In the following essay, Johnson compares “Thanatopsis” as it was originally published in the North American Review in 1817 to the later version of the poem that appeared in Bryant’s first poetry collection in 1821, explicating the literary significance of the differences between the two texts and speculating on Bryant’s poetic inspirations.

It is a commonplace of American literary history that “Thanatopsis” was written by William Cullen Bryant while he was yet in his teens, and was first printed in The North American Review. It is less known that the poem lay in manuscript for six years before it was published, and that it was then in a form so different from that now familiar as to be scarcely recognizable. These and other facts concerning this famous composition come to mind at this one hundred and tenth anniversary of its first publication, and seem worthy of collation among the curiosities of literature.

The first draft of the poem was written by Bryant at some time between May and November, 1811, before he was seventeen years old, and was published in The North American Review, together with several others from his pen, in September, 1817. The purpose of comparison between that original version and its later form will be served by reproducing it, verbatim, et literatim, et punctatim, from the files of this magazine. Here it is: “Thanatopsis”

Not that from life, and 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 time’s farthest brink,
A kinder solace must attend;
It chills my very soul, to think
Of that dread hour when life must end.
In vain the flatt’ring verse may breathe,
Of ease from pain, and rest from strife,
There is a sacred dread of death
Inwoven with the strings of life.
This bitter cup at first was given
When angry justice frown’d severe,
And ‘tis th’ eternal doom of heaven
That man must view the grave with fear.
—Yet a few days, and thee,
The all-beholding sun, shall see no more,
In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,
Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,
Nor in th’ embrace of ocean shall exist
Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolv’d to earth again;
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix forever with the elements,
To be a brother to th’ insensible rock
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak
Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.
Yet not to thy eternal resting place
Shalt thou retire alone—nor couldst thou wish
Couch more magnificent. Thou shalt lie down
With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings
The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good,
Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,
All in one mighty sepulchre.—The hills,
Rock-ribb’d and ancient as the sun,—the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
The venerable woods—the floods that move
In majesty,—and the complaining brooks,

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That wind among the meads, and make them green,
Are but the solemn decorations all,
Of the great tomb of man.—The golden sun,
The planets, all the infinite host of heaven
Are glowing on the sad abodes of death,
Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread
The globe are but a handful to the tribes
That slumber in its bosom.—Take the wings
Of morning—and the Borean desert pierce—
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
That veil Oregan, where he hears no sound
Save his own dashings—yet—the dead are there,
And millions in those solitudes, since first
The flight of years began, have laid them down
In their last sleep—the dead reign there alone.—
So shalt thou rest—and what if thou shalt fall
Unnoticed by the living—and no friend
Take note of thy departure? Thou shalt fall
Will share thy destiny.—The tittering world
Dance to the grave. The busy brood of care
Plod on, and each one chases as before
His favourite phantom.—Yet all these shall leave
Their mirth and their employments, and shall come
And make their bed with thee!—

Upon this, three obvious comments instantly arise. The first is, that the poem has four introductory quatrains, unknown to modern readers. Some have assumed that these were prefixed by error on the part of the editor, or of Dr. Bryant in sending his son's manuscript to The North American Review. That is possible, though proof is not at hand, and convincing presumption is not evident. What is certain is that the stanzas were young Bryant's work, conceived in a spirit harmonious with that of the body of the poem, and providing a logical introduction to what otherwise would have been a strangely abrupt and inconsequent beginning. It was then, as it is now, no unheard-of thing to write a prelude in a different metre from that of the chief portion of the poem.

The second observation is that even with these dubious introductory stanzas, the poem came perilously near to deserving Coleridge's whimsical criticism of his own masterpiece, as being

... incomprehensible,
And without head or tail.

For it lacks the first sixteen and the last sixteen lines, which Dr. Leonard has called "inconsistent," but which seem to me so consistent with the whole tenor of the poem that it is difficult to realize that they were written not at the same time with the rest of it but years afterward; unless, indeed, the fact that they are decidedly the best parts of the whole composition suggests their origin at a time when Bryant's powers were more matured. Let us recall them; first, the contemplative introduction:

To him who in the love of Nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language; for his gayer hours
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
Into his darker musings, with a mild
And healing sympathy, that steals away
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
Over thy spirit, and sad images
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,
And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
Make thee to shudder and grow sick at heart;—
Go forth, under the open sky, and list
To Nature's teachings, while from all around,—
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air,—
Comes a still voice:—

In that you may find traces of the quatrains, refined and glorified; and you have a lucid expression of the raison d'être of the poem. Then observe the incomparable conclusion, equally convincing, carrying the argument to the supreme climax which it
otherwise lacks, and attaining a height of both rhetorical and spiritual splendor seldom surpassed or indeed rivalled in the letters of the world:

... As the long train
Of ages glides away, the sons of men—
The youth in life's fresh spring, and he who goes
In the full strength of years, matron and maid,
The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man—
Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,
By those who in their turn shall follow them.

