

THE BASIS OF WHITTIER'S CRITICAL CREED: THE BEAUTY OF THE COMMONPLACE AND THE TRUTH OF STYLE

ALTHOUGH Whittier professed to scorn "the tricks of art"¹ and evinced little interest in aesthetic theory as such, his writing does bear a definite relationship to what he thought to be the basis of beauty and art. His beliefs, contradictory and vacillating in his youth, gradually matured under the pressures of political and abolitionist work into a doctrine of the beauty of the commonplace and the truth of style, which served as the critical basis for his best genre poetry and ballads. The full extent of his search for a critical creed and its function in shaping his artistry has never been fully examined.² This paper will attempt to highlight the evolution of his mature critical beliefs and briefly indicate their function as a valid measure for his poetic achievement.

A brief survey of Whittier's formative years (to 1833) reveals three main influences which fashioned his critical concepts and caused the lifelong struggle between the lure of external beauty and the "inner light" of the spirit: his Quaker background, Burns' poetry, and the English and American Romantics. His Quaker training, strengthened by his Biblical knowledge, stressed the necessity of individual striving for perfection against the set rules of dogma; of putting into action the humanitarian doctrines of social equality; of trusting in the inner spirit of God; and of viewing all phases of life—cultural, political, and economic—from a spiritual aspect. Also his readings in the works of Penn, Chalkley, Barclay, and Bunyan taught him to appreciate books which were "shorn of all ornament, simple and direct . . . dead to self-

gratification, careless of the world's opinion."³ The strict ethical tone and polemical purpose of these writings strengthened his moralistic view of literature and distrust of the passions. Many of Whittier's early poems dealt with social and political issues; and already the practical aspects of Quakerism led him to defend fighters for human liberty, to enlist in the temperance movement, to dedicate himself as the poet of peace, and finally to devote his mature years to the cause of abolition.

Whittier's isolated rural background, lack of education, and his Quaker dedication to humanitarianism strangely paralleled the career of Robert Burns; and it seemed only fitting that his early introduction to Burns stimulated his poetic ambitions. Whittier said about his reading of Burns' poetry: "This was about the first poetry I had ever read . . . and it had a lasting influence upon me. I began to make rhymes myself. . . . In fact I lived a sort of dual life, and in a world of fancy, as well as in the world of plain matter-of-fact about me."⁴ The themes, subject matter, and finally the style of Burns had a direct and lasting effect upon Whittier. Burns was a poet who appealed to his own people as he wrote of their ordinary thoughts and feelings. His themes were theirs too—the dislike of the harsh Calvinistic church rule, belief in the innate dignity of man and social equality, an admiration for simple rural virtue, and love of nature. He delighted in the common things of the local community, its social gatherings, folklore, and superstitions. These themes predominate in Whittier's poetry and there can be no doubt that Burns first showed him their poetic value.⁵ Finally, all of Burns' better poems have an underlying realism achieved by the use of the Scottish dialect with its rich, native terms, by the manipulation of simple, ordinary words, and by the presenta-

tion of ideas with visual, concrete detail. Also he draws heavily on the familiar objects of farm and nature as source material for his poetry. These characteristics were also to be Whittier's when he had achieved a truth of style.

However, Burns' steadying influence was lost as Whittier succumbed to the third influence of his immature years. The lure of the exotic, the mysterious, and the romantic in the works of Scott and Byron captured his imagination;⁶ while their American counterparts, Mrs. Sigourney and N. P. Willis, excited his interest in sentimental and exaggerated love themes and led him to imitate their affected literary style.⁷ Fortunately most of these attempts were only passing fads, but the presence of so many of these poems illustrates how susceptible Whittier was to popular taste. Their themes, lost love, desire for fame, melancholy, praise of the imagination and poetry, are significant, for they indicate how far Whittier had come from the strict Quaker view that art must be practical and, above all else, moral. Again, one of the main tensions in his literary career is put in focus, the lure of beauty in its own sphere against a moralistic view of art. From earliest childhood Whittier has been rigorously trained to believe that sensuous beauty and the fine arts drew men away from spiritual goodness. The Quaker attitude on the arts was a negative one, a series of do not read novels, do not attend the theatre, do not listen to music—all of which was grounded in their belief that the human impulses of man were divorced from the Divine. Like the early Puritans they feared that a delight in sensuous beauty would replace the "inner light" of spiritual perfection. So Whittier's earliest writings stressed the beauty of "a spirit of a higher mould—A being unallied to earth"⁸ and emphasized beauty's holiness and sanctity. Yet, his imitations of Byron and Willis show

the conflict between his religious training and his ardent emotional spirit. In "Stanzas" he depicts the broken hearted lover who cannot escape the powerful appeal of sensuous beauty:

