

## WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT

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### THANATOPSIS<sup>1</sup>

To him who in the love of Nature holds  
Communion with her visible forms, she  
speaks

A various language; for his gayer hours  
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile  
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides  
Into his darker musings, with a mild  
And healing sympathy, that steals away  
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When  
thoughts

Of the last bitter hour come like a blight<sup>10</sup>  
Over thy spirit, and sad images  
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,  
And breathless darkness, and the narrow  
house,

Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at  
heart;—

Go forth, under the open sky, and list

<sup>1</sup> This, the first great poem written in America, was published in the *North American Review* for September, 1817, vol. v, pp. 338-340. Bryant's father had found it, together with the 'Fragment,' later known as 'Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood,' among other papers in a desk; and had immediately taken it to Boston and shown it to his friend Willard Phillips, one of the editors of the *North American Review*. When Phillips read the poem to his fellow editors, one of them, Richard H. Dana, exclaimed, 'Ah, Phillips, you have been imposed upon; no one on this side of the Atlantic is capable of writing such verses;' and though soon persuaded that the verses really were by an American, the editors still believed that 'Thanatopsis' must have been written by the young poet's father. Phillips says in a letter to Bryant, December, 1817: 'Your "Fragment" was exceedingly liked here. . . . All the best judges say that it and your father's "Thanatopsis" are the very best poetry that has been published in this country.'

As originally printed in the *North American Review*, the poem began with what is now line 17,

— Yet a few days,

and ended with lines 65 and 66,

shall come,  
And make their bed with thee.

It was preceded by four stanzas of four lines each, which did not properly belong to the poem, but had been found with it. The beginning and ending of the poem as it now stands were first given in the volume of poems published by Bryant in 1821.

See Mr. Godwin's account of the origin of the poem, in his *Life of Bryant*, vol. 1, pp. 97-101; and of its first publication, pp. 148-155.

To Nature's teachings, while from all  
around—

Earth and her waters, and the depths of  
air—

Comes a still voice— Yet a few days, and  
thee

The all-beholding sun shall see no more  
In all his course; nor yet in the cold  
ground,

Where thy pale form was laid, with many  
tears,<sup>20</sup>

Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist  
Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee,  
shall claim

Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,  
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up  
Thine individual being, shalt thou go

To mix forever with the elements,  
To be a brother to the insensible rock  
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude  
swain

Turns with his share, and treads upon. The  
oak

Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy  
mould.<sup>30</sup>

Yet not to thine eternal resting-place  
Shalt thou retire alone, nor couldst thou  
wish

Couch more magnificent. Thou shalt lie  
down

With patriarchs of the infant world— with  
kings,

The powerful of the earth— the wise, the  
good,

Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,  
All in one mighty sepulchre. The hills  
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,— the  
vales

Stretching in pensive quietness between;  
The venerable woods— rivers that move<sup>40</sup>  
In majesty, and the complaining brooks  
That make the meadows green; and, poured  
round all,

Old Ocean's gray and melancholy waste,—

Are but the solemn decorations all  
Of the great tomb of man. The golden  
sun,  
The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,  
Are shining on the sad abodes of death,  
Through the still lapse of ages. All that  
tread  
The globe are but a handful to the tribes  
That slumber in its bosom. — Take the  
wings<sup>50</sup>  
Of morning, pierce the Barcan wilderness,  
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods  
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no  
sound,  
Save his own dashings — yet the dead are  
there:  
And millions in those solitudes, since first  
The flight of years began, have laid them  
down  
In their last sleep — the dead reign there  
alone.  
So shalt thou rest, and what if thou with-  
draw  
In silence from the living, and no friend  
Take note of thy departure? All that  
breathe<sup>60</sup>  
Will share thy destiny. The gay will  
laugh  
When thou art gone, the solemn brood of  
care  
Plod on, and each one as before will chase  
His favorite phantom; yet all these shall  
leave  
Their mirth and their employments, and  
shall come  
And make their bed with thee. As the long  
train  
Of ages glide away, the sons of men,  
The youth in life's green spring, and he who  
goes<sup>70</sup>  
In the full strength of years, matron and  
maid,  
The speechless babe, and the gray-headed  
man —  
Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,  
By those, who in their turn shall follow  
them.

So live, that when thy summons comes  
to join  
The innumerable caravan, which moves  
To that mysterious realm, where each shall  
take  
His chamber in the silent halls of death,  
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,

Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and  
soothed  
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy  
grave,  
Like one who wraps the drapery of his  
couch<sup>80</sup>  
About him, and lies down to pleasant  
dreams.

