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AMERICA'S FIRST POET

In my ninth year I began to make verses, some of which were utter nonsense.

—“An Autobiography of Mr. Bryant’s Early Life”

I

William Cullen Bryant was a celebrity for almost seventy-five years. For virtually the entire nineteenth century, he had been at the center of the nation’s ferment—first as America’s foremost poet and then, for fifty years, as its most distinguished newspaper editor. No one had greater cultural authority than this self-made man from rural New England. Already a famous poet when he left western Massachusetts for Manhattan in 1825, he had reinvented himself as a metropolitan man and in the process had helped to define the trajectory of American culture and democracy.

Bryant was a unique celebrity in his intertwined influence as America’s premier poet and crusading editor. Famous since childhood, celebrated for decades as “America’s first poet” and New York City’s “first citizen,” he had been instrumental in creating the lineaments of a distinctively American poetry and criticism. Moreover, as the nation’s most respected newspaper editor, he wielded political influence. As arguably the country’s foremost cultural authority, Bryant had championed a national literature and art, freedom of speech and the press, Jacksonian democracy, urban improvement, the Republican party of Frémont and Lincoln, an end to slavery, and the preservation of the Union. He had helped to create coherence for American culture.

Although not as flamboyant as his rival, Horace Greeley of the *Tribune*, over the years Bryant was the steadier and more reliable champion of liberal social and political causes. Bryant's old adversary Greeley, never consistent in his opinions or predictable in his behavior, had gone crazy following his quixotic presidential bid in 1872 and died a broken man. Bryant was still moving well on the public stage. With his gnomish head and white, flowing beard, he seemed to many Americans the mythic embodiment of the nation's literature and the rise of American democracy. He was Emerson's representative man, Carlyle's poetic and literary—even prophetic—hero.

No wonder his brusque, boisterous friend, James Fenimore Cooper, who was so unlike the modest, self-conscious Bryant, had declared, "We others get a little praise now and then, but Bryant is the author of America." Cooper, Greeley, and so many of the other luminaries he had known were gone. But Bryant had survived—the result, he believed, of a diet rich in grains, fruits, and vegetables, of walking and strenuous exercise (he could still vault a split rail fence), and of the wonders of homoeopathy.

What turned out to be Bryant's last working day, a hot Wednesday in late May 1878, had not started smoothly. Three years earlier, his company had moved into the *Evening Post's* new building at the corner of Broadway and Fulton Street in lower Manhattan. The Bryant Building, a ten-story complex that cost \$750,000, was a monument both to the city's rapidly rising skyline and the owner's worldly success, for among other attributes Bryant was an enlightened capitalist. Despite the heat and humidity, Bryant did not take the building's elevator. Proud of his health, he climbed the stairs to the top floor and, after settling into his office, tackled his correspondence.

Bryant received hoards of unsolicited manuscripts from aspiring poets during the five decades he served as editor of the *Evening Post*. Two poems submitted by an acquaintance were in the day's mail. After perusing the lyrics, he strode into the office of the paper's literary editor, George Cary Eggleston, a man in his thirties whose keen knowledge of Cowper and other English poets impressed Bryant. Rarely given to raw emotion in public or private, Bryant complained that the woman's verse was "extremely poor stuff." Now he would have to write her about why her poetry was unsuitable for publication. "People expect too much of me—altogether too much!" To Eggleston, his employer's voice sounded like a "wail," a cry from the heart of a man unable to hold fame at arm's length.

That Wednesday morning, May 29, Bryant checked proofs and talked for more than an hour with Eggleston about American literature and criticism. He reviewed “the whole field,” Eggleston recalled, “classifying and arranging the different branches of the subject as skillfully as he would have done it in an essay, and expressing some unconventional opinions which startled me by their vigorous originality, and by the apparent care with which they had been wrought out in his mind.” Bryant had written some of the nation’s earliest literary criticism, including essays on early American poetry and the use of trisyllabic feet that appeared in the *North American Review* in 1818 and 1819 respectively. In 1825, when he was thirty-one years old and newly settled in Manhattan, he had delivered four seminal lectures on poetry before the New York Athenaeum. Bryant could still recite every line of verse he had written (especially when ladies like his charming neighbor, Leonice Moulton, were the auditors) and quote copious stanzas from other poets.

