THANATOPSIS AND OTHER POEMS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649014101

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT

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Trieste

ENGLISH CLASSICS.

THANATOPSIS

AND OTHER POEMS.

BY WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT.

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

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NEW YORK:
EFFINGHAM MAYNARD & CO.,
SUCCESSORS TO
CLARK & MAYNARD, Publishers,
771 BROADWAY AND 67 & 69 NINTH ST.

General Introduction.

The life of the "father of our song" was almost co-extensive with the life of our republic. His eighty-four years began during the administration of Washington and ended during that of Hayes. His greatest poem was written eight years before Irving's "Sketch Book," nine years before Cooper's first novel, and twenty-eight years before Longfellow's first volume of poetry appeared. Indeed, the history of American literature may properly be said to begin with "Thanatopsis."

William Cullen Bryant was born at Cummington, Massachusetts, November 3, 1794. His father, Peter Bryant was a physician, held in high esteem both for his professional skill and for his superior learning and culture. The first of his name in this country was Stephen Bryant, who came from England about twelve years after the arrival of the Mayflower. His mother, Sarah Snell Bryant, traced the line of her ancestry back to John Alden and Priscilla Mullins, celebrated in Longfellow's poem. Thus our two most eminent poets, Longfellow and Bryant, divided the honor of descent from Captain Miles Standish's famous lieutenant. The remarkable development of Bryant's poetic faculty in early youth was largely due, probably, to the encouragement and careful training received from his father. It was he—

> "who taught my youth
> The art of verse, and in the bud of life
> Offered me to the muses."

The love of literature and some skill in the "art of verse" were a part of the family inheritance through several generations. "My father delighted in poetry," he says, "and wrote verses himself, mostly humorous and satirical." One of the poet's brothers also was a writer of verses of considerable merit. To the mother he owed much of that stern integrity of character which won for him many triumphs outside the field of poetry. She was a person of "quick and sensitive moral judgment, and had no patience with any form of deceit or duplicity," and he adds, "if, in the discussion of public questions, I have in my riper age endeavored to keep in view the great rule of right without much regard to persons, it has been owing in great degree to the force of her example, which taught me never to countenance a wrong because others did."

Bryant began to make verses in his eighth year, one of his earliest efforts being a paraphrase of the first chapter of the Book of Job, and another, a poetical address before his school. In his thirteenth year he surprised his family and the public with a political satire of over five hundred lines, which was published at Boston under the title, "The Embargo, or Sketches of the Times, a Satire, by a Youth of Thirteen." It appeared in a second edition the following year, together with several other poems of a political character. More than forty pieces of verse were written before he was sixteen years old—odes, elegies, satires, songs, and translations; but they are little more than mocking-bird rhymes, in manner echoing Pope, whose influence was still dominant, and in matter rehearsing the political sentiments of the times; moreover, they contain not the slightest hint of the characteristics of his later poetry.

In 1810 he entered the sophomore class of Williams College, then an institution consisting of a president, one professor, and two tutors. He remained here only seven months, having decided to continue his course at Yale; but this he was unable to do, on account of his father's limited means. Accordingly he began the study of law, and in 1816 opened an office in Plainfield, removing the following year to Great Barrington, villages not far from his native town. In the latter place he continued a successful practice until 1825.

It is pretty certain that during these years his happiest hours were spent with the muses. Although he studied his law-books diligently, yet he continued to read "greedily" the works of the English poets, with which his father kept him well supplied. "I read all the poetry that came in my way," he says. In 1810, the year that he entered college, he made the precious discovery of Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads," in which he found for the first time a poetic embodiment of his own undefined feelings for external nature. He once said to a friend that "upon opening the book a thousand springs seemed to gush up at once in his heart, and the face of nature, of a sudden, to change into a strange freshness and life." He had early formed the habit—which remained with him during life—of roaming the fields and woods whenever he could "steal an hour from study and care." In an unfinished poem of his old age, he says of himself at this period:

> "Ever apart from the resorts of men
> He roamed the pathless woods, and hearkened long
> To winds that brought into their silent depths
> The murmurs of the mountain waterfalls."

Under the influence of Wordsworth he now began to comprehend more fully that "various language" of Nature which he was soon to interpret so beautifully, and to engage in that subtle communion with all her

visible forms, from which the inspiration of his best poetry was to be drawn. It was during one of those solitary rambles, in 1811, that "Thanatopsis" was composed, "the greatest poem ever written by so young a man." In 1814 the "Yellow Violet" was written; in 1815, "The Waterfowl" and the "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood" were added; and in 1819 and 1820, "Green River," "A Winter Piece," and "The West Wind."

The year 1821 was an eventful one in the poet's history. He was married to the "fairest of the rural maids"; he was invited to deliver a poem before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard, and for this occasion wrote "The Ages," one of his longest and most elaborate poems; and the first volume of his serious poetry was published, containing only eight poems, but such poems as had never been written in America. During the next four years about thirty poems were written, containing some of the finest work of his life. Among these were "The Rivulet," "Monument Mountain," "Autumn Woods," "Hymn to the North Star," and the "Forest Hymn."

