AMONG THE MAKERS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE: WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT, POET AND JOURNALIST: BY ELIZABETH ANNA SEMPLE

NEW YORK has waited a long time for the memorial statue of William Cullen Bryant, soon to be unveiled in the park which bears his name. Not long after the poet’s death, on June eleventh, eighteen hundred and seventy-eight, a fund for such a purpose was proposed and the trustees, Messrs. George L. Rives and the Hon. John Bigelow, announced their readiness to receive subscriptions for a suitable memorial to be erected to the memory of one of the first men to win foreign recognition for American poetry. The commission for a portrait statue was at last happily bestowed upon Herbert Adams, and the admirable result of his labor will be seen in the reproduction shown in our frontispiece.

Mr. Adams has portrayed Bryant in that attitude of serene, benevolent contemplation, most familiar to his friends. There is something majestic in the seated figure, conveying the impression of the power, restraint and dignity, mental as well as physical, that animated this man and made him so strong a force for good throughout his long life.

In many ways the career of William Cullen Bryant is one of the most remarkable in the history of American literature. Shortly after his eleventh birthday his paternal grandfather gave him a Spanish nine-penny piece for turning the first chapter of the Book of Job into verse, and two years later “The Embargo: or Sketch of the Times: a Satire,” was privately printed in Boston. It was a volume of this edition that, a very short time ago, brought a record price at a book sale.

Bryant entered the sophomore class at Williams College in eighteen hundred and ten, but left to prepare for Yale. For financial reasons his college course was never finished, a fact which he spoke of later with regret. In this connection, it is curious to note that among the so-called Knickerbocker School of writers, Cooper, Halleck, Irving, Poe and others,—to which Bryant undoubtedly belonged for all his New England birth and ancestry—none was a college graduate.

September, eighteen hundred and seventeen, marks a new era in American poetry. In the North American Review of that date a poem appeared bearing the singular title, “Thanatopsis.” At this time the Review was conducted by three young and brilliant men—
all writers—who called themselves the "North American Club." The little packet containing "Thanatopsis" and "An Inscription upon Entrance to a Wood" was received by one of them, Mr. Willard Phillips, with whom the poet's father, Dr. Peter Bryant, had a slight personal acquaintance. The lines were accompanied by a note, "so modestly ambiguous" that for some time the real authorship of the poems was a matter of doubt. No sooner had Phillips read the contents of the packet than he rushed off to Cambridge to share his treasure with his associates, Richard Henry Dana and Edward Tyrell Channing.

"Ah, Phillips," Dana cried, when the poems had been read aloud, "you have been imposed upon! No man on this side of the Atlantic is capable of writing such verse."

Phillips warmly defended his discovery, saying that he knew Dr. Bryant, and Dana could see him at the Boston State House, for the good doctor was a State Senator.

Dana at once set out full of enthusiasm to walk to Boston. He hastened to the Senate Chamber where Dr. Bryant was pointed out to him. But he sadly admits: "I could not see the fire divine that had produced 'Thanatopsis,' and I went away disappointed and mortified at my own lack of discernment." Later, however, Dana met Dr. Bryant and a complimentary allusion to "Thanatopsis" brought about an explanation as to its real creator.

One day, during the year eighteen hundred and fifteen, Bryant, as was his custom, was walking from his first law office in Plainfield to his home in Cummerton (the very place where, a few years later, we hear of Charles Dudley Warner "trying to milk his father's cows to the rhythm of 'Thanatopsis'"), when glancing upward the poet saw a bird flying steadily across the band of light marking the setting of the sun. He stood gazing after it till it vanished, then hurrying home he wrote "To a Water Fowl," which appeared in the *North American Review* during eighteen hundred and eighteen.

FROM Plainfield Bryant moved to Great Barrington, where he was made a justice of the peace, and there married Miss Frances Fairchild, a charming young woman with some local reputation as a writer of tales and verses. This union was ideally happy, and to his wife Bryant owes the inspiration of some of his noblest poems.

One of the friends Bryant had made during his short stay at Williams was Henry D. Sedgwick, who came of a family prominent in literary affairs, his sister being one of the most popular novelists of her day. After his graduation, Sedgwick had removed to New
York and from here he wrote to Bryant urging him to give up the law and direct his attention exclusively to literature. As a practical inducement he stated that the *Atlantic Magazine* appeared to have taken on a new lease of life under the management of Henry J. Anderson, adding, "everything and everybody succeed here and it will be strange if you do not do so." He also mentioned the very large number of foreigners all "eager to learn our language," the teaching of which, to Sedgwick’s mind, offered a final resource to the impecunious author.

In speaking of Bryant’s retirement from the law, Mr. John Bigelow—later to become one of the poet’s closest friends—says: "He did not abandon it hastily or inconsiderately; nor did he trust himself to the precarious resources of his pen with any chimerical expectations. No one knew better than he how limited was the market for such literary work as he was able and willing to execute. He was animated solely by a desire to exchange an un congenial employment for a congenial one."

