Of 489 letters which Bryant certainly wrote during this period, 340 to 107 addressees appear on the following pages. Most of the remaining 149 have not reappeared, but about thirty which have been recovered seem scarcely worth printing, either because they are partial drafts, or because they are brief replies to requests for autographs, literary advice, occasional verses, or public appearances. No significant letters seem to be missing, except for nine which Bryant wrote his wife during his 1852–1853 travels abroad, presumably lost, and six to the Roslyn schoolteacher George B. Cline, who with his family occupied the Bryants' home during their long absence in 1857–1858, and who was thereafter the estate superintendent at Cedar mere.

During this period Bryant passed nearly one-fifth of his time abroad, and although Frances was with him on the last of four trips, he visited Cuba, Great Britain, Europe, and the Near East without her. And he continued a practice of sending her notes from New York to Roslyn while he was busy in the city, and to Great Barrington and upper New York State when she visited there. Thus, she remained his chief correspondent; of 111 letters to her during the period, ninety appear in this volume.

Because of his frequent travels, Bryant's letters to the Evening Post form the next largest group, fifty-four, of which all save one are recovered. The prominence of these communications in the editorial columns of the paper brought them growing attention, which was enhanced as they were reprinted in other American newspapers, and occasionally in those published abroad. Their popularity, and the encouragement of Dana and others, induced Bryant to reprint them in book form in 1850, 1859, and 1869.

There are twenty-eight known letters to Bryant's two daughters during this period, of which twenty-five appear herein, and twenty-four to his brothers Cyrus and John in Illinois, twenty-one of which are printed. There are no known letters to his brothers Arthur or Austin, or to his sister Louisa. Bryant and Richard Dana, Sr., kept up a friendly if sporadic correspondence; there are thirteen known letters to Dana, all recovered. And Bryant wrote occasionally to other old friends: George Bancroft, Orville Dewey, Ferdinand Field, Henry Longfellow, Julia Sands, Catharine Sedgwick, William Gilmore Simms, Samuel Tilden, and Gulian Verplanck.

During these eight years he lost through death a number of close friends: in 1851, David Christie, James Fenimore Cooper, and Charity Bryant; in 1852, Andrew Jackson Downing, Horatio Greenough, and William Ware; in 1853, Eliza Robbins; in 1855, Samuel Rogers; in 1856, Charles Sedgwick. But he began to enjoy a new intimacy with others, among them his young partner John Bigelow, who joined the Evening Post late in 1848, and whose guidance of the paper's editorial and business affairs during Bryant's first absence thereafter gave the senior proprietor an assurance that his interests would not suffer during future travels. Writing Bigelow in 1857 after half a year abroad, Bryant
commented, "With regard to good sense, justice, impartiality, the bold defence of the weak against the strong, and the exposure of incompetence and rascality in public office I do not know of any paper like [the Evening Post]." Bigelow returned his confidence; later in life he recorded, "For full twenty years after my daily intercourse with Mr. Bryant terminated . . ., I would find myself frequently testing things I had done or proposed to do by asking myself, How would Mr. Bryant act under similar circumstances? . . . The influence which Mr. Bryant exerted over me by his example—he never gave advice—satisfies me that every one undervalues the importance of his own example." Of ten known letters to Bigelow during the present period, seven have been recovered for this volume.

Other acquaintances with whom Bryant's letters suggest a growing intimacy were the London lawyer Edwin Wilkins Field, the American novelist Caroline Kirkland, the Scottish-American schoolteacher Christiana Gibson, and his Roslyn neighbor Leonice Moulton, the last of whom would become his most frequent correspondent after the death of his wife in 1866. Among writers, artists, and statesmen appearing for the first time among these letters were James G. Birney, Henry Kirke Brown, Benjamin F. Butler, Salmon P. Chase, Evert Duyckinck, James T. Fields, Hamilton Fish, Daniel Gilman, Andrew H. Green, William L. Marcy, Edwin D. Morgan, Hiram Powers, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Alfred B. Street, William J. Stillman, and Charles Sumner.

Though it will be apparent that in the letters written between 1849 and 1857 Bryant touches only occasionally on the domestic political issues with which he was most vitally concerned in his editorial writing and political action—the Compromise of 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law, the Kansas–Nebraska Bill, the rise of the Republican Party, the Dred Scott decision—his many travel letters show a wide acquaintance with foreign cultures and political events, a fluent command of modern European languages, and a narrative and descriptive prose style scarcely evident anywhere else in his correspondence.