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# **The Legacy of John Greenleaf Whittier or the Art of Storytelling**

A Study on how Folklore shaped Whittier's Regional Writings

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to reconsider the writings of Whittier by shifting the perspective from his value as a literary man to the pioneer work he had achieved by recording the folklore of New England and singing of his surroundings, thus placing emphasis on an anthropological re-evaluation of Whittier in an epoch in which both traditions and country living were progressively abandoned.

Chapter one presents an introductory overview of Whittier's life and use of poetic language as well as his relationship with the literary milieu of the age, the Romantic movement; albeit his poetry lacks multiple layers of interpretation, it is also true that "men of letters" respected his work for its "sincerity" and simplicity whereas the "average readers of poetry" respected it because they could "understand" it.<sup>1</sup> The second chapter focuses on regional writing in New England, its sources and representation of history and nature: being Whittier one of the Fireside poets, his verses were rich in homely details and local colour; he narrated episodes of the somber colonial life and the lively rural world, providing a perspective of the tragic conflict between Puritans and Quakers as seen by a Quaker poet, and tackling the increasing difficulties that living in the countryside entailed. As a New England bard, Whittier became a voice for the common people, creating a significant record of the traditions, landscape and its inhabitants as they stood in the nineteenth century.

Chapter three gives an insight into his sketches dedicated to Native Americans, their relations with Puritans, the surrounding nature, and folklore. Whittier was a great admirer of the works of Brainard, whose verses immortalizing the legends of the place, both Anglosaxon and Indian, the young poet resolved to imitate; his scepticism, in later life, was partially replaced by an embracing of the folklore of the region, which he reported in his ballads and prose pieces (see, for instance, his concluding remarks in *The Supernaturalism of New England*, pp. 56-57, where he tentatively adopts a mindset open to the unexpected possibilities of the supernatural). The last chapter tackles Whittier's storytelling, his inspirations and influences —Scott and Irving above all— for his work on regional folklore, dictated by his interest in collecting local and foreign legends which made him one of the pioneers in the developing field. In the land where ghost stories were a popular pastime among adults too, and Native Americans charms and remedies continued to be practised, Whittier

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<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Stoddard. *The Homes and Haunts of our Elder Poets*, p. 131.

naturally grew up in an atmosphere where tales about witches, haunted foxes and ominous shipwrecks were an integral part of the culture of the Merrimack Valley.<sup>2</sup>

This study brings together observations which seek to shed light not on the contributions of Whittier to the canon of American poetry —as a matter of fact, he remains but a voice in the chorus compared to the names that shaped the national literature of the period— but on his successful attempts to give in verse the realistic portrait of an age which managed to survive the sands of time, in his memories of the picturesque, if sometimes uncanny, life in the valleys where the hauntings and beliefs of the past were still very much alive.

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Supernaturalism of New England*, see from p. 49 to p. 55, where Whittier narrates accounts of local witchcraft, as feared by his neighbours: they served to explain unusual natural and social phenomena, such as a “bewitched” baby, always crying (because tormented by wtiches), a petrified man (a sorceress’s revenge for breaking off the engagement), a woman “bewildered” while searching for berries in the woods, as well as everyday misfortunes: a poor harvest, strange behaving animals, the butter not churning...

## CHAPTER ONE

### Writing in 19th Century New England

Of all the valleys of New England, the one crossed by the Merrimack is perhaps the most celebrated after the lifelong tribute paid by John Greenleaf Whittier in his verses.

John Greenleaf Whittier (Haverhill, 17th December 1807 - Hampton Falls, 7th September 1892) was born into a modest family of Quaker faith, and began working in the fields at an early age to provide for the household. The harsh routine and the severe winter weather soon took a toll on his delicate constitution<sup>3</sup> and, without leaving aside his delight in composing poetry, an interest which, starting from his boyhood, accompanied him through the rest of his life, resolved to dedicate himself to shoe-making, the career path his father wished him to pursue.

The young Whittier, like many of his peers raised in rural areas, didn't attend school regularly and was mainly self-taught, gaining most of his education through his growing collection of books, although his family library initially comprised no more than thirty volumes, which he read over and over until he had the opportunity to buy some of his own in Boston.<sup>4</sup> He especially cherished biography and travel books, and "borrowed all that were to be found in the neighbourhood."<sup>5</sup>

But if his father didn't approve of Greenleaf's propensity for literary expression, which he saw as a frivolous distraction, both his mother and sister encouraged the publication of his early writings in local newspapers, thus commencing his experience in the literary world with several contributions for the *Haverhill Gazette*. He later became an editor of the *American Manufacturer* in Boston and the *New England Weekly Review* in Hartford and regularly wrote for journals up until the end of the 1850s, taking a commendable stand in favour of abolitionism,<sup>6</sup> which thoroughly damaged his reputation for a considerable amount of time.<sup>7</sup> He never agreed to omit from his collected works the writings he devoted to the movement (at the expense of some of his Southern readers), although his

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel T. Pickard, official biographer and relative of Whittier, in *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, explains how the early settlers and their descendants slowly adjusted to the colder climate by "toughening themselves [and their cattle] by exposure to cold" and hadn't abandoned their old habits; as a matter of fact, it took almost two centuries before "flannels and overcoats ceased to be regarded as extravagances." (p. 17)

<sup>4</sup> In 1833, writing to a friend, he mentioned his extensive readings: "(...) all I can find—politics—history—rhyme, reason" (John G. Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 130).

<sup>5</sup> Pickard, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth remembering that the Religious Society of Friends, to which Whittier always loyally belonged, played a leading role in the condemnation of slavery. However, how William S. Kennedy points out in *John G. Whittier, the Poet of Freedom*, if the Quakers were among the first to free their slaves, they didn't meddle in the matter of Southern slavery, since most of their wealth came from trading with those States (p. 77).

<sup>7</sup> William S. Kennedy. *John Greenleaf Whittier: His Life, Genius, and Writings*, pp. 107-108.

spirited aversion to slavery did not prevent him from befriending slaveowners and slavery apologists.<sup>8</sup> While his anti-slavery lyrics were animated by an intense fervour for the cause rather than enduring poetic value,<sup>9</sup> the years he dedicated to his political battle refined the artistry of his prose pieces, by channeling his creative muse into original compositions which replaced the sometimes unconvincing imitations of his literary debut.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, under the pseudonym of “Donald”, Whittier began by writing rhymes in Scottish dialect, in the manner of Burns, a poet he greatly admired, valuing humble, rural subjects of his native New England. He then edited the poems of John G. C. Brainard, whom he appreciated for having dealt with “American themes”,<sup>11</sup> the topic that most characterised Whittier as an author: while his political influence at the time undoubtedly overshadowed his literary merits, the unprecedented work he had accomplished by earnestly treating of his beloved New England certainly deserves to be explored.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.1 The Poetry of John Greenleaf Whittier

In order to delve into John Greenleaf Whittier’s pioneering handling of regional material, we first need to acknowledge that he, in fact, did not seek literary acclaim,<sup>13</sup> and, perhaps, precisely because of this, we can shed light on the anthropological relevance of Whittier’s authentic rendering of his contemporary local and folkloric tales and their socio-historical meanings. He was unaffected by criticism as he himself pondered in a letter to Edwin Lawrence Godkin, editor of *The Nation*, dated March 9, 1867:

I cannot be sufficiently thankful to the Divine Providence that so early called my attention to the great interests of humanity, saving me from the poor ambitions and miserable jealousies of a selfish

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<sup>8</sup> Pickard, pp. 501-502.

<sup>9</sup> Edmund C. Stedman. *Poets of America*, p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> Winfield Townley Scott. “Poetry in American: A New Consideration of Whittier’s Verse,” p. 261.

<sup>11</sup> Louis C. Schaedler. “Whittier’s Attitude toward Colonial Puritanism,” p. 350.

<sup>12</sup> In *The Homes and Haunts of our Elder Poets*, Stoddard speaks of Whittier as “the most American of all the American poets” (p. 105) and believes that he remains incomparable in the matter of originality, being in all instances true to himself (118).

<sup>13</sup> The only exception being his early adulthood, when in a 1830’s letter to George Prentice, a fellow editor, he confessed to his yearning for recognition, “applause, (...) what the world calls immortality” (John G. Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 33). It was after the beginning of the 1860s that he acquired considerable fame. Pickard reports of a correspondence the elderly Whittier had with a girl, curious about his youth, to whom he told of the dreams of “something wonderful and grand” he used to have for “somewhere in the future” (pp. 25-26), though the young poet’s stimulus was spontaneous, not driven by prestige.



pursuit of literary reputation. (...) and whatever of favor [my writings] have found with the public has come to me as a grateful surprise, rather than as an expected reward.<sup>14</sup>

The “Americanness” of his poetry was delicately interwoven with many of the romantic tropes of the period, namely “the supernatural, (...) Indian legends and (...) the picturesque aspects of nature.”<sup>15</sup> References to the books he was familiar with regularly appeared in his works, giving them an autobiographical hue further reflected in the personal portrayal of the people and scenes of the Merrimack valley, as well as in his musing about the past, its traditions and superstitions, still lingering there: he was aware that it was only a matter of time before they too would be erased by modernity.

