RELIGION IN THE POETRY OF WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT:
A STUDY IN TRANSITION

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This thesis is a study of William Cullen Bryant's religious beliefs as they are expressed in his poetry. To a great extent the religious and theological aspects of his poetry have been neglected; and where they have been discussed, little attempt has been made to designate the different phases of his religion with examples from his poetry. Therefore, the writer has conducted this investigation with a profound belief that Bryant's religious views are worth noting in regard to the changes that took place in them.

Bryant often said that "A man never discusses his love affairs and his religion." Therefore, the theology that is found in his poetry has been gathered by the writer from the occasional utterances of his overflowing heart, rather than from any set effort to declare dogmatic truth.

In order that the reader may view clearly the transition in Bryant's religious beliefs, the writer has divided the study into three chapters. Chapter I deals with the Calvinistic views in Bryant's poetry. Chapter II is a delineation of the pagan and non-Christian elements in his poetry. And Chapter III is an attempt to relate the Unitarian views that are found in his poetry.

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CHAPTER I

CALVINISM AND BRYANT'S EARLY POETRY

The environment in which a man lives inevitably plays a large part in shaping his philosophy of life. The individual himself often determines whether he will be helped or hindered by his environment, whether he will face its problems and accept its attitudes, or whether he will attempt to escape them. In short, the individual determines his own attitude toward his environment.

William Cullen Bryant was preeminently a product of his environment. Born in 1794 of parents both of whom were descended from Mayflower ancestors, bred in the parochial seclusion of a village pervaded with the spirit of Puritanism, and surrounded by the virtually intact primeval forest, Bryant never outgrew the strong influence of his early environment. It is not surprising, then, that his early poems are grave, moralistic, and conservative. The austerity and precocity of Calvinism appear in them. Consequently, in order to understand Bryant's early religious views, we must know some of the historical implications of the religious life of the era in which Bryant lived.

The religious life of the early part of the Nineteenth Century in America was characterized by a system of religious thought based on the teachings of John Calvin. Basically, the believers maintained that God is the sovereign ruler of the world and that every good gift comes directly from him. The Calvinists also followed the belief in predestination expounded by John Calvin. They proclaimed that every person's life is pre-determined, some are born to be damned and some are born for life.
everlasting. They further believed that regeneration is only obtained through the spirit of God acting upon the human heart. The unchangeable nature of God was greatly emphasized. God foreordains everything that comes to pass, and the world moves according to his plans. Much stress is laid upon the belief in election, redemption, bondage of the will, and the preservation of the saints. According to Calvinism, all of the descendants of Adam have inherited his sin and the accompanying punishment. Hence, it is clearly seen that Calvinism was the dominant theology of the entire colonial period in America. To walk uprightly in the sight of God and to seek to do His Will were the aims of the Calvinists.

Bryant was exposed to Calvinism in its most rigid form when his family began to stay with his maternal grandfather, Squire Snell, who was a Justice of Peace in Plainfield, Massachusetts. Grandfather Snell belonged to a division of Calvinism founded by Dr. Samuel Hopkins, who at that time had many disciples in New England churches, and who insisted that selfishness should be eradicated to such a degree that the true Christian should be willing to suffer eternal misery for the good of the whole universe. Bryant recalled that Grandfather Snell was habitually devout. Of the other citizens of the community Bryant said that they

... had prayers morning and evening, such prayers as sixty or seventy years since were in vogue among the descendants of the pilgrims, who culled from the Hebrew Scriptures the poetical expressions with which they

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abound, and used liberally in their devotions. In this way they followed the examples of their ministers, who, however dry their services might be, were often poets in their extempore prayers. I have often in my youth, heard from them prayers which were poems from the beginning to the end, mostly made up of sentences from the Old Testament writers. How often have I heard the supplication, 'Let thy church arise and shine forth fair as the moon, clear as the sun, beautiful as Tirsah, comely as Jerusalem, and terrible as an army with banners.' One expression often used was peculiarly impressive, and forcibly affected my childish imagination: 'Let not our feet stumble on the dark mountains of eternal death.'

This devout Christian attitude was instilled in Bryant by Grandfather Snell and his associates.

In 1798, the Bryant family returned to their native home, Cummington, Massachusetts. In the main, the citizens of Cummington were inclined toward the extreme varieties of Calvinism. They had services often. Usually the citizens would gather in their own small parishes to pray. Some of the citizens who were very dissatisfied with so few services supplemented the morning services with evening services. At these services a lay brother made a prayer, hymns were sung by those who were trained at singing schools, a sermon was read from the works of some orthodox divine, and now and then a word of exhortation was addressed to the little assembly by someone who was more fluent in speech than the rest.

Responding to all of this religionism about him, in his ninth year

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Bryant began to make verses, paraphrasing the Scriptures. By the age of ten he had versified the first chapter of the Book of Job into heroic couplets. Among his papers was found the following lines which are probably a part of his amended version:

Job, good and just, in Uz had sojourned long,
He feared his God and shunned the way of wrong.
Three were his daughters, and his sons were seven,
And large wealth bestowed on him by heaven.
Seven thousand camels by his train were led;
Three thousand sheep in his pasture were fed.
For him the yoke a thousand oxen wore,
Five hundred asses his burdens bore.
His household to a mighty host increased,
The greatest man was Job in all the East.

Then came a paraphrase of the Hundred and Fourtenth Psalm and doggerel lines on the eclipse of 1806 and on Judgment Day.

About the same time, or maybe shortly afterwards, Bryant wrote a version of David's lament over Saul and Jonathan.

The beautiful of Israel's land lie slain
On the high places. How the mighty ones are fallen!
Tell it not in Gath, nor sound the tidings in the streets of Ascalon,
Lest there the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest there the heathen maidens sing.
The triumph of song. Oh ye mountain slopes,
Ye heights of Gilboa, let no offerings smoke upon your fields, for there the strong man's shield
The shield of Saul was vilely cast away,
As though he ne'er had been anointed king.
From bloody fray, from conflict to the death with men of might the bow of Jonathan
Turned never back nor did the sword of Saul return without the spoils of victory.2

1 Parke Godwin, op. cit., p. 22, ll. 1-10.

2 Ibid., p. 76, ll. 1-15.
The poetry of the Old Testament with its grandeur and beauty was a fount of inspiration which aided in expanding Bryant's imagination and rendering its words into his own.

Because the pulpit of that day dealt only with great themes, men's thoughts of the outward world and civil government became interpenetrated with thoughts of God and of immortality. Hence in Bryant's early poetry we see the ethical idealism of Calvinistic New England.\(^1\)

In Bryant's boyhood days in the Cummington community, there were seasons of religious excitement, sometimes called awakenings, but more often revivals of religion, which were of great sensational character. The principal topic of the ministers and exhorters at these seasons was the doom of the wicked, which was usually set forth in the strongest possible terms. In the winter, prayer meetings for exhortation were held almost daily. Bryant said that he often saw

> Women falling to the floor, struck down under conviction. . .and lying for a time apparently unconscious of everything that was passing around them. I saw men wringing their hands in despair. In many instances this state of depression was followed by a sudden revulsion of feeling: a mood of gladness from which its subject dated his new birth, and in which his heart overflowed with love to God and his fellow creatures.\(^2\)

In a community so religious it is quite natural that Bryant acquired habits of devotion. Therefore, he adopted the Calvinistic system of divinity, because that was all that he knew. Nothing else was taught

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from the pulpit, and Bryant supposed it to be the accepted doctrine of the religious world.

The young Bryant continued to write solemn verses (he was also writing classics) which showed a definite acceptance of the orthodox creed of his community, Calvinism. Among the best known are the verses he recited at the end of the school year, 1807, at his little community schoolhouse. One reads

Then let us tread as lowly Jesus trod,
The path that leads the sinner to his God;
Keep Heaven's bright mansion in your eyes,
Press towards the mark and seize the glorious prize.

The legacy of this New England theology gave Bryant a wealth of material for his writing. These teachings made him dread death and fear the wrath of God. In the following lines the dread of death is clearly stated:

Not that from life, all its woes
The hand of death shall set me free;
Not that this head, shall then repose
In the low vale most peacefully.

