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Seeing the World Whole: Parallels Between the Poetry of William Cullen Bryant and Emerson’s “Compensation”

by HOLLIS L. CATE

Professor George Arms poses a question about Bryant in a book on the group Arms calls the schoolroom poets: “The question . . . is: ‘What may Bryant amount to for the modern reader?’—not ‘What does he amount to?’ for that is quickly answered with ‘Nothing at all.’”¹ I suppose this observation holds as true today as in 1953 when Arms’ book was published. It seems to me though that Bryant’s poetry can amount to a great deal for the discerning reader. Albert McClean correctly says that we should not entertain the idea “that Bryant wrote a kind of descriptive verse to which he affixed sentiments palatable to his readers.”² For Bryant, writing poetry was not the pastime of an idle summer’s day, as, indeed, he points out in his poem “The Poet.” Professor McClean further notes that most of Bryant’s poetry is a “synthesis of his deepest feeling and most serious thought.”³

Howard Mumford Jones, who considers Bryant’s poetry in the light suggested by McClean, writes: “. . . one thing is clear: Bryant’s verse demands a more searching analysis than it has received . . . we have not as yet plucked out the heart of his mystery.”⁴ Professor Jones, I think, is on the track of Bryant’s predominant philosophical attitude in pointing out that “. . . one is almost tempted to define [Bryant] as a Christian who fell into the heresy of Manichaeism—that the struggle between darkness and light, between tragedy and calm, between good and evil, is his central reading of the Christian faith.”⁵ But the key, I believe, is that here we have Bryant’s central view of the world and of existence itself, Christianity notwithstanding. Struggle there may be between the forces which Jones mentions, but such dichotomies, Bryant implies, is a natural part of world order. Emerson says no less in his famous essay “Compensation.” Both men not only recognized the existing contraries but also accepted them as evidence of nature’s harmonious balance. Both, too, would have agreed with Thomas Carlyle, who, when Margaret Fuller told him she accepted the universe, responded, “Egad, you’d better.” In this regard we are

3. McClean, p. 64.
reminded of Emerson's words from "Discipline" in *Nature*: "... what good heed Nature forms in us! She pardons no mistakes. Her yea is yea and her nay, nay."\(^{6}\) No nineteenth century American poet heeded nature's lessons (or warnings) any more perceptively than Cullen Bryant did.

In 1841 Emerson said that he knew only three people who saw fully the law of reciprocity and compensation: Bronson Alcott, Thoreau, and himself.\(^{7}\) Perhaps Emerson would have been at least mildly surprised to learn that a close reading of Bryant's poetry would have revealed that the older poet was constantly focusing on Emerson's perpetually favorite theme of compensation and reciprocity, though both men apparently arrived at their views independently of the other. According to Charles Glicksburg, Bryant admired Emerson the man but had little or no interest in Emerson's transcendental philosophy.\(^{8}\)

Parke Godwin, Bryant's biographer and son-in-law, does not mention the poet's stressing compensation and reciprocity; but Godwin does sense in the poetry a view or views which go beyond the commonplace, in that Bryant attempted a "profound meditative interpretation of the great movements of the universe which amounted to a kind of philosophy."\(^{9}\)

What Godwin did not discern was that the ideas suggested in Bryant's work closely parallel those in Emerson's much quoted essay. When Bryant writes of the passage of time, for instance, he always includes offsetting compensations. The passage of time, then, is ultimately salutary. In "The Lapse of Time" (1825) there is no lament for the years hastening by, for as time passes, so do our woes:

> Then haste, thee, Time—'tis kindness all  
> That speeds thy winged feet so fast;  
> Thy pleasures stay not till they pall,  
> And all thy pains are quickly past.\(^{10}\)

Time, in other words, is an enemy only to the unthinking person. To use another example, in "Compensation" Emerson tells us that calamities at the time of their occurrence seem to be only privation. But as the years pass, recompense is made through a new phase of life and through new acquaintances.\(^{11}\) In a consoling letter to Richard Henry Dana, whose wife had died, Bryant quotes from the odes of Horace: "The snows eventually melt from the Armenian countryside, dear Valgius; mountain oaks cease to bend under the north wind's blasts; and ash trees recover their leaves."\(^{12}\) Bryant points out to his friend that the states of the seasons as

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12. *The Letters of William Cullen Bryant*, I, 133. Horace's lines in the original are translated by the editors.
well as their "alternations of storm and sunshine" are comparable to the life of man. The poet makes the same point through antithesis in his hymn "Blessed Are They That Mourn" (1820):

The light of smiles fill again
The lids that overflow with tears;
And weary hours of woe and pain
Are promises of happier years. (p. 35)

The compensation is complete with his observation that "There is day of sunny rest / For every dark and troubled night" (p. 36).