Today, however, the writer of “Thanatopsis,” “To a Waterfowl,” and other poems recited by schoolchildren and memorized by generations of Americans was fighting a spring cold. He preferred to stay at Cedarmere, his Roslyn estate twenty miles from Manhattan on the shores of Long Island Sound, but duty—yet another public speech—had called him to Manhattan that morning. Democracy, he believed, demanded sacrifice and accountability. For more than fifty years, Bryant had been one authority willing to raise fundamental questions about the character of American democracy.

Truth be told, he enjoyed metropolitan society. Bryant treasured a circle of close friends; he had a reputation for genteel clubiness; and he had delivered more than a hundred major speeches in his lifetime, most of them in Manhattan. Bryant’s worldly celebrity—the outer man—had served to ameliorate the more self-conscious, shy, and solitary impulses of his inner self. Over a long lifetime, he had struggled and largely succeeded in creating an equilibrium in his private and public lives.

Bryant had accepted an invitation from the city’s Italian American community to speak at the unveiling of a bust commemorating the Italian patriot and revolutionary, Giuseppe Mazzini, whom he had met in London in 1845. The previous Sunday, he had confessed to Dr. John Ordronaux, a close friend who occupied a cottage on Bryant’s estate, that he did not look forward to delivering the Mazzini speech. “If you knew how I am followed up by people of every class asking for this and that kind of service, you would appreciate how I am tormented. I have no rest from this kind of importunity, and, having obliged one set of people,

I can't well refuse another. Besides, Mazzini was a patriot, and Italy owes to him a large share of her independence." Once more he would harness his inner turmoil—his present melancholy and vexation—to the demands of democracy and the role of the public man. Once again he would use his celebrity status to instruct the democratic mass.

Today's unveiling was to take place at Central Park—the park for the citizens of Manhattan that Bryant had been instrumental in founding. (As early as 1833 he had lamented “a deficiency of public squares in the lower part of the city for the purposes of health and refinement.”) Following a light lunch, Bryant was driven to the park in his carriage. Arriving thirty minutes before the ceremony, he entered Central Park at the West Drive opposite Sixty-Seventh Street, near where the bust of Mazzini stood veiled on a granite base. The heat had increased, and Bryant sought shelter from the sun under several elm trees, where he chatted with an old acquaintance, General James Grant Wilson.

At the start of the ceremony, Bryant mounted the platform and, hatless, sat with other dignitaries in the intense sunlight. A friend noticed that he seemed uncomfortable and insisted on holding an umbrella over Bryant's head. When Bryant finally rose to speak, he seemed weak. Gradually, however, his voice gained resonance and fire. He ended with an apostrophe to the bust of Mazzini: “Image of the illustrious champion of civil and religious liberty, cast in enduring bronze to typify the imperishable renown of thy original! Remain for ages yet to come, where we place thee in this resort of millions; remain till the day shall dawn—far distant though it may be—when the rights and duties of human brotherhood shall be acknowledged by all the races of mankind.” Speaker and subject seemed perfectly matched. Here on a sultry spring day in the most populous and diverse city in the United States, a polyglot crowd of Americans could ponder in the bust of Mazzini and the presence of Bryant the very course of nineteenth-century democracy.

It was close to four o'clock when the ceremony ended. Wilson insisted that Bryant return with him and his daughter to the Wilsons' house at 15 East Seventy-Fourth Street for refreshments. Strolling through the Sheep Meadow and entering the Mall, they viewed the statues to Bryant's deceased friends, Fitz-Greene Halleck and Samuel F. B. Morse, and discussed national affairs. An astute student of botany and horticulture, Bryant identified birds, trees, and flowers as they passed Bethesda Fountain and walked out of Central Park onto Seventy-Second Street.

Reaching their destination, Wilson mounted the steps ahead of the poet to open the door, when suddenly, according to Wilson, Bryant pitched backward, striking his head on the paved steps. A passerby noticed the accident and offered his services while servants rushed from the Wilson residence to assist the semiconscious Bryant inside. Mrs. Wilson immediately brought him ice water and bathed his head until Bryant told her to stop. He was offered a glass of iced sherry, which he drank slowly, gradually regaining a degree of lucidity, but then groaned, "My head! My poor head! I don't feel well." Resisting entreaties from Wilson and his wife to rest in an upstairs bedroom, Bryant insisted on being taken home.