For Beauty hath a charming spell,
Upon the human will,
Though false the heart it veils so well,
It hath its homage still.⁹

Even more revealing are the pseudo-confessions of an opium eater who rhapsodizes on the witchery of his former love: "It is idle to talk of the superior attraction of intellectual beauty, when compared with mere external loveliness . . . the beauty of form and color, the grace of motion, the harmony of tone, are seen and felt and appreciated at once" (*Works*, V, 284). Of course these two pieces are imitative of the then prevailing literary modes and only imaginatively reflect the young Quaker's personal views on beauty; yet, they do highlight part of the emotional struggle that must have been taking place in his mind. Even though he avowedly condemned the sensuous, he was intrigued by it. Similarly, his early statements on art often emphasized its divine mission and the supreme creativeness of the artist. For a period he seemed to believe that the art of poetry could be an end in itself, rising above the moral issues of life and existing in its own domain of fancy and imagination.¹⁰ He wrote glowing tributes to Chatterton, Ossian, and Byron, echoing their desire for one "high and haughty hour . . . One grasp at fleeting power."¹¹

In 1833 these romantic dreams were swept completely away when Whittier joined the abolitionist party. Previous to this, along with his literary pursuits, Whittier's activities as an editor and politician had shown his sympathy for the underprivileged and he had followed Garrison's abolitionist

movement with some interest.¹² But when his poetic ambitions failed to materialize, political hopes had been defeated, and ill-health plagued his body, he returned to the Haverhill farm in a receptive frame of mind for Garrison's burning letter which pleaded: "The cause is worthy of Gabriel—yea, the God of hosts places himself at its head. Whittier enlist—Your talents, zeal, influence—all are needed."¹³ The appeal cut to the core of Whittier's Quaker beliefs on slavery and gave his susceptible, still uncertain, temperament a strength and directness of purpose for which it had been searching. So, the "dreamer born" left the "Muse's haunts to turn / The crank of opinion-mill" ("The Tent on the Beach") and reconciled his conflict between art and life, sense and spirit, desire and duty. "The Reformer," a poem typical of Whittier's feelings during the next twenty years, shows how far this trenchant devotion was to carry him. The reformer is the "strong one" who destroys the godless shrines of men to build a better future. Significantly, he lays waste not only the hypocritical church and the various worldly monuments to sin, but he also demolishes art with all her old treasures, ignoring the sad surprise of "young romance." Naive as the poem's belief in the efficacy of moral reform may be, it undoubtedly does reflect Whittier's attitude at this time.¹⁴

The beauty of ethical action and self-sacrifice became major themes in Whittier's poetry. Scores of poems praised a beauty that "Walks hand in hand with duty" (My Triumph) and repudiated the "hands that idly fold, / And lips that woo the reed's accord" ("The Summons"). He entitled his 1850 volume of poetry *Songs of Labor* rather than *Songs of Love*, since his were only simple poems of rural toil written to show "The unsung beauty hid life's common

things below" ("Dedication"). He saw the aesthetic failings of the Puritan founders and, yet, excused them because "they lived a truer poetry than Homer or Virgil wrote" (*Works*, V, 363). Such a moral concept of beauty had little connection with poetic fancy and imagination, while his critical pieces put a similar emphasis on morality and especially praised those who agreed with the abolitionist position. Art in the pure sense was anathema for the militant reformer, for it "builds on sand" ("Wordsworth"). Despite these unimaginative and stifling tenets Whittier still wrote ballads and genre pieces which minimized moralistic content. But his abolitionist conscience had to justify even these and so he stated in the introduction to "Amy Wentworth" that the soft play of art, songs, and pictures have their function in soothing the reformer's "storm-stunned" mind and providing temporary relief from "the sharp strifes and sorrows of today." Art viewed as an escape from his editorial pressures and political activities was far removed from his early desire to find in it a source of pure unfading joy. After the Civil War Whittier tempered his austere denunciation of non-moralistic art and admitted that it "beguiled some heavy hours and called / Some pleasant memories up" ("The Bay of Seven Islands"), but still it seemed of secondary value and even questionable worth.

