



The less frequently seen view of Bryant (1794-1878) as a young man; in this case portrayed in 1825 by painter, sculptor, litterateur, mechanic, later famous inventor, and all-around genius Samuel F. B. Morse.¹

NATURE, WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT, AND THE POETRY OF HOPE

"It must however be allowed, that the poetry of the United States, though it has not reached that perfection to which some other countries have carried theirs, is yet even better than we could have been expected to produce, considering that our nation has scarcely seen two centuries since the first of its founders erected their cabins on its soil, that our literary institutions are yet in their infancy, and that our citizens are just beginning to find leisure to attend to intellectual refinement and indulge in intellectual luxury, and the means of rewarding intellectual excellence. For the first century after the settlement of this country, the few quaint and unskilful specimens of poetry which yet remain to us, are looked upon merely as objects of curiosity, are preserved only in the cabinet of the antiquary, and give little pleasure, if read without reference to the age and people which produced them. A purer taste began after this period to prevail -- the poems of the Rev. John Adams, written in the early part of the eighteenth century, which have been considered as no bad specimen of the poetry of his time, are tolerably free from the faults of the generation that preceded him, and show the dawning of an ambition of correctness and elegance. The poetical writings of Joseph Green, Esq. who wrote about the middle of the same century, have been admired for their humour and the playful ease of their composition.

"But, previous to the contest which terminated in the independence of the United States, we can hardly be said to have had any national poetry. Literary ambition was not then frequent amongst us -- there was little motive for it, and few rewards. We were contented with considering ourselves as participating in the literary fame of that nation, of which we were a part, and of which many of us were natives, and aspired to no separate distinction..."

~ William Cullen Bryant, in a review of Solyman Brown's *Essay on American Poetry* (1818); for *The North American Review*, no. 22, July 1818.²

If, poetically speaking, Walt Whitman is our hearty *comrade* and fellow amidst the vast teeming throng of life, William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878), who distinctly impacted Whitman's nature-based cosmic outlook, is by comparison a solemn, yet credible, *father* figure. Those who are more than casually acquainted with the writings of both authors will know immediately what I am talking about. Added to this, how odd it is that Bryant (who spanned from 1794 to 1817), like Father Time, *both* preceded *and* survived some of his famous contemporaries in American Literature; as for instance: John Pendleton Kennedy (1795-1870), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870), Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862); while a second group outlived him by no more than a decade or less: Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), Sidney Lanier (1842-1881), and John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892).

¹ In passing, Morse's anti-"papist" diatribes of the 1830's are not to be taken all that seriously; either in support of or in detraction of him; as he most certainly, in retrospect, would have to, at the very least, revise and modify his "conspiracy" ideas; as he himself would, presumably, be compelled to admit. His reactionary views on and in defense of slavery, on the other hand, were not uncommon among some name-worthy Northerners; including, oddly enough, James Kirke Paulding; and this, in no small measure, owing to a desire on their part to maintain good-fellowship with Southerners for purposes of preserving the Union. Morse himself, by the way and like many of the "Transcendentalists" of his home state of Massachusetts, was (roughly speaking) a Calvinist spawned Unitarian.

² Solyman Brown's work is so generally affected and feeble in spirit and imagination that one can't help but wonder whether it were a hoax designed to lampoon American literature. Bryant, in any case, in summation makes clear he does not like the book.

With then such and what developed into a sage and elderly persona, somewhat humorous it is to learn that in his youth Bryant was a fairly brash political agitator armed with a vitriolic pen. His background was respectable and staid enough: he traced ancestors back to Mayflower settlers John Alden and Priscilla Mullins; of Longfellow's celebrated *Courtship of Miles Standish*; having been otherwise born of devout Calvinist-Puritan stock on the family farm in bucolic Cummington, (western) Massachusetts. Yet his first efforts at writings were heated, even embarrassingly so, invectives against the administrations of Jefferson and Madison. Likewise, he was keenly supportive of the British against Napoleon, and during the War of 1812 sided rather with secessionist New Englanders than the United States in that conflict.

With time, however, he became more subdued and carefully avoiding, as best he could, heated quarrels in the political arena. He intended first to be an attorney, and briefly set up a law practice. But drawn to literary pursuits, he put that aside and took up writing poetry, articles, and reviews for then recently founded journals; finally settling down as an editor of the New York City *Evening Post*; from which position he ended up deriving most of his income in the course of his life. As well as gaining honored renown as a bard, he was not infrequently called upon as an orator for public occasions and events, including giving memorial addresses on the passings of James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving and Fitz-Greene Halleck; all of whom personally knew and held Bryant in high regard.

