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勃拉恩特：
一位早期的美國環境作家

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摘 要

在十九世紀的時空下，勃拉恩特 (William Cullen Bryant) 廣被認爲是最卓越、最負盛名的作家之一。然而二十世紀以降，他卻早已被忽略──他的生平、著作仍被收錄於文學選集中，但卻是以「爐旁詩人」(The Fireside Poet) 之稱號而被輕輕帶過。二十世紀末，少數學者開始挑戰勃拉恩特溫和遁世的「爐旁詩人」形象，改由政治角度探討其作品，分析他如何藉由刻劃那群注定被西進擴張 (The Westward Expansion) 運動所征服的印第安人及原始荒野環境來做爲國族、文化認同之基礎 ，順便合理化其對於傑克森總統的 「印第安遷移法案 」(The Indian Removal Act) 之支持。

本文完全不同於以上的解讀。此文試圖指出勃拉恩特在其許多文本 (特別是在其向來被忽略的散文書寫) 中，並非以征服荒野 ，而是以保存荒野之環境論述與生態認同 (ecological identity) 策略來做爲美國國族主體建構之基礎。藉此觀察 ，此文意圖勾勒出勃拉恩特在美國文學史中其實扮演著環境(自然)書寫之先驅者 (a precursor of American environmental writing or nature writing) 的重要角色。

關鍵詞：勃拉恩特、自然荒野環境、美國國族主體建構、荒野保存、早期環境作家

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William Cullen Bryant as Early American Environmental Writer

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Abstract

In the nineteenth century, William Cullen Bryant was ranked the first and foremost among American poets. He was well beloved by both general readers and literati in his own day. In the twentieth century, however, Brant was viewed as a poet of minor rank and was designated by contemporary literary criticism as a dispensable "fireside poet," a writer of merely historical importance whose writings often urged to escape daily cares by plunging into natural landscape. In the late twentieth century, some critics began to challenge such a "fireside poet" image. Contending that Bryant's political mission proved him not so gentle and mild as traditionally imagined, these critics examined how Bryant in his verses justified President Andrew Jackson's the Indian Removal Act in 1830 and how he celebrated the *conquest* of the "wild" Indians and wilderness environment to construct American national subjectivity.

Completely different from these readings, this paper attempted to argue that as a magazine and newspaper journalist, Bryant was aware that wilderness environment could accomplish the work of constructing national subjectivity not through its *conquest*, but through its *protection*. Advocating forest protection and environmental preservation in many of his prose writings, Bryant helped legitimize an alternative communion of nature and nation and became a precursor of American environmental writer (or nature writer).

Keywords: William Cullen Bryant, wilderness environment, the construction of American national subjectivity, wilderness preservation, early environmental writer

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William Cullen Bryant as Early American Environmental Writer

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I

William Cullen Bryant (1798-1878) was America's first poet of international reputation,[1] and in the nineteenth century he was ranked the first and foremost among American poets (Morris 58).[2] In his own day, he was well beloved by both general readers and literati; he was so popular that his writings were routinely recited and frequently studied by schoolchildren. More than simply a well-known poet and prose writer, Bryant in his time was widely recognized as an arbiter of literary taste, a repository of cultural knowledge, and a source of national pride. Abraham Lincoln, meeting Bryant in a trip, claimed that "it was worth the journey to see such a man" (qtd. in Branch 180). Edgar Allen Poe, so frequently acerb in his comments on New England writers, stated that "no man stood more loftily than Bryant" (qtd. in Branch 180). Even Walt Whitman, now so highly revered by readers in America, asserted that Bryant's poems touched "the highest universal truth, enthusiasms, duties" (qtd. in Morris 62), and declared that Bryant's name ought "to lead the list of American bards" (Brodwin and D'Innocenzo xii).

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1 The following abbreviations will be used throughout the paper to stand for William Cullen Bryant's works:

PW: *Prose Writings of William Cullen Bryant*

RS: *William Cullen Bryant: Representative Selections, with Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes*

2 The pinnacle of Bryant's literary reputation was in the years 1820-1850. In 1824, for instance, the *United States Literary Gazette* stated that "no other American . . . had written so good poetry as Mr. Bryant" (qtd. in Morris 58). Another critic named Hugh Swinton Legare regarded Bryant's 1832 Poems as "the most faultless, . . . and the best collection of American poetry" (qtd. in Morris 58).

