

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT, an eminent American poet and journalist, was born at Cummington, Mass., Nov. 3, 1794, and died at New York, June 12, 1878. He was educated at Williams College, studied law, and in 1815 was admitted to the Bar. After ten years' successful practice at Plainfield and at Great Barrington, in Berkshire County, he removed to New York city in 1825, there becoming one of the editors of the "Evening Post," and in 1828, its editor-in-chief, a position which he held up to the time of his death. In 1807, at the age of thirteen, he published "The Embargo," a political satire in verse, but no collection of his scattered verses was made until 1821. A second collection appeared in 1832, and later other volumes of his poetry came from his pen, besides metrical translations—the fruit of the last lustre of his life—of the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey," 1870-71. He is best remembered, however, as a poet, by his "Thanatopsis," a poem written before he was twenty, and by his shorter pieces, "To a Waterfowl," "To the Fringed Gentian," and "The Death of the Flowers." A volume of "Orations and Addresses" was issued in 1873, and his complete works, in four volumes, edited by Park Godwin, his son-in-law, in 1884. Some few years before his death he began a "Popular History of the United States."

WELCOME TO LOUIS KOSSUTH

DELIVERED AT A BANQUET GIVEN BY THE PRESS OF NEW YORK,
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LET me ask you to imagine the contest, in which the United States asserted their independence of Great Britain, had been unsuccessful, that our armies, through treason or a league of tyrants against us, had been broken and scattered, that the great men who led them, and who swayed our councils, our Washington, our Franklin, and the venerable President of the American Congress, had been driven forth as exiles. If there had existed at that day, in any part of the civilized world, a powerful republic, with institutions resting on the same foundations of liberty, which our own countrymen sought to establish, would there have been in that republic any hospitality too cordial, any sympathy too deep, any zeal for their glorious but unfortunate cause,

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too fervent or too active to be shown toward these illustrious fugitives? Gentlemen, the case I have supposed is before you. The Washingtons, the Franklins, the Hancocks of Hungary, driven out by a far worse tyranny than was ever endured here, are wanderers in foreign lands. Some of them have sought a refuge in our country—one sits with his company our guest to-night, and we must measure the duty we owe them by the same standard which we would have had history apply, if our ancestors had met with a fate like theirs.

I have compared the exiled Hungarians to the great men of our own history. Difficulty, my brethren, is the nurse of greatness; a harsh nurse, who roughly rocks her foster-children into strength and athletic proportion. The mind grappling with great aims and wrestling with mighty ingredients, grows, by a certain necessity, to their stature. Scarce anything so convinces me of the capacity of the human intellect for indefinite expansion in the different stages of its being, as this power of enlarging itself to the compass of surrounding emergencies. These men have been trained to greatness by a quicker and surer method than a peaceful country and a tranquil period can know.

But it is not merely or principally for their personal qualities that we honor them; we honor them for the cause in which they failed so gloriously. Great issues hang upon that cause, and great interests of mankind are crushed by its downfall. I was on the continent of Europe when the treason of Görgey laid Hungary bound at the feet of the Tsar. Europe was at that time in the midst of the reaction; the ebb tide was rushing violently back, sweeping all that the friends of freedom had planned into the black bosom of the deep. In France the liberty of the press was extinct—Paris in a state of siege—the soldiery of that republic had

just quenched in blood the freedom of Rome—Austria had suppressed liberty in northern Italy—absolutism was restored in Russia, along the Rhine, and in the towns and villages of Würtemberg and Bavaria, troops withdrawn from the barracks, and garrisons filled the streets and kept the inhabitants quiet with the bayonet at their breast. Hungary at that moment alone upheld, and upheld with a firm hand and dauntless heart, the blazing torch of liberty. To Hungary were turned the eyes, to Hungary clung the hopes of all who did not despair of the freedom of Europe.

I recollect that while the armies of Russia were moving like a tempest from the North upon the Hungarian host, the progress of events was watched with the deepest solicitude by the people of Germany. I was at that time in Munich, the splendid capital of Bavaria. The Germans seemed for the time to have put off their usual character, and scrambled for the daily prints, wet from the press, with such eagerness that I almost thought myself in America. The news of the catastrophe at last arrived; Görgey had betrayed the cause of Hungary, and yielded to the demands of the Russians. Immediately a funeral gloom settled like a noonday darkness upon the city. I heard the muttered exclamations of the people, "It is all over—the last hope of European liberty is gone."

Russia did not misjudge. If she had allowed Hungary to become independent, or free, the reaction in favor of absolutism had been incomplete; there would have been one perilous example of successful resistance to despotism—in one corner of Europe a flame would have been kept alive, at which the other nations might have rekindled, among themselves, the light of liberty. Hungary was subdued; but does any one who hears me believe that the present state of things

in Europe will last? The despots themselves fear that it will not; and made cruel by their fears, are heaping chain on chain around the limbs of their subjects.