Ah, when I touch times farthest brink,
A kinder solace must attend;
It chills my very soul to think
On that dread hour when life must end.

In vain the flattering verse may breathe,
Of ease from pain, and rest from strife
There is a sacred dread of death
In woven with the strings of life.

The bitter cup at first was given
When angry justice frowned severe,

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Tremaine MacDowell, op. cit., p. xiv, ll. 1–4. All subsequent quotations from Bryant's poetry, unless otherwise stated, will refer to this source and will be designated by title, page, and lines only.
And 'tis th'eternal doom of heaven
That man must view the grave with fear.

And in "They Taught Me, and It was a Fearful Creed" Bryant again records his fear of death:

They taught me, and it was a fearful creed
That God forgets his creatures in the grave
And to the eternity of darkness leaves
Thought and its organs. Fearfully upon my heart
Fastened the terrible doubt— and the strong fear
Of death o'er mastered me and visions came—
Horrible visions such as I pray God
I may not see again. Methought I died
And I was laid beneath the thick green grass
Of my own native mountains. There were tears,
Warm tears, shed over me— such tears as fall
On many humble grave, and dear hands wrung
In agony to think that I should die.
And all that I learnt of Virtue here
In the world's suffering— all that from the book
Of Nature I had striven to transcribe
Into my mind— and from the laid-up thoughts
Of men of other days had now no place—
Parted— blotted out forever. . . .

Clearly, then, the teachings of the Calvinists had greatly confused Bryant.

Every person who expected to be respected in his New England society knew that a knowledge of Greek and Latin literature was an indispensable preliminary. Bryant, after having been instructed at home in the rudiments of Latin and Greek, was placed in the custody of his uncle, Parson Thomas Snell, who prepared him for seminary training. After seven months of training he was removed to the home of Reverend Moses Hallock, a Plainfield teacher, noted in his restricted sphere as a successful teacher of youth. Of this period Bryant said:

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1 "Not That from Life, and All Its Woes," p. 350, ll. 1-16.

2 "They Taught Me, and It was a Fearful Creed," p. 43, ll. 1-19.
I was early at my task in the morning and kept on until bedtime; at night I dreamed of Greek, and my first thought in the morning was my lesson for the day; at the end of two calendar months I knew the Greek New Testament from end to end almost as if it had been in English.¹

During this period also, Bryant formed a more intense acquaintance with the poetry of William Wordsworth. He had already read the *Lyrical Ballads*. He recalled concerning his first reading of the poems that "A thousand springs seemed to gush up at once into my heart and the face of Nature, of a sudden, to change into a strange freshness and life." Wordsworth identified God with Nature: Bryant never confounded the two. Wordsworth influenced Bryant greatly, but he did not reject his Calvinistic belief in God to accept the Pantheism of Wordsworth. Wordsworth never could have found delight in mountain, field, or flood, if he had not found a Spirit there which through them manifested itself to mortals. That Spirit, however, never seemed to utter sounds, or to take a personal form. But to Bryant, God never was a mere impersonal Spirit. God was transcendent even more than He was immanent. In Bryant the infinite was never merged with the finite, and mortal awe never became pantheistic absorption. Bryant surpassed Wordsworth in accounting for the presence of God in the universe. Mixed with Wordsworthianism is the abiding influence of Bryant's New England training, and the happy effect of those theological sermons to which he listened in his youth.² Wordsworth's greatest influence can be


seen in the poems which deal with God and Nature.\textsuperscript{1} In "A Forest Hymn" we read:

\begin{verbatim}
Thou art in the soft winds
That run along the summit of these trees
In music; Thou art in the cooler breath
That from the immost darkness of the place
Comes, scarcely felt; the barky trunks, the
ground,
The fresh, moist ground, are all instinct
with thee.
Here is continual worship;— Nature, here,
In the tranquility that thou dost love,
Enjoys thy presence.
\end{verbatim}

Here, the tranquility of Wordsworth is apparent, but the lines are devoid of Wordsworth's mysticism.

Thus we see that Bryant is essentially a Calvinist in his general attitude toward Nature. He was very much aware of the grandeur and beauties of Nature at an early age. He says:

I was always from my earliest years a delighted observer of Nature— the splendours of a winter daybreak over the wide waste of snow seen from our windows, the glories of the autummal woods, the gloomy approaches of the thunderstorm, and its departure amid the sunshine and the rainbows, the return of spring, with its flowers, and the first snowfall of winter. The poets fostered this taste in me, and though at the time I rarely heard such things spoken of, it was none the less cherished in my secret mind.\textsuperscript{3}

To the earliest Puritan immigrants, America was a horrible wilderness, an uncouth shaggy region, that the Evil Spirit might have made

\begin{enumerate}
\item A. H. Strong, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 21.
\item J. E. Hubbell (ed.), \textit{American Life in Literature} (Madison, Wisconsin, 1952), p. 269.
\end{enumerate}
peculiarly his own. In fact, many of them thought that love for Nature was a dangerous rival to love for God. Later, however, as the new land became home to them, they began to look upon the primitive wilderness of their environment with unvarying composure; a sense of mystery and awe frequently stilled their hearts as they travelled in the silent towering forest. In "The Burial-Place" Bryant speaks of the Puritans' reverence for the forest:

The pilgrims bands who passed the sea to keep
Their Sabbaths in the eye of God alone,
In his wide temple of the wilderness,
Brought not these simple customs of the heart
With them.1

In the wilderness they were able to see the works of God, symbolizing his transcendent beauty and at the same time his unimaginable power.

In such a manner did Bryant himself look upon Nature. In the faith of his fathers he walked erect in the forest, and beholding the grandeur there he says:

Father, thy hand
Hath reared these venerable columns, thou
Didst weave this verdant roof. Thou didst look down
Upon the naked earth, and, forthwith, rose
All these fair ranks of trees. They, in thy sun,
Budded, and shook their green leaves in thy breeze,
And shot toward heaven.2

Here Bryant declares himself wholly sympathetic with the atmosphere and feeling of Nature. With freedom to roam the woods and meditate upon their lessons, his mind and heart were awakened. He tells us himself that

1 "The Burial-Place," p. 67, ll. 40-45.

I cannot forget with what fervid devotion
I worshipped the visions of verse and of fame;
Each gaze at the glories of earth, sky, and ocean,
To my kindled emotions, was wind over flame.

Till I felt the dark power o'er my reveries stealing
From the gloom of the thicket that over me hung,
And the thoughts that awoke, in that rapture of feeling,
Were formed into verse as they rose to my tongue.¹

Consequently, Bryant never in his early poetry forgot to regard Nature as
the spiritual product of the same God worshipped by the citizens of
Cummington. In the above lines we see Calvinism in its loftiest sense.
The rapt adoration of the Calvinist in his deeper hours, his passionate
vision of God and God's ineffable loveliness and magnificence are present.
For the spiritual aspiration of the Puritan divines, he substituted an awed
reverence for Nature.