Whittier never left his native soil, and spent more than half of his life in the quaint town of Amesbury, where he resided with his mother and younger sister, strongly attached to them. His life shared little with the lively engagements of other writers and acquaintances in his circle, owing to his preference for tranquility and recurrent health issues, and his poems were the result of a profound knowledge of his whereabouts, elevating his status as bard of rural New England, who celebrated its legends and daily life in pleasant idyls.<sup>16</sup> Frank P. Stearns argues that he was “not so much an observer of life and manners, as an imaginative thinker,—one whose reflections took the shape of ideal pictures,”<sup>17</sup> an argument corroborated by the incipit of Whittier’s essay “Modern Magic”, where he declared, “I have sometimes amused myself, in the crowded thoroughfares, by indulging in vague conjectures as to the character and impelling motives of the passing multitude.”<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, when studying the poetry of Whittier, it would be improper to assume that its lyricism was tinged with the Transcendentalists’ mystical insights or that multiple layers of interpretations were concealed in his rhymes, for the message he wanted to convey was unambiguously expressed in the stanzas and always inextricably tied to a moral stance.<sup>19</sup> Whittier’s

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<sup>14</sup> John G. Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 3, p. 149.

<sup>15</sup> Schaedler, p. 350.

<sup>16</sup> During his stay in Philadelphia, in 1839, he dramatically stated that he would rather “live as an obscure New England farmer” (John G. Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 349); writing to Lucy Hooper in 1837, he had expressed his utter contempt for New York, a place he “must consider unfit for Christian, or Heathen even, to dwell in” (p. 258).

<sup>17</sup> Frank P. Stearns. *Sketches from Concord and Appledore*, p. 264.

<sup>18</sup> John G. Whittier. *The Stranger in Lowell*, p. 98.

<sup>19</sup> In *John Greenleaf Whittier: A Portrait in Paradox*, Edward Wagenknecht observes that Whittier actually disliked metaphysical poetry, since it was “rooted (...) only in thought” and, in the manner of Milton, he “wanted poetry to be simple” and about everyday life (p. 126); all the same he considered Emerson as the “greatest of American writers” (111).

conception of poetry necessarily required a moral and didactic end over a merely aesthetic one, due to the poet's Quaker upbringing which, similarly to the early Puritans, didn't permit creative expression through fine arts as it represented sensuous pleasure threatening the inward light that led to spiritual perfection.<sup>20</sup> The poet acknowledged the limits that the preclusion of "art for art's sake" implied, his overt moralizing, and only in his senior years did he attempt to find a middle ground,<sup>21</sup> albeit, George Arms reckons, it "remains at best an open question" whether Whittier was "willing to accept art as an essential expression of life."<sup>22</sup>

The poet's craftsmanship was affected by the enthusiasm of what most inspired him, more than a meticulous effort to produce a polished work of art.<sup>23</sup> Whilst his poetry was never pretentious, and less influenced by literary standards compared to the community of Boston-Cambridge literary men,<sup>24</sup> he by no means bothered to expand his field of expression, which he often repeated.<sup>25</sup> Neither his metaphorical vocabulary nor his imagery repertoire were varied or impressive; he adopted the same simple metre and rhyme scheme for the majority of his compositions too, with the result that "what was good and what was bad" made no difference in "tune."<sup>26</sup> William Kennedy remarks that, while it was peculiar for Whittier to indulge solely in such a restrictive range of rhymes and metres, with a predominance of the four-foot iambic line—or ballad—and either a successive or an alternating rhyme schemes ("wofully monotonous"), such were the characteristics of the poems composed the century before, in particular those of Burns and Elwood, who introduced Whittier to the realm of poetry.<sup>27</sup> Another indication is indeed given by the ample use of poetic devices employed in the eighteenth century, like alliteration, onomatopoeia and personifications, in addition to the words "so" and "like" introducing comments and the moral

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<sup>20</sup> Theatres, music and reading novels, among other things, were all forbidden. Whittier also maintained "thou" and "thee" for interaction; in 1869, however, he quit attending the meetings of Friends since he didn't agree with the direction they were taking (Pickard, p. 548).

<sup>21</sup> John B. Pickard. *John Greenleaf Whittier: an Introduction and Interpretation*, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> George Arms. *The Fields Were Green*, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Scott, p. 271.

<sup>24</sup> Francis H. Underwood, author of *John Greenleaf Whittier: A Biography*, maintains that the inspirations behind the "character and (...) poems" of Longfellow, Bryant, Holmes and Lowell were "almost wholly foreign" to the "narrow circle" of Whittier (p. 83).

<sup>25</sup> When analyzing Whittier's anti-slavery poems, Stoddard not only affirms that they lack any memorable line, but they also fail to "deliver [their] message" (p. 122). According to Stedman, instead, the weakness of Whittier lies in his tendency to write at length and not knowing when to stop, along with his "inability" to discard mediocre lines (p. 109).

<sup>26</sup> Scott, p. 274.

<sup>27</sup> Kennedy. *John Greenleaf Whittier: His Life, Genius, and Writings*, p. 72.

denouement in the concluding stanzas of his poems.<sup>28</sup> Kennedy also notices how “the omission of the g’s from present participles”, as well as other words ending in “ing”, contributed to the poet’s down-to-earth “picturesqueness.”<sup>29</sup> John Pickard observes that Whittier’s blurring of the distinction between “i” and “e” sounds was a common regional practice, therefore, several of his seemingly “false rhymes” didn’t actually disrupt the rhyme scheme, which flowed in harmony with the “local New England pronunciation.”<sup>30</sup> It was the naïf pattern of rhyme and rhythm that conferred a great degree of realism on his familiar themes, allowing Whittier to become the voice of the rural folk of his secluded valley.<sup>31</sup>

“The Ranger”, originally published as “Martha Mason; a Song of the Old French War” in 1856, merrily epitomized such traits with an almost nursery-rhymes’ cadence. Here Whittier did what he did best: he set a story in a lovely and familiar landscape, rich with tales and characters from local history and legends, and let it unfold until the poem’s final lesson and happy ending.

The scenery is that of Casco Bay, in Maine, in “a hazy autumn day”, evoked through a delightful pictorial description, “dim and dreamy”: crimson maples, the white sea-foam, silver birches, brown nuts “downward pattering” and red and gray squirrels leaping from the branches;

On the grass-land, on the fallow,  
Drop the apples, red and yellow;  
Drop the russet pears and mellow,  
Drop the red leaves all the day.<sup>32</sup> (54-57)

A year had passed by already since Martha’s lover, Robert Rawlin, had gone off to serve in the war in Canada and, for Martha, after seeing the other rangers coming back, it was becoming harder not to lose hope for his return. Alone and sorrowful, she was taking care of the housework and praying when some maidens blithely interrupted her:

Martha Mason, Martha Mason,  
Prithce tell us of the reason  
Why you mope at home to-day:

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<sup>28</sup> John Pickard, p. 55.

<sup>29</sup> Kennedy, *John Greenleaf Whittier: His Life, Genius, and Writings*, p. 72.

<sup>30</sup> John Pickard, p. 54.

<sup>31</sup> In the biography, Kennedy recalls a conversation he had with New England workman who very much respected the poet, “you wouldn’t think it (...) but he talks just like common [people]” (p. 166).

<sup>32</sup> John G. Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 51-52.

Surely smiling is not sinning;  
Leave your quilling, leave your spinning; (61-65)

As they were moving past, Nelly and May invited her to join them down on the beach for a rowing party but she didn't hesitate to dismiss them, at which point they sneeringly blurted out, "Vain your calling for Rob Rawlin!," insinuating that he had chosen to remain with "some red squaw," who was by then cooking his moose meat, or "some French lass", amusing him with her joyful songs:

Just forget as he's forgetting;  
What avails a life of fretting?;  
If some stars must needs be setting,  
Others rise as good as they. (104-107)

Martha burst into tears but nothing would discourage her from waiting for and dreaming of him, "Every sound my heart is making / Seems a footstep of his taking;" (135-136) when suddenly her beloved appeared on the horizon and the poem concludes on a proverbial note, —never give up, for love and gratitude are most cherished after the challenges of life.

Whittier employed a plain poetic diction that Francis Underwood poetically imagines as "the feathering of his arrows" for his purpose to speak to "the hearts of men;"<sup>33</sup> a diction somehow reminiscent of a Yankee echo of Wordsworth and the Lake Poets, which resonated with the idea of "emotion recollected in tranquillity," particularly during his old age.<sup>34</sup> His carelessness, occasionally accentuated by grammar mistakes, was not deliberate, and wasn't even confined to his technique: Eleanor Tilton refers to the arduous work of his editor, Horace E. Scudder, when Whittier had to partake in the revision prior to the publication of his collected works.<sup>35</sup> The latter was becoming increasingly indifferent to the process of arranging his poetry collection, as he felt compelled by his editor to provide the explanatory notes and dates of many of his poems, which were, to Scudder, of paramount importance.<sup>36</sup> It was unfathomable to Whittier that some people could possibly be interested in the exact date, or the exact order, in which they had been written, and the majority of those he furnished were visibly wrong.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Underwood, p. 149.

<sup>34</sup> Kennedy, *John Greenleaf Whittier: His Life, Genius, and Writings*, p. 213.

<sup>35</sup> Eleanor M. Tilton. "Making Whittier Definitive", p. 286.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 301-302.