In the twentieth century, however, Bryant was viewed as a poet of minor rank and was designated by contemporary literary history as a didactic and dispensable "fireside poet,"[3] a writer of merely historical importance whose writings often urged to escape daily cares by plunging into natural landscape. In the late twentieth century, a few critics, such as Jules Zanger and Carl Ostrowski, began to challenge such a "fireside poet" image. Zanger read Bryant's Indian poems, such as "The Prairies," as a political poem justifying Bryant's support of the Indian Removal Act (15).[4] Contending that Bryant's political mission proved him not so gentle and mild as traditionally imagined, Carl Ostrowski examined a number of his Indian poems to explore how Bryant celebrated the conquest of the "wild" Indians and wilderness environment to construct American national subjectivity. On the whole, Zanger, Ostrowski and most critics focused upon Bryant only as a writer of poetic works, and thus ignored his lifetime of accomplishments as a magazine and newspaper journalist. Also, both Zanger and Ostrowski argued that Bryant adopted the untamed American wilderness as an argumentative correlative for America's territorial expansion. For them, the creation of American national subjectivity was founded on the conquest of the "wild" Indians and American wilderness environment.

Completely different from these readings, this paper attempted to argue that although Bryant was remembered as a poet, his importance and influence was largely the product of his career as a journalist and contend that Bryant was aware that wilderness environment could accomplish the work of constructing national subjectivity not through its conquest, but through its protection. Being a

3 In *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1987), Thomas Wortham defined Bryant as one of "the fireside poets" (279). The so-called "fireside poets" included William Cullen Bryant, Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-94), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-82), James Russell Lowell (1819-91), and John Greenleaf Whittier(1807-92). Though these writers are little read today, yet they were the most famous poets during the nineteenth century. In their verses, the "fireside poets" often conveyed ancient, hearthside truth (Wortham 286); such truth tried to answer positively the inquiry of whether human nature itself had a center and tried to urge men to escape daily worries and sorrows by plunging into natural environment.

4 In the early eighteenth century, President Andrew Jackson transplanted the Indian aborigines to make way for westward-moving settlers. During these years, the "Indian question" grew in importance as settlers moved west into the land of Native Americans, leading Jackson in 1830 to push through Congress a bill which "sanctioned creation of an Indian territory west of the Mississippi, and removal of Indians in the East of this territory" (Ostrowski 299). As a result, most of the great eastern tribes were banished to the West.

newspaperman and advocating forest protection and environmental preservation in his prose nature writings,[5] Bryant helped legitimize an alternative communion of nature and nation and became a precursor of American environmental writer (or nature writer).[6]

II

Bryant was a journalist for more than fifty years. He served as Editor-in-Chief of the *New–York Evening Post*, one of New England's prominent newspapers (Branch 181), from 1829 until his death in 1878.[7] Throughout his life, he used the powerful influence of the wide-circulation newspaper to expound his own ideas regarding the social, political, literary and environmental issues of the day. Bryant's editorial writings were so informed and eloquent that by mid-nineteenth century, he had obtained a reputation as "the nation's most distinguished newspaper essayists" (qtd. in Branch 181). In order to do justice to Bryant's importance and legacy, it is necessary that we look beyond his poems and into the larger sphere of influence generated by reviews, letters, and editorials that he published in the widely-read periodical print media of his day.

In hundreds of reviews, letters, and editorial comments and criticisms published

5 Most of Bryant's distinguished works in print media and influential critical essays are collected in *Prose Writings of William Cullen Bryant,* ed. Parke Godwin (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964). This book contains Bryant's literary essays, narratives, commemorative discourses, sketches of travel, occasional addresses, and editorial comments and criticisms.

6 Traditionally, most critics in the twentieth century (such as Perry Miller, Richard Warrington Baldwin Lewis, Henry Nash Smith) contended that the American *nature* had close connection with American *nation*: they maintained that early environmental discourse in America interconnected a unique national subject (American Adam) with a representative national environment (Virgin Land) and an exemplary national motive (errand into the wilderness). The composite outcome of the interaction of these images was the ideological and nationalistic entity -- Nature's Nation; and such an entity was principally founded on the conquest of the "Virgin" Wilderness.