Bryant's adoration for the God of the Calvinists may be further
seen in his description of the concrete details of Nature. Bird's songs,
the music of the brooks, and the caresses of the fresh sylvan air raised
his low spirits and invited him to lose himself in daydreams; and in "Autumn
Woods" he exclaims:

Ah! 'twere a lot too blest
Forever in thy colored shades to stray;
Amid the kisses of the southwest
To roam and dream for aye;

And leave the vain low strife
That makes men mad— the tug for wealth and power—
The passions and the cares that wither life,
And waste its little hour.²

Likewise, in the presence of orchard and meadow and brook and river, he felt an incitement that he could not deny:

When breezes are soft and skies are fair,
I steal an hour from my study and care,
And hie me away to the woodland scene,
Where wanders the stream with waters of green,
As if the bright fringe of herbs on its brink
Had given their stain to the wave they drink;
And they whose meadows it murmurs through
Have named the stream from its own fair hue.¹

"A Hymn to the Sea" gives us, in a similar way, the poet's recognition of God's presence in the ocean's gray and melancholy waste:

The sea is mighty, but a mightier sways
His restless billows. Thou, whose hands
have scooped
His boundless gulfs and built his shore,
thy breath,
That moved in the beginning o'er his face,
Moves o'er it evermore.²

So too, there is a "Song of the Stars," in which the heavenly spheres are called

The boundless visible smile of Him
To the veil of whose brow your lamps are dim.³

Bryant is very sympathetic with Nature, and this sympathy is connected with his Calvinistic belief in man's fall. He believes that the external world is beautiful, because it is unfallen. "It shares with man the effects of sin: but, whenever we retreat from the regions which man's folly has despoiled, we may find something which remains of the lost

³ "Song of the Stars," p. 49, ll. 45-46.
paradise. So, then, from the wrath and injustices of man, the Puritans fled to the untrodden wilderness, and its solitudes, where they found a sanctuary. We read in the "Inscription For the Entrance to a Wood" that

The primal curse
Fall, it is true, upon the unsinning earth,
But not in vengeance, God hath yoked to guilt
Her pale tormentor, misery. Hence, these shades
Are still the abodes of gladness; the thick roof
Of green and stirring branches is alive
And musical with birds, that sing and sport
In wantonness of spirit; while below
The squirrel, with raised paws and form erect,
Chirps merrily. And a symbol of God's grace is seen in "The Fountain" that springs from the earth:

Thus God doth
Bring, from the dark and the foul, the pure and bright.

In "The Ages" he asks,

Has nature, in her calm, majestic march,
Faltered with age at last?

Oh no! a thousand cheerful omens give
Hope of yet happier days, whose dawn is nigh.
He who has tamed the elements, shall not live
The slave of his own passions; he whose eyes
Unwind the eternal dances of the sky,
And in the abyss of brightness dares to span
The sun's broad circle, rising yet more high,
In God's magnificent works his will shall scan—
And love and peace shall make paradise with man.

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2. "Inscription For the Entrance to a Wood," p. 6, 11. 11-20.
But amid the goodness of Nature, certain of its aspects symbolize the sinfulness of humanity. For example, human inconstancy and ingratitude are symbolized in "The West Winds:"

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Ah! thou art like our wayward race;--
When not a shade of pain or ill
Dims the bright smile of Nature's face,
Thou lov'st to sigh and murmur still.  
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And in "Earth" he says,

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Hail! how the murmur deepens! I perceive
And tremble at its dreadful import, Earth uplifts
A general cry for guilt and wrong,
And heaven is listening.  
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"The Hymn of the Waldenses" sums up clearly Bryant's Calvinistic attitude. Although we see in the stanzas the presence of God's wrath, we also see justice and love. He constantly reminds us that the oppressors will be punished and the oppressed will be rewarded.

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Hear, Father, hear thy faint afflicted flock
Cry to thee, from the desert and the rock;
While those, who seek to slay thy children, hold
Blasphemous worship under roofs of gold;
And the broad goodly lands, with pleasant airs
That nurse the grape and wave the grain, are theirs.
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Thou, Lord, dost hold the thunder; the firm land
Tosses in billows when it feels thy hand;
Thou dashest nation against nation, then
Stillest the angry world to peace again.
O touch their stony hearts who hunt thy sons--
The murderers of our wives and little ones.
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Yet, mighty God, yet shall thy frown look forth
Unveiled, and terribly shall shake the earth.
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2 "Earth," p. 78, ll. 41-44.
Then the foul power of priestly sin and all
Its long-upheld idolatries shall fall.
Thou shalt raise up the trampled and oppressed,
And thy delivered saints shall dwell in rest.¹

So it is clearly apparent that Bryant believes that all things work together
for good, even though at the present they may seem to contradict the divine
beneficence.

The Puritan virtues of the fear of God, truth, reverence, and
quietness pervade the early works of Bryant. Calvinism helped to mold his
early religious thoughts, and the Puritanism of his early home training had
a definite effect on him. Thus far we have seen the effects of this environ-
ment on Bryant's early religious beliefs. We have also seen the literary
influences on these beliefs, most especially the Bible and the works of
William Wordsworth. And, finally, we have seen how Bryant's Calvinistic
beliefs are manifested in his early poetry.

¹ "The Hymn of the Waldenenses," p. 37, ll. 1-6, 13-25.
CHAPTER II

PAGAN AND NON-CHRISTIAN ELEMENTS IN BRYANT'S POETRY

In Chapter I the writer was concerned with the delineation of Calvinistic ideas in Bryant's early poetry. It was observed that Bryant was a confirmed Calvinist up to the time that he entered Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, where he began to change his philosophy of life and religion. In this chapter the writer will try to account for the changes that were made during the period of study at Williams College.

Although Calvinism was flourishing in New England, from the standpoint of literary history the distinctive feature of the age was the emergence of the rationalistic doctrines of Deism and Stoicism. Neither was new, nor was either widely popular, but their tendency to present a man-centered rather than a God-centered universe expressed the basic beliefs of the time.

In character, Deism was a rejection of revealed religion. It denied the revelation of God in the Bible. The Deists preferred to seek religious truth through human reason, and they regarded religious duties as primarily humanitarian. Justin A. Smith describes the character of Deism as follows:

The favorite topics were the improbability of a religion, intended to be universal, being based on a long train of perplexed historical evidence, and revealed only to a single obscure people; the moral difficulties of many parts of the Bible; the doubtfulness of the texts, arising from the multitude of different readings, and the apocryphal documents; the imperfection of the evidence from prophecy; the sufficiency of natural religion, the immorality of making rewards and punishments the supreme motives of virtue, and of bribing the judgment by hope and fear. 1

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1 Justin A. Smith, Modern Church History (New Haven, Conn., 1887), p. 297.
Deism rejected all that the Calvinist had believed to be sacred.

But Deism is far too complicated a theory to be called a simple revolt against Calvinism. It is more of an extension of the seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophy of natural science. From this conceptions there inevitably followed a kind of reverence for the majesty and beauty of the universe as a whole. Deism counselled man to be humble and to reconcile himself to the order of Nature.¹

Young Bryant was first introduced to Deism at Williams College.²

In the years 1805 and 1808 Williams College had been flooded with a series of wild theories. Practically every college in New England had been attacked in a similar manner. "French philosophy had poured in like a flood, and seemed to sweep everything before it."³ Especially did the doctrines of Volney linger on the campus of Williams College. This strange doctrine fascinated greatly the young Bryant.

Associated with the Deistic interest was Bryant's interest in Stoicism. Stoicism like Deism was new to him. His stoical interest came as a result of his readings in the library of Williams College. He was

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¹ H. G. Townsend, Philosophical Ideas in the United States (Atlanta, 1934), p. 66.

² Tremaine MacDowell, op. cit., p. xxii. During the years subsequent to Bryant's graduation from Cummington School, he had no unorthodox ideas about religion, because he was preparing for college under the supervision of devout clergymen. See Tremaine MacDowell, "William Bryant Prepares for College," South Atlantic Quarterly, XXX (1931), 125.

especially interested in Greek poetry. Paganism in general fascinated him and Stoicism in particular. Bryant had always been a very serious minded youth, so Stoicism fitted perfectly with his character.

Stoicism, like Deism, was primarily a religion of the oppressed, a religion of defence and defiance. The Stoics believed that goodness, not pleasure, is the Good. They further believed that man cannot help but suffer for his fellow-man, and that perfection would be reached in the end, and that all of the world would be wrought to the Divine soul; so they accepted the doctrine of resignation. The Divine soul, to them, was Fire, and into that Fire all of the world would be drawn, and separate existence and the dross of earthly nature utterly burnt away. Then there would be no more decay or growth, no pleasure, no disturbance. Thus, Stoicism gave man an armour against that which was predominantly evil in the world, and encouraged him when the world was predominantly good. 1

Bryant read Greek literature with great eagerness. 2 Evidence of this great interest is shown by the several Greek classics that he translated during this period. But his most important intellectual experience was the revival of his interest in the paganism of Greece.