1811?

1817.<sup>1</sup>

## THE YELLOW VIOLET

WHEN beechen buds begin to swell,  
And woods the blue-bird's warble know,  
The yellow violet's modest bell  
Peeps from the last year's leaves be-  
low.

Ere russet fields their green resume,  
Sweet flower, I love, in forest bare,  
To meet thee, when thy faint perfume  
Alone is in the virgin air.

Of all her train, the hands of Spring  
First plant thee in the watery mould,<sup>10</sup>  
And I have seen thee blossoming  
Beside the snow-bank's edges cold.

Thy parent sun, who bade thee view  
Pale skies, and chilling moisture sip,  
Has bathed thee in his own bright hue,  
And streaked with jet thy glowing lip.

Yet slight thy form, and low thy seat,  
And earthward bent thy gentle eye,  
Unapt the passing view to meet,  
When loftier flowers are flaunting nigh.<sup>20</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> Figures at the left, in italics, give the date of writing; those at the right, in roman, the date of publication. For Bryant's poems the dates are taken from Godwin's standard edition of the Poetical Works.

Mr. Godwin states in his note to 'Thanatopsis' that the poem was written in the summer of 1811, which would make Bryant only sixteen years old at the time, not seventeen, as Mr. Godwin himself elsewhere says. Bryant's own account of the matter is given in a letter of 1855, which Mr. Godwin quotes: 'I cannot give you any information of the occasion which suggested to my mind the idea of my poem "Thanatopsis." It was written when I was seventeen or eighteen years old — I have not now at hand the memorandums [sic] which would enable me to be precise — and I believe it was composed in my solitary rambles in the woods.'

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

And when again the genial hour  
Awakes the painted tribes of light,<sup>30</sup>  
I'll not o'erlook the modest flower  
That made the woods of April bright.

1814.

1821.

INSCRIPTION FOR THE EN-  
TRANSE TO A WOOD

STRANGER, if thou hast learned a truth  
which needs  
No school of long experience, that the world  
Is full of guilt and misery, and hast seen  
Enough of all its sorrows, crimes, and cares,  
To tire thee of it, enter this wild wood  
And view the haunts of Nature. The calm  
shade

Shall bring a kindred calm, and the sweet  
breeze  
That makes the green leaves dance, shall  
waft a balm

To thy sick heart. Thou wilt find nothing  
here

Of all that pained thee in the haunts of  
men,<sup>10</sup>  
And made thee loathe thy life. The primal  
curse

Fell, it is true, upon the unsinning earth,  
But not in vengeance. God hath yoked to  
guilt

Her pale tormentor, misery. Hence, these  
shades

Are still the abodes of gladness; 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,<sup>20</sup>

Chirps merrily. Throngs of insects in the  
shade

Try their thin wings and dance in the warm  
beam

That waked them into life. Even the green  
trees

Partake the deep contentment; as they bend  
To the soft winds, the sun from the blue  
sky

Looks in and sheds a blessing on the scene.

Scarce less the cleft-born wild-flower seems  
to enjoy

Existence, than the winged plunderer  
That sucks its sweets. The mossy rocks  
themselves,

And the old and ponderous trunks of pros-  
trate trees

That lead from knoll to knoll a causey<sup>30</sup>  
rude

Or bridge the sunken brook, and their dark  
roots,

With all their earth upon them, twisting  
high,

Breathe fixed tranquillity. The rivulet  
Sends forth glad sounds, and tripping o'er  
its bed

Of pebbly sands, or leaping down the rocks,  
Seems, with continuous laughter, to rejoice  
In its own being. Softly tread the marge,  
Lest from her midway perch thou scare the  
wren

That dips her bill in water.<sup>1</sup> The cool wind,  
That stirs the stream in play, shall come to  
thee,<sup>40</sup>

Like one that loves thee nor will let thee  
pass

Ungreeted, and shall give its light embrace.

1815. 1817.

TO A WATERFOWL<sup>2</sup>

WHITHER, midst falling dew,  
While glow the heavens with the last steps  
of day,

Far, through their rosy depths, dost thou  
pursue

Thy solitary way?

Vainly the fowler's eye  
Might mark thy distant flight to do thee  
wrong,

As, darkly seen against the crimson sky,  
Thy figure floats along.

Seek'st thou the plashy brink  
Of weedy lake, or marge of river wide,<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The poem, as first published in the *North American Review* for September, 1817, under the title 'A Fragment,' ended at this point. The last lines were added in the first edition of the *Poems*, in 1821.