However, this paper claimed that Bryant helped legitimize an alternative communion of *nature* and *nation* because such a communion was mainly founded on the preservation -- not the conquest -- of nature.

7 During this period, newspaper rose from low-circulation trade journals to become the print-medium through which most Americans received their news and views of the world (Branch 181).

in magazines and newspapers, Bryant showed a wide audience of Americans that American wilderness environment could be the cultural resources requisite for constructing national subjectivity. In actuality, during the early national period of New England, the discourse of wilderness environment constituted not only a specifically American *nature*, but also a distinct concept of an American *nation* (Mazel 2000, xviii). Wild nature, as William Cronon pointed out in his *Uncommon Ground* (1995), was both a "self-conscious cultural construction" (39) and "thoroughly contested terrain" (51). For Bryant, representing "virgin" wilderness was a conscious discursive construction. Throughout his life, Bryant mainly employed periodical literature to celebrate the American wild landscape as an aesthetic and cultural resource and to argue for environmental awareness, preservation and protection.

Bryant's vision of wilderness environment as a cultural construction was an important catalyst to the growth of America's national literature. In the early decades of the nineteenth century (the time America had just achieved her political independence), popular taste for European books stubbornly reflected the widely-held assumption that New England lacked the cultural resources requisite for great art. In order to resist this assumption, Bryant resisted imitation of European literary tradition. [8] In his lifetime, Bryant staunchly held the view that America ought to assert her cultural independence from Europe. In an 1839 editorial titled "Sensitiveness to Foreign Opinions," Bryant argued that "there is no occasion for perpetual appeal to the opinions of Europe," and that Americans "should pull the sinews out of our [American] literature" (PW 389-90). In "Early American Verse," an influential critical essay published in the *North American Review* in July, 1818, Bryant reproved American poetry for being "tinged with a sickly and affected imitation of the peculiar manner of some of the late popular poets of England" (PW 54 -55). He further proclaimed the importance of establishing American national literature:

8 Bryant strongly denied an imitative art. In "Lectures on Poetry," he contended that when all the energy of poets "is employed in servilely copying the works of their predecessors, it is not only impossible that any great work should be produced among them, but the period of a literary reformation . . . is postponed to a distant futurity" (PW 44).

> On our becoming an independent empire, a different spirit began to manifest itself and the general ambition to distinguish ourselves as a nation was not without its effect on our literature. It seems us that it is from this time only that we can be said to have ports of our own, and from this period it is that we must date the origin of American poetry. (PW 48)

Clearly, such a declaration of independence showed a sharp denial that American writing was an imitative art.

For Bryant, the principal means by which American writers might avoid the "subservience to British opinion" was to attend more carefully to the natural environment surrounding them (RS lxii). In a series of reviews published in magazine, Bryant repeatedly suggested the value of wilderness environment as a resource of constructing cultural and national subjectivity. In his approving 1824 review of Catherine Sedgwick's novel *Redwood*, for instance, Bryant maintained that American novelist had "a rich and varied field before them in the United States" largely because the primitive environment in America had exceptional "features of grandeur and of beauty" (PW 352-53). Bryant also predicted that this richness of wilderness environment would in time inspire a comparably rich body of historical and literary traditions -- that the study of nature would inform poetry, and that new modes of cultural expression would "spring up in our land to ally themselves with every mountain, every hill, every forest, every river, and every tributary brook" (PW 25).

Through periodical print media that he reached his widest audience, Bryant frequently affirmed that American wilderness environment was a vital resource for an incipient national culture. Frequently portraying the immensity of American pristine environment and the flora and fauna of the United States, Bryant became a pioneer recorder of New England scenes (RS xxxv). In order to describe the American environment, he observed nature closely and presented the diversity of "natural productions" -- including copperhead, palm tree, wild plum, and many other things –- in his writings. In this way, environmental writing could therefore be aligned with the contemporary critique of the "national narrative." Bryant's writings became an influential model for a unique national literature because it explored the rich relationship between the American environment and the artistic insight the environment engendered. Presenting his close observation of wild

environment, Bryant did not only help Americans recognize the literary possibilities of the natural environment, but also revealed his environmental perception and ecological awareness.

