

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79 Ibid., p. 86. 80 Ibid., p. 116.
81 Ibid., p. 63. 82 Ibid., p. 78.
83 Ibid., p. 57.
artistic unity. In "The Evening Wind" Bryant realizes that the wind travels in one cycle because it leaves the sea, travels over the land, and returns to the sea.\textsuperscript{84} In "The Mother's Hymn" there is another suggestion of unity when our poet speaks of
\begin{quote}
... the ties that bind
The mother to the child she bears.\textsuperscript{85}
\end{quote}
This unity is brought about by the infant's identifying his mother with nature. The infant realizes a sense of comfort when he is in intimate relation with his mother. Through this relationship the child is led to perceive beauty in nature. Here we have a filial bond between mother and child as well as between nature and child. Then in "Noon" Bryant suggests the idea of unity when he says that man in "the noon of life" does not pause to think of the mystery
\begin{quote}
That links us to the greater world, beside
Whose border we but hover for a space.\textsuperscript{86}
\end{quote}
Bryant, like Wordsworth, was endowed with the power to see the oneness of city life as he saw the oneness of nature. Just as God's power was present in all movements of the sea, so it was that God's power was present in the crowded street. In Bryant's poem called "The Crowded Street he seems to be watching the enormous crowd of men and women rushing to and fro, some happy, perhaps, others sad.

\textsuperscript{84}Ibid., p. 124. \hfill \textsuperscript{85}Ibid., p. 267.
\textsuperscript{86}"Noon," Ibid., p. 206.
Needless of one another, each, he admitted, was bent upon his own task, his own pleasure; yet the poet's keen eye not the less saw the bond which made them one. 87

That is, Bryant recognized, as he indicates in the following lines, that

There is who needs, who holds them all,
In His large love and boundless thought.
These struggling tides of life that seem
In wayward aimless course to tend,
Are eddies of the mighty stream
That rolls to its appointed end. 88

Bryant in a similar manner to Wordsworth suggests the mystic element; however, he does not carry us nearly so far into the mystic realms of nature as does Wordsworth. In "A Forest Hymn" Bryant seems to assert a belief in mysticism when he considers "the miracle that still goes on" 89 about him, and in the "delicate forest flower" 90 seems to find

An emanation of the indwelling life,
A visible token of the upholding love,
That are the soul of this great universe. 91

Again, there is a suggestion of mysticism in his poem "Among the Trees," as the writer has mentioned in a preceding chapter, when he wonders whether the trees might have a "dim sense of pleasure and pain." 92 In "The Mystery of Flowers" also Bryant suggests his belief in mysticism when

87 Elmer James Beley, Religious Thought in the Greater American Poets, p. 17.
88 Poetical Works, p. 208. 89 Ibid., p. 80.
90 Ibid. 91 Ibid. 92 Ibid., p. 322.
he carefully observes different flowers. Of them he says,

The faintest streak that on a petal lies,
May speak instruction to initiate eyes. \(^{93}\)

From Bryant's treatment of romantic themes it is quite obvious that he was a truly romantic poet. It is a fact that Bryant was influenced by English romantic writers; yet he chose his own native themes about which he cared to write. In selecting these subjects he was careful to choose themes that excite the imagination, touch the heart, and appeal to the understanding. Bryant's love of nature and of God led him to "see into the life of things."

Bryant, like Wordsworth, "associated nature in his mind with innocence and unworldliness, and he believed that men could learn much from nature in regard to a happy and normal way of life." \(^{94}\)

\(^{93}\) Ibid., p. 396.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

From a careful study of Bryant's work it is quite evident that he was a true nature poet, for he was so fervently inspired by his natural surroundings that he was led to write poetry that enkindled the minds of the common people as well as the most educated to a deeper appreciation of the beauty of nature. Bryant's early experience in these natural surroundings never faded from his memory, but rather developed his imagination so intensely that he was always alert to the influences of nature. His verse was always emotional, yet it was written in a very simple descriptive manner.

He was pre-eminently a poet of forests, waters, earth, sky, and plant and animal life. We must agree that many poets have written of the beauties of nature, but no other poet has excelled Bryant in writing of the aspects of external nature. His familiarity with plant and animal life alone is sufficient evidence of his extensive knowledge of external nature; yet he persistently wrote of the seasons, the months, the tempests, the rain, and the wind. In the seasons and in the months he noted the inevitable changes

101
of nature day by day. In the spring he rejoiced in the re-
juvenation of life, but in the autumn he grew rather pensive
because of the decay of nature. In the tempests and rain
Bryant perceived the constructive as well as the destructive
power of nature. Especially was Bryant made happy upon be-
holding the peaceful scene of nature which followed the
tempest. In the winds Bryant felt a spirit of joy and
refreshment. As Bryant witnessed the great miracles of na-
ture about him, he was almost awe-stricken. However,
through his knowledge of natural science the external change
of nature became more obvious to him.