<sup>2</sup> On the origin of this poem, see Godwin's *Life of Bryant*, vol. 1, pp. 143, 144. Hartley Coleridge once called it 'the best short poem in the English language;' and Matthew Arnold was inclined to agree with his judgment. See an account of the incident in Bigelow's *Life of Bryant*, note to pp. 42, 43.

Or where the rocking billows rise and sink  
On the chafed ocean-side ?

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

All day thy wings have fanned,  
At that far height, the cold, thin atmosphere,  
Yet stoop not, weary, to the welcome land,  
Though the dark night is near. 20

And soon that toil shall end;  
Soon shalt thou find a summer home, and  
rest,  
And scream among thy fellows; reeds shall  
bend,  
Soon, o'er thy sheltered nest.

Thou 'rt gone, the abyss of heaven  
Hath swallowed up thy form; yet, on my  
heart  
Deeply has sunk the lesson thou hast given,  
And shall not soon depart.

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. 30

1815. 1818.

#### GREEN RIVER <sup>1</sup>

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.

Yet pure its waters — its shallows are  
bright  
With colored pebbles and sparkles of light, 9

<sup>1</sup> This was Bryant's favorite among his early poems.

And clear the depths where its eddies play  
And dimples deepen and whirl away,  
And the plane-tree's speckled arms o'er-  
shoot

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 dia-  
mond-stone.

Oh, loveliest there the spring days come,  
With blossoms, and birds, and wild-bees' 20  
hum;

The flowers of summer are fairest there,  
And freshest the breath of the summer  
air;

And sweetest the golden autumn day  
In silence and sunshine glides away.

Yet, fair as thou art, thou shunnest to  
glide,

Beautiful stream! by the village side;  
But windest away from haunts of men,  
To quiet valley and shaded glen;  
And forest, and meadow, and slope of hill,  
Around thee, are lonely, lovely, and still; 30  
Lonely — save when, by thy rippling tides,  
From thicket to thicket the angler glides,  
Or the simpler comes, with basket and  
hook,

For herbs of power on thy banks to look;  
Or haply, some idle dreamer, like me,  
To wander, and muse, and gaze on thee,  
Still — save the chirp of birds that feed  
On the river cherry and seedy reed,  
And thy own wild music gushing out  
With mellow murmur of fairy shout, 40  
From dawn to the blush of another day,  
Like traveller singing along his way.

That fairy music I never hear,  
Nor gaze on those waters so green and  
clear,

And mark them winding away from sight,  
Darkened with shade or flashing with light,  
While o'er them the vine to its thicket  
clings,

And the zephyr stoops to freshen his wings,  
But I wish that fate had left me free  
To wander these quiet haunts with thee, 50  
Till the eating cares of earth should de-  
part,

And the peace of the scene pass into my  
heart;

And I envy thy stream, as it glides along  
Through its beautiful banks in a trance of  
song.

Though forced to drudge for the dregs  
of men,  
And scrawl strange words with the bar-  
barous pen,  
And mingle among the jostling crowd,  
Where the sons of strife are subtle and  
loud —

I often come to this quiet place,  
To breathe the airs that ruffle thy face, 60  
And gaze upon thee in silent dream,  
For in thy lonely and lovely stream  
An image of that calm life appears  
That won my heart in my greener years.  
1819. 1820.

#### A WINTER PIECE

THE time has been that these wild soli-  
tudes,  
Yet beautiful as wild, were trod by me  
Often 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 10  
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 20  
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, 30

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, 40  
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 50

The rabbit sprang away. The lighter track  
Of fox, and the raccoon'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  
Splendors 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 incrustated 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 glimmer with an amethystine light.  
But round the parent-stem the long low  
boughs

Bend, in a glittering ring, and arbors 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.

1820.

1821.

## HYMN TO DEATH

Oh! could I hope the wise and pure in  
heart  
Might hear my song without a frown, nor  
deem

My voice unworthy of the theme it tries, —  
I would take up the hymn to Death, and  
say

To the grim power, The world hath slan-  
dered thee

And mocked thee. On thy dim and shad-  
owy brow

They place an iron crown, and call thee king  
Of terrors, and the spoiler of the world,  
Deadly assassin, that strik'st down the fair,  
The loved, the good — that breathest on the  
lights

Of virtue set along the vale of life,  
And they go out in darkness. I am come,  
Not with reproaches, not with cries and  
prayers,

Such as have stormed thy stern, insensible  
ear

From the beginning; I am come to speak  
Thy praises. True it is, that I have wept  
Thy conquests, and may weep them yet  
again,

And thou from some I love wilt take a life  
Dear to me as my own. Yet while the spell  
Is on my spirit, and I talk with thee

In sight of all thy trophies, face to face,  
Meet is it that my voice should utter forth  
Thy nobler triumphs; I will teach the world  
To thank thee. Who are thine accusers?