III

While many critics had noticed Bryant's poetic celebrations of American nature and the Indians, few had recognized the value and importance of his prose environmental writings. By carefully examining his prose environmental writings, we could find that Bryant was a naturalist. As a matter of fact, closely observing wild environment, Bryant also assiduously studied natural history and natural science. From the extent evidence, it seemed that Bryant was self-educated in most major branches of natural science, a field of inquiry that was among the most significant sources of his literary production (Branch 185). From an early age, Bryant studied chemistry; after growing older, he was devoted to botany, which he studied under the tutelage of a famous naturalist, Amos Eaton (Branch 185); even as an old man, asserted David Tomlinson, "Bryant was never content unless he knew the name of every tree, bush, and weed in sight" (qtd. in Branch 185).

Throughout his career as a journalist, Bryant praised and reviewed a number of new American writings of natural science and natural history, therefore employing periodical print media to bring new scientific information to all lay readers. Bryant's contribution to the *Evening post*, asserted Michael P. Branch, "clearly demonstrated his knowledge of medicine, geology, mineralogy, hydrology, climate, agriculture, horticulture, and botany" (186). When commenting on *Of Travels* (1791), William Bartram's influential literary natural history, Bryant claimed: "I never read description of natural scenery, nor expressions of delight at the beauty of vegetable products, more enthusiastic than those travels of Old Bartram" (PW 201-02).[9] These lines displayed Bryant's zeal and passion for nature study and his expertise as a naturalist.

9 Throughout his years as a journalist, Bryant frequently took botanical excursions, both alone and with friends, including Thomas Cole, a painter and a writer in the mid-nineteenth century (Branch 187).

For Bryant, his love of wild nature and his faith in natural history and natural science were a forceful means of understanding the cultural and natural resources of the American environment. All these resources, Bryant believed, could provide the foundation of creating a distinctive national subjectivity. In his environmental writings, Bryant's allusions to New England natural objects were as varied and extensive as they were accurate. Bryant's birds and mammals, as Norman Foerster pointed out,[10] were "sufficient to stock a zoological garden"; his trees were nearly thirty in numbers; and of all the flowers known to him, "some forty-five were mentioned in his poetry" (10); all these descriptions of natural objects demonstrated the patience and precision of a seasoned naturalist -- Bryant.

In a letter suggesting his awareness of the significance of the study of natural environment as a cultural, aesthetic and spiritual practice as well as a scientific endeavor, Bryant stated:

> Man is necessarily a naturalist . . . The educated naturalist comes in and supplies deficiencies and rectifies mistakes, showing the innumerable degrees of relations which the works of the creation bear to each other, and revealing to the inquirer a new world of beauty and order, a mighty and magnificent systems of parts in which the most perfect harmony is united with boundless variety, . . . (qtd. in Branch 187)

In these lines, Bryant's vision of nature study as the study of the "relation which the works of the creation bear to each other" was proto-ecological in its stress on a symbiotic integration with natural environment. Through this emphasis upon natural interrelationships as constitutive of the systematic integrity of nature, Bryant created an alternative national identity: ecological identity; this identity was not based on the conquest of nature, but on the full identification with nature. In *Ecological Identity: Becoming a Reflective Environmentalist* (2002), Mitchell Thomashow contended that ecological identity was an "orientation and sensibility"

10 In 1923, Norman Foerster in his famous book, *Nature in American Literature: Studies in the Modern View of Nature,* argued that what most engaged the "American spirit" was an acute sensibility to American wild environment and stated that only by the encounter with wild nature could "the story of American culture" become independent from that of Europe (qtd. in Mazel 2001: 208).

that involved

> a reconstruction of personal identity, so that people begin to see how their actions, values, and ideals are framed according to their perceptions of nature . . . . Ecological identity refers to how people perceive themselves in reference to nature, as living and breathing being connected to the rhythms of the earth, . . . (xiii)

Indeed, Bryant's love of natural environment, his ecological awareness, and his observation and study of nature -- all these qualities made him become an environmentally aware subject who fashioned a new kind of identity for his nation -- ecological identity. Through his prose nature writings, Bryant forged "a concept of *ecological* citizenship" (Thomashow xvii, emphasis added) out of the old, traditional *national* citizenship based on the conquest of the American wilderness.