Wilson accompanied Bryant in a Madison Avenue car to Seventeenth Street and then by cab to the poet's brownstone at 24 West Sixteenth Street. From time to time, Bryant was able to string a few words and sentences together before lapsing into silence. Approaching his residence, he became disoriented, asking, "Whose house is this? What street is this?" But then he reached into his pocket, pulled out his key, and opened the door. A niece, Anna Fairchild, who was staying with him while Julia, his daughter and companion, was in Atlantic City, rushed to Bryant's assistance. Miss Fairchild called for the famous homoeopathist Dr. John F. Gray. Over the next few days, in consultation with other attending physicians, Dr. Gray concluded that Bryant was suffering from "haemorrhage of the brain" and in all likelihood would not survive.

II

William Cullen Bryant's life began far from Manhattan and the "wilderness" that had been so artfully contrived for Central Park by his friend Frederick Law Olmsted. Cullen (as everyone called him) was born on November 3, 1794, in a roughhewn log cabin two miles from Cumington, a frontier enclave in the Berkshire range of western Massachusetts. The town was sparsely settled, remote, and lonely. Nevertheless, the backcountry residents of Hampshire County were famous for their resistance to the British Intolerable Acts of 1774 and, after the Revolutionary War, for their fierce adherence to democratic politics. The Whiskey Rebellion had broken out in the region in the year of Bryant's birth, rekindling the specter of Daniel Shays.

Wilderness—vast forests of beech, birch, ash, maple, and hemlock—surrounded and impinged on the hardscrabble settlement. The first

family had come to Cummington in 1770. Three years later, Bryant's grandfather, Ebenezer Snell, moved his family from North Bridgewater to Cummington. Known as Deacon and Squire, Ebenezer, a stern, energetic Calvinist, cleared land in the highlands above the town and built a commodious house that became known as the Homestead. He planted fields of Indian corn and wheat, set aside grassland for cows and sheep, and started an apple orchard.

Both sides of Bryant's family had roots in New England. The ancestors of his father, Dr. Peter Bryant, had arrived in Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1632. His mother, Sarah Snell Bryant, could trace her ancestry to the *Mayflower* voyagers. Among Sarah's ancestors were Captain John Alden and Priscilla Mullins, the romantic figures depicted in *The Courtship of Miles Standish* by Bryant's younger friend, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Peter Bryant had set up his practice in Cummington in 1792. He boarded with Squire Snell, courted the Deacon's daughter, whom he might have known when he and the Snells lived in North Bridgewater, and married her that year.

When Cullen was four years old, he would move with his family into the Homestead, remaining there until he was twenty-two and ready to briefly embark on a career in law. The second son in a closely knit family that would number five boys and two girls, Cullen was formed by wilderness—the forests, verdant valleys, and high, rolling hills of western Massachusetts. Bryant recalled that his family “then lived in a house, which stands no longer, near the center of the township, amid fields which have a steep slope to the north fork of the Westfield River, a shallow stream, brawling over a bed of loose stones in a very narrow valley.” Cummington itself consisted of a few dwellings and stores. Bryant described the surrounding area in “Lines on Revisiting the Country”:

Broad, round, and green, that in the summer sky
With garniture of waving grass and grain,
Orchards, and beechen forests, basking lie,
While deep the sunless glens are scooped between,
Where brawls o'er shallow beds the streams unseen.

The wild, pristine highlands of the Berkshire range, its hills rising to two thousand feet, would mold the boy and become summer and autumn retreat for Bryant in later age.

Many of Bryant's finest lyrics derive from the landscape surrounding the Homestead. He apostrophized a stream that ran through the

Snell property in “The Rivulet,” a lyric that counterbalances Nature’s joys against the loss of youth. It was by “childhood’s favorite brook” that the fledgling poet tried his “first rude numbers,” composing lines of Romantic verse that he would declaim to the delight of the family.

Across the road from the rivulet, a dense forest, described by Bryant in his early blank verse masterpiece, “Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood,” challenged the most intrepid wanderer—as it does today:

Stranger, if thou hast learned a truth which need
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. . . .