Another issue promptly appeared, this time related to Whittier's renowned distaste for his early literary work, which he deemed amateurish and unworthy of note: of the hundreds of verses composed before his mid-twenties, almost all had been lost, and the remnants had been absent-mindedly scattered about.<sup>38</sup> From 1827 to 1832, he had customarily written and published poems weekly, and those too were virtually all vanished.<sup>39</sup> Writing to Scudder on June 13, 1888, Whittier, "horrified" by the "ghosts of rhymes" before him, vehemently disowned them;<sup>40</sup> a few years earlier, in 1883, in a letter to Underwood, one of his biographers, he had bluntly told him how he had hoped for his old lines to be "buried in oblivion", and the shorter the book would turn out to be "the better for [Osgood, his Boston publisher] and for us."<sup>41</sup> The same year he apologized to Underwood for the nuisance caused by "all the foolish things written by [him]" and justified himself: "the public have no interest in (and certainly no right of knowing if they had) these abortions," looking askance at the biographer's insistence on digging up "all that school-boy nonsense."<sup>42</sup> With the exception of a few manuscripts, Scudder's attempts to persuade Whittier to have them printed proved vain and the editor, without the needed authorization, relinquished for good.<sup>43</sup> Still, in the previous fifty years, some of them had circulated without his approval, both in newspapers and books, and those he acquiesced to give a "presentable appearance," explaining that the reason why

they met with some degree of favor at that time may be accounted for by the fact that makers of verse were then few in number, with little competition in their unprofitable vocation, and that the standard of criticism was not discouragingly high.<sup>44</sup>

Though not very original, Whittier's first prose and poetical pieces dared to experiment and were decisively influenced by his readings:<sup>45</sup> apart from the aforementioned Burns, the young Whittier leaned to Milton, one of his favourites, to the extent that he believed his "whole life" had been

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 304-305.

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Pickard, p. 81.

<sup>40</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 3, p. 556.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 473.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 469-470.

<sup>43</sup> Tilton, p. 306.

<sup>44</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 3, p. 557.

<sup>45</sup> Content and style-wise, "The Opium Eater," an intensely melodramatic story he penned for *The New England Magazine* in 1833, was one of those belonging to the category; it strongly evoked De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, "wholly unlike anything else of my writing." (John G. Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, p. 143).

under “the influence of his writings,”<sup>46</sup> as well as Addison, Irving and Byron for his prose.<sup>47</sup> According to John Pickard, the latter’s direct impact on Whittier is observed in his replication of the distinctive features of the Byronic hero, cynical and disillusioned, since the Quaker was notably intrigued with Byron’s study and treatment of the passions, sin and rebellion above all. Nonetheless the outcome was far from successful, being overly contrived in its uncritical venture into sophistication, alien to Whittier’s archetypal homeliness.<sup>48</sup> The “Proem”, expressly composed for the introduction of his first general collection in 1847, showcased the awareness of his tentative steps in the directions of his literary masters, along with the nature of his poetical endeavours. There he proclaimed his love for “the songs of Spenser’s golden days” and the Arcadia of Sidney, disheartened by his failure to recreate them, hindered by “the harshness of an untaught ear”<sup>49</sup> bound to look elsewhere for a livelihood. Without possessing the genius of Milton or Marvell, he cherished the thought of sharing the same fondness for what words have the power to convey.

It goes without saying that Whittier never let his weaknesses thwart his imaginative zest, as his witticism about them suggested: one of his anecdotes related to an Englishman who memorized his verses by heart at which he marvelled greatly, quipping “I wonder, thou shouldst burden thy memory with all that rhyme” and he added, “it is not well to have much of it: better get rid of it as soon as possible.” For his part, he couldn’t remember any, and suspected he had written “far too much.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, his prolific adventure in poetry chronicled his (relatively restricted) life experience and vast knowledge of English and foreign literature, both ancient and contemporary, together with his enthralling interest in the mysterious oriental history, romance and religion. As a worthy heir of Burns, he knew where to “look for true poetic material, (...) the common heart and the common life,”<sup>51</sup> in the mountain and lake region of New England, which he eulogized in all its times and seasons. But New England was also home to countless other poets and writers, and the literary culture to which Whittier belonged may help to further locate the roots of his poetry, with an eye to the role of folkloric and nature themes, the focus of this study.

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<sup>46</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 3, p. 135.

<sup>47</sup> Nelson F. Adkins. “Two Uncollected Prose Sketches of Whittier,” p. 365.

<sup>48</sup> John Pickard, pp. 19-20.

<sup>49</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Kennedy. *John Greenleaf Whittier: His Life, Genius, and Writings*, pp. 357-358.

<sup>51</sup> Kennedy. *John G. Whittier, the Poet of Freedom*, p. 13.

## 1.2 The Literary Milieu

In Whittier's early days pursuing a literary vocation seldom secured economic independence, since it long had been belittled as of secondary importance to the rise of New England's prominence within the colony, at least up until the first decades of the 19th century when poetry began to gain traction, —but was not yet paid for.<sup>52</sup> As a matter of fact, before 1830 only the upper class had the privilege to devote their time to “belles lettres.”<sup>53</sup> Young adults then couldn't rely on a career in literature and it remained confined to a pastime; the same went for Whittier, who never entirely overcame his father's prejudices against the profession of authorship<sup>54</sup> (and actually somewhat shared them),<sup>55</sup> and whose abolitionist commitment considerably narrowed the circulation of his writings: Underwood is of the opinion that no “literary periodical out of New England” would have conceded that a poem with his name could be printed.<sup>56</sup>

In the prefatory note to “Moll Pitcher. A Poem,” published in 1832, Whittier stated how the composition hadn't been prompted by either poetical reputation or money, believing the former to be an “unprofitable commodity,” as for the latter, he wasn't devoted enough to poetics to convert it into a revenue prospect.<sup>57</sup> In a letter to Lydia Huntley Sigourney, dated February 4, of the same year, he avowed that, in spite of his gratitude for poetry, “something holy,” he was pressured into trusting “to other and less pleasant pursuits, for distinction and profit,” politics being his only alternative. He believed, in fact, that there was “something inconsistent in the character of a poet and a modern politician” and that his contemporaries seemed to “have ideas similar to those of that old churl Plato, who was for banishing all poets from his perfect republic.”<sup>58</sup> By midcentury, however, it had become a source of a reasonable profit and the “commercialization of letters,” prior to then validated under the guise of a “higher purpose”, was complete.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, as Lawrence Buell explains, the issue with New England in the early years of the American republic was that writing

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<sup>52</sup> Samuel Pickard, p. 119.

<sup>53</sup> Lawrence Buell. *New England Literary Culture: from Revolution through Renaissance*, p. 57.

<sup>54</sup> Greenleaf's father even opposed William Lloyd Garrison's exhortation to study the classics and the benefits of a higher education, given that not only there were against the Quakers' priorities, but also they would divert him for his duties at home (Kennedy. *John Greenleaf Whittier: His Life, Genius, and Writings*, p. 85).

<sup>55</sup> Scott, p. 262.

<sup>56</sup> Underwood, p. 136.

<sup>57</sup> John G. Whittier. “Moll Pitcher. A Poem,” p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> John G. Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 77.

<sup>59</sup> Buell, p. 60.

implied “the sublimation of literary impulses into the socially acceptable forms of cultural patriotism” together with “a bourgeois version of the Old World aristocratic ideal of refined accomplishment.”<sup>60</sup> Starting from 1835, literary activity flourished widely and in a matter of years, the majority of towns in New England accommodated a lyceum, promoting readings, lectures and debates, whose proceeds significantly helped regional writers.<sup>61</sup> All along it had been northeastern Massachusetts (and principally Boston) that gave eminence to almost half of the important authors of New England,<sup>62</sup> resulting in a literary renaissance and the cultural hegemony of the region’s secular liberalism. Professor Buell provides a brief sketch of the stereotypical New England author of the period who was a male, born at the beginning of the century to upper-middle-class New England parents who could afford him a good education and financial security, and having overall a sheltered upbringing. He was raised in northeastern Massachusetts and attended Harvard: in those years, or soon after, he had taken up teaching and then wrote for, or edited, a periodical; he fancied poetry most of all but couldn’t rely on it for a living.<sup>63</sup> It is also curious to note that if the figure of the writer, at least initially, stayed at the margins of the thriving New England society—and was simultaneously expected to validate it—the person per se didn’t, and was generally part of its most prominent citizens (390).

The full-fledged professionalization of letters happened to coincide with the blossoming of Romanticism that, as a consequence of the period’s predominance of Unitarian-Whig orthodoxy, determined a fairly conservative evolution of the movement (44). The idea of literature as emerged in the 1820s and 1830s from the literary establishment of Boston, insisting on its responsibility for the “moral advancement” of society, was now endorsing the Romantic’s faith in the individuals’ potential to improve themselves as well as the prioritisation of reason over emotion—while not denying the value of the latter (44). The literary models adopted, the poetry of Wordsworth and the “regional historicizing” of Scott, were especially admired for their progressivism, moralism and

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58. The author mentions the case of future president John Quincy Adams who, in a letter addressed to his brother Thomas in 1801, talking about his “poetical trifles,” he expressed his wish to remain anonymous since more than a few “very worthy citizens among us” were convinced that “it is impossible to be at once a man of business and a man of rhyme” (59). On one occasion, Lydia M. Child recounted the warning from some of her female acquaintances who asserted that “no woman could expect to be regarded as a *lady* after she had written a book” (381).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24. It has to be clarified that public speaking wasn’t exactly a novelty since it was widely popular in the U.S. during its neoclassical period as well (and remained so until the 1860s); oratory profoundly affected New England literature.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37. Needless to say, the northeastern Massachusetts establishment was a male-dominated environment.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 386. Family-wise, female writers didn’t differ much from their male counterpart, with the only exception of education, where she nevertheless had access to the best one available at the time. She was less disposed to leave her homeland and was in the position to have a marriage where she could be on par with her husband. She delighted in writing fiction after her household duties (387).