He was not only introduced to new conceptions of religion and


2 Exactly what Bryant read is unknown; however, he was familiar with Andrew Dalsel's Collectanea Graeca Minora, which was probably one of his textbooks. For further discussion of his readings see Tremaine MacDowell, "Cullen Bryant at Williams College," New England Quarterly, I (October, 1928), 443.
ethics at Williams College, but new excesses in conduct as well. Although he himself maintained a clean record of deportment, the escapades of his colleagues startled the carefully nurtured lad from Cummington. Especially did he find it distressing to see his mates remove the Bible from the pulpit chapel. On another occasion a group of fellows nailed the Bible to the pulpit, and finally, they burned it. It was far more shocking, however, to a youth of his sheltered and devout upbringing to learn that some of the men of his college, in a drunken carousal, had performed a mock celebration of the Lord's Supper.  

Because Bryant was dissatisfied with the academic life at Williams College, he decided that he would seek higher education elsewhere. He was given an honorable dismissal from Williams with the hopes of entering Yale in the autumn of 1811. This was the happiest moment of his life. He returned to his home town, Cummington, on May 8, 1811, before the end of the third quarter of his first term at Williams. His hopes for going to Yale were shattered, however, because of insufficient funds.

Although it is apparent that Bryant was unconscious of any religious or philosophical development at Williamstown, he did experience a degree of growth. MacDowell says that

It is clear, for example, that there was a slight increase in his skill in versification, for the poems of the period possess new ease and smoothness. ... As far as he developed

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1 Tremaine MacDowell, "Cullen Bryant at Williams College," South Atlantic Quarterly, XXX (1931), 458.

2 Parke Godwin, op. cit., p. 35.
religiously, Cullen's mind was subjected to powerful, but
diverse forces, both destructive and constructive. His
dislike for the Puritan faculty and their administration,
together with the desecration of the external symbols of
religion, the Bible and Holy Communion, were conducive to
a weakening of faith in the old order of the Snells and
Parson Hallock of Cummington. His interest in Greek
thought and the influence of French Deism were stimulants
to independent thinking and guide-posts to a liberal posi-
tion in theology. It was perhaps fortunate that the boy
did not enter Yale in the following autumn, and that he
never returned to Williams. He had been sufficiently
exposed to new influences to start in his mind novel trains
of thought, but he had not been long subjected to the aca-
demic routine as to lose mental elasticity or vigor.1

Bryant keenly regretted that he was never permitted to complete
his education. "I have always thought this unfortunate for me," he wrote
in 1874, "since it left me but superficially acquainted with several
branches of education which a college course would have enabled me to
master, and would have given me greater readiness in their application." 2

This disappointment was very evident in the months subsequent to his
departure from Williams College.

It was in the autumn of 1811, back in Cummington, that Bryant com-
posed the first draft of "Thanatopsis." Of the poems written between 1811-
1815, the period of his pagan and non-Christian exploration, "Thanatopsis"
is the most representative of his contemporary attitude toward life.

The title of the poem is a name coined from the Greek words --
"thanatos" (death) and "opsis" (view). Therefore, the poem is a view of
death. It is a Deistic and Stoical meditation on death. The disappoint-
ment of not being able to attend Yale was still on Bryant's mind, but in

1 Tremaine MacDowell, "Cullen Bryant at Williams College," South
Atlantic Quarterly, XXX (1931), 465. The italics are mine.

2 Parke Godwin, op. cit., p. 35.
the poem he attempted to rationalize it in terms of the inevitable end of life. Life is so brief, so fleeting! He saw it as only a brief moment in the limitless span of eternity. He learned this lesson from observing Nature--a few months and all of this eager bursting life would be over, and then everything would be silent and bleak as the woods. For him, life was the same as Nature. And for him, too, death would come one day to all as it did to all Nature. Then why should he worry about the things that really did not matter? All that mattered was to live a good and useful life, and in the end approach death, not with fear, but with courage and faith.

In reality, the poem voiced the youth's reply to the question raised by Robert Blair, Beilby Proteus, and Henry Kirke White: "How shall a man face death?" The Calvinists of Cummington would have said that a

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1 In an autobiographical fragment, Bryant left the following account of his reading prior to the composition of "Thanatopsis":

About that time my father brought me home, I think from one of his visits to Boston, the 'Remains of Henry Kirke White,' which had been republished in this country. I read the poems with great eagerness, and so often that I committed several of them to memory, particularly the 'Ode to the Rosemary.' The melancholy tone which prevails in them deepened the interest with which I read them, for about that time I had, as young poets are apt to have, a liking for poetry of a querulous cast. I remember reading, at the same time, the remarkable poem Blair's 'Grave,' and dwelling with great satisfaction upon its finer passages. I had the opportunity of comparing it with a poem on a kindred subject, also in blank verse, that of Bishop Proteus on 'Death,' and observing how much the verse of the obscure Scottish minister excelled in originality of thought and vigor of expression that of the English prelate. In my father's library I found a small, thin volume of the miscellaneous poems of Southey, to which he had called my attention, containing some of the finest of Southey's shorter poems. I read it greedily. Cowper's poems had been in my hands from
man should face his destiny, accept the doctrines of historical Christi-
anity, and then approach the grave as a gateway to a new and more beauteous
existence in Paradise with God. But, a careful look at "Thanatopsis" shows
that no mention is made of this doctrine in the first or later revisions
of the poem. Consequently in Bryant's discussion of death he does not
rely on the doctrines of election or conversion as believed by the Calvin-
ists. Nor does he mention the joys of heaven or the delights of a future
life. Although he invites us to commune with Nature, he really summons us
to a thoughtful contemplation of that steady movement of mankind towards
the grave. The "still small voice" is the voice of Nature, not God; and
the mysterious realm is the pale realm of death, not the heaven of the
Calvinists. Death has swallowed up all:

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 sepulchre. 2

For Bryant, the whole earth was the great tomb of man. Mingled
and contrasted with his thoughts of life's transientness and the brief span

an early age, and now I passed from the shorter poems,
which are merely generally rhymed prose, to his 'Task',
the finer passages of which supplied a form of blank
verse that captivated my admiration. Parke Godwin, op.
cit., p. 37.

The exact date of the first draft of the poem is disputed. It is
generally set between September and October of 1811. Bryant himself states
that it was written between his seventeenth and eighteenth birthdays. The
poem was revised in 1817, and the final revision was made in 1821. For
discussion of the dates of the revisions of the poem consult ibid., p. 98.
See also Tremaine MacDowell, Bryant: Representative Selections, 558.

"Thanatopsis," p. 4, ll. 34-38.
of human existence, is the idea of the hoary antiquity and the tremendous, unchanging duration of the earth itself.\footnote{William Aspenwall Bradley, William Cullen Bryant (New York, 1926), p. 29.}

The hills
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,— the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
The venerable woods— the rivers that move
In majesty, and the complaining brooks
That make all 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.\footnote{"Thanatopsis," \textit{op. cit.}, p. 5, ll. 38-46.}

The spirit of the poem is pagan. Bryant seems convinced that the world is moving toward ruin, and mankind is doomed. Therefore, he humanizes the grave by insisting on the common lot of man.

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 phantom; yet all these shall leave
Their mirth and their employments, and shall come
And make their beds with thee.\footnote{Ibid., 1. 60-66.}

Finally, he instructs his fellowmen to

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 a 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.\footnote{Ibid., 1. 73-82.}
Here, for the moment, Bryant deified the grave armed with the Stoical belief that the grave brings release from the miseries of human existence, and the Deistic belief that death does not bring further individualistic existence, but final union with the insensate physical universe. Thus, he exhibits a fusion of Deistic and Stoical thinking. Even natural death to Bryant in his poetic mood had its sunny aspects. Instead of treating it as a penal institution only to be dreaded, he treats it as a change as natural, as inevitable, and as beneficial as the changes of the seasons; as the changes from infancy to maturity, from hunger to satiety, from sleeping to waking; as no more the penalty of virtue; a change which the good are just as certain to experience as the wicked, the rich as the poor, the noble as the peasant. 1

During the next four years of his life, Bryant maintained the same non-Christian attitude as that expressed in "Thanatopsis." In the numerous poems of the period which dealt extensively or exclusively with death, he never accepted for himself the consolations of the orthodox religion.