Whittier's fullest statement on the function of art in general came in *The Tent on the Beach* (1867). Here he presented his final view, a minor reconciliation between the doctrine of art for its own sake and an art which only serves moral ends. He admits that his poetry has been too moralistic and that his ethical conscience has thwarted fancy's imaginative flight; yet, when one of the speakers in the poem

comments that art needs no other justification than beauty itself, Whittier responds characteristically in the person of the singer:

Better so (to have a moral in poetry)
 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,

 Beyond the poet's sweet dream lives
 The eternal epic of man.

And Whittier concludes by saying that the "truth" of art, its faithfulness to the dicta of Christianity, does not need the "garnish of a lie," or that elements of beauty for their own sake are not necessary for good poetry. Confusing religion with aesthetics, Whittier's concept of the function of art remained obscured throughout his life.

Of course, Whittier's intense reform activity strengthened his devotion to literature based on Christian goodness and truth, and this conviction formed an essential part of his mature views on beauty. Once his reform interests lessened in the 1850's, his confidence in outward action and social progress changed to a reliance on inner values and individual search; and his concepts of the beautiful and its relationship to the artist deepened accordingly. The beauty of silence and peace, fundamental to his belief in the "inner light," assumed a larger and more influential role in his poetry. Perhaps the best expression of his changing views is in an essay entitled "The Beautiful." Written in 1844, the article fully indicates the transition that Whittier was making from his stringent abolitionist position to a more inclusive view of beauty. It states unequivocally that the external elements of form and shape do not constitute the beautiful, nor does a

"mechanical exactness" based on classically correct rules. Rather, true beauty comes from the mind as a radiation of "holiness, of purity, of that inward grace that passeth show." The artist must understand this and discern in the "outward environment . . . a deeper and more real loveliness." Conversely, Whittier claims that ugliness or deformity occurs only when there is an absence of virtue or the presence of sin. This inner spiritual beauty transcends rules and techniques, as Whittier once remarked of John Woolman's writings: "Beauty they certainly have, but it is not that which the rules of art recognize" (*Works*, VII, 345).

Obviously this idea of beauty is intimately connected with his belief in the Quaker doctrine of the "inner light," which maintained that the indwelling of the holy spirit in each man was a personal, introspective experience, and, at times, a mystical relationship. In striving for individual perfection, no set dogma or creed is followed, only the subjective voice of the "inner light." So, when Whittier commented that "beauty, in and of itself, is good" ("To Avis Keene"), he meant something far different from Keats' similar statement. Following Emerson's organic view of art, Whittier believed that goodness, truth, and beauty were one and that the material was only a reflection of the Divine archetype. As a corollary, Whittier held that the appreciation of beauty was a personal thing which could be found anywhere and by anyone. The attraction of an external object was dependent on "an instantaneous reflection as to its history, purpose, or associations." Such a view followed the prevailing romantic belief in Alison's comments on the subjectivity of the beautiful—that the mind not only received but also created in its appreciation of the beautiful. Thus, beauty was no longer intrinsic or absolute in the Neoclassic sense, but dependent upon

states of mind, resulting from associations enkindled in our imaginations by external objects. Whittier responded to this concept quite early, for in 1833 he had a fictional character explain how his physical attraction for a young lady had become blended with all the former ideas he had of "female excellency and purity and constancy" (*Works*, V, 284).

