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JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

FOCUS ON YESTERDAY

by

RICHARD DALE OLSON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

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Department English
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We have carefully read the dissertation entitled John Greenleaf Whittier: Focus on Yesterday


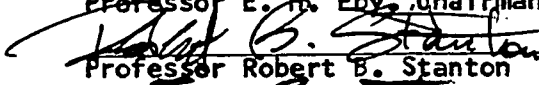

submitted by Richard D. Olson

in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of doctor of philosophy

and recommend its acceptance. In support of this recommendation we present the following joint statement of evaluation to be filed with the dissertation.

This dissertation attempts a reexamination and reassessment of the poetry of John Greenleaf Whittier. The difficulties implicit in such an attempt arise from the great bulk of the Whittier canon and its wide variation in excellence, the alternations of Whittier's interests during his lifetime, and the extensive critical treatment which Whittier's poems received during the nineteenth century. The dissertation seizes on the second of these difficulties to develop its major theme, and argues that Whittier's significance lies in his embodiment of the competing tensions in American thought and aspirations and, to a lesser extent, his resolution of them. Its weaknesses lie in the meeting of the first and third difficulties noted above. "Covering" the canon and its variations has led Mr. Olson into repetitions and restatements during the dissertation, and seeking fresh insights into Whittier has led him to concentrate on some poems which seem to deserve more attention than they have received, sometimes to the exclusion of the more familiar poems. His strategy, which is on the whole successful, is to concentrate his treatment of aspects of Whittier's verse upon several long poems: his attitude toward poetic art in "The Tent on the Beach"; his consciousness of external nature in "The Bridal of Pennacook"; his attitude toward the past and future in "Mogg Megone" and "Snow-Bound"; and his attitude toward industrialism in "Birchbrook Mill." He has succeeded somewhat better in demonstrating Whittier's value as a source of information about the consciousness of nineteenth century America than in reassessing his value as a poet.

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PREFATORY NOTE

The nature of this study has demanded explicit and detailed reference to many poems of Whittier with which the general reader of American literature may be unfamiliar. I have thus quoted liberally from several of these poems, not only because of their unfamiliarity, but also in order to provide a sense of their general texture and their individual qualities.

University of Washington

Abstract

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

FOCUS ON YESTERDAY

Richard Dale Olson

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The purpose of this dissertation is to identify patterns of conflict in Whittier's poetry, and to show how particular poems gain strength from the opposition or resolution of these conflicting ideas. Chapter I attempts to dissociate Whittier from the stereotype of the genteel poet; discusses critical reactions to Whittier, stressing the qualified renewal of interest in recent decades; and identifies several polar attitudes in his poetry which reflect cross-purposes in the origin and ideals of America.

Chapter II concentrates on Whittier's early poetry. Though conventional in style, it is often characterized by violence and a sense of alienation far removed from the "common things of . . . common life" that he had specified as the primary material of poetry. A suppressed opposition to authority is indicated, as yet unsettled in the specific object of abolition. In contrast, other poems celebrate the idyllic scenery of his native Merrimac Valley.

Succeeding chapters focus on conflicts relating to art, nature, the past, industrialization and disengagement from conventional life. Whittier's misgivings over the function of the artist, typical of his Yankee-Quaker ancestry, are balanced by romantic notions of the writer's vocation, through which he sought to arouse the sensibilities of his practical compatriots to the "beauty of the commonplace." Symbolic resolutions of this conflict are pointed out in "The Tent on the Beach" and "Among the Hills."

Similar conflicts involving his response to nature are explored through "The Bridal of Pennacook" and a number of shorter poems. He opposes the utilitarian exploitation of nature to the romantic interest in the primitive or rustic landscape. Nature is valued for its innocence and its revelation of the divine. He approaches transcendently a pantheistic identification of nature and spirit, but when this fails to support his preconceptions, he becomes suspicious of natural revelation, and falls back on orthodoxy.

Ideologically, Whittier eschews the past for a grander future of millennial harmony, but instinctively his vision is turned toward the past, reflecting his general tendency away from involvement. Three distinct approaches are evident: the remote and primitive past of the "world's childhood" is often reconstructed in his Indian narratives; that of the colonial settler is utilized to create an authentic American legendry; and finally his own personal past is viewed as a

pastoral idyl of human warmth and vital joy. From the latter he drew his purest poetic impulse, and he is thus vitally involved in the literary discovery of the child. In "Snow-Bound" he transformed his childhood world into an imaginatively recoverable paradise, effectively harmonizing many of his poetic interests.

Whittier wanted to regard industrialization as support for hope, but its virtues seemed outweighed by its faults. He saw it as the despoiler, not only of the landscape, but of human nature; greed and misery were exacerbated by the promise of machine-made riches. The image of the "machine in the garden" clarified by Leo Marx as a dominant motif in 19th century American literature darkens his imaginative vision; his suspicion is revealed in the imagery of "The Fountain," "Haverhill," "Birchbrook Mill," and other poems.

The final chapter indicates Whittier's concern with the American Dream. His life as a whole, in work and love, describes a series of feints toward involvement succeeded by withdrawal. Poetically this pattern is revealed in poems which treat love either in idyllic terms or else as thwarted by death or an unbridgeable gulf in the status of the lovers, and in the symbolic construction of a world shut off from the prevailing social order as in "The Tent on the Beach" and "Snow-Bound." Through the latter structure, he is revealed as a prototype of the American artist. His attempts to realize the American Dream in action being discouraged,

he retired to create it in an imaginative world of the past,
an America of the soul.

CHAPTER I

GENTEEL POET WITH A DIFFERENCE

1

Perhaps the prime basis of the disfavor that engulfed Bryant, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, and Whittier near the end of the nineteenth century was the charge that they were largely supporters of convention rather than rebels or critics or angry and discouraged prophets. Conversely, those writers among their contemporaries whose reputations have risen and whom we most admire today were in some profound way opposed to or dissatisfied with the complacent, progressive, expansionist tendencies of nineteenth century America. Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and Thoreau from the earlier generations and James, Clemens, and Emily Dickinson from the later all expressed opposition to prevailing attitudes. Although Emerson, to whom the reaction of the twentieth century is at least mixed, was in many ways a supporter of America's popular image as a new and more glorious manifestation of human enterprise and dignity, he drew definite lines between himself and his age and constantly encouraged individuals and institutions to self-examination and transformation of a revolutionary character. At a hasty glance, Whitman might seem exceptional, for certainly his belief in America was unexceeded in intensity; but the terms in which he expressed that belief were hardly such as to inspire complacency in the ordinary political, economic,

or religious booster of American designs.

The genteel poets, however, seem in retrospect to have been generally attuned to the social and intellectual currents of their times. George Arms, in his revealing attempt to reevaluate the "schoolroom poets," as he calls them, identifies a biographical basis for contemporary reservations against their poetry, in that they tended to be "optimists in theology," "romantics in philosophy," "progressives in politics," and "dissociationists in sensibility."¹ Even when, as in the case of Lowell, they worked for reforms of political and social wrongs, their dissatisfaction seems superficial compared with that of the writers mentioned above, to the same degree, perhaps, that their popular success was greater. Bryant, Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell, and Whittier--the names conjure a vision of smiling octogenarians, at peace with themselves, the society of their times, and Providence, receiving virtually unlimited adulation, as unreserved as it was uncritical, and basking in a self-esteem reminiscent of that of the English Augustans in its most extreme manifestations. Arms suggests, as a reason for our age's failure to take them seriously, the fact that

By long exposure too fully aware of the poetry and having customarily become acquainted with it before much literary sensitivity has been developed, we read carelessly and imperceptively. If we can bring ourselves to read this poetry with the freshness and flexibility with which we read less familiar poems . . . we shall find that they wrote poems of much firmer texture than we realized, poems of considerable and controlled effect.²

Expecting "superficial didacticism," we get that and nothing else from them.

As Arms indicates, our glib judgements doubtless do a certain injustice to all of these men, for each possessed his own individual virtues of courage, independence of mind, sophistication, benevolence, or even unique habits of style or insight, which certainly could not be thought of as characteristic of their age and society as a whole. But to no one of them is our disdain more thoroughly unjust than it is to John Greenleaf Whittier.

The ups and downs of Whittier's reputation are of prime interest in the study of the poet. With the other genteel poets he became the object of universal veneration in his lifetime, not only as a poet, but as a man. In the twentieth century, respect for the man has continued virtually unabated, but the efforts of the poet have been treated, at least until recently, with virtually complete critical silence, broken only by the stammering apologies of biographers whose frankly stated interests lay in his life, his politics, his reform work, or his religious views. An occasional attempt to reassert the fact that Whittier was also a Poet, and a genuine one, has only served to emphasize a general obliviousness to the fact.

In the fifties and sixties, however, several studies have subjected his poetry to systematic scrutiny, demonstrating that Whittier wrote other works besides "Snow-Bound" that could

without exaggeration be called poems. To a large extent this interest is part of a general trend to resuscitate and reevaluate all the schoolroom poets, as poets, coming as a natural reaction to the natural reaction of the turn of the century, which rightly rolled them off their pedestals of popular esteem but wrongly attempted to consign them to the trash-heap of intellectual oblivion. The later reaction continues, with Whittier perhaps having the greatest potential for retrieving lost ground.³

As applied to Whittier, the process of reevaluation sometimes has an emotional coloring not evident in the judgments of Longfellow, Bryant, Holmes, and Lowell. Paul Elmer More called him " . . . the finest of our New England spirits."⁴ One senses, in reading such judgments, that the significance of all aspects of his work and character is enhanced by something else that undergirds and adds to their importance in locating Whittier in the American pantheon. His total accomplishment is greater, in effect, than the sum of its individual parts and, viewed in the proper focus, may be seen as providing him with a small but unique place in American life and letters.

It is perhaps illuminating to catalogue all the ways in which Whittier presents a profile divergent from that of his fellow genteel poets. He was the son of a farmer, largely self-taught, while they were the children of ministers and professionals and became college graduates and professors.

He was a Quaker; they were members of conventional faiths. He was an abolitionist when to be one was dangerous, and for a time he had political ambitions; but he was also sickly, he never married or traveled, and he spent most of his life in a state of semi-retirement, almost a kind of voluntary hermitage. Finally, he questioned the value of art to a degree his Bostonian counterparts undoubtedly would have found singular. He represented attitudes and a way of life much different from their relatively cultivated and cosmopolitan backgrounds; clearly he does not fit the general pattern of genteel experience, philosophy, or conventions.

Such biographical differences might be ignored if they did not have corresponding effects on his writing. From a critical standpoint, the quality that sets Whittier apart from and in a sense above the rest of the genteel poets is the fact that his poetry is more definitely related to his apprehension of the meaning of his life and times. His ballads, pastorals, and character-sketches are, for the most part, drawn from scenes and models he had known. Winfield Townley Scott, himself a poet, called Whittier superior to Longfellow, Lowell, and Holmes, because he found inspiration in the life around him. "Where they were often wooden, he was natural."⁵ Ludwig Lewisohn arrives at the same conclusion, though in a somewhat more pictorial fashion, stating that "About Whittier there is something clear and authentic, something of brooks and trees rather than of horse-hair furniture and antimaccassars." He

also esteems Whittier as "far more respectable and memorable than Longfellow."

Whittier is extraordinary in that his poetic voice comprised accents so varied that criticism long remained unsettled as to which represented his most significant utterance. For half his life he was best known as a literary propagandist. Both positive and negative judgments throughout the nineteenth century were colored by this fact, which brought praise from ardent supporters of abolition but constituted something of an embarrassment for more objective evaluators. One recent biographer notes that "His early admirers compared him to poets like . . . Shelley, because by his songs he awoke the public conscience against a great injustice."⁶ But the poems contributed later to the Atlantic and the Independent "made his fame undergo one of the strangest metamorphoses in the history of poetic reputations. . . . He became the mouth-piece of the common people."⁷

The high estimation placed upon Whittier's anti-slavery verse by so astute a critic as Lowell was undoubtedly influenced by the latter's own predilection for reform. Prefacing Whittier's "Texas," a poem opposing the annexation of another slave-state, Lowell wrote,

Whittier has always been faithful to the Muses' holy trust. He has not put his talent out at profitable interest, by catering to the insolent and Pharisaical self-esteem of the

times; nor has he hidden it in the damask napkin of historical commonplaces, or a philanthropy too universal to concern itself with particular wrongs, the practical redressing of which is all that renders philanthropy of value. Most poets are content to follow the spirit of their age . . . Not so Whittier. From the heart of the onset upon the serried mercenaries of every tyranny, the chords of his iron-strung lyre clang with a martial and triumphant cheer.⁸

Lowell provides a more objective appraisal in "The Fable for Critics." Although he remains unstinting in his praise of Whittier's best lyrics, he also recognizes a tendency to write too much and sometimes too carelessly.⁹

Edgar Allen Poe, whose critical acidity was proverbial, was kinder to Whittier than to many contemporaries, even though his judgment, written long before Whittier had demonstrated the full extent of his abilities, was necessarily incomplete. "Mr. Whittier is a fine versifier," he observed,

as far as strength is regarded independently of modulation. His subjects, too, are usually chosen with the view of affording scope to a certain vivida vis of expression which seems to be his forte; but in taste, and especially in imagination, which Coleridge has justly styled the soul of all poetry, he is ever remarkably deficient. His themes are never to our liking.¹⁰

In view of Poe's aversion to the subservience of art to causes, and realizing that until Poe's death Whittier's poetry was primarily directed toward the furthering of abolition, one can hardly doubt that this was the theme Poe found offensive.

When Whittier appeared as another kind of poet, in Lays of My Home (1843), he began to be compared with Longfellow. "Snow-Bound" and later volumes received almost universal praise in the nineteenth century, from fellow-writers

no less than from a public which purchased them at a rate most twentieth century poets would doubtless envy. Bayard Taylor called him "the high priest" among American poets.¹¹ Oliver Wendell Holmes believed that Whittier had had an unparalleled part in sweetening "the soul of Calvinist New England," and had provided "the truest and best expression of the New England inner life which it has ever found, at least in versified utterance."¹² Admiration of Whittier was not limited to Americans: Matthew Arnold and Tennyson were highly appreciative of certain of his poems, and his Songs of Freedom particularly touched peoples around the world who were struggling to gain or maintain insecure liberties.

Not surprisingly, Walt Whitman showed more understanding and appreciation for Whittier than Whittier for Whitman. "In Whittier," he wrote, "lives the zeal, the moral energy that founded New England."¹³ He thought Whittier was filled with "genuine utterance" and, all in all, "rather a grand figure."¹⁴ But he also noted limitations: Whittier's morality seemed to him incomplete; Whittier was "not composite and universal enough (doesn't wish to be, doesn't try to be) for ideal Americanism."¹⁵ If Whitman knew about Whittier's having thrown Leaves of Grass in the fireplace, he remained creditably charitable.

Typical of the praise lavished on Whittier during this period is that of Lafcadio Hearn in a review of The Vision of Echard (1878). He praised the "wonderful gift of melody--

that song without a discordant note--that rhythmic flow, limpid and pure and strong, in which Whittier is unsurpassed [which] seems to mellow with years like good wine."¹⁶ Thus the very qualities which were expressly praised (and perhaps over-emphasized) in Whittier's lifetime--i.e., the lack of either verbal or emotional discord or tension--have contributed to his decline in ours. Perry Miller observed that those who associated Whittier's poetry with his Quaker appearance "supposed they were ensuring the reverence of posterity," but that in actuality "they did Whittier grave disservice, from which his reputation now grievously suffers."¹⁷ To a large extent the denigration of Whittier is the result of associating him with the prevailing--and presently unpopular--tendencies of his age, which he does not always represent; in fact, he is often as intensely critical of his age as were Melville, Thoreau, and Twain.

Among the biographies that followed the death of the poet little was added to the technical criticism of Whittier's poetry. The preeminence of his later work was established, "Snow-Bound" was universally acclaimed as his masterpiece, and a warm but general appreciation was prodigally extended to the poems of nature, reminiscence, and religion, while the anti-slavery pieces, though consigned to an inferior station, nevertheless served to elevate Whittier's stature as a man willing to sacrifice personal ambition for the good of an oppressed people. Bryant observed that Whittier's championship of the slave, while it had given

him a certain notoriety, had acted as a hindrance rather than a help to his poetic reputation.¹⁸

In 1905 it was still possible for a professional critic like Paul Elmer More to say that "Whittier is one of the authors of my choice, and . . . I read him with ever fresh delight." But More's qualifications foreshadowed the restrictions of immediately succeeding years: he praised Whittier for a "relaxed quality" and the exploitation of a poetic strain of homely benevolence "almost more difficult" than the more rarified realm of the conventional muse "because it lies so perilously near the trivial and mean."¹⁹

Just two years later, an article by Bliss Perry concentrated almost wholly upon Whittier's "moral courage," his revolution against religious apathy, and his ability to guide successfully a "passionate feeling of faction." Whittier's continuing life as a poet was felt to lie in his appeal for brotherhood in connection with the persistent racial problem and in his hope for international peace, toward which Perry ironically felt that progress had been made since Whittier's day.²⁰ Thereafter followed the great silence, with virtually no books or articles of critical significance appearing between 1910 and 1930. The emotional cataclysm of World War I, overturning the positive hopes of several generations, and the breathless pace of the roaring twenties apparently found no common ground with a poet who had celebrated peace, harmony and quietism.

In the thirties the silence was lifted and, although Whittier did not claim the attention granted other forgotten writers of the nineteenth century, a noticeable ripple on the swelling current of critical literature since that time has had Whittier for its subject. Generally, the earlier emphasis remained focused on what he was and what he said rather than how he said it. Gay Wilson Allen noted that Whittier's

'moral steam' is typical of no one, not even Longfellow, so much as Whittier himself. And it indicates, if not an antagonism, at least an obtuseness toward artistic form and technique. Emerson can theorize about natural ruggedness and Walt Whitman can 'chant his barbaric yawp over the rooftops,' but Whittier can write as 'rugged' or 'barbaric' as either and apparently never give the question much thought one way or the other.²¹

In line with the ideological and revolutionary focus of criticism in the thirties, someone was perhaps bound to attempt to reinstate Whittier's revolutionary poetry as the chief ornament of his reputation. Thus Albert Mordell, in the earliest full-length biography of the period, while granting the literary superiority of some of the rural and legendary poems, expressed the opinion that Whittier's "poems of freedom . . . represent his chief and most permanent contribution to American literature."²² He rates Whittier not only above the other genteel authors, but also above Poe, as "one of the great New England literary quartette--he ranks with Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau. He is the one [sic] of the few prophets in American literature, [a] universal poet of freedom, [deserving] a place with Walt Whitman among our great American poets."²³

Although few writers of the thirties take a position as extreme as Mordell's, their common theme is that Whittier had been too greatly disparaged. Aspects of his talent cited as generally overlooked or too hastily condemned are humor and naturalism,²⁴ accurate description of nature,²⁵ and an occasional tightness and organic development of form surpassing that of his contemporaries.²⁶

In the fifties, as previously noted, George Arms developed the latter idea with reference to specific poems, praising Whittier's best work for a "complex view of character, control of narrative technique, and a just proportion of parts"; he concluded that "Whittier is sometimes a poet by the most exacting standards," and that more thorough examination is warranted. He also provided a rather disappointing qualification to his revaluation of all the schoolroom poets, observing that "it should be clear that such approval is of them as minor and not major poets." Twentieth century hesitation, he believes, arises from the assumption that we must approve of them as major poets or not at all.²⁷

Essays by Howard Mumford Jones and Hyatt Waggoner in the late fifties focus interest on Whittier's religious poetry. The former thinks Whittier is, at his best, unsurpassed in this medium, noting that present literary criticism is indifferent or hostile to religion in literature unless it be high church Anglicanism; "and so we forget that no American writer has more finely phrased a trust in the goodness of God." Of

stanzas from "Our Master," Jones avers that "Not even the seventeenth century can surpass this simple perfection of religious statement."²⁸ Waggoner rates Whittier as one of the few religious poets in America "whose work is still readable as poetry."²⁹

Whittier's hymns, of course, have always been recognized as among his notable achievements, and they ensure the perpetuity of his name in limited circles for a long time to come. But it is probably less clear that Whittier anticipated contemporary religious revolution to a striking and prophetic degree, not only in his activist approach to practical Christianity, but also in theorizing that was uniquely bold and speculative for a conservative trinitarian of his day, including a willingness toward essential (though by no means institutional) ecumenicism. He once said,

If I had nothing else to be thankful for, I should still feel grateful that I have not become a bigoted sectarian. To me, Quaker and Catholic are like, both children of my Heavenly Father, and separated only by a creed, to some, indeed, a barrier like a Chinese Wall, but to me frail and slight as a spider's web.³⁰

Still more striking is his prophesy of a state of affairs akin to the "religionless Christianity" proposed by Bonhoeffer and a number of theological popularizers such as Bishop Robinson³¹ and Harvey Cox.³² Whittier asserted

a strong faith [that] ere the lapse of two centuries, [there would be] a complete and permanent change in the entire Christian world . . . men will awake to the simple beauty of practical Christianity. . . . altar, church, priest, and

ritual will pass away; but the human heart will be the Holy of Holies.³³

His consistent recognition of God in man and of divine service in constant and sometimes costly self-sacrifice is not altogether different from the approach of some contemporary radical theologians, though he, of course, would never have phrased his attitude in their terms, and they might not recognize him as a theological ancestor. But, semantics aside, an indubitable similarity exists.

Like Arms, Waggoner emphasizes the fact that Whittier's poetry is unlike that admired by most modern poets in that it states directly, is almost never dramatic, and lacks irony, but he contends that contemporary taste is not the only defensible criterion; "poetry lacking purely verbal distinction may yet have other memorable qualities." Waggoner claims that Whittier is not, as commonly supposed, blind to the full range and complexity of human experience, but that he recognizes the "brotherhood of secret sin" and the tragedy in life, and that his Biblical faith kept his best nature poetry from the clichés of romantic primitivism. Waggoner also reintroduces claims for the merit of some of Whittier's reform poetry, "when he excoriates the 'churchgoers' who condone slavery and injustice, the 'clerical oppressors' whose 'faith' never issues in 'works,' or the church in whose name some of the most terrible crimes have been committed."³⁴

Meanwhile, the sixties have seen still further developments in Whittier's revitalization. Whereas Waggoner found

two dozen poems still pleasurable and rewarding, John Pickard numbers forty as still readable and a dozen as superior, and rates Whittier right behind Whitman, Dickinson, Poe, and Emerson as the fifth among American poets of the nineteenth century.³⁵ Pickard also upholds Whittier's particular "home-spun" vision:

As Emerson embodied the philosophic thought of American in his poems, Whittier incorporated its common ideals and traditions in his. By being scrupulously true to his own experience, conscious of the beauty of the commonplace, and responsive to the popular sentiments of domesticity, piety and freedom he was 'the people's poet' in a sense that the educated and cultured genteel poets could never be.³⁶

A further service of Pickard has been to direct attention to Whittier's long-neglected ballads and narrative verse. Both he and Lewis Leary subject specific poems to the scrutiny of modern textual criticism, following the path outlined by Arms, and they find the method to work in a surprising number of instances. Leary's general estimate is somewhat more qualified than Pickard's, but he shows a high degree of appreciation for Whittier's prose, especially Margaret Smith's Journal. Leary observes that Whittier's life was perhaps "his best poem," but he recognizes that "Snow-Bound" caught much of its essence. His final judgment seems to reflect modern opinion in general: "What seems most satisfactorily to survive are his portraits of people and his sketches of New England countryside--the vignettes, the pastorals, the idyls, the genre pieces, evocative of scene and character and mood."³⁷

Also suggestive of potential new directions in the study of Whittier is a lecture by Perry Miller, who proposes that Whittier is a vastly more complex figure "both as man and as writer, then [sic] he appears in the conventional view of him as one of the five monumental 'household poets' of nineteenth century America."³⁸ Mentioning the recent Longfellow revival, Miller says that

a case could be made that Whittier, in the variety of his verse forms, in his imagery, in his cadences, also deserves reevaluation. Naturally one would concentrate on "Snow-Bound" and several poems of his maturity. To the limits of his talent, he did continue to grow, to study the craft of writing, and this fact does make the achievement of his old age a testimony to his indestructable vitality.

However, Miller's attention in this lecture is primarily directed to another sphere, in which he thinks Whittier still more worthy of interest than with respect to his ultimate success:

In this story, the fact that Whittier was a Quaker, and a passionate one, makes his struggle to bring the lawless, anarchic impulse of poetry under discipline a very different, a much more fascinating conflict than we shall discover in Bryant, Longfellow, or Holmes, or indeed in many poets at present more highly esteemed.³⁹

The indications are that Whittier may continue to prove a rich field for criticism of various kinds. His religious poetry is recognized as displaying rare grace in what may be termed a "depressed area" in the field of criticism, and "Snow-Bound," by virtue of its length and depth, its sincerity, and its unity of mood, method, and stylistic detail, may yet

lay claim to the title of the most impressive single American poem of the nineteenth century. Also of continuing interest are the other genre pieces, his narratives, his portraits of people, and the relationship between his life and his work, which, as noted by Miller, poses a disturbing number of questions.

3

From the very beginning of his poetic career, Whittier was involved in a personal and literary quest of the meaning of America, as established in the Puritan-Quaker tradition of his family and his region. Although, like the other genteel poets, he was an inveterate imitator, especially with respect to versification, he almost always drew his matter directly from his personal observations or the legends and traditions that were an integral part of his background. Like Thoreau, he found in his immediate surroundings all the satisfactions the world could offer and material for all he wished to say.

More dear, as years on years advance,
 We prize the old inheritance,
 And feel, as far and wide we roam,
 That all we seek we leave at home.

No incense which the Orient burns
 Is sweeter than our hillside ferns;
 What tropic splendor can outvie
 Our autumn woods, our sunset sky?

("Haverhill," p. 474)⁴⁰

It would be foolish to deny that all or any of the faults attributed to Whittier are present in his poetry. He was verbose, repetitive, guilty of flaws in rhyme and grammar, and often "poetic" in an undesirable sense. His bad habits are exaggerated, perhaps, but still common enough to cause discomfort in a reader setting out on an uncharted voyage through the sea of his collected poems. He wrote a great many verses without taste or feeling; one can only imagine that he was able to put his better self to sleep, churning out smooth but banal rhymes automatically. The range of value of his poetry is immense, from simple grandeur to spacious triviality, often in the same poem. Yet, and fortunately this fact has not gone unrecognized, to dismiss Whittier summarily is to ignore not only a man, but an era and a large portion of the idealistic yearnings of America.⁴¹

Because Whittier's sources of inspiration were so diverse and his achievement was so varied in both content and merit, it is difficult to pinpoint a particular focus of interest as that which chiefly engrossed his imagination. This apparently patternless diversity has undoubtedly helped to deflate his reputation, for it seems to indicate an absence of the controlling purpose we expect of a major poet, the poet who, in Wordsworth's sense, creates the taste by which he is to be esteemed. When we think of Wordsworth, for instance, we are impressed with the idea of a developing and peculiarly intimate relationship with nature as the focal

point of his imagination, and each of the romantic poets likewise presents a unified and original imaginative stance: Byron calls to mind the idea of heroic defiance of authority; Shelley, of a dreamer of ethereal and equally heroic dream-visions; Coleridge, of the felicitous use of the gothic and supernatural, molded to an intense realization of scene; and Keats, of sensuous experience so intense and accurate as to hover halfway between pleasure and pain. As it is with the great romantics, so it is with the most memorable poets of any other age; I mention them in particular because so many of the qualities epitomized in their work are also characteristic, to a lesser degree, of Whittier's. Inasmuch as he was a poet at all, he was a romantic poet, perhaps more genuinely so, or at least in a more widely-ranging sense, than any other notable American poet.

It is common, among admirers as well as detractors, to take a compartmentalized view of Whittier's poetry, and to regard him as simply a writer of anti-slavery verse, or a writer of legends and ballads, or a writer of religious and devotional poetry, or a celebrant of the homespun pastoral, without considering the relationship of these various modes to his imaginative outlook as a whole. The standard edition of his poetry is divided into such categories, as a result of his own classification, but it may be that this pat and convenient but rather arbitrary division has tended to obscure any underlying unity-in-diversity that might exist

in his total vision.⁴² One can only imagine the difficulty that might be involved in wading through Wordsworth, had his entire canon been passed on, divided into categories such as nature poems, autobiographical poems, political poems, character sketches and the like, with a contingent disappearance of the chronological relationship of individual poems. Whittier, like Wordsworth, is sadly in need of an editor to perform the ruthless excision Arnold exercised in the case of the latter.⁴³

Whittier's interests embraced all facets, many of them contradictory, of American thought and experience. His life, character, and literary work, apparently so placid on the surface throughout his eighty-five long years, present, on closer examination, a complex of polarities. Perhaps these conflicts stem from the fact that, essentially a passive and contemplative observer, he found a task--perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the task found him--requiring action and a sacrifice of personal interest, and he accepted its challenge. The sense of ambiguity that often lies at the heart of great literature, he chose to exercise in life as well as in his writing. Some feel that his descent into the world of heroic endeavor weakened or dissipated his artistic potential.⁴⁴ Perhaps this is true, but to a remarkable degree he enjoyed the best of both worlds. His active reform work was crowned with at least a semblance of success, if not the substance, and his literary achievement, rated highly in his

lifetime, and suffering an abysmal decline immediately thereafter, has been more and more frequently recognized of late as a substantial and enduring legacy.

The elements of contrast in the life and work of Whittier have not gone entirely unnoticed. The most thorough attempt to identify them was undertaken by W. W. Hurd, who listed the following "paradoxes": in spite of "limited culture and opportunity," Whittier caught the attention of many who possessed both; though he violated poetic convention, he became "a great poet"; he was "an ardent lover who never married"; he idealized and spiritualized the harsh childhood that had "crushed him"; he "was a dreamer who could scheme"; and, though "a prophet of peace," he helped to bring on the Civil War. 45

These examples, while challenging and indicative of unexamined areas in the study of Whittier, are by no means exhaustive. Rather, they provide merely a rudimentary sketch of the deep polarity evident in Whittier's approach to such matters as art, nature, religion, society, and political thought. Hurd makes no attempt to explain, except in a cursory way, the origins or the ultimate significance of the paradoxes he uncovers, or to organize them in a single focal scheme of opposing elements in Whittier's general world-view.

The existence of such factors calls for explanation and interpretation, especially in a poet generally thought

of as expressing a few simple and uncomplicated viewpoints, and one whom contemporary criticism may have unjustly ignored in its revulsion against conventional and popular nineteenth century literature. Perhaps, as suggested above, Whittier has been linked too uncritically with the genteel poets, rather than allowed to stand on his own merits, as an authentic voice of natural and untaught robustness. In at least one poem, "Snow-Bound," it is generally agreed that he has caught the native accent, image, and character in a situation nowhere else so genuinely and appealingly recorded, and, if in one, why not in others?

Perhaps elements of contradiction can be discovered and tied together so that, if the effort does not allow us to stamp him as a great poet, we may yet see him as a serious and progressing practitioner of his art, who sought to provide his countrymen with a vision of their destiny. One thinks of Whitman and his attempt to speak to the man in the street, and one must recognize that Whittier spoke far more successfully to the man in the field and the church and the lists of democratic jousting, of youthful joy and simple faith and the rights of the oppressed. And he did so precisely because he felt and expressed their doubts and vacillations relating to the nature of the American Dream and the methods of achieving it.

The division of American thought and effort into two modes, labelled variously practical and idealistic, liberal and conservative, hopeful and pessimistic, etc., is a common device of historians and interpreters of our history, reaching back to earliest colonial times in the prudential and spiritual urges of the puritans and symbolized by the two outstanding literary and philosophical figures of the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin and Jonathan Edwards. This division is obviously oversimplified, and in reality it covers a variety of contrary impulses felt throughout Europe and England during the period of the formation of the American republic (envisioning this process as extending from the beginning of colonization until well into the nineteenth century), but which were perhaps more influential in America simply because it was in a formative state.

To outline a few of these controversial ideologies, we might mention the conflict between non-conformist or underprivileged groups and governmental authority, as evidenced in the English Civil War, the slowly dawning recognition of the rights of individuals and minority groups, and the American and French revolutions; the puritan rejection of art and certain types of literature; the contradictory ideas of America held by the Virginia colonists and the New England settlers, as pastoral paradise and frightful wilderness;⁴⁶ the conflict of orthodox religion and deistic, unitarian, and

positivistic beliefs; the divergence of neo-classic and romantic interpretations of physical and human nature; and opposing ideas concerning the industrial revolution, which were felt in America as a conflict between agrarianism and technology, and recorded in the changing views of Thomas Jefferson.⁴⁷

In his drive toward literary expression, Whittier became intimately involved, on a practical or personal level, with each of these seminal controversies, often with sympathies extending in both directions. Thus he stands at the crossroads of America's vision of itself and its ideal fulfillment. At certain points primary sources of his inspiration and imaginative vision merge and reinforce each other, but at others they tend to pull in opposite directions. As a Yankee and New Englander, he looks to the Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, agrarian past, and delves into the romance and legendary features of the reclamation of the American wilderness, especially New England; as a Quaker, however, he is not content merely to dwell in that past, and this discontent, along with the impetus of romantic optimism, forces him to look also to the egalitarian future, in which creed and race would be subordinated to recognition of the individual. Yet the millennial future foreseen by his Quaker idealism has its roots in the agrarian past, and primarily in the New England past of Puritan aggressiveness and dedication, tempered by Quaker tolerance and freedom from exacerbating guilt and

pride. His personal past, his boyhood and home-life, combines both sources of inspiration. His father was both a hard-bitten, taciturn Yankee farmer and a Quaker and Jeffersonian democrat who sympathized with practical reform.

Thus, although various critics have seen him as a relatively uncomplex individual, whom they have classified as genteel poet, abolitionist reformer, devout Quaker, etc., and while it is true that portions of his work may be placed into these categories, his poetry as a whole is marked by definite contradiction and complexity. In almost every aspect of his life and work, a series of dual outlooks appears, which may be representative of cross-purposes in the origin and ideals of the nation itself. One example involves his somewhat ambiguous attitude toward his own poetry and toward art and literature in general. John Pickard cites as "One of the main tensions of his literary career . . . the lure of beauty in its own sphere and a moralistic view of literature which relegates beauty to a secondary position."⁴⁸ The casual scorn he sometimes expressed toward his own literary endeavors is at odds with the purposefulness of his general attitude toward life and his unflagging poetic output.

Other contradictions may be discerned in Whittier's views on nature, religion, and personal, social and political concerns. He admires nature, at one time, for its sheer force and violence and, at another, with a kind of Wordsworthian mysticism, but he also shows an awareness of its

limitations as a revelation of providence and finds its beneficence illusory. Eighteenth and nineteenth century ideas seem to struggle within him; he is both an adherent of "common sense" and an ardent romantic. His early biographer, Samuel Pickard, noted the rarity of the combination in Whittier, "of the poetic and devotional temperament combined with preeminent political sagacity and business judgement. . . ." ⁴⁹ In general, his romantic models are not those we would expect to inspire a devotee of Quaker passivity.

With respect to religion he alternates between an eschatological interpretation of history and a recurrent inclination toward belief in a millennial future achieved largely through human effort. His ability to recognize divine inspiration in non-Christian faiths seems to be at odds with his relative orthodoxy. In many ways he embraces society and the world at large, and yet he remains a kind of recluse, a lifelong bachelor and, after 1840, a virtual invalid for whom work and contact with the world and with strangers provided an uncomfortable stimulation, perhaps a threat. ⁵⁰ Lewis Leary suggests that Whittier's health problems, "The migraine headaches, the nervous collapse, the palpitations of the heart . . . whatever their physical base, seem almost certainly to have been symptoms also of a mind not at peace with itself." ⁵¹ His bachelorhood also remains something of a mystery, considering the many strong attachments he aroused in various women, some of which he

apparently reciprocated to a greater or lesser degree.