Time, too, has a compensating side beyond personal, individual loss. In terms of the world at large time also gives and takes away, but, ultimately, as Emerson says, "Our action is overmastered and characterized above our will by the law of nature" (Compensation," p. 110). Bryant anticipates this view in his famous line "Truth crushed to earth, shall rise again" (p. 182). And in "The Ages" he writes of the corruption of the church holding sway, but at last "the earthquake came" and "the web" (the corrupted church) "crumbled and fell" (p. 17). Time's regenerative power creates the new from the old, for nature will have her way in rendering compensation. For instance in "The Greek Boy" (1829) we learn that the "glorious Greeks of old" are gone; they are "mingled with the mould" (p. 120). But the balancing lines are,

Yet fresh the myrtles there—the springs
Gush brightly as of yore;
Flowers blossom from the dust of kings
As many an age before. (p. 120)

In addressing the boy, the poet says that though Greece is not the Greece of old "Her youth [is] renewed in such as thee" (p. 121).

Two other poems which show Bryant's concern with nature's compensating ways are "The Murdered Traveller" (1825) and "After a Tempest" (1824). In the former Bryant describes the bones of a murdered traveller found "far down a narrow glen" (p. 73), but,

The fragrant birch above him hung
Her tassels in the sky:
And many a vernal blossom sprung,
And nodded careless by. (p. 73)

Nature will have her way in reflecting eternal beauty. Too, we see the dead traveller now as part of nature, no more heeded by her creatures than a tree or bush:

The red bird warbled, as he wrought
His hanging nest o'erhead.
And fearless, near the fatal spot,
Her young the partridge led. (p. 73)
Though the victim of violence lay dead, nature’s beauty at least partially offsets the result of the murder. “After a Tempest” suggests the same idea. After the storm has passed, activity returns to normal. The scene is peaceful and calm as “the flocks came scattering from the thicket” and “the farmer swung the scythe or turned the hay” (p. 67). At the poem’s close Bryant says that war storms, too, shall pass, for “not for aye can last / The storm, and sweet the sunshine when ’tis past” (p. 68). These words reenforce Emerson’s words, written from his usual moral stance: “Though no checks to a new evil appear, the checks are there and will appear” (p. 100). We see, then, that as nature has her way our loss is only the promise of gain.

Emerson points out that nature makes further compensation in that she “contrives to intenerate the granite and felspar, takes the boar out and puts the lamb in and keeps her balance true” (“Compensation,” p. 99). In “The Skies” (1825) Bryant writes of the upper spheres as the seat of storms. Hail and sleet emanate from there, “lightnings break,” and there “the strong hurricanes awake.” But the lamb replaces the boar, for the skies are also “prodigal of smiles / Smiles sweeter than . . . frowns are stern.”14 In “The Ages” (1821) we read that “misery brought in love—in passion’s strife / Man gave his heart to mercy pleading long, / And sought out gentle deeds to gladden life” (p. 14). One obvious scene involving nature’s placating effect is in “The Fountain” (1839). An Indian fight results in staining the woods and waters of the fountain with blood. But “the next day’s shower / Shall wash the tokens of the fight away” (p. 186), and again, as Emerson says, nature “keeps her balance true.”

Many of Bryant’s poems, of course, are on the subject of death. But even here the poet’s focus on compensation is clear. In “The Hymn to Death” (1825) Bryant says his intent is to praise death, not denounce it, for God has appointed it “to free the oppressed / And crush the oppressor” (pp. 39–40). Death is beneficent in one way because it prompts the dying felon to speak the truth about his wrongs, to exonerate the one blamed for the dying one’s crime. Indeed, death from the first has been “on virtue’s side,” protecting the weak from the oppressor, eliminating “sons of violence and fraud” (p. 42). Apparently Bryant’s father died while the poet was writing “The Hymn of Death,” and in lines at the end of it, in light of that event, he expresses dismay at what he had written about the beneficence of death; but, significantly, he says the lines would stand, still recognizing, I suppose, the central truth of them.

