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*Understanding Whittier; or,
Warren in the Aftermath of Modernism*

MARK ROYDEN WINCHELL

Insofar as there is ever a consensus on such matters, literary modernism began around the second decade of the twentieth century and lasted until the mid-1950s.¹ Although its innovations in technique would remain a permanent part of our cultural heritage, poets and critics eventually began to question the modernist attitude toward life and art. The publication of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* in 1956, followed by Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959, signaled a sea-change in poetic fashion. The appearance of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image* in 1957 suggested that the New Criticism (often seen as the interpretive arm of modernism) was also suffering from declining influence. Whatever brought the modernist hegemony to an end, it has now been gone as long it ever existed. One of the consequences of living in the aftermath of modernism is that we no longer need to view the literary canon through the eyes of the New Criticism. This was a lesson well learned by one of the greatest of the New Critics – Robert Penn Warren.

Like so many other literary movements, high modernism was in large part a reaction against the reigning orthodoxy of the time. As it came to be defined by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, it was a revolt against the excesses of Romanticism – at least as they were institutionalized in the Victorian era. In his famous essay on the metaphysical poets, Eliot argues that English poetry got off the track not with the publication of the *The Lyrical Ballads* at the end of the eighteenth century but a hundred years earlier when a "dissociation of sensibility" crept into English verse.² In *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (published in 1939, some eighteen years after Eliot's essay), Cleanth Brooks wrote a history of English poetry illustrating Eliot's thesis. In effect, the

¹ See, for example, Monroe K. Spears, *Dionysus and the City: Modernism in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). On page 11 of that book, Spears suggests 1909-57 as the inclusive dates for literary modernism.

² This argument was made in Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets," first published in 1921. See T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931).

modernists of the early twentieth century had recovered the sense of irony and paradox that had informed the metaphysical verse of the early seventeenth century. This development was due to influences as disparate as French Symbolism and Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Unfortunately, in putting flesh on Eliot's canon, Brooks made it that much more evident what the New Critics were asking us to do without, which was pretty much the entire eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Less than a decade later (in *The Well Wrought Urn* [1947]), Brooks revised the New Critical tradition to show that poets such as Alexander Pope, Thomas Gray, William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Alfred Lord Tennyson really did write with irony, wit, and paradox – perhaps without knowing it and certainly without calling attention to it in the way that the metaphysical and early modernist poets did.

Still, there were limits even to the critical ingenuity of Cleanth Brooks. If John Keats could easily be brought into the high modernist-New Critical fold, Percy Shelley could not. Even more hopeless were the American fireside poets, those greybeard eminences with three names who seemed to embody everything that modernism arose to combat. In Brooks and Warren's classic textbook *Understanding Poetry*, Longfellow's sententious and platitudinous "Psalm of Life" is cited as an example of everything that poetry ought not to be. Longfellow, of course, was not the worst offender. If he was capable of writing popular verse that virtually every schoolchild once committed to memory, he could also write highly sophisticated poetry, which would pass muster with even the most demanding high modernist. ("The Jewish Cemetery in Newport" is only the most famous of such poems.) A far more equivocal case is that of John Greenleaf Whittier. Lacking Longfellow's education in literature and languages, Whittier was an earnest middlebrow, who thought poetry far inferior to propaganda. Only his Quaker spirituality and an aversion to marriage kept him from becoming the epitome of bourgeois respectability. In a letter to Brooks, dated March 18, 1966, Warren wrote of the reading assignment immediately before him: "I am embarking on Whittier, with what feelings you may well imagine."³

The occasion for Warren's encounter with Whittier was an anthology of American literature that he, Cleanth Brooks, and R. W. B. Lewis were editing for St. Martin's publishers. Because this was an historical rather than a New Critical textbook, it would have been difficult to ignore Whittier altogether. By the time he had completed what began as an irksome chore, Warren had written an appreciative essay on the fireside bard for the winter 1971 issue of the *Sewanee Review* and had made a selection of Whittier's verse for a volume published by the University of Minnesota Press later that year. On January 20, 1971, Warren wrote to Allen Tate: "If anybody had told me 20 years ago that I'd ever be entranced with *Snow-Bound* I would have thought him certifiably insane."⁴