Thus in the winter of eighteen hundred and twenty-four to twenty-five, Bryant came to what Washington Irving—a good friend of a later date—loved to term, "the gamesome city of the Manhattoes;" Mrs. Bryant remaining in Great Barrington to await the outcome of the bold venture. His first residence was with a French family named Everard, on Chambers Street, where he was often visited by S. F. B. Morse, then a struggling artist.

Bryant speedily became acquainted with the leading literary men of the day, to whom he was already something of a celebrity through his membership in the Bread and Cheese Club, an organization which gained its title through the quaint practice (suggested by Cooper, its founder) of having candidates for membership balloted for with bread and cheese—a piece of bread was cast for affirmative and cheese for the fateful black ball.

These meetings were held once a fortnight in Washington Hall, at the corner of Broadway and Reade Street where the Stewart Building now stands, and among the regular attendants were Cooper, Halleck, Drake, Paulding, Bryant, Washington Allston, Sands, Percival,—in fact all the writers as well as the wits of the day.

Gulian C. Verplanck was also a member and in eighteen hundred and twenty-seven he, together with Robert C. Sands and Bryant, were engaged in the production of *The Talisman*, "an annual publication containing miscellanies in prose and verse" written by the trio, usually in Sand’s library in Hoboken. Though *The Talisman* gave great pleasure to certain sympathetic souls, not to speak of the three collaborators, it was far from being a pecuniary
success, and Bryant's financial condition was almost desperate when, in eighteen hundred and twenty-six, he was offered and accepted an editorial position on the Evening Post.

Speaking of journalism at that day, Mr. Bigelow, who for many years occupied an editorial position on the Post, said to me:

"Journalism when Bryant entered the profession was as little like the journalism of today as Jason's fifty-oared Argo is like a modern steamship. A weekly packet with the news of a file of London papers condensed into a few paragraphs supplied all the information from the outside world for which there seemed to be any demand, while local news was limited pretty much to such items as friends of the editor or interested parties might take the trouble to communicate.

"For the first twenty years," Mr. Bigelow continued, "of Mr. Bryant's connection with the Post he had but one permanent assistant in the office. The attraction and influence of the paper depended mainly upon its editorials which rarely occupied more than a column. As the Post was published in the afternoon, work had to be begun at an early hour in the morning. During the first forty years of his editorial life, it was a rare thing for Mr. Bryant, if in town, not to be found at his desk before eight o'clock.

"One day, a few weeks before he died, I asked him if he never varied from his earlier rules, including early rising, exercising with dumbbells and a horizontal bar for half an hour before eating a breakfast of rigorous simplicity, then walking to and from his office, rain or shine.

"'Not the width of your thumb-nail,' was Mr. Bryant's answer."

When Bryant joined the Post's staff, its publication office was in William Street, but later it removed to the building it occupied for so many years, at the south-east corner of Broadway and Fulton Streets, a spot more than any other filled with memories of the poet. Here is the window from which he used to gaze out while composing the stirring editorials, the fame of which spread all over the country and made the Post a power,—a window that was (and is still) often pointed out to curious visitors. Of the desk at which he wrote, as characteristic, apparently, as all else belonging to Bryant, Mr. Bigelow says:

"Bryant's desk was his newspaper Egeria. It was also a curiosity. Except for a space about two feet long and eighteen inches deep, his desk was usually covered to a depth of from twelve to twenty inches with opened letters, manuscript, pamphlets and books, the accumulation of years. During one of his visits to Europe his
assistant thought to do Bryant a good turn by getting rid of this rubbish and clearing his desk so that he could have room for at least one of his elbows on the table. When he returned and saw what had been done, his expression—he said nothing—told that what had been so kindly intended was anything but a kindness. He also had one habit in common with Pope ("Paper-sparing Pope") as Swift called him), of always writing his copy for the paper on the backs of these old letters and rejected manuscript. One who associated with Bryant for many years affirmed that he never knew the Editor to write one article on a fresh piece of paper."

During his early days in New York, Bryant frequently visited Cooper at his home, three hundred and forty-five Greenwich Street, and it was not long after his first dinner there (at which, by the way, he met Halleck for the first time), that Bryant wrote to R. H. Dana apropos of a review projected for the North American Review, dealing with the "Last of the Mohicans," which the poet had been asked to prepare.

"Ah, sir, he (Cooper) is too sensitive for a creature like me to touch. He seems to think his own works his own property instead of being the property of the public to whom he has given them."