One other aspect of the doctrine of associations, its connection of the material and spiritual worlds, was investigated in an article, "Swedenborg" (1844). Whittier lauded the power of Swedenborg's transcendental theories in stripping bare the sense objects of the world to reveal "the types and symbols of the world of spirit." Stressing the associations that an imaginative man like Swedenborg could make between the "facts" of this world and the spiritual values of the next, Whittier also praised his realistic expression of these abstract ideas. This relation of the spiritual to the material and the importance of personal associations paralleled Emerson's 1836 doctrine of correspondence in its far-reaching effects on Whittier's artistic creed and writing. Undoubtedly it seconded in a theoretical way the practical and religious training of Quakerism and further strengthened his moral view of beauty. More importantly it led him to perceive that an accurate record of his personal experiences with their multitude of concrete impressions could reveal the implicit values hidden beneath the physical form. So, tardily, Whittier found in the ordinary things of his life—his farm background, the local Haverhill scenery, his knowledge of Quaker history, Essex county legends, boyhood memories—factual images that could be transmuted by personal associations and imaginative effort into authentic, worthwhile materials for poetry. The romance that he hoped to find in these familiar things was based on the awareness that the truth of humble experi-

ences and simple feelings had as much wonder and beauty as his former dreams "of lands of gold and pearl, / Of loving knight and lady" ("Burns"). This theory of the beauty of the commonplace formed the cornerstone for his finest poems written in the 1850's. Now his subject matter, an old rhyme about a calloused Marblehead skipper, his birthplace in a snowstorm, a girl raking hay on a summer's day, a local tale about a Hampton witch, was based directly on the commonplace incidents of his own experience.

Associated with this final understanding of the proper material for his writing was the problem of finding the appropriate manner for expressing these feelings. From his earlier literary experiments he came to believe that style was the communication of an emotion or an idea, usually associated with some ethical or practical end, in the clearest, most direct manner. In his essay on Robert Dinsmore he praises that rural poet for calling things by their right names without any euphuisms or transcendental terms. Similarly he approves E. P. Whipple's prose, because "he wrote with conscience always at his elbow, and never sacrificed his real convictions for the sake of epigram or antithesis" (*Works*, VI, 318). Increasingly he emphasized the necessity of dressing truth in a somber guise, rather than garnishing it by ornamentation or elaborate stylistic devices. This truth of style actually meant a fidelity to personal experience, a realization of one's own powers and insights, and an attempt to present them in the clearest possible manner. Numerous critical comments stressed the intention of the author and the relationship between the emotional experiences of the man and his method of expression.¹⁵ In theory, at least, Whittier was presenting the organic belief that form should follow function. When joined to his love of the commonplace, this truth of style

enabled Whittier to see that mere surface ornamentation or tricks of rhetoric were harmful; that a writer must first be himself and then concentrate on style; that the inner emotional quality of a work rises above mere literary technique; and finally, that the subject matter must bear a direct relation to the author's own personal experience. Though this emphasis on truth often caused Whittier to overmoralize and disregard valid literary techniques, it never allowed him to equate sincerity with dullness. His best works do attempt to "throw a golden haze of poetry over the rough and thorny pathways of every-day duty" (*Works*, VI, 216) and to utilize "the extraordinary richness of language and imagery" (*Works*, VII, 287) which Whittier so admired in other writers.¹⁶

Practically, it is revealing to see how Whittier employed these beliefs in his own writing. He consistently uses images which have their source in the everyday experiences of farm-life, the harvest, the change of seasons, growth of crops, husking, planting, and his most effective poems abound in descriptions which are taken directly from a specific section of Essex county. The opening of "The Last Walk in Autumn" literally transcribes the scenery along the Merrimack River; while the town in "The Countess" is an accurate picture of Rocks Village, a small settlement a few miles from Whittier's house. "Snow-Bound," "Skipper Ireson's Ride," "A Sea-Dream," and "Among the Hills" are similarly dependent on exact local description. Also his finest genre sketches rely on the careful accumulation of these realistic details. Note the series of images from the poem "In Peace":

A track of moonlight on a quiet lake,
Whose small waves on a silver-sanded shore
Whisper of peace, and with the low winds make
Such harmonies as keep the woods awake,
And listening all night long for their sweet sake;

A green-waved slope of meadow

 A slumberous stretch of mountainland

 A vale-fringed river, winding to its rest

 Such are the pictures which the thought of thee,
 O friend, awakeneth,—

These images taken from familiar Essex county scenes are expanded to connote the general theme of peace and beauty. By imaginative association Whittier links the various scenes with the feelings he had for his friend, for only that way could the hidden virtues be expressed with concrete sense appeal. Here, justifiably, external physical beauty complements and heightens the moral beauty of man's inner nature.