In “The Old Man’s Funeral” (1824) an elderly man says to the mourners that they should not weep for the old one who had died, in that, after all, he had lived a full life. He adds: “Nor can I deem that nature did him wrong, / Softly to disengage the vital cord” (p. 50). The old man could

have told those assembled what Bryant writes of death in "A Forest Hymn" (1825):

Lo! all grow old and die—but see, again,
How on the faltering footsteps of decay
Youth presses—even gay and beautiful youth
In all its beautiful forms. These lofty trees
Wave not less proudly that their ancestors
Moulder beneath them. (p. 81)

To grow old and die is one thing, but what of death carrying off one in the bloom of youth? Even so, in "The Death of the Flowers" (1825) the poet searches for a compensating analogy. The time is autumn, and the meadows are "brown and sere" (p. 92). The flowers are gone, killed by the frost. Then the poet thinks of a young person (no doubt his sister Sarah) who had died "when the forest cast the leaf" (p. 92). But in the final lines of the poem Bryant included the recurring transitional "yet"; "Yet not unmeet it was that one, like that young friend of ours, /So gentle and so beautiful, should perish with the flowers" (p. 93). Neither was it "unmeet" for American soldiers during the Revolution to shed their blood fighting the British. In "Seventy-Six" (1835) we read that the "loved warriors haste away," but the populace "deemed it sin to grieve" (p. 167). Blood flowed "like brooks of April rain" but "that death stain on the vernal sward / Hallowed to freedom all the shore" (p. 167). To fight was, perhaps, to die, but the noble cause outweighed the resulting deaths in battle. Liberty had its price, and, in this regard, Emerson's line rings true: "... for every benefit you receive a tax is levied" ("Compensation," p. 113).

Another aspect of "Compensation" which Bryant's poetry reflects is Emerson's well-known point that "Essence, or God, is not a relation or a part, but the whole" ("Compensation," p. 121). Here is Bryant in a Keatsian mood in lines from "A Scene on the Banks of the Hudson" (1828):

Loveliest of lovely things are they
On earth, that soonest pass away.
The rose that lives its little hour,
Is prized beyond the sculptured flower. (p. 116)

In reading these lines we recall Emerson's aphoristic words, "Every sweet has its sour . . ." ("Compensation," p. 98). And Emerson warns us against attempting to extract only the sensual from experience. Man too often "sees the mermaid's head but not the dragon's tail, and he thinks he can cut off that which he would have from that he would not have" ("Compensation," pp. 105-06). We see a further paradoxical balance in Bryant's "Upon the Mountain's Distant Head" (1829). The mountain's peak is covered with "trackless snows." All is still in the frigid air, but, nonetheless, the "day's departing light" (p. 123) shines there. Conversely, below, the vales of summer, the bird-filled woods, and "fields of flocks,
/ Are dim with mist and dark with shade" (p. 123). Nature's lesson here
is that “the light of life departs” earliest from hearts “warm and kindly” but “lingers with the cold and stern” (p. 123). Hear Emerson again: “Life invests itself with inevitable conditions which the unwise seek to dodge, which one and another brags that he does not know, that they do not touch him” (“Compensation,” p. 105). Bryant, in the final analysis, was not one of the unwise.

In “The Fountain” (1839) Bryant addresses the freshet of spring:

No stain of thy dark birthplace; gushing up
From the red mould and slimy roots of earth,
Thou flashest in the sun. (p. 185)

In this poem we see one of Bryant’s most pronounced examples of the antithesis of light and darkness: “Thus does God / Bring, from the dark and foul, the pure and bright” (p. 185). But what we see is the whole of reality, complete essence. As Emerson says, “We can no more halve things . . . than we can get an inside that shall have no outside, or a light without a shadow” (Compensation,” p. 105).

When Bryant wrote of nature’s powerful forces, he always saw two sides of them. In “A Hymn of the Sea” (1842) he mentions the friendly sea breezes carrying ships laden with riches and treasures. The great deep, however, has another face: “But who shall hide thy tempest, who shall face / The blast that wakes the fury of the sea?” (p. 203). Bryant’s description of God’s power (or Emerson’s “essence”) upon the face of the sea gives us an awesome picture. Masts are snapped, sails are rent, and the ships are “whirled like chaff” (p. 203). We have a similar picture in “The Winds” (1839). The wind that softly plays at one time can also “dart upon the deep, and straight is heard / A wilder roar, and men grow pale and gray” (p. 188). And in “A Forest Hymn” (1825) the God who provides the sanctuary of the forest is also the God who, Bryant says, can “scare the world with tempests” and send a whirlwind that “uproots the woods / And drowns the villages” (p. 81).