It is evident from "Green River" that the practice of law was uncongenial to Bryant from the first, and from various allusions in his private letters it would seem also that, with Macaulay, he had come to believe it more than questionable "whether the rules and doctrines observed among lawyers be agreeable to reason and morality." He was certainly ill at ease among the "hoary-headed wranglers" of court-rooms, and was conscious of a gross perversion of his refined poetic faculties in continuing to "drudge for the dregs of men." In 1825, therefore, he abandoned the law, went to New York as a "literary adventurer," and soon became editor of the "New York Review and Athenæum." But in this position there was little promise of success or even of a livelihood. The sombre little poem, "The Journey of Life," written at this time, shows him groping in the darkness where—

> "The lights that tell of cheerful homes appear
> Far off; and die like hope amid the glooms."

The next year he became assistant editor, and in 1829 editor-in-chief, of the "Evening Post," with which journal he continued to be associated the remainder of his life. Poetry was now necessarily neglected, and his best energies were engaged in the fervid toil of daily journalism, where genius loses its individuality and serves only to make a part of that vague force for good in the world known as the "power of the press." His long career as a journalist was to a remarkable degree successful and honorable; but it is as a poet, not as a journalist, that posterity will continue to honor him.

In 1832 a volume containing about ninety poems appeared. It was republished in England, with a dedication to the poet Rogers by Wash-

ington Irving, and won much unwilling praise from the English critics. In 1836 another edition was issued, and in 1842 a little volume containing twenty new poems appeared under the title of "The Fountain and Other Poems." Henceforth new poems were added, at infrequent intervals, until the last year of his life. Among the most popular of the later poems are "The Song of the Sower," "Planting of the Apple Tree," "Among the Trees," and the two fairy pieces, "Sella" and "The Little People of the Snow." The grand music of the "Forest Hymn" of his early years is continued in "A Hymn of the Sea," and in "The Flood of Years," written in his eighty-second year, the lofty and solemn chord of "Thanatopsis" and the "Hymn to Death" is again sounded.

As material prosperity increased, Bryant became a great traveller, visiting the old world six times, and many of the remoter parts of his own country. About the only literary fruits of his extensive journeying are the "Letters of a Traveller" and "Letters from the East." These, and a volume of "Orations and Addresses" constitute his prose works which are likely to live. A "Popular History of the United States" bears his name, to which, however, he contributed only the preface. He edited a popular anthology, "The Library of Poetry and Song," and was associated with Mr. E. A. Duyckinck in editing an edition of Shakespeare, which is yet to appear.

That "grim power" whose praises the poet had sung in his youth, in 1866 took from him his wife, who for forty-five years had been "the brightness of his life." She is frequently alluded to in his poetry, and an unfinished piece, found upon his desk seven years after her death, is filled with the tenderest memories of "that happy past," beginning:

"The morn hath not the glory that it wore,
  Nor doth the day so beautifully die,
Since I can call thee to my side no more,
  To gaze upon the sky.

"For thy dear hand with each return of Spring,
  I sought in sunny nooks the flowers she gave;
I seek them still, and sorrowfully bring
  The choicest to thy grave."

Probably to escape the depression of spirits caused by this great sorrow, Bryant began in 1866 the translation of Homer, and five years later gave us a complete version of the great world-poet, the best, perhaps, ever made in English. After this crowning achievement the sabbath calm of his days was not often broken. His life, as he had hoped, was now—

"Journeying in long serenity away."

He was always active in promoting every movement of art, literature, and benevolence, and, though instinctively shrinking from publicity, was often sought by his fellow-citizens to assume the chief honor at public festivals. While performing one of these characteristic duties, the delivery of an address at the unveiling of a statue to Mazzini in Central Park, he was stricken by the heat of the sun and died a few days later, June 12, 1878. It was as he had fancifully wished in his poem "June," written fifty-three years before—that he might be laid to rest "in flowery June," the season of—

"Soft airs, and song, and light, and bloom."

The proper rank of Bryant among our great poets it would be difficult to fix, so many and so uncertain are the tests of poetical greatness. The range of his poetic conceptions was limited, and it was a part of his wisdom to recognize the limitations of his genius and never to poach upon the domains of other poets. His thoughts are at times even commonplace, but it was his peculiar merit to be able to think the most common thoughts with most uncommon force and beauty. Certain it is that in the spiritual depth of the inspiration of his nature-poetry and in its grave, majestic music, he has not been equalled by any American poet. He is superior also in what may be called the power of condensed imagination, "the art of presenting the greatest things in the fewest words and of suggesting the indescribable and the illimitable." He has been called the "American Wordsworth," but the epithet is likely to be misleading if used to describe his poetry. "He is not merely a worshipper at Nature's shrine," says Whipple, "but a priest of her mysteries, and an interpreter of her symbolic language to men. Though he resembles Wordsworth in this bias of his genius, he resembles him in little else, and imitates nobody." His love of nature was intense, and the extent and accuracy of his knowledge of even the minutest facts of the outward world was hardly surpassed by that of the trained naturalist. "I was always from my earliest years a delighted observer of external nature," he says. Nearly two-thirds of his poems are direct suggestions from some object or aspect of nature. He possessed the instinct of the artist for detecting everywhere even the most evanescent shades of beauty, and the instinct of the moralist for perceiving the remotest analogies of spiritual truth.

His poetry has never been popular, in the ordinary sense of the word; neither has the poetry of Shelley and Wordsworth, to whom, among English poets, he stands nearest in poetical kinship. He is too meditative and too distant from average human sympathies to give general pleasure. Besides, he loved nature better than he did men, and in nature he loved best the solemn and sublime aspects. His reflections are always serious and often sad. The burden of his song is the transi-