— Who?

The living! — they who never felt thy  
power,

And know thee not. 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. But the good —  
Does he whom thy kind hand dismissed to  
peace,

Upbraid the gentle violence that took off  
His fetters, and unbarred his prison-cell?

Raise then the hymn to Death. Deliver-  
er!

God hath anointed thee to free the op-  
pressed

And crush the oppressor. When the armed  
chief,

The conqueror of nations, walks the world,  
And it is changed beneath his feet, and all  
Its kingdoms melt into one mighty realm —  
Thou, while his head is loftiest and his heart  
Blasphemes, imagining his own right hand  
Almighty, thou dost set thy sudden grasp  
Upon him, and the links of that strong chain  
Which bound mankind are crumbled; thou  
dost break

Sceptre and crown, and beat his throne to  
dust.

Then the earth shouts with gladness, and  
her tribes

Gather within their ancient bounds again.  
Else had the mighty of the olden time,  
Nimrod, Sesostris, or the youth who feigned  
His birth from Libyan Ammon, smitten yet  
The nations with a rod of iron, and driven  
Their chariot o'er our necks. Thou dost  
avenge,

In thy good time, the wrongs of those who  
know

No other friend. Nor dost thou interpose  
Only to lay the sufferer asleep,

Where he who made him wretched troubles  
not

His rest — thou dost strike down his tyrant  
too.

Oh, there is joy when hands that held the  
scourge

Drop lifeless, and the pitiless heart is cold.  
Thou too dost purge from earth its horrible  
And old idolatries; — from the proud fanes  
Each to his grave their priests go out, till  
none

Is left to teach their worship; then the fires  
Of sacrifice are chilled, and the green moss  
O'ercreeps their altars; the fallen images  
Cumber the weedy courts, and for loud  
hymns,

Chanted by kneeling multitudes, the wind  
Shrieks in the solitary aisles. When he  
Who gives his life to guilt, and laughs at all  
The laws that God or man has made, and  
round

Hedges his seat with power, and shines in  
wealth, —

Lifts up his atheist front to scoff at Hea-  
ven,

And celebrates his shame in open day,  
Thou, in the pride of all his crimes, cutt'st  
off

The horrible example. Touched by thine,  
The extortioner's hard hand foregoes the  
gold

Wrung from the o'er-worn poor. The perjurer,  
Whose tongue was lithe, e'en now, and valuable  
Against his neighbor's life, and he who laughed  
And leaped for joy to see a spotless fame  
Blasted before his own foul calumnies, 80  
Are smit with deadly silence. He, who sold  
His conscience to preserve a worthless life,  
Even while he hugs himself on his escape,  
Trembles, as, doubly terrible, at length,  
Thy steps o'ertake him, and there is no time  
For parley, nor will bribes unclench thy grasp.  
Oft, too, dost thou reform thy victim, long  
Ere his last hour. And when the reveller,  
Mad in the chase of pleasure, stretches on,  
And strains each nerve, and clears the path  
of life  
Like wind, thou point'st him to the dreadful goal,  
And shak'st thy hour-glass in his reeling eye,  
And check'st him in mid course. Thy skeleton hand  
Shows to the faint of spirit the right path,  
And he is warned, and fears to step aside.  
Thou sett'st between the ruffian and his crime  
Thy ghastly countenance, and his slack hand  
Drops the drawn knife. But, oh, most fearfully  
Dost thou show forth Heaven's justice, when thy shafts  
Drink up the ebbing spirit — then the hard  
Of heart and violent of hand restores 101  
The treasure to the friendless wretch he wronged.  
Then from the writhing bosom thou dost pluck  
The guilty secret; lips, for ages sealed,  
Are faithless to their dreadful trust at length,  
And give it up; the felon's latest breath  
Absolves the innocent man who bears his crime;  
The slanderer, horror-smitten, and in tears,  
Recalls the deadly obloquy he forged  
To work his brother's ruin. Thou dost make 110  
Thy penitent victim utter to the air  
The dark conspiracy that strikes at life,

And aims to whelm the laws; ere yet the hour  
Is come, and the dread sign of murder given.