His thoughts upon the subject of death and immortality were as fluctuating as those of most other men. Mingling in his mind in varying degrees, or constantly interchanging were doubt, denial, hope, and confidence. At times it seems that he saw no more than dust remaining after death. Therefore, he began to apostrophize death as a friend of mankind. 2


He says:

Raise then the hymn to Death. Deliverer!
God hath anointed thee to free the oppressed
And crush the oppressor. When the armed chief
The conqueror of nations, walks the world,
And it is changed beneath his feet, and all
Its kingdom melt into one mighty realm—
Thou, while his head is loftiest and his heart
Blasphemes, imagining his own right hand
Almighty, thou dost set thy sudden grasp
Upon him, and the links of that strong chain
Which bound mankind are crumbled; thou dost break
Sceptre and crown, and beat his throne to dust.1

In the manner of a true Stoic, Bryant welcomes death as a deliverer from
the oppressions of this life, resigning himself to his fate.

In recalling the death of his much beloved sister, he again, shows
resignation:

And now, when comes the calm mild day, as still
such days will come,
To call the squirrel and the bee from out their winter home;
When the sound of dropping nuts is heard, though all the
trees are still,
And twinkle in the smoky light the waters of the rill,
The south wind searches for the flowers where fragrance
late he bore,
And sighs to find them in the wood and by the stream no more.

And then I think of one who in her youthful beauty died,
The fair meek blossom that grew up and faded by my side.
In the cold moist earth we laid her, when the forests cast
the leaf,
And we wept that one so lovely should have a life so brief:
Yet not unmeet it was that one, like that young friend
of ours
So gentle and so beautiful, should perish with the flowers.2

Still further, even when he contemplated his own dissolution, he thought
himself as passing as silently as the south wind. Although he meditated

1“Hymn to Death,” p. 16, ll. 60-72.
upon his own death, it was ever in the mood of serenity and calm, with no
anticipation of bitterness and no surging in upon him of regret at the
inexorableness of the fate that awaits not only man, but all Nature. He
says:

   Yet a few years shall pass away,
   And I, all trembling, weak, and gray,
   Bowed to the earth, which awaits to fold
   My ashes in the embracing mould,
   (If haply the dark will of Fate
   Indulge my life so long a date),
   May come for the last time to look
Upon my childhood’s favorite brook.
Then dimly on my eye shall gleam
The sparkle of thy dancing stream;
And faintly on my ear shall fall
Thy prattling currents merry call;
Yet shalt thou flow as glad and bright
As when thy met’st my infant sight.

   And I shall sleep—and on thy side,
   As ages after ages glide,
   Children their early sports shall try,
   And pass to hoary age and die.
   But thou, unchanged from year to year,
   Gayly shall play and glitter here;
   Amid young flowers and tender grass
   The endless infancy shall pass;
   And, singing down thy narrow glen,
   Shall mock the fading race of men.

The same serene philosophy expressed earlier in "Thanatopsis" is
seen in "A Chorus of Ghosts." Here, the poet seems to be weary of life
and is longing for its extinction. He hears the voices of the tenants of
the grave summoning him to take his rest with them:

   Come to thy couch of iron rest!
   Come share our silent bed!
   There’s room within the grave-yard’s bounds
   To lay thy weary head.

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1 "The Rivulet," p. 31, ll. 67-90.
Cold are its walls— but not for thee—
And dark, but thou shalt sleep;
Unfelt, the enclosing clods above
Their endless guard shall keep.

Come, we will close thy glazing eye,
Compose thy dying head;
And gently from its house of clay
Thy struggling spirit lead.

The poet is very curious to know about the tenants of this dark passage-way; therefore, he goes to talk with the monarch, and challenges him to disclose the secrets of his narrow cell. In "The Night Has Reached Its Solemn Noon" he makes this appeal:

By all the dying feel and fear,
By every fiery throe,
By all that tells thy triumphs here
And all we dread below;
By those dim realms— those portals pale
Whose keys 'tis thine to keep,
I charge thee, tell the thrilling tale!
I charge thee, draw aside the veil
That hides the dear one's sleep.

And in "Death's Messenger" Death answers his invocation:

Yet a few hours, and Nature's hand
Itself shall sorrow's balm apply;
And I shall bless the kind command
That cools this brow and seals this eye.

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1 "A Chorus of Ghosts," Parke Godwin, op. cit., p. 115, ll. 1-4, 13-16, 20-24. This poem and the two following were published in 1814. They do not appear among Bryant's collected works.


3 "Death's Messenger," p. 117, ll. 30-34.
Nature, here, gives him courage. To him, as with the Stoic, death is not to be feared, but looked upon as a friend to man.

Bryant did not believe that any man died before his time. In "Old Man's Funeral" he compares death with the harvest, and praises it as the peaceful and fitting end to a happy and long life.

And I am glad that he has lived thus long,
And glad that he has gone to his reward;
Nor can I deem that nature did him wrong
Softly to disengage the vital cord.
For when his hand grew palsied, and his eye
Dark with the mists of age, it was time to die.1

The same philosophy is expressed in "June" when the poet chooses the time that he wishes to die.

'Twere pleasant, that in Flowery June
When brooks send up a cheerful tune,
And groves a joyous sound,
The sexton's hand, my grave to make,
The rich, green mountain-turf should break.2

The same feeling expressed in "Thanatopsis" and "A Chorus of Ghosts" is restated in the above lines. Bryant seems almost in love with death and is willing to face it with courage.

Between the years 1811-1815, Bryant was on the threshold, wavering between doubt and confidence and denial and hope. This period of his life had been filled with great disappointments. Especially had the disappointment of not being able to complete his college work been great; but he, nevertheless, faced all of his problems courageously.

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1 "The Old Man's Funeral," William A. Bradley, op. cit., p. 81, ll. 41-47.

2 "June," p. 53, ll. 5-9.
Of the poet himself during this period, we possess ample material from a portrait in the recollections furnished by his son-in-law, Parke Godwin, by a few of those who knew him.

One recalled his solitary, brooding habits; his love of the thickets along Green River and the Houstonic; and his restrained, almost austere manner with strangers, contrasted with his cheerful, entertaining, joyous way among his friends. Colonel Taylor said that he liked to wander above anything else, and when he met an acquaintance his first salutation was, 'Come, what say you for a stroll,' once begun, was apt to last for the larger part of the day. Another says that he was commonly gentle, courteous, and polite; but he allowed of no familiarities; and impertinence and vulgarism he rebuked on the spot, no matter who the offender. He was spare, almost diminutive in size. . . . Little as he was, however, he was fearless, and would have undertaken to do anything that he liked. He was punctual in going to church, owning half a pew in the Congregational Church, but he was terribly prone to pick the sermons all to pieces. ¹

From these testimonies it is clear that Bryant was perplexed during this period of his life. The tone of his writings during this period seem a lingering memory of the sublime lamentations of Job that he translated in his early childhood, an impression from the Greeks of that ineffable sadness which moans through even the lightest music, and the infinite solitude of the primeval forests. All of this is stretched over these works treating death.

Especially is the melancholy tone of the Greeks seen in Strophe, one of the "Oedipus" as he rendered it in English:

Where is the wretch condemned to death
From Delphi's rock sublime?
Who bears upon his hand of blood
The inexplicable crime?

¹
Parke Godwin, op. cit., p. 203.
Oh! swifter than winged pace
Of stormy-footed steed,
Fly, murderer! fly the wrath that waits
The unutterable deed!
For lo! he follows on the path
Who fell before thee late,
With gleaming arms and glowing flame,
And fierce, avenging hate.

The peculiarities of Greek literature were instilled very deeply in Bryant. By yielding to the delusive passions of the Greeks he was able to speak more boldly about the mysterious charm, death, of which he was very aware.

In actuality the period between 1811 and 1815 was a dark interlude in Bryant's life. The poems on love and death were attempts to show the universality of death in the natural order of things. Too, the poems show his sympathy with the doubts and perplexities of the age in which he lived. In the poems there is no recognition of the Christian doctrine of resurrection and immortality. Certainly there is no belief in the continuousness of the individual's consciousness after death. Bryant took the idea of death out of its theological aspects and sophistications, and the perversions of the conscience with which it is connected, and restored it to its proper place in the scheme of things.