Although he has been rightly characterized at the American Wordsworth, Bryant's substrata roots, as literary historian William Ellery Leonard points out,³ were in 18th century poets like James Thomson, Mark Akenside, Thomas Young, William Cowper, and, in addition Isaac Watt.⁴ Penning as many poems with Indian themes as he did, one would surmise Philip Freneau was an influence also. If so, this could only have come after Bryant put aside his strong anti-Jefferson feelings; as his initial respect for Freneau was grudging.⁵ Wordsworth, Robert Burns, and Henry Kirke White were others who subsequently left their mark on his work; not least of which White whose gravity of manner often surfaces in Bryant's usual verse technique.

In his lifetime he was nigh universally admired generally, and it would be something to find anything bad spoke or writ of him by his contemporaries; Edgar Allen Poe, for one and for example, being no little lavish in his praise.⁶ Yet with the change of generations Bryant has tended to fall out of favor with much of conventional literary criticism. While this is to be regretted, it is to a degree understandable. Too frequently Bryant succumbs to contrived and artificial 19th century figures of speech and modes of expression; which if we browse through him superficially make him seem trivial. Two things, however, need to be said in response to this. First, Bryant like any poet had his better and less than better poems, and his superior efforts are more than adequate to sustain his stature as one of this country's first rank poets. Secondly, resonating throughout the general corpus of his work is a mature and profound vision of life that still inspires and will move sensitive readers deeply. And, to be candid and speaking from personal experience, what therapy and a comfort it is sometimes to curl up in a snug spot imbibing his warm, albeit sometimes somber yet nevertheless hopeful and positive view of things that draws on both Nature and religion for its strength. Together with Audubon, Thoreau, and Whitman, no one else in white American culture ever served as a better mouthpiece for Nature's voice plaintively calling to us amid the ravages and disturbing throes of the modern living.

Bryant's most familiar poems are his "Thanatopsis" (1811, pub. 1817) "The Ages" (1821), and "To a Waterfowl" (1816, pub. 1818). Yet in the interest of bringing attention to some of his lesser known pieces, assembled here is a sampling of other pieces that also display him at his most moving and, for that reason, excellent.

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<sup>3</sup> See Leonard's essay on the poet found in *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917), vol. 1, edited by Trent, Erskine, Sherman, Van Doren, ch. 5, pp. 260-278; and which is one of most erudite, and just appraisals of Bryant in print.

<sup>4</sup> Bryant later wrote "I may be said to have been nurtured on Watt's devout poems composed for children."

<sup>5</sup> See the earlier quoted review of Solyman Brown's *Essay on American Poetry* (1818); *The North American Review*, no. 22, July 1818.

<sup>6</sup> See Poe's "The Poetic Principle," *Home Journal*, series for 1850, no. 36 (whole number 238), August 31, 1850, p. 1, cols. 1-6; available at <http://www.eapoe.org/works/essays/poetprnb.htm>

## A WINTER PIECE.

The time has been that these wild solitudes,  
Yet beautiful as wild, were trod by me  
Oftener than now; and when the ills of life  
Had chafed my spirit--when the unsteady pulse  
Beat with strange flutterings--I would wander forth  
And seek the woods. The sunshine on my path  
Was to me as a friend. The swelling hills,  
The quiet dells retiring far between,  
With gentle invitation to explore  
Their windings, were a calm society  
That talked with me and soothed me. Then the chant  
Of birds, and chime of brooks, and soft caress  
Of the fresh sylvan air, made me forget  
The thoughts that broke my peace, and I began  
To gather simples by the fountain's brink,  
And lose myself in day-dreams. 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. When shrieked  
The bleak November winds, and smote the woods,  
And the brown fields were herbless, and the shades,  
That met above the merry rivulet,  
Were spoiled, I sought, I loved them still, -- they seemed  
Like old companions in adversity.  
Still there was beauty in my walks; the brook,  
Bordered with sparkling frost-work, was as gay  
As with its fringe of summer flowers. Afar,  
The village with its spires, the path of streams,  
And dim receding valleys, hid before  
By interposing trees, lay visible  
Through the bare grove, and my familiar haunts  
Seemed new to me. Nor was I slow to come  
Among them, when the clouds, from their still skirts,  
Had shaken down on earth the feathery snow,  
And all was white. The pure keen air abroad,  
Albeit it breathed no scent of herb, nor heard  
Love-call of bird, nor merry hum of bee,  
Was not the air of death. Bright mosses crept  
Over the spotted trunks, and the close buds,  
That lay along the boughs, instinct with life,  
Patient, and waiting the soft breath of Spring,  
Feared not the piercing spirit of the North.  
The snow-bird twittered on the beechen bough,  
And 'neath the hemlock, whose thick branches bent  
Beneath its bright cold burden, and kept dry  
A circle, on the earth, of withered leaves,  
The partridge found a shelter. Through the snow  
The rabbit sprang away. The lighter track  
Of fox, and the racoon's broad path, were there,  
Crossing each other. From his hollow tree,