How successfully Whittier could apply his beliefs to poetry may be seen by an examination of "Telling the Bees." The story hinges on a local Essex county superstition that a death in the family would drive away the bees and the custom of draping the hives in black mourning colors to prevent this. The narrative itself records the delayed visit of a young man to the farmhouse of his beloved Mary. The tone of the poem is informal, almost conversational, and Whittier relates the tale as if he and the reader were re-walking the ground on which it took place. In the first lines, directly addressing this reader and insisting that he follow the scene closely, Whittier points out:

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.

There is the house, with the gate red-barred
 And the poplars tall;

And the barn's brown length, and the cattle-yard
And the white horns tossing above the wall.

The details are plain and unelaborated: the poplars are merely "tall," the barn just "brown," and the cattle are depicted only by "white horns." A series of "ands" connects one detail to the next in almost childlike fashion.¹⁷ Then, as if pausing in this trip with the reader, Whittier notes that, although a year has passed, everything is still the same:

And the same rose blows, and the same sun glows,
And the same brook sings of a year ago.

The reiteration of the adjective "same" and the definiteness and confidence of the repeated "there is" intensify the mood of assurance as the poet recalls how carefully he had prepared for his former visit. Then excitedly, reliving that past moment, he exclaims, "I can see it all now . . . just the same"; and by repeating the description of the opening stanzas, the poet emphasizes the "sameness" of the scene. Yet, the mood shifts when the poet, coming closer to the house, almost casually notes: "Nothing changed but the hives of bees." This one small detail breaks the continuity and with increasing tension he hears the drearily singing chore girl and sees the ominous shreds of black on the hives. The warm June sun of an earlier stanza now chills like snow as the eventual discovery is foreshadowed. Still, the poet refuses to abandon his former confidence and assumes that Mary's grandfather must be dead. Suddenly, he sees the old man sitting on the porch and is now close enough to understand the song of the chore girl:

"Stay at home, pretty bees, fly not hence!
Mistress Mary is dead and gone!"

Whittier concludes the poem with the surprise revelation of her death and allows the reader's imagination to supply the

resulting horror and shock of the loss. Only then is the reader aware of the skillful manipulation of theme, as the careful development of the attractiveness and assurance of external nature hides the inevitable destruction of human beauty and earthly love. The ironic contrast of the boy's trust and expectation with the true situation offers a psychological insight into the problem of death.¹⁸ As a whole the poem succeeds because of the utter simplicity of its prose-like phrasing and ballad meter, and because of its firm structural unity created by the progression from assurance to fear and then surprise. The stylistic devices are few: some repetitions in the use of the adjective "same" and similar physical detail; some parallelisms, like the balance in "heave and slow," "forward and back"; some alliteration as the "s" sounds in the last stanzas; and a restatement of detail with a changed significance when the warm sun is transformed into a chilling snow and the happy song of the brook is altered into the dreary chant of death. The poem's artlessness shows Whittier's mastery of simple narration, his truth of style; while its theme employs a rural situation and local environment to emphasize an underlying problem of human existence. The beauty of the commonplace here is one of wonder and surprise that causes reflection in the reader's mind.

The best of Whittier's genre pieces and his ballads illustrate the essential truth which he had first recognized in Burns' poetry: that underneath the most commonplace objects lay beauty, rich treasures of life's tragedy and comedy. His regional works reveal the inner love of a man for the environment that moulded him, the tradition that inspired him, and the people that loved him. Acting on his belief in the beauty of the commonplace and the truth of style, Whittier worked these materials of the home and affections into

artistic creations that proved the validity of his critical theories.