If we go back, not twenty, but nearly forty years earlier to Warren's seminal essay "Pure and Impure Poetry" (1942), we find a critic who is already uneasy with the lapidary smoothness of the conventional poem. "Poetry wants to be pure, but poems do not," he writes. "At least most of them do not want to be too pure. . . . They mar themselves with cacophonies, jagged rhythms, ugly words and ugly thoughts, colloquialisms, clichés, sterile technical terms, headwork and argument, self-contradictions, clevernesses, irony, realism – all things which call us back to the

³ James A. Grimshaw, Jr., ed., *Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren: A Literary Correspondence* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 265.

⁴ Quoted in Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 391.

world of prose and imperfection.”⁵

Although Whittier did not express himself in this manner, he too began to tire of what passed for pure poetry in his day – the decorative effusions of second- and third-generation Romantics. Rather than postulate an alternative poetic, he professed to give up poetry entirely. In his essay “The Nervous Man” (1833), the twenty-six-year-old Whittier wrote:

Time has dealt hardly with my boyhood’s muse. Poetry had been to me a beautiful delusion. It was something woven of my young fancies, and reality has destroyed it. I can, indeed, make rhymes now, as mechanically as a mason piles one brick above another; but the glow of feeling, the hope, the ardor, the excitement have passed away forever. I have long thought, or rather the world hath *made* me think, that poetry is too trifling, too insignificant a pursuit for the matured intellect of sober mankind.⁶

In giving up the sentimentality of popular verse, Whittier dedicated himself to propaganda for the abolition of slavery. It was the sort of decision that most New Critics would have found equivocal at best.

Throughout *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* and subsequent works of criticism, Cleanth Brooks argues that poetry and propaganda are two different modes of discourse. Perhaps Yeats put the matter best when he said that we make rhetoric out of our quarrels with others and poetry out of our quarrels with ourselves. To be effective, propaganda should be straightforward and virtually immune to the sort of ironic contemplation that characterizes the greatest poetry. But, as Warren notes, the verse that Whittier had written before he became a propagandist was demonstrably lacking in everything but a kind of hackneyed verbal facility. In giving up ersatz poetry for genuine political commitment, Whittier’s writing at least acquired the qualities of good prose. Warren puts the matter as follows:

For a poet of natural sensibility, subtlety, and depth to dedicate his work to propaganda would probably result in a coarsening of style and a blunting of effects, for the essence of propaganda is to refuse qualifications and complexity. But Whittier had, by 1833, shown little sensibility, subtlety, or depth, and his style was coarse to a degree. He had nothing to lose and stood to gain certain things. To be effective, propaganda, if it is to be more than random vituperation, has to make a point, and the point has to be held in view from the start; the piece has to show some sense of organization and control, the very things Whittier’s poems had lacked. (*Makers and the Making*, 543)

When Whittier the propagandist wrote in verse, he could compose the rousing call to arms “Massachusetts to Virginia” (1843). This timely example of partisan rhetoric grew out of the case of George Latimer, a slave who had escaped from Virginia to Boston. Although the Fugitive Slave Act lay in the future, the authorities in Massachusetts had a clear legal obligation to return Latimer to his owner. Predictably, Whittier opposed this violation of higher justice and used his verse to rebuke Virginia, which had once stood side-by-side with Massachusetts in America’s own war for freedom and independence. It took another seven years, however, for Whittier to achieve a genuine degree of poetic complexity.

⁵ Robert Penn Warren, *New and Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1989), 4-5.