The squirrel was abroad, gathering the nuts  
Just fallen, that asked the winter cold and sway  
Of winter blast, to shake them from their hold.

But Winter has yet brighter scenes,--he boasts  
Splendours beyond what gorgeous Summer knows;  
Or Autumn with his many fruits, and woods  
All flushed with many hues. Come when the rains  
Have glazed the snow, and clothed the trees with ice;  
While the slant sun of February pours  
Into the bowers a flood of light. Approach!  
The incrusted surface shall upbear thy steps,  
And the broad arching portals of the grove  
Welcome thy entering. Look! the massy trunks  
Are cased in the pure crystal; each light spray,  
Nodding and tinkling in the breath of heaven,  
Is studded with its trembling water-drops,  
That stream with rainbow radiance as they move.  
But round the parent stem the long low boughs  
Bend, in a glittering ring, and arbours hide  
The glassy floor. Oh! you might deem the spot  
The spacious cavern of some virgin mine,  
Deep in the womb of earth--where the gems grow,  
And diamonds put forth radiant rods and bud  
With amethyst and topaz--and the place  
Lit up, most royally, with the pure beam  
That dwells in them. Or haply the vast hall  
Of fairy palace, that outlasts the night,  
And fades not in the glory of the sun;--  
Where crystal columns send forth slender shafts  
And crossing arches; and fantastic aisles  
Wind from the sight in brightness, and are lost  
Among the crowded pillars. Raise thine eye,--  
Thou seest no cavern roof, no palace vault;  
There the blue sky and the white drifting cloud  
Look in. Again the wildered fancy dreams  
Of spouting fountains, frozen as they rose,  
And fixed, with all their branching jets, in air,  
And all their sluices sealed. All, all is light;  
Light without shade. But all shall pass away  
With the next sun. From numberless vast trunks,  
Loosened, the crashing ice shall make a sound  
Like the far roar of rivers, and the eve  
Shall close o'er the brown woods as it was wont.

And it is pleasant, when the noisy streams  
Are just set free, and milder suns melt off  
The plashy snow, save only the firm drift  
In the deep glen or the close shade of pines,--  
'Tis pleasant to behold the wreaths of smoke  
Roll up among the maples of the hill,  
Where the shrill sound of youthful voices wakes  
The shriller echo, as the clear pure lymph,  
That from the wounded trees, in twinkling drops,  
Falls, mid the golden brightness of the morn,  
Is gathered in with brimming pails, and oft,

Wielded by sturdy hands, the stroke of axe  
Makes the woods ring. Along the quiet air,  
Come and float calmly off the soft light clouds,  
Such as you see in summer, and the winds  
Scarce stir the branches. Lodged in sunny cleft,  
Where the cold breezes come not, blooms alone  
The little wind-flower, whose just opened eye  
Is blue as the spring heaven it gazes at--  
Startling the loiterer in the naked groves  
With unexpected beauty, for the time  
Of blossoms and green leaves is yet afar.  
And ere it comes, the encountering winds shall oft  
Muster their wrath again, and rapid clouds  
Shade heaven, and bounding on the frozen earth  
Shall fall their volleyed stores rounded like hail,  
And white like snow, and the loud North again  
Shall buffet the vexed forest in his rage.

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THE WEST WIND.

Beneath the forest's skirts I rest,
Whose branching pines rise dark and high,
And hear the breezes of the West
Among the threaded foliage sigh.

Sweet Zephyr! why that sound of woe?
Is not thy home among the flowers?
Do not the bright June roses blow,
To meet thy kiss at morning hours?

And lo! thy glorious realm outspread--
Yon stretching valleys, green and gay,
And yon free hill-tops, o'er whose head
The loose white clouds are borne away.

