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WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT'S "THE PRAIRIES":  
TOWARD WHITMANIAN SENSE OF FORM IN THE POEM

In the summer of 1832 William Cullen Bryant, already editor in chief to the "New York Evening Post", made a visit to Illinois. He commented on the experience in a letter to Richard Henry Dana<sup>1</sup>:

I have seen the great west, where I ate corn bread and hominy, and slept in log houses with twenty men and women and children in the same room [...]. At Jacksonville I got on a horse and traveled about a hundred miles to the northward over the immense prairies with scattered settlements on the edges of the groves. These prairies, of a soft fertile garden soil, and a smooth undulating surface, on which you may put a horse to full speed, covered with high thinly growing grass, full of weeds and gaudy flowers, and destitute of bushes or trees, perpetually brought to my mind the idea of their having been once cultivated. They looked to me like the fields of a race which had passed away, whose enclosures and habitations had decayed, but in those vast and rich plains smoothed and levelled by tillage the forest has not yet encroached<sup>2</sup>.

Bryant's poem "The Prairies" which appeared the following year in the "Knickerbocker" magazine incorporates ideas and images offered in the above letter extract. The ideas were not new or unusual for Bryant. As early as "Thanatopsis", published

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<sup>1</sup> Dated from New York, October 8, 1832.

<sup>2</sup> The Letters of William Cullen Bryant, eds W. C. Bryant II, Th. G. Voss Fordham Univ. Press, New York 1975, Vol. 1, p. 360.

in 1817 when the poet was only 23, and as late as "The Flood of Years" first printed in the "Scribner's Monthly" for July 1876, when he was 82, the reader may find Bryant entertaining notions of life as continually perishing in its individual forms but everlasting in the essential process<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, in what Albert F. McLean calls Bryant's "poems of progress", the poet's public vision focuses on evolution and renewal as laws of social and civilizational history: "Somehow - all violence, tyranny, greed and corruption notwithstanding - human society could share with natural processes the propensity to renew itself and bring forth fresh, beautiful forms of life"<sup>4</sup>.

"The Prairies" is an unusual poem in the Bryant cannon because the experience of travelling through vast open landscape seems to have given the author an image commensurate with the cosmic scope of his vision, and so capable of actually structuring the whole poem<sup>5</sup>. Already in "Thanatopsis", written in 1811 when Bryant was only seventeen and first published in 1817<sup>6</sup>, the movement from the initial preoccupation with "the narrow house" or coffin of section one to the celebration of earth's "mighty sepulchre" in section three<sup>7</sup> employs the widening scope of vision as an important element of the poem's order. However, the main structural affinities of this early masterpiece remain with the

<sup>3</sup> See also E. Miller-Budick "Visible Images" and the "Still Voice" Transcendental Vision in Bryant's "Thanatopsis", "Emerson Society Quarterly" 1976, Vol. 22, p. 71-77.

<sup>4</sup> A. F. McLean (Jr.), William Cullen Bryant, Twayne Publishers, New York 1964, p. 86.

<sup>5</sup> D. Ringe (The Pictorial Mode: Space and Time in the Art of Bryant, Irving and Cooper, Univ. Press of Kentucky, Lexington 1971, p. 213-214) observes that Bryant often emphasized the enormous dimensions of the world around him. R. A. Ferguson (William Cullen Bryant: The Creative Context of the Poet, "New England Quarterly" 1964, Vol. 53, p. 460) points out that both E. Burke (Why Visual Objects of Great Dimensions are Sublime, [in:] A Philosophical Enquiry in Works I, p. 206) and E. Alison (Essays, Vol. 1, p. 324-325, Vol. 2, p. 23, 66-67) with whose works Bryant was familiar "discuss the issue of scope as a fundamental source of the sublime". Thus Ferguson links Bryant back to the influence of the Scottish Common Sense and Associationist Philosophy rather than forward to the Transcendentalists.

<sup>6</sup> In "North American Review", September 1817. The poem was frequently revised both before and after its first publication.

<sup>7</sup> See also Ferguson, William Cullen Bryant..., p. 464.

Puritan sermon. Both Albert McLean<sup>8</sup> and Robert Ferguson<sup>9</sup> point out that the structure of "Thanatopsis" parallels "a tripartite division into doctrine, reason, and uses". What is more, the images are firmly kept in the role of illustrations to the philosophical argument:

... Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim  
 Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,  
 And, lost each human trace, surrendering up  
 Thine individual being, shalt thou go  
 To mix for ever with the elements,  
 To be a brother to the insensible rock  
 And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain  
 Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak  
 Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould<sup>10</sup>.