If we see the world as a whole, then we must see the inseparable halves that make it so. For Emerson the world was a mathematical equation which, turned any way we will, always balances itself (“Compensation,” p. 102). “All things are double,” he says, “one against the other” (“Compensation,” p. 109). Bryant, too, recognized the world’s polarity. In “Hymn to the North Star” (1825) he writes: “Alike, beneath thine eye, / The deeds of darkness and of light are done” (p. 75). If there is freedom, “The Antiquity of Freedom” (1824) implies, then tyranny lurks. Though freedom was “twin-born with man” (p. 199), tyranny

... shall weave his snares,
And spring them on thy [freedom’s] careless steps, and clap
His withered hands, and from their ambush call
His hordes to fall upon thee. (p. 200)

Freedom must always be on guard, for her enemy is ever-present.
The thought of pain is no more comforting than the thought of tyranny, but as we see in the sonnet “Mutation” (1824) nature’s equation invariably balances once again in that pain dies as quickly as pleasure: “The fiercest agonies have shortest reign; / And after dreams of horror, comes again / The welcome morning with its rays of peace” (p. 70). Bryant goes on to say that change saves man much grief; “Weep not that the world changes — did it keep / A stable changeless state, ’twere cause indeed to weep” (p. 70). No wonder Howard Mumford Jones refers to Bryant as one given to “stoic meliorism.” If Bryant fits this description, he does so, for the most part, because he recognized balancing, often paradoxical, dualities at work in the world.

One such duality Bryant stresses in his famous poem “Thanatopsis” (1817), which is not only about our leaving the world but also about the world after we have left it. After all, nature, the great mother that soothes and consoles, will also receive us all when we will “be a brother to the insensible rock / And to the sluggish clod” (p. 22). The nature that nourishes us in life will provide the “elements” with which we will “mix forever” (p. 22) in death. As it nourishes us on the one hand, nature claims our growth on the other. But all this is as it should be is Bryant’s implication in his words “sustained and soothed / By an unfaltering trust” (p. 23). Since no higher power is mentioned in the poem, what are we to trust in, if not in the knowledge that nature’s way is the best way?

Closely allied with the foregoing concept of a doubleness in nature is the idea of our actions prompting reactions geared to offset the initial cause. Emerson writes: “The indignation which arms itself with secret forces does not awaken until we are pricked and stung and sorely assailed” (“Compensation,” p. 117). In “Song of the Greek Amazon” (1824) Bryant describes a young woman who seeks revenge on those who had murdered her sweetheart and “left him to the fowls of air” (p. 71). The one wronged then becomes the aggressor. We hear the voice of the woman saying,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The march of hosts that haste to meet} \\
\text{Seems gayer than the dance to me;} \\
\text{The lute’s sweet tones are not so sweet} \\
\text{As the fierce shout of victory.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(p. 71)

In “The White-Footed Deer” (1844) we see another wrong (as viewed by the Indians) redressed. The woman in the poem had forbidden her son to shoot the deer sacred to the Indians; but the young man shot it anyway, not finding any other game. Retribution was not long in coming:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{But ere that crescent moon was old,} \\
\text{By night the red men came,} \\
\text{And burnt the cottage to the ground,} \\
\text{And slew the youth and dame.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(p. 210)

The son’s act generates the reaction of the Indians, who slay not only the
deer’s killer but also the one who had forbidden the slaying. What would be malicious cruelty in the eyes of civilized society becomes just retribution in the eyes of the savage.

The most illustrative poem of Emerson’s point that we “cannot do wrong without suffering wrong” (“Compensation,” p. 110) is “The Massacre of Scio” (1824). In this poem Bryant accurately foretold the Greeks’ gaining their independence from the Turks. In 1824 many Sciotes were butchered by the Ottomans, but Bryant’s admonition is,

Weep not for Scio’s children slain
Their blood, by Turkish falchions shed,
 Sends not its cry to heaven in vain
For vengeance on the murderer’s head. (p. 43)

The incident indeed only brought about more sympathy (including Lord Byron’s) for the Greeks in their battle for independence. And, of course, in 1829 Greece became an independent nation. In reading this poem, we recall Emerson’s well-known words of compensation: “The martyr cannot be dishonored. Every lash inflicted is a tongue of flame; every prison a more illustrious abode; every burned book or house enlightens the world; every suppressed or expunged word reverberates through the earth from side to side” (“Compensation,” p. 120).