An obvious contradiction related to both religion and politics concerns his apparent relaxation of Quaker pacifism in support of individual militants such as John Brown and the Civil War effort in general. Throughout his life he enjoyed violent and martial stories and admired military heroes to a degree that seemed out-of-keeping with Quaker ideals.⁵² One admirer referred to his combination of the activism and militancy of the crusader with "the soul which has ever dominated the oriental mystics and sages."⁵³ A related instance of divided interests lies in the opposition of the Yankee tradition of individualism in which he was raised and his willingness to work for the imposition of restraints and reforms. Although, in general, he believed in keeping reform efforts within the boundaries of the law, and he denounced the violations of mobs, he could, like Thoreau, be pushed to the point of civil disobedience, as when he advocated refusal to comply with the fugitive slave law.⁵⁴

His attitude toward the rise of technology is also ambivalent; at times he seems to welcome technological innovation, but he is also aware of its potentially blighting effects. The old conflict of agrarianism and industrialism remains unresolved in his thinking. In spite of the apparent success of the abolition movement, Whittier was sometimes disillusioned by the progress of democracy, and his disappointment in this respect has been compared to that of

Whitman and Samuel Clemens.⁵⁵ In spite of the contention of Samuel Pickard that Whittier never quarreled, found friends in every church and party, looked for the best points in the character of those he met, and was generally positive and optimistic in his outlook on life,⁵⁶ Leary declares that he anticipated not only Twain's condemnation of the race, but even Eliot's wasteland in the poem, "For Righteousness' Sake," (p. 317) in which he asserts, "The age is dull and mean."⁵⁷

The polar sources of Whittier's response to his observations of the American scene may be roughly classified as conservative and progressive: the conservative "common-sense" heritage of his Yankee-Quaker origins, which influenced him by inheritance and nurture, vied with his progressive tendencies and his unhesitating allegiance to prevalent romantic ideals; sensitivity to nature, sympathy for humanity (also, of course, a reflection of Quaker influence), and delight in the odd, the wonderful, and the mysterious were seemingly instinctive to him, but their expression was called forth, as if inevitably, by his first exposure to his earliest romantic masters, Burns, Scott, and Byron. These two contradictory springs of thought and action underlie many if not all of the polar positions Whittier takes with respect to art, nature, religion, society, politics, and personal involvement.

Footnotes for Chapter I

¹The Fields Were Green: A New View of Bryant, Whittier, Holmes, Lowell, and Longfellow (Stanford, California, 1953), p. 7.

²Ibid., p. 6.

³Ibid., p. 33.

⁴"Whittier the Poet," Shelborne Essays, Third Series (New York, 1906), p. 35.

⁵"Poetry in America: A New Consideration of Whittier's Poetry," New England Quarterly, VII (June, 1934), 259.

⁶The Story of American Literature (New York, 1939), pp. 66, 67.

⁷Albert Mordell, Quaker Militant: John Greenleaf Whittier (Boston, 1933), pp. xv, 174.

⁸Quoted in Samuel T. Pickard, Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier (Boston and New York, 1894), I, 298.

⁹It should be noted that "The Fable" appeared in 1848, before Whittier's best work was written.

¹⁰Quoted in Mordell, p. 107.

¹¹S. Pickard, Life, II, 617.

¹²Ibid., II, 644-668.

¹³Specimen Days, April 16, 1881.

¹⁴Quoted in Lewis Leary, John Greenleaf Whittier (New Haven, 1961), p. 91.

¹⁵Quoted in Mordell, p. 268.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 252-253.

¹⁷"John Greenleaf Whittier: The Conscience in Poetry," Harvard Review, II (Winter-Spring, 1963-64), 9.

¹⁸Francis H. Underwood, John Greenleaf Whittier: a Biography (Boston, 1884), p. 314.

¹⁹More, "Whittier the Poet," pp. 37, 40.

²⁰"Whittier for Today," Atlantic Monthly, C (December, 1907), 852-854, 858.

²¹American Prosody (New York, 1935), p. 130.

²²Quaker Militant, pp. xiv-xv. Mordell's book provides worthwhile background material, but his individualistic judgments are chiefly interesting for a tone of crusading stridency and intemperance. For example, he calls the anti-slavery poems "too dangerous to be introduced into the schools," because "They still breathe that 'blasphemy' and 'sedition' of which vested interests are in mortal fear." (p. 169).

²³Ibid., pp. 321, xvii.

²⁴Desmond Powell, "Whittier," American Literature, IX (November, 1937), 341.

²⁵Scott, pp. 265, 267.

²⁶Lewisohn, p. 68.

²⁷The Fields Were Green, pp. 39, 47, 8.

²⁸"Whittier Reconsidered," Essex Institute Historical Collections, XCIII (October, 1957), 244-246.

²⁹"What I Had I Gave: Another Look at Whittier," English Studies, XVI (1959), 34. Waggoner finds this quality in Whittier most effective when not specifically religious, as in the poems of nature and reform.

³⁰S. Pickard, Life, I, 281.

³¹Honest to God (Philadelphia, 1963).

³²The Secular City (New York, 1965).

³³S. Pickard, Life, I, 280.

³⁴Op. cit., pp. 33-37.

³⁵John Greenleaf Whittier (New York, 1961), p. 133. Though such ratings are highly subjective and inconclusive, his placement is interesting, for it shows an advance of one notch over a period of ten years: Arms, whose overall view is similar to Pickard's, had included Melville as one of the group superior to Whittier.

³⁶Ibid., p. 100.

³⁷John Greenleaf Whittier, pp. 170-171.

³⁸"The Conscience in Poetry," pp. 8-9.

³⁹Ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁰The Complete Poetical Works of Whittier, ed. Horace E. Scudder (Cambridge, Mass., 1894). Unless otherwise noted all citations from Whittier's poems in my text are to this volume.

⁴¹Arms, p. 2, called the general critical silence with regard to Whittier and the rest of the genteel group a virtual "disowning of a large segment of our literary experience."

⁴²Mordell, p. 291, observes that many of the poems seem to be placed in the wrong category, or that no clear reason exists for certain poems falling in one category rather than another.

⁴³Powell, p. 340, has presented the yet more extreme suggestion that the best plan for his poetry might be an anthology composed primarily of fragments.

⁴⁴For instance, More, p. 33, though highly appreciative of Whittier's poetry, nevertheless expresses regret "that one whose temper and genius called for fostering in quiet fields should have been dragged into that stormy arena."

⁴⁵"Paradoxes in the Life and Poetry of John Greenleaf Whittier," Poetry Review, XVII (August, 1926), 261-266.

⁴⁶Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden (New York, 1964), pp. 37ff.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 117ff.

⁴⁸John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 27.

⁴⁹Life, p. 358.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 336.

⁵¹John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 55.

⁵²John A. Pollard, John Greenleaf Whittier: Friend to Man (Boston, 1949), p. 10.

⁵³B. O. Flower, Whittier: Prophet, Seer and Man (Boston, 1896), pp. 134-135.

⁵⁴See, for example, "Massachusetts to Virginia," and "The Sentence of John L. Brown," (not the famous John Brown), Poetical Books, pp. 286-291.

⁵⁵Pollard, p. 336.

⁵⁶Life, p. 358.

⁵⁷John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 115.

CHAPTER II

THE NOBLE GESTURE

Whittier's background and the diversified springs of his inspiration contributed to making his poetry a testing ground for the conflicts mentioned in Chapter I. As suggested there, one main source of this inspiration was, inevitably, the romanticism that pervaded the intellectual and emotional atmosphere of his youth, during which he said that he found equal satisfaction in his rural home and the passage of the seasons, in reading, "and in dreaming of something wonderful and grand in the future."¹ But the nature of Whittier's romantic leanings has been the subject of much conflicting interpretation. He has perhaps been too facilely labelled the "American Burns." Although Whittier thought of the Scotch poet-farmer as one who had awakened him to the romance of ordinary life, Burns's influence on his poetry has probably been over-emphasized. Whittier himself is at least partially responsible, because of his unqualified praise of Burns, whom he called

. . . the noblest poet of our race. . . . I read Burns every moment I had to spare. And this was one great result to me of my communion with him: I found that the things out of which poems came were not . . . somewhere away off in a world and life lying outside the edge of our own New England sky--they were right here about my feet and among the people I knew. The common things of our common life I found were full of poetry.²

Aside from a few imitations of Scotch dialect, however, Whittier's early work indicates that Burns was not the poet he chiefly tried to emulate.³ It was, in fact, some time before the "result" mentioned in the above passage took effect, for his first poems tended to be about anything but the people he knew and the "common things of . . . common life." A sufficient indication of this fact lies in his intention, never fulfilled, to bring out his first collection of verse under the title of The Poems of Adrian (Adrian was one of several rather exotic pennames Whittier attached to his early newspaper poetry). As Perry Miller said, in an attempt to undercut the general opinion of Whittier as a simple uneducated country versifier, "For a farm-boy in Haverhill to appear in print as 'Adrian' was the New England equivalent of Byron's appearing before Europe as Childe Harold."⁴ The special appropriateness of this remark lies in the predominance of the un-Quakerly Byronic strain that pervades so many of Whittier's early verses, and Whittier's own youthful peroration of Byron as "the master spirit of his time."⁵

Although Whittier's romanticism has been called into question,⁶ there is no denying that a number of the earlier poems develop romantic poses or views of life related to his background and reading. These reveal certain themes or approaches central to his work as a whole, though modified in later years by his deepening religious outlook, the success of the struggle for abolition, and a mellowing detachment

which is in itself of a character that might be labelled "romantic." A Byronic strain predominates in a number of these poems celebrating lonely exile or heroic defiance of oppression.

Miller suggests that the Byronic influence has not been consistently stressed because of Whittier's wise effort to eliminate "these early effusions" from the gaze of posterity.⁷ But enough of them do survive, surreptitiously concealed in the appendix to the general collections of his poetry, to indicate the directions of his first burst of inspiration; not all of them, it might be added, deserve such ignominious burial. While they are often naively imitative in style and diction, they yet reveal much about Whittier's uphill struggle to escape the limitations of rural isolation, inadequate schooling, and a religious profession at odds with the "wonderful and grand" future he had conceived for himself. For Whittier was, at least at this time, ambitious in a "worldly" sense.⁸ His awareness of the factors marshalled against this ambition resulted in an outburst of Byronic despair crude in expression, but in spirit genuine.

The very first poem published by Whittier, "The Exile's Departure" (1825), takes the form of a melodramatic monologue by a fictitious narrator who laments histrionically that he must leave "Fond scenes, which delighted my youthful existence," for some unspecified reason. The burden of the poem lies in the narrator's sadness at having to leave the "shores

of Erin,"

With none to support me in peril and pain,
 And none but the stranger to drop the sad tear
 On the grave where the heart-broken Exile is lain.

(p. 484)

The same attitude is carried further, and somewhat more convincingly, in a later poem, "The Fratricide" (1831), which portrays a man self-exiled for the murder of a brother. Having returned in his old age, he looks down from a hill upon the scene of a happy childhood, and recalls with painful fondness,

His childhood's home, and his father's toil,
 And his sister's kiss, and his mother's smile,
 And his brother's laughter and gamesome mirth,
 At the village school and the winter hearth;
 The beautiful thoughts of his early time,
 Ere his heart grew dark with its later crime. (p. 493)

This poem is much more successful than the earlier one and even has a certain grim ability to move, largely because of the somewhat more specific imagery. There is at least a superficial resemblance to Whittier's own birthplace, with a "well-known hill," oaks, and a stream-traced valley, indicating a certain degree of identification of poet and persona.

The juxtaposition of sensitivity to scenes of childhood with dark, guilty memories of violence--"the curse of Cain"--is also effective, and perhaps somewhat unexpected from a Quaker youth whose experience would hardly seem to generate the sense of alienation recorded here at an extreme pitch;

this might be passed off as mere imitation or melodramatic imagining, but it recurs so frequently in the themes and characters chosen by the youthful Whittier that a more definite relationship with his own inner feelings is indicated. George Rice Carpenter observed that, "Bred in isolation, he had suddenly been thrust out into the jostling world,"⁹ to a self-imposed but nevertheless harsh and painful exile, marked by the guilt of abandoning the ways of his ancestors. The specific memory of the "winter hearth" is also significant for it is an image to which Whittier returns again and again as a symbol of domestic warmth and intimacy and of human resistance to the darker forces of nature.

The theme of lonely exile also figures, at least peripherally, in Whittier's selection of other subjects for early poems, as in "Judith at the Tent of Holofernes" (1829), and "Bolivar," (1830) who is pictured not at the height of his victories, but as perishing alone,

. . . in the land he saved from slavery's ban,
Maligned and doubted and denied, a broken-hearted man!

(p. 488)

"Isabella of Austria," (1831), beset by a premonition of death, sits "gloomily apart" in the midst of jubilant revels; "The Female Martyr" (1833) is a young nun whose life expresses a sacrificial "turning from the world"; and "The Missionary" (1833), though pursuing his calling with a noble sense of idealism, is occasionally oppressed by his sacrifice of

familiar sights and faces. The religious motif combines again with the sense of loneliness in "The Star of Bethlehem" (1830) and "The Vaudois Teacher" (1830). In the latter, a proselyting Waldensian in the guise of a peddler coaxes a young girl to leave home, family, and the religion of her youth to become a heretic and an exile. In these poems Whittier seems to be expressing a symbolic sense of the historic role of the Quaker as the shunned outcast of colonial New England; his background and a predilection for romantic defiance combine to lead him to seek characters through whom he can express the noble gesture defining his sense of self-identification, which was later to impel him to turn his back on the world of convention and respectability. His participation in the abolitionist cause may be regarded as representing a real-life fulfillment of the romantic and projective role-playing evident in his use of these subjects.

A Byronic mood is also evident in another group of Whittier's early poems, which deal with sudden vengeance and devastation in the manner of "The Destruction of Sennacherib." Surprisingly, the young Quaker also found this a compelling theme, though hardly one associated with the outward aspects of the common life he knew at first hand. The earliest of these poems in the standard collection is "The Sicilian Vespers" (1828), a colorful and violent tale of obscure vengeance, in which "the wakened pride of an injured land" (p. 487) inspires an unidentified people to rise up against

an oppressive authority. As the title indicates, the poem centers about the ravaging of a convent-monastery, an early indication, perhaps, of Whittier's lack of sympathy for priests and religious institutions of a settled and depredacious kind. The hour of the vesper is, ironically, the hour of attack, and the peace of the temple, as well as "the song and the dance . . . /With the fire-side tale of mirth" among the peasants are alike destroyed. The indifference of nature to human violence, indicated in the image of a smiling sun shining upon "ruined temple . . . And the ghastly forms of men," is reinforced and made explicit in the final stanza.

Ay, the sunshine sweetly smiled,
 As its early glance came forth
 It had no sympathy with the wild
 And terrible things of earth.

Although crude and imitative, these verses reveal interesting aspects of Whittier's thought. The point of view of the poem is quite objective. Although the destroyed city and temple are identified as oppressors of the attacking horde, the violent revenge of the latter is condemned as a "dark and midnight deed" which ill becomes "the calm of Heaven." There is at least a suggestion of the romantic doctrine of the innocence of nature and man's spoliation of natural good by greed and violence, but no judgment is indicated. Future preoccupations of the poet, implied but not made explicit, are presented in conflict.

The general pattern, of a social unit, dwelling in

peace and carefree unconcern, and disrupted by the intrusion of a destructive or avenging agency, is also followed in "The Cities of the Plain" (1831), "Toussaint L'Ouverture" (1833), and "The Earthquake" (1828). The first two, of course, reveal two of Whittier's special interests, a Biblical theme and an uprising of slaves, but here this material is less propagandistically handled than might be expected. The interest of the poet seems to lie in the pattern described above, rather than in the particular materials or the message that might be derived from them. In the first the poignancy of the overthrow of pride and beauty is predominant; the operation of justice is an abstract rather than a particular force. In the second, the violence of the Negroes' revolt overshadows the justice of their cause.

Stanzas three and four of "The Cities," following the warning of divine vengeance, describe a sensuously idyllic Sodom:

'Twas an evening of beauty; the air was perfume,
The earth was all greenness, the trees were all bloom;
And softly the delicate viol was heard,
Like the murmur of love or the notes of a bird.

And beautiful maidens moved down in the dance,
With the magic of motion and sunshine of glance;
And white arms wreathed lightly, and tresses fell free
As the plumage of birds in some tropical tree.

The vague ideality of the scene reflects Whittier's infatuation with the sentimental tradition of portraying historical and Biblical themes prevalent among newspaper versifiers of

the early nineteenth century.¹⁰ It is as far removed from historical realism as it is from the unvarnished beauty of the familiar scenes convincingly portrayed in his later poetry.

The succeeding stanza presents the other aspect of the lide of Sodom, "the shrines of foul idols," and "rites of obsceneness," in which "The blasphemer scoffed at the name of the Lord." These practices explain the reasons for Sodom's overthrow, but the agent of destruction, the divine wrath, is left in the background as the remainder of the poem concentrates on scenes of the city in the throes of destruction, ending in a melodramatic picture of total ruin, when ". . . death brooded over the pride of the Plain!"¹¹ Even regarded as a "religious" poem, "The Cities" is hardly the sort of thing to be expected from a peace-loving Quaker!

Similarly, "Toussaint L'Ouverture" begins with an evocation of a calm, luxuriant landscape, moonlit, and "Soft as the landscape of a dream." In grim contrast are the exploitation and brutalization of the slaves, the moral irresponsibility of their masters, and the suddenly aroused violence that crushes the latter. The attitude that led Whittier to join the cause of abolition is fully evident; he seems almost to condone the Negro's "vengeance bitterer than his wrong," but he emphasizes the fact that Toussaint's sense of justice impelled him to reciprocate the past kindness of a white master by enabling him to escape.

Perry Miller observes that this poem is even gorier than "Mogg Megone," but that "here the context is neither Scottian antiquarianism nor pseudo-Byronic lyricism; it is stark violence, massacre, and, in the climax [of the third strophe], rape of the white planter's wife by the black demon."¹² This section contrasts the former submissiveness of the slave with the violence of his unleashed revenge and hatred.

Dark, naked arms were tossed on high;
 And, round the white man's lordly hall,
 Trode, fierce and free, the brute he made
 And those who crept along the wall,
 And answered to his lightest call
 With more than spaniel dread,
 The creatures of his lawless beck
 Were trampling on his very neck!
 And on the night-air, wild and clear,
 Rose woman's shriek of more than fear;
 For bloodied arms were round her thrown,
 And dark cheeks pressed against her own.

This passage is the most intense and vigorous in the poem; one senses the degree to which the poet's imagination was caught up at this point, in that the stylistic pattern of lockstep couplets is broken, reflecting the chaos of the scene.¹³

Aside from the abolition content of the poem, Miller observed that the "building up, through the language of turmoil, to the final bestiality of the rape makes the passage one of the few verses in which Whittier achieved an authentic intensity that none of his fellow poets ever could approximate," an intensity comparable to the "more vehement flights of Melville's prose or . . . Whitman's ecstasies." Miller relates the violent

tone of this poem, which was written in 1833, the year of Whittier's abdication of fame through literature or politics, for the outcast role of the abolitionist, to the internal conflict involved in thus bowing to the demands of his conscience, and reflecting "the ordeal for the Quaker striving to become an artist." Neither Melville nor Whitman, "nor any writer out of American experience, but only Whittier can convey to us, even though he must do it by elaborate indirection, the true ferocity of the Quaker conscience."¹⁴ Not only this poem, however, but the whole group of those celebrating exile and catastrophe indicate the smoldering and barely restrained intensity of Whittier's conflicts during this period.

The third poem mentioned above, "Earthquake," indicates a fascination with destruction itself, apparently entirely unmotivated, with nature the destroyer. Again the ruin of a city is portrayed, with woe befalling alike "The despot midst his menial band," and the mother who presses "The infant to her faithful breast." Before the onrush of their fate,

. . . prince and peasant knelt in prayer,
For grief had made them equal there. (p. 487)

The violence of nature is the equalizer, and the poetry seemingly revels in its force:

On swept the whelming sea;
The mountains felt its shock,
As the long cry of agony
Thrills thro' their towers of rock. (p. 488)

As in "The Sicilian Vespers" the indifference of nature to human agony is suggested in the final stanza's image of the morning sun shedding light upon the lifeless ruin.

2

In all of these poems runs a common theme: the humbling of human pride. The poet glories in a power beyond the alteration of human effort and ready to destroy the product of that effort. The implicit attitude is similar to that expressed in Byron's noted apostrophe to the ocean, from Childe Harold's Pilgrimage:

Man marks the earth with ruin--his control
Stops with the shore; upon the watery plain
The wrecks are all thy deed, nor doth remain
A shadow of man's ravage, save his own.

.

. . . thou dost arise
And shake him from thee; the vile strength he wields
For earth's destruction thou dost all despise,
Spurning him from thy bosom to the skies,
And send'st him, shivering in thy playful spray
And howling, to his Gods, where haply lies
His petty hope in some near port or bay,
And dashest him again to earth:--there let him lay.

(IV, 1605-1620)

The ocean, for Byron, represents an element of nature that retains its primal excellence in the midst of a world decaying under the influence of human baseness. Whittier probably would not consciously go as far as Byron in condemning his species, but these early poems indicate a latent and general opposition to the status quo, as yet unsettled in abolitionism.

No doubt his consciousness of the historical role of the Quaker as a persecuted outcast, as well as current romantic tendencies, fed this spirit of rebellion. It is noteworthy that the Byronic reaction was at least as strong in his early work as the influence of Burns or Scott.

The poem "Ocean" is in fact an obvious if rather dim imitation of the more famous peroration of Byron, suggesting through the same image the sense of a power, "Deep, awful, and obscure," defying human control, and limiting human presumption. As in the stanzas by Byron, the relationship of the ocean to youth, and by implication, to a happier past, either personal or historical, is indicated. There is, however, even at this point a significant difference in the attitudes of the two poets toward nature. Whittier's admiration is less wholehearted and more ambiguous. Byron, recalling his youth, identified with the ocean in all its moods, when its breakers became "a terror" as well as when they bubbled in "delight." Whittier, on the other hand, carefully distinguished between the two moods, associating the calm of the sea with "youth's bright hour . . .

When fancy paints, with magic spell,
The bliss of coming years. (p. 486)

But its turbulence symbolizes the deceitfulness of this spell, and the "cruel disappointment" flinging "Its shade on hope's dim ray." Thus whereas Byron's attitude is one of unlimited admiration for natural force, in both its

delight-bringing and its destructive aspects, Whittier's feeling for the latter is mixed and, at this stage of his development, a bit confused. The first three stanzas of the poem indicate definite admiration of the ocean's awesome force. In the last stanza, however, he seems to take a second look at its implications: it is or may be alien and antagonistic, and symbolic of a general aspect of life that tends to thwart and frustrate youthful hope and ambition. Whittier, by virtue of his background, education, and religion, found himself not at home in the world as it is; and yet, not content to remain in the backwater of Haverhill life and in the relatively unambitious pattern of his immediate forefathers, he forced himself to enter that world anyway, while holding firmly to the very features that prevented his assimilation. Perhaps he could not have done otherwise. But the fact of his uncertainty is revealed in this poem in his dichotomous admiration for and reaction to the awesomeness of the ocean. Though it took other forms, this conflict with regard to nature remained with him for life.

The harshness of the northern climate also presented a symbol of the admirable but fearsome aspect of nature. In the first five stanzas of "The Spirit of the North" (1829), an almost worshipful attitude is evident. The personified "Lord of sunless depths and cold!" is linked with the Creator, as a spirit above and remote from lowly man; it is inimical to human venturesomeness, the

Monarch of a realm untrod
 By the restless feet of men,
 Where alone the hand of God
 'Mid his mighty works hath been! (p. 487)

The poet's response to the "wrathful form" of the northern climate is obviously similar to the attitude expressed toward the ocean, a combination of admiration for its power and lordly qualities and repugnance for its cruel potential. The final stanza, as in the poem to the ocean, seems to distort the intention of the poem. The first four lines continue the mood of preceding stanzas, ending with a rhetorical and unanswerable question, disclosing the mood in which, from an esthetic and logical standpoint, the poem should end.

Lord of sunless depths and cold! . . .
 Who hath power to humble thee?

The stanza, however, is only half finished, and Whittier's irrelevant conclusion was apparently dictated by the necessity of completing it rather than by any genuine piety:

Spirit of the stormy north!
 Bow thee to thy Maker's nod;
 Bend to him who sent thee forth,
 Servant of the living God. (p. 487)

From the standpoint of either logic or art these lines are unsportable, mere filler to fledge out the metrical scheme, a practice which crops up all too often even in Whittier's maturer poems and provides the most telling ammunition for

hostile critics.

The primary purpose of this poem, as in "Ocean," was to present an image of the indomitable power of nature. Whittier was seemingly fascinated with this theme, for he returned to it just a year later. "The Frost Spirit" (1830) achieves a sense of urgency and unity lacking in the earlier poem. Conflicting attitudes are present as before, but here they work against each other through natural rhythm and a highly specific and effective choice of images, anticipating such poems as "The Last Walk of Autumn" and "Snow-Bound," and reaching a high degree of dramatic tension. The personification in the first stanza, though it dates the poem and perhaps grates on modern poetic sensibility, is nevertheless compellingly ominous.

He comes,--he comes,--the Frost Spirit comes! You
 may trace his footsteps now
 On the naked woods and the blasted fields and the
 brown hill's withered brow.
 He has smitten the leaves of the gray old trees
 where their pleasant green came forth,
 And the winds, which follow wherever he goes, have
 shaken them down to earth.

Here, perhaps for the first time, Whittier has gone beyond mere imitation of his literary models, to exercise his considerable powers of observation and accurate visualization that would prove his forte in later years. Also, although he was often guilty of technical indifference in his casual use of stanzaic forms, form and content are harmonized in these lines to a degree that should satisfy rigorous criticism.

The suspended beats after the first two iambs, repeated in each stanza, indicate the inevitability of the approach of the terror, and the rush of the next phrase provides a sense of frenzied response. In the second line the alternation of iambic and anapestic feet suggests the pounding of gigantic and irresistible footsteps, while an increase in tempo in the third line, brought about by the greater use of the anapest, gives an impression of their ever nearer approach. In the fourth line the winds in the wake of oppressing force are also suggested in the flowing syllables of the juxtaposed words, "follow wherever."

The forbidding aspect of the image is apparent throughout succeeding stanzas; "the fisherman's sail is stiff with ice," "the dark Norwegian pines have bowed," and the dancing streams are stilled. But a sense of anticipation and even admiration is also present. It is suggested in the suspension of the first line of each stanza and also in the images of "the fires of Hecla" glowing "On the darkly beautiful sky above and the ancient ice below" and the "quiet lake" which will "ring to the skater's heel." In the first four stanzas the image of the Frost Spirit is greeted with a mixture of fear, awe, and anticipation of its accompanying splendor, foreshadowing the marvellous winter imagery of later poems.

The last stanza makes a more explicit judgment of the spirit as one of "evil power," but by the successful opposition of human artifice in "the light of the parlor fire"--

--the same that will irradiate the frozen blizzard of "Snow-Bound"--to natural force, both the conflicting reactions of fear and admiration are preserved. Although hostile, the frost may be challenged and defeated. This challenge is of value in that it compels its human adversaries to "gather closer the circle round, when that firelight dances high." It is thus a force that tends to create a bond between individuals, the members of a family or any other social unit, of warmth and sympathy, symbolized by the parlor-fire. The successful meeting and turning away of the challenge is evident in the final line of the poem as those gathered round the real and symbolic fire "laugh at the shriek of the baffled Fiend as his sounding wing goes by."

This poem thus anticipates "Snow-Bound"; however, the young Whittier emphasized nature's antagonistic force, while, in his mellowed maturity, he placed greater stress on the sympathies binding those who face its challenge. Here the world remains to be conquered; there the conquering force of love is well-established.

3

The poems cited above reveal Whittier's response to the threatening forces of active life and the natural world beyond the detached sphere of the Merrimac Valley, which he associated with the calm retirement and essential aloofness he preferred. And this too finds expression in several early poems. "The Vale of the Merrimac" (1825) sounds one of the essential

chords of Whittier's poetry; in the present and in familiar native scenes, he contends that romance and beauty exist equal or superior to the charms of older, tradition-laden localities more celebrated and "famous in history's story," because "oppression is there--and the hand of the spoiler,/ Regardless of justice or mercy has past [sic] there." The keynote of the poem is sounded in the last lines of the first stanza, in which the glory of these remote regions is minimized:

And their vales may be lovely and pleasant--but never
 Was skiff ever wafted, or wav'd a white sail
 O'er a lovelier wave than my dear native river,
 Or brighter tides roll'd than in Merrimac's vale!

(p. 485)

Each stanza covers a different aspect of the comparative virtues of the remote and the nearby. The cumulative effect is impressive, the developing comparisons are logical and convincing, the language and imagery are specific, and the meter (primarily anapestic with four stresses per line), while commonplace, is not unsuitable for the subject. It is superior to the majority of the poems consigned to the appendix, because it deals with an actual locale. Three stanzas deal respectively with the comparative renown, mildness and romance, and bounty of other valleys and the poet's own, which he counters with the refrain-like but appropriately varied conclusion mentioned above. The last stanza, on the other hand, deals exclusively with the Merrimac and suggests

some of Whittier's most notable qualities, such as his use of specifically indigenous and natural imagery to create scenes of surpassing beauty:

Oh, lovely the scene, when the gray misty vapor
 Of morning is lifted from Merrimac's shore;
 When the fire-fly, lighting his wild gleaming taper,
 Thy dimly seen lowlands comes glimmering o'er;
 When on thy calm surface the moonbeam falls brightly,
 And the dull bird of night is his covert forsaking,
 When the whippoorwill's notes from thy margin sound lightly,
 And break on the sound which thy small waves are making.

Even here we may note the effects of Whittier's selective vision, which in many ways resembled Hawthorne's. The scenes he chooses are those softened by morning mists and moonlit shadows rather than those of full day, enhancing the romantic potential of the picture. However, whereas Hawthorne often used the distorting effects of moonlight, shadow, and mirror-image to express an unwelcome reality invisible to the direct glance (for instance, the undiminished age of Dr. Heidegger's guests, or the pumpkin head of the presumptuous Feathertop), Whittier's purpose seems rather to hide what such a glance might reveal as too harsh and unpalatable. His vision of home, of the Merrimac Vale, of New England is thus a reflection of his impulse toward the imaginative creation of a Utopia, excluding the uncomfortable, the tedious, and the disgusting. But his doing so is more than mere escapism; it involves a desire to express the idyllic potential beneath even the most commonplace surface of life. In spite of threatening realities, the bonds of warmth and sympathy and

natural beauty are also real, and he finds these imaged in the familiarity of place as well as in the intimacy of a firelight gathering, while a storm beats unremittingly about the eaves.

Whittier hoped for the realization of the American Dream. In the poem "Benevolence" (1825) he expresses this dream in direct terms. The first five stanzas review several historical occurrences of benevolent action leading toward the release of various enslaved peoples. Even as an adolescent, Whittier was adamantly opposed to slavery. The next stanza indicates a realization that much remains to be done and takes the form of a supplicatory prayer.

On our fair shore be thy mild presence known;
And every portion of Columbia's land
Be as God's garden with thy blessings sown. (p. 486)

Whittier's American Dream takes the form of a millennial hope in which the harmonious conditions of Eden--"God's garden"--will prevail. But the dream is not to be limited to America alone. This stanza ends with a world-wide hope:

Yea o'er Earth's regions let thy love expand
Till all united are in friendship's sacred band!

The last stanza of the poem presents a Biblical vision of the laying down of instruments of war and foresees a time when "peace, a lasting peace, Throughout the world shall reign."

Both his romantic impulses and his Quaker influence encouraged Whittier's hope of universal harmony. A

similarity to the visionary outlook of Shelley is evident in the lines above, and also a Quaker preoccupation of long standing.¹⁵ But Whittier's approach to the concept of millennial peace is in some senses original. It often seems as though he feels the condition is already existent in embryo at the fireside of home and must extend from there through a series of ever-widening spheres, ultimately embracing the world as a whole. While this outlook may seem to smack of provincialism, it also lends imagistic and symbolic weight to his conception.

The theme of "The Vale of the Merrimac" is repeated in three stanzas from "Moll Pitcher" which were apparently retained as a unit when that poem was rejected by the poet.¹⁵ In the second of the stanzas, scenes of traditional romantic association are listed with their various advantages; the stanza concludes with a ringing tribute to New England's ability to hold the imagination of its "wandering sons." As in later and better poems, Whittier associates this sentiment with the imagination of childhood, thus introducing what we may call the Wordsworthian theme so often found in his poetry. The sky of New England is, to the child's eye, "like a dream of love." Remembering the heightened awareness of childhood, Whittier thinks of his home ground as the special province of romance, and some of his most successful and striking poetry was a result of his effort to recall the idyllic aspects of his boyhood.

The last stanza clarifies this association of childhood and the creative imagination, again with similarity to Wordsworth.

Land of my fathers!--if my name,
 Now humble, and unwed to fame,
 Hereafter burn upon the lip,
 As one of those which may not die,
 If the wild dreams which quicken now
 The throbbing pulse of heart and brow,
 Hereafter take a real form
 Thine be the bard's undying lay,
 The murmur of his praise be thine!¹⁷

It seems clear that the "wild dreams" consisted of an anticipation of poetic achievement and, in the light of Whittier's unacademic, virtually untaught background, the whole tenor of the poem discussed up to this point becomes clear. Becoming a poet meant virtual alienation from the life of his forebears; intense forces of tradition and habit, both internal and external, stood in his way--Quaker and Puritan antagonism to the artistic life and the sophisticated world's hostility to the rise of the rustic. It is no wonder that his dreams intensified the natural inward turning of his imagination and impelled him virtually to remake his world in a more desirable image; to attempt to stamp the world with the impress of his own idyllic vision; and to create a pastoral paradise of the harmonious communication with nature and the human intimacy he had known as a child.

The nature of these "wild dreams" is made more explicit

in another poem, also reprinted in Whittier-Land entitled "I Would Not Lose That Romance Wild." Although naive and effusive--Whittier was at most nineteen when these stanzas were composed--it reveals much about his youthful attitude toward poetry, his source of inspiration, his ambition, and his sense of limitations. Like a true romantic, he bases his artistic impetus in a "high and gifted feeling," synonymous with the romance of the title, a

. . . power that made me fancy's child,
The clime of song revealing.¹⁸

This poem dispels the notion that Whittier did not consider "the serious development of his poetical talents . . . until he was about thirty."¹⁹

It is not certain that Whittier had read Wordsworth by this time, but enough of the theory of the famous Preface to Lyrical Ballads had become known to him that he apparently also felt the poet to be distinguished by the intensity of his responses. Thus the calling was felt, in line with the romantic theory of the poet-prophet, to have been thrust upon him, a result of inspiration or inner compulsion rather than mere choice or the interest of the craftsman in words and sounds and metaphors.

Whittier's estimate of poetry in this poem is very high in spite of his knowledge

. . . that there are those who deem
But lightly of the lyre;--

a reflection, perhaps, of the opposition to education and writing presented by his father, who felt that the vocation was neither in keeping with Quaker practice nor likely to prove remunerative, and perhaps by other members of his family or sect. But poetry lives in spite of neglect or criticism and raises "Above the wreck of meaner things" an "unfading wreath" which outlives temporary scorn. Of his own work he is not so confident, and his apologetic tone is similar to that which he later uttered in the familiar "Proem." Addressing his own "lyre" he says that there may be "No witchery in thy tone," and none of "the lofty harmony/ Which other bards have known." Again the idea arises of a feeling of inferiority and struggle against vast, squelching forces that threaten his rise. He expects neither wealth nor fame from his devotion, but only the establishment of bonds of sympathy through telling

. . . in humble strain,
 The feelings of a heart,
 Which, though not proud, would still disdain
 To bear a meaner part,
 Than that of bending at the shrine
 Where their bright wreaths the muses twine.

It is a humble purpose, restrained by the large admixture of doubt that always troubled Whittier's pursuit of artistic goals.

A longing for recognition, a love of poetry associated with his responses to his native region and childhood's joy, a feeling that both of these were essentially antagonistic to

the easier and perhaps more "Quakerly" course of remaining in the old tracks of his ancestors, and a sense of opposition of external and internal limitations preventing the realization of his dreams are all evident in these early poems, establishing the ground upon which his later and more memorable work would be superimposed. The tendency toward a fearful involvement indicated in his life and work at this early stage is countered by the design of uneasy withdrawal and retirement in the later pattern of his life and writing.