And there the full broad river runs,
And many a fount wells fresh and sweet,
To cool thee when the mid-day suns
Have made thee faint beneath their heat.

Thou wind of joy, and youth, and love;
Spirit of the new-wakened year!
The sun in his blue realm above
Smooths a bright path when thou art here.

In lawns the murmuring bee is heard,
The wooing ring-dove in the shade;
On thy soft breath, the new-fledged bird
Takes wing, half happy, half afraid.

Ah! thou art like our wayward race;--
When not a shade of pain or ill
Dims the bright smile of Nature's face,
Thou lovest to sigh and murmur still.

THE INDIAN GIRL'S LAMENT.

An Indian girl was sitting where
Her lover, slain in battle, slept;
Her maiden veil, her own black hair,
Came down o'er eyes that wept;
And wildly, in her woodland tongue,
This sad and simple lay she sung:

"I've pulled away the shrubs that grew
Too close above thy sleeping head,
And broke the forest boughs that threw
Their shadows o'er thy bed,
That, shining from the sweet south-west,
The sunbeams might rejoice thy rest.

"It was a weary, weary road
That led thee to the pleasant coast,
Where thou, in his serene abode,
Hast met thy father's ghost:
Where everlasting autumn lies
On yellow woods and sunny skies.

"Twas I the broidered mocsen made,
That shod thee for that distant land;
'Twas I thy bow and arrows laid
Beside thy still cold hand;
Thy bow in many a battle bent,
Thy arrows never vainly sent.

"With wampum belts I crossed thy breast,
And wrapped thee in the bison's hide,
And laid the food that pleased thee best,
In plenty, by thy side,
And decked thee bravely, as became
A warrior of illustrious name.

"Thou'rt happy now, for thou hast passed
The long dark journey of the grave,
And in the land of light, at last,
Hast joined the good and brave;
Amid the flushed and balmy air,
The bravest and the loveliest there.

"Yet, oft to thine own Indian maid
Even there thy thoughts will earthward stray,--
To her who sits where thou wert laid,
And weeps the hours away,
Yet almost can her grief forget,
To think that thou dost love her yet.

"And thou, by one of those still lakes
That in a shining cluster lie,

On which the south wind scarcely breaks
The image of the sky,
A bower for thee and me hast made
Beneath the many-coloured shade.

“And thou dost wait and watch to meet
My spirit sent to join the blessed,
And, wondering what detains my feet
From the bright land of rest,
Dost seem, in every sound, to hear
The rustling of my footsteps near.”

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#### RIZPAH.

*And he delivered them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them in the hill before the Lord; and they fell all seven together, and were put to death in the days of the harvest, in the first days, in the beginning of barley-harvest. And Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah, took sackcloth, and spread it for her upon the rock, from the beginning of harvest until the water dropped upon them out of heaven, and suffered neither the birds of the air to rest upon them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night. 2 SAMUEL, xxi. 10.*

Hear what the desolate Rizpah said,  
As on Gibeah's rocks she watched the dead.  
The sons of Michal before her lay,  
And her own fair children, dearer than they:  
By a death of shame they all had died,  
And were stretched on the bare rock, side by side.  
And Rizpah, once the loveliest of all  
That bloomed and smiled in the court of Saul,  
All wasted with watching and famine now,  
And scorched by the sun her haggard brow,  
Sat mournfully guarding their corpses there,  
And murmured a strange and solemn air;  
The low, heart-broken, and wailing strain  
Of a mother that mourns her children slain:

“I have made the crags my home, and spread  
On their desert backs my sackcloth bed;  
I have eaten the bitter herb of the rocks,  
And drunk the midnight dew in my locks;  
I have wept till I could not weep, and the pain  
Of my burning eyeballs went to my brain.  
Seven blackened corpses before me lie,  
In the blaze of the sun and the winds of the sky.  
I have watched them through the burning day,  
And driven the vulture and raven away;  
And the cormorant wheeled in circles round,  
Yet feared to alight on the guarded ground.  
And when the shadows of twilight came,  
I have seen the hyena's eyes of flame,  
And heard at my side his stealthy tread,  
But aye at my shout the savage fled:  
And I threw the lighted brand to fright  
The jackal and wolf that yelled in the night.

“Ye were foully murdered, my hapless sons,

By the hands of wicked and cruel ones;  
Ye fell, in your fresh and blooming prime,  
All innocent, for your father's crime.  
He sinned--but he paid the price of his guilt  
When his blood by a nameless hand was spilt;  
When he strove with the heathen host in vain,  
And fell with the flower of his people slain,  
And the sceptre his children's hands should sway  
From his injured lineage passed away.

