

FRANK GADO, *William Cullen Bryant: The Complete Stories* (Hartford, Vt.: Antoka Press: 2014), 327 pp.

In many respects, Bryant has become a shadowy figure in the American literary canon. Students in academic classes may encounter “Thanatopsis,” but few others from Bryant’s verse output. They are even less likely to find specimens of his prose publications, and, among those, rarely find him represented by a short story. The American Writers Series volume of Bryant, edited by Tremaine McDowell (1935), includes only “A Border Tradition” and “The Indian Spring.”

Frank Gado previously published two stories, “A Pennsylvania Legend” and “The Indian Spring,” in *William Cullen Bryant: An American Voice* (2006). Thus, Gado’s present edition fills a long-standing gap, supplying us, as it does, with the texts of Bryant’s thirteen stories, plus the “Preface” to *The Talisman* for 1828. The book could not have been prepared by a better editor than Frank Gado who has been championing Bryant’s causes for decades.

Bryant’s stories are worth knowing as representatives of short-story themes during the early national era of American literature. They divide between the Sentimental and the Gothic; some focus on such then popular topics and tropes as the American landscape, Native American characters and circumstances, folk traditions that were appealing in American and other literary circles during the 1820s-30s. Stories like “A Border Tradition” and “A Pennsylvania Legend” connect with antecedent folklore, some of which has continued to wend its way into the present day.

The uncertainties and, at times, violence that were part of American frontier life in young Bryant’s era also shape some of his fiction. Moreover, as Gado’s edition attests, Bryant’s stories are far removed from those narratives that seem to be chopped down novels, as is suggested by many specimen of the genre from the last decades of the eighteenth on through the first two decades of the nineteenth century. In contrast, Bryant’s stories have distinct and felicitous beginnings, middle sections, and conclusions. In this respect, his stories take deserved artistic rank with those of writers who are more generally cited as originators of the American short story as literary art: Irving, Hawthorne, and Poe.

Bryant’s Gothic stories may hold out greater appeal than those of the sentimental stamp,

though I admit to this preference as one of my own; as such they draw greater attention from students of American Romanticism to Bryant’s deft uses of Gothicism in some of his verse. Bryant’s abilities in narrative techniques are not customarily highlighted in discussions of his verse, which omission downplays or ignores his accomplishments in balladry and other types of verse narratives, just as his endeavors and artistry in the short story have been overlooked for years. In his Gothic stories, he creates a fine line between natural and supernatural possibilities, thereby linking him with the kindred art of Poe, Irving, Hawthorne, and others in his day.

Just as Bryant has been credited with adapting major forms of eighteenth-century British verse into the literary mainstream in American literature, he might well be complimented for his ingenious adaptations of the Gothic-supernatural story to American conditions and characters. Much has been made of such adaptations by Charles Brockden Brown, Irving, Hawthorne, and Poe. Only the last three in this list are renowned for their short fiction, however, and against the repeated attention devoted to their productions, Bryant’s stories had never been collected or sensibly assessed until Gado commenced his investigations. Instead, these stories have remained in the shadows compared with the attention that Brown’s novels have enjoyed as the spearheaders of Gothicism into American literary currents. Just so, Bryant’s stories seem in one way or another to anticipate techniques employed by later writers (e.g., “Medfield” as precursor to Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener”), whose works have received greater attention from specialists in American literature.

Gado’s introduction, notes, and additional apparatus enhance the collection. Most notable is his attention to and sensible, illuminating critiques of Bryant’s techniques. And in this area, I note my sole difference from Gado’s opinions, for I consider “Medfield” structurally more coherent. I would argue that Medfield’s emotional conflict corresponds artistically to the story’s fragmentary structure. Needless to say, this difference alone does not prevent me from recognizing the valuable service Frank Gado has offered to American literary studies by producing this collection of Bryant’s fiction. The book should enjoy a long shelf life.

Benjamin F. Fisher, Emeritus (Oxford, MS)