Footnotes for Chapter II

- ¹Flower, Prophet, Seer, and Man, p. 3.
- ²Ibid., pp. 32-33.
- ³Leary, John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 83.
- ⁴"The Conscience in Poetry," p. 17.
- ⁵"Lord Byron," Whittier on Writers and Writing, ed. Edwin Cady and Harry Hayden Clark (Syracuse, 1950), p. 40. Elsewhere Whittier praised Byron for "a power which no other writer ever possessed--a lofty and overmastering intellect. . . ." and the ability "to call up from the unvisited depths of the human heart, feelings too terrible and mighty for our nature." p. 70.
- ⁶Powell, p. 339.
- ⁷"The Conscience in Poetry," p. 17.
- ⁸S. Pickard, Life, p. 102.
- ⁹John Greenleaf Whittier (Boston and New York, 1903), p. 95.
- ¹⁰Carpenter, p. 43.
- ¹¹This line suggests a similar image in Poe's "The City in the Sea," originally written in the same year as "The Doomed City" and also employing vaguely oriental imagery.
- ¹²"The Conscience in Poetry," p. 23.
- ¹³Miller (loc. cit) asserts that this passage was probably the least constructive contribution to emancipation ever made by Whittier, because of the justification it might seem to provide to American southerners who viewed Negroes as brutes whose propensity for violence required forceful restraint. However, Whittier carefully qualifies this image in designating the enraged attacker as "the beast he [the slavekeeper] made," a clause underlined in some editions of the poem.
- ¹⁴Loc. cit.
- ¹⁵John Pollard (p. 178) notes that Whittier regarded Byron and Shelley as heralds of liberty and that their preferences and his for a career were a "dead parallel." He cites quotations from both in their mid-twenties to indicate

their disdain of poetry and admiration of action, government, and moral and political science, matching the stated views of Whittier.

¹⁶The stanzas appeared in the New England Review in 1830 and were included by Samuel Pickard among the uncollected poems reprinted in Whittier-Land (Cambridge, Mass., 1904).

¹⁷Whittier-Land, p. 133.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 130.

¹⁹Whitman Bennett, Whittier, Bard of Freedom (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1941), p. 27.

CHAPTER III

ART FOR LIFE'S SAKE

Central to the problem of understanding Whittier's contribution to our literature is his ambiguous conception of the task of the artist. Like some other romantics, Whittier from time to time scorned the vocation of the artist, and at one point in his young manhood he asserted confidently that the world would know him "in a loftier capacity than as a writer of rhymes."¹ But today, as the abolition struggle recedes into the past, at least partially discredited and all but superseded by racial struggles of fresher vintage, it is as a poet that he is and will be remembered. His pre-occupation with the question of the function of poetry is indicated in the fact that it crops up repeatedly in letters, in his criticism, and in various prose writings. Also it is an informing idea in several of his poems, most notably in two of his longest and best, "The Tent on the Beach" and "Among the Hills." This chapter will concentrate on these two poems as foci of Whittier's concept of the artist's role, presupposing that his most reliable and significant opinions would be most accurately reflected where they are treated with a high degree of achieved artistic success.

From 1833 to the middle fifties, Whittier's poetry was concentrated upon reform and abolition, and by 1850 he was commonly regarded "only as an exuberant abolitionist

versifier."² But by the time he wrote "The Tent on the Beach," (1867) the character of his writing had undergone a marked change. This poem reveals also a definite change in his self-estimate and, perhaps more clearly than anything else he ever said or wrote, the ambiguities he felt concerning his writing. In spite of a lifelong suspicion of art, he recognized himself as

. . . a dreamer born,
 Who, with a mission to fulfill,
 Had left the Muses' haunts to turn
 The crank of an opinion-mill. (p. 243)

It is clear that the recording of these dreams was his first passion, and that his decision to follow "duty" in taking up the cause of abolition represented a turning aside from his natural bent and a willful submergence of artistic sensibility to the demands of the moralist, the reformer, and the preacher.

A letter relating to this passage indicates his clear intention to recover older and, from an artistic standpoint, purer aspirations. Writing to a reader who had complained that these lines placed a low estimate on journalism, Whittier, in the course of making his explanation, declared that "Up to a comparatively recent period my writings have been simply episodic, something apart from the real object and aim of my life."³ He did not clarify this aim, but if we may judge by his most ambitious endeavors of the period immediately preceding this time, "Snow-Bound" and this same "Tent on the

Beach," it is obvious that this "real object" referred to a type of poetry apart from the banalities of the anti-slavery propaganda or any direct attempt to reform, educate, or preach to his readers. Thus he recognized a definite distinction between the persuasive verse of the abolition period and that which even the struggles of those years could not shut out.

Always he had been conscious of neglected elements in his nature; he was, as he declared in "The Tent on the Beach," a solitary auditor of voices which he alone heard and felt a need to translate for grosser ears, and a silent observer of visions he felt called upon to recreate.

For while he wrought with strenuous will
 The work his hands had found to do,
 He heard the fitful music still
 Of winds that out of dream-land blew.
 The din about him could not drown
 What the strange voices whispered down;
 Along his task-field weird processions swept,
 The visionary pomp of stately phantoms stepped. (p. 243)

He found these "dreams" not in the traditional abodes of romance and fantasy, the remote, the alien, or the unreal, where he himself had begun his search long before, but in "The common air," where few others had looked for them.

Such music as the woods and streams
 Sang in his ear he sang aloud;
 In still, shut bays, on windy capes,
 He heard the call of beckoning shapes,
 And, as the gray old shadows prompted him,
 To homely moulds of rhyme he shaped their legends grim.

(p. 243)

At a time when it was standard for American writers to seek material in the fabulous but well-tilled traditions of older cultures, Whittier, perhaps because of a long and apparently culturally impoverished childhood, which his biographers habitually disparage, grew up with an imagination nurtured upon what was at hand. What Hawthorne complained of as a "thinness" of native materials did not seem to bother Whittier, for he had nothing with which to compare them.

In spite of his recovery of his real vocation as an interpreter of the beauty concealed in ordinary life, Whittier's attitude toward art remained ambiguous. The introduction to "The Tent" exemplifies the inevitable note of apology which creeps so often into his later work:

I would not sin, in this half-playful strain,--
 Too light, perhaps for serious years, though born
 Of the enforced leisure of slow pain,--
 Against the pure ideal which has drawn
 My feet to follow its far-shining gleam. (p. 242)

He recognizes the ideal he pursues as pure, yet he feels it may also be unworthy because remote from simple moral persuasion. He feels it necessary to excuse himself on the grounds of poor health, implying that he ought to be doing something more strenuous and "noble"--to devote himself to causes rather than art. Although most of his life, except for the brief period of active abolitionism, was primarily dedicated to the production of verse, Whittier found it necessary from time to time to deprecate artistic endeavor in comparison to

simple good deeds.

It has been suggested that his self-deprecation was merely an exercise in mock humility, the traditional pose of the "simple bard," who negates his performance while reveling in the applause it has won for him. No doubt this is at least partially true; Perry Miller suggested that Whittier employed guile "most systematically in building up the legend of his guileless simplicity."⁴ Leo Marx has observed a tradition among American fictional narrators who begin by "impulsively dissociating themselves from the world of sophisticated Europe, ideas, learning, in a word, the world, and speaking in accents of rural ignorance."⁵ Whittier would then seem to be merely typical of American writers and of poets in general, but one cannot escape the feeling that, at least at times, he convinced himself as well as others that his guilelessness, his simplicity, and his suspicion of art were more than a mere pose.

There is, for instance, the evidence of his temporary intention to cease writing poetry.

In 1833 he wrote to Mrs. Sigourney of his decision to look to politics rather than literature for lasting fame:

The truth is, I love poetry, with a love as warm, as fervent, as sincere, as any of the more gifted worshipers at the temple of the Muses. I consider its gift as something holy and above the fashion of the world. In the language of Frances Bacon, 'The Muses are in league with Time,' . . . but I feel and know that

'To other chords than mine belong
The breathing of immortal song.

And in consequence, I have been compelled to trust to other

and less pleasant pursuits for distinction and profit. Politics is the only field now open for me, and there is something inconsistent in the character of a poet and a modern politician.⁶

It was during this year that Whittier felt he had "knocked Pegasus on the head,"⁷ and in 1837 he wrote to Lucy Hooper that works such as theirs would be short-lived.⁸ Undoubtedly readers and critics have been influenced negatively by Whittier's tendency to minimize his own efforts. The dates of these statements, however, are certainly significant; they cannot be taken as representing his final or most considered judgment on his own composition.

The earliest of the passages, written while he was considering a political career which never materialized, might be regarded as an attempt to talk himself into abandoning a course which seemed long, arduous, uncertain, and unprofitable; the words are immediately followed by the very un-Quaker-like and unidealistic assertion that he wanted fame during his lifetime or not at all.⁹

Whittier's statement to Lucy Hooper was also accompanied by vital qualifications. The works mentioned as perishable and doomed were specified as "the hurried sketches and 'bits of poetry' which thou and myself and a score of others who might be named have ever written."¹⁰ His specific intent was to encourage Miss Hooper to turn her pen to the creation of a longer and weightier poem of less ephemeral import. Though he may have thought at the time that he had

abandoned his poetical aspirations, in 1837 almost all of his best poetry lay far in the future, his political ambitions were all but ended, and he would soon be virtually retiring from public life altogether in order to write poetry in and among, and mainly about his first and most lasting love, the hills and people and old times of northern Massachusetts.

Thus the blow suffered by Pegasus in 1833 proved to have been far from fatal. Poetry would not let him alone. It obviously exercised a profound and obsessive hold upon him that was far deeper than his casual self-evaluation indicates. This view is validated in a letter written during a particularly trying period, when poor health and other problems made composition difficult. He wrote to James T. Fields in connection with the publication of "Songs of Labor," "I have had no leisure when in tolerable health for any polishing of rhymes. I suppose under such circumstances I ought not to have made any, but I could not help it."¹¹

The apparent indifference of some of his judgments is at odds not only with his unflagging output, but also with the admiration and seriousness evinced in other passages. He once said that to attempt a poem without being "consecrated to the sacred interests of religion and humanity would be a criminal waste of life."¹² However such a statement might be regarded by twentieth-century criticism, it is at least suggestive of a serious attitude toward art, belying his own

self-disparagement. In general it may be said that his attitudes reflect the perennial conflict between the artistic sensibility and Yankee-Quaker suspicion of the esthetic realm.

Considering his background and personal limitations it is probably remarkable that Whittier ever became a poet at all. Color-blind, insensitive to tone, taught to frown on music and song, denied all but the rudiments of education, hopelessly isolated from anything suggesting consciously literary or cultural influence, and dedicated or at least basically sympathetic to religious views that barred all that hinted of ostentation, vanity, or sensuous allure, it is not to be wondered at "that he turned out so much that is faulty, but that now and then he attained such exquisite grace."¹³ And it is probably no wonder that he should have felt at times a discomfoting desire to dam or severely inhibit the virtual flood of numbered words that poured from him. While the poet was yet in his teens, his father had protested to A. W. Thayer of the Haverhill Gazette, who was encouraging the idea of schooling, that "it was contrary to Friends' custom to acquire the polish of literary culture."¹⁴ There is little doubt that his conscientious son never quite escaped this conviction, as frequent humble references to his verse testify. In a letter to the thirtieth anniversary celebration of the American Anti-Slavery Society, he admitted that he was "not insensible to literary reputation," but he

added, "I set a higher value on my name as appended to the Anti-Slavery Declaration of 1833 than on the title-page of any book."¹⁵ Although he felt the poet's calling to be a high one, the calling to be a man, he was quite sure, was higher, and he did not wish to miss the best that he could attain.

Also indicative of Whittier's distrust of art is his supposed inattention to matters of style. Although he composed poetry with difficulty and revised intensively, his willingness to be advised as to the selection of a word or a phrase, even at times by persons of no special literary competence, is evidence of a lingering feeling that inordinate emphasis on style and technique is not entirely justifiable. In the most extensive existing study of Whittier's versification, Gay Wilson Allen classified it as fifty to one hundred years behind Emerson's, and asserted that there was no evidence in his work of experimentation in technique. The question of organic composition never occurred to Whittier; he simply fitted his material to forms ready at hand, primarily four-stress couplets, ballad meters, and iambic pentameter.¹⁶ Later critics have questioned these propositions, however, as applying to the whole body of Whittier's works. Winfield Scott called Whittier "a man with something to say who became aware of the importance of craftsmanship."¹⁷ George Arms and more recent critics have detailed instances of Whittier's skillful tailoring of the

forms he used in his best work to meet his own requirements.¹⁸

Though aware of the duty of the artist to his art and the sense of artistic vocation, Whittier remained uncertain as to whether this vocation was ultimately concerned with the creation of an imaginative experience or simple motivation to action and holiness. Many have seen him as wholly in the grip of the latter conception, but he is often no more overtly didactic than his American contemporaries,¹⁹ or even than the eminent romantic and Victorian poets of England. The opinion of critics is divided on the matter of Whittier's didacticism, although one suspects that many of them, as a result of the widespread circulation of his hymns and anti-slavery pieces, have simply taken it for granted, without examining thoroughly his work as a whole.²⁰

The didactic label is often too loosely applied. John Pickard attributes didacticism to several recurring themes used by Whittier: the value of domestic emotions, the rewards of true love, the innocence of childhood, the necessity of social equality, and the nobility of ethical action.²¹ Pickard also criticizes these as representing stock ideas of the nineteenth century. One notes that these themes are essentially positive, while the vision of our age tends to be negative, and, recalling the fate of early nineteenth century American pessimists, one is forced to wonder whether any writer admired in his lifetime really evades the "stock ideas" of his age. It is also questionable whether it is

intrinsically more desirable to express negative stock ideas than positive ones. But even if these questions should be answered in the affirmative, in conformity to contemporary ideas, it is still debatable whether these themes or topics are essentially either didactic or dated. Domestic emotions, the innocence of childhood, and social equality are quite obviously viable concerns of twentieth century literature. The fact is that no theme is in itself didactic in an undesirable sense, nor is it, except in rare instances, usually in connection with artificial and obviously dated conventions, the exclusive province of any age or century. Didacticism lies not in what an author says, nor in his point of view, but rather in the failure to present his material so that his ideas emerge from it and are tested by it; it is a characteristic of form rather than of content.

It is true that Whittier was frequently guilty of detached direct statement, not because of what he had to say, but because he was impatient with indirect statement. Realizing that his audience was largely unsophisticated, he was very likely guilty at times of writing down to its level. One finds, for instance, a plethora of soulless and effusive remembrances of obscure figures, but also the rigidly honed criticism of "Ichabod." In the categories mentioned above are "Songs of Labor," "In School Days," and "The Christian Slave," in which domesticity, childhood innocence, and social equality are treated with unconvincing banality or

exaggerated fervor. But these may be contrasted with "Snow-Bound," which deals with the first two themes in simple and exalted dignity, and "Letter from a Missionary," in which the selfish refusal to admit social equality is condemned with effective ironic detachment. Not unlike Lowell, perhaps, Whittier felt more comfortable when he wrote to serve the causes of moral and spiritual uplift and reform, and he was most anxious that his readers get the message.

2

Frequently, however, he was able to write so as to please the uncommon as well as the average reader, as in "The Tent on the Beach."

The pattern of this poem, loosely related to that of the Decameron and The Canterbury Tales, shows evidence of careful craftsmanship. It represents an extreme example of a symbolic pattern that had become quite habitual for Whittier, an illumination of a world within a world, where the dreaming romantic assumes the dominant role; a detached and protected situation among congenial companions becomes the ideal society where visions and dreams of the ideal and the beauty of the commonplace reign supreme. This pattern occurs again and again--a symbolic departure from the physical world, followed by its dreamy evocation in the form of recollections of childhood and old tales. These

recollections underscore the esthetic potential of everyday experience. The camp on the beach is related to the winter fireside; either may provide the necessary catalyst to withdrawal. A careless reading may easily miss the subtle recreation of actuality in a symbolic and indirect form, but the clue is given in the mention of specific times--dawns and sunsets--congenial to the inward look, and the "silent throng," invisible to the physical eye, but filled with significance for the interpretation of time and eternity, the "vaster mystery" they represent.

This invitation to a world inside a world is followed by an intensely detailed description. As in "Snow-Bound," Whittier's ideal world is realistically embodied.

Behind them, marshes, seamed and crossed
 With narrow creeks, and flower-embossed,
 Stretched to the dark oak wood, whose leafy arms
 Screened from the stormy East the pleasant inland farms.
 At full of tide their bolder shore
 Of sun-bleached sand the waters beat;
 At ebb, a smooth and glistening floor
 They touched with light, receding feet.
 Northward a green bluff broke the chain
 Of sand-hills; southward stretched a plain
 Of salt grass, with a river winding down,
 Salt-whitened, and beyond the steeples of the town. (p. 242)

The farms are "screened away," and the site of the imaginative recreation is beyond the steeples, whose bells sound only occasionally above the noise of wind and tide, the elemental forces of nature, recalling the marks of another world of semi-isolation, in "Snow-Bound," where

No church-bell lent its Christian tone
To the savage air. (p. 400)

"The Tent on the Beach" is a more carefully wrought achievement than it is usually credited with being.²² Intensely vivid description alternates with masterful handling of colloquial conversational verse in the dramatic frame of the poem, and several of the narratives are also among Whittier's best in the presentation of character and thematic elements. The frame setting is only one unifying element. Others are evident in the progression of time, detailing, as in "Snow-Bound," an evening's talk around a fireside; the question of the function of art, recurring from time to time in the conversation of the vacationers and also indirectly touched upon in several of the included poems; and the scheme of the narratives themselves.

With the setting established we are introduced to the small but congenial group of friends, the Man of Books, the Editor or Reader, and the Traveller, each minutely described and forming an intimate circle. A human element is also present in the background, consisting of other vacationers, mostly youthful and viewed through the illusions of age as innocent, uninterruptedly happy, and in love. Special mention is made of "A flute-voiced woman," occasionally heard singing in a nearby tent, who later enlivens the circle of friends by her welcome intrusion at their fireside. She introduces the element of femininity that often represents

for Whittier the softening and enlarging influence of the imagination, of art.

Setting and company are thus conducive to a mood of intimate communication and renewal in this out-of-the-way place, "Untouched as yet by wealth and pride." The Editor, who is of course Whittier himself, is urged--though he admits he needs little coaxing--to read a few of his manuscripts, which he does "with secret pride" and no little anxiety:

His pale face flushed from eye to beard,
With nervous cough his throat he cleared,
And, in a voice so tremulous it betrayed
The anxious fondness of an author's heart, he read.

(p. 245)

After this introduction, Gothic and realistic colonial legends, reflections on the primitive life of the Indian, romances, anecdotes of religious and upright men, and meditations on nature--virtually all the themes that held Whittier's attention--are presented in a variety of modes. Each tale is followed by a linking interlude that preserves the dramatic context of the setting on the beach while the group muses on the stories and on the ideas they bring to mind. After two narratives of a moralistic bent, the question of the function of art is raised by the girl, who has by this time crept to the Reader's fireside, and who questions the act of prying into ". . . the secrets which belong/ Only to God," as in the preceding tale, "The Grave

by the Lake." The Reader attempts to settle her fears, but the Man of Books grows impatient with the metaphysical turn of the conversation and makes a plea for common realism, encouraging the poet to

'. . . ride once more
Your hobby at his old free pace.
But let him keep, with step discreet,
The solid earth beneath his feet.
In the great mystery which around us lies,
The wisest is a foll, the fool Heaven-helped is wise.'

(p. 249)

The Traveller then interjects a claim resembling the idea of art for art's sake, upbraiding the Reader in a friendly way for following an "austere school" and subjecting art to morality. "'With conscience keen from exercise,'" he chides,

'And chronic fear of compromise,
You check the free play of your rhymes, to clap
A moral underneath, and spring it like a trap.' (p. 249)

The Reader is defended by the girl, who states the opposing view:

'Better so
Than bolder flights that know no check;
Better to use the bit, than throw
The reins all loose on fancy's neck.
The liberal range of Art should be
The breadth of Christian liberty. (p. 249)

These lines have been accepted as representing Whittier's total view, but such an interpretation loses sight of the dramatic context, in which Whittier is, of course, the

progenitor of both sides of the debate. It is significant that he keeps himself, i.e., the Reader, apart from direct participation in the colloquy at this point, suggesting that he recognized the merits of both views and remained in a state of conflict. However, he seems to accept the girl's description of his narrative practice as marked by "losses which are truest gains." Tacit sympathy for her views is also suggested in the fact that the Traveller himself bows graciously to her judgment, with the query,

'Who ever yet a case appealed
Where beauty's judgment had been heard? (p. 249)

Thus beauty judges finally for restraint and usefulness within the bounds of "Christian liberty," and we may regard this evaluation as representing the general tendency of Whittier's esthetic theory. But he does not conform slavishly to it, for he includes in the scheme of "The Tent" such unmoralized tales as "The Changeling," "Kallundborg Church," "The Dead Ship of Harpswell," and "The Palatine," and still others in which a moral intent rises naturally from the narrative. The fact that these tales follow the colloquy on the function of art is also significant. It is as though the Reader, i.e., Whittier, is consciously heeding the check to the moralizing tendency which he himself has dramatically supplied.

The tendency to apologize, either in his own person, or through the dramatic commentary, continues, however,

throughout the linking materials. Of "The Madis of Attitash," he says,

'. . . I hardly dare
To venture on its theme worn out;
What seems so sweet by Doon and Ayr
Sounds simply silly hereabout.' (p. 253)

Following this piece, the Book-man and the Traveller chide him, a bachelor, for singing of love. The latter asks mockingly,

'How should he know the blindfold lad
From one of Vulcan's forge-boys?' (p. 254)

"The Palatine," a story of the fabled appearance of a ghost-ship, is introduced casually as something

'Which one midsummer day I caught
In Narrangansett Bay, for lack of fish.' (p. 258)

Returning, after several unmoralized tales, to "Abraham Davenport," he refers to the previous discussion, mentioning that this story will be marked by

The sort of sidelong moral squint
Our friend objects to, which has grown,
I fear, a habit of my own. (p. 259)

The apologetic modesty expressed by the Reader is partially belied by the "secret pride" he felt in opening his portfolio.²⁴ Whittier reveals in this poem, perhaps unconsciously, his somewhat anomalous attitude toward his writing, a desire to excel and receive applause and at the

same time to shrug it off, as it were, as just something he "ripped off" in his spare time.

A loose but unifying direction of thought is also evident in the total pattern of the narratives, a large number of which deal with Gothic, supernatural, and metaphysical themes, invoking guilt, fear, and a questioning of the ultimate purpose of life. These themes find a certain limited resolution in the final poems. "Abraham Davenport: relates with quiet humor how simple trust enables Davenport to continue with his duty during an eclipse of the sun. This seemingly supernatural event strikes hypocritical fear into most of his colleagues, who tremble with the thought that the Day of Judgment is upon them. Davenport alone remains calm and able to carry out his "present duty," recognizing his "Lord's command/ To occupy till He come." His confident and common-sense faith is summed up in his injunction to his fellows to

'Let God do His work, we will see to ours.
Bring in the candles.' (p. 260)

Thereupon the colonial council continues with the solemn duty of dealing with

An act to amend an act to regulate
The shad and alewife fisheries.

The final lyric, "The Worship of Nature," brings us back to nature as an influence benign and docile, rather

than malevolent and unpredictable. A universal forgiveness is suggested, providing a fitting resolution, not only to the narrative scheme, but also to the debate over the nature and function of art. The theme of this lyric, that

. . . prayer is made, and praise is given,
By all things near and far; (p. 261)

is echoed in the words of the Traveller in the concluding stanzas of the poem as a whole:

'Allah il Allah! He hath praise
From all things.' (p. 261)

Recalling the Traveller's championship of artistic freedom, a final resolution of the question is implied, including the secular as well as the sanctified. Since nature, in Whittier's view, is from God and points to the divine, its sincere representation, even apart from directly moral ends, is also a part of His service.

The poem ends fittingly at midnight, the day is over, and the group turns sadly to thoughts of the coming day. The world beyond the retreat must be faced again, but life has been renewed by this "escape" to a world within a world, and by the knowledge that it may be renewed again in the imagination:

On sadly said, 'At break of day
We strike our tent and go our way.'
But one made answer cheerily, 'Never fear,
We'll pitch this tent of ours in type another year.'

(p. 261)

The dream-evocation receives its first clear statement in a poem addressed to his sister Elizabeth and accompanying a copy of The Supernaturalism of New England. This volume consisted of prose sketches written in the early 1840's. Even at this time, when Whittier's interests were still primarily directed to the abolition struggle, he maintained a strong interest in what might be termed a "purer," non-propagandistic approach to literature. The note of apology, however, is already present, though somewhat less pronounced than in "The Tent on the Beach" and other poems written during and after the war.

He writes, apropos of the volume of supernatural sketches, that "the wise and sage" may "Turn coldly from my playful page," but he believes Elizabeth will understand his meaning and purpose, and he seems to derive confidence from his realization of her comprehension and sympathy:

I know that thou wilt judge aright
Of all which makes the heart more light,
Or leads one star-gleam to the night
Of clouded Melancholy. ("To My Sister," p. 291)

Whittier has been accused of evading the harsh, of writing merely "pretty" poetry, unfailingly positive, and thus unjustifiably ignoring the seamy side of life. The charge is certainly understandable in an age when the negative outlook is a prime criterion in evaluating what passes

for intellectually sincere art, but it is not necessarily an absolute requirement, nor is Whittier unaware of the opposition of negative elements; he chooses, however, to raise a barrier against them by accentuating the positive, which he finds behind "the moonlight gate of dreams." The suggestion in the first stanza that he writes to make "the heart more light" implies a heart heavy to begin with, but simple escapism is not the ultimate reason for his identification of the purpose of poetry and romance. This reason becomes clearer in the second stanza. He realizes that Elizabeth,

. . . with clear discerning eyes,
Shalt rightly read the truth which flies
Beneath the quaintly masking guise
Of wild and wizard fancies.

Romance thus becomes an aid to the understanding, a device for perceiving beauty and mystery beneath the dull exterior of the commonplace and taken-for-granted events of daily life. Here, on this ground, he asserts, have unfolded all the wonders of the ages, which may be evident to anyone who opens himself to perceiving them.

Like Wordsworth, he associates this knowledge with the imaginative life of childhood, as in the lovely, muted images of the third stanza:

Lo! once again our feet we set
On still green wood-paths, twilight wet,
By lonely brooks, whose waters fret
The roots of spectral beeches;

Again the hearth-fire glimmers o'er
 Home's whitewashed wall and painted floor,
 And young eyes widening to the lore
 Of faery-folks and witches.

These images, twilit nature, the brooks of Essex County, the hearth-fire, and the remembered stories of wonder, are frequently evoked in the poems of his later years, touched by the glory of unfolding experience; but as with Wordsworth, their full significance was not evident to the child.

Care, pain, death, and sober manhood stand between the mature Whittier and the remembrance of the child's spontaneous awakening to love and beauty. But realizing the intrinsic value of the childlike vision, he attempts, through the efforts of his imagination, to preserve or rekindle this spontaneity. The "dreamer born" regretted the interlude of his politically active years,

A weary work of tongue and pen,
 A long, harsh strife with strong-willed men, (p. 391)

and turned away in relief to the making of what he yet spoke of as only "an idle rhyme," based on his early memories:

To pluck a flower from childhood's clime,
 Or listen, at Life's noonday chime,
 For the sweet bells of Morning!

This poem is notable not only for its statement of Whittier's attitude toward art, but also for sincerity, simple colloquial diction, and a personal tone unique in American letters up to the time of its writing. This is not mere

literary imitation, but the genuine utterance of a man nourished on native materials and personal contact with rustic life and resistant nature. His early assertion of the supremacy of native wonders over those of more celebrated lands is, at least by implication, reiterated here. One may speculate that it was not merely for reasons of health that Whittier refrained from travel abroad when this became possible. Significantly, he once wrote to Emerson, "And what folly to run abroad over the Old World, when all that is beautiful may be seen from our own doorstep!"²⁴

A further statement of the function of art occurs in the prologue to "Amy Wentworth," written in 1861, during the dark early days of the war. The note of apology is accentuated here because of Whittier's realization of the contemporary horror; yet the very awfulness of the war also provides a reason for contemplating the simple and beautiful. In Whittier's case it seems to enforce such contemplation. Although the times seem too momentous for the "play of art," he feels it necessary to "keep sweet,/ If so we may, our hearts." There is a need to recollect something besides barbarism and madness and strife, to recall the fact that these things are not ends in themselves but acts intended to conserve the values of a bygone and more gracious life. The "household melodies" and "pleasant pictures" he seeks to sing and portray are calculated to help

. . . hold against the hosts of night
And slavery all our vantage-ground of light. (p. 80)

This poem also belongs with those that represent Whittier's construction of a retreat away from reality. The glow of the hearth-fire irradiates the prologue, but the primary image, leading up to the narrative itself, is "Of winds in the woods, and waves on pebbled bounds." The legend of Amy Wentworth is simple and perhaps less impressive than the quiet dignity of the prologue's couplets, but it is not without elements that bind it to those introductory lines. The picture of the aristocratic heroine as she dreams of the man she loves is quite fine in the traditional ballad manner:

She sings, and smiling, hears her praise
 But dreams the while of one
 Who watches from his sea-blown deck
 The icebergs in the sun.

She questions all the winds that blow,
 And every fog-wreath dim,
 And bids the sea-birds flying north
 Bear messages to him. (p. 80)

Her beloved, a seafaring man, is naturally of a lower class, but although "high and low mate ill," she loves him anyway, for "love has never known a law/ Beyond its own sweet will!"

In its complementary relationship to the prologue, the narrative assumes a further dimension. The poet has announced his purpose as that of keeping hearts sweet and holding against slavery the "vantage-ground of light." Light is opposed to slavery, the essence of which is that it places a false valuation on individuals; as the poem suggests, the existence of social classes also supports this false valuation,

but light, which is love, overrides it. In Whittier's idealizing vision, the realization of the American Dream depends upon making this light prevail, but war is a threat to stability and democratic progress. Thus the ballad, as a symbolic presentation of the unimportance of rank, has a deeper relationship to the prologue than might be superficially evident; it is a reminder of the basic aims of a society intent upon making maximum room for the dignity of the individual.

4

The narrative portion of "Among the Hills" has ostensibly the same theme, but its more detailed, denser presentation is carried further, to the climax in marriage of the romance between the charming city-bred lady and the rustic farmer whose habits have been transformed by her example and instruction. As in the Pygmalion theme, he is no longer fit for the life he knew before she entered the scene, unless she will share it with him. He accuses her of regarding him merely as

'The plaything of your summer sport,
The spells you weave around me
You cannot at your will undo,
Nor leave me as you found me. (p. 87)

The lady herself is described in lines reminiscent of Wordsworth's "Phantom of Delight," as complete in beauty, capable in her domestic duties, and possessed of an impalpable, mystical charm beyond either physical beauty or simple utility:

Her air, her smile, her motions, told
 Of womanly completeness;
 A music as of household songs
 Was in her voice of sweetness.

Not fair alone in curve and line,
 But something more and better,
 The secret charm eluding art,
 Its spirit, not its letter. (p. 86)

The prelude is generally conceded to be one of Whittier's finest works. Sharp images and diction, a flexible pattern of shifting moods, and realistic portraiture are combined in a harmonious whole that vies with the best reflective blank verse of the romantic period. It also contains perhaps the fullest statement of Whittier's commitment to art and his feeling of the emptiness of lives dead to the influences of the dreams he loved and the beauty he saw all about him.

The ever-present note of apology ends on a note of ambiguity, as if Whittier had second thoughts:

I lay aside grave themes, and idly turn
 The leaves of memory's sketch-book, dreaming o'er
 Old summer pictures of the quiet hills,
 And human life, as quiet, at their feet.

And yet not idly all. (p. 84)

In spite of this disclaimer it would be difficult to imagine a graver theme than that of the prelude, in which Whittier takes a stern look at a very un-idyllic aspect of New England life. This piece is thus, in a sense, a companion or a complement to the gracious and graceful pastoral vision of

"Snow-Bound." The intent of the two poems is much the same, but here he portrays lives "Blind to the beauty everywhere revealed," while there he illustrates a full realization of that beauty with a resulting harmony.

"Among the Hills" exposes the central conflict Whittier felt between the Puritan ethic, especially in its social and economic sense, and the romance of the commonplace which that ethic was prone to overlook. The prelude presents a picture of rural life without the invigoration of fancy, spirit, art, or sensibility in terms as bitterly indicting as those of Twain or Norris; Whittier shows himself capable of the sternest kind of realism in describing the other side of rural life, "Where love is wanting" to soothe "the grind of toil," and

. . . the eye and ear
And heart are starved amidst the plenitude
Of nature. (p. 84)

He recollects " . . . old homesteads, where no flower/ Told
that the spring had come," and neither "tree or vine . . .

. . . cast the tremulous shadow of its leaves
Across the curtainless windows, from whose panes
Fluttered the signal rags of shiftlessness. (p. 84)

The interiors were just as bad, "bookless, pictureless," with unwashed floors piled with rubbish, the habitat of "Shrill, querulous women," and "sour and sullen men,/ Untidy, loveless," prematurely old,

With scarce a human interest save their own
 Monotonous round of small economies,
 Or the poor scandals of the neighborhood. (p. 84)

Blind to the external loveliness of nature, as well as
 to the spirit shining through it--"The sacramental mystery of
 the woods"--they are no less blind to the essence of the
 worship to which they pay hypocritical lip-service:

Church-goers, fearful of the unseen Powers,
 But grumbling over pulpit-tax and pew-rent,
 Saving, as shrewd economists, their souls
 And winter pork with the least possible outlay
 Of salt and sanctity; in daily life
 Showing as little actual comprehension
 Of Christian charity and love and duty,
 As if the Sermon on the Mount had been
 Outdated like a last year's almanac. (p. 85)

The language is direct and sharply colloquial; harsh tones
 emphasize the squalor, described in detail piled upon detail,
 of human waste and ignorance. The notion that Whittier
 thought only of the sweet and harmonious and charming as fit
 subject matter for poetry, or that he limited himself to
 verse of unvaried tonal qualities, is thoroughly exploded in
 these lines.

Whittier was, of course, in many ways sympathetic with
 the puritan ethic of work and frugality, and he often seems
 to adopt the anti-intellectual, anti-esthetic attitude that
 is at least partly representative of the common-sense Yankee
 tradition toward written, pictorial, or musical expression;
 these misgivings are evident in his apologetic approach to
 those poems which are not calculated to effect any direct

social or moral end. But he also recognized that attitudes of esthetic appreciation are fundamentally related to the appreciation of real life, and could even be used to develop a sense of the latter; it is with this "art of reality" that his greater poems are concerned.

In this poem his purpose is to

Invite the eye to see and heart to feel
The beauty and the joy within their reach,--
Home, and home loves, and the beatitudes
Of nature free to all. (p. 85)

The utilitarian purpose is thus not absent, as he recognizes in declaring that his opening of the past is not all idle, but he cannot be blamed of unworthy didacticism, for his purpose grows and expands in the prelude in an organic vision of sense and form. He seems to recognize here that not only slaves are prisoners. Even an Essex county farmer may be enslaved if he fails to recognize the possibility of being

Proud of field-lore and harvest craft, and . . .
All their fine possibilities. (p. 84)

Toward the aim of inculcating such pride, he invites "the poor prisoner" of his own narrowly selfish horizons to feast "At Nature's table . . . With joy and wonder." Thus, waited upon by "all harmonies/ Of sound, form, color, motion," he shall become, not a prisoner, but a

. . . princely guest, whether in soft attire
Of leisure clad, or the coarse frock of toil.

A man should be, and recognize himself as,

. . . more precious than the gold of Ophir.
 Sacred, inviolate, unto whom all things
 Should minister, as outward types and signs
 Of the eternal beauty which fulfills
 The one great purpose of creation, Love,
 The sole necessity of Earth and Heaven! (p. 85)

The end of art as of all else is the good of man and the good of individual men. In all his writings Whittier keeps his eye upon this purpose. A skeptical age may pretend to think such a doctrine naive, but only the most perverse and self-seeking cynicism will fail to find it worthwhile.

The ballad itself illustrates the enlargement of spiritual horizons through art. Influenced by the developed sensibilities of his attractive visitor, the simple, nameless farmer of the poem

. . . learns the meaning of the hills
 He dwelt from childhood under. (p. 88)

In the last three stanzas, Whittier dwells upon the meaning of the idyllic situation of the farmer and his town-bred wife in what seems to be an overtly and crudely attached piece of moralizing.