“But I hoped that the cottage roof would be  
A safe retreat for my sons and me;  
And that while they ripened to manhood fast,  
They should wean my thoughts from the woes of the past.  
And my bosom swelled with a mother's pride,  
As they stood in their beauty and strength by my side,  
Tall like their sire, with the princely grace  
Of his stately form, and the bloom of his face.

“Oh, what an hour for a mother's heart,  
When the pitiless ruffians tore us apart!  
When I clasped their knees and wept and prayed,  
And struggled and shrieked to Heaven for aid,  
And clung to my sons with desperate strength,  
Till the murderers loosed my hold at length,  
And bore me breathless and faint aside,  
In their iron arms, while my children died.  
They died--and the mother that gave them birth  
Is forbid to cover their bones with earth.

“The barley-harvest was nodding white,  
When my children died on the rocky height,  
And the reapers were singing on hill and plain,  
When I came to my task of sorrow and pain.  
But now the season of rain is nigh,  
The sun is dim in the thickening sky,  
And the clouds in sullen darkness rest  
Where he hides his light at the doors of the west.  
I hear the howl of the wind that brings  
The long drear storm on its heavy wings;  
But the howling wind and the driving rain  
Will beat on my houseless head in vain:  
I shall stay, from my murdered sons to scare  
The beasts of the desert, and fowls of air.”

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THE AFRICAN CHIEF.

Chained in the market-place he stood,
A man of giant frame,
Amid the gathering multitude
That shrunk to hear his name--
All stern of look and strong of limb,
His dark eye on the ground:--
And silently they gazed on him,

As on a lion bound.

Vainly, but well, that chief had fought,
He was a captive now,
Yet pride, that fortune humbles not,
Was written on his brow.
The scars his dark broad bosom wore,
Showed warrior true and brave;
A prince among his tribe before,
He could not be a slave.

Then to his conqueror he spake--
"My brother is a king;
Undo this necklace from my neck,
And take this bracelet ring,
And send me where my brother reigns,
And I will fill thy hands
With store of ivory from the plains,
And gold-dust from the sands."

"Not for thy ivory nor thy gold
Will I unbind thy chain;
That bloody hand shall never hold
The battle-spear again.
A price thy nation never gave
Shall yet be paid for thee;
For thou shalt be the Christian's slave,
In lands beyond the sea."

Then wept the warrior chief, and bade
To shred his locks away;
And one by one, each heavy braid
Before the victor lay.
Thick were the platted locks, and long,
And closely hidden there
Shone many a wedge of gold among
The dark and crisped hair.

"Look, feast thy greedy eye with gold
Long kept for sorest need:
Take it--thou askest sums untold,
And say that I am freed.
Take it--my wife, the long, long day,
Weeps by the cocoa-tree,
And my young children leave their play,
And ask in vain for me."

"I take thy gold--but I have made
Thy fetters fast and strong,
And ween that by the cocoa shade
Thy wife will wait thee long."
Strong was the agony that shook
The captive's frame to hear,
And the proud meaning of his look
Was changed to mortal fear.

His heart was broken--crazed his brain:
At once his eye grew wild;
He struggled fiercely with his chain,
Whispered, and wept, and smiled;
Yet wore not long those fatal bands,
And once, at shut of day,
They drew him forth upon the sands,
The foul hyena's prey.

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AN INDIAN AT THE BURIAL-PLACE OF HIS FATHERS.

It is the spot I came to seek,--
My fathers' ancient burial-place
Ere from these vales, ashamed and weak,
Withdrew our wasted race.
It is the spot--I know it well--
Of which our old traditions tell.

For here the upland bank sends out
A ridge toward the river-side;
I know the shaggy hills about,
The meadows smooth and wide,--
The plains, that, toward the southern sky,
Fenced east and west by mountains lie.

A white man, gazing on the scene,
Would say a lovely spot was here,
And praise the lawns, so fresh and green,
Between the hills so sheer.
I like it not--I would the plain
Lay in its tall old groves again.

The sheep are on the slopes around,
The cattle in the meadows feed,
And labourers turn the crumbling ground,
Or drop the yellow seed,
And prancing steeds, in trappings gay,
Whirl the bright chariot o'er the way.