In this chapter we have seen the obvious break that Bryant made with the orthodox religion of his home community, and his preoccupation with thoughts of death and the grave. We have also seen his gradual movement toward Deism and Stoicism. By virtue of his exposure to these great philosophical forces, he turned to them for comfort and solace during the period in which he was confused, perplexed and disillusioned.

"Oedipus Tyrannus," Parke Godwin, op. cit., p. 94. This poem does not appear in Bryant's collected works.
CHAPTER III

UNITARIAN CONCEPTS IN BRYANT’S POETRY

In the earlier chapters of this study the writer has been concerned with the Calvinistic, pagan, and non-Christian concepts of Bryant’s poetry. From a point of view of religion, however, the most significant period of his life and works is the period of his Unitarian beliefs.

Unitarianism flourished in New England in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Before 1825, the date usually adopted as the beginning of organized Unitarianism in America, the ideas of Unitarianism were preached by a number of the laity and clergymen of New England.1

The Unitarians denied the belief in the Trinitarian formula. They declined to accept the doctrine of the Trinity, because they felt that it was not necessary in order to be a Christian. They had no creed or official theology, but they had statements of faith, the most popular being: “The Fatherhood of God; the Leadership of Jesus; salvation by character; the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.”2 The Unitarian belief concerning the future life can be conferred from this. They had a great hope of a future existence, but they stopped short of expressing any definite knowledge concerning the "when" or "where" of such existence. Unitarianism differed from Deism in its acceptance of revelation, but its chief significance rests in its emphasis on humanitarianism.

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2 Ibid., p. 298.
The greatest exponent of Unitarianism in the early nineteenth century was William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), whose beliefs had a great effect on Bryant’s father, Dr. Peter Bryant, and thus on his son. Dr. Bryant lent a listening ear to the doctrines promulgated by Channing. He subscribed to Unitarian publications and listened attentively to its innovators. Dr. Bryant’s liberalism in religion greatly influenced his son’s thinking. William began to accept the doctrines of Unitarianism, and with this acceptance his religious views assumed their mature form. These views were for his day, however, essentially liberal.

On the twenty-ninth of January, 1817, Bryant was called upon to make an address before the Bible Society of Great Barrington. The following week the address was published in the local newspaper. About it Godwin says:

His general theme was ‘The Bible’ of which he said: ‘It’s sacredness awes me, and I approach it with the same reverential feeling that an ancient Hebrew might be supposed to feel who was about to touch the ark of God with unhallowed hands.’ His special topic, however, was the political and social influences of the Scriptures, and he tried to show, by glancing at the moral condition of the nations, that wherever they were allowed a free circulation among the people the great interests of human civilization were rapidly advanced.

By 1820, his liberalism had become so well-known that he was asked to contribute to a Unitarian hymnal. Bryant, himself, did not like the

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1 Channing contributed to The Christian Examiner, the most influential newspaper of the period. For a full discussion of Channing’s Unitarian views see “Christianity,” The Literature of the United States, ed. by Walter Blair, Theodore Hornberger, and Randall Stewart (Atlanta, 1946), p. 417.

2 Parke Godwin, op. cit., p. 155.
manner in which the songs were written, and when he finally accepted Christ as his personal Savior, he revised them for public worship.\(^1\)

"To a Waterfowl" is the first poem of the period which shows his return from his youthful explorations of paganism to Christianity. When Bryant began to face the world alone in his law office, Christian elements began to appear more and more frequently in his poetry. In the poem, the moral idea is the central inspiration. The bird is to him a symbol of his own destiny, and the poem is an illustration of his most profound religious faith and hope in divine guidance. The last stanza states the fact clearly:

He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.\(^2\)

These lines are perfect in faith. At this time, the world was before him, and competence and success were far away. But most significantly, the lines express his celebration of divine Providence, and they bring God's care into the affairs of his individual life.

Unlike most of the orthodox Unitarians, Bryant declared his entire reliance on Christ. Because he knew his own weaknesses and his insufficiencies, he trusted in what God had done for him, and for what he would do through Jesus Christ. He expressed explicitly this belief in the hymns that he wrote for the Unitarian hymnal.\(^3\) We surmise that to Bryant the lustre of the star did indeed lead the kings of the East to Bethlehem; the blessed

\(^1\) See \textit{infra}, p. 34.

\(^2\) "To a Waterfowl," p. 8, ll. 29-32.

\(^3\) A. H. Strong, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 31f.
Virgin bent above the manger wherein lay her Holy Child; that water was changed to wine at the marriage of Cana of Galilee; the blind received their sight, and the dead arose to life again.

He celebrated Christ’s nativity by saying:

As shadows cast by cloud and sun
Flit o’er the summer grass
So in thy sight, Almighty One!
Earth’s generations pass.

And while the years, an endless host,
Come pressing swiftly on,
The greatest names that earth can boast
Just listen, and are gone.

Ye doth the star of Bethlehem shed
A lustre pure and sweet;
And still it leads as once it led,
To the Messiah’s feet.

O Father, may thy holy star
Grow every year more bright,
And send its glorious beams afar
To find the world with light.

And in the hymn founded on the saying of Mary the Mother of Jesus at the marriage of Cana of Galilee, he says:

Whate’er he bids observe and do;
Such be the law that we obey,
And greater wonders men shall view
Than that of Cana’s bridal day.

The flinty heart with love shall beat,
The chains shall fall from passions slave,
The proud shall sit at Jesus’ feet
And learn the truths that bless and save.

In stanza two of "Oh God, Whose Dread and Dazzling Brow" he paid the following tribute to Christ:

1 "As Shadow Cast by Cloud and Sun," ibid., p. 32, ll. 1-16.

2 "Whate’er He Bids Observe and Do," ibid., p. 31, ll. 1-8.
Aid our weak steps and eyesight dim
The paths of peace to find,
And lead us all to learn of Him
Who died to save mankind.¹

Bryant is highly desirous in these lines of accepting Christ as his personal Savior.

The hymn, "He Hath Put All Things Under His Feet," is one of the poet's most significantly religious hymns. In it he declares the world-wide supremacy of Christ:

O North, with all thy vales of green!  
O South, with all thy palms!  
From peopled towns and fields between  
Uplift the voice of psalms!  
Raise, ancient East! the anthem high,  
And let the youthful West reply.  
Lo! in the clouds of heaven appears  
God's well-beloved Son;  
He brings a train of brighter years;  
His kingdom is begun;  
He comes a guilty world to bless  
With mercy, truth, and righteousness.²

The cross is mentioned infrequently in Bryant's poetry, yet faith in the cross is not wholly absent from his lines. In "Waiting By the Gate" this faith is apparent:

And some approach the threshold whose looks are blank with fear,  
And some whose temples brighten with joy in drawing near,  
As if they saw dear faces, and caught the gracious eye  
Of Him, the Sinless Teacher, who came for us to die.³

¹ "Oh God, Whose Dread and Dazzling Brow," p. 15, ll. 5-8.
² "He Hath Put All Things Under His Feet," p. 35, ll. 1-12.
³ "Waiting By the Gate," p. 36, ll. 1-8.
Bryant makes all final joy depend upon Christ's death.

Closely allied with the belief in the resurrection of Christ is the poet's respect for the ordinance of the Lord's Supper." In the poem he looks upon the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as the crowning service of the church. Far more to him than a mere ordinary memorial was the bread and the communion table. That mystic loaf did in some true way unite him with the risen Lord.

It was Bryant's contemplation of the life of Christ that led him to confident belief in the immortality of the soul. He asks:

When we descend to dust again
Where shall the final dwelling be
Of thought and all its memories then,
My love for thee, and thine for me?¹

Doubt is making way for faith in his spiritual life. This hope transformed itself into the convocation that Christ really arose from the dead, and that even as he returned from the grave, so shall we; since man is made in the image of God, man's soul shall never die.

The bereaved maiden in "The Indian Girl's Lament" comforts herself with the thought that her dead lover will still be hers:

"Thou'rt happy now, for thou hast passed
The long dark journey to the grave,
And in the land of light, at last,
Hast joined the good and the brave;
Amid the flushed and balmy air,
The bereavest and the loveliest there.

.........................