To enter the wood, Bryant declares, is to open oneself to self-discovery, setting aside any theologizing over mordant “guilt” and “Her pale tormentor, misery.” Here, freed of dogma, the wanderer can apprehend nature and find the words to inscribe it:

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.

In recording this world literally and figuratively, Bryant developed a style—words, images, and cadences—designed to capture the discrete particulars of Nature. Typically, he merges the outer world with his inner emotions. As he writes at the start of the final version of “Thanatopsis”:

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

Guided by Bryant’s poetry, cultural enthusiasts would discover his part of the Berkshires in the late nineteenth century. Western Massachusetts would become the nation’s own Lake Country—tonic for Americans and as inspiring to native writers and artists as any English landscape conjured by William Wordsworth.

Young Bryant immersed himself in this rural world. “I was always from my earliest years a delighted observer of external nature—the splendors of a winter daybreak over the wide wastes of snow seen from our window, the glories of the autumnal woods, the gloomy approaches of the thunderstorm, and its departure amid sunshine and rainbows, the return of spring, with its flowers, and the first snowfall of winter.” A life-long student of botany and a horticulturalist of note, Bryant was the most specific and comprehensive recorder of nature in nineteenth-century American poetry. “He was a passionate botanist,” his friend, Colonel Ralph Taylor, remembered, claiming that Bryant “knew the name of every tree, flower, and spire of grass.” Even Bryant’s lesser-known lyrics display remarkable detail, as in “The Old Man’s Counsel”:

Within the woods,
Whose young and half transparent leaves scarce cast
A shade, gay circles of anemones
Danced on their stalks; the shad-bush, white with flowers
Brightened the glens; the new-leaved butternut
And quivering poplar to the roving breeze
Gave a balsamic fragrance.

Set against the exquisite detail in these lines is the elegiac tone of the lyric, for Bryant measures his ability to transcribe nature against his failing vision.

Ralph Waldo Emerson observed that Bryant was shrewd in tying his mind to “the northern landscape—its summer splendor, its autumn russets, its winter lights and glooms.” To read Bryant’s strongest poems—among them his lovely meditative lyric “To the Fringed Gentian,” the wondrous “Summer Wind,” or the cold, metaphysical “A Winter Piece”—is to discover the ways in which he seized truth from the Berkshire landscape and the seasons of his youth.

If Nature fostered vision, Bryant mastered the craft of transcribing this world in his father’s well-appointed library. Dr. Bryant had accumulated an extensive collection of books, and Cullen poured over the classics and English poetry as well as books on botany, chemistry, and the natural sciences. Combining book knowledge with his constant rural rambles, Bryant became the first authoritative American poet to compose strong lyrics about the elemental forces and philosophical depths of the native landscape.

One elemental force—death—was an unavoidable aspect of Bryant's boyhood. Death was part of the "various language" of Nature, endemic in Berkshire society, a motif in the boy's reading, and a peril in his personal life. Bryant was a sickly infant; in later years he recalled that his "case was thought a doubtful one." A family acquaintance confirmed that "the poet was puny and very delicate in body, and of a painfully nervous temperament. There seemed little promise that he would survive the casualties of early childhood." Existence was tenuous in New England wilderness society, and Bryant almost succumbed at an early age.

Fortunately, Peter Bryant was an experienced and innovative physician. Worried about the enlarged size of his newborn son's head in proportion to the fragile body, Dr. Bryant devised an innovative cure. According to Senator Henry Dawes, himself a Cummington native: "In after years, when he had become famous, those who had been medical students with his father when he was struggling for existence with the odds very much against him, delighted to tell of the cold baths they were ordered to give the infant poet in a spring near the house each early morning of the summer months, continuing the treatment, in spite of the outcries and protestations of their patient, so late into the autumn as sometimes to break the ice which skimmed the surface."