Methinks it were a nobler sight
To see these vales in woods arrayed,
Their summits in the golden light,
Their trunks in grateful shade,
And herds of deer, that bounding go
O'er hills and prostrate trees below.

And then to mark the lord of all,
The forest hero, trained to wars,
Quivered and plumed, and lithe and tall,
And seamed with glorious scars,
Walk forth, amid his reign, to dare
The wolf, and grapple with the bear.

This bank, in which the dead were laid,

Was sacred when its soil was ours;
Hither the artless Indian maid
Brought wreaths of beads and flowers,
And the gray chief and gifted seer
Worshipped the god of thunders here.

But now the wheat is green and high
On clods that hid the warrior's breast,
And scattered in the furrows lie
The weapons of his rest;
And there, in the loose sand, is thrown
Of his large arm the mouldering bone.

Ah, little thought the strong and brave
Who bore their lifeless chieftain forth--
Or the young wife, that weeping gave
Her first-born to the earth,
That the pale race, who waste us now,
Among their bones should guide the plough.

They waste us--ay--like April snow
In the warm noon, we shrink away;
And fast they follow, as we go
Towards the setting day,--
Till they shall fill the land, and we
Are driven into the western sea.

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.

Before these fields were shorn and tilled,
Full to the brim our rivers flowed;
The melody of waters filled
The fresh and boundless wood;
And torrents dashed and rivulets played,
And fountains spouted in the shade.

Those grateful sounds are heard no more,
The springs are silent in the sun;
The rivers, by the blackened shore,
With lessening current run,
The realm our tribes are crushed to get
May be a barren desert yet.

SEVENTY-SIX.

What heroes from the woodland sprung,
When, through the fresh awakened land,
The thrilling cry of freedom rung,
And to the work of warfare strung

The yeoman's iron hand!

Hills flung the cry to hills around,
And ocean-mart replied to mart,
And streams whose springs were yet unfound,
Pealed far away the startling sound
Into the forest's heart.

Then marched the brave from rocky steep,
From mountain river swift and cold;
The borders of the stormy deep,
The vales where gathered waters sleep,
Sent up the strong and bold,--

As if the very earth again
Grew quick with God's creating breath,
And, from the sods of grove and glen,
Rose ranks of lion-hearted men
To battle to the death.

The wife, whose babe first smiled that day,
The fair fond bride of yestereve,
And aged sire and matron gray,
Saw the loved warriors haste away,
And deemed it sin to grieve.

Already had the strife begun;
Already blood on Concord's plain
Along the springing grass had run,
And blood had flowed at Lexington,
Like brooks of April rain.

That death-stain on the vernal sward
Hallowed to freedom all the shore;
In fragments fell the yoke abhorred--
The footstep of a foreign lord
Profaned the soil no more.

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#### CATTERSKILL FALLS.

Midst greens and shades the Catterskill leaps,  
From cliffs where the wood-flower clings;  
All summer he moistens his verdant steeps  
With the sweet light spray of the mountain springs;  
And he shakes the woods on the mountain side,  
When they drip with the rains of autumn-tide.

But when, in the forest bare and old,  
The blast of December calls,  
He builds, in the starlight clear and cold,  
A palace of ice where his torrent falls,  
With turret, and arch, and fretwork fair,  
And pillars blue as the summer air.

For whom are those glorious chambers wrought,  
In the cold and cloudless night?  
Is there neither spirit nor motion of thought  
In forms so lovely, and hues so bright?  
Hear what the gray-haired woodmen tell  
Of this wild stream and its rocky dell.

'Twas hither a youth of dreamy mood,  
A hundred winters ago,  
Had wandered over the mighty wood,  
When the panther's track was fresh on the snow,  
And keen were the winds that came to stir  
The long dark boughs of the hemlock fir.

Too gentle of mien he seemed and fair,  
For a child of those rugged steeps;  
His home lay low in the valley where  
The kingly Hudson rolls to the deeps;  
But he wore the hunter's frock that day,  
And a slender gun on his shoulder lay.

And here he paused, and against the trunk  
Of a tall gray linden leant,  
When the broad clear orb of the sun had sunk  
From his path in the frosty firmament,  
And over the round dark edge of the hill  
A cold green light was quivering still.

And the crescent moon, high over the green,  
From a sky of crimson shone,  
On that icy palace, whose towers were seen  
To sparkle as if with stars of their own;  
While the water fell with a hollow sound,  
'Twixt the glistening pillars ranged around.