"Like other modern poets, he recognized in nature, not
only a thing of beauty, but also a precious healing power,
which seemed to him to stream into his spirit through the
senses."¹ Bryant's sense perceptions were more highly de-
veloped than those of any other American poet. He rejoiced
in the merry chirping birds, the humming insects, the
screaming eagle, the mighty voice of earth and sea, and
the noise of the hurricane. As he beheld the stars and the
delicate forest flowers, he felt an emanation of the love
of God who tenderly watched over him. Of the odorous pine
and the delicate little violet that grew along the streams
he breathed a fragrance of delight. But in the breezes he

¹Norman Foerster, Nature in American Literature, p. 10
seemed to feel the breath of God because they seemed to affect him with a soothing power.

This soothing power in nature for Bryant came in solitude, not with man in the crowded street.

He would retire from the "haunts of men" as often as possible to repurify himself, to forget amid the beauties of nature the misery of the crowd, to revive the visions of his boyhood spent amid the solitudes, and to get near to God whom, in the jostling crowd, he could not feel.²

Bryant's philosophy of nature was largely influenced by Puritanism because he was brought up under its underlying principles. Through its influence he conceived God as a personal Being working through nature, for in nature he was always seeing a symbol of His grace. In contrast, however, to the loving-kindness of God, Bryant was led to dwell upon the sin of man and its consequences. It is true that his idea of death was always shadowed by Puritanism because he wrote of the coldness of the tomb and the universality of death as did the "graveyard poets"; yet in maturity he perceived death as an inevitable ministry of life. That is, to Bryant, death was as natural and as universal as life, and the rich and poor, the good and bad alike must meet it. Therefore, Bryant's optimistic attitude toward death led him beyond its realms, for he had faith in an eternal life where there will be no more sorrow

²Fred Lewis Pattee, Side-Lights on American Literature, p. 322.
or death.

Although Bryant never wholly escaped the Puritan influence, his philosophy was modified by the influences of deism and Unitarianism. Under these influences he was led to emphasize truth and freedom as instruments of God. Bryant found this age an opportune time for writing because the nation was being shaped and democracy was the watchword. Throughout his poems he proclaimed the ideal of freedom, for he visioned an age in which good would overcome evil and Christ would reign supremely.

Bryant was also influenced by other romantic poets to whose writings he had access in his youth. In Thomson, Bryant admired the treatment of external nature; in Cowper he liked the religious atmosphere; and in Wordsworth he appreciated the beautiful descriptions of nature that so clearly resembled his own surroundings. Although we may see some resemblances to the work of these romantic writers in Bryant's poetry, we can best understand Bryant as a romanticist when we notice his own unique treatment of romantic themes.

Some of the romantic themes which Bryant emphasizes most are as follows: the Indian, the prairie and the pioneers, history and legends of his own country, grotesque horror, massive aspects of nature, and unity. In his
imagination he sees the Indian as a departed race for which he mourns. In writing of the Indians he presents to us very clear pictures of their bravery, customs, and traditions. Of the prairie Bryant apparently chose to write because of his love for the broad open prairies where he breathed an air of freedom as he beheld their boundless beauty. He was so favorably impressed with the pioneers that he perceived them as God-fearing people. Bryant was always glorifying his own country. In the Pilgrims and in the brave heroes of the American Revolutionary War he saw the making of an American nation, a nation that would stand the test of all ages. In the grotesque horror and tragic deaths of travelers, hunters, and Indians Bryant found romantic themes; yet in the death of loved ones he found nothing for romantic thought. Because Bryant looked upon the massiveness of nature, he perceived it from a more extensive viewpoint than other poets. Thus he brought into his poetry the thought of vast areas, the firmament as a vault, spacious prairies, whole bodies of water, and races of people. In nature Bryant perceived the tie that makes us one. He saw the tie that binds the child to its mother and the tie that binds us to the greater world, wherein he conceived the unity of nature. So lightly does Bryant touch the mystic element of nature that we may clearly see
that his idea was not a philosophical view. Thus we may
describe Bryant's poems as expressions not of mysticism,
but of spiritualized naturalism.

We may finally conclude that Bryant's greatest achieve-
ment as a poet was not found in his philosophical or romantic
themes, but in his themes from external nature, for it seemed
to be his special talent to interpret nature for us. We
shall continue to remember Bryant as the first great Ameri-
can poet who wrote of the Puritan ideals and who gave us
our best descriptive, reflective, and original nature poetry.
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