⁶ Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren, *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1973), I: 540. Subsequent references to this text will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

Warren attributes the effectiveness of "Ichabod" (1850) to "a subtlety of dramatization," which derives from "a division of feeling on the part of the poet." Although there is a ritualistic acknowledgment of former amity between the two states in "From Massachusetts to Virginia," that older bond is more asserted than felt. In "Ichabod," the speaker is clearly someone who once revered his current target of abuse. The fallen hero in this poem is Daniel Webster, the senator from Massachusetts, who has forsaken his abolitionist principles in order to back the Fugitive Slave Act and, with it, the promise of compromise and perpetual union. The title of the poem is an allusion to I Samuel 4:21. Here, the wife of one of the sons of Eli gives birth even as the temple is being destroyed. But, as a critic noted in the April 1960 issue of the *Explicator*, there is an even more suggestive allusion to Genesis 9:20-25. In this biblical passage, Noah, having survived the flood, plants a vineyard and gets drunk from the wine that he makes. A sense of filial piety prompts his sons Shem and Japheth to avert their eyes from their father, who has passed out naked, as they back out of the room where he lies. At the end of Whittier's poem, the former admirers of Webster are exhorted to "Walk backward with averted gaze, / And hide the shame" (*Makers and the Making*, 559).

Warren notes a further richness to this allusion. The one son of Noah who did not avert his gaze but looked directly on his father's nakedness was Ham, who is often thought to be the progenitor of the black race. Because Ham's progeny is cursed to be a "servant of servants," biblical apologists for slavery have used this passage as a defense of the peculiar institution. Warren's line of analysis is so intriguing that one only wishes he had asked the question that Cleanth Brooks almost certainly would have asked – what is the function of the allusion to Ham in this particular poem? At the very least, Ham's indiscretion was to see an ostensibly great man at his worst. When Noah was at his best, he saved the world from extinction. For this reason, Christian iconography often portrays him as the antithesis of Adam and a precursor to Christ. But the salvation rendered by Noah was only temporary. In saving the world from death by water, he spared it for the apocalyptic "fire next time." And in his drunken nakedness, he resembles a later Adam more than an early Christ. The speaker of Whittier's poem sees Webster as just such a phony or fallen savior. (Warren astutely points to the allusions to Lucifer elsewhere in the poem.) If his former white admirers can do no more than look away in horror, Ham is uniquely qualified to see the Great White God for what he actually is. If Whittier did not consciously intend such an interpretation, it may be that his imaginative engagement with the issue of slavery enabled him to write better than he knew.

One poem in which Whittier's subconscious was surely at work is "The Pipes of Lucknow: An Incident of the Sepoy Mutiny" (1858). I have not been able to find this poem, which is so untypical of Whittier, in any textbook-anthology of American literature other than Brooks, Warren, and Lewis's *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (1973). The scene is India, where a group of Scottish women and children are besieged by an uprising of fearsome brown-skinned natives. In the third stanza, the dire scene is set:

Day by day the Indian Tiger
 Louder yelled, and nearer crept;
 Round and Round the jungle serpent
 Near and nearer circles swept.
 "Pray for rescue, wives and mothers,—

Pray, to-day!" the soldier said;
 "Tomorrow, death's between us
 And the wrong and shame we dread." (*Makers and the Making*, 564)

At the moment when danger is greatest and all hope seems lost, the embattled Scots hear the sound of bagpipes in the distance. The suspense builds as the sound draws nearer. The climax of the poem can only be described as the triumph of white imperialism:

Round the silver domes of Lucknow,
 Moslem mosque and Pagan shrine,
 Breathed the air to Britons dearest,
 The air of Auld Lang Syne.
 O'er the cruel roll of war-drums
 Rose that sweet and horrible strain;
 And the tartan clove the turban,
 As the Goomtee cleaves the plain. (*Makers and the Making*, 565)