Bryant again emphasizes that the ways of the world make provisions for the victims of oppression. In “The Ages” (1821) he tells us that “The weak, against the sons of spoil and wrong, / Banded and watched their hamlets, and grew strong” (p. 14). Emerson’s statement says essentially the same thing: “Our strength grows out of our weakness . . . .” (“Compensation,” p. 117). The oppressor, then, disturbs the moral harmony of the universe at his own risk.

My final paragraphs focus on Bryant’s poems on the seasons and on his views toward them in terms of compensation and antithesis. The seasons for Bryant seemed to epitomize Emerson’s reference to nature as a mathematical equation, which always manages to balance. One season is the promise of another, and so the cycle goes on. With each one there is a tax for every benefit, but, conversely a gain for every loss, either given or promised. We learn in “The Conjunction of Jupiter and Venus” (1826) that too much of one thing is replaced by another; “Enough of drought has parched the year, and scared / The land with dread of famine. Autumn, yet, / Shall make men glad with unexpected fruit” (p. 112). In the sonnet “Midsummer” (1826) Bryant mentions the debilitating effects of the summer’s heat; nature’s creatures are adversely affected, including men smitten by sunstroke. But then comes October: “Ay, thou art welcome, heaven’s delicious breath! / When woods begin to wear the crimson leaf, / And suns grow weak and the meek suns grow brief . . . .” (p. 99). Obviously, however, one must first endure the enervating summer to enjoy weaker suns. In another sonnet “November” (1824) Bryant asks
for “Yet one smile more, departing, distant sun!” The season of “piercing frost, and winds” (p. 70) is on the way.

But we find in “A Winter Piece” (1821) that even harsh winter has its redeeming side for Bryant. Its scenes “seemed / Like old companions in adversity” (p. 30). The brook bordered by frost instead of flowers is just as gay to the poet. The air is piercing and invigorating; then, too, winter has its show as well as spring and summer. As a part of this show, the trees are clothed in ice and the “massy trunks / Are cased in pure crystal” (p. 31). Bryant accepts the winter just as the animals he describes do: the darting rabbit, the squirrel gathering nuts, and the partridge finding a shelter. Winter “boasts / Splendors beyond what gorgeous summer knows” (p. 31).

In September 1814 Bryant wrote to William Baylies (Bryant’s mentor in law) asking how he was faring in a southern autumn, adding: “It is bitter cold today with us, and I have several times regretted that you were not here to enjoy it—.”16 One might at first think Bryant had tongue firmly in cheek, but on reading “A Winter Piece” he would not be at all sure. In any event spring awaits, and Bryant has words of welcome in “March” (1824) for the blustery month:

Ah, passing few are they who speak,
Wild stormy month! in praise of thee;
Yet, though thy winds are loud and bleak,
Thou art a welcome month to me. (p. 53)

Though winds do howl, Bryant knows the cycle includes replacing the boar with the lamb: “But, in thy sternest frown abides / A look of kindly promise yet” (p. 54).

In 1840 at age forty-six Bryant wrote Ferdinand Field: “As I advance in life the world widens in some respects and contracts in others; I have more acquaintances and fewer intimates.”17 Bryant could hardly have been surprised that such was the case. His verse is filled with incisive suggestions of expansion and contraction. At any rate whether or not we agree with Howard Mumford Jones that Bryant was a Christian with the voice of a stoic or with Benjamin Spencer that he was a “melancholy progressive,”18 his poetry says to us that the world’s mysterious dual processes go on.

I make no claim in this paper of plucking “out the heart” of Bryant’s mystery as Professor Jones says we have not done. But I have tried to show that Bryant’s poetry evinces a consistent pattern of thought, at least in terms of the world’s being inseparable halves which make up a perfectly balanced whole. What Emerson says about Nature’s checks and balances in his famous essay Bryant expresses in his own way throughout his poetry. Unfortunately, however, the older poet has never received credit

for having done so. Professor Glicksburg points out that, "somewhat curiously, the connections of William Cullen Bryant with Emerson were slight." On the surface this would appear to be so, but one connection (albeit an unperceived one on the part of the two writers and the critics as well) is their parallel views on compensation and reciprocity.

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