Bryant survived infancy and a series of potentially fatal childhood illnesses. "My health was rather delicate from infancy," he said, "and easily disturbed." He was frequently sick and prone to fevers; on one occasion, his temperature was so high that his parents doubted "they could raise him." Bryant also suffered from "frequent and severe attacks of colic." Once, he was kicked by a horse and severely injured; copious bloodletting by Dr. Bryant complicated his recovery. Unlike his older brother Austin, he wilted under rural labors. He admits in "A Lifetime," a retrospective lyric, that he was a "delicate child and slender." In his autobiographical fragment he adds: "Sometimes the tasks of the farm were too great for my strength, and brought on a sick headache, which was relieved under my father's directions by taking a little soda dissolved in water." Bryant's infirmities would persist through his teenage years and early adulthood. From "Thanatopsis" to his final poem of consequence, "The Stream of Life," he would be preoccupied with the beauty and fragility of life.

Although Bryant would leave western Massachusetts to craft a version of himself as a new type of American—self-reliant, adventurous, multitalented, pragmatic, and democratic—he never fully escaped the

region's culture and habits of being. The Puritan legacy bequeathed to him by his mother's side of the family would remain strong. Even as he moved away from the doctrinal rigidity of Calvinism as a young man to embrace the more expansive, egalitarian tenets of Unitarianism, Bryant retained a Calvinist conviction that life requires moral justification in personal, public, and even artistic endeavors. Bryant's character and art were formed in part by the Puritan myth of an elected people engaged in a divine drama, an unending primal errand in the wilderness.

Tutored by his mother, whose fifty-year diary reveals Sarah Bryant as a robust and pious soul committed to the Puritan virtues of economy and usefulness in life, Cullen mastered the alphabet at sixteen months. He also followed his older brother Austin's progress through the Scriptures, which he read at the age of four. What he learned from his "stately," devoutly religious mother was the libertarian side of biblical lore, which he acknowledged in "A Lifetime":

Of the cruel King of Egypt
 Who made God's people slaves,
 And perished, with all his army,
 Drowned in the Red Sea waves;

"I ought to be fond of church-going," he observed, "for I began early, making my first appearance at church about the middle of my third year, though there is no note of how I behaved myself there." To Bryant, the preachers presiding over their Sunday congregations were "often poets in their extemporaneous prayers." From the ministers' mellifluous prayers and supplications, their dignified and plain style, he absorbed those rhetorical elements that would characterize his verse. At home, Bryant practiced his own sermonizing. Transfixed by the stately cadences and rhymed meter of the religious verse, he would stand on a chair and passionately recite the hymns of Isaac Watts.

Bryant's grandfather, Ebenezer Snell, also supervised the boy's spiritual instruction. Squire Snell was a justice of the peace, a deacon in the Congregational church, and a stern Calvinist immune to the more liberal winds of Unitarianism that were creeping into the Berkshires from Boston and that had already converted Bryant's father. Some of Bryant's earliest verse was a response to Grandfather Snell's instructions to turn the first chapter of the book of Job into heroic couplets. Typical of the young poet's efforts is this couplet:

His name was Job, evil he did eschew,
To him were born seven sons; three daughters too.

Peter Bryant, remembered by Cullen as possessing “a mild and indulgent temper” similar to the one the poet would cultivate, gently dismissed his son’s efforts at biblical verse as mere doggerel.

Peter Bryant was the countervailing influence in his son’s life. He fostered in Cullen a love of literature as well as a skeptical attitude about religious and intellectual orthodoxy. Dr. Bryant was a large, barrel-chested man who had experienced the world beyond the Calvinist confines of western Massachusetts. A respected physician and surgeon, he had trained under a French doctor and attended medical lectures at Harvard and had sailed as a ship’s surgeon in late 1795. A disastrous business transaction involving investment in a merchant ship might have landed him in debtor’s prison had he remained in Cummington. Captured by the French, Dr. Bryant spent a year on the island of Mauritius working in a hospital. After returning to Cummington in May 1798, Peter Bryant maintained a lively correspondence with physicians in Boston, where ideas were more progressive than in the stony predestinarian hills of the Berkshires. Bryant remembered that his father dressed like “a Boston gentleman” and projected a certain “metropolitan air”—an image the son would cultivate in adulthood. Dr. Bryant also was a lover of music and literature, a writer of verse in the Augustan tradition of Pope, a freethinker on matters of religion, and a staunch Federalist who, starting in 1806, served in the Massachusetts legislature for twelve years. He detected literary talent in his son and encouraged Cullen to write poetry.