Warren is surely correct when he writes that "'Lucknow' seems more in the spirit of Kipling [in cadence as well as content, he might have added] than of the saint of Amesbury, the abolitionist, and the libertarian poet who, in this very period, was writing poems deeply concerned with the freedom of Italians ('From Perugia,' 1858, and 'Italy,' 1860), though not with that of Sepoys." Warren even goes so far as to see "Lucknow" as "a racist nightmare, like that of Isaac McCaslin in Faulkner's story 'Delta Autumn,' when he lies shaking with horror at his vision of the wilderness ruined to make room for a world of 'usury and mortgage and bankruptcy and measureless wealth, [where] Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew all breed, and spawn together until no man has time to say which one is which nor cares.'" ⁷ Perhaps an even closer comparison could be made between Whittier's poem and Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s, *The Clansman*, which achieved cinematic immortality as D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. Like Whittier, Dixon and Griffith show noble clansmen coming to the rescue of endangered white womanhood! Here again, Whittier's verse seems to have a voice and sensibility all its own.

Two other remarkable examples of voice in Whittier's poetry can be found in "Song of Slaves in the Desert" (1847) and "Letter from a Missionary of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, in Kansas, to a Distinguished Politician" (1854). The "Song of Slaves" depicts a nomadic group of African females exiled from their native land. The comparison to the plight of chattel slaves in America is obvious, but even more striking is the exotic strangeness of these women. The first stanza of the poem is sufficient to suggest both the situation and the language:

Where are we going? where are we going,
 Where are we going, Rubees?
 Lord of peoples, lord of lands,
 Look across these shining sands,
 Through the furnace of the moon.
 Strong the Ghiblee wind is blowing,
 Strange and large the world is growing!

⁷ Robert Penn Warren, *John Greenleaf Whittier's Poetry: An Appraisal and Selection* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 41, 40. Subsequent references to this text will be cited parenthetically in the text.

Speak and tell where we are going,
Where are we going, Rubee? (*Makers and the Making*, 559)

The Negro spirituals to which we are accustomed use biblical imagery to express the Christian faith of African American slaves. The slaves in Whittier's poem are neither Christian nor American. Rather than faith, they express doubt and bewilderment. In addition to the plain sense of what the poem is saying, the incantatory rhythms of the language remind us of the degree to which American readers (especially white American readers) are removed from the experience of the speakers of this poem. If the Negro spirituals sometimes seduce us into believing that slavery was a blessing for heathen Africans, no one is likely to walk away from Whittier's poem with that impression. This is due in no small part to the poet's ability to submerge his own voice and sensibility into those of his speakers.

If anything, "Letter from a Missionary" is even more of a verbal *tour de force*. The speaker in the poem is a rabid defender of slavery, whose disdain for black people is exceeded only by his hatred of white abolitionists. The rhetoric in this poem is so extreme that it is really not necessary to know Whittier's position on the issues in question to realize that the ironic muse is operating in overdrive. One suspects that this poem is modeled on the series of dramatic monologues that Robert Browning published in the 1840s. The difference, of course, is that Browning's speakers tend to be a bit more subtle than Whittier's missionary. The Duke in "My Last Duchess" (1842) reveals his villainy despite his best effort to hide it. It would not occur to Whittier's missionary that his views needed to be concealed – certainly not from the likeminded politician he is addressing. It is only Whittier's eavesdropping audience that would be scandalized by what they hear. The poem begins as follows:

Last week—the Lord be praised for all His mercies
To his unworthy servant!—I arrived
Safe at the Mission, *via* Westport; where
I tarried over night, to aid in forming
A Vigilance Committee, to send back,
In shirts of tar, and feather-doublets quilted
With forty stripes save one, all Yankee comers,
Uncircumcised and Gentile, aliens from
The Commonwealth of Israel, who despise
The high prize of the calling of the saints,
Who plant amidst this heathen wilderness
Pure gospel institutions, sanctified
By patriarchal use. The meeting opened
With prayer as was most fitting. Half an hour,
Or thereaway, I groaned, and strove and wrestled,
As Jacob did at Penuel, till the power
Fell on the people, and they cried "Amen!"
"Glory to God!" and stamped and clapped their hands;
And the rough river boatmen wiped their eyes;
"Go it, old hoss!" they cried, and cursed the niggers—
Fulfilling thus the word of prophecy,
"Cursed be Canaan." (*Makers and the Making*, 560)