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

The third observation is that a number of textual changes were made in the original portion of the poem, two of which are of curious interest, while the remainder are for the marked improvement of the verses. One of the former two is the change from “the Borean desert pierce” to “the Barcan desert pierce,” as it was in the first volume of his poems, in 1821; thence to “traverse Barca’s desert sands,” in Cleveland’s famous Compendium of American Literature; and finally to “pierce the Barcan wilderness,” in Bryant’s own last edition of his works and in Stedman’s American Anthology. I must say that the version of 1821 seems to me far preferable to either of the later ones. But the point of supreme interest is the change from “Borean” to “Barcan” desert—from the Arctic Zone to the Tropics. The reason for this I have never been able to ascertain, or satisfactorily to imagine. The other of the two changes is that from “That veil Oregan, where he hears no sound” to “Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound.” The poetical improvement is great. But the curious use of the form “Oregan” tends to confirm the supposition that the boy had been reading the Travels of the egregious Jonathan Carver, who employed that spelling, and who insisted on calling by that name the river properly known as the Columbia.

Let us note briefly the other changes: The passage—

... the floods that move
In majesty,—and the complaining brooks,
That wind among the meads, and make them green,
is to its vast improvement changed and amplified to—

... rivers that move
In majesty, and the complaining brooks
That make the meadows green; and, poured round all,
Old ocean’s gray and melancholy waste.

A few verses further on “glowing on the sad abodes of death” was happily changed to “shining ...” Still further “what if thou shalt fall unnoticed” gives place to the much better “what if thou withdraw in silence ...” So, too, “Thousands more will share thy destiny” becomes “All that breathe ...” Then finally—oh, Sacred Nine!—comes the supremely saving alteration. Bryant first wrote—

... The tittering world
Dance to the grave. The busy brood of care
Plod on, and each one chases as before
His favorite phantom.

“The tittering world!” It would be unbelievable, were it not there, in black and white. For all the world it reminds me of the Tittery, too, with which, with malice prepense, I “ragged” our Latin professor when we tackled the First Eclogue. However, Poe wrote “We cannot help agreeing that no living human being,” and called it poetry; also he had “Psyche, uplifting her finger,”—as if, I suppose, to say “Naughty! naughty!” And Longfellow observed that “Nothing in nature’s aspect intimated That a great man was dead.” And there are others. Yet we must rejoice with great thanksgiving that Bryant thought better of it, and gave us this instead:

... 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.

It must not escape notice, either, that the rhetorical person of the poem is changed, from first to third. In the original, it was Bryant himself who was addressing somebody. In the revised version, Bryant indeed speaks in the introduction, but after that he quotes the “still voice” of Nature. The pure Paganism of the first draft remains unchanged, save for a single phrase, which cannot have slipped in by inadvertence, but must have been introduced for the sake of its poetical value—philosophy sacrificed to art. “Sustained and soothed by an unfaltering trust” is absolutely incongruous with all the rest of the poem; yet it is precisely one of the lines which the world most values.

As to the inspiration of the poem, and the circumstances in which it was written, neither time nor patience would permit consideration of all that has been advanced; much of which is sheer rubbish. The notion that Bryant had to sit upon some actual and particular rock, inspect the roots of some one oak tree, and watch some farmer plowing a field, in order to get inspiration for his verses, is to deny to a poet possession of that faculty of imagination which is essentially his foremost attribute. That he wrote it in a fit of despair because his father could not send him to Yale College is an unwarranted aspersion. That he was inspired by Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* is impossible, for he had not then seen them. But he was influenced by Kirke White’s *Remains*, from which he copied a phrase or two; and also by Porteus’s *Death*, which he seems greatly to have admired. And above all he was moved by one of the great masterpieces of English verse, *The Grave* of Robert Blair, of which the masculine vigor, the stately imagery and the solemn splendor are unmistakably reflected in the revised version of “Thanatopsis”.

By way of epilogue, it may be recalled that among the other poems of Bryant’s which were printed along with “Thanatopsis” in that number of The North American Review was an “imitation” of an Ode of Horace, I:9, *To Thaliarchus*, in which the stately *Permitte Divis cœtera* is made to read:

To Providence resign the rein,
Nor vex with idle care thy brain,
To know if thou shalt go to Maine,
Ohio, or Kentucky!

That half tempts me to suspect him of having been the author of the classic Senior Anthem, *Cocachelunk*:

Some will go to Greece, or Hartford,
Some to Norwich, or to Rome;
Some to Greenland’s icy mountains,
But the most will stay at home.

At any rate it confirms me in my skepticism as to his being in the dumps because he had to quit Williams and go to Worthington to study law, instead of becoming one of the multitudinous sons of Elihu Yale.

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