The first English edition of Bryant’s work appeared in eighteen hundred and thirty-two. The poet’s good friend Verplanck had written to his old comrade Washington Irving (then our minister to England) requesting that he find a publisher for these poems and bring them before the English public. Though his new literary ward was personally a complete stranger to him, Irving undertook the task with his usual blithe good nature and friendly interest. After some difficulty he found a publisher named Anderson who consented to undertake the venture on condition that Irving would be willing to affix his own name as "Editor"; to which Irving willingly assented, having no thought that his duties would be more than purely honorary. However, trouble arose in connection with a certain line in "The Song of Marion’s Men," reading, "The British soldier trembles when Marion’s name is heard," for the publisher declared that a mere hint that any British soldier actually could tremble would suffice to bring ruin on the whole enterprise. Finally a compromise was reached and the matter satisfactorily adjusted by changing the offensive line to "The foeman trembles in his tents," and the volume was issued, dedicated to Samuel Rogers.

The "Editor" tells of a tete-a-tete breakfast with this famous wit. "He served his friends as he served the fish," Irving related
“with a squeeze of lemon over each. It was very piquant but it rather set my teeth on edge.”

However, neither this nor any subsequent English edition brought great pecuniary reward to the author himself. Once a friend brought him a copy bound in paper, purchased on a London railway stand for a shilling. The poet remarked, when he heard the price, “It’s more than I ever got for it,” and laughed heartily when he saw the villainous portrait forming the frontispiece, “looking,” he added, “more like Jack Ketch than a respectable poet.”

From his American copyrights, Bryant eventually derived considerable money, though, as he was wont to say in speaking of his early struggles, “I should have starved had I been obliged to depend on poetry for a living,” usually adding those familiar words of Goldsmith’s, “Could a man live by poetry it were not an unpleasant employment to be a poet.”

Though Bryant was famed among his friends and associates for the kindness of his heart and his equable disposition, he was by no means incapable of righteous indignation. Two lines in one of his poems,

“And wrath has left its scar—that fire of hell
Has left its frightful scar upon my soul,”

by most readers has been construed as one of those bits of imaginary self-accusation that even the most blameless of poets indulge in. However, an incident passed over by Mr. Bryant’s biographers seems to indicate that, to the sensitive conscience of the poet, it may have had some shadow of foundation.

If you walk along Broadway by the Post Office, you will pass over a spot that, in April, eighteen hundred and thirty-one, was the scene of a personal encounter between Bryant and William T. Stone, then editor of the *Commercial Advertiser*, a publication far from friendly to the *Evening Post*. And of this event Philip Hone says in his “Diary”: “While I was shaving this morning at eight of the clock I witnessed from the window an encounter in the street nearly opposite between William C. Bryant and William L. Stone; the former the editor of the *Evening Post* and the latter the editor of the *Commercial Advertiser*. The former commenced the attack by striking Stone over the head with a cow-skin; after a few blows, the men closed and the whip was wrested from Bryant and carried off by Stone. When I saw them first, two younger persons were engaged but soon discontinued their fight. A crowd soon closed in and separated the combatants.” The cause of this “encounter” is given by another writer of the time as “Stone’s having given Bryant the lie.”
When, years later, rumors were spread that the Post building was to be attacked by rioters, Bryant not only took measures to defend his property but was on hand to see that they should be enforced, for with all the well-known amiability of his nature he was not lacking in personal courage. His moral courage was never called in question, even by his bitterest enemies—and in his journalistic career he made many. Unmoved by blame or praise, he walked unswervingly in the political path he had marked out for himself—first as a Free Soil man, later as a Republican, of which party he is justly regarded as one of the founders.

No man was ever a more loyal friend. "He held to his friends with hooks of steel," Mr. Bigelow says, "closing his eyes to everything about them which he could not admire. When Verplanck and Tilden deprecated the nomination of Lincoln and opposed his election, much as he regretted their course and frankly denounced it, he never permitted it, for one minute, to disturb their friendly relations or interrupt their mutual confidences."

Bryant was one of the most ardent workers for the establishment of the National Academy of Design and presided at the opening of the first building at Twenty-third Street and Fourth Avenue; moreover when the Academy was started he gave gratuitous courses of lectures on mythology which proved popular, and had to be repeated for two years. He was also a founder of the Century Club, and at the time of his death, its president.

To all his work, be it poetry or prose, Bryant brought the spirit of the true craftsman, since it was always his first desire to make what he did the best expression of his mental impulse, so far as in him lay. And this is one reason why our memories of the man himself are almost as valuable as his "Thanatopsis" and the handful of other poems that seem to be framed for immortality. We love to recall the majestic form of the old man, striding along from twenty-four West Sixteenth Street (his last residence in New York and the place of his death) to the building at Fulton Street and Broadway that is still filled with recollections of his years of service there.

The serenity and dignity of this man's work seem to have been made manifest in his person, and—once more to quote Mr. Bigelow—"Those seeing him in his later years discerned a new force and fitness in Dr. Donne's lines:

""No spring nor summer beauty has such grace
As I have seen on an autumnal face.""