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NOTES

1. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, ed. Horace E. Scudder, Cambridge Edition (Boston, 1894), p. 189. All poems cited and all quotations of poetry will be from this book, unless otherwise stated.
2. The notes on Whittier in Harry Hayden Clark's *Major American Poets* (New York, 1936), pp. 802-816, contain the most complete account of Whittier's poetic theories and indicate a three-fold maturing in the poet from romanticism to political liberalism to "religious humanism." The best introduction to Whittier's critical approach is found in Edwin H. Cady and Harry Hayden Clark's *Whittier on Writers and Writing* (Syracuse, 1950). They note the wide variety of Whittier's critical interests and indicate his developing an "individual sort of realism" (p. 9). Frances Mary Pray, *A Study of Whittier's Apprenticeship as a Poet* (Bristol, 1930), pp. 1-110, has a detailed investigation of the early influences on Whittier's poetry, but goes no further than 1835. Clarence Arthur Brown in his *The Achievement of American Criticism* (New York, 1954) places Whittier in a definite historical perspective and concludes that Whittier was not insensitive to literary technique but that "he always subordinated it to the moral and humanitarian values of art" (p. 171).
Biographers of Whittier since George Rice Carpenter's *John Greenleaf Whittier* (Boston, 1903) have almost completely ignored this important aspect. The most recent biography, John A. Pollard, *John Greenleaf Whittier: Friend of Man* (Boston, 1949), eliminates the poet for a detailed consideration of the humanitarian.
3. *The Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, Standard Library Edition, 7 Vols. (Boston, 1892), VI, 10. Hereafter cited as *Works*.
4. Carpenter, *op. cit.*, p. 299.
5. The poem, "Burns," written in 1854, when Whittier had finally found his true *métier*, indicates this debt by commenting that Burns had taught him to see "through all familiar things / The romance underlying."
6. Poems like "Moll Pitcher" and "Mogg Megone" imitate the narrative type of historical romance which Scott had made so popular. In his critical works Whittier refers to Byron more

than anyone else and for over ten years (1824-1834) the poetry of the unsophisticated Quaker mirrored the disillusioned, anti-social attitudes of the Byronic hero. "The Exile's Departure" expresses the *Weltschmerz* of an outcast warrior as he leaves his country; "The Fratricide" shows the downfall of a rebel against the moral code; "Life's Pleasures" reflects the disillusionment of a young man; and "Lines," written after reading Byron's account of a tempest in the Alps, glory in the storm and grandeur of the landscape. These last three poems are found in Pray, *op. cit.*, which contains many other examples.

7. In Pray, *op. cit.*, poems like "Night," "Lyre," "Ocean," follow the loose poetical phrasing and rhetorical exaggerations of Mrs. Sigourney; while there are over a dozen poems (like "The Declaration") which attempt the sophisticated, lightly romantic tone of Willis' love poetry.
8. Pray, *op. cit.*, p. 239.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
10. In a letter quoted by Carpenter, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-97, Whittier says: "I am haunted by an immedicable ambition—perhaps a very foolish desire of distinction, of applause, of fame, of what the world calls immortality."
11. Pray, *op. cit.*, p. 193.
12. In 1831 he published "To William Lloyd Garrison," praising him for his "steadfast strength of truth" and "martyr's zeal."
13. Carpenter, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
14. The fervid, moralistic tone of this poem is typical of over two-thirds of Whittier's poetry written from 1833-1850. Titles like "The Slave-ships," "The Hunters of Men," "Clerical Oppressors," and "The Moral Warfare" indicate how engrossed Whittier had become in his abolitionist work.
15. See *Works*, VI, 201, 218-219, 221-222, 225-256; VII, 344-345.
16. Whittier's taste is far wider than one might imagine and his appreciation of different styles is more catholic. He admired four main types of writing and tried to emulate them: the poetic, sentimental school which abounded in vague, romantic descriptions, as seen in Grace Greenwood and John Neal; the dramatic, often theatrical, appeal of writers like Charles Brockden Brown and Harriet B. Stowe; the forceful, balanced style found in Milton and Burke; and the plain, simple style of Bunyan or Woolman.
17. The scene described here is an exact duplication of the path the boy Whittier often took from Job's Hill, west of the birthplace, through a break in the cemetery wall, continuing on down by the brook to his home.

18. Typically the fact that there was no moral or religious consolation attached bothered Whittier. And he wrote to Lowell about it: "I send thee a bit of rhyme which pleases me, and yet I am not quite sure about it. What I call simplicity may be only silliness. . . . But I like it and hope better things of it." Quoted in Samuel T. Pickard's *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier* (Boston, 1907), p. 414.