

1863

THE POET

William Cullen Bryant

Bryant, William Cullen (1794-1878) - American poet and editor of the New York Evening Post who practiced law before devoting his life to writing. A master of blank verse, Bryant's earliest works are considered his best. The Poet (1863) - Expresses Bryant's belief that poetry depends upon emotion. Opening lines: Thou, who wouldst wear the name / Of poet mid thy brethren of mankind,...

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Thou, who wouldst wear the name
 Of poet mid thy brethren of mankind,
 And clothe in words of flame
 Thoughts that shall live within the general mind!
 Deem not the framing of a deathless lay
 The pastime of a drowsy summer day.

But gather all thy powers,
 And wreak them on the verse that thou dost weave,
 And in thy lonely hours,
 At silent morning or at wakeful eve,
 While the warm current tingles through thy veins
 Set forth the burning words in fluent strains.

No smooth array of phrase,
 Artfully sought and ordered though it be,
 Which the cold rhymers lay
 Upon his page with languid industry,
 Can wake the listless pulse to livelier speed,
 Or fill with sudden tears the eyes that read.

The secret wouldst thou know
 To touch the heart or fire the blood at will?
 Let thine own eyes o'erflow;
 Let thy lips quiver with the passionate thrill;
 Seize the great thought, ere yet its power be past,
 And bind, in words, the fleet emotion fast.

Then, should thy verse appear
 Halting and harsh, and all unaptly wrought,
 Touch the crude line with fear,
 Save in the moment of impassioned thought;
 Then summon back the original glow, and mend
 The strain with rapture that with fire was penned.

Yet let no empty gust
 Of passion find an utterance in thy lay,
 A blast that whirls the dust
 Along the howling street and dies away;
 But feelings of calm power and mighty sweep,
 Like currents journeying through the windless deep.

Seek'st thou, in living lay's
To limn the beauty of the earth and sky?
Before thine inner gaze
Let all that beauty in clear vision lie;
Look on it with exceeding love, and write
The words inspired by wonder and delight.

Of tempests wouldst thou sing,
Or tell of battles- make thyself a part
Of the great tumult; cling
To the tossed wreck with terror in thy heart;
Scale, with the assaulting host, the rampart's height,
And strike and struggle in the thickest fight.

So shalt thou frame a lay
That haply may endure from age to age,
And they who read shall say:
"What witchery hangs upon this poet's page!
What art is his the written spells to find
That sway from mood to mood the willing mind!"

THE END