They are hastening the event they dread. Every added shackle galls, into a more fiery impotence, those who wear them. I look with mingling hope and horror to the day—a day bloodier, perhaps, than we have yet seen—when the exasperated nations shall snap their chains and start to their feet. It may well be that Hungary, made less patient of the yoke by the remembrance of her own many and glorious struggles for independence, and better fitted than other nations, by the peculiar structure of her institutions, for founding the liberty of her citizens on a rational basis, will take the lead. In that glorious and hazardous enterprise, in that hour of care, need, and peril, I hope she will be cheered and strengthened with aid from this side of the Atlantic; aid given not with the stinted hand, not with a cowardly and selfish apprehension, lest we should not err on the safe side—wisely if you please. I care not with how broad a regard to the future, but in large, generous, effectual measure.

And you, our guest, fearless, eloquent, large of heart and of mind, whose one thought is the salvation of oppressed Hungary, unfortunate but undiscouraged, struck down in the battle of liberty, but great in defeat, and gathering strength for future triumphs, receive this action at our hands, that in this great attempt of man to repossess himself of the rights which God gave him, though the strife be waged under a distant belt of longitude, and with the mightiest despotism of the world, the Press of America takes part with you and your countrymen. I give you—"LOUIS KOSSUTH."

ADDRESS AT THE FOUNDING OF THE METROPOLITAN
ART MUSEUM

DELIVERED AT THE UNION CLUB HOUSE, NOVEMBER 23, 1869

WE ARE assembled, my friends, to consider the subject of founding in this city a museum of art, a repository of the productions of artists of every class, which shall be in some measure worthy of this great metropolis and of the wide empire of which New York is the commercial centre. I understand that no rivalry with any other project is contemplated, no competition save with similar institutions in other countries, and then only such modest competition as a museum in its infancy may aspire to hold with those which were founded centuries ago, and are enriched with the additions made by the munificence of successive generations. No precise method of reaching this result has been determined on, but the object of the present meeting is to awaken the public, so far as our proceedings can influence the general mind, to the importance of taking early and effectual measures for founding such a museum as I have described.

Our city is the third great city of the civilized world. Our republic has already taken its place among the great powers of the earth; it is great in extent, great in population, great in the activity and enterprise of her people. It is the richest nation in the world if paying off an enormous national debt with a rapidity unexampled in history be any proof of riches; the richest in the world if contented submission to heavy taxation be a sign of wealth; the richest in the world if quietly to allow itself to be annually plundered of immense sums by men

who seek public stations for their individual profit be a token of public prosperity.

My friends, if a tenth part of what is every year stolen from us in this way, in the city where we live, under pretence of the public service, and poured profusely into the coffers of political rogues, were expended on a museum of art, we might have, deposited in spacious and stately buildings, collections formed of works left by the world's greatest artists, which would be the pride of our country. We might have an annual revenue which would bring to the museum every stray statue and picture of merit for which there should be no ready sale to individuals, every smaller collection in the country which its owner could no longer conveniently keep, every noble work by the artists of former ages which by any casualty, after long remaining on the walls of some ancient building, should be again thrown upon the world.

But what have we done—numerous as our people are, and so rich as to be contentedly cheated and plundered, what have we done toward founding such a repository? We have hardly made a step toward it. Yet, beyond the sea there is the little kingdom of Saxony, with an area even less than that of Massachusetts, and a population but little larger, possessing a museum of the fine arts, marvellously rich, which no man who visits the continent of Europe is willing to own that he has not seen.

There is Spain, a third-rate power of Europe, and poor besides, with a museum of fine arts at her capital the opulence and extent of which absolutely bewilder the visitor. I will not speak of France or of England, conquering nations, which have gathered their treasures of art in part from regions overrun by their armies; nor yet of Italy, the fortunate inheritor of so many glorious productions of her own artists. But there

are Holland and Belgium, kingdoms almost too small to be heeded by the greater powers of Europe in the consultations which decide the destinies of nations, and these little kingdoms have their public collections of art, the resort of admiring visitors from all parts of the civilized world.

But in our country, when the owner of a private gallery of art desires to leave his treasures where they can be seen by the public, he looks in vain for any institution to which he can send them. A public-spirited citizen desires to employ a favorite artist upon some great historical picture; there are no walls on which it can hang in public sight. A large collection of works of art, made at great cost, and with great pains, gathered perhaps during a lifetime, is for sale in Europe. We may find here men willing to contribute to purchase it, but if it should be brought to our country there is no edifice here to give it hospitality.