Is that a being of life, that moves  
Where the crystal battlements rise?  
A maiden watching the moon she loves,  
At the twilight hour, with pensive eyes?  
Was that a garment which seemed to gleam  
Betwixt the eye and the falling stream?

'Tis only the torrent tumbling o'er,  
In the midst of those glassy walls,  
Gushing, and plunging, and beating the floor  
Of the rocky basin in which it falls.  
'Tis only the torrent--but why that start?  
Why gazes the youth with a throbbing heart?

He thinks no more of his home afar,  
Where his sire and sister wait.  
He heeds no longer how star after star  
Looks forth on the night as the hour grows late.  
He heeds not the snow-wreaths, lifted and cast  
From a thousand boughs, by the rising blast.

His thoughts are alone of those who dwell  
In the halls of frost and snow,  
Who pass where the crystal domes upswell  
From the alabaster floors below,  
Where the frost-trees shoot with leaf and spray,  
And frost-gems scatter a silvery day.

“And oh that those glorious haunts were mine!”  
He speaks, and throughout the glen  
Thin shadows swim in the faint moonshine,  
And take a ghastly likeness of men,  
As if the slain by the wintry storms  
Came forth to the air in their earthly forms.

There pass the chasers of seal and whale,  
With their weapons quaint and grim,  
And bands of warriors in glittering mail,  
And herdsmen and hunters huge of limb.  
There are naked arms, with bow and spear,  
And furry gauntlets the carbine rear.

There are mothers--and oh how sadly their eyes  
On their children's white brows rest!  
There are youthful lovers--the maiden lies,  
In a seeming sleep, on the chosen breast;  
There are fair wan women with moonstruck air,  
The snow stars flecking their long loose hair.

They eye him not as they pass along,  
But his hair stands up with dread,  
When he feels that he moves with that phantom throng,  
Till those icy turrets are over his head,  
And the torrent's roar as they enter seems  
Like a drowsy murmur heard in dreams.

The glittering threshold is scarcely passed,  
When there gathers and wraps him round  
A thick white twilight, sullen and vast,  
In which there is neither form nor sound;  
The phantoms, the glory, vanish all,  
With the dying voice of the waterfall.

Slow passes the darkness of that trance,  
And the youth now faintly sees  
Huge shadows and gushes of light that dance  
On a rugged ceiling of unhewn trees,  
And walls where the skins of beasts are hung,  
And rifles glitter on antlers strung.

On a couch of shaggy skins he lies;  
As he strives to raise his head,  
Hard-featured woodmen, with kindly eyes,  
Come round him and smooth his furry bed  
And bid him rest, for the evening star  
Is scarcely set and the day is far.

They had found at eve the dreaming one  
By the base of that icy steep,  
When over his stiffening limbs begun  
The deadly slumber of frost to creep,  
And they cherished the pale and breathless form,  
Till the stagnant blood ran free and warm.

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THE ANTIQUITY OF FREEDOM.

Here are old trees, tall oaks and gnarled pines,
That stream with gray-green mosses; here the ground
Was never trenched by spade, and flowers spring up
Unsown, and die ungathered. It is sweet
To linger here, among the flitting birds
And leaping squirrels, wandering brooks, and winds
That shake the leaves, and scatter, as they pass,
A fragrance from the cedars, thickly set
With pale blue berries. In these peaceful shades--
Peaceful, unpruned, immeasurably old--
My thoughts go up the long dim path of years,
Back to the earliest days of liberty.

Oh FREEDOM! thou art not, as poets dream,
A fair young girl, with light and delicate limbs,
And wavy tresses gushing from the cap
With which the Roman master crowned his slave
When he took off the gyves. A bearded man,
Armed to the teeth, art thou; one mailed hand
Grasps the broad shield, and one the sword; thy brow,
Glorious in beauty though it be, is scarred
With tokens of old wars; thy massive limbs
Are strong with struggling. Power at thee has launched
His bolts, and with his lightnings smitten thee;
They could not quench the life thou hast from heaven.
Merciless power has dug thy dungeon deep,
And his swart armorers, by a thousand fires,
Have forged thy chain; yet, while he deems thee bound,
The links are shivered, and the prison walls
Fall outward; terribly thou springest forth,
As springs the flame above a burning pile,
And shoutest to the nations, who return
Thy shoutings, while the pale oppressor flies.