I am frankly unconvinced by Warren's suggestion that the missionary might actually be a good but misguided individual. Whittier does not endow this man with any admirable or endearing qualities. What he does give him is a verbal energy that is mesmerizing to the reader. Rather than looking backward to Browning, this poem seems to anticipate Ezra Pound's "Sestina: Altaforte." Although Pound makes it clear from the start that Dante placed the historical inspiration for this poem in the Inferno for stirring up strife, he is a captivating presence. Warren praises Whittier for his remarkable act of ventriloquism in creating the missionary. But what he has done seems more the opposite of ventriloquism. Rather than projecting his own voice into the persona of an imaginary character, Whittier is like the gifted actor who can imaginatively become someone he might hate in real life.

Leslie Fiedler has argued that American literature can be divided between works that esteem home and those that revile it. Not surprisingly, those works that the New Critics have admitted to the canon of "serious" literature have tended to be "more elegantly structured and textured, more ideologically dense, more overtly subversive – more difficult and challenging" than those that appeal to a popular audience. Moreover, "they almost invariably celebrate the flight from civilization and the settlement, church and school, from everything which ha[s] survived (under female auspices) of Christian humanism in the New World – thus reinforcing the myth of Home as Hell."⁸ Because Whittier and his fellow "fireside" poets are so obviously in the camp of the home lovers, they have frequently been dismissed as tenderminded sentimentalists – perhaps one step above the hacks who compose Hallmark greeting cards. What Warren discovered when he rediscovered Whittier was not so much an easy and ritualistic affirmation of "family values" as it was a vision earned. As much as he might laud the nuclear family, Whittier was himself a lifelong bachelor, who endured a lonely existence in the arena of public controversy. Warren puts the matter as follows:

Almost everyone has an Eden time to look back on, even if it never existed and he has to create it for his own delusion; but for Whittier the need to dwell on this lost Eden was more marked than is ordinary. If the simple indignation against a fate that had deprived him of the security of childhood could be transmuted into righteous indignation, both forms of indignation could be redeemed in a dream of Eden innocence. This was one of the subjects that could summon up Whittier's deepest feeling and release his fullest poetic power. (*Makers and the Making*, 546).

One of the poems that Warren finds most impressive is "Telling the Bees" (1858). In a headnote, Whittier writes: "A remarkable custom, brought from the Old Country, formerly prevailed in the rural districts of New England. On the death of a member of the family, the bees were at once informed of the event, and their hives dressed in mourning. This ceremonial was supposed to be necessary to prevent the swarms from leaving their hives and seeking a new home" (*Whittier's Poetry*, 138). The speaker of this poem is remembering a trip he had taken a year earlier to the home of his beloved, a young woman named Mary. Because it had been a month since he had visited her, he eagerly approaches the farmhouse. Although the secret of the poem is not divulged until the final stanza, the detail and clarity of the speaker's memory suggests that this was no ordinary tryst. Consider, for example, the following stanza:

⁸ Leslie Fiedler, *What Was Literature?: Class Culture and Mass Society* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 151-52.

I can see it all now, —the slantwise rain
 Of light through the leaves,
 The sundown's blaze on her widow-pane,
 The bloom of her roses under the eaves. (*Makers and the Making*, 565-66)

When he sees the servant girl drape the beehive with a “shred of black,” the speaker realizes that someone in Mary’s family has died. He assumes that it must be her aged grandfather until he sees the old man sitting on the porch. Then the speaker hears the servant girl informing the bees that “Mistress Mary is dead and gone.” On that climactic revelation, the poem ends. Whittier has wisely allowed us to infer the speaker’s emotions rather than parading them before us. Also, in the act of telling the bees, he has found a particularly apt controlling metaphor. Or so a close reader schooled in the New Criticism might have observed. Writing in the aftermath of modernism, Warren delves into the poet’s life (what would once have been considered the “biographical fallacy”) to shed additional light on what Whittier might have been intending in his poem. “Telling the Bees” was an exercise of memory, written thirty years after the poet had left the homeplace on which his setting was based and twenty-two years after he had sold the property. Warren also thinks it significant that Whittier gives the woman in the poem the same name as his sister Mary, then kills her off at a time when his own sister was still very much alive. “[A]nd there is, of course, the strange fact that he cast a shadowy self – the ‘I’ of the poem – in the role of the lover of Mary, again playing here with the theme of lost love, of the lost girl, but bringing the story within the family circle, curiously coalescing the youthful yearning for sexual love and the childhood yearning for love and security within the family circle” (*Makers and the Making*, 548-49).