Bryant recalled his early schooling as unsatisfactory. He entered the district school when he was four years old—so young and delicate that he would often awaken to find himself enfolded in the lap of the teacher, leading (according to family members) to furious outbursts of shame and indignation from the sleepy little fellow. “Reading, spelling, writing and arithmetic, with a little grammar and a little geography, were all that was taught, and these by persons much less qualified, for the most part, than those who now give instruction.”

What distinguished the young student was his aptitude for language. Through long winter evenings, he and his brother Austin read voraciously in his father’s “well chosen” library, part of the two-room office that the doctor added to the Homestead. Here he first encountered

Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Goldsmith, Burns, Cowper, Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, and “American versifiers in abundance.” He also listened to Dr. Bryant and his medical students as they discussed scientific matters or debated state, national, and global affairs. Young Bryant was curious about all forms of knowledge. He came readily to the notion that ideas exist in the world and drive history and nations.

III

“I was thought to be a precocious child,” Bryant admitted; his literary talent impressed the citizens of Hampshire County. His first published verse appeared in the Northampton *Hampshire Gazette* on March 18, 1807; it was a poem in heroic couplets on the theme of progress that he had delivered three years earlier to local acclaim at a school commencement. The next year, he composed a long poem, *The Embargo, or Sketches of the Times: A Satire, by a Youth of Thirteen*, that his father arranged to have published in pamphlet form. The *Monthly Anthology* praised the poem as an “extraordinary performance,” and Dr. Bryant’s Federalist friends in the state legislature were delighted by its attack on the Jefferson administration. In 1809, a “Corrected and Enlarged” edition of *The Embargo* appeared, this time with the name of its author, William Cullen Bryant, on the title page. Young Bryant was learning the power of celebrity.

The Embargo adumbrates Bryant’s admittedly facile understanding of the controversial political issues destined to mold his life and career. In the 420 lines of this juvenile satire, Cullen vilifies Jefferson and condemns the president’s imposition of the Embargo Act of 1807. His best lines are vitriolic:

Go, wretch, resign the presidential chair,
 Disclose thy secret measures foul or fair,
 Go, search, with curious eye, for horned frogs,
 ‘Mongst the wild wastes of Louisianian bogs;
 Or where Ohio rolls his turbid stream,
 Dig for huge bones, thy glory and thy theme;
 Go scan, Philosopher, thy **** charms,
 And sink supinely in her sable arms;
 But quit to abler hands, the helm of state,
 No image ruin on thy country’s fate!

This shrewd, bellicose boy uses the heroic couplet and the conventions of classical rhetoric to skewer Jefferson for a policy that had kept ships in New England ports, inflamed the entire region, and brought New England to the brink of secession. The little rascal even alludes to the president's alleged black mistress!

Much of *The Embargo* is little more than a muddled outpouring of Federalist cant. Cullen had uncritically absorbed his ideas about Jefferson from Peter Bryant and his father's Federalist friends, who, like much of New England, found the Republican president to be anathema. Jefferson was obsessed with the enforcement of the embargo, vilifying entire communities and accusing violators of treason. In the end, even some members of Jefferson's party broke ranks and joined the Federalist opposition in repealing the act on the day of the president's retirement in 1809. Bryant would regret his attack on Jeffersonian ideals. In time, he would become the champion of precisely those democratic masses ("each blockhead's vote") that in his youthful folly he accused the president of pandering to. One striking feature of Bryant's cultural authority was his ability to redefine himself and his opinions as the very idea of America also evolved.

More relevant to an impetuous boy's evolution into a mature poet and political thinker is the theme of American progress that appears, admittedly in a minor key, in *The Embargo*. To young Bryant's mind, the uniqueness of the American experiment resides in the happy marriage of Commerce and Agriculture, "a bright pair" bestowing its blessing on the nation:

'Tis done, behold the cheerful prospects rise!
 And splendid scenes the startled eye surprise;
 Lo! busy commerce courts the prosperous main;
 And peace and plenty glad our shores again!
 Th' industrious swain sees nature smile around
 His fields with fruit, with flocks, his pastures crown'd.

Raised on New England soil but destined to be a metropolitan man, Bryant would always subscribe to a doctrine of progress that was central to American democracy.