This is perhaps the most naturalistically concrete passage in the whole poem, its images sharp and immediate. Yet the fragment starts in a rather abstract, homiletic way: "Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim / Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again" and "thou shalt go / To mix for ever with the elements". Such generalizations become more directly available to the senses in the subsequent images. The "surrendering up" of "thine individual being" is concretized as becoming "brother to the insensible rock / And to the sluggish clod" then, still more strikingly, in the violent picture of oak's roots piercing "thy mould". In fact, the reader may observe in the course of this fragment how the idea which at first expresses itself most readily in the standard patterns of biblical imagery becomes translated into the language of particular scenes and objects.

In Bryant's most popular poems such as "To a Waterfowl" (1818) or "To the Fringed Gentian" (1829) the procedure seems to be reversed: a description, quite lengthy in proportion to the whole

<sup>8</sup> A. F. McLean, Bryant's "Thanatopsis": A Sermon in Stone, "American Literature", January 1960, Vol. 31, p. 474-479 and *ibid.*, William Cullen Bryant..., p. 78-80.

<sup>9</sup> Ferguson, William Cullen Bryant..., p. 456.

<sup>10</sup> The Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant, Roslyn Edition, rpt. Ans Press, New York 1969, p. 21-22. All subsequent quotations from Bryant come from the same edition.

poem, is followed by reflection with a moral turn as a rule. Accordingly the poem, such as for example "To the Fringed Gentian", falls into two parts. First the flower is described in some detail. Here the reader may find Bryant at his best as a sensitive and knowledgeable observer of nature. It takes four out of the poem's five stanzas to present the gentian:

Thou blossom, bright with autumn dew,  
 And colored with the heaven's own blue,  
 That openest when the quiet light  
 Succeeds the keen and frosty night

(128).

Then the late autumnal scene with its lonely blue flower is turned into a kind of scriptural text from which a moral lesson may and should be read:

I would that thus, when I shall see  
 The hour of death draw near to me,  
 Hope, blossoming within my heart,  
 May look to heaven as I depart

(128).

It is in poems like this that Bryant connects most easily with the tradition of Puritan lyric poetry in America. In fact, the method of Anne Bradstreet in "Contemplations" is exactly the same as the procedures in "To the Fringed Gentian" or "To a Waterfowl":

I heard the merry grasshopper then sing,  
 The black clad Cricket, bear a second part,  
 They kept one tune, and plaid on the same string,  
 Seeming to glory in their little Art.  
 Shall Creatures abject, thus their voices raise?  
 And in their kind resound their makers praise:  
 Whilst I as mute, can warble forth no higher layes<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> The Works of Anne Bradstreet in Prose and Verse, ed. J. H. Ellis, rpt. P. Smith, Gloucester, Massachusetts 1962, p. 372.

In this stanza of "Contemplations" and throughout the poem a similar sensitivity to the beauties of nature goes together with the insistence on turning the natural scene into a version of the Scriptures presenting man with God's message. It is the poet's task to read the message for himself and for others.

On the stylistic level, the poems quoted so far share the split into idea and its illustration as in "Thanatopsis" or into the image and the elaboration of its meaning as in "To the Fringed Gentian". They testify to a difficulty experienced also later by for example Longfellow in "The Cross of Snow" and, in fact, in most of his lyrics; a difficulty in joining the object and its meaning, the scene and its emotional and intellectual content in an unbroken continual relation. The problem lies in the inability to present idea as coextensive with the image, even when, as in "Thanatopsis" or in "The Flood of Years" the vision itself postulates organic continuity.