Whittier is, of course, best remembered for “Snow-Bound: A Winter Idyl” (1866). Because this poem has become as much a part of our consciousness of New England as a Currier and Ives print, it is far too easy to dismiss it as verbal kitsch – arresting local color, perhaps, but little else. Once again, Warren examines Whittier’s life to plumb some of the depths of his text. “Snow-Bound” appeared when Whittier was near sixty and had just experienced what would prove to be the final break with Elizabeth Lloyd, the one woman he seems to have loved and might have married. His *sister* Elizabeth, to whose care he had devoted so much of his adult life, had recently died. And the noble goal of abolition had finally been achieved at a horribly bloody price. The nation itself had reached a kind of crossroads and was in a sufficiently reflective mood to want to indulge in nostalgia. Consequently, Whittier’s poem became an immediate success and made him modestly rich overnight.

According to Warren, Whittier spends the first 174 lines of “Snow-Bound” simply setting the scene. The descriptions, however, are so precise that they carry the obvious authority of experience. Consider, for example, the coming of the storm in lines 15-18:

The wind blew east; we heard the roar
 Of Ocean on its wintry shore,
 And felt the strong pulse throbbing there
 Beat with low rhythm our inland air. (*Makers and the Making*, 569)

Even better are lines 151-54:

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. (*Makers and the Making*, 571)

The oxymoron “unwarming light” and the synaesthesia “coldness visible” brilliantly capture the disjunction between heat and light on this moonbright winter evening.

Although Whittier is commonly thought of as a Romantic poet, the view of nature that he gives us in “Snow-Bound” is not that of a tame and domesticated presence that sympathizes with the mood of the poet. If the wilderness is the place in which the prototypical American hero seeks refuge in his flight from home, the situation is reversed in Whittier’s signature poem. Here, it is home that provides refuge from nature. This is not only because the weather is bad outside but also because death is the ultimate end of all that exists under the dominion of nature. Whittier is keenly aware that, of all the characters in the poem, only he and his brother Matthew still survive. Rather than being a celebration of nature, “Snow-Bound” is Whittier’s attempt to overcome the ravages of nature.

In lines 175-211, we are abruptly transported from the long-ago winter idyll to the bleak world of time-present. After acknowledging the dominion of “Time and Change” in this world, Whittier asserts the counterveiling force of religious faith:

Yet Love will dream, and Faith will trust,
 (Since He who knows our need is just,
 That somehow, somewhere, meet we must.
 Alas for him who never sees
 The stars shine through the cypress-trees!
 Who, hopeless, lays his dead away,
 Nor looks to see the breaking day
 Across the mournful marbles play!
 Who has not learned in hours of faith,
 The truth to flesh and sense unknown,
 That Life is ever lord of Death,
 And Love can never lose its own! (*Makers and the Making*, 571)

To be sure, a cynical modern reader might find this statement a trifle didactic. Compared with the beautifully realized image of “coldness visible,” such a declaration of faith sounds hollow and forced – an instance of whistling past the graveyard. Even if Whittier is being totally sincere, one finds his angst more compelling than its resolution.