Thus, from the first of time, hast thou been found  
On virtue's side; the wicked, but for thee,  
Had been too strong for the good; the great of earth  
Had crushed the weak for ever. Schooled in guile  
For ages, while each passing year had brought 119  
Its baneful lesson, they had filled the world  
With their abominations; while its tribes,  
Trodden to earth, imbruted, and despoiled,  
Had knelt to them in worship; sacrifice  
Had smoked on many an altar, temple-roofs  
Had echoed with the blasphemous prayer and hymn:  
But thou, the great reformer of the world,  
Tak'st off the sons of violence and fraud  
In their green pupilage, their lore half learned —  
Ere guilt had quite o'errun the simple heart  
God gave them at their birth, and blotted out 130  
His image. Thou dost mark them flushed with hope,  
As on the threshold of their vast designs  
Doubtful and loose they stand, and strik'st them down.<sup>1</sup>

Alas! I little thought that the stern power,  
Whose fearful praise I sang, would try me thus  
Before the strain was ended. It must cease —  
For he is in his grave who taught my youth  
The art of verse, and in the bud of life  
Offered me to the Muses. Oh, cut off 139  
Untimely! when thy reason in its strength,  
Ripened by years of toil and studious search,  
And watch of Nature's silent lessons, taught  
Thy hand to practise best the lenient art  
To which thou gavest thy laborious days,  
And, last, thy life. And, therefore, when  
the earth

<sup>1</sup> The poem was at first left unfinished, at this point. Its concluding lines were added after the death of Bryant's father, in 1820, at the age of fifty-three.

Received thee, tears were in unyielding eyes  
And on hard cheeks, and they who deemed thy skill  
Delayed their death-hour, shuddered and turned pale  
When thou wert gone. This faltering verse, which thou  
Shalt not, as wont, o'erlook, is all I have  
To offer at thy grave — this — and the hope 151  
To copy thy example, and to leave  
A name of which the wretched shall not think  
As of an enemy's, whom they forgive  
As all forgive the dead. Rest, therefore, thou  
Whose early guidance trained my infant steps —  
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.

Now thou art not — and yet the men whose guilt 160  
Has wearied Heaven for vengeance — he who bears  
False witness — he who takes the orphan's bread,  
And robs the widow — he who spreads abroad  
Polluted hands in mockery of prayer,  
Are left to cumber earth. Shuddering I look  
On what is written, yet I blot not out  
The desultory numbers; let them stand,  
The record of an idle revery.  
1820. 1825.

#### 'O FAIREST OF THE RURAL MAIDS'<sup>1</sup>

O FAIREST of the rural maids!  
Thy birth was in the forest shades;  
Green boughs, and glimpses of the sky,  
Were all that met thine infant eye.

Thy sports, thy wanderings, when a child,  
Were ever in the sylvan wild;  
And all the beauty of the place  
Is in thy heart and on thy face.

<sup>1</sup> 'O Fairest of the Rural Maids' will strike every poet as the truest poem written by Bryant. (FOX.)

The twilight of the trees and rocks  
Is in the light shade of thy locks;  
Thy step is as the wind, that weaves  
Its playful way among the leaves.

Thine eyes are springs, in whose serene  
And silent waters heaven is seen;  
Their lashes are the herbs that look  
On their young figures in the brook.

The forest depths, by foot unpressed,  
Are not more sinless than thy breast;  
The holy peace, that fills the air  
Of those calm solitudes, is there.

1820.

1832.

#### MONUMENT MOUNTAIN<sup>2</sup>

THOU who wouldst see the lovely and the wild  
Mingled in harmony on Nature's face,  
Ascend our rocky mountains. Let thy foot  
Fail not with weariness, for on their tops  
The beauty and the majesty of earth,  
Spread wide beneath, shall make thee to forget  
The steep and toilsome way. 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  
To which thou art translated, and partake  
The enlargement of thy vision. Thou shalt look

<sup>2</sup> The mountain called by this name is a remarkable precipice in Great Barrington, overlooking the rich and picturesque valley of the Housatonic, in the western part of Massachusetts. At the southern extremity is, or was a few years since, a conical pile of small stones, erected, according to the tradition of the surrounding country, by the Indians, in memory of a woman of the Stockbridge tribe who killed herself by leaping from the edge of the precipice. Until within a few years past, small parties of that tribe used to arrive from their settlement in the western part of the State of New York, on visits to Stockbridge, the place of their nativity and former residence. A young woman belonging to one of these parties related, to a friend of the author, the story on which the poem of 'Monument Mountain' is founded. An Indian girl had formed an attachment for her cousin, which, according to the customs of the tribe, was unlawful. She was, in consequence, seized with a deep melancholy, and resolved to destroy herself. In company with a female friend, she repaired to the mountain, decked out for the occasion in all her ornaments, and, after passing the day on the summit in singing with her companion the traditional songs of her nation, she threw herself headlong from the rock, and was killed. (BRYANT.)