IV

In Bryant's prose environmental writings, there were many different rhetorical forms, such as the commemorative discourse, the narrative, the address, the review, the letter, and the editorial comment. Among these forms, the letter and the editorial comment were the most important. In his letters (most of his letters were travel letters), Bryant acquainted his readers with the grandeur of American wilderness environment and alerted them to the dangers attendant upon the exploitation of natural resources. In his editorials, Bryant argued intelligently, powerfully and prophetically on behalf of environmentally sound practices, such as the establishment of a pubic park and the preservation of forests and primitive environment.

In actuality, Bryant was a well-traveled newspaper editor of his day. Traveling within America and abroad, Bryant composed plenty of travel letters.[11] These letters showed that Bryant was an indefatigable observer of nature who

11 On his trips within America and abroad, Bryant would routinely draft letters delineating his observations and send those letters back to New York for publication in the *Post* (Branch 191).

journeyed thousands of miles in order to depict New England environment. Defining Bryant as a romantic fireside poet, literary history ignored the fact that Bryant was also an itinerant naturalist and environmental journalist "who ran rivers, crossed swamps, forded streams, and walked up to forty miles a day to explore and report on the richness of the American wilderness" (Branch 191). Through Bryant's travel letters, an enormous number of his American compatriots were able to get their first glimpse of Illinois prairies, Georgia river marshes, and Florida coral reefs and so on. By expanding Americans' sense of land, and by bringing before his compatriots the variety of "natural productions" -- such as sturgeon, alligator and "prairie-wolf" (PW 21), "gallberry" and "cypress-trees" (PW 28), Bryant successfully created a unique American national literature. He employed the print medium of the newspaper to help reinforce the role of wilderness environment in the construction of American cultural identity.

In his travel letters, Bryant showed the beauty of American wilderness environment to his readers; however, he also lamented the inevitable destruction of the pristine wilderness he encountered in his journeys. Describing the American environment in loving detail, Bryant also warned his compatriots that wild nature "resents the violence done her, and punishes those who first break the surface of the earth with the plow" (qtd. in Branch 192). In a travel letter titled "A Tour in the Old South,"[12] Bryant delineated "the pine forests of North Carolina" (PW 27). He warned that the "boxing" of pine trees in order to collect turpentine was "a work of destruction" (PW 28):

> it strips acre after acre of these noble trees, and, if it goes on, the time is not far distant when the long-leaved pine will became nearly extinct in this region, which is so sterile as hardly to be fitted for producing anything else. (PW 28)

Revealing Bryant's sympathetic attitude toward the "extensive forests of pine" (PW 28), these lines also displayed Bryant's poignant environmental awareness that he was documenting aspects of the wild landscape before their inexorable loss.

In addition to travel letters, editorial comment was another important form in

12 Bryant wrote this letter from North Carolina in 1843.

Bryant's prose nature writings. In his editorial comments, Bryant made the most direct use of the newspaper for the purpose of environmental advocacy. Perhaps one of the striking examples of Bryant's effective use of the editorial comment in the cause of environmental advocacy was his remarkable call for an organized, government-administered system of forest preservation and protection in 1865. In an editorial essay titled "The Utility of Trees," Bryant claimed:

> it will be an act of provident wisdom to reserve considerable tracts of forests in different parts of the country, as the public domain, with a view of preventing the destruction of trees . . . . In order to prevent the trees from being felled and the public property wasted, a body of foresters to watch it and keep out trespassers must be retained in the pay of the Government. (PW 402)

Employing editorial comments to persuade and to advance the sorts of environmental reforms he felt were in his nation's best interests, Bryant in these lines presciently and prophetically emphasized the significance of forest protection. This proposal for forest protection would eventually be realized by Gifford Pinchot (1865-1946) -- "the father of American Forestry and the Forest Service" (LaLonde 162),[13] but not until forty years later, with the establishment of the US Forest Service in 1905.