patriotism, as evinced by the publications of the Boston-Cambridge literati belonging to the fourth and fifth generations (44-45). Yet, despite the copious literary production of the epoch, the centralization of the leading literary institutions and the standards of the publishing industry did cause a more rigorous selectivity of the canon.<sup>64</sup> Edmund Stedman argues that these themes, in addition to religion and domesticity, were the ones that, typifying Americanism, conditioned the success or failure of a work.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, readers were “darkly warned” about the immoral lives of some of the circulating authors (i.e. Shelley and Byron).<sup>66</sup>

The aesthetic dimension was thus closely connected to the moral sphere, and even more so in New England where only after the second half of the century did writers start to challenge this interdependence (which had never before been questioned), giving rise to the most noteworthy literary works of these years.<sup>67</sup> Romanticism took root there thanks to the traditional New England individuality, and it elevated the importance of the creative process, and its inspirations drawn from the world of experience, along with the notion of author as one who could claim a valid place within a society still doubtful about the role of artistic expression.<sup>68</sup>

New England romantic writers, who shared the scepticism about the “merely fictive” and the perplexity of preserving unchanging moral principles, were, therefore, engaged in a movement that strived for literary independence and even acknowledged their need of “self-justification.”<sup>69</sup> The conflicting relationship between the utilitarian function of art and the writers’ tentative attempts at resistance becomes then one of, if not the most important key to interpret the literature of nineteenth-century New England. Hawthorne’s response to moralistic utopianism, for instance, was a narrative “self-consciousness” in which characters turned into “mere figures” and plots into “contrivances.”<sup>70</sup>

The literature being discussed is, in the words of Professor Buell, a “learned literature,” namely a literature springing from research, which for Whittier stemmed from folklore, —for Hawthorne,

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>65</sup> Stedman, p. 123.

<sup>66</sup> John Pickard, p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> Buell, pp. 68-69.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 373-374.

instead, from history.<sup>71</sup> They were both seen by the establishment in a favourable light, though the authors never closely affiliated with them since they preferred a quieter life (45-46). In the manner of Hawthorne, Whittier redirected his sentiment against the establishment into “nostalgia or ethical idealism” which granted him recognition as the authentic “indigenous poetic voice” that they longed to imitate; even his less-than-refined polished verses were praised for their kinship to reality (46). But if Whittier’s committed moralizing did not pass unnoticed, resonating with the Romantic belief in poetry’s redemptive force (at times at the expense of his art), the same couldn’t be said for Hawthorne, who believed that the presence of a moral didn’t prove that its social purpose had been achieved or that the work’s value had been enhanced, and to meet the public expectations he sought to maintain a delicate balance between the two.<sup>72</sup>

Whittier’s poetry also reflected the Romantic emphases on “nature and spontaneity” —whose precursor had been neoclassical pastoralism—, which for the first time ennobled America’s backwardness into “national treasure”, its simple, homely virtues and nature, the folklore and folkways of the land (86). Together with Longfellow, Bryant, Holmes and Lowell, he was one of the Fireside poets who combined Romantic themes with a “traditional literary language” distinctive of the neoclassical period and influenced by Wordsworth’s poetic theory.<sup>73</sup> They conservatively stuck to a neoclassical ideal of order and moderation heightened by the Puritans’ lasting cultural heritage in the region, which managed to resist the enlightenment model of rationality.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, in New England, poetry continued to be shaped by a certain conservatism: it conformed to a traditional verse form, conveyed by an “impersonal, authoritative authorial voice” consistent with the appropriate “spiritual or ethical” intent that poems had to suggest.<sup>75</sup> The emotions they intended to elicit were predominantly compassion and sentimentality, —a prime example of the latter being the famous poems of Lydia H. Sigourney. Professor Buell distinguishes four aesthetic strategies selected by poets of the period, the first being the “romance of repression” which prioritized a “disciplined renunciation” —as seen in the poetry of Emily Dickinson—<sup>76</sup> accompanied by the similar theme of the “absent center” (123). They were both characterized by a “fear of experience”

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68. Hawthorne’s tales always pondered on the difficult reconciliation between morality and history versus invention as the basis of the creative act (14).

<sup>73</sup> Arms, p. 3. They were otherwise known as Schoolroom poets or Household poets.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>75</sup> Buell, p. 108.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

which, talking of Whittier, strongly resonated with his personality, although it wasn't uncommon among his Yankee coevals to eschew the outside world because of their inability to "bear too much reality" (124). The issue of the absent center revolved around the lack of a final resolution, of which the subject was destined to remain on the verge, expressing the Romantic attitude to fulfillment thought to be either "something vanished" or "yet to be grasped."<sup>77</sup> The third strategy employed used to relate imagery to a concept, in other words, a "consolatory or (...) ethical reflection" was drawn from each happening presented by the poet who thoroughly dramatized its progression;<sup>78</sup> the last one, instead, suddenly anticipated the closure and as a technique dated way back to the early republic with Federalist satire (131-132).

By the end of the century, then, a New England "poetic voice" and tradition had decidedly emerged: the cultural prestige of poetry went hand in hand with Victorian morality, which saw in the voice of poets one of the most suitable instruments for evoking and perpetuating its ethos (135). How Whittier treated what happened to be some major Romantic themes within the New England scene of the time will be examined in the next chapter.

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126. This strategy will be resumed in chapter four when discussing Whittier's "Telling the Bees".

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128. Such motif was especially recurrent in Whittier's nature poems, as the following chapter will further elaborate.



## CHAPTER TWO

### New England's Finest Bard

The depth of John Greenleaf Whittier's affectionate ties with his native New England had always been expressed in his poetry by simple, heartfelt imagery whose realistic details brought to life the splendid and eldritch corners of New England. There the poet introduced his readers to the folktales and traditions of his valley as collected from conversations, letters and his family's inglenook storytellers. He paid homage to the natural and rural scenery, the lives of the industrious and homely inhabitants of the Merrimack valley through evocative descriptions of his provincial town and its familiar surroundings, set in his present day or placed within an historical frame. In doing so, his rustic style and the naturalness of his language were befitting of the content of his narrative and legendary poems. Their circulation secured him a reputation as a respected craftsman whose Americanism was most sincere and intense, an allegiance proclaimed in "Album Verses," in the fall of 1838, where he declared he thought of himself as one who keeps

Deep in his heart the scenes which grace  
And glorify his "native place;"  
Loves every spot to childhood dear,  
And leaves his heart "untraveled" here[.]<sup>79</sup> (21-24)

Whittier remained true to his roots—and trusted his fellow countrymen to do the same—and never failed to take pride in his "Yankee Land," where he captured the change of seasons, husking parties, berry picking, all the ordinary events and memories of his childhood as a farmboy in old New England. Many of these poems were imbued with a touch of romance reminiscent of the words he wrote to his cousin Ann Elizabeth Wendell in August of 1842, in which he contemplated, as in a reverie, "how strange" it was for a "momentary glimpse of a landscape [,] a smile [,] the tone [of] a word spoken carelessly [,] a tree [,] the shadow of a cloud on the hillside" to "burn themselves like enamel upon the mind and live there ever after."<sup>80</sup> While his writing didn't possess complex social, or psychological, insights, and he did not share Hawthorne's symbolic imagination and its skilful handling (as he declared to Underwood in 1883, "I am not one of the master singers and don't pose

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<sup>79</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 512.

<sup>80</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 568.

as one”),<sup>81</sup> his success in representing the core values of New England distinguished him as a worthy American poet.<sup>82</sup> Whittier’s devotion to “the vale of the Merrimac” was professed in the homonymous poem of 1825, where, after considering the cultural importance and beauty of other streams, he had emphatically concluded each stanza by reiterating how dear he held his native river, “home of [his] fathers.”<sup>83</sup> If the Merrimack wasn’t a locus amoenus for “wild fairy-tale[s],” with no wandering minstrels singing of courtly love and no castles on its banks, little did it matter to eighteen-year-old Whittier whose childhood had been passed upon “the moss-cover’d bank” looking at “the breeze-wafted sail,” under a weather-beaten oak in “the green groves of wild-wood.” Picturing the river path illuminated by the glow of the moon and dancing fireflies, the young poet resolved to celebrate it accordingly.

Seven years later, in the introduction to the poems of Brainard, a remark on the region as a hidden gem for poetic sources echoed and reinforced his early sentiments. In debating those who believed in the bards’ necessity to “linger over the classic ruins of other lands, and draw their sketches of character from foreign sources,” he observed how New England was actually “full of Romance” with its wilderness conquered by their ancestors, “nobler than those of old [,] haunted by Sylph and Dryad,” the Indians and their disappearance, “the Powwow and the war-dance,” not forgetting “the tale of superstition, and the scenes of Witchcraft.”<sup>84</sup> The premise that the poetic muse could be found from local sights and history also reflected the Romantic sensibility of his time, which emphasized the subjective experience of the aesthetic realm.<sup>85</sup>

## 2.1 The Romantic Regionalist Approach to History and Nature

Whittier’s writing coincided with the moment in US history when New England’s hegemony was starting to wane and its pronounced cultural regionalism was giving way to a more comprehensive sense of national identity, since it was judged as “backward” on account of its overwhelming provincialism. The picturesque valley towns long remained on the verge of turning into an uncanny place and New England regional writers repeatedly dealt (and struggled) with such dichotomies in

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<sup>81</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 3, p. 476. The comment was occasioned by Underwood’s overly uncritical reading of Whittier’s work.

<sup>82</sup> John Pickard, p. 132.

<sup>83</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 485.