Upon the green and rolling forest-tops,  
 And down into the secrets of the glens,  
 And streams that with their bordering  
 thickets strive  
 To hide their windings. Thou shalt gaze,  
 at once,  
 Here on white villages, and tilth, and herds,  
 And swarming roads, and there on soli-  
 tudes  
 That only hear the torrent, and the wind,  
 And eagle's shriek. There is a precipice <sup>20</sup>  
 That seems a fragment of some mighty  
 wall,  
 Built by the hand that fashioned the old  
 world,  
 To separate its nations, and thrown down  
 When the flood drowned them. To the  
 north, a path  
 Conducts you up the narrow battlement.  
 Steep is the western side, shaggy and  
 wild  
 With mossy trees, and pinnacles of flint,  
 And many a hanging crag. But, to the  
 east,  
 Sheer to the vale go down the bare old  
 cliffs —  
 Huge pillars, that in middle heaven up-  
 bear <sup>30</sup>  
 Their weather-beaten capitals, here dark  
 With moss, the growth of centuries, and  
 there  
 Of chalky whiteness where the thunder-  
 bolt  
 Has splintered them. It is a fearful thing  
 To stand upon the beetling verge, and see  
 Where storm and lightning, from that huge  
 gray wall,  
 Have tumbled down vast blocks, and at  
 the base  
 Dashed them in fragments, and to lay thine  
 ear  
 Over the dizzy depth, and hear the sound  
 Of winds, that struggle with the woods be-  
 low, <sup>40</sup>  
 Come up like ocean murmurs. But the  
 scene  
 Is lovely round; a beautiful river there  
 Wanders amid the fresh and fertile meads,  
 The paradise he made unto himself,  
 Mining the soil for ages. On each side  
 The fields swell upward to the hills; be-  
 yond,  
 Above the hills, in the blue distance, rise  
 The mountain-columns with which earth  
 props heaven.

There is a tale about these reverend  
 rocks,  
 A sad tradition of unhappy love, <sup>50</sup>  
 And sorrows borne and ended, long ago,  
 When over these fair vales the savage  
 sought  
 His game in the thick woods. There was  
 a maid,  
 The fairest of the Indian maids, bright-  
 eyed,  
 With wealth of raven tresses, a light form,  
 And a gay heart. About her cabin-door  
 The wide old woods resounded with her  
 song  
 And fairy laughter all the summer day.  
 She loved her cousin; such a love was  
 deemed,  
 By the morality of those stern tribes, <sup>60</sup>  
 Incestuous, and she struggled hard and  
 long  
 Against her love, and reasoned with her  
 heart,  
 As simple Indian maiden might. In vain.  
 Then her eye lost its lustre, and her step  
 Its lightness, and the gray-haired men that  
 passed  
 Her dwelling, wondered that they heard no  
 more  
 The accustomed song and laugh of her,  
 whose looks  
 Were like the cheerful smile of Spring,  
 they said,  
 Upon the Winter of their age. She went  
 To weep where no eye saw, and was not  
 found <sup>70</sup>  
 Where all the merry girls were met to  
 dance,  
 And all the hunters of the tribe were out;  
 Nor when they gathered from the rustling  
 husk  
 The shining ear; nor when, by the river's  
 side,  
 They pulled the grape and startled the  
 wild shades  
 With sounds of mirth. The keen-eyed  
 Indian dames  
 Would whisper to each other, as they saw  
 Her wasting form, and say, *The girl will  
 die.*  
 One day into the bosom of a friend,  
 A playmate of her young and innocent  
 years, <sup>80</sup>  
 She poured her griefs. 'Thou know'st, and  
 thou alone,'

She said, 'for I have told thee, all my love,  
 And guilt, and sorrow. I am sick of life.  
 All night I weep in darkness, and the morn  
 Glares on me, as upon a thing accursed,  
 That has no business on the earth. I hate  
 The pastimes and the pleasant toils that  
 once  
 I loved; the cheerful voices of my friends  
 Sound in my ear like mockings, and, at  
 night,  
 In dreams, my mother, from the land of  
 souls, <sup>90</sup>  
 Calls me and chides me. All that look on  
 me  
 Do seem to know my shame; I cannot bear  
 Their eyes; I cannot from my heart root  
 out  
 The love that wrings it so, and I must die.'