And, musing on the tale I heard
 'T were well, thought I, if often
 To rugged farm-life came the gift
 To harmonize and soften;

If more and more we found the troth
 Of fact and fancy plighted,
 And culture's charm and labor's strength
 In rural homes united,--

The simple life, the homely hearth,
 With beauty's sphere surrounding,
 And blessing toil where toil abounds
 With graces more abounding. (p. 89)

If one limits the narrative to a single level of meaning the charge of didacticism is warranted. If Whittier's farmers had had to depend upon taking sophisticated women to wife in order to realize the potential beauty of rugged rustic life, few indeed would ever be able to indulge the opportunity, and we are left with mere sentimentality. But recalling the circumstances of his own life, we must realize that the harmonizing gift need involve no such improbable circumstance. Whittier realized a debt, perhaps, to his mother and sister Elizabeth for his own perception of beauty in the commonplace, but both were country-girls born and bred. The ballad thus takes on an allegorical significance, in the light of the prelude. The charming farm-wife is a kind of objective correlative of the artistic insight Whittier finds lacking in all too many of the penny-pinching, narrow-visioned descendants of the puritans. She represents the "fancy" that might be plighted to lifeless economic facts, and the beauty that may surround even simple life.

Ignorance of the "art" that existed in natural surroundings and in simple human relationships, and which is always evident to the perceptive eye and heart, he could not condone. His idea of the function of literature, of his own mission as a poet, was, in its most esthetically developed

sense, to reveal this "beauty of the commonplace" to eyes so clouded, so blind, or so preoccupied as to be insensitive to its existence. Obviously, such blindness was not proper for the inheritors of new world splendor and the precursors of the freemen of the future, as these are described toward the end of the prelude:

Our yeoman should be equal to his home
Set in the fair, green valleys, purple walled,
A man to match his mountains, not to creep
Dwarfed and abased below them. (p. 85)

The picture is not entirely pessimistic. Whittier sees himself as a prophet of an age when the common man will recognize his heritage; a parallel with Whitman is evident, as he speaks of a

. . . Golden Age, whose light is of the dawn,
And not of sunset, forward, not behind.

Beauty was everywhere for Whittier and, unable to resist its appeal, he converted its appreciation and expression into a joyful duty. But he also recognized, at least at times, "That beauty, in and of itself, is good," as he says in the poem, "To Avis Keene" (1850), upon receiving a basket of sea-mosses.²⁵ The most worthy beauty, for Whittier, is natural, a gift of God, rather than that inspired and created by artists. The gift of "ocean flowers" strikes him as a reminder of the universality of natural beauty, "Forever teaching us" delight in creation.²⁶

Whittier's view of art remains utilitarian, even when not committed to a clearly attainable moral purpose. Art is a servant of creation and of the Creator, inasmuch as it may reveal more clearly the world's beauty and God's goodness. This appears to be Whittier's essential attitude to literature of primary value, i.e., other than the propagandistic poetry which he recognized as inferior in aiming at a political and social, rather than at a primarily "spiritual," good. Therefore, art should concentrate on beauty:

Beauty is goodness; ugliness is sin:
 Art's place is sacred: nothing foul therein
 May crawl or tread with bestial feet profane.

("An Artist of the Beautiful, p. 216)

As a sacred thing, art is a form of service, and Whittier reconciles predilections for both.

But beauty need not be sought only among the esoteric and alien; it may be found everywhere. It was not excluded from the province of the "farm-wagon and buckboard of verse," as Whittier called his own. He supported this belief sincerely and eloquently by constantly evoking the esthetic potential of the farmyard, the domestic hearth, common labor, and the unsung fields and streams he loved. His buckboards were often constructed of sturdy material and may yet provide transport for a willing reader.

Footnotes for Chapter III

¹S. Pickard, Whittier-Land, p. 4. Whittier italicized the last five words.

²Carpenter, John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 228.

³Pollard, Friend to Man, p. 331.

⁴"The Conscience in Poetry," p. 9.

⁵The Machine in the Garden, p. 109.

⁶S. Pickard, Life, p. 101.

⁷Ibid., p. 171.

⁸Ibid., p. 211

⁹Ibid., p. 102. One is reminded of Tennyson's youthful assertion, made at about the same time and quoted in Jerome Hamilton Buckley, The Victorian Temper (New York, 1951), p. 68: "I mean to be famous," he had said to his brother. But unlike Whittier, Tennyson, in a milieu more receptive to art and artists, never imagine himself as becoming famous through any means but poetry. He was fully prepared to spend a requisite time in apprenticeship during the silent years of 1832-1842, with the restful grand success of the revised volume of his early poems.

¹⁰S. Pickard, Life, p. 211.

¹¹Ibid., I, 350.

¹²Leary, John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 86.

¹³More, "Whittier the Poet," p. 30.

¹⁴S. Pickard, Life, I, 53.

¹⁵Carpenter, p. 126.

¹⁶American Prosody, pp. 127-129.

¹⁷"Poetry in America," p. 271.

¹⁸It should also be noted, in Whittier's defense, that the "literary" elements of his style were common to greater poets of his age. Arms has established the fact that even with respect to diction and form, in spite of Wordsworth's

theoretical emphasis on colloquial speech, the English romantics are closer to the Augustans and the American genteel tradition than to either the seventeenth or the twentieth century. P. 3.

¹⁹ Lowell, for example, freely admitted he had not learned "the distinction 'twix singing and preaching."

²⁰ Arms feels that didacticism was probably not Whittier's main trouble, at least no more than his background would lead us to expect, and somewhat perplexingly asserts that "In theory he does not incline toward it at all." P. 36.

²¹ John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 51.

²² S. Pickard (Life, II, 507) records the fact that Whittier thought "The Tent" better than "Snow-Bound."

²³ Elsewhere, also Whittier confesses to the pride and anxiety of authorship. Pollard (p. 258) quotes his reply to Fields' appreciative mention of "Barbara Freitchie" as follows: "It was kind and like thyself to tell me that my rhyme found much approval. It is only when they are blamed or praised that we fully realize how much we love these bantlings of ours."

²⁴ S. Pickard, Life, I, 366.

²⁵ One is reminded of Emerson's lines on the rhodora:
If eyes were made for seeing,
Then beauty is its own excuse for being.

²⁶ The chief glory of Wordsworth, according to Whittier, was his ability to transmute this natural beauty into poetry. The compliment turns out to be a rather backhanded one, as Whittier seems to praise the subject-matter of Wordsworth's art to a greater degree than the poet's skill in presenting it. The idea is especially significant with respect to Whittier's total attitude toward art.

Art builds on sand; the works of pride
And human passion change and fall;
But that which shares the life of God
With Him surviveth all. ("Wordsworth," p. 188)

CHAPTER IV

CONTRASTING FACES OF NATURE

1

Perhaps the most ubiquitous element in Whittier's poetry is his consciousness of nature. His response to flowers, birds, streams, mountains, or seashore is frequently and often inextricably bound up with his notions of religion, art, and the glory of his native region. Even the independence and individualism which he regarded as the birthright of New Englanders and which he wished to see spread among all peoples is infused with a consciousness of natural beauty. Tennyson thought that in some descriptions he would rank with Wordsworth,¹ and he is probably more akin to the English romantics as an observer of natural scenery untruded upon by humanity than any other American poet of the nineteenth century.² The accuracy and vividness of Whittier's descriptions, the sense of close scrutiny communicated in sharply pictorial imagery, is evident on any number of Whittier's neglected pages. Though often mentioned in passing, this aspect of his poetry has not received full credit during the period of his general neglect. Winfield Scott, however, noted correctly that "His descriptions of nature are among his chief claims as a poet."³

Nevertheless, Whittier's attitude toward nature is beset by ambiguities similar to those he felt about art and

no less deeply rooted. Through the Yankee-Quaker tradition came a qualified distrust of natural as well as artistic beauty, stemming from the Biblical establishment of man's superiority to and rulership over nature, and from a latent Christian tendency toward asceticism revived by the puritan movement (in a broad sense). Distrust of the senses led to a desire to assume a life in the spirit beyond dependence upon sensuous desire and pleasure. For the New England colonists the idea of the fundamental hostility of nature was bitterly reinforced upon arrival in the New World, which struck William Bradford as "a hideous wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men." This attitude became a staple of the puritanic instinct, transmuted into other forms, but never wholly lost.

Whittier's consciousness of the early puritan strictures of the New World is evident in Margaret Smith's Journal. His young heroine is pleasantly surprised when her expectations of a dreary and fearsome land prove to be unfounded:

. . . I think I may say it was with a feeling of praise and thanksgiving that mine eyes wandered up and down over the green meadows, and corn-fields, and orchards of my new home. Where, thought I, foolish one, be the terrors of the wilderness, which troubled thy daily thoughts and thy nightly dreams! Where be the gloomy shades, and desolate mountains, and the wild beasts, with their dismal howlings and rages! Here all looked peaceful, and bespoke comfort and contentedness.⁴

The comfort and contentedness to be derived from nature are the subject of much of Whittier's poetry, but he

is not unconscious of its harsher aspects as well. Occasionally these contradictory faces of the natural world come into sharp conflict in a single poem, illuminating the changing relationship between man and nature which figured so strongly in the rise and development of romanticism and its opposition to industrialism. The discussion in this chapter will focus upon the relatively unknown poem, "The Bridal of Pennacook" (1844), which brings together many of Whittier's contradictory feelings about nature.

But first it might be well to examine a more direct statement of the limits defining these feelings in "Patucket Falls," an essay written in the same year as "The Bridal," during Whittier's stay in Lowell, Massachusetts. After a visit to the falls area, he noted that their natural charm had been obliterated by the utilitarian growths of dams and mills, and he is led to imagine the beauty of the spot as the colonists must have seen it in 1652 during the first recorded visit to the area. Recalling the words of Bradford's journal respecting the lack of esthetic response of the puritan to the glories of the New World landscape, he says chidingly,

But these hard-featured saints of the New Canaan 'care for none of these things.' . . . They see only 'a great and howling wilderness, where be many Indians, but where fish may be taken, and where be meadows for ye subsistence of cattle,' and which, on the whole, 'is a comfortable place to accommodate a company of God's people upon, who may, with God's blessing, do good in that place for both church and state.'⁵

He then observes somewhat condescendingly that in their

journals and narratives

. . . nothing is more remarkable than the entire silence of the worthy writers in respect to the natural beauty or grandeur of the scenery amid which their lot was cast.⁶

Although they were well-educated and familiar with the classics,

. . . they seem to have been utterly devoid of that poetic feeling or fancy whose subtle alchemy detects the beautiful in the familiar. . . . Hard, harsh, unlovely, yet with many virtues and noble points of character, they were fitted, doubtless, for their work of pioneers in the wilderness. Sternly faithful to duty, in peril, and suffering, and self-denial, they wrought out the noblest of historical epics on the rough soil of New England. They lived a truer poetry than Homer or Virgil wrote.⁷

Again we notice a predilection for the "poetry of life" over that of the pen, but up to this point, in spite of his fair-minded appraisal of puritan virtues, Whittier clearly places himself in a different mold, as one for whom nature's charms are compellingly magnificent.

Continuing in this reflective manner, he speaks at first somewhat deprecatingly of the fact that the colonists noticed only the utilitarian aspects of the falls area. However, he is Yankee enough to feel a qualified sympathy with their attitude. "But what has all this to do with the falls?" he asks:

When the rail-cars came thundering through his lake country, Wordsworth attempted to exorcise them by a sonnet; and, were I not a very decided Yankee, I might possibly follow his example, and utter in this connection my protest against the

desecration of Patucket Falls, and battle with objurgatory stanzas these dams and mills, as Balmawhapple shot off his horse-pistol at Stirling Castle. Rocks and trees, rapids, cascades, and other waterworks are doubtless all very well; but on the whole, considering our seven months of frost, are not cotton shirts and wollen coats still better? As for the spirits of the river, the Merrimac Naiads, or whatever may be their name in Indian vocabulary, they have no good reason for complaints; . . . Its numerous falls and rapids are such as seem to invite the engineer's level rather than the pencil of the tourist; and the mason who piles up the huge brick fabrics at their feet is seldom, I suspect, troubled with sentimental remorse or poetical misgivings.⁸

The duality in Whittier's response to nature is thus clearly evident. He is instinctively moved to cry out with Wordsworth and Scott against the desecration of natural beauty, but the Yankee in him demands that he take a second look at the practical concomitants of this desecration, and common sense requires that he recognize the demands of necessity. A dichotomy is thus revealed in his attitude to nature resembling that of his feelings about art: the claims of beauty are at odds with those of utilitarianism.⁹

2

These contradictory claims are also evident in "The Bridal of Pennacook" This poem describes the childhood, romance, and marriage of Weetamoo, an Indian girl, culminating in her cruel destruction as a result of the savage pride of her husband and her father. Whittier has often been criticized for idealizing his Indians,¹⁰ but as this poem shows, his conception of the Indian character is not always heroic or admirable. Like some others of Whittier's

Indian tales, "The Bridal" may be read as an allegory of Whittier's attitudes toward nature.

The poem follows the general pattern of "The Tent on the Beach," in which the poet steps from the world of activity and affairs into a detached setting, with a few intimate friends. The preface describes a summer's journey, perhaps a real one, in which five friends, including the poem-narrator had been "wandering for many days/ Through the rough northern country." The first part of the preface describes the scene as one of extreme loveliness and also provides a sketch of the narrator's companions: a lawyer; his brother, a theological student; and a merchant and his daughter. The lawyer is described as a genial companion "with an eye to see/ Life's sunniest side." His brother is as yet free of the cant and stuffy sanctimony sometimes associated with his profession, but in describing him Whittier takes a backhanded swipe at the religious practices he deplored; it is observed that the young man's

. . . mirror of the beautiful and true,
 In Man and Nature, was as yet undimmed
 By dust of theologic strife, or breath
 Of sect, or cobwebs of scholastic lore. (p. 24)

Distrustful of long-faced piety, Whittier praises "an irreverent mirthfulness," which placed the student above the mold of the "pattern priest."

The merchant is described with a veiled irony not unworthy of Chaucer, as not only shrewd and sagacious, but

also, significantly, a man

To whom the soiled sheet found in Crawford's inn,
Giving the latest news of city stocks
And sales of cotton, had a deeper meaning
Than the great presence of the awful mountains
Glorified by the sunset. (p. 24)

Although dead to nature's spiritual and esthetic influences, he is eminently capable of manipulating it to his own profit; thus he is a direct spiritual descendant of the Colonial fathers, whose blindness to natural beauty Whittier had noted in "Patucket Falls." Also significant is his interest in the product of slavery. As if by way of recompense for his insensitivity, his daughter is "A delicate flower," unfit for nature's more menacing features,

. . . on whom had blown too long
Those evil winds, which, sweeping from the ice
And winnowing the fogs of Labrador,
Shed their cold blight round Massachusetts Bay. (p. 24)

The evil winds may symbolize the soul-pinching acquisitive instincts of which the merchant is so exemplary an inheritor.

In contrast to the idyllic "garden" picture of the first portion of the preface, a northeastern storm comes up on the homeward journey, which drives the travellers to an inn for the sake of the girl, who

Shrank from its harsh, chill breath, and visibly
drooped
Like a flower in the forest. (p. 24)

Here, we have a typical example of Whittier's poetic

structuring and also an indication of the duality of nature that transfixed his imagination. Driven from a menacing world of battling wind and rain, the group finds a place of retirement in which they may pause in peace, share each other's company, think and meditate, and relate old legends. The divinity student's humanity overrules his studies; he

. . . forsook his sermons,
His commentaries, articles and creeds,
For the fair page of human loveliness, (p. 25)

He sang to the merchant's daughter her favorite songs and recited poems of Cowper and fittingly, (considering the burden of the poem) of Wordsworth.

Meanwhile, Whittier's purported discovery, in the landlord's library, of "an old chronicle of border wars/ And Indian history," provides a take-off for the tale proper, with the added artifice of an assertion that, in the manner of Boccaccio, the narrative to follow has been versified by the male travellers in turns for the amusement of the invalid. The situation of father, daughter and divinity student provides a rough parallel to the triangular relationship of the legend, indicating the barbarity of the Indian men in contrast to the deferential handling of womankind by the narrator and his companions, and thus counterpointing the narrative's structure as a lament for the faded charm of the past. Whittier recognized the merits of both past and present.

Although there is considerable differentiation in the

manner of telling the various portions, which heightens the effect of each, Whittier does not go so far as to assign specific portions of the tale to specific members of the group or to provide dramatic links between the parts of the story. Probably, as he later mentioned in connection with "The Tent on the Beach," he thought the practice was somewhat hackneyed as a result of imitations of Boccaccio and Chaucer, or perhaps he felt that his gifts were not such as would enable him to compete with these masters of the form, although the colloquial ease of the intricate connective stanzas of "The Tent on the Beach" indicates that he might have carried this technique much further without fear of absolute failure.

The typically apologetic ending of the preface enlarges upon the conflict of the romantic or esthetic and the utilitarian attitudes toward nature hinted at in the portrait of the merchant and indicates the significance of the pastoral element in Whittier's thinking. He identifies himself with the "Pilgrims of Romance" who lament that the land

should but figure
 On the apocryphal chart of speculation
 As pastures, wood-lots, mill-sites, with
 the privileges,
 Rights, and appurtenances, which make up
 A Yankee Paradise. (p. 25)

Also he deplors the exchange of melodious Indian names "for syllables significant,/ Of cotton-mill and rail-car." This identification and the heavily ironic reference to the spare, ugly nature of a "Yankee Paradise" effectively dissociate

Whittier from the utilitarian outlook with which he indicated sympathy in "Patucket Falls." The image of the railway again appears as an ominous symbol of loss and detraction from "beautiful tradition" and unspoiled nature.

In the narrative portion of the poem, the contrasting garden and wilderness aspects of nature and the impending loss of the natural landscape realistically described in the preface are treated in symbolic terms. The two portions of the poem thus effectively complement each other in the development of these themes, as well as in that both present characters in similar circumstances. Weetamoo's paternal habitation is described in Section I, "The Merrimac," as a pleasant portion of the Merrimac Valley like that celebrated so often in Whittier's remembrances of his own boyhood; the river is a "mountain-born brightness" whose "wild waters shine" down the mountain slopes, "where the trees/ Stretched their long arms above thee [the river] and kissed in the breeze." The village and the people of Pennacook are cheerful, happy, and busy.

In contrast is "The New Home" described in Section V as

A wild and broken landscape, spiked with fire,
 Roughening the bleak horizon's northern edge;
 Steep, cavernous hillsides, where black hemlock spurs
 And sharp, gray splinters of the windswept ledge
 Pierced the thin-glazed ice, or bristling rose,
 Where the cold rim of the sky sunk down upon
 the snow. . . .

No cheerful village with its mingling smokes,
 No laugh of children wrestling in the snow,
 No camp-fire blazing through the hillside oaks,
 No fishers kneeling on the ice below. (pp. 29-30)

The stylistic texture of these two sections emphasizes the differences of the two homes and of Weetamoo's response to each. The surging, businesslike iambic pentameter of this section, the acutely realistic and unmetaphorical description, the consistent use of heavy consonants, and the ringing negatives present a harsh contrast to the bubbling anapestic measure and the melodious, jubilant imagery describing Weetamoo's original home.

The contrast of settings is reproduced also in the differing natures of the bridal pair. Weetamoo is idealized in Section III, "The Daughter," as a perfect type of the "noble savage," free, innocent, and as natural and unsophisticated as a bird or a flower, a typical example of Whittier's characterization of feminine virtues combined with poetic and spontaneous instincts. By comparison with this hardy wild-flower of the forest, the merchant's sickly, passive daughter is a delicate and rather pitiful hothouse plant. Weetamoo's character is reflected in a loose iambic tetrameter, rushing predicates, and sweeping alexandrines concluding each stanza:

Child of the forest! strong and free,
 Slight-robed, with loosely flowing hair,
 She swam the lake or climbed the tree,
 Or struck the flying bird in air.

The blade of her light oar threw off its
 shower of spray! (p. 28)

The emphasis is on active, outdoor liveliness in contrast to the constricted routine of "civilized" youth, who must bow to

the rigid rule,
The dull restraint, the chiding frown,
The weary torture of the school,
The taming of wild nature down.

Conversely, Winnepurkit, her intended husband, presents a powerful but grim proud figure of contrast, a puritan among Indians, described in sober, formal couplets in Section IV, "The Wedding":

The moons of forty winters had shed
Their snow upon that chieftain's head,
And toil and care and battle's chance
Had seamed his hard, dark countenance. (p. 29)

By comparison, Weetamoo seems "A fawn beside the bison grim," and the poet wonders rhetorically,

Why turns the bride's fond eye on him,
In whose cold look is naught beside
The triumph of a sullen pride? (p. 29)

The answer supplied is simply that it is Nature's way, unaccountable, but nevertheless strangely wise:

Ask why the graceful grape entwines
The rough oak with her arm of vines;
And why the gray rock's rugged cheek
The soft lips of the mosses seek:

Why, with wise instinct, Nature seems
To harmonize her wide extremes
Linking the stronger with the weak,
The haughty with the soft and meek! (p. 29)

Both the grim and the graceful are present in actuality and neither can be excluded, though it is obvious that in "The Bridal" the poet sympathizes with "the soft and meek" Weetamoo, representing the fading pastoral scene inevitably crushed by progress. This process is clarified and lamented in the last stanzas of Section I:

O Stream of the Mountains! if answer of thine
 Could rise from thy waters to question of mine,
 Methinks through the din of thy thronged banks a moan
 Of sorrow would swell for the days which have gone.

Not for thee the dull jar of the loom and the wheel,
 The gliding of shuttles, the ringing of steel;
 But that old voice of waters, of bird and of breeze,
 The dip of the wild-fowl, the rustling of trees! (p. 26)

Weetamoo and her natural, instinctive freedom thus represent not only the grace of her own life and the fate of the American Indian tribes in general, but also Whittier's idealized boyhood. He too had been virtually unplagued by the "dull restraint" and "weary torture" of school and the sophisticated urban and intellectual world, and he contrasts this period with the laborious years which followed, when he came to feel that

. . . we, from Nature long exiled,
 In our cold homes of Art and Thought,
 Grieve like the stranger-tended child,
 Which seeks its mother's arms, and sees but feels
 them not. (p. 28)

Although the story of Whittier's first becoming acquainted with the poems of Burns has been often retold, and

the incident is generally accepted as the catalyzing event that influenced him to begin composing his own verse, his love of nature probably provided the first great impulse toward self-expression. In this respect his career reveals a number of parallels to that of Wordsworth, and in the frequent attempts to project him as an American Burns or Scott, his similarity to the most eminent of the lake poets has been strangely neglected. In his attitudes toward childhood and the influences of nature, his rejection of study and of an exclusively "bookish" approach to life, his sympathy with rustic folk and country speech and manners, and his revolutionary impulses, he bears impressive resemblance to the poet of Rydal.

Whittier's "Barefoot Boy," whose instinctive appreciation of nature and simplicity is not unlike that of Weetamoo, may also be viewed as a counterpart of the child celebrated by Wordsworth in The Prelude or the "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality." Boyhood is recalled in terms of exaggerated praise: the "best philosopher" of Wordsworth becomes in Whittier's terminology a prince--of a spiritual rather than a temporal kingdom--whose riches of mind, insight, and immediate experience are closed off from the "million-dollared" republican. Satiated with "Outward sunshine, inward joy," the barefoot boy is obviously the same being that Wordsworth describes as one "on whom those truths do rest/ That we are toiling all our lives to find."

For both poets, as for Weetamoo, Nature is the great educator. Whittier would sympathize with the idler of "Expostulation and Reply," but, if anything, the detailed "Knowledge never learned of schools" of the barefoot boy is more intimate and convincing than the recreational pleasures of Wordsworth's "child of joy," perhaps revealing the difference between a farm-boy's view of nature and that of a mere country-dweller of patrician background. Whittier recalls the habits of animals and the processes of plant cycles, while Wordsworth was plainly more interested in activities consciously undertaken as sport: ice-skating, boating, cliff-climbing, etc. But youthful intimacy with nature represented for both a freedom that could not last. Wordsworth's solemn adjuration that the soul must "Too soon . . . have its earthly freight" is paralleled by Whittier's complaint that bare feet must "too soon . . . Lose the freedom of the sod," and "for work be shod."

For both boyhood is essentially ignorant of its bliss: in Wordsworth's phrasing the child is "blindly with its blessedness at strife" in pursuing the concerns of the "common day" of adulthood; Whittier laments,

Ah! that thou couldst know thy joy,
Ere it passes, barefoot boy! (p. 397)

Elsewhere, however, Whittier asserted that the joy of nature is not irreconcilably lost with childhood; unlike Whittier and "modern" man, Weetamoo, though not entirely

unhappy with her husband--having learned, according to "the maxims of her race, . . . to become a slave"--is permitted to return, at her father's summons, to Pennacook, where she is able "to sit once more/ A child upon her father's wigwam floor!" Her joy turns to sorrow, however, when Winnepurkit, feeling that his duty has been fulfilled by bearing her home, announces that her father must provide the means for her return. This the proud old chieftain will not do.

As described in Section II, "The Bashaba," Passaconaway bears a strong resemblance to Whittier's merchant companion, as one moved more by the uses of things than by their esthetic import. Of all persons and things, he loves only his daughter. He is described among "his spoils of chase and war" as "a wise dark man" whose "magic skill" held in thrall

All the subtle spirits hiding
Under earth or wave.

He is a type of the unyielding strong man to be found in any age:

Still, to such, life's elements
With their sterner laws dispense,
And the chain of consequence
Broken in their pathway lies. (p. 27)

In this case his stern pride meets its match in that of Winnepurkit, and the innocent Weetamoo is broken in the contest of unyielding wills. Faithful and recognizing the duty of her marriage vows, she finally attempts to retrace the path

of her homecoming alone, only to drown in rapids. Through the symbolism of the poem, Whittier seems to indicate a realization, perhaps unconscious, that neither the individual nor the race can return to childhood and innocence except in dreams; neither duty nor reality will bend to the desire of the heart for a return to past simplicity and ease. The natural landscape of the pastoral and agrarian American Dream is irrevocably transformed by its adaptation to the utilitarian ends of the aggressive white man, just as the "natural" grace and feeling of Weetamoo is broken by the aggressive pride of those she loves.

The poem ends with the lovely "Song of the Indian Women," a lament ostensibly for Weetamoo, but also for all things past, for childhood, lost innocence, and the pastoral grace and harmony that perhaps never were except in the imagined recollection of days gone by.

The path she is treading
 Shall soon be our own;
 Each gliding in shadow
 Unseen and alone!
 In vain shall we call on the souls gone before:
 Mat Wonck Kunna-monne! They hear us no more! (p. 33)

As noted in connection with Section IV, "The Wedding," Whittier expressed an acceptance of the "wise instinct" of nature in harmonizing "her wise extremes." The wisdom of this instinct is not borne out in the description of the harsh

austerity of Winnepurkit's home, nor in the sad conclusion of the poem, as Weetamoo's strong husband is guilty of a kind of infidelity. The grounds on which Whittier accepted the harsh elements of nature are thus not really clear in "The Bridal," but they are clarified to some degree in the seasonal symbolism contained in a remarkable number of his poems. All the seasons are represented, and appreciation is accorded to each but, somewhat surprisingly, poems devoted to the dark seasons, autumn and winter, in which the fact of the season is particularly important to the substance of the poem, outnumber those dealing with spring and summer.

One cannot assume on these grounds that Whittier felt an absolute preference for these seasons, but it is sufficiently remarkable that in spite of a relatively weak constitution and numerous physical disabilities he should have felt a strong liking for the periods of the year that probably intensified his discomfort. Perhaps this appreciation is an indication, expressed in a disguised but distinctly minor key, of the deep-rooted but "undercover" movement of his imaginative interests away from the positive and the progressive to the secluded past. The one poem of Whittier's whose merits are universally recognized, "Snow-Bound," clearly indicates his love of winter.¹¹

It may be that this interest is related to his preoccupation with dawn and sunset, "shady dells" and misty scenery, and any diminution of direct sight that allows freer

play to the imagination. His sense of pastoral harmony and of mystical rapport with nature both often arise from this canted or shadowed vision. Two poems in which reality explodes the pastoral frame usually imposed upon it by the poet are "Maud Miller" and the preface to "Among the Hills." Both are framed in brightly sunlit settings, which, in spite of their beauty, have no beneficent influence on the individuals involved. Maud and the judge indulge their separate and obviously incompatible dreams, and the harvester whom Maud marries and whom the judge has unrealistically dreamed of being turns out to be a loutish clod whose highest aspiration seems to be to sit "by the chimney log, / Dozing and grumbling o'er pipe and mug." (p. 48)

The summer sun is brilliantly described in the first lines of "Among the Hills" in richly textured blank verse; diction, sense, and sound conspire to turn a New England scene into an idle, lazy replica of a Mexican country-village at siesta-time:

Along the roadside, like the flowers of gold
That tawny Incas for their gardens wrought,
Heavy with sunshine droops the golden-rod,
And the ren pennons of the cardinal-flowers
Hang motionless upon their upright staves. . . .

The locust by the wall
Stabs the noon-silence with his sharp alarm.
A single hay-cart down the dusty road
Creaks slowly, with its driver fast asleep
On the load's top. (p. 84)

Significantly, however, this "symphony of peace" brings to mind not the cheerful and diligent farmers with whom Whittier

usually peoples his New England scenes, but rather those of the same sort as Maud's spouse, lazy, niggardly, untouched by the romance of love or nature, and seemingly dead to all spiritual or humane influences.

It is almost as if the bright light of summer's sun reveals more than Whittier cares to discover. He prefers to see it mellowed by the haze of dawn or the shadows of sunset, which contribute to his sense of the mystic significance of nature and allow him to melt into his surroundings and become part of them. Under the influence of sunset, "the summits vast and old" surrounding the Bearcamp River during a summer excursion "melt in rosy mists . . .

The valley holds its breath; no leaf
Of all its elms is twirled:
The silence of eternity
Seems falling on the world. (p. 162)

In the last stanza of this poem, the passing of summer is rhetorically, but not actually, lamented:

Farewell! these smiling hills must wear
Too soon their wintry frown,
And snow-cold winds from off them shake
The maple's red leaves down.
But I shall see a summer sun
Still setting broad and low.

("Sunset on the Bearcamps," p. 162)

Already he looks forward to a dream of summer to be cherished in winter, and one suspects that this anticipated "emotion recollected in tranquility," the essence of poetry for

Whittier, as for Wordsworth, gave him as much satisfaction as the original vision.

The season for which Whittier most explicitly claims a preference is autumn. In the essay "Taking Comfort" he wrote of a part of this season as

The loveliest season of the whole year--that transient but delightful interval between the storms of the 'wild equinox, with all their wet,' and the dark, short, dismal days which precede the rigor of winter. . . . The sun rises through a soft and hazy atmosphere; the light mist-clouds melt gradually away before him; and his noontide light rests warm and clear on still woods, tranquil waters, and grasses green with the late autumnal rain.¹²

In "A Day" the same Indian summer days are apparently referred to when he counsels,

Talk not of sad November, when a day
Of warm, glad sunshine fills the sky of noon,
And a wind, borrowed from some morn of June,
Stirs the brown grasses and the leafless spray. (p. 168)

Although the mood of this poem looks forward to spring, there is a willingness to wait for it, to take the seasons in their turns and savor each one for whatever there may be in it of joy and beauty.

"The Last Walk of Autumn," which has been called Whittier's finest nature poem,¹³ draws together many of the most characteristic threads of his thought and imagination. Actually it presents a somewhat kaleidoscopic vision of all seasons, but, significantly, the catalyzing agent is that time of year when fall verges on winter, as the title

indicates, and

. . . all things, stark and dumb,
Seem praying for the snows to come,
And, for the summer bloom and greenness gone,
With winter's sunset lights and dazzling morn atone.

(p. 150)

With the peculiar New England blend of keen observation and colloquial ease characteristic of Robert Frost, Whittier etches an unforgettable picture of migrating geese:

With mingled sound of horns and bells,
A far-heard clang, the wild geese fly,
Storm-sent, from Arctic moors and fells
Like a great arrow through the sky,
Two dusky lines converged in one,
Chasing the southward-flying sun;
While the brave snow-bird and the hardy jay
Call to them from the pines, as if to bid them stay.

(p. 150)

His thoughts are then drawn to a consideration of the time that has passed since a similar walk taken a year before, when a south wind warmed the air with the atmosphere of summer. The implication is that he prefers no season in particular but finds delight in the definite change of seasons that occurs in New England. The romance of this pattern of alternation is more delightful to him than all the rumored splendors of legendary lands. Romance is everywhere, not in the scene, but "in the eye of the beholder";

. . . he who sees his native brooks
Laugh in the sun, has seen them all. (p. 151)

Although the lines above indicate a sense of nostalgic yearning for summer, the poem as a whole may perhaps contain a clue to his undeniable affection for the harsher seasons. Although the seasonal alteration is marked, autumn and winter are, in some aspects, especially characteristic of northern New England, with its short summers and unpredictable springs. While Whittier admits that at times he longs "for gentler skies," and bathes "in dreams of softer air," he recognizes that these longings and dreams are essentially unrealistic, for they fail to take into account the associations that hover around him almost palpably in the northern climes he loves.

Stanzas XXI-XXIV describe his preference of his home territory, for the fact that it is his, for a simplicity elevating men above artifact and architecture, for "equal village schools" and freedom of thought, for "sweet homes" whose inhabitants bear "the faults and follies of the race" and are content to admire such as themselves rather than a mythological ideal of perfection, and for the fact that each man may feel himself significant in his struggle "for the sake/ Of mother, sister, daughter, wife." Perhaps the fact of struggle is the key to Whittier's response to the dark seasons. Against the challenge of the climate, independence, self-assurance, and responsibility are finely honed. It is

Better with naked nerve to bear
 The needles of this goading air,
 Than, in the lap of sensual ease, forego
 The godlike power to do, the godlike aim
 to know. (p. 152)

Whittier thus associates the difficulty of winter-living with the purposive striving of mankind. Winter is symbolic of the rigorous New England farm-life which had turned out so many of the men who inspired the American Revolution and fought its first battle, and who had also taken a leading role in the attempt to eradicate slavery. Although no overt reference to slavery occurs in the poem, a fact somewhat surprising, in view of its date (1857), the reference to "sensual ease" is clearly directed to the plantation-owners and slave-keepers of the South. Dependence on exploited humanity had, in Whittier's view, diminished their ability "to do," and frantic attempts to rationalize and perpetuate their ignoble system had taken from them the power to distinguish between truth and falsehood, right and wrong, in short, the power or desire "to know."¹⁴ The New Englander's exposure to winter's wind and snow is thus judged to have a positive moral value.

As in some early poems and in "Snow-Bound," joy and gaiety, a heightening of the spirit, and an intensification of anticipation are also associated with the coming of winter's chill and snow:

Then let the icy north-wind blow
 The trumpets of the coming storm,

To arrowy sleet and blinding snow
 Yon slanting lines of rain transform.
 Young hearts shall hail the drifted cold,
 As gaily as I did of old;
 And I, who watch them through the frosty pane,
 Unenvious, live in them my boyhood o'er again. (p. 152)¹⁵

Three reasons, then, stand out as affecting Whittier's delight in the dark seasons: they are symbolic of the harsh struggle of New England farm-life; they are associated with memories of youthful joy; and they provide a challenge to mind and body leading to a concomitant growth of character. In addition, the haze of autumn and the transforming phenomena of winter, like the dawn and sunset scenes abounding in his poetry, offer the patterns of subdued light and shadow in which his imagination especially flourished. The harsh effects of winter are blended with the sweet memories of human warmth about the hearthfire in the pattern mentioned in "The Bridal of Pennacook" as characteristic of Nature's uncanny wisdom.

4

In nature, Whittier also finds one source of the continuing revelation posited by Quaker doctrine. A second arises from what he terms the inner light in its clarification of duty. He did not always find them in harmony, and occasionally he seems to steer away from the genuine utterance of his imagination to make his response to nature and experience cohere with his preconceived ideas of duty and right thinking. Nature is sometimes too equivocal to

satisfy his longing for an assurance of transcendent benevolence; it is either silent or else it seems to distort the divine message. At this point Whittier rejects his imaginative vision and turns to the inner light of duty or tradition as opposed to the external light of nature. An important area of conflict is thus evident in Whittier's attitudes to nature, involving its religious and mystic significance, and illustrating the sense of opposition he felt between traditional and romantic modes of thought.