<sup>84</sup> John G. C. Brainard and John G. Whittier. *The Literary Remains of John G. C. Brainard with a Sketch of His Life*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>85</sup> John Pickard, p. 50.

their works.<sup>86</sup> Professor Buell frames the popular depiction of these country towns within the “repertoire of motifs” whose literary, social and mythic significance had led the “cult of the New England village” to represent a national ideal, one that now continued to embody the traditional “Yankee” spirit of northern and western New England.<sup>87</sup> Several writers, for the most part women, constrained by the “Victorian cult of domesticity”, decided to settle there, soon reached by those who weren’t interested in a career in editing or publishing in the cities: the time dedicated to recording their whereabouts called forth a local color movement corresponding to the regionalist equivalent of the eastern literary renaissance.<sup>88</sup>

The inevitable process of urbanization and the consequent modernization had brought a general awareness of an all-too-swiftly vanishing present that needed to be chronicled, further intensified by a certain “local patriotism” caused by the aforementioned decline of New England (206-207). Under the dual influence of Romantic and realist elements,<sup>89</sup> the New England literature of place could then be defined as “conservative,” in the sense that it was composed by all those writers who chose to commit to “roots in an age of rootlessness” which, for Whittier, was sometimes conveyed in a rather melancholic tone (300). It blended fictional and nonfictional materials and techniques, conforming to the aims of contemporary didactic writing and having “absence” as one of the major themes, which related to the cultural milieu of the inland regions and the actual migration of many of its inhabitants from the countryside to western states and urban centres.<sup>90</sup>

Drawing from folklore, New England regional literature increasingly provided a series of stock characters, “schoolmasters, yankee peddlers, (...) tricksters, jacks-of-all-trades,” local customs, traditions and, of course, legends (297). One of the favourite annual events was Thanksgiving which, along with harvest time, inspired Whittier’s jolly poem “The Pumpkin,” a playful ode to the fruit during the holiday feast that reunited New Englanders. It represented the moment for the usual interchange of mirthful greetings, “thy life be as sweet, and its last sunset sky / Golden-tinted and

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<sup>86</sup> Buell, p. 21.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54. Some of the motifs of local colorism particularly resonated with the situation of women of the era, although the author argues that only from 1860 did women steal the spotlight as the best writers of regional tales and sketches (303).

<sup>89</sup> Along the lines of Walter Scott, whose prose works are classified both as Romantic fiction and Victorian realism (*Ibid.*, p. 240).

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, It also deliberately avoided any trace of industrialization, with the exception of occasional details, such as the railroad (301).

fair as thy own Pumpkin pie!” (41-42), and the moment to recollect the olden days (“what calls back the past, like the rich Pumpkin pie?”) and childhood memories:

When wild, ugly faces we carved in its skin,  
Glaring out through the dark with a candle within!  
When we laughed round the corn-heap, with hearts all in tune,  
Our chair a broad pumpkin, —our lantern the moon,  
Telling tales of the fairy who travelled like steam,  
In a pumpkin-shell coach, with two rats for her team!<sup>91</sup> (27-32)

Admiring how Whittier mastered his local colorism, John Pickard points out his “painter-like ability” to stay true to the original setting, where everything, and nature above all else, was presented exactly as it was because the poet “transcribed rather than created” and “represented rather than arranged.”<sup>92</sup> Whittier’s accuracy in his topographical details becomes even more noteworthy once we consider that regional prose and poetry used to standardize and select the “authentic materials” in order to meet the popular and literary taste of the day.<sup>93</sup> They presented a realistic portrayal of life in New England thanks to the knowledge gathered from natural history essays, travel literature and autobiographical narratives —which counted the well-known Providence tales and the Indian captivity narratives.<sup>94</sup> However, the most exemplary literary work for regional writers to learn from and imitate remained Washington Irving’s *Sketch-Book*, with its classic short stories of early American folklore “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Rip Van Winkle,” whose bewitched valleys and streams and eerie midnight rides captivated New England authors enough to follow Irving’s path.<sup>95</sup> Whittier too wished to immortalize the folktales he had been brought up on, and in *Legends of New England* of 1831 and 1847’s *The Supernaturalism of New England* he combined prose and poetry to document and narrate the region’s lore and old wives’ tales.<sup>96</sup> Besides, writing to Sarah J. Hale in 1832, he expressed his intention to publish “a series of sketches in the manner of Irving’s [,] distinct enough however from him in style (...)

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<sup>91</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 390.

<sup>92</sup> John Pickard, p. 53.

<sup>93</sup> Buell, p. 297.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* Professor Buell considers the essays and anecdotes of *Our Village* by Mary Russell Mitford as equally impactful.

<sup>96</sup> They will be analyzed in chapter four, when exploring the origins of Whittier’s pioneer work in collecting the folklore and folklife of the Merrimack valley.



which shall illustrate some of the superstitions and peculiarities of our New Englanders.”<sup>97</sup> Unfortunately, the project never saw the light of day. Indeed, Irving’s emblematic stories inaugurated a prolific period of local sketches and tales that from 1820 onward were regularly printed in literary magazines, especially the *New England Magazine* which numbered Whittier, Hawthorne and Longfellow amongst its contributors.<sup>98</sup>

There were two distinct threads around which regional authors wove their stories: provincial gothic and comic grotesque, which mirrored the ambivalent attitude they had toward these themes and places of interest, going from a nostalgic attempt to turn back the clock to the urban prejudice against the rural peasantry and their way of life, looked down on as ridiculous and “repressive.”<sup>99</sup> Comic grotesque had its origins in the neoclassical tradition of traveling and the habit of writers to regard “provincial manners [and] backwardness” with “a condescending eye,” as Sarah Kemble Knight did in her *Journal* all along her round trip journey, and several local colorists (and Hawthorne) after her, over the course of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Nonetheless, the Yankee folk hero (and his dialect) progressively went from stereotypical “bumpkin” during Neoclassicism to the “literary archetype” of the Romantic hero, aided by America’s “self-conscious provincialism” which abandoned a satire full of patronizing superiority in favour of an “affectionate comedy.”<sup>100</sup>

Provincial gothic, the second strand of regionalism, examined its features in the light of Dark Romanticism, the alluring sub-genre of Romanticism which emerged from the Transcendental philosophical movement and borrowed from Gothic fictions many of its elements, leading, if only for a while, to the triumph of irrationality in an Age of Enlightenment. The sinister themes, the belief in the unseen presence of supernatural and evil agents—for which the long-lasting influence of New England’s Puritan culture was mainly responsible—the sense of guilt, fear and isolation evoked a sombre and mysterious atmosphere present in the works of numerous New England writers (*The Scarlet Letter* by Hawthorne is but one example). There, the rather grotesque, and oftentimes tragic, nature of existence in secluded, sleepy towns, from which the protagonists wished

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<sup>97</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 73.

<sup>98</sup> Buell, p. 294.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 336-337. Professor Buell describes these Yankee characters as the “folk counterpart” of the literary and intellectual New England tradition, they also appeared in “classic American autobiographies,” such as Benjamin Franklin’s (339-340).

to run away (splendidly encapsulated in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*),<sup>101</sup> was revealed within the familiar landscape whose sensory imagery had a prime role in bringing the scene alive. The long winter evenings were spent sipping apple cider by the trembling candlelight throwing spectral shadows across the room; lonely, silent nights in backwoods homesteads were interrupted only by the old, creaking wooden chair and stairs, the howling wind and owls hunting. It wasn't hard to imagine early morning sleigh rides, when children were gliding through the snow-covered pines, wounded lumberjacks were heading homeward and the air smelled like peppermint, and as dusk was falling, crows circled around abandoned mills, while the town's clock tower was chiming and thunder rumbling in the distance, not to mention the age-old rumours of mossy graveyards haunted by witches. These were just a few of the local scenes that surrounded the tumultuous inner world of the characters in the writing of New England provincial gothic, whose focus on the edifying powers of moral virtues was product of the "aesthetic utilitarianism" of the works accepted by the literary milieu.<sup>102</sup> Tying melodrama to colonial folklore, writers passed down the cultural and regional heritage, dramatizing the burden of sin, repression and alienation in a place both wonderful and strange.

The history of New England witchcraft had been particularly exploited by authors (together with the voyage of the Mayflower, another literary staple), being a period full of superstitions and lore that left their trace even on the region's local topography, in which rocks, brooks, bridges, hollows and ponds were named after folkloric figures, usually demonic entities believed to haunt those remote spots —such beliefs typically arose whenever they came with a peculiar shape or were sacred to Native tribes, supposed to be in league with the "evil one".<sup>103</sup> During the Puritan age, these mysterious locations, where mystical and earthly realms met, used to be both revered and feared, and in Whittier's days, while the initial witch hysteria had died down, the thrill of passing by them was still very much alive for adults and children alike.<sup>104</sup> Whittier, who beguiled his leisure hours by collecting regional superstitions before they had vanished once and for all, described in his poems some of the ghostly and other-worldly sights in his vicinity, one of them called "The Devil's

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<sup>101</sup> The hopelessly poignant love story was set in the town of Starkfield, Massachusetts, which, albeit fictional, wasn't spared from the decline that hit rural New England during the latter part of the century.

<sup>102</sup> Buell, pp. 352-353.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360.

<sup>104</sup> In this day and age, instead, one of the caves (already partly damaged) was on the verge of being destroyed in order to expand the local high school's football pitch. Thankfully, it has been preserved (see TheDiscoveryService. "The Devil's Den." Atlas Obscura, 30 March 2022, available at [www.atlasobscura.com/places/the-devils-den](http://www.atlasobscura.com/places/the-devils-den). Accessed 21 May 2022).