It was a summer morning, and they  
 went  
 To this old precipice. About the cliffs  
 Lay garlands, ears of maize, and shaggy  
 skins  
 Of wolf and bear, the offerings of the tribe  
 Here made to the Great Spirit, for they  
 deemed,  
 Like worshippers of the elder time, that  
 God <sup>100</sup>  
 Doth walk on the high places and affect  
 The earth-o'erlooking mountains. She had  
 on  
 The ornaments with which her father loved  
 To deck the beauty of his bright-eyed girl,  
 And bade her wear when stranger warriors  
 came  
 To be his guests. Here the friends sat  
 them down,  
 And sang, all day, old songs of love and  
 death,  
 And decked the poor wan victim's hair with  
 flowers,  
 And prayed that safe and swift might be  
 her way  
 To the calm world of sunshine, where no  
 grief <sup>110</sup>  
 Makes the heart heavy and the eyelids red.  
 Beautiful lay the region of her tribe  
 Below her — waters resting in the embrace  
 Of the wide forest, and maize-planted  
 glades  
 Opening amid the leafy wilderness.  
 She gazed upon it long, and at the sight  
 Of her own village peeping through the  
 trees,

And her own dwelling, and the cabin roof  
 Of him she loved with an unlawful love,  
 And came to die for, a warm gush of tears  
 Ran from her eyes. But when the sun  
 grew low <sup>121</sup>  
 And the hill shadows long, she threw herself  
 From the steep rock and perished. There  
 was scooped,  
 Upon the mountain's southern slope, a  
 grave;  
 And there they laid her, in the very garb  
 With which the maiden decked herself for  
 death,  
 With the same withering wild-flowers in  
 her hair,  
 And o'er the mould that covered her, the  
 tribe  
 Built up a simple monument, a cone  
 Of small loose stones. Thenceforward all  
 who passed, <sup>130</sup>  
 Hunter, and dame, and virgin, laid a stone  
 In silence on the pile. It stands there yet.  
 And Indians from the distant West, who  
 come  
 To visit where their fathers' bones are laid,  
 Yet tell the sorrowful tale, and to this day  
 The mountain where the hapless maiden  
 died  
 Is called the Mountain of the Monument.  
 1824. 1824.

## AUTUMN WOODS

ERE, in the northern gale,  
 The summer tresses of the trees are gone,  
 The woods of Autumn, all around our vale,  
 Have put their glory on.

The mountains that in fold,  
 In their wide sweep, the colored landscape  
 round,  
 Seem groups of giant kings, in purple and  
 gold,  
 That guard the enchanted ground.

I roam the woods that crown  
 The uplands, where the mingled splendors  
 glow, <sup>10</sup>  
 Where the gay company of trees look down  
 On the green fields below.

My steps are not alone  
 In these bright walks; the sweet south-  
 west, at play,

Flies, rustling, where the painted leaves  
are strown  
Along the winding way.

And far in heaven, the while,  
The sun, that sends that gale to wander  
here,  
Pours out on the fair earth his quiet  
smile —  
The sweetest of the year. 20

Where now the solemn shade,  
Verdure and gloom where many branches  
meet;  
So grateful, when the noon of summer  
made  
The valleys sick with heat?

Let in through all the trees  
Come the strange rays; the forest depths  
are bright;  
Their sunny colored foliage, in the breeze,  
Twinkles, like beams of light.

The rivulet, late unseen,  
Where bickering through the shrubs its  
waters run, 30  
Shines with the image of its golden  
screen,  
And glimmerings of the sun.

But 'neath yon crimson tree,  
Lover to listening maid might breathe his  
flame,  
Nor mark, within its roseate canopy,  
Her blush of maiden shame.

Oh, Autumn! why so soon  
Depart the hues that make thy forests  
glad,  
Thy gentle wind and thy fair sunny noon,  
And leave thee wild and sad! 40

Ah! 't were a lot too blest  
Forever in thy colored shades to stray;  
Amid the kisses of the soft southwest  
To roam and dream for aye;

And leave the vain low strife  
That makes men mad — the tug for wealth  
and power —  
The passions and the cares that wither  
life,  
And waste its little hour.

1824.