In 1857, during a visit to Spain, I found in Madrid a rich private collection of pictures, made by Medraza, an aged painter, during a long life, and at a period when frequent social and political changes in that country dismantled many palaces of the old nobility of the works of art which adorned them. In that collection were many pictures by the illustrious elder artists of Italy, Spain, and Holland. The whole might have been bought for half its value, but if it had been brought over to our country we had no gallery to hold it.

The same year I stood before the famous Campana collection of marbles, at Rome, which was then waiting for a purchaser—a noble collection, busts and statues of the ancient philosophers, orators, and poets, the majestic forms of Roman senators, the deities of ancient mythology,

“The fair humanities of old religion,”

but if they had been purchased by our countrymen and landed here, we should have been obliged to leave them in boxes, just as they were packed.

Moreover, we require an extensive public gallery to contain the greater works of our own painters and sculptors. The American soil is prolific of artists. The fine arts blossom not only in the populous regions of our country, but even in its solitary places. Go where you will, into whatever museum of art in the Old World, you find there artists from the new, contemplating or copying the masterpieces of art which they contain. Our artists swarm in Italy. When I was last at Rome, two years since, I found the number of American artists residing there as two to one compared with those from the British isles. But there are beginners among us who have not the means of resorting to distant countries for that instruction in art which is derived from carefully studying works of acknowledged excellence. For these a gallery is needed at home which shall vie with those abroad, if not in the multitude, yet in the merit of the works it contains.

Yet further, it is unfortunate for our artists, our painters especially, that they too often find their genius cramped by the narrow space in which it is constrained to exert itself. It is like a bird in a cage which can only take short flights from one perch to another and longs to stretch its wings in an ampler atmosphere. Producing works for private dwellings, our painters are for the most part obliged to confine themselves to cabinet pictures, and have little opportunity for that larger treatment of important subjects which a greater breadth of canvas would allow them, and by which the higher and nobler triumphs of their art have been achieved.

There is yet another view of the subject, and a most important one. When I consider, my friends, the prospect which

opens before this great mart of the western world I am moved by feelings which I feel it somewhat difficult clearly to define. The growth of our city is already wonderfully rapid; it is every day spreading itself into the surrounding region, and overwhelming it like an inundation. Now that our great railway has been laid from the Atlantic to the Pacific, Eastern Asia and Western Europe will shake hands over our republic. New York will be the mart from which Europe will receive a large proportion of the products of China, and will become not only a centre of commerce for the New World, but for that region which is to Europe the most remote part of the Old. A new impulse will be given to the growth of our city, which I cannot contemplate without an emotion akin to dismay. Men will flock in greater numbers than ever before to plant themselves on a spot so favorable to the exchange of commodities between distant regions; and here will be an aggregation of human life, a concentration of all that ennobles and all that degrades humanity, on a scale which the imagination cannot venture to measure. To great cities resort not only all that is eminent in talent, all that is splendid in genius, and all that is active in philanthropy; but also all that is most dexterous in villainy, and all that is most foul in guilt. It is in the labyrinths of such mighty and crowded populations that crime finds its safest lurking-places; it is there that vice spreads its most seductive and fatal snares, and sin is pampered and festers and spreads its contagion in the greatest security.

My friends, it is important that we should encounter the temptations to vice in this great and too rapidly growing capital by attractive entertainments of an innocent and improving character. We have libraries and reading-rooms, and this is well; we have also spacious halls for musical entertainments, and that also is well; but there are times when we do not care

to read and are satiate with the listening to sweet sounds, and when we more willingly contemplate works of art. It is the business of the true philanthropist to find means of gratifying this preference. We must be beforehand with vice in our arrangements for all that gives grace and cheerfulness to society. The influence of works of art is wholesome, ennobling, instructive. Besides the cultivation of the sense of beauty—in other words, the perception of order, symmetry, proportion of parts, which is of near kindred to the moral sentiments—the intelligent contemplation of a great gallery of works of art is a lesson in history, a lesson in biography, a lesson in the antiquities of different countries. Half our knowledge of the customs and modes of life among the ancient Greeks and Romans is derived from the remains of ancient art.

Let it be remembered to the honor of art that if it has ever been perverted to the purposes of vice, it has only been at the bidding of some corrupt court or at the desire of some opulent and powerful voluptuary whose word was law. When intended for the general eye no such stain rests on the works of art. Let me close with an anecdote of the influence of a well-known work. I was once speaking to the poet Rogers in commendation of the painting of Ary Scheffer entitled "Christ the Consoler." "I have an engraving of it," he answered, "hanging at my bedside, where it meets my eye every morning." The aged poet, over whom already impended the shadow that shrouds the entrance to the next world, found his morning meditations guided by that work to the founder of our religion.