Den”:<sup>105</sup> the cavern, near Chester, New Hampshire, widely known throughout the surrounding country for its ill-omened reputation. As reported by Samuel Drake more than a century ago, not a few “frightful tales” had been told “around winter firesides, of the demons who haunted [the mountain’s chamber] in bygone times;” tradition said the “evil spirits,” invisible to mortals, assembled at midnight all year round.<sup>106</sup> In an article for the *New England Magazine*, Whittier acknowledged that he never managed to discover the true origins of the haunting of “The Devil’s Den,” although “the fact” that it was a “favorite resort of his [was] incontestably proven” by the trail to the mountain’s entrance that was always trampled down, and he wrote about how a visit to the place inspired the homonymous poem, in an attempt to preserve the legend.<sup>107</sup> The opening lines set the mood of the scene by giving an account of the gloomy landscape where, on the hill, the pine trees were standing still on a breezy, silent night, little owls were flying drowsily between them, but in spite of the moonlight, the poet warned that “darkness [was] there.”<sup>108</sup> The mouth of the dim cave resembled “the jaws of a monster,” around which the leaves of “wild bushes of thorn and fern” were fluttering in the wind, half-covering the “shadowy cavern.” From the rock of the hill, a stream was flowing and above it a bent oak, dead after being struck by lightning, extended its bare, broken branches “like skeleton’s arms.”

In this frightfully suggestive ambience “’twas said” that the cave was “an evil place / The chosen haunt of the fallen race” (31-32) and that “the midnight traveler oft hath seen” a fire coming from within, and heard fearful sounds, as if from hell: “the ghostly gibber, the fiendish yell[.]” Severed hands waved at the curious wanderers, who, in other circumstances, in daylight or under the shining stars, would never have dreaded the eerie cave, since in the company of foxes, raccoons, croaking frogs and the nighttime singing of the whip-poor-will, it wouldn’t have conveyed the same impression of loneliness.<sup>109</sup> Anyhow, Whittier found in the wicked den and “its lingering fear” something to “fancy dear,” as he mused in the final stanza:

Something which tells of another age,  
Of the wizard’s wand, and the Sybil’s page,  
Of the fairy ring and the haunted glen,

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<sup>105</sup> Buell, p. 360.

<sup>106</sup> Samuel A. Drake. *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore*, p. 342.

<sup>107</sup> John G. Whittier. “New-England Superstitions”, p. 29.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

And the restless phantoms of murdered men:  
The grandame's tale, and the nurse's song—  
The dreams of childhood remembered long;  
And I love even now to list the tale  
Of the Demon's Cave, and its haunted vale. (53-60)

In many instances, the evocative power of folkloric sights and sounds led Whittier to reminisce about the halcyon days of his youth and the fairytales of the past, along with superstitious rumours circulating in his neighbourhood, which he amusingly reported (sometimes with the benefit of doubt). In "Birchbrook Mill" Whittier once again delighted in presenting a bewitched location, but this time, the story behind the haunted ground where the old mill used to be is not disclosed, leaving the reader in chilling suspense. The first stanza begins with the imagery of a stream, the Birchbrook, running quietly, while the roar of the sea could be heard in the distance; the only trace of human presence was to be found in the tip of the spire of the far-off church and in the "white sail of a ship", "ghost-like" against the overcast sky, because there was no sign left of the mill workers, the dam or the pond of the mill: they had all disappeared, as if erased by the hands of time.<sup>110</sup> Nature had indeed "brought the old wild beauty back again" and, throughout the day, wildflowers were touched by the glowing light of the sun, birch trees swayed in the wind and the song sparrows chirped melodiously on the banks of the brook; yet, as soon as the sun set, a sudden change of aura in the air seemed to come out of nowhere: schoolgirls "[shrank] with dread" and the farmer, returning home from a long day in the fields, went by "with quickened tread."

In that witching hour, no soul would "dare [to] pause" and listen to the sounds of the mill coming alive again, followed by, as someone swore, a "cry of pain" and "the pawing of an unseen horse, / Who waits his mistress still" (39-40), albeit no ghosts of a woman and her horse had ever been spotted. However, those who looked for the reason behind such "common dread" sought in vain, for no human "tongue [had] fitly told" the mysterious story of the haunted mill, instead,

The secret of the dark surmise  
The brook and birches hold.  
What nameless horror of the past  
Broods here forevermore? (51-54)

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<sup>110</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 133.

In wondering what really happened, Whittier “let the scenic curtain fall” on the abandoned place, leaving us to guess whether, to this day, darkness brings with it the fearful shrieks.

It goes without saying that the poet cherished the “lighthearted” folklore of New England as much as its “dark” side, and so the last legend connected to local topography that may be worth mentioning is “The Wishing Bridge” —as Whittier himself declared in the opening lines:

Among the legends sung or said  
Along our rocky shore,  
The Wishing Bridge of Marblehead  
May well be sung once more.<sup>111</sup> (1-4)

A century before the poet took interest in this “old-time story,” tradition had it that every good wish made upon it was destined to come true.<sup>112</sup> One day, after school, two girls crossed the bridge, the first gaily asked to become a reigning queen, the other to explore the world; many years later, when they were elderly, they met again: the “future queen” confessed that she had married a poor farmer, and her “realm” was nothing more than the homestead, but wouldn’t change a thing, while the other woman revealed how she had never left her house to take care of the sick mother, reading her travel books and in doing so, her wanderlust was satisfied. It is interesting to notice how, if we are to exclude some antique postcards, there is virtually no existing literary work that refers to the folktale (and the same can be said for the previous one), which corroborates Whittier’s pioneer effort in collecting never-before-recorded oral material.

Nevertheless, it would be difficult to continue to speak of such matters without a momentary focus on the impact that the history of the region had on its literature: according to Professor Buell, New England topographical writers “poetized” the landscapes of their homeland with “an aura of legend and history” with the intent to draw the public’s attention to the “Puritan heritage,” an indissoluble aspect of the American character.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, the northeastern intellectual response to the fading regional influence brought forth the Romantic historical novel, which was rooted in Puritan colonial New England and sought to “re-create” it as a “literary artifact,”<sup>114</sup> blurring the “distinction”

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<sup>111</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 130.

<sup>112</sup> Curiously enough, another “Wishing Bridge” and the exact same legend can be found in the enchanting Gap of Dunloe, County Kerry, Ireland.

<sup>113</sup> Buell, p. 287. The interest in the past wasn’t new, it came from the tradition of providential histories.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

between fiction and history.<sup>115</sup> The genre, popularized by Sir Walter Scott in his successful “combination of sophisticated entertainment and moral[ity],” was recognized for the historical accuracy of its settings and became a fertile ground for the rhetoric of Romantic nationalism, in this case, the myth of the “Pilgrim-Puritan” past, which, (howbeit controversial)<sup>116</sup> consolidated New England’s regional identity.<sup>117</sup> There, too, the canon was very selective, besides, merely the period of the first Puritan settlements had been adequately treated; “Indian themes,” for instance, were popular but handled poorly due to the (rather predictable) colonizing subjectivity which caused Natives to be depicted as “caricature[s] of [either] noble savages or bestial villains” (212). While reverence for Puritans ancestors wasn’t a *conditio sine qua non* for the approach to colonial history—and the problematization of such a legacy certainly contributed to its vogue—the temptation of falling into a stereotypical rendering of the Puritans had to be resisted just the same, as Hawthorne notably demonstrated in the short story of “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” where through the allegory of the dichotomy of “jollity and gloom,” he hinted at the necessity of a reconciliation between the two conflicting philosophies (211). Even so, in *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne, didn’t refrain from concealing the welcomed passage from an “age of wizardry to the age of science” in addition to “identifying the future,” instead of the past, “as the realm of romantic possibility.” This was also taken up by other authors, with the consequence that the New England strain of historical novels that presented Puritanism in its most “grotesque” facet was putting at stake the Romantic dedication to celebrating the collective history of the region (245-246). For this particular reason, the theme of continuity (and change) from the time of the grim forefathers to that day and age returned over and over again in its various literary adaptations, consistent with the writers’ varyingly enthusiastic approach to the topic (246-247).

In prose and poetry alike, Whittier and those among the Romantics who wished to extol the virtues of New England, respected their ancestors for having passed down the finest “Yankee” traits,

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209. Hawthorne, in “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” did in fact tackle the issue of “narrative historicity” by exposing the “impossibility of nonfictional fiction” (210).

<sup>116</sup> The author reminds us that the “consensus myth” of New England was actually “Massachusetts-cantered” since the early history of the individual states hadn’t been as rosy as they pictured: Rhode Island, for example, had been founded by Roger Williams who, after fleeing himself from Massachusetts Bay Colony, welcomed all the persecuted people, advocating for religious freedom, or Vermont, a “frontier haven” for “venturesome” New Englanders who hadn’t been fortunate enough to live up to Puritans’ standards (*Ibid.*, 204).

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208. The realism of the representation by no means eclipsed the plot itself and how it related to contemporary ideology: the Puritan background, more often than not, was the “symbolic backdrop” for the unfolding timeless dramas, especially in light of the query “as to whether a (...) past so (...) mundane [and] fully recorded” would satisfy the author’s creative needs (242-243).

including industriousness, self-reliance, resourcefulness and the value of education,<sup>118</sup> narrating with a quasi-nostalgia the simpler by-gone era (245). This was especially true on the occasion of centennials of towns, parks or churches, when, during the celebration, the public was “reminded of the (...) time” that had flown by since their foundation, with a special focus on what had changed and what had stayed the same, memorable “events and personages” that had made their history and how far they had come since the wilderness days (288-289).