"And thou dost wait and watch to meet
My spirit sent to join the blessed,
And, wondering what detains my feet
From that bright land of rest,
Dost seem, in every sound, to hear
The rustling of my footsteps near."²

¹"Life," p. 82, ll. 49-52.
²"The Indian Girl's Lament," p. 28, ll. 31-36, 49-54.
And in "The Future Life" Bryant writes:

How shall I know thee in the sphere which keeps
The disembodied spirits of the dead,
When all of thee that time could wither sleeps
And perishes among the dust we tread?

Will not thy own meek heart demand me there?
That heart whose fondest throbs to me were given—
My name on earth was ever in thy prayer,
And wilt thou never utter it in heaven?

In meadows fanned by heaven's life-breathing wind,
In the resplendence of that glorious sphere,
And larger movements of the unfettered mind,
Wilt thou forget the love that joined us here?

Shall thou not teach me in that calmer home,
The wisdom that I learned so ill in this—
The wisdom which is love—till I become
Thy fit companion in that land of bliss? ¹

Bryant has confidently assumed a belief in the immortality of the soul.
He realized that there was hope, because he believed that Christ had
brought life and immortality with his coming.

In "The Past" he knows that all of earth's treasures will be
destroyed by time, but he says:

Thou unrelenting Past!
Strong are the barriers round thy dark domain
And fetters, sure and fast,
Hold all that enter thy unbreathing reign.

Childhood, with all its mirth,
Youth, Manhood, Age that draws us to the ground,
And last, Man's life on earth,
Glide to thy domains, and are bound.

All shall come back; each tie
Of pure affection shall be knit again;
Alone shall Evil die,
And Sorrow dwell a prisoner in thy reign.

And then shall I behold
Him, by whose kind paternal side I sprung,
And her, who, still and cold,
Fills the next grave— the beautiful and the young.¹

The belief in immortality is definitely apparent in these lines.

Although Bryant had shown early interest in the church and God, it was not until 1858 that he joined the "visible" church.² What change led him to take this step has never transpired; but it was in Naples in 1858, and in the sixty-fourth year of his life that he first showed his determination to make a formal confession of the Christian faith and become united with the church. The only original account of this important event was recorded by Rev. Mr. Waterson of Boston. He tells us that

Mrs. Bryant had been suddenly prostrated by serious illness, and he had watched over her through many anxious weeks. ...At this time I received from him a note stating that there was a subject of interest upon which he would like to converse with me. On the following day, the weather being delightful, we walked in Villa Reale, the royal park or garden overlooking the Bay of Naples. Never can I forget the beautiful spirit that breathed through every word he uttered, the reverent love, the confiding trust, the spiring hope, the rooted faith....He said that he never united himself with the church, which with his present feeling he would gladly do. He then asked if it would be agreeable to me to come to his room on the morrow and administer the communion, adding that as he had not been baptized he would desire that ordinance at the

¹ "The Past," p. 66, ll. 1-4, 9-12, 49-56.

² In New York he frequented the church of Dr. Follen, less because of his varied intellectual resources, which were exceptional, than because of the freedom he found there for the expansion of religious life in all directions. Dr. Follen was called a Unitarian. Bryant continued until his death, when in town to attend churches of this denomination, under the successive pastorates of Dewey, Osgood, and Bellows. At Roslyn, he attended the Presbyterian Church. He was a trustee of this church and a constant attendant and one of its largest contributors. John Bigelow, op. cit., p. 275.
same time. The following day was the Sabbath....In fulfill-
ment of his wishes, in his own quiet room, a company
of seven persons celebrated together the Lord's Supper.
With hymns, selections from the Scriptures, and devotional
exercises, we went back in thought to the large upper room
where Christ first instituted the Holy Supper, in the midst
of the disciples. Previous to the breaking of the bread
William Cullen Bryant was baptized. With snow white head
and flowing beard, he stood like one of the ancient prophets,
and perhaps never since the days of the Apostles had a truer
disciple professed allegiance to the Divine Master....After
the service, Mr. Bryant repeated the lines of John Lyden,
the oriental scholar and poet—lines which he said had
always been special favorites of his, and of which he was
often reminded by the holy tranquillity which seems as with
conscious recognition to characterize the Lord's Day: 'With
silent awe, and I hailed the sacred morn,/ That scarcely
wakes while all the fields are still;/ A soothing calm on
every breeze is borne,/ A graver murmur echoes from the hill,/And softer sings the linnet from the thorn,/ Hail, light
serene! Hail, sacred Sabbath Morn!'

It was under this great emotional spell that Bryant penned the
following lines, which reveal more of his inner life than anyone ever
learned from his lips:

See, before us, in our journey, broods a mist upon the
ground;
Thither leads the path we walk in, blending with the
gloomy bound.
Never eye hath pierced its shadows to the mystery that
screen;
Those who once have passed within it never more on earth
are seen.
Now it seems to stoop beside us, now at seeming distance
lowers,
Leaving banks that tempt us onward bright with summer-
green and flowers.
Yet, it blots the way forever; there our journey ends at
last;
Into the dark cloud we enter, and are gathered to the
past;
Thou who, in this flinty pathway, leading through a
strangerland,
Passest down the rocky valley, walking with me hand and
hand,
Which of us shall be the soonest folded to that dim Un-
known?

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1 Ibid., p. 281.
Which shall leave the other walking in this flinty path alone?

Viewed from that serener realm, the walks of human life may lie,
Like the page of some familiar volume, open to thine eye;
Haply, from the o'erhanging shadow, thou mayst stretch unseen hand,
To support the wavering steps that print with blood the rugged land.
Haply, leaning o'er the pilgrim, all unfleeting thou art near,
Thou mayst whisper words of warning or of comfort in his ear,
Till, beyond the border where that brooding mystery bare the sight,
Those whom thou hast fondly cherished stand with thee in peace and light.¹

The same philosophy is further stated in "The Flood of Years," when he says,

Old sorrows are forgotten now,
Or but remembered to make sweet the hour
That overpays them; wounded hearts that bled
Or broke are healed forever. In the room
Of this grief-shadowed present, there shall be
A Present in whose reign no grief shall gnaw
The heart, and never shall a tender tie
Be broken; in whose reign the eternal Change
That waits on growth and action shall proceed
With everlasting Concord hand in hand.²

When asked if these lines represented his real convictions, Bryant answered,

Certainly I believe all that is said in these lines, otherwise I could not have written them. I believe in the everlasting life of the soul, and it seems to me that immortality would be but an imperfect gift without the recognition in life to come of those who are dear to us here.³

³Blair, Hornberger, and Stewart, op. cit., p. 480.
It is interesting to note the change in ideas expressed in these lines from the idea expressed earlier in "Thanatopsis." At the time that "Thanatopsis" was written, Bryant was just seventeen years old. "The Flood of Years" was written in his eighty-first year; it was written in a retrospective mood. The uncertainty of mind concerning the future disappeared in his last years.

One of Bryant's most significant contributions to the religious literature of the times was a preface to a little volume written by Rev. Dr. Alden entitled "Thoughts on the Religious Life." In the preface he says:

I cannot but lament the tendency of the time, encouraged by some of the zealous prosecution of science, to turn its attention from the teachings of the gospel, from the beautiful example of Christ's life, and the supremely excellent precepts which He gave His disciples and the people who resorted to hear Him. To those teachings and the example the world owes its recovery from the abomination of heathenism.

The character of Christ which was the perfect model, is in itself so attractive, so altogether lovely, that I cannot describe in language the admiration with which I regard it; nor can I express the gratitude I feel for the dispensation which bestowed that example on mankind, for the truths which He taught, and the sufferings He endured for our sakes. I tremble to think what the cruel world would have been without Him.

In my view of the life, the teachings, the labors, and the sufferings of the blessed Jesus, there can be no admiration too profound, no love of which the human heart is capable too warm, no gratitude so inadequate. It is with sorrow that I see any attempt to put aside the teachings as a delusion, to turn men's eyes from His example, to meet with doubt and denial the story of his life.

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1 See supra, p. 20f.