With the publication of *The Embargo*, Dr. Bryant concluded that his talented son deserved a broader prospect than the one Cummington provided. "It was decided," Bryant wrote, "that I should receive a college education, and I was accordingly taken by my father to the house of my

mother's brother, the Rev. Dr. Thomas Snell, in North Brookfield, to begin the study of Latin." Bryant arrived in Brookfield, fifty miles east of Cummington, on November 8, 1808, five days after he celebrated his fourteenth birthday. Reverend Snell, who had been pastor of the Second Congregational Church in North Brookfield since 1798, was, according to Bryant, "a rigid moralist, who never held parley with wrong in any form." A graduate of Dartmouth and a former tutor at Haverhill Academy, Reverend Snell quickly recognized Bryant's talent for languages, rapidly advancing the boy from daily assignments in Horace and Cicero to reading Virgil's *Aeneid*. Bryant wrote a letter to his father detailing his progress in Latin and enclosing two translations from the *Aeneid* in heroic couplets. "Respected Father," he began, "You will doubtless find in the preceding lines much that needs emendation and much that characterizes the crude efforts of puerility." Peter Bryant demanded lucidity and exactness from his son, and much of Bryant's facility with metrical and verse forms can be ascribed to his influence.

Reverend Snell was another of the family's ardent Calvinists. He kept a skeptical eye on his young ward, who was prone to wandering the fields and meadows and reading unwholesome books, including the Gothic tales of Mrs. Radcliffe. Still, when Peter Bryant visited his son at Dr. Snell's home the following July, he was pleased with his son's progress in Latin and the boy's new aptitude for art.

In August, following a return to Cummington and a summer working on the Snell farm, where he was occasionally goaded by Squire Snell for "making varses again," Bryant left to study Greek and mathematics with Reverend Moses Hallock in nearby Plainfield. His aptitude for Greek was so keen that by the end of October he had mastered the Greek New Testament "from end to end almost as if it had been English." In October 1810, after more study at home, Bryant was accepted by Williams College as a sophomore.

He was now sixteen and already something of a celebrity among the students at Williams (although some of the boys doubted that he actually had written *The Embargo*). A classmate, Charles Sedgwick, described Bryant as "tall and slender in his physical structure, and having a prolific growth of dark brown hair." Bryant quickly concluded that the college, a bastion of Calvinism and Federalism, offered a curriculum that was "meager and slight." Williams consisted of a president, one professor, and two tutors; and the college had endured several years of turmoil as students rebelled against their rude surroundings. Williams was not intellectual or urbane; it was no Concord or Boston.

To the delight of members of the Philotechnian Society, a literary club he had joined, Bryant composed a verse satire, *Descriptio Gulielmopolis*, in which he lampooned the faculty, the dreary lives of the students, and the physical conditions at Williams:

Why should I sing those reverend domes
 Where science rests in grave repose?
 Ah me! Their terrors and their glooms
 Only the wretched inmate knows.
 Where through the horror-breathing hall
 The pale-faced, moping students crawl
 Like spectral monuments of woe;
 Or, drooping, seek the unwholesome cell
 Where shade, and dust, and cobwebs dwell,
 Dark, dirty, dank, and low.

After seven months at Williams, Bryant received permission from his father to leave the college. Williams College, like Cummington, was a small backwater place, so demoralized that its president and students would soon escape to Amherst to start a new college. Bryant journeyed home at the end of May 1811, planning to transfer to Yale College with his roommate, John Avery, and another friend.

Cullen's family was delighted, as it always was on his return, to have its prodigal son at home. Within the family circle, Cullen was buoyant and even boisterous, the charming center of the Bryant household. The youngest brother, John, who would become a minor poet, recalled, "He was lively and playful, tossed me about, and frolicked with me in a way that made me look upon him as my best friend." With another brother, Arthur, the two boys would roam the Berkshire range, reciting strophe and antistrophe choral lines from *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in a translation by Cullen himself.

Bryant was sixteen, dreaming of Yale and a scholar's—perhaps a famous poet's—life. At Sunday evening prayer services, he had often prayed to the Lord that he might "receive the gift of poetic genius, and verses that might endure. I presented this petition in those early years with great fervor, but after a time I discontinued the practice; I can hardly say why." Nevertheless, in the evolving construction of democratic American society, anything seemed possible for a boy seeking fame and a new life.