Once again topographical poetry (whose origins can be traced back to the British “locodescriptive verse”) was the genre that most suited the ceremonies and by midcentury there was at least one “hymn, ode, ballad, or discursive poem,” all similar in content and style, that had been composed specifically for each of them.<sup>119</sup> One of Whittier’s last poems, “Haverhill. 1640-1890” is a prime example of such verses: written and read in honor of the two hundred fiftieth anniversary of the town, it evoked the “olden times,” when the pioneers arrived and successfully endured harsh mental and physical trials; they bravely faced the “drear, untrodden solitude / The gloom and mystery of the wood” (10-11) as well as wild animals prowling the dark, the dangers of black bears and wolves howling, and the unpredictable Natives peeking through foliage-covered trees.<sup>120</sup> In their modest wooden cabins, while youngsters were homesick for dear old England, the threatened settlers of Haverhill<sup>121</sup> learnt to live with the perils, taking refuge in the garrison houses when the Indians were lurking, ready to attack and if “the terror of the midnight raid,” “the winter march (...) of captive wife and child” were hard to forget, “nor fire, nor frost, nor foe could kill / The Saxon energy of will” (39-40). Whittier noted how all the “memories of the border town,” handed down “by old tradition,” resurfaced by chance, slightly changed, off and on; he also didn’t fail to call attention to the transformation of the settlement into a city, where “crowded workshops” and highways had replaced the homestead and the “wood-path,” along with the space that had been taken away from nature.<sup>122</sup> In spite of that, the scenery, the splendour of the autumn and the golden hour were still as magnificent as ever, and the poet couldn’t blame the “sires [who] kindle[d] [t]here their household

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<sup>118</sup> Although the majority of schoolhouses were on the verge of decay, schoolmasters who didn’t turn out to be “mediocre charlatans” à la Ichabod Crane were esteemed “local figure[s]” (*Ibid.*, p. 317).

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* They are now lost.

<sup>120</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 473.

<sup>121</sup> Haverhill, originally known as Pentucket, the Native American word for “place of the winding river” (the Merrimack), was part of a tract of land that once belonged to the legendary Chief Passaconaway; for more information on the purchase, see Sidney Perley, *The Indian Land Titles of Essex County, Massachusetts*, “The Deed of Haverhill” (1912).

<sup>122</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 474.

fires,” so much so that the more years went by, the more their legacy was treasured, realizing that no matter how “far and wide we roam, (...) all we seek we leave at home.”<sup>123</sup> Whittier’s final suggestion, in line with the spirit of the times, was to

Hold fast your Puritan heritage,  
But let the free thought of the age  
Its light and hope and sweetness add  
To the stern faith the fathers had. (105-108)

It seems only natural to now bring attention to how a poet of Quaker upbringing, after the infamous persecutions for heresy perpetrated by the Puritans, treated such a controversial theme.

## 2.2 A Quaker among the Ghosts of the Puritan Past

This part will tackle the historical relations between Puritans and Quakers in the works of Whittier to provide a more comprehensive picture of his approach to the regional past: the pivotal mark it had left on the folklore and folkways of New England is relevant to the successive research in their role in Whittier’s poetry.<sup>124</sup>

The nineteenth-century revival of Puritanism, whose importance can be understood by considering the predominance of “religiocentric” thought in antebellum New England, was additionally fueled by conservative evangelicals and the Second Great Awakening (reaching its peak by the 1880s), and was the theatre of the “dispute” between orthodox Congregationalists and Arminian-Unitarian over the role and interpretation of the historical legacy of their Puritans ancestors.<sup>125</sup> Whittier, whose initial fascination with the New England pre-industrial past revolved around its legends rather than its Puritan history,<sup>126</sup> didn’t associate with either side of the sectional conflict, instead, following in the footsteps of Burns and Scott, he “preferred to romanticize” and write about “ghosts [,] Indians” and the tales of his youth and the supernatural in the Merrimack valley, material of old New England folklore that derived from his “reading in colonial literature and histories”<sup>127</sup> Only later did

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<sup>123</sup> The same concept appeared in Edith Wharton’s *Summer* during the “Old Home Week festivity” of the town of North Dormer at the end of August, when people “gather[ed] to celebrate its sense of place and to welcome those who [had] left (...) back home” (Carol Wershoven. “The Divided Conflict of Edith Wharton’s *Summer*,” p. 8).

<sup>124</sup> I’ve intentionally left out the vast collection of his purely religious poems.

<sup>125</sup> Buell, p. 215.

<sup>126</sup> Schaedler, p. 351.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 354.



Puritanism make an appearance in his works —more precisely, Louis Schaedler considers 1833 as the year in which it first played a significant role, in the short story “Passaconaway,” where the poet still took a neutral stance—<sup>128</sup> and contrarily to his anti-slavery cause (and the unforgiving portrayals of Hawthorne), he generally adopted a fairly moderate position regarding the Puritans, arguably mitigated by his Quaker faith in the goodness of humankind that kept him from tarring all of them with the same brush. In *John G. Whittier, the Poet of Freedom*, Kennedy transcribed the conversation English poet and journalist Edwin Arnold held with Whittier at Oak Knoll, the latter’s house in Danvers, Massachusetts, when the Englishman noted how the fellow Quaker “had been speaking of the enduring and gloomy influence” that the “Puritan doctrines” exerted upon “the minds of New Englanders, of their pernicious darkening of life and literature and how [the poet] himself had come under the cloud of Calvinism and its terrors,” but on his part, “the world was (...) too beautiful and God far too good” to think the same way as them.<sup>129</sup>

Having said that, some instances strongly compelled him to disclose his endorsement of religious freedom, standing up against “theological bigotry” and dedicating the last lines of his regional poems to “monitory exempla” (as discussed in chapter one),<sup>130</sup> the first being the attempts to partially rehabilitate the figure of Cotton Mather and the reputation of Puritanism with reference to the witch trials, one of the darkest pages in New England’s history. Among the dissenting voices there was Charles W. Upham, who believed Mather to be a cunning manipulator who deceived the public with the witchcraft delusion for self-interested reasons, and the Unitarians, for whom he embodied everything that was wrong with the Puritan ethic, concerned about the eventuality of the theocracy making a comeback.<sup>131</sup>

A poem that Whittier wrote, plausibly inspired by the debate, was “Calef in Boston. 1692”, published in 1849, where he imagined the heated exchange between Robert Calef, a merchant in colonial Boston, highly critical of the Salem trials in which Mather was involved, and the preacher himself. There he hinted at the episode of Margaret Rule, a young woman who “in the solemn days of old” had been in the spotlight for the claims of diabolical possession (with the expression “your spectral puppet play” Whittier alluded to the practice of folk-magic where dolls were created and used to cast a spell over the person they resembled), as reported in *More Wonders of the Invisible*

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<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> Kennedy. *John G. Whittier, the Poet of Freedom*, pp. 182-183.

<sup>130</sup> Buell, p. 360.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 218-219.

*World*,<sup>132</sup> the merchant's resolute response to Mather, for which he was arrested.<sup>133</sup> Even so, he persisted to make sure something similar wouldn't be repeated and the treatise was publicly burned in the yard of Harvard College by order of the then president, Rev. Increase Mather, Cotton's father. After that, the mass hysteria gradually died down and nobody had been hanged ever since, Calef "had [indeed] saved the cause."<sup>134</sup> The poet sympathized with the merchant, resting assured that "the preacher's spectral creed / Chills no more the blood of men" (35-36).<sup>135</sup>

In *The Supernaturalism of New England*, dated two years earlier, Whittier wrote about the marvellous, considering the region to be an "enchanted ground" for someone like Mather; "no wonder," the poet observed with a certain irony, "that the spirits of evil combined against him" and he remarked how convenient, "how satisfactory to orthodoxy" had been the "nice discrimination" done by the demons supposed to haunt a girl who was "choked" while trying to "read the Catechism yet [had] no trouble with a pestilent Quaker pamphlet."<sup>136</sup> Whittier's bitter quip is easily explained by the minister's conviction that the "plague of witchcraft" in the region had been caused "in about an equal degree" by Indians and Quakers, both accused of being devil-worshippers, and if their stories always kept the curious listeners with bated breath, the guiltless doomed to Gallows Hill couldn't share the same feelings.<sup>137</sup> It was thank to people like Calef, "benefactors of their race," that "the delusion ha[d] measurably vanished,"<sup>138</sup> although, as Kennedy specifies, even if more than a century had elapsed since the Quakers' persecution, "the old Puritan (...) bigotry still existed."<sup>139</sup>

For almost ten years, starting from 1658, Quakers were banished from Massachusetts and punished with death if they dared to return (the fate of Mary Dyer);<sup>140</sup> their women were branded as witches and publicly humiliated: the first Quakers who arrived in Boston in 1656, Ann Austin and Mary

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<sup>132</sup> According to Calef, the woman wasn't bewitched, merely starved for men's attention, which Mather didn't mind; she was soothed by his hands and not women's (Robert Calef. *More Wonders of the Invisible World*, p. 44).

<sup>133</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 371.

<sup>134</sup> Drake, p. 64.

<sup>135</sup> Mather's works will be resumed in chapter four, for Whittier poetized a number of stories and legends documented by the Puritan clergyman.

<sup>136</sup> John G. Whittier. *The Supernaturalism of New England*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>139</sup> Kennedy. *John G. Whittier, the Poet of Freedom*, p. 59.

<sup>140</sup> Those who did, were hanged; in 1682, the Quaker William Penn, who too was persecuted, fled from England and founded the colony of Pennsylvania, meant as a refuge for all the members of the Society of Friends.