A FOREST HYMN<sup>1</sup>

THE groves were God's first temples.  
Ere man learned  
To hew the shaft, and lay the architrave,  
And spread the roof above them — ere he  
framed

The lofty vault, to gather and roll back  
The sound of anthems; in the darkling  
wood,

Amid the cool and silence, he knelt down,  
And offered to the Mightiest solemn thanks  
And supplication. For his simple heart  
Might not resist the sacred influences  
Which, from the stilly twilight of the  
place, 10

And from the gray old trunks that high in  
heaven  
Mingled their mossy boughs, and from the  
sound

Of the invisible breath that swayed at once  
All their green tops, stole over him, and  
bowed

His spirit with the thought of boundless  
power

And inaccessible majesty. Ah, why  
Should we, in the world's riper years, neg-  
lect

God's ancient sanctuaries, and adore  
Only among the crowd, and under roofs  
That our frail hands have raised? Let me,  
at least, 20

Here, in the shadow of this aged wood,  
Offer one hymn — thrice happy, if it find  
Acceptance in his ear.

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. They, in thy  
sun,

Budded, and shook their green leaves in  
thy breeze,  
And shot toward heaven. The century-  
living crow,

Whose birth was in their tops, grew old  
and died 30  
Among their branches, till, at last, they  
stood,

As now they stand, massy, and tall, and  
dark,

Fit shrine for humble worshipper to hold

1824.

<sup>1</sup> See Godwin's *Life of Bryant*, vol. i, p. 214.

Communion with his Maker. These dim  
vaults,  
These winding aisles, of human pomp or  
pride

Report not. No fantastic carvings show  
The boast of our vain race to change the  
form

Of thy fair works. But Thou art here —  
Thou fill'st

The solitude. Thou art in the soft winds  
That run along the summit of these trees  
In music; Thou art in the cooler breath 41  
That from the inmost darkness of the place  
Comes, scarcely felt; the barked trunks, the  
ground,

The fresh moist ground, are all instinct with  
Thee.

Here is continual worship; — Nature, here,  
In the tranquillity that Thou dost love,  
Enjoys thy presence. Noiselessly, around,  
From perch to perch, the solitary bird  
Passes; and yon clear spring, that, midst its  
herbs,

Wells softly forth and wandering steepes the  
roots 50

Of half the mighty forest, tells no tale  
Of all the good it does. Thou hast not left  
Thyself without a witness, in the shades,  
Of thy perfections. Grandeur, strength, and  
grace

Are here to speak of Thee. 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  
Wears the green coronal of leaves with  
which 60

Thy hand has graced him. Nestled at his  
root

Is beauty, such as blooms not in the glare  
Of the broad sun. That delicate forest  
flower,

With scented breath and look so like a  
smile,

Seems, as it issues from the shapeless mould,  
An emanation of the indwelling Life,  
A visible token of the upholding Love,  
That are the soul of this great universe.

My heart is awed within me when I  
think

Of the great miracle that still goes on, 70  
In silence, round me — the perpetual work

Of thy creation, finished, yet renewed  
Forever. Written on thy works I read  
The lesson of thy own eternity.  
Lo! all grow old and die — but see again,  
How on the faltering footsteps of decay  
Youth presses — ever gay and beautiful  
youth

In all its beautiful forms. These lofty  
trees

Wave not less proudly that their ancestors  
Moulder beneath them. Oh, there is not  
lost 80

One of earth's charms: upon her bosom  
yet,

After the flight of untold centuries,  
The freshness of her far beginning lies  
And yet shall lie. Life mocks the idle  
hate

Of his arch-enemy Death — yea, seats him-  
self

Upon the tyrant's throne — the sepulchre,  
And of the triumphs of his ghastly foe  
Makes his own nourishment. For he came  
forth

From thine own bosom, and shall have no  
end.

There have been holy men who hid  
themselves 90

Deep in the woody wilderness, and gave  
Their lives to thought and prayer, till they  
outlived

The generation born with them, nor seemed  
Less aged than the hoary trees and rocks  
Around them; — and there have been holy  
men

Who deemed it were not well to pass life  
thus.

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

The passions, at thy plainer footsteps shrink  
And tremble and are still. O God! when  
Thou 101

Dost scare the world with tempests, set on  
fire

The heavens with falling thunderbolts, or  
fill,

With all the waters of the firmament,  
The swift dark whirlwind that uproots the  
woods

And drowns the villages; when, at thy call,  
Uprises the great deep and throws himself

Upon the continent, and overwhelms  
Its cities — who forgets not, at the sight