2 John Bigelow, op. cit., p. 275.
In a letter to John Bigelow from Miss Bryant, William Bryant's daughter, the following comment is made:

This preface must have been one of the last things that my father wrote. It speaks more fully than I have known him to do elsewhere of his religious beliefs and of his belief in Christ, and is very touching, I think. I remember how earnestly he used to enjoin upon me to study the example of Christ and to try to follow it. He was so reserved even with his children in speaking of such things that he rarely admonished one in this way, but when he did, it was done with simplicity and earnestness that made it something that could never be forgotten.

Bryant often remarked that a gentleman should never speak of his love affairs and his religion, but as Miss Bryant remarks in the letter, there is perhaps no fuller discussion of his religious beliefs than those found in the preface to the little book by Rev. Dr. Alden.

In the last poem written by Bryant, he stated very clearly the faith that he implied in the preface. The poem, "A Lifetime," is a memorial to his beloved wife. The poem seems to sum up his life beautifully.

I sit in the early twilight,
And through the gathering shade,
I look on the field around me
Where yet a child I played.

And I peer into the shadows,
Till they seem to pass away,
And the fields and their tiny brooklet
Lie clear in the light of day.

He stoops to gather blossoms where
The running waters shine
And I look on him with wonder,
His eyes are so like mine.

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1 John Bigelow, op. cit., p. 278.
And there by the child is standing
By a stately lady's knee,
And reading of ancient peoples
And the realms beyond the sea.

I look again, and there rises
A forest wide and wild,
And in it the boy is wandering,
No longer a little child.

Another change, and I see him
Approach his dwelling place
Where a fair-haired woman meets him
With a smile on her young face —

Another change and I see him,
Where the city's ceaseless coil
Sends up a mighty murmur
From a thousand modes of toil.

Though years have whitened his temples
His eyes have the first look still,
Save a shade of settled sadness,
A forecast of coming ill.

I am gazing in the twilight
Where the dim-seen meadows lie,
And the wind of night is swaying
The trees with a heavy sigh.

Twelve years after the death of his wife, death came almost unexpectedly to Bryant. No services were held for him except those at All Souls Church where the poet had long worshipped. The Rev. Dr. Bellows, Bryant's pastor during the later years of his life, read the King's Chapel

service for the dead, and then offered prayer, followed by a brief but sympathetic message.

. . . A devoted friend and lover of religious liberty, he was equally a lover of religion itself — not in any precise dogmatic form, but in its righteousness, reverence, and charity. What his theology was, you may safely infer from his long and regular attendance in this place of Christian service. Still he was not a dogmatist, but preferred practical piety and wise virtue in all modes of faith. What was obvious in him for twenty years past was increasing respect and devotion to religious institutions, and a more decided Christian quality in his faith. . . . the increasing sweetness and beneficence of his character, meanwhile must have struck his familiar friends. His last years were his most devout and most humane years. He became beneficent as he grew able to be so, and his hand was open to all just need and to many unreasonable claimants. 1

With Bryant’s death the question in “An Evening Revery” was answered, and the prophecy fulfilled —

O thou great Movement of the Universe
Or Change, or Flight of Time — for ye are one!
That bearest, silently, this visible scene
Into night’s shadow and the streaming rays
Of starlight, whither art thou bearing me?
I feel the mighty current sweep me on,
Yet know not whither. Man can foretell afar
The courses of the stars; the very hour
He knows when they shall darken or grow bright;
Yet doth the eclipse of Sorrow and Death
Come unforewarned. 2

If we seek expression of Bryant’s belief in life beyond the grave, it can be found in almost every poem that he wrote after 1815. Sometimes doubt undermined his faith, but there was always hope for a bright tomorrow. Even his own life ended in hope and joy.

1 John Bigelow, op. cit., p. 285. The italics are mine.

Bryant's mature conception of God was indeed that of the Apostle Paul, who said, "In Him we live and move and have our being." To him, God was the Soul of the Universe. Bryant knew that only faith in God's infinite care enabled him to face his problems calmly and serenely.

It was in recognition of his long life of Christian service that after his death the pulpits of New England abounded in expositions the moral lessons to be drawn from the incidents of so wonderful a career. These expressions were for the most part eulogistic, making no pretensions to be philosophical. The Rev. Mr. R. C. Waterson, addressing the Massachusetts Historical Society, said:

Mr. Bryant was a scholar, yet his life was not passed either in studious retirement, or even in a scholastic way, among books. He was familiar with various languages, ancient and modern, retaining with critical exactness his classical knowledge, yet his hours were habitually occupied with the practical aspects of his time. . . . His poetry was generally calm and contemplative, yet he was in daily contact with the most exciting controversies of the period. . . . In him a rare combination of extraordinary qualities intermingled: strength and gentleness, elevation of thought and childlike simplicity, genius, common-sense and practical wisdom.1

This address, which dwelt lovingly upon Bryant's religious traits, was printed but not published.

Many of the learned societies of which Bryant was an associate paid him their respect in addresses by eminent members to the memory of his virtues, talents, and services. With the words in which George William Curtis, at the request of the New York Historical Society, paid tribute to Bryant, this study is closed:

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1 Parke Godwin, op. cit., p. 411.
Here, then, we leave him, with tender reverence for the father of our song, with grateful homage to the spotless faithful citizen, with affectionate admiration for the simple and upright man. Here we leave him, and we go forward refreshed, strengthened, inspired, by the light of the life which, like a star serene and inextinguishable, 

'Flame in the forehead of our morning sky.'\(^1\)

\(^1\)Parke Godwin, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 419.
CONCLUSION

Our first great American poet, William Cullen Bryant, was by all odds a Christian gentleman. Although he was no professed theologian, it is clear from a careful study of his poetry that he had profound religious beliefs. Religion was never a passion with him, but it never failed throughout his life to be an informing power. If faith was at times waver-
ing in him, prayer was always to him a source of comfort and help.

In his early poetry, he wrote about the only religion that he knew, Calvinism. The moral sublimity of the New England Calvinists is over-
whelming in his early poetry. He saw God revealed everywhere in the uncorrupted evidences of His handiwork. Man brought evil into the world, but Nature, though sharing the doom of mortality, remains undefiled as it came from the hand of the Creator. This is the substance of his early religious thinking.

Some critics have called Bryant a pagan. Many of his poems, indeed, seem written without the belief in the hope of immortality. Rather, he resorted to the Stoical belief that the grave brings release from the miseries of human existence, and the Deistic belief that death brings not further individualistic existence, but final union with the insensate uni-
verse. This attitude is stated most explicitly in "Thanatopsis," his greatest lyrical achievement.

Bryant's mature years were his most productive years, and his most profoundly religious. If the rite of baptism was not performed for him until he had passed well on towards the age of three score and ten years,
he was none the less a Christian gentleman. The simple reverence which was
taught him during his childhood kept an unrelaxing hold on his heart.

The influence of his early religious training affected the spiritual
expression of his verse throughout his literary career. As we have seen,
he became acquainted with the imagery of Hebrew poetry in his youth, and
it gave his verse a sense of something elemental such as is seen in
Biblical phrases. The pagan strain found in Bryant came as a result of
his readings in the classics. In his love of all things beautiful, in his
religious regard for Nature, as well as in the pervasive sadness of the
tears of things which interpenetrates his verse, the poet is not remote
from the ancient classical poets. His poetical acceptance of the tradi-
tional feelings concerning Nature which formed a part of the inherited
religion of his race, even while his mind was weaned from the orthodox
dogmas of its belief, was classical also. And when he returned to
Christianity, the supplicancy with which he bowed before the Mighty Powers
of the universe in which the Divine Presence was revealed was not reasoned,
but instinctive.

Beginning as a Calvinist, turning to Deism and Stoicism, and later
embracing Unitarianism, Bryant retained Puritanical tinges all of his life.
He was ever ethical, but he never formulated or accepted wholeheartedly
any religious creed. Eclectic in his beliefs, he was equally catholic in
his worship. Finding the groves God's first temples, he worshipped there.
Although he was devout in conduct, and didactic in spirit, he was not
strictly orthodox according to the theology of his own generation. But of
such a man whose religion inevitably partook of the nature of his character, his beliefs regarding the subject would necessarily be calm, lofty, and noble.
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