"The Bridal of Pennacook" takes a provocative and somewhat baffling turn, in that Weetamoo is destroyed in the attempt to fulfill her duty as a wife rather than through her desire to enjoy the instinctive pleasures and carefree ease of childhood. She is able to return to Paradise, but her effort to go again to the world of stern reality and duty proves to be her undoing. Yet duty, as consciously identified with the inner light, is commonly upheld by Whittier as the highest good, and one might expect that moral justification for Weetamoo's destruction would arise, not from her attempt to follow this course, but from the natural inclination to go back to the ease of her childish existence and avoid the demands of conscience and maturity. Structurally and imaginatively the poem thus indicates something less than wholehearted acceptance of what Whittier's conscious morality tends to uphold, for duty brings Weetamoo's downfall, whereas rebellion against its demands as she conceived them would

have saved her.

The ambiguity implicit in the poem suggests Whittier's indecisive view of divine benevolence as both immanent in and transcending nature. Sensitivity to the quiet Merrimac countryside led him to a romantic association of nature and worship that verged at times on pantheism. As a youth, Whittier preferred communion with nature to orthodox modes of worship. Of the eight-mile trip to the Friends' meeting-house in Amesbury for First-day meetings, he said, "I think I rather enjoyed staying at home, wandering the woods, or climbing Job's Hill."¹⁶

With respect to religious observances more formal than those of the Quakers, there is no doubt of his feeling that the natural creation is more conducive to true devotion. He is obviously sympathetic with the views of "young Mr. Jordan," the fiance of Margaret Smith's cousin Polly, who explains at length his reasons for choosing the life of a farmer over that of a minister:

For my part, . . . I have no notion that the pulpit is my place; I like the open fields and sky better than the grandest churches of man's building; and when the wind sounds in the great grove of pines on the hill near our house, I doubt if there be a choir in all England so melodious and solemn. These painted autumn woods, and this sunset light, and yonder clouds of gold and purple, do seem to me better fitted to provoke devotional thoughts, and to awaken a becoming reverence and love for the Creator, than the stained windows and lofty arched roofs of old minsters.¹⁷

Whittier often toys with the romantic concept of nature as innocent and unfallen. In a sketch describing a

walk in the vicinity of Lowell, he tells of coming upon a drunken man, whose prostrate wretchedness jars upon his reverie:

In contrasting the exceeding beauty and harmony of inanimate Nature with the human degradation and deformity before me, I felt, as I confess I had never done before, the truth of a remark of a rare thinker, that 'Nature is loved as the city of God, although, or rather because, it has no citizen. The beauty of Nature must ever be universal and mocking until the landscape has human figures as good as itself. Man is fallen; Nature is erect.¹⁸

On another occasion, the glowing beauty of a gift of fruit raises doubts that it lies under the general curse, and he is led to imagine humorously that "Its parent vine, rooted in Paradise,/ O'ercrept the wall," or that Eve was allowed to smuggle it out by a pitying angel at the gate. The harvest season is thus an "annual taste/ Of primal good." ("The Fruit-Gift," p. 148)

Although Whittier can treat lightly the doctrine that humanity and the world were under a curse, he was well aware of barriers in the way of the achievement of millennial harmony. But these he finds primarily in the nature of man; he seems to feel that the earth could still be a paradise if men would take advantage of nature's bounty without greed, prejudice, or exploitation of one another. In the poem "Garden" (1882), the idea of the "fortunate fall" is suggested. The reward granted to toil is viewed as turning "the curse of Earth's gray morning" into "The blessing of its noon." A legendary Eden which "May nevermore be found" is scorned for

the blessings of the present, wrought by the efforts of one's own hands.

At times Whittier apprehends a mystical identification of the physical world and spiritual essence; the line of demarcation assumes a hazy indefiniteness and mortal nature momentarily borrows the guise of eternity. An apparently unfamiliar sylvan setting suddenly strikes the narrator of "A Mystery" (1873) with the distinct impression that he has been there before and is gazing at "the river of my dreams," along which he seems to be guided by "A presence, strange at once and known," like a vestigial consciousness "of some forgotten life." The experience assumes a religious significance in later stanzas, as a revelation of love's power to bridge without pain or shock the gulf between time and eternity.

"Hampton Beach" (1843) details a similar experience of mystical rapport with nature, under the influence of "the healing of the seas," to which Whittier turns, as in "The Tent on the Beach," for renewal. The first five stanzas describe the approach to the beach in tones of eager expectancy. With stanza six the mood changes somewhat; the relief and relaxation sought become abruptly palpable:

Good-by to Pain and Care! I take
 Mine ease to-day:
 Here where these sunny waters break,
 And ripples this keen breeze, I shake
 All burdens from the heart, all weary thoughts away.

As in several of his more noteworthy poems, Whittier has devised a unique stanza form which effectively underscores the current of thought and feeling. In the first stanzas the short second line is grammatically bound to succeeding lines, echoing the anticipation of arrival. In stanza six, however, concluding a structure abruptly begun at the end of the first line, the short line emphasizes the actual fact of arrival, with the consequent shutting away of the world beyond the immediate scene. The longer syntactical elements and a more frequent use of polysyllabic diction in the lines which follow it reveal his relaxed identification with the idyllic hideaway, a mood which is made explicit in the next stanza:

I draw a freer breath, I seem
 Like all I see--
 Waves in the sun, the white-winged gleam
 Of sea-birds in the slanting beam,
 And far-off sails which flit before the
 southwind free. (p. 143)

His reaction to the immediate scene symbolizes a broader, mystical movement of his apprehensive powers, embracing not this experience alone, but life as a whole. Momentary sensuous languor is regarded as a foreshadowing of an eternal existence, which Whittier hopes may come just as this mood stole over him, with "No fearful change, nor sudden wonder," but rather like a dimly remembered scene or a dream of the sort recorded in "A Mystery," or like the recollected sublimity of childhood.

night ends the vigil. Nature calls him to solitary withdrawal from human activity and bustle, tempts him with an illusion of bliss, and drives him back again to the shelter of his fellowmen, but the moment bears an inexplicable significance for him; he rests in the knowledge that

. . . long and oft shall Memory tell
Of this brief thoughtful hour of musing
by the Sea. (p. 143)

Like the transcendentalists, Whittier often regards nature as a manifestation of divinity. Emerson stated that nature and its uses always suggest the absolute, and that "the happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship."¹⁹ Although transcendentalism was in one sense an attempt to "domesticate" the nature which appeared so fearsome to the early colonists, the term itself expresses a desire to go beyond the appearance and physical fact of nature--in Emerson's terms, commodity and beauty--to find its spiritual and ideal meanings, a pursuit which also attracted Whittier. The Quakers, however, were perhaps the most extreme of the dissenters in doing away with objects of sensuous appeal that might tempt man away from the recognition of higher, spiritual values, and Whittier's appreciation of the religious appeal of external nature was sometimes uneasily accommodated to his early training.²⁰

This hesitation is reflected in "A Summer Pilgrimage," (1833) which recounts Whittier's feelings during what must

have been an annual trek to the hills and mountains north of the Merrimac. The title itself is suggestive of the quasi-religious nature of the undertaking, which he clarifies in comparing himself to a palmer, seeking, "The strong uplifting of the hills." Throughout the poem religious terminology and illusion are employed. "A sense of worship" arises from the calm majesty of sunset and moonrise on the mountains, but Whittier is quick to dissociate this from the worship "of satyr-charming Pan," and to explain that more than sensuous excitation is at the root of his reverent mood. He praises

Not Beauty's self, but that which lives
And shines through all the veils it weaves,--

reflecting "the Eternal Good." (p. 166) The experience is but a "fond illusion" and a "masquerade" beyond which "Eternal verities remain." Although the last clause may have been less hackneyed when Whittier used it than it seems to us, its abstract nature reveals his tendency to handcuff in an essentially unpoetic generalization an imaginative image that threatens to break away from the prison of his preconceptions.

The revelation inherent in nature is thus best appreciated when it reflects traditional Christian concepts. In the poem "April" (1852) the cycle of the seasons is viewed as a recurrent revelation of the truth of the gospel hope, a "yearly evangel," bearing "Ressurrection and life to the graves of the sod!" (p. 146) Nature sometimes seems to be the surest revelation of the true nature of God, the proof,

intuitive rather than rational, that the flaming hell proclaimed by Calvinism was a chimera. In spite of Whittier's intellectual rejection of a wrathful divinity and the fact that it had all but faded from the more vocal and literate elements of New England protestantism, such poems as "The Eternal Goodness" indicate that it was still influential enough to invite debate; perhaps Whittier felt a need for personal reassurance of the falsehood of its sanguinary and self-elevating doctrines. "The Lakeside" (1849) indicates Whittier's predilection for a belief in natural revelation belying the fierce and arbitrary deity of Calvinism and evident even to the primitive Indian, who is imagined as feeling, under the spell of the lake's loveliness, that "God near him seemed." Whittier closes the poem with a prayer of thanksgiving for "tender love" manifested "In radiant hill and woodland dim,/ And tinted sunset sea. (p. 144)

Nature thus functions as a moderating counterbalance to the divine image distorted by sectarian conflict. Under the rebellious impulse generated by his indignation at slavery, Whittier could even conceive of renouncing orthodox revelation altogether as hopelessly distorted by its association with vested interests. Such an attitude is evident in "A Sabbath Scene" (1850), a satire on the compliance of the clergy with the Fugitive Slave Law. Although the poem is dated by its subject matter, its scathing indictment of the hypocritical complicity of elements that should be opposed to social

exploitation is universal enough to be appreciated even yet.

"A wasted female figure" is imagined as rushing into a church for protection from a Legree-like hunter. When several "stout hands" are raised to shield her, the preacher apologizes and helps to tie her bonds, explaining that even on the Sabbath "we must fulfil/ Our moral obligations." (p. 312)

At this the narrator's moral sense is inflamed:

My brain took fire: 'Is this,' I cried,
 'The end of prayer and preaching?
 Then down with pulpit, down with priest,
 And give us Nature's teaching! . . .

'Than garbled text or parchment law
 I own a statute higher;
 And God is true, though every book
 And every man's a liar!' (p. 313)

What seems up to this point, to be sheer melodrama is contained within the structure of nightmare; as this passes, the clamor of the steeple-bell is appraised by the narrator to be only the supper-bell. Seeing "a good old Book" surrounded by white blooms, a summer breeze, and an oriole, he becomes aware of a more benevolent interpretation of scripture than that mediated by the parson: "bird and flower" serve to make plain "The lesson of the Teacher":

For to my ear methought the breeze
 Bore Freedom's blessed word on;
 Thus saith the Lord: Break every yoke,
 Undo the heavy burden! (p. 313)

But in spite of the beauty and seeming innocence of nature, and its function as a corrective to theological distortions, a certain respectful distrust persists. In "The Over-Heart" (1859) the mystery of the nature of God is represented in the mysterious dual aspect of nature:

And what is He? The ripe grain nods,
 The sweet dews fall, the sweet flowers blow;
 But darker signs His presence show:
 The earthquake and the storm are God's
 And good and evil interflow. (p. 436)

In this case the path of mysticism proves to be a dead-end for Whittier, and he abandons the ambiguous message of nature for the less equivocal revelation of Christian orthodoxy. Nature is only to be trusted while it supports his preconceptions. As in this poem, Whittier gets into difficulties when his sensory observations and his beliefs fail to coalesce, and so we actually have two poems juxtaposed without any logical connection. The first, ending with the stanza above, takes a mystical point of view not unlike, though inferior in expression, that revealed in Emerson's "Brahma."²¹

The second, a religious poem in the traditional manner of the Protestant hymn, makes no mention of nature, but attempts to console by the idea that the divine nature is revealed only in Christ. The duality of nature imputed to God in the first section is totally ignored, and all is love in spite of earthquake and storm:

Gone be the faithlessness of fear,
 And let the pitying heaven's sweet rain
 Wash out the altar's bloody stain;
 The law of Hatred disappear,
 The law of Love alone remain. (p. 436)

As one reader has said, "When nature seemed most undecipherable as revelation, Whittier turned with undiminished hope to the accomplishment of the vision."²²

His care to prevent creation from usurping the place that should rightfully belong to the Creator perhaps indicates a fear of temptation in that direction. He was aware that Nature, as divinity, would be arbitrary, unpredictable, and essentially indifferent to the purposes of man, sometimes an aid to, but never the object or the sole basis of faith. Norman Foerster asserted that Whittier was "the first important American writer to point out the perils of the 'nature cult,' the seduction of the spirit by the senses."²³

Nature is a splendid, orderly frame, apparently meaningful, but too vast to be trusted as an indication of the significance of its relatively tiny human inhabitants. This is the theme of "Questions of Life" (1852), in which Whittier seriously confronts the solutions offered by nature, and also by history, to a rationale of human existence. Anticipating evolutionary theory, and even more recent scientific investigations into the relationship of animate and inanimate matter on the lowest levels, he wonders if all things feel "Life's many-folded mystery," or whether man is the unique inheritor of consciousness and stands "severed and distinct,/"

From Nature's chain of life unlimited." But Nature, in spite of its grand utterances, provides no real answers; it only returns

The echoed question it receives.
 What sings the brook? What oracle
 Is in the pine-tree's organ swell?
 What may the wind's low burden be?
 The meaning of the moaning sea?
 The hieroglyphics of the stars?
 Or clouded sunset's crimson bars?
 I vainly ask, for mocks my skill
 The trick of Nature's cipher still. (p. 432)

Thus, when he is not under the imaginative spell of mountains or seaside, Whittier seems to reject the romantic belief in natural revelation.

"The Meeting" (1868), a philosophical dialogue, reflects the notion that by the very plenitude of her charms Nature may deceive. A guest invited by Whittier to a silent Quaker service chides his host afterward for attendance at "these dull rites of drowsy-head," encouraging him, if he prefers to worship in silence, to

Seek it where
 It soothes with dreams the summer air,
 Not in this close and rude-benched hall,
 But where soft lights and shadows fall,
 And all the slow, sleep-walking hours
 Glide soundless over grass and flowers! (p. 445)

Whittier insts that he does not prefer the bare meeting house to "breezy hill or sea-sung shore," but he finds it more convenient for an attitude of unalloyed communion with "God alone," for

. . . nature is not solitude:
 She crowds us with her thonging wood;
 Her many hands reach out to us
 Her many tongues are garrulous;
 Perpetual riddles of surprise
 She offers to our ears and eyes;
 She will not leave our senses still,
 But drags them captive at her will;
 And, making earth too great for heaven,
 She hides the Giver in the given. (p. 446)

Thus nature, although often cited as a revelation of the spiritual world behind itself, is also felt to be a hindrance to recognition of that world or presence.

But the disillusionment that arises from observing nature is not always merely indifferent. The late poem, "Revelation" (1886), reflects the naturalistic pessimism just then assuming literary preeminence as a reaction to the easy optimism of prosperity and to the diffusion of evolutionary theory and psychological investigation. The benevolent image of nature conjured by romanticism is altogether rejected. A few stanzas parallel the doubting portions of "In Memoriam."

Takes Nature thought for such as we,
 What place her human atom fills,
 The seed-drift of her careless sea,
 The mist on her unheeding hills?
 What recks she of our helpless wills?

Strange god of Force, with fear, not love,
 Its trembling worshipper! Can prayer
 Reach the shut ear of Fate, or move
 Unpitying Energy to spare?
 What doth the cosmic Vastness care? (p. 466)

Nature is labelled the "dread Unconcern." In its disquieting gaze love is utterly absent. The voice of God, on the other

hand, comes from the heart, "A voice without a sound," which commands "Be just,/ Be true, be merciful." God is revealed finally, not by indifferent nature, but rather "By all that He requires."

The intuitive voice of duty is thus elevated above the experience of the senses, and once it is established in its rightful and dominant role, nature also falls into place. An empirical basis for faith is finally ruled out, in favor of simple trust in the Quaker "inner light," which, heeded, will shed its beams on the observed external world, as well as in the interior dimension of heart and mind. Having established faith in the ascendant position, Whittier can say, "I fear no more." Viewed alone, the face of Nature is obscure and unrevealing; her beauty may be cancelled by terror. But focused by faith, natural beauty provides a capstone of hope, a symbol of universal love and benevolence.

Imagination and duty pull in opposing directions in "Mountain Pictures" (1862), a juxtaposition of two poems which also provide an interesting contrast between what may be termed the romantic or mystical and the common sense Yankee poles of Whittier's inspiration. The first poem, "Franconia from Pemigewasset," suggests the misty imagery of Shelley.

The clouds that shattered on yon slide-worn walls
 And splintered on the rocks their spears of rain
 Have set in play a thousand waterfalls,
 Making the dusk and silence of the woods
 Glad with the laughter of the chasing floods,
 And luminous with blown spray and silver gleams. (p. 156)

The picture of "Monadnock from Wachuset" in the second poem is etched more sharply; over "the wavy lines/ Of far receding hills," Monadnock is seen to rise "from his night of pines."

Contrasted with the sublime visual imagery of the "mountain pictures," a cleared slope reveals a "brown old farm-house," perched "like a bird's nest" and replete "With home-life sounds":

The bleat of sheep along the hill we heard,
The bucket plashing in the cool, sweet well,
The pasture-bars that clattered as they fell;
Dogs barked, fowls fluttered, cattle lowed. (p. 157)

The poet meets the farmer, who rather casually agrees with the praise of the splendid mountain-scape and adds,

I love it for my good old mother's sake,
Who lived and died here in the peace of God!

In the darkness of the journey home, the words are pondered by the poet, who comes to the conclusion

. . . that man was more than his abode,--
The inward life than Nature's raiment more;
And the warm sky, the sundown-tinted hill,
The forest and the lake, seemed dwarfed and dim
Before the saintly soul, whose human will
Meekly in the Eternal footsteps trod,
Making her homely toil and household ways
An earthly echo of the song of praise
Swelling from angel lips and harps of seraphim. (p. 157)

This didactic note seems unfortunately platitudinous, but given Whittier's theory of art and nature, it proceeds quite naturally from the flow of the poem's imagery, from the

sublime and far-off to the homely and hearby and human. What seems imaginatively to be a diminuendo movement is actually a crescendo in terms of the ideology to which Whittier too often submitted his imaginative exploration of experience. In the contrast of the sublime mountain scenes and the farmyard, the reader tends to feel let down, just as, we might suspect, the poem's narrator might have felt the homestead unworthy of interest after witnessing the spectacle of the mountain sunset. But the farmer, who lives with both, estimates them more judiciously. He looks

. . . into the sunset o'er the lake,
Like one to whom the far-off is most near: (p. 157)

and thus least worthy of notice, as it is from his point of view of everyday reality. The poem thus functions as a criticism of the romantic fascination with the remote and unreachable, to which Whittier himself was of course susceptible. An attempt is made to reveal the beauty of the commonplace as finer and more significant in its homely reality than the essentially unapproachable splendor of nature.

However, Whittier's susceptibility to the latter was so great that the poem as a whole fails, for the versification of the final lines falls into flat generalization; the farmer's tribute to his mother and the poet's meditation on what he has seen and heard, which should be climactic, are commonplace and ineffective. Whittier's conscious intention to

elevate the principle of simple human endeavor above the glory of nature, to present man as "more than his abode," cannot match his enraptured vision of the mountains.

His intention is clear, however, as is the ambiguity thus revealed in his attitude toward nature. Even more surely than Wordsworth, and without the latter's sometimes discomfitting patronization, Whittier finds, or attempts to find, the meaning of natural beauty completed in the associations attached to it by human beings. As has been pointed out before, Whittier's descriptive verse is seldom for the purpose of description alone, but gains meaning from the activities and responses of people.²⁴ Nature is, or should be, subservient to man. When it is untended, as in the preface to "Among the Hills," the picture is a dismal one. The Eden Whittier envisions is not a natural condition, but ultimately a result of man's labor with and on nature and the affection and companionship of loved friends and relatives. Under these influences, any place may become a paradise, as is noted by Dr. Singletary, a fictional creation who functions as his creator's mouthpiece:

"One cannot but admire, . . . that wise and beneficent ordination of Providence whereby the spirit of man asserts its power over circumstances, moulding the rough forms of matter to its fine ideal, bringing harmony out of discord,--coloring, warming, and lighting up everything within the circle of its horizon. A loving heart carries with it, under every parallel of latitude, the warmth and light of the tropics. It plants its Eden in the wilderness and solitary place, and sows with flowers the gray desolation of rocks and mosses. Wherever love goes, there springs the true heart's-ease, rooting itself even in the polar ices."²⁵

Footnotes for Chapter IV

¹Pollard, Friend to Man, p. 439.

²Jones, "Whittier Reconsidered," p. 240.

³"Poetry in America," p. 265

⁴The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier (Boston and New York, 1892), I, 19-20. Unless otherwise noted all citations from Whittier's prose in my text are to this edition.

⁵Ibid., I, 362.

⁶Loc. cit.

⁷Ibid., I, 363.

⁸Ibid., I, 364-365.

⁹His statement on this conflict in terms of the intrusion of the railroad is especially significant, for the image is common in nineteenth century American literature. Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden, pp. 45-46, mentions its occurrence as an indication that

If America seemed to promise everything that men always had wanted, it also threatened to obliterate much of what they already had achieved. Thus contradictory images of America as garden and wilderness were both psychologically valid. The paradox was to be a cardinal subject of our national literature, and beginning in the nineteenth century our best writers were able to develop the theme in all its complexity.

¹⁰"The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish," Whittier on Writers, p. 27, in which Whittier himself criticized Cooper for the same reason.

¹¹J. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 103, asserts that his most successful poems describe the starkness of fall or winter.

¹²Prose Works, I, 381.

¹³J. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 103.

¹⁴A further, less-veiled reference to the political situation occurs in the next to the last stanza, an unnecessary, irrelevant excrescence to the poem (as all three of the last stanzas are), in which he declares,

I have not seen, I may not see,
My hopes for man take form in fact,
But God will give the victory
In due time; in that faith I act. (p. 153.)

¹⁵The mood of this passage is strongly reminiscent of the closing stanzas of Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality," again indicating a similarity that has gone largely unnoticed.

¹⁶S. Pickard, Whittier-Land, p. 32.

¹⁷Margaret Smith's Journal, Prose Works, I, 77. In an embryonic form, the theme of "Among the Hills" is evident in Jordan's statement that some planters ". . . see nothing in these things, save as they do affect their crops of grain or grasses, or their bodily comforts in one way or another." This is all the more apparent because of Jordan's later assertion that his appreciation had only flowered in acquaintance with Polly's natural and instinctive love of nature, which had had a tempering influence upon his own masculine tendency to view it only in terms of its uses.

¹⁸"Taking Comfort," Prose Works, I, 383-384.

¹⁹Emerson's Works, Vol. I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures (Boston and New York, 1883), p. 65. Arthur Christy, "The Orientalism of Whittier," American Literature, V (November, 1933), p. 251, suggests that Emerson was responsible for Whittier's liberalism with respect to Oriental pantheism.

²⁰Leary, John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 93.

²¹Christy, pp. 250-252, suggests that this poem and parts of "Miriam" and "The Preacher" indicate Whittier's "acceptance of the basic principles of the Vedanta." Some passages he finds "too pantheistic to be Christian and too Christian to be good pantheism," indicating a blindness to the distinctions between various doctrines of these faiths.

²²Waggoner, "What I Had I Gave," p. 37.

²³"Whittier," Nature in American Literature (New York, 1923), p. 32.

²⁴Leary, p. 144.

²⁵Prose Works, I, 248.

CHAPTER V

"OLD FAITH AND FANCIES NEW"

1

Hardly less noticeable than Whittier's fascination with nature is his constant reference to time; his concern with past and future is the source of one of the most enigmatic conflicts found in his outlook. The elegiac note common to romanticism and the nineteenth century as a whole is at variance with his repeated proclamation of a new age, a millennium of peace and harmony, the realization of the American Dream, which follows the general trend of American optimism. An instinctive, romantic preference for the past vies with an ideological belief in progress, based on an amalgam of Yankee utilitarianism and liberal, activist religious belief derived from Quaker and humanistic influences.

This chapter will examine this conflict as it is developed in the poem, "The Reformer," and in other writings. The concentration of Whittier's imaginative vision on various periods of the past will be discussed, culminating in an interpretation of "Snow-Bound" and showing how he resolved the conflict by developing a vision of the future in terms of his idealized past. For all his activity in attempting to bring about a better world, the evidence of Whittier's poetry, as this chapter will attempt to show, indicates that his imagination gravitated naturally toward and was most effective

in dealing with bygone scenes. The elegiac mood of his writing is impregnated with a covert hostility to the spirit of change and iconoclasm rapidly sweeping over the western world under the aegis of technology.

At his worst, Whittier's dwelling upon the past deteriorates in spongy lamentation over the "good old days," and his ideological assertion of the great future ahead chips platitudes from the plaster mountain of Victorian optimism; but when he strikes a proper tension between the two directions of his vision, slicing sharply through the cold lava of pat ideas, the living core of poetry is revealed.

Ideologically, Whittier was committed to the present and the future, as eras in which good might be accomplished. According to his announced purpose, his interest in the past was primarily intended to be useful and instructive. In defending himself against charges of fanaticism levelled at his defense of tradition, he declared,

I reverence whatever is good and true and heroic in the past, not because it is old, but because it brings with it the freshness and newness of an immortal life, and it is not merely a part of the past, but of the present future also.¹

At the height of his interest in reform activities, Whittier was asked which of his poems he would wish to be remembered for. He named "The Reformer" (1846), a poem which presents in somewhat allegorical fashion his conflicting attitudes toward violent change.² As in a vision, he sees

. . . a Strong One, in his wrath,
 Smiting the godless shrines of man
 Along his path. (p. 364)

This iconoclast is pictured ambiguously as fearfully "grim and soiled" but healthily "brown with tan"; he is opposed by such adverse elements as Wealth, Fraud, and Sloth, but also by benign Art, Reverence, Use, and Romance. Whittier's own doubts are indicated as the vision passes, and he wakes, "Shuddering and sick of heart." But his fretful instincts are assuaged by the clearer picture he gains upon awakening; as the dust clears, "The Waster seemed the Builder too."

'T was but the ruin of the bad,--
 The wasting of the wrong and ill;
 Whate'er of good the old time had
 Was living still. (p. 365)

The despoiler envisioned in the dream is also changed in aspect: his formerly fearful countenance grows calm and smiling. There follows a picture of an earthly paradise in which the Biblical vision of swords beaten into plowshares is realized, the slave is freed, forts and prisons are transformed into "pavilions gay" and schools for girls, and "The outworn rite, the old abuse,/ The pious fraud," and the captivity of the good are doomed, in accordance with "that great law/ Which makes the past time serve to-day."

Perhaps Whittier is addressing his own instincts in the stanzas in which he advises the "backward-looking son of time" that human nature is changeless in its conservative unwillingness to sacrifice the coils of custom:

Idly as thou, in that old day
 Thou mournest, did thy sire repine;
 So, in his time, thy child grown gray
 Shall sigh for thine.

But his avowed belief is that

. . . life shall on and upward go;
 Th' eternal step of Progress beats
 To that great anthem, calm and slow,
 Which God repeats. (p. 365)

The "lesson" of the poem, however, is drawn out over too many stanzas, perhaps indicating the intensity of Whittier's desire to convince himself and to reassure faint-hearted or pessimistic readers of the worth of revolutionary ideas.

More dangerous to the preservation of tradition than the reformer is public apathy. "The Landmarks" (1879), a plea for the preservation of the Old South Church, reveals a feeling that valued mementoes might be too readily and thoughtlessly sacrificed to "mammon's grasping claim" or mere heedlessness. But in spite of his love for such memorials, assertions of the supremacy of the present and future are evident in all periods of his life. He is prone to see in history evidence of "the steady gain of man" and indications

'That all of good the past hath had
 Remains to make our own time glad,
 Our common daily life divine,
 And every land a Palestine.'

("The Chapel of the Hermits," p. 40)

As late as 1881 he was capable of as much optimism as ever, as he wrote,

The world is growing better; the Lord reigns; our old planet is wheeling slowly into fuller light. I despair of nothing good. All will come in due time that is really needed. All that we have to do is to work--and wait.³

In "Among the Hills," which presents the drab side of the immediate past, he apostrophizes, as noted in Chapter III, a

. . . Golden Age, whose light is of the dawn,
And not of sunset, forward, not behind.

But he wants this future age complete with "All the old virtues" (italics mine), and one cannot mistake his suspicion that men are not quite what they had been in "the vanished past." Figures of colonial history and of his own childhood loom larger than contemporary men. Samuel Sewall, a repentant participant in the witchcraft trials, contrasts "Widely as heaven and hell" with "the cunning trickster and knave" (p. 67) of courts in Whittier's own day. Figures out of his past possess uniqueness and vitality lacking among his own contemporaries, who dully conform with the fashions of the times. Such individualistic and spontaneous originals as Abram Morrison are "Dead and gone!"

Gone forever with the queer
Characters of that old year!
Now the many are as one;
Broken is the mould that run
Men like Abram Morrison. (p. 415)

In spite of his assertion that "in the beautiful present the past is no longer needed,"⁴ he is contemptuous, in his tribute to Joshua Coffin, "To My Old Schoolmaster" (1851), of

"the busy ones" who "Look not forward nor behind," but laugh at the pedagogue "Tabernacled in the Past."

Dabbling, in their noisy way,
In the puddles of to-day,
Little know they of that vast
Solemn ocean of the past.

But he respects the man who spends his life,

In an age whose eager view
Seeks but present things, and new,
Mad for party, sect and gold,
Teaching reverence for the old. (p. 191

In spite of his belief that the value of the past lies only in its usefulness, Whittier, like the admired teacher, loved and revelled in "the remembrance of things past." Much of his collected prose, including his most ambitious attempt at fiction, Margaret Smith's Journal, touches on some aspect of personal or historical past. There is frequently a note of passionate, lyrical intensity in his allegiance to the old and legendary that is missing in the strained self-consciousness of his praise for present and future. More and more frequently, beginning in the 1850's, immediate experience--the memory of a loved one, the smell of flowers he had sought as a youth, the sight of a child at play, the altered landscape of winter, or the rhythm of breaking waves--tended to plunge him back into the emotional milieu of childhood, often simply for the imaginative delight of recalling the "morning time" of life, and "the fairer hills of youth,"

which he sometimes seems to regard as more intensely real than present circumstances. In 1885 he wrote in "The Reunion" that

The eyes grown dim to present things
Have keener sight for bygone years,
And sweet and clear, in deafening ears,
The bird that sang at morning sings. (p. 239)

An inner vision, perhaps corresponding to the auditory image of the inner voice and related to the inner light of Quaker doctrine, predominates over sensory sight. This introspective outlook, indisputably related to his feeling for the past, indicates a discomfort in the present which all his intellectually and ideologically derived ideas about its superiority or the necessity of concentrating upon improvement and progress cannot assuage. He was repelled in spite of himself by the obvious callousness, greed, and complacency of contemporary life, at least as much as by the occasional cruelty of those puritans who had exercised their religious zeal in persecution.

The biting, pitiless indictment of the present in "For Righteousness Sake" (1855) has a ring of sincerity never quite attained in his platitudinous assertions of the irresistible progress of mankind. The first stanza is much the best, welding words in an almost metaphysical density and harshness that reveal the "white heat" noted by Lowell as characteristic of Whittier at his polemical best:

The age is dull and mean. Men creep,
 Not walk; with blood too pale and tame
 To pay the debt they owe to shame;
 Buy cheap, sell dear; eat, drink and sleep,
 Down-pillowed, deaf to moaning want;
 Pay tithes for soul-insurance; keep
 Six days to Mammon, one to Cant. (pp. 317-318)

Unfortunately the remainder of the poem does not maintain the controlled verbal tension of these lines, and he slides into optimistic generalization.

2

Whittier does not view the past all in a lump. we may distinguish three distinct approaches, resulting in three different kinds of poetry. The remote and primitive past of the "world's childhood" is related to his feeling for nature and is often evoked in his Indian narratives. The nearer past of the colonial settler, stern and harsh on the exterior, but inwardly marked by spiritual vitality, is an age of magic and superstition, sometimes cruel and dangerous, but also, and perhaps more often, entrancingly beautiful. Finally, Whittier's own personal past, during which he realized to a fuller degree than later the instinctive relationship to nature of the savage and the sense of mystery of the colonists, is viewed as a pastoral idyl of human warmth, security, and vital joy. In general, while there is considerable overlapping, these three stages of his interest fall into a roughly chronological pattern. His Indian legends are mainly a product of the early, imitative period of his work; the colonial legends

are most heavily concentrated in his early middle years; and the backward glances at his own childhood become increasingly frequent after the end of the Civil War.⁵

Impressed by the work of Burns and Scott, Whittier wished to create for America, as they had for Scotland, an authentic literary image. In an early critical essay he scorned the often-expressed opinion "that the New World is deficient in poetry and romance" and that its writers were consequently obliged to draw on "foreign sources" for material. "On the contrary," he asserted,

New England is full of Romance. The great forest which our fathers penetrated--the red men--their struggle and their disappearance--the Powwow and the War-dance--the savage inroad and the English sally--the tale of superstition, and the scenes of Witchcraft; all these are rich materials of poetry.⁶

Like Emerson and a group of lesser writers, Whittier seemed to feel a need for a more truly and originally American expression in literature.⁷ His belief that poetry had not yet been adequately welded to the realities of American geography and experience was bluntly conveyed in yet another review:

We have no songs; American domestic life has never been hallowed and beautified by the sweet and graceful and tender associations of poetry. We have no Yankee pastorals. Our rivers and streams turn mills and float rafts, and are otherwise as commendably useful as those of Scotland; but no quaint ballad, or simple song, reminds us that men and women have loved, met, and parted, on their banks. . . . Poetry is not one of our household gods. . . . Our poetry is cold--abstract --imitative. . . .⁸

A sense of nationalistic pride thus figured in his attempts to exploit the past for literary purposes.

Through his poetry Whittier attempted to realize or symbolize his idealized concept of America. In the earlier years this took the form of a consciousness of isolation, the result of his background, perhaps, and of a desire to fight against its disadvantages through an aggressive attack upon entrenched social and political evils with whose victims he could feel a kinship as a result of his own limitations. At the same time he was not without pride in these very limitations. A pattern of poetry resulted in which he identified defensively with the fading past of primitive nature, his love of his native region and its legends, and a future in which social evils and inequalities would vanish.

Thus developed a duality of vision which looked forward to a time of human fulfillment and backward to a golden age now faded. He spoke often of his own purpose as that of one who

. . . reconciled as best he could
Old faith and fancies new. ("My Namesake," p.393)

Even "Mogg Megone" (1834), now seldom read, perhaps because of its relegation to the appendix of the collected editions, reveals an unexpectedly ambiguous view of the American past.⁹ In spite of failings, it was undeniably popular and frequently reprinted. Carpenter declared that it had been read avidly by the youth of his generation and

thought it warranted more attention than it had received.¹⁰ Thus the poem may hold significance demanding more than passing perusal. Whittier was perhaps responding to influences in the American experience below conscious awareness on a deeper and archetypal level.

The basic plot of the tale is violent and melodramatic, with overtones of racial and religious bigotry. Mogg, a chieftain of the Penobscots, has made a deal with the English renegade, John Bonython, to deed over a vast tract of land in exchange for the white man's daughter Ruth. Although she had conspired with her father to use the Indian for her own purposes of revenge upon an Englishman who had loved and left her, she is appalled when Mogg presents the scalp of her former lover. Remembered feelings of tenderness return, and she is filled with revulsion for the Indian. After he falls asleep from drink, she kills him, with the blessing of her double-crossing father, whose sense of obligation to Mogg has prevented him from doing the job himself. Horrified at her deed, she rushes into the night and finally, hoping for comfort and absolution, to the retreat of Pere Ralle, a French priest who has an abbey near Megon's village. At this time a party of English raiders is about to attack the village, which, because of its allegiance to the French, stands in the way of English plans. Ralle has counted heavily on Megon to lead the Indians in the struggle against the English and, when Ruth tells him of her deed, he spurns her, in the name

of man and God. While village, abbey and priest are being destroyed, she flees and wanders like a wild animal for the better part of a year. The poem ends with a description of the end of her flight as she leans against a tree-trunk, dead.

Mogg, more than any other of Whittier's Indians, may be considered an effective answer to the accusation that the poet consistently presented the Indian in a sentimental, idealized light. He and the other characters of the poem bear far more resemblance to the warped and violent creatures of twentieth century fiction than to the Indians and colonists of eulogistic patriotic tradition. The vision of mankind presented in the poem is bitterly pessimistic. Not only Mogg but also the other main characters are conniving as well as murderous, and the priest, Ralle, actually scorns Ruth not because of his outraged sense of virtue or justice, but because the deed has ruined his plans. An ironic view of his "mission" is implied as the British raiders approach and he faces the end, kneeling, praying, kissing his cross, and thinking "terrible thoughts . . .