What is unusual in "The Prairies" is that the poem presents the reader not with illustrations of abstract statements through concrete examples, nor does it impose doctrinal or ethical patterns upon the natural scene; instead it establishes the scene as center from which the cosmic law of permanence and change radiates demonstrating that past and future, here and everywhere, nature and man are linked as subject to the same process. The poem opens with a view of the prairie "boundless and beautiful" as "the dilated sight / Takes in the encircling vastness" (130). The stress on the opening up of space as the dominating element in the view of the prairie corresponds with the fact that the "inner eye" within the poem is given an analogically boundless vision. "The great heavens seem to stoop down upon the scene in love" (131) and the presence of God is immediately experienced. In the key simile the prairie becomes like "the ocean, in his gentlest swell [...] with all his rounded billows fixed / And motionless forever" (130) and then is quickly released into the movement of the waves of grass and patches of shadow and sunshine chasing each other across the surface without, however, disturbing the underlying stability, the solid fixity of the land. The paradox of motion and stasis, of mutability and permanence resolved in the image bringing together ocean and land strikes me as clearly Whitmanesque. Bryant repeats both the par-

adox and its resolution through image, focusing in turn on "the prairie hawk that, posed on high, / Flaps its broad wings, yet moves not -" (131). Heaven and earth are thus united in, as it were, reflecting each other by presenting images of the same law.

The first section is clearly organized around the vision of vast space in which heaven and earth come together. The next three paragraphs, do away with temporal divisions. The past and the future become simultaneously available to the eye in a succession of pictures presenting the life of the "mound builders", the passing of the red man, the migration of beaver and bison to regions further west. The sound of bees in the air directs the ear and the eye to the future. The bee, "a more adventurous colonist than man", has accompanied the settlers across "the eastern deep". It now "fills the savannas with his murmurings" (133). The "domestic hum" foreshadows the advent of settlers, the coming of a new wave across the undulating surface of the prairie.

In a quite Whitmanian fashion the poem translates movement in space into movement in time. It thus succeeds in bringing together the world of nature ruled by the paradox of permanence and change in space and the world of man governed by continuity and transience in time. As in Whitman, the strategy seems first of all a response to deep and lasting preoccupation with death. Despite the increasingly public tone of the later poems, "Thanatopsis", "The Prairies", "The Flood of Years" and a number of other poems by Bryant can all be viewed as offering visions of organic continuity to oppose and transcend the fact of individual death. Structurally, however, "The Prairies" is not quite like Whitman's poems. Rather than opening its frame in harmony with the boundless prospects it offers, the poem ends abruptly with the withdrawal of vision. The procession of images is broken by the enforcement of the dream-vision convention:

[...] All at once

A fresher wind sweeps by, and breaks my dream,  
And I am in the wilderness alone.

(133)

Thus, at the end of the poem, the reader returns to the initial scene in which the speaker faces "the unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful / For which the speech of England has no name" (130). The vision is gone, the poem's frame is shut, the vista has closed, and the speaker has not advanced.

For the essence of the structural difference between "The Prairies" and any of Whitman's great poems - "Song of Myself", "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", "Starting from Paumanok" - lies in the position of the speaker. The vision is very similar if not altogether the same, the opening of space leads to the opening of time and together they constitute the principle of the poem's progress. Still, Bryant's speaker does not enter his vision nor does he move with it. His imaginative journey in time finds no effective correlative in his physical and psychic movement. So much so that at the end of the poem the reader does not even feel that the protagonist has traveled from here to there, that he has made progress in the course of his horseback journey. Because physically and psychically the speaker remains in his starting place, that is "in the wilderness alone" rather than passing across the prairie with the waves of grass and generations of settlers, the withdrawal of vision at the end of the poem produces a corresponding sense of cancellation of his emotional and spiritual growth.

The concept of the self in "The Prairies" is not commensurate with the concepts of limitless time and space which so strikingly shape the poem. The self fails to fill the open vista with its potential for growth. On the contrary, the speaker's detached position results in a negative correspondence between the "I" in the poem and the reported experience. The vision's spiritual significance is diminished because the reader cannot see, much less share, its effect upon the speaker. The insistence on the reader's involvement, so characteristic of Whitman, is absent. The reader is not asked to accept the vision as his own nor is he encouraged to participate in the process of the self's growth. The absence of the self within the vision and of the reader's involvement account for the quality of coldness which Lowell and others were so quick to identify in Bryant<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Best known is the fragment from "A Fable for Critics":

Whitman's significant modification of the vision and forms through which it is articulated in Bryant's poetry consists not only in the placement of the self conspicuously in the center of the poem. More importantly perhaps, Whitman makes the "I" in the poems enter into intimate relations with the scene perceived and grow with the scene's expansion. He also builds up a sense of intimacy, if not of identification, between the self in the poem and the poem's reader.

The reader becomes a direct participant in the process of the self's expansion and spiritual growth.

