

America's First Great Poem.

IN the history of literature there are occasionally noted the names of some distinguished writers whose best remembered work was accomplished at the very beginning of their careers. One remarkable illustration is found in the poem "Thanatopsis," which was composed by William Cullen Bryant (1794-1873) when he was but seventeen years of age.

His father found the poem in his son's desk, together with the manuscript of "The Waterfowl," and was so affected by the discovery of verse so unusual that he hastened to the house of a neighbor, thrust the manuscripts into his hand, and then burst into tears as he exclaimed:

"Oh, read that. It is Cullen's!"

"Thanatopsis" was taken by Dr. Bryant to the editor of the newly established *North American Review*; but this gentleman and the friends to whom he showed it, were at first unwilling to believe that an American could have written so fine a poem. It was, however, published (in 1817); yet even then, and for a long time after, most persons credited it to Dr. Bryant rather than to his son.

The importance of "Thanatopsis" is at once literary and historical. It is in reality the first original note ever sounded in American poetry. Until that time Americans had merely imitated whatever style of writing happened to be current in England. Bryant, however, attained spontaneous self-expression and distinct individuality. He drew a direct inspiration from Nature itself; and his lines were vivified by the imagination that is unforced. The publication of "Thanatopsis," therefore, is now held to mark the date at which the national literature of America begins.

THANATOPSIS.

BY WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT.

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
 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
 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,
 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 mold.

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 sepulcher. The hills,
 Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun—the vales
 Stretching in pensive quietness between—
 The venerable woods—rivers that move
 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
 Of morning; traverse Barca's desert sands,
 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 withdraw
 In silence from the living, and no friend
 Take note of thy departure? All that breathe
 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 fantom; 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
 In the full strength of years, matron, and maid,
 And the sweet 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
 About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.