Of evil seen and done,
Of scalps brought home by his savage flock
From Casco and Sawga and Sagadahock
In the Church's service won. (p. 504)

The poem also provides a rough approximation of a theme not uncommon in American literature, in which a dark-skinned primitive is placed in an intimate relationship with a member of the dominant white race. In this case a strong, masculine

Indian chieftain is united with a vacillating and seemingly weak white girl, the cast-off daughter of a renegade, symbolizing, perhaps, the confrontation of the Indian tribe and the white settler, exiled from his European homeland. The Indian receives the white girl with affection, proffered aid, and trust, and she, like the puritan, pretends to reciprocate, but has no real intention of doing so. For a deed he has committed at her behest, she kills him. Similarly the Indians were goaded by aggressive and often deceptive white exploitation to violent reactions that forced the colonists ultimately to destroy or drive them away. In the case of both the colonist and the girl a division is evident between professed and real purposes that leads to insufferable guilt; as elsewhere in American literature and tradition, this guilt is exposed through a confrontation between white and dark, the archetypal love and rejection relationship later exploited by Melville, Twain, and Faulkner, and identified by Leslie Fiedler.¹¹ Perhaps "Mogg Megone" suggests an ambiguous attitude toward the whole scheme of national and religious pretensions of justice and idealistic aims. It is not surprising that Whittier later wished to disavow the poem.

In spite of its general imitativeness, occasional clumsiness, and frequent digressions, the poem is not without flashes of lyrical beauty, as when Ruth describes a visitation by her mother's spirit after her murder of Megone:

'All dimly in the wan moonshine,
 As a wreath of mist will twist and twine,
 And scatter, and melt into the light;
 So scattering, melting on my sight,
 The pale, cold vision passed;
 But those sad eyes were fixed on mine
 Mournfully to the last.' (p. 502)

Description is handled with symbolic effectiveness in the opening picture of Mogg, in which the imagery suggests his pride and strength and also foreshadows his destruction.

Who stands on that cliff, like a figure of stone,
 Unmoving and tall in the light of the sky,
 Where the spray of the cataract sparkles on high,
 Lonely and sternly, save Mogg Megone? . . .
 Far down, through the mist of the falling river,
 Which rises up like an incense ever,
 The splintered points of the crags are seen,
 With water howling and vexed between,
 While the scooping whirl of the pool beneath
 Seems an open throat, with its granite teeth! (p. 495)

The sexual symbolism, while doubtless unintentional, is powerfully suggestive, since his crime and his murder both result from overweening passion.

Recalling the fact that this poem was written during the years of Whittier's ambitious groping for renown and his traumatic about-face decision to join the abolition movement, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to find in the description of Ralle's uneasiness a vague self-portrait, suggesting Whittier's struggle between Quaker ideal and worldly ambition:

How ill thy troubled musings fit
 The holy quiet of a breast
 With the Dove of Peace at rest,
 Sweetly brooding over it.

Thoughts are thine which have no part
 With the meek and pure of heart,
 Undisturbed by outward things. (p. 503)

At any rate the story poses questions Whittier would not consciously have deigned to consider about human duplicity and savagery and about the conflict of the races.

3

In the thirties and forties most of Whittier's poetic effort was expended upon anti-slavery verse, a digression, as we have seen, from his real creative interests. The situation had demanded hastily composed invective rather than art, and relatively few of the abolition poems rise above this level.¹² With the decline of his active abolitionism, around 1840, and increasingly in the fifties, he turned to subjects other than salvery, especially to the creation of a number of ballad-
 tales about the colonial past of New England, thus continuing the scheme of developing the legendry of place and the songs of American life that he had demanded earlier.¹³

Traditional ballad subjects are blended with his own predilections, based upon his heritage and the surroundings he loved. The Quakers and others who suffered persecution at the hands of the puritan church officials naturally receive sympathy. Examples are Thomas Macy, who fled to become one of the first white settlers of Nantucket Island after attempting to defend a banished Quaker ("The Exiles"); "Cassandra Southwick," ordered to be sold into slavery for

failing to pay a fine for non-attendance at church; and "Mabel Martin," shunned because her mother had been hanged as a witch, but ultimately befriended by a leader of the region.

Whittier's treatment of the Quaker-Puritan conflict is surprisingly objective. He does not overlook the less attractive features of Quaker fanaticism; "In the Old South" describes Margaret Brewster as breaking into an orthodox worship service dressed in sackcloth and sprinkled with ashes, "half-crazed and half-divine" (p. 121). Whittier's catalogue of puritans also includes a wide variety of types, the pitying Justice Pike of Salisbury, sincere but cruel Governor Endicott, honest and repentant samuel Sewall, and the cruel priest of "The Exiles."¹⁴

As a ballad-writer Whittier shares in the interest in the Gothic mode typical of early nineteenth century writers such as Charles Brockden Brown, Irving, Hawthorne, and Poe-- "The New Wife and the Old," for example, develops the "Ligeia" motif. But he adds a characteristic New England touch in such ballads as "The Dead Ship of Harpswell" and "The Palatine," two versions of the Flying Dutchman legend traditional to the fishing communities on the coasts of New England, and through his unfailing interest in the witchcraft legends of Massachusetts. Romantic idyls such as "Amy Wentworth" and "The Witch of Wenham" also exploit the place-names and landmarks of familiar territory, while introducing the democratic themes of the union of high and low or the

unprotected and outcast woman defended by the strong and unassailable village hero.¹⁵

Most of these ballads exploit historical or legendary incidents, but a few are entirely of Whittier's own creation, such as "Maud Miller" (1854), the much-maligned tale of a country lass and a city judge who spend their lives lamenting their failure to follow a moment's impulse and to escape from conventional--and ironically inevitable--choices of life-partners. More recently, attempts have been made to reinterpret this poem as a subtle and ironic criticism of the sentimental wish for "what is not" rather than as a mawkish illustration of the oft-quoted lines,

For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: 'It might have been!' (p. 48)

It is just as possible to read the poem as meaning that the words are sad because "it" never could have been. It would therefore be especially foolish to waste time in repeating these words, thereby preventing oneself from realizing whatever benefits might be gleaned from reality.¹⁶

Some of Whittier's narratives unintentionally combine fact and fiction.¹⁷ Perhaps the best of these is "Skipper Ireson's Ride" (1857). It is based on the story of a Captain Floyd Ireson of Marblehead, who, having

Sailed away from a sinking wreck
With his own town's-people on her deck,

is cruelly but perhaps fitly punished by the offended women of the town, who tarred and feathered him and pulled him through the streets in a cart.¹⁸ The narrative is handled with a light, buoyant touch, demonstrating the sense of humor that Whittier seldom chose to reveal in his published verse (though it is frequently employed in his essays and letters). The first stanza established a mock-heroic tone, comparing Ireson's adventure to various legendary journeys, of which his is "The strangest ride that ever was sped."

The second stanza describes his appearance, pitiful, but also amusing, with "Body of turkey, head of owl," and "Wings a-droop like a rained-on fowl." The incongruous picture of sober, hardy fish-wives so jocularly engaged in pushing and pulling him along is enhanced by the quaint dialectic rendition of the refrain :

'Here's Flud Oirson, fur his horrd horrt,
Torr'd an' futherr'd an' corr'd in a corrt
By the women o' Morble'ead.' (p. 55)

The next four stanzas relate the events that led up to the ride and enlarge upon the humorous picture of "Wrinkled scolds" and "Girls in bloom . . . such as chase/ Bacchus round some antique vase." Such are the "Maenads" who chant the dulcet refrain.

With the seventh stanza comes a shift in point of view and mood, as the suffering skipper is brought to the forefront of attention, unaware "Of the fields so green and the

sky so blue," or even of the sounds of jeering voices. For his punishment is manifold. He speaks, revealing the gloom of a soul tortured with pain beyond that of outward circumstance:

'What to me is this noisy ride?
 What is the shame that clothes the skin
 To the nameless horror that lives within?
 Waking or sleeping, I see a wreck,
 And hear a cry from a reeling deck!
 Hate me and cruse me,--I only dread
 The hand of God and the face of the dead!' (p. 55)

Even the lost skipper's wife and the mother "mourning her only son" are moved, and with mingled scorn and pity they free Ireson and leave him to suffer alone. In a unique manner, the poem blends humorous external detail with a real perception of the suffering of a guilty soul.

The ability to deal lightly with history and local legend is also demonstrated in "The Double-Headed Snake of Newbury" (1859). The amphisbaena is a legendary creature of Old New England which "carried a head where his tail should be." The poem begins with mock-seriousness, perfectly blending a spirit of naive awe and the irony that penetrates it. Four-stress couplets are well-adapted to the mood of the poem. The snake is compared to "Dragons and griffins and monsters dire," such as "Crawl . . . Through dusk tradition and ballad age." The second strophe considers the origin of the legend, as emanating from the real and understandable fears of the settler on a tiny "strip of Christian earth,"

desolate and "Full of terror and mystery." This passage ends with a backhanded compliment to the restraint this embattled folk were able to place on their imaginations, since "the snake had two heads, and not a score!" (p. 61)

Also included in the poem is a gentle spoof of the credulity of Cotton Mather, who

. . . came galloping down
All the way to Newbury town,
With his eyes agog and his ears set wide, . . .
Stirring the while in the shallow pool
Of his brains for the lore he learned at school,
To garnish the story, (p. 62)

for inclusion in his Wonder-Book. An especially remarkable characteristic of the creature was the fact that its two heads wriggled independently; they "could never agree," and "Neither knew what the other was at." It thus found a ready parallel in reality, and the poem ends with the climactic observation that

And still, whenever husband and wife
Publish the same of their daily strife,
And, with mad cross-purpose, tug and strain
At either end of the marriage-chain,
The gossips say with a knowing shake
Of their gray heads, 'Look at the Double Snake!
One in body and two in will,
The Amphisbaena is living still!' (p. 62)

The poem thus combines history, legend, humor, and application without didacticism or superfluity.

Although Whittier's colonial ballads certainly represent an invaluable contribution to native literature, John Pickard perhaps overstates his case when he calls them "his finest poetic achievement."¹⁹ Better than the more distant past of history, Whittier loved the immediate past of his own youth,²⁰ and it is from his childhood that he drew his purest poetic impulse. As in "Snow-Bound," he turned to it for his deepest realization of life and his ideals. Like Wordsworth he recognized in the child the natural poet, and in the poet the retention of a childlike response to experience:

If not the wisest, it appears to me that the happiest people in the world are those who still retain something of the child's creative faculty of imagination. . . . For the child is always something of a poet; if he cannot analyze, like Wordsworth and Tennyson, the emotions which expand his being, even as the fullness of life bursts open the petals of a flower, he finds with them all Nature plastic to his eye and hand. The soul of genius and the heart of childhood are one.²¹

Whittier recognized in the child not only a private and selfish poetic faculty, but also an infectious though unconscious ability to induce joy and enthusiasm in those around him. As a symbol of Christ the child is possessed of a regenerative faculty, opening windows of the spirit for those settled into the narrow bondage of adult calculation and the habit of taking for granted the miracle of every day's sunrise and of every moment's "fine possibilities."

Not in history alone, but every day and always, Christ sets the little child in the midst of us as the truest reminder of himself, teaching us the secret of happiness, and leading us into the kingdom by the way of humility and tenderness.²²

Whittier is thus vitally involved in the literary discovery of the child, one of the most significant and enduring contributions of the romantic period to subsequent literature. Today, when the exploitation of childhood and adolescence has become a commonplace of fiction, just as the outlook of society, especially American society, has gradually shifted to a greater concern with the desires, interests, and gratifications of youth, we tend to forget that child-figures do not appear prominently in pre-romantic literature.²³

Before the romantic era, few seemed to question the idea that childhood and youth were rebellious, uncivilized stages to be grown out of as soon as possible and to be ignored as much as possible. The ideal of innocence or perfection, at least in the western world, was racial and historical rather than personal, and variously mythologized as Eden, a legendary Golden Age, or a pastoral world of idle, contemplative shepherds. The inhabitants of any of these were rational and responsible adults.

The ascendancy of the child in literature is a response to several factors. Youth serves as a symbol of the opposition of imagination and spontaneity to the formalism of the eighteenth century; of the revolt of the common man, whose traditional role was disrupted by the rise of industrialism

and laissez-faire economic principles; and of the elegiac tone sometimes felt to be characteristic of all nineteenth century literature as a result of urbanization, the industrial revolution, and the abandonment of traditional theological concepts, all of which seemed to threaten a change in the very nature of mankind itself. According to Peter Coveney the romantic tradition saw the dissociation of Man and Nature as the main problem of modern civilization, with the consequent de-naturing of man.²⁴ To those who envisioned man in this predicament, the child became a symbol of growth in the face of the "falling skies" of revolution and enlightenment.²⁵

The romantics, glorifying instinct, emotion, and spontaneity at the expense of reason and order, also identified childhood with an unfallen condition of humanity, thus inverting the doctrine of Original Sin to one of "Original Innocence."²⁶ According to this view, the child represents man in a relatively innocent stage of development; he is a sort of pre-lapsarian figure with special relevance to an age peculiarly aware of the limitations and inconsistencies of the human condition. His awareness and sense of wonder are lost to the ordinary adult; he dwells on the fringes of society, and thus his point of view is utilized as a critique of society.²⁷

Perhaps this conception owes most to Rousseau, but Blake and Wordsworth, associating innocence and childhood in

an original and unique way, seem to have been largely responsible for the introduction of the child in a prime role in English literature. For both poets the end of childhood represented a kind of fall from grace or insight. Wordsworth, for example, examines his own life subjectively and retrospectively and finds a failure of vision and intensity of sensation, which he associates with maturation. He therefore imagines a pre-existent state, which not only places the child closer to heaven but also gives him, paradoxically, greater intimacy with nature and the brute world, as is also the case with the child dwelling in Blake's "Beulah." The doctrine of original sin is thus reinterpreted as a psychological phenomenon occurring in the life of each man, rather than as revealed theological dogma.

The romantic concern with "organic" art is simply one expression of interest in the dynamic and living, as opposed to the static and mechanical. A capacity for growth is preferred above cold realization. Thus the child, the savage, and the common man, especially the rustic or farmer (until Whitman came to include the industrial laborer in the scheme of romantic potential), are opposed and preferred to the mature, the cultivated, and the sophisticated; nature, the wilder the better, is opposed to the machine, and the pastoral countryside to the town. The instinctive distrust of urban society, culminating in the stereotypes of the "wicked city" and the "wholesome country" date from this period.²⁸

In America these feelings were intensified in both directions, because of the implicit desire to make a new start in a new world. On one hand there was a desire to reassert the traditional "pastoral" concept of life, as in the case of Jefferson, and on the other, a desire to exploit the new forces of science and technology, which might most clearly be observed in the pragmatic attitudes and achievements of Benjamin Franklin. No American poet of the nineteenth century is more susceptible to the romantic view of childhood than Whittier. In the sophisticated world south of the Merrimac, which had embraced the new age, leaving the pastoral existence of Essex County and northern New England behind, he was a psychological exile, who looked back with nostalgia on the integrated life of his childhood. The early poems of exile and the violent destruction of worldly communities are thus intimately bound up with his own inner conflicts, and the abolition struggle provided the necessary outlet for the sense of opposition thus aroused. The achievement of abolition constituted a symbolic victory over the outside world and the modern forces of greed and exploitation it encouraged, and it left him free to retire from the combat to enact the imaginative and symbolic recreation of the pastoral world of his first love.

The regenerative effect of childhood is the theme of several of Whittier's poems. It is realized dramatically in "The Hermit of the Thebaid" (1854), in which a child innocently

asks if God lives only in the desert and thus opens the mind of the hermit to the fact that "There is no place where God is not." (p. 46) He returns with the child, only to find that its mother (its sex is nowhere indicated, perhaps by design) is his sister, and thus he is fittingly reunited with his family. A similar theme is found in "The Minister's Daughter" (1880); the innocent but probing questions of a little girl on the fall of man and the curse of God lead her minister-father to reject the Calvinistic "gospel of hatred" as blasphemous and idolatrous. (p. 460) The sentimentality of these poems is somewhat unconvincing, but "Child-Songs" (1875) is an appealing tribute to the undeniably salutary potential of childhood viewed in the light of love. Whittier alludes to both Burns and Wordsworth as poets who have profited more from "childhood's sweet appeal" than from "all the sages teach."²⁹ Children are God's "small interpreters," the "freshest from His hands/ And nearest unto Him!" (p. 454)

The purity of childhood feelings and emotions is asserted in "In School Days" (1870), which demonstrates clearly the change in taste and literary sensibility since the nineteenth century. Whittier obviously intended to illustrate the guilelessness, the innocent frankness, and the pure motivation of children. He and the boy in the poem, assumed to be a reminiscence self-portrait, take the girl's apologetic assertion of affection at face value, after she has surpassed him in a spelling-bee:

'I'm sorry that I spelt the word:
 I hate to go above you,
 Because, '---the brown eyes lower fell,--
 'Because, you see, I love you!' (pp. 407-408)

The meaning of the incident for Whittier and the boy is that

He lives to learn, in life's hard school,
 How few who pass above him
 Lament their triumph and his loss,
 Like her,--because they love him. (p. 408)

The poem is skillfully wrought and has undeniable charm as a rendition of the conventional image of the child, but to a contemporary reader, unavoidably conscious of depth psychology and the ubiquitousness of social and psychological game-playing, it is not merely sentimental; the coy admission of the girl that she is sorry for having spelled a word and passed the boy has less innocent overtones probably unsuspected by Whittier and his readers. The girl's apparently innocent puppy love and her arch assertion of superiority suggest the ulterior motives of the domineering female role so aptly rendered by Charles Schultz in the creation of Charlie Brown's bete noire, Lucy. But in the nineteenth century Oliver Wendell Holmes shed tears over the poem, and Matthew Arnold called it "one of the perfect poems which must live."³⁰ His "touchstone" method seems to have shattered against the poem's smooth and simple surface.

The view that childhood represents an unfallen state, even a suggestion that the legend of Eden and the fall of man symbolize childhood and the passage to maturity, is implicit

in a number of Whittier's poems. It is quite explicitly stated in "A Lay of Old Time" (1856):

We share our primal parents' fate,
And, in our turn and day,
Look back on Eden's sworded gate
As sad and lost as they. (p. 219)

The fall of man is recognized as an archetypal occurrence repeated in the psychological life of every man, as disclosed by Blake and Wordsworth. But Whittier takes the idea further, in one direction, than Wordsworth, who declared that the vision "is now forever vanished from my sight." In the New World, a new Paradise may be achieved, and the vision need not die for one who retains a child's enthusiasm, spontaneity, and sense of possibility. In the final stanza "The pitying Angel" who encouraged Adam and Eve as they looked backward in shame descends again

And leads through Toil to Paradise
New Adams and new Eves! (p. 219)

5

What was the nature of the world which Whittier attempted to recapture? It would probably be safe to say that during the period surrounding Whittier's youth, rural New England attained more nearly than any other section of the country an approximation of Jefferson's ideal of an agrarian society dedicated to the cultivation of the humanistic as opposed to the materialistic and acquisitive instincts of

mankind.

The stately buildings of Beacon Street meant less for the commonwealth than the homesteads of Essex County, whose simple structure followed the needs of a household in which servants were unknown; the company that gathered around the hearth was united in mutual dependence,--a dependence typical of the relations of all citizens to one another and to the state.³¹

The 1797 edition of The Encyclopedia Britannica noted under the heading "New England" that "it may in truth be said, that in no part of the world are the people happier . . . or more independent than the farmers of New England."³² As for the village of Haverhill itself, George Washington is reported to have called it, during the New England campaign of the Revolutionary War, the "pleasantest village I have come through."³³

Pollard asserts that "Whittier was twice blessed in his spiritual development of the Quakerism of his people and by his freedom from cloying urban influences," but that he suffered from the want of educational advantages of the city.³⁴ The simplicity of rural farm life was accentuated by the austerity of Quaker practice, forcing the young dreamer to make the most of his natural surroundings and his own resources of spirit and intelligence. The capacity of these is best indicated by the mark he made on the world in spite of meager opportunities. It may be questioned whether what he lacked in formal education was not far outweighed by intimate association with the hills and streams and flowers and wildlife of his early surroundings.

It is doubtful that he thought of his situation as

particularly constricting with respect to an essential knowledge or wisdom. More probably, he saw the depths of experience underlying the bland exterior of simple village and country life, like Dr. Singletary, who asserted that

'Human life . . . is the same everywhere. If we could but get at the truth, we should find that all the tragedy and comedy of Shakespeare have been reproduced in this little village. . . . On the surface, everything about us just now looks prosaic and mechanical. . . . But underneath all this there is an earnest life, rich and beautiful with love and hope, or dark with hatred, and sorrow, and remorse.³⁵

Whittier's devotion to country life and folk may also have been augmented by the fact that from these people came the chief support for abolition and other revolutionary causes in which he believed.

In the country and in the hearts of simple farmers and mechanics grew the seeds of reform that had been planted by the religious revolt of the seventeenth century, that were nourished by the political revolt of eighteenth century, and were brought to blossom by the emotional revolt of the nineteenth century.³⁶

In the North only those bound by the conventions of trade, state and church were "wholly indifferent to slavery. More open minds everywhere, and particularly the inhabitants of certain rural districts, knew it to be a gigantic evil."³⁷ Thus the bases of Whittier's allegiance to his native ground were diversified and deep. As his earliest biographer observed, "no poet has more fully identified himself with the beauty of nature in the region of his birth than Whittier."³⁸

As much as to anything else, his poetry is a response to his environment, a parochial response that conventional schooling might have done much to erase. Bliss Perry noted that, in spite of his nationalism and curiosity about the world at large, "Whittier never lost a sort of rusticity. One may like him all the better for it. It goes with his role like the rusticity of Burns. Yet it seems now, as Burns's provincialism does not, to narrow the range of his influence as a poet."³⁹ By the time Whittier was a grown man New England's role in national leadership had diminished, and Perry relates the poet's narrowed influence in the twentieth century to this fact. The influence Whittier exerted in his own century is undeniable. Van Wyck Brooks described it as nation-wide:

It could really have been said of us then, as it cannot now be said at all, that as a folk we had won a certain coherence, a certain sort of ripeness in the better part of ourselves, which was reflected in the coherence of our men of letters. Whittier, for example, was a common basis, and a very sweet and elevating basis, for a national programme of emotions the like of which no poet since his time has been able to compass.⁴⁰

The rejection by the twentieth century of the "sweet and elevating" included the rejection of Whittier; whose personality and poetry had become too exclusively--and to some extent unfairly--identified in these terms.

As explained in Chapter IV, "The Barefoot Boy" reveals the parallelism of the development of Whittier and Wordsworth as poets whose impetus toward writing came to a large extent

from a childhood enraptured with nature. In the attempt to bridge the gap between childhood and age, to retain the illusion of spontaneity, grace, and intimacy with nature, Whittier was even more successful than Wordsworth, of whose "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" it has been said that "the most intense emotion. . . is one of regretful loss."⁴¹ For Whittier, not only as a poet, but as a man, recollection brings no sense of irremediable loss but an almost palpable renewal of the joy, harmony, and integrated apprehension attributed by the romantic consciousness to childhood.⁴² The opening lines of "My Psalm" (1859) are characteristic of the poetic stance he adopted in the recollection of youthful enthusiasm:

I mourn no more my vanished years:
 Beneath a tender rain,
 An April rain of smiles and tears,
 My heart is young again. (p. 397)

Until the very last year of his life Whittier retained this ability to recreate the glow of an earlier day. "An Outdoor Reception" (1892) commemorates an occasion attended by many young people, with whom the poet was delighted to associate and identify in spite of his eighty-five years.

In such an atmosphere of youth
 I half forget my age's truth;
 The shadow of my life's long date
 Runs backward on the dial-plate,
 Until it seems a step might span
 The gulf between the boy and man. (p. 471)

The charge of senility that might too readily be aroused by such sentiments is mitigated by the fact that he himself good-naturedly recognizes its possibility. He makes no effort to deny it but actually seems to enjoy the thought:

My young friends smile, as if some jay
 On bleak December's leafless spray
 Essayed to sing the songs of May.
 Well, let them smile, and live to know,
 When their brown locks are flecked with snow,
 'Tis tedious to be always sage
 And pose the dignity of age. (p. 471)

Nor is his attitude marred by cloying nostalgia. Succeeding lines reveal clear-eyed recognition and willing acceptance of the limitations of mortality. Although he feels "'Tis pleasant to behold the sun," he would not repeat life even if he could.

Whittier's claim of youthfulness in age was apparently not mere wishful thinking. In a sense recognized by many of his contemporaries, he never aged. Throughout his life he communicated a quality of innocence and untainted idealism. Gail Hamilton, whose relative youth did not prevent her from pursuing an attachment for Whittier verging upon romantic love, described him as "thoroughly sweet and simple, with such a child-like manliness."⁴³ However, this innocence or naivete may not have been preserved without cost. Desmond Powell observed that "There is in him, too, a childlike innocence that may be the result of turning his back on life."⁴⁴ In spite of his efforts on behalf of the slave, in spite of his

political activities, one senses, in his best poetry, a desire for withdrawal.

His retreat into the atmosphere of childhood was inspired by a feeling that the present had not fulfilled his earlier hopes. Realizing that the end of slavery was not to usher in the real millennium for which he had hoped, he retired to one of his own imaginative creation, or re-creation, as if to gain a new start, a symbolic rebirth. The barefoot boy was complimented on the grounds that

Every morn shall lead thee through
Fresh baptisms of the dew. (p. 397)

In reenacting childhood's vision of splendor, he sought this sense of fresh baptism natural to youth.⁴⁵ Similarly, the imagistic pattern of "Snow-Bound" enacts a symbolic rebirth from the "womb" of snow warmed by firelight.

6

"The Barefoot Boy" reveals only one aspect of the golden moment, the experience of Eden, that Whittier was bent on recapturing. If one element of Paradise is the gift of nature, a second and more important one depends upon the sharing of love and affection. These qualities were found in abundance in the isolated farmhouse at Haverhill, in the dynamics of a domestic situation providing in generous measure security and love. Paul Elmer More observed that for

Whittier, as for Cowper, "home was a refuge from the world."⁴⁶
 And when the world failed him it was to this spot near the
 Merrimac River that he returned, with the realization that,
 in spirit, he had never really left it:

Yet wheresoe'er his step might be,
 Thy wandering child looked back to thee!
 Heard in his dreams thy river's sound
 Of murmuring on its pebbly bound,
 The unforgotten swell and roar
 Of waves on thy familiar shore;
 And saw, amidst the curtained gloom
 And quiet of his lonely room,
 Thy sunset scenes before him pass.

("The Merrimac," p. 142)

This is the setting of "Snow-Bound," probably the finest example of American pastoralism. This poem brings into focus all the poetic interests of his career and harmonizes them in a single unified structure, a symbolic mythopoeic portrayal of New England rural life. It also reveals his conception of the ideal society, combining strenuous work, family intimacy, and an awareness of the beauty and mystery beneath the surface of the commonplace. Various conflicts fundamental to his vision are juxtaposed and resolved: life is recreated as art; nature is both threat and protector; human goodness is triumphant over evil; the past is recreated in memory and imagination and becomes a symbol of eternity; and eternity dwarfs time and nullifies death.

The poem, though long, is tightly unified by several interwoven patterns of imagery and thematic elements.⁴⁷

Overriding all is the theme of enclosure in the frame of impenetrable snow, which is seen as a threat at the beginning, becomes a spiritual haven in the body of the poem, and is finally punctured by ongoing necessity. Other unifying elements are the time sequence, focused on a single evening around the hearth-fire; the fire itself, a symbol of human warmth overcoming the threat of nature and also of the divine inner light which conquers all; the remembered tales and experiences of members of the family within the memory of the poet himself; and the interplay of time and eternity, the ultimate mystery in a mysterious world.

The world of "Snow-Bound" is itself an artistic creation of the elements, an idyllic picture of harmony framed by the snow which both symbolizes and shuts out the jarring influences of the world outside, and transforms the familiar landscape into an awesome dream-world of fantastic shapes. The sty, the corn-crib, the garden-wall, and a stand of trees seem like "strange domes and towers," and other familiar objects suggest remote wonders of a more specific character:

The well-curb had a Chinese roof;
And even the long sweep, high aloof,
In its slant splendor, seemed to tell
Of Pisa's leaning miracle. (p. 400)

Even work is transformed into a romantic undertaking. The performance of "nightly chores" before the snow has fallen is described in straight-forward, realistic detail; neither

enthusiasm nor unwillingness is indicated. But the opening of a path through the transfigured world of the morning after becomes a journey through Aladdin's cave, and the routine task of feeding the animals is carried out "with merry din," in contrast to the sobriety of the preceding evening.

Basic to the whole poem is the theme of enclosure, of retreat, in a religious sense, away from the interference of an alien and multifarious world. This theme is highlighted in the second of the two quotations prefixed to the poem, which describes a similar situation in brief. The falling snow hides all, and

. . . all friends shut out, the housemates sit
 Around the radiant fireplace, enclosed
 In a tumultuous privacy of storm.⁴⁸

A similar isolation surrounds Whittier's farmhouse, severed from the world, which, beyond the white boundary of the snow, might just as well have ceased to exist.

No church-bell lent its Christian tone
 To the savage air, no social smoke
 Curled over woods of snow-hung oak. (p. 400)

The solitude is thus not only romantic and pleasantly mysterious. It also holds a hint of menace, evident in the opposition in the lines above of its "savage" presence to the invisibility of symbols of society and religion. The farmhouse at Haverhill serves much the same role in Whittier's scheme as Huck Finn's raft on the Mississippi does for Twain. Like

that of Huck, Whittier's retreat is not without a threat, the icy onslaught of the north that had from the beginning exercised Whittier's imagination as a symbol of awe and dread. The elements are personified in terms of terror as the solitude is

. . . made more intense
By dreary-voiced elements,
The shrieking of the mindless wind,
The moaning tree-boughs swaying blind,
And on the glass the unmeaning beat
Of ghostly finger-tips of sleet. (p. 400)

The world of humanity is reduced to "the circle of our hearth." The benevolent voices of nature are also hushed by the overwhelming blanket of frost. Even "the sharpest ear" cannot hear "The buried brooklet," whose music had provided "companionship," and "grown/ To have an almost human tone." But in spite of elemental fury and isolation, warmth and love secure an inviolability for this retreat that Huck's raft never possessed. The family is

Content to let the north-wind roar
In baffled rage at pane and door,
While the red logs before us beat
The frost-line back with tropic heat;
And ever, when a louder blast
Shook beam and rafter as it passed,
The merrier up its roaring draught
The great throat of the chimney laughed.

.
What matter how the night behaved?
What matter how the north-wind raved?
Blow high, blow low, not all its snow
Could quench our hearth-fire's ruddy glow.

(pp. 400-401)

A similar movement is evident in the passage describing the boys in bed, a retreat within a retreat. The roaring and rocking of the wind accompanies the sifting of snow-flakes "through the unplastered wall," but youthful slumber transforms the sounds into peaceful murmurs:

Faint and more faint the murmurs grew,
Till in the summer-land of dreams
They softened to the sound of streams
Low stir of leaves, and dip of oars,
And lapsing waves on quiet shores. (p. 405)

The evocation of the first evening, describing each person present, reaches far back into the past and forward into the future, as far as eternity. Here are mother and father; the simple uncle, a type, perhaps, of all the good, credulous folk Whittier had always admired; the beloved sisters; and the two guests, the sensible reserved teacher, and the "not unfeared," fanatical Harriet Livermore, "A woman tropical, intense," and dark, resembling in many ways the dangerous, dark heroines and villainesses of Hawthorne. These two "outsiders" serve to introduce the theme of reform and abolition, hardly to be ignored in Whittier's masterpiece, but no longer at the forefront of interest. Here it is placed in focus as the interlude it was in the overall drama of Whittier's life. As Arms suggests, this theme serves as a poetic counter, modifying the idyllic dream for one of "larger hopes and graver fears."⁴⁹ The two guests suggest two attitudes toward reform, the teacher pursuing vigorously

but intelligently a course of righting social wrongs, and the young lady entering a course of sterile, self-indulgent religious fanaticism, suggesting perhaps Whittier's view of the alternate courses pursued by those who, like him, attempted to encourage abolition by legal and political means, and by the adherents of Garrison, who took an extreme position of eschewing "compromise" in their demands for immediate reforms on all fronts.⁵⁰

Here also is religion, simple and unquestioned, blunting but not quite effacing the knife-edge of mortality, and making possible, for Whittier, an apprehension of experience upon which even death has little effect. Quaker and Presbyterian are united in good works, as "The wise old Doctor went his round" and stopped to notify Mrs. Whittier of a sick neighbor's need of aid. "The Quaker matron's inward light" and "The Doctor's mail of Calvin's creed," though "twain in faith, in love agree," in the dispensation of "The Christian pearl of charity." (p. 405)

In spite of its isolation, their ice-locked world is neither narrow nor constricting, for it is as large as the imaginations of its inhabitants, and these are well-stocked with pleasant memories, old legends, snatches of song and history, Indian tales, and gothic romances. Some are of harsh occurrences, but these are mellowed and muted by the protective envelope of snow, which is itself tamed and humanized by shadows cast by the hearth-fire. The symbolic importance of

the fire is evident in the first of the prefatory quotations, in which it is likened to "the Divine light of the Sun: . . . as the Celestial Fire drives away dark spirits, so also this our Fire of Wood doth the same." (p. 399)⁵¹ As night begins to fall, the collection and stacking of wood is described in great detail, and the fire is imaged as blazing higher and more brilliantly

Until the old, rude-furnished room
Burst, flower-like, into rosy bloom;
While radiant with a mimic flame
Outside the sparkling drift became,
And through the bare-boughed lilac-tree
Our own warm hearth seemed blazing free. (p. 400)

The artificial light of the fire, lit by loving human hands, is contrasted with the cold, natural light of the moon, which seems in league with the savage aspects of the storm.

For such a world and such a night
Most fitting that unwarming light,
Which only seemed where'er it fell
To make the coldness visible. (p. 400)

While the snowbound retreat is a creation of nature's artistry, its poetic recreation in memory and imagination represents a timeless oasis within the flux of time, which is, rather than the snow, the real villain of the poem, the ally of change and mortality. As he recalls the seeming security of the haven in the light of the hearth-fire, he apostrophizes these antagonistic elements, as if suddenly

struck by a realization of the extent of their performance:

O Time and Change!--with hair as gray
 As was my sire's that winter day,
 How strange it seems, with so much gone
 Of life and love, to still live on!
 Ah, brother! only I and thou
 Are left of all that circle now. (p. 401)

The loss is most poignantly felt in connection with the recent death of Elizabeth, "Our youngest and our dearest. . . .

With me one little year ago:--
 The chill weight of the winter snow
 For months upon her grave has lain: . . .
 But still I wait with ear and eye
 For something gone which should be nigh,
 A loss in all familiar things,
 In flower that blooms, and bird that sings. (p. 403)

But Faith and Love allied to Memory and Imagination are triumphant, and he rests in the confidence

That Life is ever lord of Death,
 And Love can never lose its own!

Thus Elizabeth remains alive in his memory. Abetted by the confidence of immortality thus secured, Whittier takes Tennyson's position that "'Tis better to have loved and lost/ Than never to have loved at all." The gulf between time and eternity is diminished, almost eradicated, as in the poem, "A Mystery," mentioned in Chapter IV, and "The Vanishers" (1864), the first poem he wrote after Elizabeth's death.⁵² In "Snow-Bound" the recollection of loved ones is not merely a lament, but a source of hope and comfort, a life-giving

experience.

And yet, dear heart! remembering thee,
 Am I not richer than of old?
 Safe in thy immortality,
 What change can reach the wealth I hold?
 What chance can mar the pearl and gold
 Thy love hath left in trust with me? . . .
 And when the sunset gates unbar,
 Shall I not see thee waiting stand,
 And, white against the evening star,
 The welcome of thy beckoning hand? (p. 403)

The golden age of Whittier's childhood is amplified to include the many-hued legends of each member of the family, modulated into the trials of the present and the effort to overcome them, and projected forward to the eventual realization of eternity, a further amplification of the glorious week insulated from all struggle and interference of the outside world. Eternity itself is thus imaged in the paradise of the remembered past; the Eden and Jerusalem of the soul are one, a paradise not of green and growing things gratuitously presented by beneficent Nature, but forged of human love and intimacy and imagination. The garden is transposed into a winter-isolated domestic scene, bright with the Promethean gift of fire on the hearth and lighting up all that exists of the world. But there are reminders, in the knowledge of tragic flaws in human nature and in thoughts of death, that paradise is not a lasting state in the temporal world, but a transient visitant to be caught when it can.