The opening section of "Song of Myself" shows the protagonist retiring "to the bank by the wood" to become "undisguised and naked". Though the movement is toward isolation and withdrawal, the partnership with a single "spear of summer grass" and the common ground between the fact of nature and the self is carefully established:

I loafe and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass,  
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air<sup>13</sup>,

When the scene broadens, when the vistas of landscape expand, the self moves not only physically through them but also emotionally and spiritually with them, as it relates to multitudinous

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There is Bryant, as quiet, as cool, and as dignified,  
As a smooth, silent iceberg, that never is ignifed,  
Save when by reflection it is kindled o' nights  
With a semblance of flame by the chill Northern Lights.

[...]

He is very nice reading in summer but inter  
Nos, we don't want extra freezing in winter;  
Take him up, in the depth of July, my advice is.  
When you feel an Egyptian devotion to ices.

(The Complete Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell, Cambridge Edition, The Riverside Press, Cambridge 1896; rpt. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1897 p. 131) but also N. H a w t h o r n e in his Journal (The Heart of Hawthorne's Journal, ed. Newton Arvin, Boston 1929, p. 285, 299) and Emerson in a letter to Margaret Fuller from 1842 (The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. J. Rusk, Vol. 3, Holland Univ. Press, New York 1939, p. 24) commented on the chilly quality of Bryant's poetry.

<sup>13</sup> W. W h i t m a n, Leaves of Grass, Reader's Comprehensive Edition, eds. H. W. Blodgett, S. Bradley, New York University Press, 1975, p. 28-29, 4-6. All subsequent quotations from Whitman are from the same edition.

forms of natural and human life. At the end of the poem Whitman's protagonist absorbs time and space but reciprocally gives himself away to the elements and to each individual reader-disciple:

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,  
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.  
I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

(LG. 89; 1337-1340)

When time and space cease to be limitations and the self has filled up the expanse around, the poem's perspective opens correspondingly as each successive reader is launched on the same journey and invited to repeat its cycle ad infinitum into the future. A Whitman poem does not end in the withdrawal of vision, nor in the cancellation of its significance. On the contrary, the vision's timelessness is reinforced when the reader joins the cyclic progression from birth to growth and fulfillment.

As far as the speaker's position is concerned, Whitman's late "Prayer of Columbus" comes perhaps closest to "The Prairies". Like the "I" in "The Prairies", Columbus' "I" is an observer rather than a presence within his vision. There are significant differences, however. The discoverer's prophetic moment comes in answer to his urgent personal need. Before the insight is actually granted the poem dwells at length on Columbus' lonely misery, his hardships and his unfailing faith. The vision at the end of the poem brings him comfort as well as justifies his endurance. It is crucial for the poem's meaning and yet takes a disproportionately brief space within the whole poem. This is because the lengthy review of Columbus' suffering in service of his mission aims first of all at the identification of Whitman, the man and poet in his time, and every reader of the poem in his time, with Columbus' plight. The element of emotional involvement thus created allows the vision timeless validity and power, despite the fact that it occupies but a small fraction of the poem's length. Replacing Whitman's customary "I", Columbus as the speaker of the poem opens its temporal frame. What the reader knows to be historical truth about the ultimate triumph of Columbus'

vision, he can also apply to Whitman as poet, and consequently accept as legitimate inference about himself. The pattern is thus not only redrawn but actually experienced on different time levels and therefore accepted as obtaining throughout history. The expectation of its repetition for every reader in his time remains natural and logical as long as the poem continues to be read.

Structurally, "The Prairies" seem to come somewhere between the twofold nature-religious lyrics of Anne Bradstreet and Whitman's personal poem of progression<sup>14</sup>. What remains unchanged is the treatment of a concrete scene or situation as a source of spiritual insight. Bryant's vision seems remarkably close to Whitman's, in that it offers the view of life as flux to which 'thine individual being' must be surrendered; it must return to the process rather than be radically terminated or transformed through death. It may be said about Bryant that in "The Prairies" the need, quite like Whitman's to come to terms with the fact of individual morality which lay at the roots of many of his poems, found adequate metaphorical equivalents in the procedures of imaginative familiarization of space and time. The blank vastness of nature and the annihilating stasis of death are confronted and, as it were, domesticated by being released into motion. Although Robert Ferguson argues that Bryant's nature poems are really acts of withdrawal from nature into the realm of the settlements<sup>15</sup>, "The Prairies" strikes me first of all as an effort of imagination to design space and time. The expanse of the prairie is "taken in" in an orderly, deliberate way as waves of wind-blown grass across the eternal land and time is correspondingly organized in waves of civilizations succeeding one another through eternity. Human life is thus brought in contact and reconciled with nature under the same law. In the poetic rendering of such romantic organic vision categories of space and time become liquid. Their fluidity is crucial for

<sup>14</sup> I refer to the concept of Whitman's poem of progression as presented especially in Chapter IV of my book "The Poetry of the Central Consciousness Whitman and Dickinson" ("Acta Universitatis Lodzianis" 1982, Folia litteraria 7; revised edition, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.