Another example of Bryant's prescient environmental editorializing was his call for the establishment of a public park. As editor of *Evening Post*, Bryant frequently alerted his readers to the aesthetic and spiritual need to protect certain natural areas from the encroachment of civilization. Recognizing the value of the undeveloped, primitive state of wilderness environment, Bryant in the 1840s proposed his idea of a public park and thus became the earliest proponent of the public park idea (Runte 4).[14] Later, Bryant also supported the appointment of pioneer conservationist Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) as the first

13 Gifford Pinchot was the first American to choose forestry as a career (Nash 73). Also, he was "the first chief of the USDA Forest Service and an architect of the early conservation movement" (Miller and Sample xi).

14 During the 1840s, Bryant in the pages of *Evening Post* called for the establishment of a large reserve within easy reach of New York City (Runte 4).

superintendent of what became Central Park (PW 6). [15] Bryant's prescient call for wilderness protection and his "invention" of the public park idea eventually led to the birth of national park system in late-nineteenth-century America. Truly, it was George Catlin (1796-1872) who used the term "nation's park" for the first time;[16] it was Olmsted who took a leading role in formulating the national park concept; and it was John Muir (1838-1914) who established a national park philosophy and who was responsible for the national park system in America. However, we should not ignore the fact that it was Bryant who first created the idea of Public Park on the editorial pages of his *Evening Post* in the early nineteenth century.

Protecting wilderness environment for his nation was Bryant's principal concern in many of his editorial comment essays. In an 1844 Post editorial titled "A New Public Park," Bryant asked his compatriots to support his plan for a park not merely because it would provide "an extensive pleasure ground for shade and recreation," but also because the park's invention was motivated by his recognition of the efficacy of the wilderness landscape in constructing a desired national subject and a collective consciousness of cultural subjectivity as well as because the tract identified was a "beautiful woodland" inhabited by trees "of almost every species that grows in our woods"(RS 319). In another editorial page, Bryant asserted:

> As we are going on . . . we are making a belt of muddy docks all round the island. We should be glad to see one small part of the shore without them, one place at least where the tides may be allowed to flow pure, and the ancient brim of rocks which borders the waters left in its original picturesqueness and beauty. Commerce is devouring inch by inch the coast of the island, and if we would rescue any part of it for health and recreation it must be done now. (RS 319-20)

15 Frederick Law Olmsted was one of the first professional landscape architect in America. He was known for his designs of city parks, among them Central Park in New York City, as well as for his efforts to create state parks and national park -- such as Yosemite in California. Besides, he was an early environmental writer; his famous essay "The Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Trees" observed the rapid destruction of the American wilderness and advocated its protection.

16 In his *North American Indians* (1844), George Catlin employed the term "nation's park" for the first time (263). He was a landscape painter and a writer in the nineteenth-century America. He valued nature in their "precivilized" forms for their positive qualities.

In such clear, easily comprehensible language, Bryant employed the form of editorial comment to disseminate the message of environmental protection. His role as an environmental journalist and his acumen as an early environmental writer should receive sustained critical attention.

V

Today, Bryant is frequently remembered as a poet and he continues to be remembered only as the author of such poems as “The Prairies” and “Thanatopsis.” Few readers are aware that Bryant contributed pieces of prose environmental writing (or nature writing) and environmental advocacy to the widely-read periodical print media that dominated public discourse in the nineteenth-century America. Nevertheless, to completely understand his contributions to the construction of American national subjectivity and national culture, it is necessary that we expand our exploration to include his lifetime of achievements as a magazine and newspaper journalist. Bryant was “an environmentally progressive editor, reviewer, correspondent, and editorialist” who successfully used the most powerful print media of his age to construct American national subjectivity, to disseminate the information about nature study and to advocate environmental protection (Branch 195). In addition, to preserve the beauty of natural environment, he invented the idea of a public park. Inspiring his American compatriots a new faith in the viability of their wilderness environment as a source for national culture and cultivating public appreciation for the aesthetic beauty and literary possibilities of the American environment, Bryant also modeled for Americans a respect for wilderness environment and legitimized concern for the integrity of natural interrelationship so frequently impaired by the unbridled agricultural and industrial expansionism of his age. Constructing an “ecologized” or “environmentalized” subjectivity for his nation, Bryant was unquestionably an early American environmental writer.

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