Thus the week had to end, a week of eternity surrounded by the passage of time, with the arrival of the mail-carrier

and the village paper, reminding of the ongoing life beyond the lull of the blizzard. The concluding passage begins with a recognition that even memories must be put aside, as Whittier implored the "Angel of the backward look" to clasp "The brazen covers of thy book." This spirit would seem to be a close relation of the angel who shut the door of Eden on Adam and Eve in "A Lay of Old Time," and pityingly encouraged them to build paradise anew. Just so, Whittier's own Eden had to be abandoned; it was necessary to traverse the "Green hills of life that slope to death." He realizes, with muted apology, that life is not static, either in reality in memory. As always "The dreamer" must "leave his dream midway/ For larger hopes and graver fears." (p. 408)

But present duty is more effectively fulfilled in the light shed by the cumulative radiance of past love. The remembrance of the hearth-fire and the love it symbolized remains as a perpetual renewal. Whittier invites the reader to warm "the hands of memory . . . at the wood-fire's blaze!" Like the wood-fire, the poem is a revelation of what man can do for man in driving away the "dark spirits." It illustrates the wealth in domestic and commonplace situations, simple human relationships, and the mutual interdependence of love. These are represented as characteristic of the ideal society and essential to the realization of the American Dream. Though often ignored, they are as natural as breathing, and full of the same uncredited blessing, the "benediction of the

air." If anyone may be warmed by the soft light kindled here, it is enough.

Like "The Barefoot Boy," "Snow-Bound" parallels Wordsworth's "Ode on the intimations of Immortality," but it also indicates that Whittier goes beyond Wordsworth in preserving childhood vision, perhaps to the detriment of his poetry. Wordsworth, positing immortality on the basis of his sensory experience of nature, demonstrates most convincingly a sense of inevitable loss, which his stated resolution of the poem does nothing to assuage. Whittier, accepting the concept of earthly mutability, realizes the ambiguity of sensory experience, but finds intimations underlying nature that contribute to an assured sense of the immortality of the spirit. Wordsworth falls into despondency as his youthful apprehension of the vision of natural glory fades; a sense of imprisonment overcomes him. Whittier, recognizing the ambivalence of external nature, which provides not only a setting for his vision, but a threat to it, looks for security on something behind and subsuming nature, which he apprehends spiritually as the Inner Light or the Eternal Goodness, and physically as mankind, who is "more than his abode," because he is potentially capable of overcoming the bent toward malice he shares with perpetually mixed nature. The Inner Light, symbolized by the fire on the hearth, is not merely a theological concept, but also an aspect of the imaginative and interpretive power of man, estimating nature

at its real but limited worth, and penetrating behind it to discover a world of spirit which nature may enhance but can never entirely represent or share.

Man alone possesses or shares the real image of God. If Wordsworth's poem is greater than Whittier's as an achieved work of art, it is at least partially because the human spirit seems to be more at home with despair than with fulfillment. Sorrow and disenchantment lend themselves better to verbal communication and leave a more lasting impression than peace and harmony, which demand a rarer medium than the printed word for full expression. Perhaps a realization of the insufficiency of words to express directly and deeply what he felt led Whittier at times to disparage his literary work.

A parallel to the relative success of Wordsworth and Whittier, as poets, may be found in the work of a single poet greater than either. Milton, in Paradise Lost, may be thought of as exercising his "Wordsworth-voice" when dealing with Satan, and his "Whittier-voice" when dealing with the Deity. The poetry involving the former is generally accepted as being far more moving, eloquent, and poetically satisfying, so much so that it became a commonplace of romantic criticism to overlook the nature and activity of Satan (who displays the petulance and selfishness, as well as the energy and activity, of a child), and, judging him strictly on the basis of the poetry describing and spoken by him, to elevate him to the role of hero.

It is relatively easy for men, even "good" men, to express their diabolical urges with power and an ability to startle, whether these be overtly malicious, like the intentions of Milton's Satan, or merely pessimistic, like the finest lines of Wordsworth's ode. Whittier chose not to do this except at rare intervals, as in the powerfully scathing lines of the preface to "Among the Hills." It is much more difficult to express our divine urges, as Whittier almost constantly tried to do, often with total failure, and as Wordsworth attempted to do in the latter part of the ode, perhaps no less successfully than Whittier, but in a manner less convincing because of his much grander statement of the other side of the case.

The problem of the ode is thus much like the problem of Paradise Lost. We cannot sense God in the latter or feel Wordsworth's "philosophic calm" in the former because Satan speaks so masterfully and Wordsworth's sense of loss is so complete. Whittier chooses to speak primarily for God and of harmony, and few poets have done so more effectively. The poets of the Bible did, and some of the metaphysical poets, and Hopkins, and perhaps T. S. Eliot in "Ash Wednesday." The list is not long and it is made up primarily of those whose use of language was intensely dense and subtle, altogether unlike that of Whittier, who takes us as far as relatively direct language can toward the sublime. His achievement is a tribute to his sincere and accurate

rendition of the meaning of his life, his time and his place, which he raises to mythic significance as an incarnation of the American Dream.

Footnotes for Chapter V

¹Mordell, Quaker Militant, p. 154.

²S. Pickard, Life, I, 351.

³Flower, Prophet, Seer and Man, p. 121.

⁴Leary, John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 146.

⁵Perhaps a fourth group might be identified, including those poems portraying historical, Biblical, or legendary individuals or incidents, in which a religious or hortatory motive predominates--such as "Raphael," "The Wife of Monoah to Her Husband," "The Legend of St. Mark," and "Saint Gregory's Guest." These are generally more contrived and "literary," more remote from his personal life and genuine imaginative instincts, and they seldom come off as well as the better poems of the other groups. They belong, perhaps, with the bulk of his anti-slavery poems as the offspring of duty and the didactic impulse, the products of what Lowell referred to as "simple excitement," rather than "pure inspiration." These will be largely excluded from consideration in this chapter. Arms, The Fields Were Green, p. 34, states that Whittier's best poetry was that which was fused with his own experience, and compares him to Mark Twain as one whose "artistry functioned best in a personal frame of reference."

⁶"American Romance," Whittier on Writers, p. 106.

⁷According to Carpenter, John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 94, Whittier "was the only man of genius who was attacking the problem directly." Longfellow, for instance, was a scholar creating literature primarily on foreign models.

⁸"The Poetry of Heart and Home," Whittier on Writers, p. 121.

⁹Whittier shrugged "Mogg" off in later years as suggesting "the idea of a big Indian in his war-paint strutting about in Sir Walter Scott's plaid" (Poetical Works, p. 495), and he allowed it to be reprinted only because of his publisher's insistence. Leary, p. 37, notes that Whittier objected to the poem "on both moral and aesthetic grounds," because it was in poor taste and not "calculated to do good," and he confesses that "Why Whittier was attracted to so grisly a tale cannot be known."

¹⁰Carpenter, p. 171.

¹¹"Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" An End to Innocence (Boston, 1955), pp. 147-148.

¹²An example of one which, by common consent, does is "Massachusetts to Virginia," in which Whittier's scorn of southern demands is seen to emanate from the same regional spirit which he celebrates in the colonial ballads.

¹³Mordell, p. 182, notes that in looking to these facets of the past for American legends, Whittier anticipated Nathaniel Hawthorne, and each writer expressed admiration for the other's efforts along this line. With regard to his prose tales and sketches, it appears that Whittier recognized the superiority of Hawthorne's creations, which, he wrote, "rebuked and shamed my own poor efforts in a similar direction."

However, Allen, American Prosody, p. 138, records Bayard Taylor as having called Whittier incomparable among American ballad-writers in range and skillful treatment of materials and believes that most critics have acknowledged his supremacy in this area.

¹⁴John Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 126, notes that in Margaret Smith's Journal, even the more bigoted of the early divines are constantly humanized: Nathaniel Ward's prejudices are balanced by his practical jokes and light verse, and Cotton Mather's pomposity is contrasted with his youthful earnestness.

This book has probably received less attention than it deserves among early American novels. The point of view of the young English girl is effectively maintained throughout, no less consistently than that of Huck Finn in Mark Twain's masterpiece. Margaret is moralized no more than Huck, Leary, p. 124, observes that Whittier's use of simple colloquial language, straight-faced humor, and masked irony are not greatly different from Twain's, and that the book is ". . . so filled with facts drawn from ancient records that most readers have difficulty knowing where history leaves off and fiction begins." According to Whitman Bennett, Bard of Freedom, p. 87, it was, in fact, first published as purportedly an actual colonial document.

¹⁵John Pickard, "Whittier's Ballads: The Maturing of an Artist," Essex Institute Historical Collections, XCVI (January, 1960), has dealt at length with many of the best of these New England ballads in an attempt to present signs of Whittier's development as an artist. His final judgment, p. 72, is that these poems express no moral or social purpose, but Whittier's irrepressible desire to express his feelings for his section of the country, and that in these poems Whittier attained the rank of one of America's finest creators of historical and traditional narrative.

¹⁶J. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, pp. 82-84, and Arms, The Fields Were Green, pp. 41-42, defend this poem on the basis of its ironic implications.

¹⁷Bennett, p. 58, notes that all through his life Whittier had the habit of twisting facts of legends or events he used, even when these were historical.

¹⁸In the headpiece of the poem (p. 55) Whittier apologetically informs the reader that after writing it he learned that Ireson wasn't entirely to blame for the neglectful conduct as is indicated in the poem.

¹⁹"Ballads," p. 56.

²⁰Leary, p. 142.

²¹"Preface to Child Life in Poetry," Whittier on Writers, p. 198.

²²Loc. cit.

²³Peter Coveney, Poor Monkey (London, 1957), p. 1.

²⁴These de-naturing and dehumanizing influences gave rise to the artistic response characterized by what Lionel Trilling, The Opposing Self (New York, 1955), pp. xff., has given the name of the "opposing self," the self expressly conscious of its individuality and personal existence in the face of irresistible cultural forces tending to extinguish surprise, elevation, and the freedom of the self, all qualities to some extent characteristic of childhood.

²⁵Coveney, p. 284.

²⁶Ibid., p. xii.

²⁷Coveney, p. 284, describes the romantics as having "directed their interest toward the child, as a symbol of sensitive growth towards viable maturity. For them the child was, if you like, a creative symbol; a focal point of contact between the growing human consciousness and the 'experience' of an alien world, about which they could concentrate their disquiet, and, importantly, their hopes for human salvation."

²⁸Samuel Johnson, for instance, felt no such preference; his general attitude is indicated in his having written that "To one that has passed so many years in the pleasures and opulence of London, there are few places that can give much delight." Quoted in Boswell's Life of Johnson, Oxford Standard Authors Edition (London, 1960), p. 1343n.

²⁹Whittier's declaration that "The child must teach the man" vaguely echoes Wordsworth's famed conclusion to "My Heart Leaps Up." A New Testament source of his interpretation of the role of childhood is also clear in this poem, particularly in the repetition of Jesus' words, "Of such the kingdom!"

³⁰Arms, The Fields Were Green, p. 42.

³¹Carpenter, pp. 14-15.

³²Quoted in Marx, The Machine in the Garden, p. 73.

³³Pollard, p. 5.

³⁴Ibid., p. 35.

³⁵"My Summer with Dr. Singletary," Collected Prose, I, 209. The tendency of American writers to delve deep in a limited field is well-established. One may cite Thoreau, Frost, and Faulkner, who said, "I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it."

³⁶Carpenter, p. 105.

³⁷Ibid., p. 110.

³⁸Underwood, John Greenleaf Whittier: a Biography, p. 169.

³⁹"Whittier for Today," p. 856.

⁴⁰America's Coming of Age (New York, 1915), p. 22.

⁴¹Coveney, p. 41.

⁴²Donald Hall, in his introduction to Whittier, The Laurel Poetry Series (New York, 1960), p. 14, mentions Whittier's affinity with the general tendency of American literature, for which "Nostalgia is the great . . . subject." But he notes perceptively that "Whittier differs from the parade of most American writers in one enormous respect; he is somehow optimistic."

⁴³Quoted in Mordell, Quaker Militant, p. 230. S. Pickard, Life, II, 461, and Flower, Prophet, Seer and Man, p. iii, record similar impressions.

⁴⁴"Whittier," p. 340.

⁴⁵R. W. B. Lewis, in The American Adam (Chicago and London, 1958), deals with the exploitation by Thoreau and Whitman of traditional theological terms and concepts in a secular way. Whittier, on occasion, also followed this practice.

⁴⁶"Whittier the Poet," p. 28.

⁴⁷Leary, pp. 158-146, has made an extensive breakdown of the poem's structure, dividing it into three basic sections, labelled as follows: (1) Isolation--lines 1-178; (2) Love and companionship--lines 212-613; and (3) The impingement of the world on the quiet, wintry, rural solitude--lines 629-714. These are divided by interludes on time and change (lines 179-211) and as the brothers lay in bed (lines 629-714). The whole is rounded off with a conclusion (lines 715-759). John Pickard, Whittier, p. 91, notes a series of emotion-developing contrasts between fire and snow, past and present, and people and elements, subsumed in the larger contrast between love and immortality on one hand and pain and death on the other.

⁴⁸Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Snow Storm."

⁴⁹The Fields Were Green, p. 46.

⁵⁰J. Pickard, Whittier, p. 29.

⁵¹The hearth-fire apparently had more than symbolic importance for Whittier; Pollard, p. 457, notes that tending the fire in his study was "almost a rite, the one thing that he would share with nobody."

⁵²This poem is based on an Indian legend that dead loved ones glide through forest and mountain cleft, always just out of sight, and beckon the living to follow "To the sunset of the Blest." (p. 157)

CHAPTER VI

THE "MACHINE IN THE GARDEN"

Related to Whittier's ambiguous attitude toward present and future and his instinctive imaginative return to the past is a corresponding conflict over the ultimate effects of industrialization. As mentioned in connection with his feelings toward nature, the image of the "machine in the garden" darkens his imaginative vision. Whittier did not come into habitual contact with the machine age until his sojourn in Lowell as editor of the Middlesex Standard in 1844; the effects of this contact become increasingly evident in his writing during and after this period. Ultimately, of course, he could not avoid realizing that a social process far more extensive than slavery was taking place, and his nostalgic exploitation of his own past was surely, at least in part, a response to the changes it heralded.

However, Whittier's first, impersonal response to the machine was approving and even enthusiastic. The idea of a railroad to the Pacific was greeted as the kind of work, as opposed to the aggressive conflict with Mexico, that "constitutes the true glory and real prosperity of nations."¹ Even earlier, in 1829, he had recognized the contribution of the Erie Canal to the prosperity of the Northeast, and he had advocated the building of the Boston and Albany Railroad because of a feeling that manufacturing would become, in the

future, the main resource of New England.² At this time (1829) he was editor of The American Manufacturer, a newspaper established in support of the new tariff protecting native industry, which all New England had opposed until 1828.³ Although his views may have been influenced in part by his associations in this editorial position, they undoubtedly reflected the general climate of opinion.

Even in writing upon literature Whittier was able to draw on the imagery of an industrial age, as when he described Longfellow's "Psalm of Life" as ". . . alive and vigorous with the spirit of the day in which we live--the moral steam enginery of an age of action."⁴ As the steam engine was to be adapted to the immediate (and if necessary, coercive) physical betterment of mankind, poetry was obligated to take the same direct and machinelike route to moral improvement--so Whittier thought at this time. The term "moral steam enginery" might well characterize much of his own abolition verse and many of the stanzas he dedicated to admired but forgotten contemporaries who served faithfully in the cause. To a large degree, of course, Whittier was simply reflecting a basic tenet of American esthetic philosophy, which regarded poetry primarily as a vehicle of noble and uplifting sentiment.⁵

On rare occasions, Whittier was able to incorporate facets of the new technology into his millennial vision, along the lines of Whitman, though in more traditional terminology. In "The Cable Hymn" (1858)⁶ the first transatlantic cable--

the western origin of which, in the Bay of Trinity, Newfoundland, is significantly mentioned--is imaged as transmitting "the voice of God," via "couriers . . . shod with fire." The cable is described in supernatural and theological terms as a "magic thread," "Ocean's carrier dove," and the "swift shuttle of the Lord," weaving "The bridal robe of earth's accord," and "The funeral shroud of war!" Whittier's progressive, definitely un-Calvinistic attitude is revealed as he envisions the cable as a "mystic cord," clarying and speeding communication, and thereby eliminating possibilities for misunderstanding and contributing to mutual sympathy and respect between nations and peoples. The "herald of the Lord" proclaims "'The world's long strife is done; . . .

'And one in heart, as one in blood,
 Shall all her peoples be;
 The hands of human brotherhood
 Are clasped beneath the sea. (p. 256)

Ironically, only two years after Whittier was celebrating the uniting of continents and peoples of various parts of the world by the cable, the people of his own nation were locked in bloody civil war, at least in part owing to controversial tariffs designed to protect the industries that turned out marvels like the cable--and also guns, grenades, and ammunition. Perhaps Whittier sensed the connection, for never again did he write of the fruits of technology in such glowing terms. Toward the end of his life, however, passing mention is made in two poems to the advantages of

technological development. In "Burning Driftwood" (1890) he recognizes the expanded vistas of his age in personal terms, as a compensation for the failure to realize his youthful ambitions:

Far more than all I dared to dream,
 Unsought before my door I see,
 On wings of fire and steeds of steam
 The world's great wonders come to me. (p. 472)

In the final stanza of "The Homestead," (1886), an appeal to the younger generation of New England not to desert the ancestral heritage, Whittier, although pleading with the "wanderers from ancestral soil," to "Leave noisome mill and chaffering store," recognizes that agriculture itself has been beneficially affected by the developments that have accounted for those same mills.

With skill that spares your toiling hands,
 With chemic aid that science brings,
 Reclaim the waste and outworn lands,
 And reign thereon as kings! (p. 136)

Science itself, as opposed to its more visible technological concomitants, is even less frequently mentioned by Whittier. He seems, however, to have been entirely free from the hostility of many conservative religious people in contemplating the theory of evolution. Nowhere does he approach the hysterical despair of such poets as Tennyson as a result of scientific investigation. The imagery of "Invocation" (1851), with the animistic overtones noticeable elsewhere in

Whittier's poetry, could be read as an imaginative anticipation of Darwin's theory. Creation is described in typical fashion, as first formless and void. Then,

To that dark, weltering horror came
 Thy spirit, like a subtle flame,--
 A breath of life electrical,
 Awakening and transforming all,
 Till beat and thrilled in every part
 The pulses of a living heart.

Then knew their bounds the land and sea;
 Then smiled the bloom of mead and tree;
 From flower to moth, from beast to man,
 The quick creative impulse ran. (p. 431)

He recognized, however, the potentially unsettling effects not only of Darwin's findings, but also of the space and chronology-expanding discoveries of astronomers and geologists, as is clear from "The Meeting" (1868):

Doubts to the world's child-heart unknown
 Question us now from star and stone;
 Too little or too much we know,
 And sight is swift and faith is slow;
 The power is lost to self-deceive
 With shallow forms of make-believe.
 We walk at high noon, and the bells
 Call to a thousand oracles,
 But the sound deafens, and the light
 Is stronger than our dazzled sight. (p. 446)

But the basis of his own religious attitude was flexible enough to accommodate any addition to human knowledge. The Quaker belief in continuous revelation freed him from any illusions as to the infallibility of past sources and traditions, and he welcome additions to knowledge "from every

source" as "The tokens of that primal Force,/ Older than heaven itself." Following these lines from "Miriam" he indicates his belief that "truth" never need fear the "fact."

Nor fear I aught that science brings
 From searching through material things;
 Content to let its glasses prove,
 Not by the letter's oldness move,
 The myriad worlds on worlds that course
 The spaces of the universe;

 By inward sense, by outward signs,
 God's presence still the heart divines. (pp. 95-96)

Much as he loved the traditional poetic atmosphere of old legends, he was also aware of poetry and mystery in the actual facts of life and nature. In "Charms and Fairy Faith," he asserted that

The wonderland of childhood must henceforth be sought within the domains of truth. The strange facts of natural history, and the sweet mysteries of flowers and forests, and hills and waters, will profitably take the place of the fairy lore of the past, and poetry and romance still hold their accustomed seats in the circle of home, without bringing with them the evil spirits of credulity and untruth.⁷

2

With industrialism, however, the outward manifestation of the intellectual revolution accomplished by science, Whittier was less comfortable, as were many of his contemporaries. According to Leo Marx the tension between the industrial and bucolic systems of value had its "greatest literary impact" between 1840 and 1850. The United States had reached a decisive stage in its economic development

variously identified as the "take-off" or the "great watershed in the life of modern societies," when resistance to development is overcome and the forces of economic progress "expand and come to dominate the society."⁸ This tension had much to do with the literary explosion known as the American Renaissance: it provided a theme adequate to support great literature. The ideal of America as an Eden, a pastoral retreat, came head-on against the industrial revolution with its "disfigurement" of the landscape, its temptations to the weakness of human acquisitiveness, and its tendency toward the development of cities, slums, and the brutalized poor. Literature exploited this collision.

But pastoral seclusion has generally been exposed to the danger of defilement by elements in the outside world, or, if nothing else, by the realization that death is inevitable, no matter what degree of temporary peace and harmony may be achieved. In nineteenth century America, Marx has found this symbol of infringement or foreboding, the active "counterpart" to the passive security evoked in the pastoral dream, in the machine. Industrialization provides the counterforce in the American archetype of the pastoral design, and the opposition of pastoral ideal and restless progress, of country and city, informs the great preponderance of significant American literature;

. . . again and again our writers have introduced the same overtones, depicting the machine as invading the peace of an enclosed space, a world set apart, or an area somehow made to

evoke a feeling of encircled felicity. The setting may be an island, or a hut beside a pond, or a raft floating down a river, or a secluded valley in the mountains, or a clearing between impenetrable walls of forest, or the beached skeleton of a whale--but whatever the specific details, certain general features of the pattern recur too often to be fortuitous. Most important is the sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction. It invariably is associated with crude, masculine aggressiveness in contrast with the tender, feminine, and submissive attitudes traditionally attached to the landscape.⁹

Whittier's association of woman or the feminine principle with a poetic attitude toward nature, as opposed to the masculine desire to see it merely as a commodity to be exploited or dominated has been previously noted, especially in connection with "Among the Hills."¹⁰ The machine, with its potential for enlarging profit at the expense of seemingly inexhaustible resources and human awareness of the landscape, seems to encourage and hasten this exploitation. Thus Whittier envisions nature as antagonistic to the domination of the machine and eager for rebellion and a return to freedom and growth.

Whittier wanted to believe in technology as a contributor to progress, as portrayed in "The Cable Hymn." He wished to believe in its power to transform the unacceptable elements in urban life and to mitigate conflicts arising from the inequalities of slavery and international differences, but actual contact with industrial society made him uncomfortable. He wanted to think of Amesbury as "a model manufacturing village, but he was uneasily aware that even there the very forces were hard at work which he had condemned

repeatedly since 1829--economic forces which bred an aristocracy of wealth . . . Whittier saw the old stability and beauty of life in Amesbury dissipating under the impact of it."¹¹ The change wrought by the new "factory atmosphere" in the town was partly responsible for his removal from Amesbury.

Danvers, on the other hand, a town relatively untouched and unchanged by the machine age, appealed to him to a much greater extent, and he "was grateful for the quiet of Oak Knoll."¹² Leary notes that "The new industrialism which altered the familiar rustic face of New England both charmed and appalled him."¹³ This attraction-repulsion syndrome in connection with progress and the machine age is evident in the poem "Haverhill" (1890), one of Whittier's better occasional poems. Written for the city's 250th anniversary celebration, it takes the form of a review of its history from the time of the earliest settlers when it was mere "wilderness," a "drear, untrodden solitude," full of "The gloom and mystery of the wood." The transformation of this wilderness is noted with approval and pride in the ancestry of those who accomplished it in spite of terror and hardship:

Ah! bleeding hands alone subdued
 And tamed the savage habitude
 Of forests hiding beasts of prey,
 And human shapes as fierce as they.

But pride is not altogether unmingled with regret at nature's forced retreat.

That hamlet now a city is,
 Its log-built huts are palaces;
 The wood-path of the settler's cow
 Is Traffic's crowded highway now . . .

And Nature holds with narrowing space,
 From mart and crowd, her old-time grace,
 And guards with fondly jealous arms
 The wild growths of outlying farms. (pp. 473-474)

A feeling is also evident that home is something one never gets out of one's system; as opposed to the later attitude revealed in Wolfe's title, You Can't Go Home Again, Whittier's would seem to be that one can't really leave it, indicating the degree to which he clung to the old values. He has what might be called a "sacramental" attitude toward the region of his birth, verging on a kind of ancestor-worship, as he praises the wisdom

. . . which led our sires
 To kindle here their household fires. (p. 474)

But present admiration is not unbounded. Implicit in the poem is a vague premonition that the process of civilization has gone too far; a peak has been reached in the satisfaction of human needs and a decline has already set in. It is as if Whittier senses that life has passed him by, and that though others may find fulfillment in the present age, he finds it more fully in the memory of a life less active and bustling, and characterized by a sense of pastoral harmony and seclusion evident in "Snow-Bound." Instead of "The slow years" which

. . . left not affluence, but content,
 Now flashes in our dazzled eyes
 The electric light of enterprize;

"the old idyllic ease" now "Seems lost in keen activities," and "crowded workshops" have taken the place of "The hearth's and farm-field's rustic grace." (p. 474)

On such an occasion a negative note would obviously be out of place, and Whittier counters these criticisms of the present with the weak assertion that "No dull, mechanic round of toil" can entirely deface "Life's morning charm." The poem ends with the expected assertion, drawn out over eight stanzas, that the town, and by extension the world, is growing better and better, but the points of highest poetic intensity recount the adventurous past of the pioneers and the personal nostalgia of the lines last quoted. The metrical structure slackens, and cliches of thought and diction predominate in the conventional optimism of the concluding section, as in the following stanza:

Earth shall be near to Heaven when all
 That severs man from man shall fall,
 For, here or there, salvation's plan
 Alone is love of God and man. (p. 474)

Whittier's heart is really with the past rather than with the present. Pollard notes that he believed in thrift and sobriety and thus was baffled by a modern age that was casting these traditional virtues aside,¹⁴ and which he cautions to "Hold fast your Puritan heritage." He follows

this advice with a tribute to the present for "Its light and hope and sweetness," which he felt must be added "To the stern faith the fathers had," but the communication of the poem as a whole is a sense of misgiving as to whether that light is not already fading.

3

Whittier's instinctive suspicion of the machine age is most directly recounted in his several essays on the manufacturing town of Lowell, written during his stay there in 1844.¹⁵ These essays were later collected under the title, A Stranger in Lowell, which has its own significance in revealing Whittier's sense of alienation from the new age of industrialization. He was both fascinated and repelled by a way of life which promised much but tended to drive its adherents to want more and more which they were able to enjoy less and less. With mingled admiration and suspicion he declared that "Work is here the patron saint."¹⁶ He approved of the fact that women worked in the factories along with men, but he disparaged the long workdays. Although "wage slavery" did not arouse him to the same level of indignation as the more obvious slavery of the South, he recognized its existence and advocated a ten-hour workday as opposed to the twelve-and-one-half-hour day then in effect.¹⁷ He felt the machine should free men from work, rather than chain them to it.

But he also realized that both employer and employee

were responsible for wishing to maintain the high profits and wages of the longer day. Much like Thoreau, Whittier felt the industrial system encouraged a desire for superfluity, which offended his Quaker love of simplicity. Reflecting upon the dedication of Lowell's inhabitants to work, he wrote:

Labor, graduated to man's simple wants, necessities, and unperverted tastes, is doubtless well; but all beyond this is weariness to flesh and spirit. Every web which falls from these restless looms has a history more or less connected with sin and suffering, beginning with slavery and ending with overwork and premature death.¹⁸

He also referred to J. A. Etzler, who believed "that the world was to be restored to its paradisiacal state by the sole agency of mechanics," and that he himself had discovered the means of effecting this "millennium of mechanism."¹⁹ Earlier in the essay, Whittier had spoken in his own person, perhaps ironically, of Lowell as promising a "millennium of steam-engines and cotton-mills," but in reflecting upon the dream of Etzler and gazing at the actuality so far achieved in Lowell, he voiced uncertainty.

Looking down, as I now do, upon these huge brick workshops, I have thought of poor Etzler, and wondered whether he would admit, were he with me, that his mechanical forces have here found their proper employment of millennium making. Grinding on, each in his iron harness, invisible, yet shaking, by his regulated and repressed power, his huge prisonhouse from basement to capstone, is it true that the genii of mechanism are really at work here, raising us, by wheel and pulley, steam and waterpower, slowly up that inclined plane from whose top stretches the broad table-land of promise?²⁰

In 1844 he was willing to leave the question unanswered, though the very act of raising it is sufficient indication of his fear that the answer would be negative.

It seemed to him that material gain for its own sake had become the great object of American man, to which independence, pride, and heritage were being thoughtlessly sacrificed. In "The Homestead" (1886) he pleads for a return to the rural life consonant with these old values and based on free sufficiency rather than slavish luxury.

What matter if the gains are small
That life's essential wants supply?
Your homestead's title gives you all
That idle wealth can buy.

All that the many-dollared crave,
The brick-walled slaves of 'Change and mart,
Lawns, trees, fresh air, and flowers, you have,
More dear for lack of art.

His antagonism to industrial development was based, however, not only upon his objective appraisal of its adverse effects on those who nourished it, but also on an emotional and esthetic distaste revealed in the imagery he characteristically applies to it. In "Miriam," for instance, he personifies the factories as

. . . o'ershadowing all,
Huge mills whose windows had the look
Of eager eyes that ill could brook
The Sabbath rest. (p. 94)

Similar imagery occurs in "My Summer with Dr. Singletary." The Doctor's town of Peewawkin is described in approving

terms as a well-preserved specimen of a quiet old New England hamlet. "No huge factory threw its evil shadow over it; no smoking demon of an engine dragged its long train through the streets; no steamboat puffed at its wharves, or ploughed up the river"21

Even before his encounter with the energetic but discordant atmosphere of Lowell, Whittier had written a romantic fantasy entitled "The Fountain" (1837), which described the response of an Indian brave returning to the Powwow River after a long exile. He sees with dismay that the efforts of civilized man and "progress" have "tamed and tortured" the "native loveliness" of hills and river.

Where the birch canoe had glided
Down the swift Powwow,
Dark and gloomy bridges strided
These clear waters now;
And where once the beaver swam,
Jarred the wheel and frowned the dam.

For the wood-bird's merry singing,
And the hunter's cheer,
Iron clang and hammer's ringing
Smote upon his ear;
And the thick and sullen smoke
From the blackened forges broke. (p. 8)

While it would be incorrect to equate Whittier's views with those of the Indian brave of the poem, his sympathies are clear. His desire to preserve something of the old primitive aspect of New England is also evident in "Kenoza Lake" (1859):

Long be it ere the tide of trade
 Shall break with harsh-resounding din
 The quiet of thy banks of shade,
 And hills that fold thee in. (p. 220)

Whittier's love of the backward look is thus distinctly related to his discomfort with the trappings of industrialism. Cady mentions his "tendency . . . to reach back nostalgically to the life of rural simplicity and integrity fast dissolving in the swirl of an evolving industrial society."²² The degree to which Whittier defies glib generalization is evident in the contradictory statements of various critics; in contrast to Cady's judgment, Arms wrote that Whittier was uneasy with the past because he believed in the epic quality of his own age, and that perhaps Whittier's lack of an integrated view of the past led him to write long preludes to so many of his ballads and narratives.²³

As has been noted, however, Whittier's preludes are often closely connected with the narratives they precede, and his views of past and present alike are ambiguous and contradictory. But, if anything, his view of the past, especially his own personal past is more "integrated" and less uncertain than his view of the present, largely because of his puzzlement over the potential effects of industrialization. His preludes are sometimes a way of dealing with the unwelcome advent of technology and often take the form of imaginative erasures of its effects, as in "The Truce of Piscataque" (1860). The introduction to this poem sets the stage for the

narrative and expresses a suppressed antagonism to the spiritual enervation that seemed to have accompanied the taming of nature.

Raze these long blocks of brick and stone,
 These huge mill-monsters overgrown;
 Blot the humbler piles as well,
 Where, moved like living shuttles, dwell
 The weaving genii of the bell;
 Tear from the wild Cocheco's track
 The dams that hold its torrents back;
 And let the loud-rejoicing fall
 Plunge, roaring, down its rocky wall;
 And let the Indian's paddle play
 On the unbridged Piscataqua! . . .

So, haply shall before thine eyes
 The dusty veil of centuries rise,
 The old, strange scenery overlay
 The tamer pictures of to-day. (p. 74)

Whittier's contempt for the "tame" present contrasts ambiguously with the millennial vision he frequently imagines, which would domesticate both nature and mankind to an even greater degree.

Consideration of the past is viewed as an antidote to the directionless haste of the present, and the preludes are sometimes designed to elicit a responsive attitude in the poet's audience. In "Mary Garvin" (1856), Whittier's essential hostility to the new spirit is evident along with a feeling that the new age is perhaps inimical to the values he wishes to see preserved. The "sharp-lined man of traffic," and the "mill-girl watching late and long the shuttle's restless play" are encouraged to pause and realize their humanity. Although the river, "vexed in all its seaward course with

bridges, dams and mills," has "lost its freedom of the hills,"

. . . human hearts remain unchanged: the sorrow
and the sin,
The loves and hopes and fears of old, are to our
own akin. (p. 49)

In "Birchbrook Mill" (1884), Whittier aims at a fusion of local legend and his ambiguous attitudes toward the conflict of primitive and industrial impulses in American society, though he tends finally to veer away from a conclusive exposition of the latter theme, as if wishing to avoid its pessimistic implications, and thus returns to standard melodrama. The significance of the legend for the poet is evident in that he mentioned it in a prose essay of the thirties and returned to it fifty years later in this poem. In "Charms and Fairy Faith" he mentions an abandoned millsite, from which, in its days of operation, the miller, arriving early, mysteriously heard all the machinery going full-tilt; when he touched the latch or the threshold, however, the noises ceased.²⁴ The machinery thus seemed to have assumed a life of its own, implying, in rudimentary form, a prophetic insight into a commonly broached twentieth-century theme: the fear that the machine, instead of remaining the docile servant of man, may become his independent and enslaving master.

The beginning of the poem is structured as a conflict between the wild impulse of nature toward unrestricted freedom and the attempts of man to harness her energy to his own ends.

Now nature seems to be victorious, for the river has shaken off impediments and reclaimed its pristine independence. As so often in Whittier's pastoral scheme, the setting is removed from human habitation, but not so far that civilization is forgotten altogether; a church spire, a typical counter to Whittier's primitive landscape, is barely visible, along with a distant "ghost-like" sail. Except for these indications of human presence, nature dominates the scene; even the remnants of the mill have disappeared: its timbers are gone for some farmer's fire, its millstones have been carted off for service as doorsteps, and the river runs as freely as ever.

No more a toiler at the wheel,
 It wanders at its will;
 Nor dam nor pond is left to tell
 Where once was Birchbrook mill . . .

Man trespassed here; but Nature lost
 No right of her domain;
 She waited, and she brought the old
 Wild beauty back again. (p. 133)

As usual nature is associated with beauty and the feminine principle, as opposed to masculine utilitarianism.

However, the scene is not without a sinister aspect. By day sunlight rouses life, the birches whisper, and birds fly and sing in the primitive garden reclaimed by the elements. But Nature has not been able to shake off the effects of civilization completely: former inhabitants will not leave the site alone, and "when the dark night falls" it seems to echo with the sounds of former activity. The passing

schoolgirl and even the hardy farmer on his way home "dare not pause to hear the grind/ Of shadowy stone on stone," or "The splashing of a water-wheel" where no wheel remains.

Here the machine is introduced into the garden in a strikingly original way, associated with night and the fear of the unknown and invisible. Instead of freeing man from old fears, superstitions, and guilt, it perpetuates them. A negative answer to the question Whittier posed in Lowell forty years earlier is suggested.