Thy birthright was not given by human hands:
Thou wert twin-born with man. In pleasant fields,
While yet our race was few, thou sat'st with him,
To tend the quiet flock and watch the stars,
And teach the reed to utter simple airs.
Thou by his side, amid the tangled wood,
Didst war upon the panther and the wolf,
His only foes; and thou with him didst draw
The earliest furrows on the mountain side,
Soft with the deluge. Tyranny himself,
Thy enemy, although of reverend look,

Hoary with many years, and far obeyed,
Is later born than thou; and as he meets
The grave defiance of thine elder eye,
The usurper trembles in his fastnesses.

Thou shalt wax stronger with the lapse of years,
But he shall fade into a feebler age;
Feebler, yet subtler. He shall weave his snares,
And spring them on thy careless steps, and clap
His withered hands, and from their ambush call
His hordes to fall upon thee. He shall send
Quaint maskers, wearing fair and gallant forms,
To catch thy gaze, and uttering graceful words
To charm thy ear; while his sly imps, by stealth,
Twine round thee threads of steel, light thread on thread
That grow to fetters; or bind down thy arms
With chains concealed in chaplets. Oh! not yet
Mayst thou unbrace thy corslet, nor lay by
Thy sword; nor yet, O 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. But wouldst thou rest
Awhile from tumult and the frauds of men,
These old and friendly solitudes invite
Thy visit. They, while yet the forest trees
Were young upon the unviolated earth,
And yet the moss-stains on the rock were new,
Beheld thy glorious childhood, and rejoiced.

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“THE MAY SUN SHEDS AN AMBER LIGHT.”

The May sun sheds an amber light  
On new-leaved woods and lawns between;  
But she who, with a smile more bright,  
Welcomed and watched the springing green,  
Is in her grave,  
Low in her grave.

The fair white blossoms of the wood  
In groups beside the pathway stand;  
But one, the gentle and the good,  
Who cropped them with a fairer hand,  
Is in her grave,  
Low in her grave.

Upon the woodland's morning airs  
The small birds' mingled notes are flung;  
But she, whose voice, more sweet than theirs,  
Once bade me listen while they sung,  
Is in her grave,  
Low in her grave.

That music of the early year  
Brings tears of anguish to my eyes;

My heart aches when the flowers appear;  
For then I think of her who lies  
Within her grave,  
Low in her grave.

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WAITING BY THE GATE

Beside a massive gateway built up in years gone by,
Upon whose top the clouds in eternal shadow lie,
While streams the evening sunshine on quiet wood and lea,
I stand and calmly wait till the hinges turn for me.

The tree-tops faintly rustle beneath the breeze's flight,
A soft and soothing sound, yet it whispers of the night;
I hear the wood-thrush piping one mellow descant more,
And scent the flowers that blow when the heat of day is o'er.

Behold, the portals open, and o'er the threshold, now,
There steps a weary one with a pale and furrowed brow;
His count of years is full, his allotted task is wrought;
He passes to his rest from a place that needs him not.

In sadness then I ponder how quickly fleets the hour
Of human strength and action, man's courage and his power.
I muse while still the wood-thrush sings down the golden day,
And as I look and listen the sadness wears away.

Again the hinges turn, and a youth, departing, throws
A look of longing backward, and sorrowfully goes;
A blooming maid, unbinding the roses from her hair,
Moves mournfully away from amid the young and fair.

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

I grieve for life's bright promise, just shown and then withdrawn;
But still the sun shines round me: the evening bird sings on,
And I again am soothed, and, beside the ancient gate,
In this soft evening sunlight, I calmly stand and wait.

Once more the gates are opened; an infant group go out,
The sweet smile quenched forever, and stilled the sprightly shout.
O frail, frail tree of Life, that upon the greensward strows
Its fair young buds unopened, with every wind that blows!

So come from every region, so enter, side by side,
The strong and faint of spirit, the meek and men of pride.
Steps of earth's great and mighty, between those pillars gray,
And prints of little feet, mark the dust along the way.

And some approach the threshold whose looks are blank with fear,
And some whose temples brighten with joy in drawing near,

As if they saw dear faces, and caught the gracious eye
Of Him, the Sinless Teacher, who came for us to die.

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.

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Bryant also wrote a number of short stories. One of which, "The Skeleton's Cave" and that appeared in the multi-authored collection *Tales of the Glauber Spa* (1832), can be found in .pdf at:

<http://www.gunjones.com/Skeletons-Cave-WCBryant.pdf>

~or~

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/41482215/The-Skeleton-s-Cave-by-William-Cullen-Bryant>

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