Fortunately, however, the poem does not end here. Lines 212-399 return us to the past with portraits of Whittier’s father, mother, uncle, aunt, and eldest sister. Then, a bit later (lines 438-589), the poet recalls the two visitors who sat around the fireside that night – the idealistic young schoolmaster and the irascible Harriet Livermore. Technically, these descriptions remind us of how much we lost when modernist poets abandoned narrative verse for more indirect and introspective modes of expression. (Whittier is particularly deft in his understated deconstruction of Harriet Livermore – the “not unfear’d, half-welcome guest.”) One is almost tempted to say that the true immortality to be found in this poem is that of memory. Like all accomplished

writers, Whittier is able to make characters, situations, and images live long after the particulars that inspired them (not to mention the poet himself) have been reduced to dust. But the situation is actually more complex. In between his portrait of the family and his description of the two guests, Whittier inserts thirty-eight lines (400-37) concerning his recently deceased sister Elizabeth. If his recollections of the group around the hearth are inevitably mired in the past, his meditations on Elizabeth raise the ultimate question about the future – what happens to the dead? It is here that Whittier finds an objective correlative for the faith that he had merely proclaimed earlier in the poem.

In what seems like utter despair, the speaker remembers that his sister has been dead for but a year. If the snow that lies upon her grave is symbolically appropriate, his springtime pilgrimage to that grave is bitterly ironic, as the birds and flowers and unclouded skies seem to mock the agony that he feels. He can only experience “A loss in all familiar things, / In flower that blooms, and birds that sing.” Then, a few lines later, he writes:

And while in life's late afternoon,
Where cool and long the shadows grow,
I walk to meet the night that soon
Shall shape and shadow overflow,
I cannot feel that thou art far,
Since near at need the angels are;
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? (*Makers and the Making*, 573-74)

If Elizabeth Whittier functions as a kind of Quaker Beatrice here, the effect is undercut by the fact that Whittier goes on for another 412 lines (more than half the poem) with no further reference to the afterlife. In fact, when he reaches the climactic point in “Snow-Bound,” he writes:

Clasp, Angel of the backward look
And folded wing of ashen gray
And voice of echoes far away,
The brazen covers of thy book . . . (*Makers and the Making*, 576)

Not unlike the muse, the “Angel of the backward look” is a mere literary convention. It is therefore understandable that Warren sees this poem as being far more concerned with the historic past than with the eschatological future. As he notes, this interest in the meaning of the past links Whittier with other writers long considered more central to the American tradition. Concluding his discussion of “Snow-Bound,” Warren writes: “Whittier, though without the scale and power of Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner, and though he was singularly lacking in their sense of historical and philosophic irony, yet shared their deep intuition of what it meant to be an American. Further, he shared their intuitive capacity to see personal fate as an image for a general cultural and philosophic situation. *Snow-Bound* sets his star in their constellation. If it is less commanding than any of theirs, it yet shines with a clear and authentic light” (*Makers and the Making*, 554).

When I began this essay, my intention was to give an account of Warren's response to Whittier. Instead, I have found myself going off periodically in other directions, finding different points of interest and emphasis, and occasionally disagreeing with Warren's opinions. But this is as it should be. The point of criticism is not to find *the* aesthetically correct interpretation of a text or to pronounce final judgment on a writer's place in the canon. The best criticism invites us to visit works of the imagination with our own sense of wonder and discovery. In order to effect a needed revolution in taste, modernism had to strike down the sort of poetry written by John Greenleaf Whittier. But like all true poets, Whittier refused to stay dead. It is perhaps ironically fitting that one of the prime instruments of his resurrection should have been a "close reader" of Robert Penn Warren's stature. If no American poet of the twentieth century grew more than Warren over the years, few critics remained as open to new discoveries. In his encounter with Whittier, that meant returning to a writer he thought he knew and *seeing* that man's work for the first time.

Mark Royden Winchell has published widely on literature, cultural politics, and the American South. His most recent book is *Too Good to Be True: The Life and Work of Leslie Fiedler* (2002). Winchell won the Warren-Brooks Award in 1997 for *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism*. At present, he teaches in the English department and Great Works Program at Clemson University and directs the League of the South Institute for Southern History and Culture.