At this point, however, the poem discards the symbolic implications thus far suggested. Instead of envisioning the mystery as grounded in the "genuine" conflict of nature and technology which seems to have called forth his interest in the first place, Whittier resorts to the machinery of standard melodrama.

Has not a cry of pain been heard
 Above the clattering mill?
 The pawing of an unseen horse,
 Who waits his mistress still?

The possibility of illicit love, discovery,--perhaps even murder, is suggested as explaining the mysterious phenomena of the millsite.

The tensions raised in the beginning of the poem are disseminated altogether in the commonplace conclusion:

God's pity spare a guilty soul
 That drama of its ill,
 And let the scenic curtain fall
 On Birchbrook's haunted mill! (p. 133)

The poem thus breaks up in the middle, but the first portion seems symbolic of Whittier's imaginative attempt to erase the effects of technology and to allay his fears of its baleful influence. Though the visible phenomena may be put out of mind, ghostly misgivings remain. Once marked by the hand of man, Nature can never again be the innocent, primal garden. Once marked by the machine perhaps mankind can never regain the harmony of the ideal pastoral landscape portrayed in "Snow-Bound." But Whittier seems to have been unwilling or unable to follow through with the pessimistic implications of the early stanzas and of the "facts" displayed in the essay.

His own unresolved attitudes toward the primitive past and the industrialized present are indicated in his unwillingness to let nature rule or quite expunge the present, or to specify the meaning of the ghostly occurrences:

The secret of the dark surmise
The brook and birches hold.

The reader is left with an aura of puzzlement and wonder, just as Whittier is left puzzling at the direction taken by America in the second half of the nineteenth century.

When asked to write an inscription for a bas-relief representing the last Indian and the last buffalo, Whittier complied with a brief stanza that may serve as a symbolic statement of his sense of unfamiliarity in a seemingly lifeless age that had passed him by and left him, at least occasionally, in painful uncertainty:

The eagle, stooping from yon snow-blown peaks,
For the wild hunter and the bison seeks,
In the changed world below; and finds alone
Their graven semblance in the eternal stone. (p. 475)

Just so, monuments of a new age of stone and steel were replacing all too rapidly the warm and breathing pastoral existence he had envisioned as fulfilling his dream of what America might be.

Footnotes for Chapter VI

¹Pollard, Friend to Man, p. 241.

²Ibid., pp. 67, 69.

³S. Pickard, Life, I, 73.

⁴Carpenter, John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 166. This passage is also noteworthy as containing what must be Whittier's most sweeping lapse in critical judgment: he said, "These nine simple verses are worth more than all the dreams of Shelley, and Keats, and Wordsworth." It should be noted, however, that this statement was made in 1838, at a time when he was most deeply involved in firing the moral steam engines of abolition, and literary America was especially conscious of intellectual immaturity and desirous of asserting the coming of age of American letters. It cannot be doubted that, in the long run, he knew better, for the poetry that he recognized as his own best reflects the spirit of Wordsworth rather than the tone of "The Psalm of Life."

⁵Miller, "The Conscience in Poetry," p. 21.

⁶Hall, p. 12, refers to this poem as "one of the great series of nineteenth century odes to modern inventions."

⁷Collected Prose, I, 397-398.

⁸The Machine in the Garden, p. 26.

⁹Ibid., p. 29. At this point Marx appears to exaggerate the "invariability" of a violent response to the machine and its association with aggressiveness. Elsewhere, p. 222, citing Emerson's "The Young American," and Whitman's "Passage to India," he notes that these two writers commonly conceived of an "industrialized version of the pastoral ideal." For Thoreau also, concomitant effects of the machine age could arouse "idyllic satisfaction," as in his observation of the foliate pattern created by thawing soil and water on a railroad cut in Walden, The Works of Thoreau, ed. Henry Seidel Canby (Boston, 1937), pp. 446-449.

¹⁰More, "The Spirit and Poetry of Early New England," Shelborne Essays, Eleventh Series (New York, 1921), p. 30, notes that Whittier, in his historical narratives, chiefly remembers women as "introducing the leaven of rebellion" against the masculine and often cruel authoritarianism of church and state.

¹¹Pollard, p. 311. ¹²Ibid., p. 312.

¹³John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 60.

¹⁴Friend to Man, p. 317.

¹⁵Marx, p. 26, notes that this was about the year in which the industrial "take-off" began in America, "just at the time our first significant literary generation was coming to maturity."

¹⁶"The City of a Day," Prose Works, I, 351.

¹⁷Pollard, p. 306.

¹⁸"The City of a Day," Prose Works, I, 353.

¹⁹Etzler's views were published in a pamphlet entitled The Paradise Within the Reach of All Men, Without Labor, by Powers of Nature and Machinery. An Address to All Intelligent Men (London, 1842).

²⁰Ibid., pp. 353-354. Thoreau, "Paradise (to be Regained)," The Works of Thoreau, pp. 787-788, reviewed Etzler's pamphlet and questioned not only the plausibility of a mechanical paradise, but also its desirability. He asserted that "Every machine seems a slight outrage against natural laws." Beyond this objection, he thought Etzler's aims too petty: "The chief fault of this book is that it aims to secure the greatest degree of gross comfort and pleasure merely. . . . moral reform must take place first, and then the necessity of the other will be superseded."

²¹Prose Works, I, 203. It becomes evident that his attribution to the factory of an evil influence and aspect is no mere passing fancy, but a recurrent and consistent response, when we find still a third reference in a similar image, this time in the description of the frame-setting of "The Tent on the Beach":

Untouched as yet by wealth and pride,
That virgin innocence of beach;
No shingly moster, hundred-eyed,
Stared its gray sand-birds out of reach. (p. 244)

²²Whittier on Writers, p. 14.

²³The Fields Were Green, p. 37.

²⁴Prose Works, I, 393.

CHAPTER VII

WHITTIER'S AMERICAN DREAM

Much has been written about the symbolic importance of America as a new world, morally as well as physically, and about the attempts of colonists, revolutionary fighters for independence, and nineteenth century thinkers and writers to define New World ideals. The idea of the "American Dream" has obtained widespread currency, formerly as a real millennial hope of religious, political, and social reformers, and more recently as a symbol of American idealism--even, occasionally, as an object of scorn. Whittier was one of the most ardent believers in the American Dream, both as an achievable millennial state and as a symbol of national and human aspiration. Although he did not use this term, he regarded America as an actual or potential Eden, the home of "new Adams and new Eves," and forerunner of a general earthly millennium, which for him constituted the American Dream.

His millennial hope was a lifelong enthusiasm, varying from time to time, according to circumstances and events. It was a goal he actively strove to realize through the cause of abolition, but it assumed a more inward and "spiritual," or symbolical meaning toward the end of his life. His efforts to see this goal established focused on abolition because this was related to all of the chief movements or bodies with which he identified; it was a longstanding concern of the

Quakers; it was the prevailing though largely underground sentiment of Massachusetts, especially of the farmers and laborers with whom Whittier thought lay the hope of America's fulfillment of his ideals; and it was implicit in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights as he read them--documents which lodged the essence of the American Dream. Slavery thus came for him to represent the chief if not the only barrier in the way of realization of an ideal America.

Thus when slavery ceased to exist legally, the American Dream at first seemed to have come to life for him. At the time of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, he said, "We are living in a grand time; one year now is worth a dozen of the years of our ancestors."¹ Later, when the passage of the constitutional amendment abolishing slavery was announced by the ringing of bells, he expressed his jubilant optimism in the poem "Laus Deo!" (1865), of which he said, "It wrote itself, or rather sang itself, while the bells rang."

Ring, O bells!
 Every stroke exulting tells
 Of the burial hour of crime.
 Loud and long, that all may hear,
 Ring for every listening ear
 Of Eternity and Time! . . .

It is done!
 In the circuit of the sun
 Shall the sound thereof go forth.
 It shall bid the sad rejoice,
 It shall give the dumb a voice,
 It shall belt with joy the earth! (pp. 345-346)

The stanza pattern is an intricate imitation of the tolling bells, reinforcing the enthusiasm of the emotion, and the meter and the concentrated r's, l's, and nasals roll out almost as suggestively as Poe's better known tintinnabulation.

Much later, in 1883, the poem "Our Country" pays tribute to Emancipation in terms almost as optimistic, but in rather wooden quatrains, suggesting a belabored reiteration of conventional ideas, rather than the soaring jubilation of "Laus Deo."

Well have thy later years made good
 Thy brace said word a century back,
 The pledge of human brotherhood,
 The equal claim of white and black. (p. 384)

Such lines as these reinforce the notion of Whittier's unalloyed optimism. Actually, however, the total record of his writing indicates a much more qualified attitude with respect to the realization of the American Dream than is indicated by the positive tone of "Our Country."

2

A tension similar to that disclosed by Leo Marx is revealed by R. W. B. Lewis in The American Adam. He identifies the shaping of American viewpoints as a dialogue between several opposing attitudes: the part of Hope comprised those who looked optimistically upon the future, as the home of the American Adam, the new man, free of conventional attitudes and errors, and embarking upon the creation of a new and more

perfect society, while the party of Memory was characterized by nostalgia and a belief in the inherent sinfulness of man, which "seemed never so patent as currently in America."² Lewis identifies a third voice as that of what he terms "the party of Irony," which "was characterized by a tragic optimism: by a sense of the tragic collisions to which innocence was liable (something unthinkable to the hopeful), and equally by an awareness of the heightened perception and humanity which suffering made possible (something unthinkable among the nostalgic)."³

Although neither Marx nor Lewis mentions Whittier at length, he is profoundly preoccupied with the tensions they expose in the American consciousness. In Lewis's terms, he might be cited as a member of the party of Irony, for he shares both the optimism of hope and the nostalgia of memory. As indicated in Chapter VI, industrialization had an ambiguous effect on Whittier, but basically he was repelled by it. Its abuses were perhaps a partial cause of his disillusionment following Emancipation, and thus he chose to ignore it in his ideal conception of America. In spite of his desire to feel that science and technology could release humanity from drudgery and help to usher in a new golden age, his best poems look backward. He is perhaps the last prophet of the agrarian ideal of America and also of simple Quaker egalitarianism; in connection with both, he may have realized that he was pleading lost causes, in terms of the "real" world, but at the same time

he believed in them as realities of the imagination.

Because he failed to take into account the full potential of technological advance, Whittier falls under the criticism levelled by Leo Marx at Crevecoeur and Jefferson, as adherents of "the pastoral theory of America," who held "a naive and ultimately static view of history."⁴ Like Jefferson, who said that "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God,"⁵ Whittier was essentially an agrarian. For Jefferson, Marx says, American conditions made the pastoral hope credible. The conditions that created this credibility were just those that existed in the detached communities of Northern Massachusetts during Whittier's boyhood.

Art and life, the pastoral vision and the reality, declares Marx, coalesced in Jefferson's hopes. "In the egalitarian social climate of America the pastoral ideal, instead of being contained by the literary design, spills over into thinking about life."⁶ As noted in Chapter III, Whittier also strove to see art and life as one, and suspected all art that seemed too remote from life, even when he himself was responsible for it.

Indeed, Jefferson and Whittier, unlike in most external respects, each (as Richard Hofstadter says of Jefferson) "wanted with all his heart to hold to the values of agrarian society [even though he] believed in progress."⁷ Also similar were their attitudes toward public affairs. Jefferson

invariably regarded "his political activity as a temporary departure from the natural and proper pattern of his life. It is always a concession to an emergency. . . . Calls to public duty followed by withdrawals to the country comprise the very rhythm of his life."⁸ One cannot help but be reminded of Whittier's characterization of himself as

. . . a dreamer born
 Who with a mission to fulfill,
 Had left the Muses' haunts to turn
 The crank of an opinion-mill.

("The Tent on the Beach," p. 243)

Like Jefferson, he regarded his political and abolition activity as an interlude in the normal tempo of his life, demanded by duty.

Carpenter mentions the period following his first attempt to enter a broader sphere of life when he went to Boston to edit the American Manufacturer as

. . . three years in which he tried to speak the language and live the life of this strange outer world, to cherish its ambitions and enjoy as best he could its pleasures, only in the end . . . to be brought inevitably back to the quiet rural district which had moulded him and had already signed and sealed him as its own.⁹

Thus developed the recurring pattern in the thirties of intense activity in scattered urban centers followed by periods of physical collapse which forced him home to recuperate.

The change back to the old soil and the home life gave him strength again. The tone of complaint and despair disappeared from his letters; the selfish note of purely personal ambition vanished. Though frequently prostrated by illness, it was clear that his health was essentially better while he lived on the farm and as a farmer.¹⁰

While in Philadelphia editing the Pennsylvania Freeman, Whittier longed for New England, preferring to see the familiar hills, valleys, and streams rather than the blank and barren walls of the city,¹¹ and in 1840 he was forced by illness to give up his work, "virtually forever." As Carpenter describes it, ". . . thus ended the second flight into the outer world, the second attempt to meet face to face the great forces of the passionate city centres, closing like the first in physical defeat."¹² Unlike his thwarted attempt to enter politics in 1832, neither the decision of 1833 nor that of 1844 seems to have been entirely willful; they appear to have been dictated by imperatives of his nature which he but dimly understood, if at all, drawing him out of the limelight and away from the direct path to the fame he announced himself as desiring,¹³ but conspiring to place him upon an indirect path to honors far exceeding those which he might have gained through the course he planned in 1832.

Jefferson, because of his position, was forced to sacrifice his agrarian ideals, but Whittier continued to hold onto the pastoral image as an ideal yet to be achieved. With his disillusionment over the failure of Emancipation to

harmonize human relationships, the preservation of optimism demanded a narrowing and an intensification of his goals, like that attributed to Thoreau, for whom "the realization of the golden age, is, finally, a matter of private and, in fact, literary experience." Thoreau found in the woods around Concord enough to satisfy the demands of his imagination; Whittier was equally content with the hills and streams of northern Massachusetts.

Whittier's life follows the classic American pattern of a rise from obscurity to fame and honor, accompanied by, or followed by, a retreat. For his best work he left a life of active reform for one of relative retirement in the surroundings of his youth, a wiser and somewhat disillusioned man though by no means embittered, and an immensely better poet, who was able at last to express fully and richly his interpretation of the American Dream in terms of the old pre-industrial hope of Thomas Jefferson. But the gain was made at the expense of a symbolic withdrawal, represented in the whole reclusive pattern of his life, his relative isolation, his illness, and his bachelorhood. Whittier's life thus gives evident of a cycle of innocence, experience, and rebirth basic to the mythological self-identification of western civilization and especially relevant with respect to American life.

Whittier's love poems also reveal this tendency to withdraw from social and personal involvement. Love is treated generally either in idyllic and unrealistic terms, or else it is thwarted by the death of the beloved or an unbridgeable gulf in the backgrounds, interests, or status of the lovers. The puritan lover in the poem "Marguerite" feels free to declare his love for the outcast Papist heroine only when the fact that she is dying leaves him "safe" from the necessity of following up his declaration.

The first person narrator of "Telling the Bees," approaching the home of his beloved, perhaps to declare his intentions, also finds that death has been there before him. This brief narrative combines an intense realization of place with a sense of passing time and provocative tone of suspense; the narrator's attitude of expectancy is reinforced by the short, halting second line of each stanza, which reveals Whittier's fine attentiveness, on occasion, to the organic harmony of meter and mood:

Here is the place; right over the hill
 Runs the path I took;
 You can see the gap in the old wall still,
 And the stepping-stones in the shallow
 brook. . . .

A year has gone, as the tortoise goes,
 Heavy and slow;
 And the same rose blows, and the same sun glows,
 And the same brook sings of a year ago. (p. 59)

The eager recognition of every detail of the farmyard, unchanged since the young couple first realized their love, a year before and since their last meeting, a month prior to the action of the poem, underscores the imminent joy of reunion. Clashing with this pattern, the single change in the surroundings strikes an ominous note:

Just the same as a month before,--
 The house and the trees,
 The barn's brown gable, the vine by the door,--
 Nothing changed but the hives of bees. (p. 59)

Knowledge dawns gradually through the remaining five stanzas, with a sense of restrained but slowly deepening gravity. The chore-girl is draping the hives in accordance with an old custom indicating a death in the family and supposed necessary to prevent the bees from leaving the hive and seeking a new home. The narrator, struck with a dread thought, is briefly eased by the idea that the one mourned must be Mary's grandfather, until he hears her dog whining and sees the old man sitting sadly on the doorsill. The last lines, reproducing the song of the chore-girl, drop the tragic fact like a plummet, effectively culminating the mood of inevitable fate that resounds through the poem:

And the song she was singing ever since
 In my ear sounds on:--
 'Stay at home, pretty bees, fly not hence!
 Mistress Mary is dead and gone!' (p. 60)

With unusual restraint, Whittier avoids all temptation

to comment or moralize, but the manner of dwelling on the remembrance reveals some characteristic and salient features of his attitude toward life and love. Mary herself is virtually unmentioned in the concentration on the scene, the passage of time, and the recollected emotion of the narrator. The burden of loss is thus focused on a generalized attitude toward the inevitability of change, rather than on a specific individual. It is not Mary who is remembered specifically, but the sensation of loss itself, almost, in a sense, for its own sake.

Love and marriage are sometimes presented as having dark, forbidding, or unhealthy aspects. In "The New Wife and the Old" (1843), the dead first wife disturbs the sleep of her young successor and leaves the elderly husband in cheerless communion with the nameless "dark Past," which is provocatively left to the imagination of the reader. "The Sisters" (1871) explores the effects of love so possessive it would prefer the beloved dead rather than alive and happy with another woman. Rhoda, to whom Estwick Hall, a mariner, is officially betrothed, is awakened from her sleep by Annie, her younger sister, who declares she has heard Hall call her name as if he were in trouble at sea. Rhoda, revealing her lack of faith, replies,

'Thou liest! He never would call thy name!

'If he did, I would pray the wind and sea
To keep him forever from thee and me!' (p. 101)

But both know that he is dead, and Annie, confident of Estwick's preference for her, though it was unspoken in life, hushes a groan with the thought of

The solemn joy of her heart's release
To own and cherish its love in peace.

She vows never to love another, and announces in a tone of necrophilious gloating, worthy of one of the demented heroines of Poe,

'Life was a lie, but true is death. . . .

'But now my soul with his soul I wed;
Thine the living, and mine the dead!' (p. 101)

"The Henchman" (1877) expresses a sense of chivalric love reminiscent of the early Elizabethan age.¹⁴ The "lady" of the poem is described in worshipful terms, in the pattern of Renaissance courtliness, as far above her admirer, who would not presume to make his admiration known.

The distance of the stars is hers;
The least of all her worshippers,
The dust beneath her dainty heel,
She knows not that I see or feel.

Oh, proud and calm!--she cannot know
Where'er she goes with her I go;
Oh, cold and fair!--she cannot guess
I kneel to share her hound's caress! (p. 122)

The couplets possess an energetic urgency, unusual in Whittier's tetrameters, achieved through the ritualistic repetition of

grammatical patterns, especially balanced declaration and rushing inversions. The style thus echoes the worshipful attitude of the narrator, content to pursue, like the bold lover of Keats' Grecian urn, without hope of capturing.

Unheard of her, in loving words,
I greet her with the song of birds;
I reach her with her green-armed bowers,
I kiss her with the lips of flowers.

The hound and I are on her trail,
The wind and I uplift her veil;
As if the calm, cold moon she were,
And I the tide, I follow her. (p. 122)

He sees love as ennobling himself, through its sacrificial quality; "The love that no return doth crave" raises him "To knightly levels." Though he would feel "blest" to die "For any need of hers," he would never presume to make a claim upon her as a living lover. The narrator thus regards love as worship of a deity full of "scorn and pride"; the beloved must remain an unapproachable goddess, or the illusion of her worth would be destroyed.

The significance of this poem as a revelation of Whittier's real attitude toward love and romance is underscored by the existence of several poems recounting actual relationships. These "affairs" are always viewed as irrevocably past, beyond resumption, and therefore "safe." "Memories" (1841) hints at religious differences that perhaps had something to do with a divergence of "pathways" which had been "one in youth." "My Playmate" (1860) laments the

"moaning" of a "sea of change/ Between myself and thee!"
 (p. 77) "A Sea Dream" (1874) most clearly echoes the
 sentiment of "The Henchman," although in this case the
 beloved is one "whose mortal life/ Immortal youth became":

Thou are not here, thou art not there
 Thy place I cannot see;
 I only know that where thou art
 The blessed angels be,
 And heaven is glad for thee. . . .

I could not look on thee and live,
 If thou wert by my side;
 The vision of a shining one,
 The white and heavenly bride,
 Is well to me denied. (p. 160)

Albert Mordell notes that at a certain point in each of
 Whittier's early romantic associations, an inevitable deteriora-
 tion seemed to take place.¹⁵ Mordell attributes it "to the
 perversity of fate" that Whittier was continually attracted
 to women whose social and religious preferences were incom-
 patible with his own. "He, the shy, idealistic, and unpracti-
 cal dreamer [sic] was always being jolted as he awoke to the
 realization that his sweethearts were invariably of a worldly
 and practical nature."¹⁶ The psychology of gamesmanship
 would probably find more than mere chance in such consistency
 on the part of fate, and it is not altogether unlikely, in
 view of the attitude expressed in "The Henchman," that
 Whittier entertained serious feelings only for such women
 as he knew would refuse him.¹⁷ He seems to have been more
 capable of appreciating love as an emotional rather than as

a physical phenomenon, as is indicated in a letter to Mrs. Fields, in which he told her, "I am thankful that the right to love is a right which nobody, not even its object, can deny. 'If I love you,' said Spinoza, 'What is that to you!'"¹⁸ This is obviously not the type of love we associate with romantic passion. Mordell perhaps comes closer to the point when he says that in his relationships with women, Whittier "neither gave aught of himself nor accepted anything from them."¹⁹

Although he stated a preference for real flesh and blood heroes over those of legend and mythology, idealized on a plane above that of life,²⁰ his attitude toward love reverses this inclination; he tends to etherealize the women he cares for. He seems to have felt more comfortable with love held at a distance, and he shied away from the real thing, perhaps unconsciously. Perhaps the basic reason for Whittier's failure to marry lies in the same stringent dedication to service that turned him away from poetry and politics to the potential martyrdom of abolitionism. Feeling that slavery was the greatest evil of his time, he took immediately and direct action against it. So, perhaps, believing that to work for the greatest good of all mankind was in the largest degree only possible to one who remained free of interfering and essentially selfish relationships, he purposely--though not necessarily consciously--avoided marriage. Thus the tendency noted in his artistic methods,

of deviating from the original direction of a poem, as in "The Over-Heart" and "Birchbrook Mill," is reflected also in Whittier's actions and habits in general.

The pattern of alternation found in Whittier's ventures into activity and romance is subsumed in the course of his life as a whole, which moves from the recurrent, frenzied activity of these early romantic ventures and of abolitionism to the increasing detachment of the years after his breakdown in 1840. At the end of the Civil War, his political and social interests were discontinued for the life of a village poet, confined as much as possible to a relatively small circle of friends and relatives. He is reported as having said, "With the abolition of slavery I felt myself released from all societies."²¹ Whittier thus moves toward the position taken by the mystic in "The Mystic's Christmas" (1882), who replies with quiet tolerance when comrades chide him for refraining from their cheerful celebration that they may keep it as they wish. He explains

'As ye are feeling I have felt,
And where ye dwell I too have dwelt.

'But now, beyond the things of sense,
Beyond occasions and events
I know, through God's exceeding grace,
Release from form and time and place. (p. 462)

Poetically this movement is symbolically represented, not only in those poems which recreate the past, but in the larger group involving the symbolic construction of a kind of island

of repose, shut off from the ongoing world of affairs, which is sensed as vaguely hostile to this inner sanctum of imaginative construction. In the terms of Leo Marx this represents a genuine realization of the traditional pastoral mode, which recognizes not only the enjoyment of a natural environment but the acquired advantages of cultural development, and a sense of threatening influences beyond the verge of the retreat.

Whittier thus anticipates the direction of American fiction in the nineteenth century, as described by A. N. Kaul, who notes that, as opposed to European fiction, in which "Established society provides . . . the very tissue and fiber of the actions. . . ." American novels tend to

lead their characters, on a raft or along a trapper's path, [or it might be added, back in time to a snowbound farmhouse in a disappearing landscape] away from the civilization of the time and put them in a position where they can enter into, or create, radically different social relations and thereby a different social world.²²

Kaul believes that these heroes affirm the vitality of the American pre-Civil War myth

and the extent to which literary imagination still regarded the individual as essentially unfettered by social restrictions and pressures. The great novelists of this time seldom project the established social order as the ultimate arbiter of man's destiny. . . . in the last analysis, individuals retain the right to fashion for themselves a society which conforms to their highest ideals. The positive values which emerge . . . are, accordingly, not bound so much to social institutions as they are addressed to the basic needs of ideal community life, or, what the elder Henry James would call perfect fellowship among men.²³

Although Kaul refers specifically to novels, a more exacting description of "Snow-Bound" could hardly be imagined.

Whittier's "ideal community" is, if anything, less disturbed in its symbolic representation, for it was less disturbed in actuality, and it remained in many respects unchanged even after the war. The myth had been so nearly a reality that he seemed at times able to ignore its essentially mythic character.

4

Whittier's influence on later ages, though not extensive, has perhaps been felt to a greater degree than is generally conceded.²⁴ At least one later poet, Edwin Markham, recorded the influence of Whittier as an important factor in his own work,²⁵ but for the most part, as Donald Hall stated, "Neither America nor American poetry has followed the way of thought that Whittier represented."²⁶

But he is, to a greater degree than any of the other genteel poets, a prototype of the American artist.²⁷ Like Thoreau and Whitman, he was thoroughly unbound by the limiting conventions of his time, and free to defy its social and political temper when defiance seemed called for. Kaul says of Huck Finn and Natty Bumppo that "It is not society which has turned its back upon them but rather they who from the fullness of their moral judgment reject society--or civilization, as they call it."²⁸ These words might equally apply to

the three authors mentioned above, in the sense that they reject society's claim to determine thought and behavior. Together they form a kind of company of American anchorites, whose dedication to their particular idealistic visions of America supplanted the requirements of home, wife, or family.

In many ways their lives and attitudes are similar. Like Whittier, Thoreau and Whitman remained bachelors, in spite of their marital eligibility and suggestions of budding romances that did not culminate in marriage. Three Eveless American Adams. All were independent of society, Whittier and Whitman led by their own versions of the inner light, and Thoreau defiantly marching to the strains of his own personal drummer. Each had many jobs and eventually withdrew from active labor except on a sporadic basis, as demanded by necessity. All had taught school briefly and found it not to their liking, because of an essential antipathy for the coercive nature of the vocation. All ventured to speak for the common man and venerated manual labor, which they rated, openly or tacitly, as superior or at least equal to writing and the pursuit of esthetic goals: Whittier's deprecation of his writings has been demonstrated in Chapter iV; Whitman thought of the work of the American laborer as the truest poetry; and Thoreau devoted the latter part of his life to his pursuits as a self-styled naturalist. All were frugal and abstemious with respect to their personal habits. Most important of all, all three held a significant relationship

to the conflict of nature and industrial society which Leo Marx has indicated to be at the root of much of American literature: Thoreau questioned the purposes of industrialization; Whitman embraced it wholeheartedly; and Whittier, who first tried to include it in his vision, ultimately rejected it and developed his vision of the ideal America in terms of the old pre-industrial hope of Thomas Jefferson.

Thoreau and Whittier were both dedicated, actively and in writing, to the eradication of slavery and defiance of the government when its actions offended their sensibilities. Both were identified primarily with particular and isolated rural locations, Walden Pond and the Merrimac Valley of Essex County. Carpenter mentions that both were typical of a certain character-type especially cultivated in New England, which was felt to produce "side by side with garrulousness, inquisitiveness, and the innate desire for community building --a certain reticence, a self-centered tendency that thrives in solitude, that wishes only to be let alone . . . to be free from the trammels of community life."²⁹

Between Whittier and Whitman even more striking similarities exist. Both were largely self-educated as writers through their journalistic experiences. Both were poets of the American ideal, with the difference that, whereas Whitman tended to scorn the past and concentrate on present and future, Whittier embraced the past and sought to remake the future in the light of its best examples and efforts. In

spite of this difference, and Whittier's disgust for the Leaves of Grass, the lives and characters of the two men were remarkably similar. Both were motivated by their respective interpretations of the Quaker "inner light," Whittier in a more-or-less orthodox fashion, and Whitman in his own more liberal way. Both were positive in outlook, essentially peacemakers who eschewed violence. Both celebrated the working-man, Whittier primarily the farmer and handcraftsman, and Whitman (although he does not neglect the rural worker) the urban laborer, the mechanic, the railroad builder, the assembly-line worker, and the entire host of those engaged in vocations peculiar to the industrial age. Both were optimistic with regard to the future and looked to the marvels of science and invention to open up new avenues of achievement and understanding for humanity as a whole. Both assumed a distinctive garb which set them off from the literary community in general, Whittier the long, sober coat of the Quaker and Whitman the attire of the workingman.³⁰

Their differences resulted from dissimilar origins in time and place. Whittier, born and nurtured on an isolated farm, was more circumscribed, at least initially, in experience, and by the time he went into the world, his beliefs and attitudes, especially religious, had hardened into the conservative mold that he never rejected, in spite of his distinct distrust of clerical organization. His social and artistic impulses were provided by the Quaker fathers, the

romantic poets of England, and their imitators in current American magazines, while Whitman, born later, was probably inspired to a large extent by Emerson's demand for a new outlook and a new mode of expression; as he suggested, "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil."³¹ Whittier, it is true, had responded to the same urge that drew forth Emerson's demand, but the America he celebrated was already receding from view.

Whittier's quest of the American Dream was thus not one that could be encompassed by action. It was not a journey to be undertaken in the world of flesh and blood, but in the world of the spirit and the imagination, and its realization was most nearly achieved through the symbolism of a withdrawal from the world of events, the present, into a meditative world where time either ceases altogether, as in the poems which reveal a mystic rapport with nature, or where past, present, and future blend into a hazy inclusiveness, as in "Snow-Bound."

The island of repose and fulfillment he sought was depicted through a varied but consistent group of images, the seashore, or his native hills and streams, or the fire-side. Usually the harmony attained is not achieved without an awareness of the contrasting and perhaps threatening influences of an alien and often antagonistic world, beyond a fringe of trees or the isolating blizzard. Sometimes its steeples are visible over intervening trees, or its

churchbells are heard, as in "The Tent on the Beach," but by some means, if only by a sinister invisibility, as in "Snow-Bound," we are made conscious that it exists, and that it must be returned to; the isolated sojourn is only temporary.

Whittier has been criticized on the grounds that he was pledged to the theory of art as an escape from life.³² But, like Thoreau's journey to Walden, Whittier's escape may be regarded as an escape not only away from life, i.e., the life of everyday dullness, blindness, and insensitivity so powerfully described in the prelude to "Among the Hills," but also as an escape to a richer and intensified concept of life, his version of the American Dream, a sense of the "beauty of the commonplace."

One of the functions of the artist, and not the least important, is certainly to point up this enriched vision, as Whittier attempted to do through his "escapism." As he suggested in "The Tent on the Beach,"

He better sees who stands outside
Than they who in procession ride. (p. 254)

The solitary sojourn away from the distraction of events, whether undertaken in a desert, by the lakeside, or in the realm of the imagination, as in Whittier's case, is a traditional and perhaps essential condition for the growth of insight, wisdom, and maturity.³³ The merely romantic escapist is one whose forays lead away from rather than toward increased

responsibility and self-discipline. With Whittier this was never the case. Retreat is essential but not an end in itself; it is rather a means of recharging oneself to meet the demands of the hostile, ongoing world outside.

Whittier thus affirms the possibility of the realization of the American Dream, not in the physical world, but as a spiritual ideal, the kingdom of God within. His writing may be viewed as an attempt to find a symbolic realization of this ideal, in legend and history, in the struggle for abolition, in nature, and in the direct statement of the religious poems, but most successfully, in his own past on the isolated farm at Haverhill. Although the physical realization of the Dream is momentary, the spirit can maintain its life in spite of the alterations of Time. Significantly the ideal is bound up with childhood recollected in maturity. The paraphrase of Wordsworth has a certain appropriateness, because Whittier achieved the "philosophical calm" that Wordsworth attempted to portray. He proclaims that the "vision," the "glory and the dream," have not passed entirely away with maturity, and we feel the reality of the assertion that he has lost nothing, in spite of the missing faces and the changes in his mode of living.

Yet the reality, the incarnation of Eden, could only take place in a child's world. The American Dream, inasmuch as it could be actually manifested, is a child's dream. It has often been noted that the American hero is a child or an

adult with a youthful outlook, or one who resists maturity, retreating from society to nature or a simpler environment. The end of childhood or the failure of retreat represents an irrevocable loss. For Whittier, however, no retreat was necessary, and nothing was lost. He was an incarnation of the American Adam, but since Eden is essentially a child's world, it was inevitable that he retain something of the character of the child. For him the American Dream was a reality, and because this realization remains in the record of his life and poetry, he retains an impalpable but potent significance as one who dwelt in the America of the soul, and reveals it yet to those who wish to see it.

Footnotes for Chapter VII

¹Leary, John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 68.

²The American Adam, p. 7.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 7-8. Thoreau and Whitman are mentioned by Adams as individuals who not only wrote about but also lived the ideas inherent in the hopeful party.

⁴The Machine in the Garden, p. 114.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 135. (Quoted by Marx.)

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

⁹John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 53.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 135.

¹¹S. Pickard, Life, I, 243.

¹²Carpenter, pp. 143, 144.

¹³S. Pickard, Life, I, 167.

¹⁴In the headnote to the poem, pp. 121-122, Whittier, describing the circumstances of its composition, said that it was written on request for a young lady who accused him of never having written a love song. She expressed a disbelief that he could and also a wish that he would try to write one for her to sing. Whittier mentions also the fact that he had "bestowed a good deal of labor" upon it, and that "It is not exactly a Quakerly piece, nor is it didactic, and it has no moral that I know of."

¹⁵An example of Whittier's tendency to "back off" when such a relationship seemed in danger of going beyond a safe degree of attachment--or detachment--is evident in the reported development of his acquaintance with Gail Hamilton. Mordell, Quaker Militant, p. 234, says that she proposed to Whittier, that he feared her, that she built a house for him, and that from this point on they saw and corresponded with each other less.

¹⁶Mordell, pp. 192-193.

¹⁷Pollard, Friend to Man, p. 411, accuses him of never having cared for marriage, and Samuel Pickard, Life, I, 78, noted that he was "a shy, timid recluse."

¹⁸Pollard, p. 400.

¹⁹Quaker Militant, p. 221.

²⁰In "Our River" (p. 224), for example, he chides,
The heathen streams of Naiads boast,
But ours of man and woman.

²¹Life, II, 535.

²²The American Vision (New Haven and London, 1963), pp. 56-57.

²³Ibid., p. 56.

²⁴Howard Mumford Jones, "Whittier Reconsidered," p. 236, cites an anticipation of Frost in Whittier's "honest simplicity," and several poems foreshadow the realistic colloquialism and the emotional understatement of the later New Englander. Jones also mentions a similarity to Robinson in Whittier's portrait of Abraham Davenport. Donald Hall, The Laurel Whittier, p. 18, mentions Robinson as a poet, "whom Whittier could have understood, though he would not have liked him," because "Robinson was convinced that life was pretty much a bad thing." Hall goes on to say that it is a natural that Robinson's view should be "more convincing" today, "for Robinson's negativism is the weather of our time. To read Whittier requires an effort of the historical imagination; we must learn to cope with goodness and optimism."

²⁵Mordell, p. 319.

²⁶Hall, p. 18.

²⁷Perhaps Lowell recognized this when he observed that "Mr. Whittier is, on the whole, the most American of our poets." (Quoted in Pollard, p. 260.)

²⁸The American Vision, p. 56.

²⁹John Greenleaf Whittier, pp. 179-180.

³⁰Perry Miller, "The Conscience in Poetry," p. 9, suggested that Whittier, like Whitman, "projected his sincerity into a pose."

³¹John A. Kouwenhoven, Introduction to Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose, Modern Library College Edition

(New York, 1950), p. xi.

³²Powell, "Whittier," p. 338.

³³Carpenter, p. 254, suggests that his reclusiveness was "the source of his power as a poet."

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