<sup>15</sup> Ferguson, William Cullen Bryant..., p. 431-463.

overcoming the split between thought and its illustration, object and its meaning. Envisioning perception as progression in space and time establishes relations of continuity between image and idea. When, however, "The Prairies" ends, as it does, by bringing the speaker back to the starting point, time and space are separated again. The speaker, confronting the vastness of the land, finds himself physically and spiritually "in the wilderness alone". The shutting down of the poem's temporal frame leaves him time bound. Although capable of appreciating the awesome majesty of space, he cannot enter it but must remain isolated in a different dimension. Structural foundations of the characteristically open Whitmanian poem rest on the fact that space and time are kept correspondingly open throughout, while the self enters the flowing vision as protagonist in the drama of evolution.

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KU WHITMANOWSKIEJ KONCEPCJI FORMY:  
"PRERIE" WILLIAMA CULLENA BRYANTA

Począwszy od "Thanotopsis" (1811), a skończywszy na "The Flood of Years", w różnych wierszach Bryanta czytelnik odkrywa podobieństwo, a nawet tożsamość wizji starszego poety z wizją Whitmana. Stylistycznie i formalnie Bryant pozostaje jednak poetą poprzedniej epoki, a technika jego wierszy często nasuwa skojarzenia z tradycją amerykańskiej liryki religijnej XVII i XVIII w.

Wiersz "Prerie" napisany pod wpływem podróży Bryanta do Illinois w roku 1832 jest w kanonie jego twórczości o tyle niezwykły, że bardziej niż inne utwory tego poety zbliża się do whitmanowskiej koncepcji formy i pozwala prześledzić jej zasadnicze elementy i ukształtowanie. Bezkresna, porośnięta trawą przestrzeń prerii podsuwa Bryantowi obraz poetycki, stanowiący ekwiwalent kosmicznej wizji życia jako przemijającego w swych indywidualnych wcieleniach, ale niezniszczalnego i wiecznego jako stale odnawiający się proces. Falujący bezkres prerii nieodparcie kojarzy się z przemijaniem i przedwzięnością cza-

su, w którym cywilizacje następują po sobie jak kolejne fale poruszanej wiatrem trawy, ale sam proces ewolucji nie ma końca. Podobne otwarcie przestrzeni i traktowanie jej jako równoważnika nieskończonego, "otwartego" czasu charakterystyczne jest dla najlepszych liryków Whitmana.

Strukturalnie "Preriom" brak jest whitmanowskiej koncepcji podmiotu lirycznego. Whitmanowskie "ja" wprowadzone w nieograniczoną przestrzeń i czas posiada równie nieograniczoną zdolność rozwoju, wypełniając sobą poszerzone perspektywy przestrzeni i czasu. W ten sposób wiersze Whitmana nie kończą się, a tylko otwierają na nieograniczone możliwości podmiotu. Statyczne potraktowanie "ja" w "Preriach" jako biernego odbiorcy wizji w końcowym efekcie zamyka wiersz w ramach konwencji widzenia czy snu. Podmiot liryczny nie uczestniczy w potężnym ewolucyjnym marszu przez czas i przestrzeń, nie wypełnia ich sobą, a jedynie obserwuje. Przy końcu wiersza, zbudzony z marzenia, znajduje się fizycznie i duchowo w tym samym miejscu, w którym znajdował się na początku wiersza, narzucając swą statyczność całej wizji.

Z jej zniknięciem wracamy do status quo. Oglądany przez wyobraźnię ewolucyjny proces nie stał się treścią i metodą życia, drogą przyjętą przez podmiot oraz przez identyfikującego się z nim czytelnika. Tym niemniej Bryant wyraźnie antycypuje w "Preriach" nie tylko treść whitmanowskiego przesłania, ale także zarysowuje kształt, w którym się ono wyrazi.