Fisher, were stripped naked to ensure they didn't carry the devil's mark,<sup>141</sup> others were led away and abandoned in the wilderness to the "tender mercies" of wolves and Indians.<sup>142</sup> The same treatment was reserved for dissenting Puritans, like Anne Hutchinson. The poems that Whittier dedicated to Quakers were among the ones that conveyed his most heartfelt sentiments, and they become even more meaningful in the light of certain contemporary currents which still regarded Quakers as "enemies" whose persecution could be excused because symptomatic of the intolerant age in which they were living.<sup>143</sup> In a correspondence with Rev. George E. Ellis, who blamed Quakers as much as Puritans, Whittier rejoined that as

a son of New England, (...) of all that is (...) noble in the character of the Puritans, there is no warmer admirer than myself. But for the sake of vindicating them from the charge of that intolerance which they shared with nearly all Christendom, I cannot undertake to justify or excuse persecution by vilifying its victims.<sup>144</sup>

"Cassandra Southwick. 1658" of 1843 is a ballad that Whittier composed drawing on the sad and tragic story of the Southwick family of Salem, which, according to Kennedy, the poet had found in the books of Joseph Besse and George Bishop.<sup>145</sup> The Southwicks were Quakers who suffered the persecutions for belonging to the "cursed sect of heretics" —as the General Court called them in 1656—, they had their property seized and were and fined for refusing to attend the Puritan church. Tradition said that their son and daughter were sentenced to be sold as slaves in the West Indies, fortunately, no sea captain carried out the order; the parents, Lawrence and Cassandra, were instead whipped and banished to Shelter Island, where they died of starvation the following year.<sup>146</sup> Whittier used his poetic license to name the protagonist, whose real name was Provided, after her mother, presumably deeming "Cassandra" to be more alluring. The ballad centered around the time the daughter was imprisoned and auctioned off in the market-place, in the presence of colonial

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<sup>141</sup> Any peculiar skin blemish was identified as such, hence, women didn't hesitate to harm themselves in order to conceal it or make it disappear. The two women were imprisoned and their books burned.

<sup>142</sup> John G. Whittier. *The Supernaturalism of New England*, p. 41.

<sup>143</sup> Buell, p. 224. Others thought of the sect as fanatics, stern disciplinarians or vagrants, because of their itinerant preaching.

<sup>144</sup> Samuel Pickard, p. 785.

<sup>145</sup> Kennedy. *John G. Whittier, the Poet of Freedom*, p. 288. The authors were both Quakers; as resulted in my research, in all likelihood the books in question were Besse's *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People Called Quakers* (1753) and Bishop's *New England Judged by the Spirit of the Lord* (1703). Henry W. Longfellow developed a similar theme in *The New-England Tragedies*.

<sup>146</sup> Janet I. Delorey. *A Study of Lawrence and Cassandra Southwick*, p. 36.

governor John Endecott, where, to use the words of Drake, she faced her destiny with “the calm resignation of a Christian martyr and the spirit of a Joan of Arc.”<sup>147</sup> As opposed to many of his narrative poems, Whittier chose to focus on the protagonist’s inner thoughts and suffering, which he understandably considered to be of more importance than the entirety of the story itself.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, John Pickard draws attention to the fact that the poet generalized “all the characters, (...) only briefly seen by the hesitant glances of [Cassandra].”<sup>149</sup>

In the first stanzas the young maiden is pathetically reliving the night before in jail, cold and dark, when the sole lights were the setting sun and the glow of the stars, and the frost of autumn had already begun to settle.<sup>150</sup> Apart from the sea waves far away, the silence was deafening; “hour after hour crept by” while she was sitting alone, unable to sleep “for I knew that on the morrow / The ruler and the cruel priest would mock me in my sorrow” (13-14) Suddenly, her mournful waiting was interrupted by the “tempter,” viciously taunting Cassandra about her newfound loneliness: if her “happy schoolmates,” in her absence, will carry on just the same, (“not for thee the nuts of Wenham woods by laughing boys are broken”), she had forsaken the homely kindness of her loved ones, she had missed the first “flowers of autumn” and “fruits of the orchard” to chase a delusion, travelling down an “evil path” which would doom her to be, at most, an “easy prey.”<sup>151</sup> Cassandra thereupon burst into tears and, firm in her faith, prayed to exorcise the adversary until he vanished. Combining the familiar seasonal imagery of a New England sea town with the somber colonial atmosphere (“and there were ancient citizens, cloak-wrapped and grave and cold”), the ballad proceeded with the narration of the fateful morning, when Cassandra was brought before Endecott and Rawson and elicited the compassion of those present —“shame on their cruel laws!’ / Ran through the crowd in murmurs loud the people’s just applause” (113-114).<sup>152</sup> A wrathful Endecott left, and thoroughly relieved, the maiden was liberated, offering her thanks to the Lord for His justice. As if closing the circle of Cassandra’s ordeal, the ballad ended with a prayer containing a

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<sup>147</sup> Drake, p. 185.

<sup>148</sup> John Pickard, p. 65.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>150</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>151</sup> Here Whittier mentioned (Cassandra in the company of) “maniac women, loose-haired and sackcloth bound”: the most famous reference would be the protest of Margaret Brewster, Quaker militant, (discussed in the following pages) which, however, occurred in 1677, nineteen years after the trials and tribulations of the Southwicks.

<sup>152</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 20-21.

formula similar to the one at its beginning, in tune with the ballad's overall religious theme: God will always be there for those who call out to Him.

Like "the chorus of a Greek tragedy" Whittier never directly intervened, instead, to impart his distinct moralistic flavour; he let the touching pathos and the intensity of Cassandra's spirituality to speak up for themselves in the extended dramatic monologue and the first person narrative perspective.<sup>153</sup> In a few instances the poet used symbolic (and biblical) animal imagery to further illustrate the good-and-evil dichotomy: Cassandra compared herself to a lamb, whereas Endecott with his "lion glare," was like a "wolf amid the flock. It must be pointed out that Whittier ascribed the most ruthless and fanatical side of Puritanism only to the representatives of its institutions. On a general note, Professor Buell explains that it wasn't uncommon for New England romancers looking for "rebel protagonists" to gravitate toward "modern heroines in Quaker garb" who represented a "refreshing contrast to the grayness of the (...) establishment," thus reversing the idea behind Scott's handling of history, in which the world of the past knew little about present-time emotional restraint.<sup>154</sup> Whittier's generation then conceived the Puritan era as the ideal battlefield for "dramatizing archetypal conflict."<sup>155</sup>

Because of the evangelical success of Quakerism, whose heartening doctrine of the "Inner Light" subverted the Puritans' insistence on human depravity and sin, Puritanism's stability, founded upon an extremely strict biblical observance to counteract the devil's wiles, was perceived to be threatened.<sup>156</sup> Quakers who weren't immediately exiled, or taken to the gallows, didn't escape whipping at a cart's tail through the streets or towns, as poignantly recounted by Whittier in "How the Women Went From Dover. 1662." Similarly to "Cassandra Southwick," the poem dwelt on the physical and mental endurance of the persecuted Quakers, this time three women (Mary Tompkins, Ann Coleman and Alice Ambrose) punished as "vagabonds" who preached their creed, challenging the authoritarian Puritan ministers. Starting from Dover, N. H., they were ordered to be whipped through eleven towns, until they were "out of [the] jurisdiction," the constable of Salisbury, however, with the approval of the people and the broad-minded major, Robert Pike, who even opposed the Salem prosecutions, didn't obey and the women were set free. Undefeated, the women

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<sup>153</sup> Stoddard, p. 117. A very empathetic moment was, for example, Cassandra walking through the streets with the sheriff, she was gazed at, but too mortified to look back.

<sup>154</sup> Buell, p. 244.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245. The opposite extremes represented in "The May-Pole of Merry Mount" are but one example.

<sup>156</sup> In other words, as Stedman puts it, Puritans heavily relied on a literal reading of the Old Testament as much as Quakers believed in the "spirit" of the New (101).

soon resumed their missionary work: almost half of the citizens of Dover converted to Quakerism.<sup>157</sup>

Whittier immersed the readers in the tormented journey of the Quakers in a tale that was “one of an evil time / When souls were fettered and thought was crime” (101-102): during an icy-cold December day, their backs, at dawn, lashed and chafed by the bitter wind, were bleeding already.<sup>158</sup> Leaving behind them a red-stained snow, the women were observed by the townsfolk, while officials and youngsters joined the “dismal cavalcade,” when all of a sudden the afflicted ominously predicted the violent death of the magistrate (which did indeed result from the Cochecho massacre, also known as the Raid of Dover, in 1689). Waldron, angered by their words, ordered that they be punished more severely to “drive” the devil out of their bodies. Surrounded by a wintry landscape, the women entered the forest to arrive in Hampton, where again “goodman [and] goodwife” stopped their chores and turned out to watch the sad sight: if they were labelled as “witches going to jail” by the “outlying settler” they passed by, some of the town’s women, although dissuaded (they are thieves!), tried to help them. It was almost eventide when they reached Salisbury and their torment would come to an end, there Whittier concluded the poem on a rather triumphal note—the Quakers knelt down to praise the Lord, illuminated by the last rays of sunlight—and with perhaps one of the most moving and eloquent lines of his body of work:

O woman, at ease in these happier days,  
Forbear to judge of thy sister’s ways!  
How much thy beautiful life may owe  
To her faith and courage thou canst not know,  
Nor how from the paths of thy calm retreat  
She smoothed the thorns with her bleeding feet. (111-116)

Acknowledging the stoicism that Quakers embraced in the midst of adversity, as well as their resolute “devotion to truth,” the poet never failed to take a personal stand for religious tolerance and didn’t allow the evil that Puritan authorities did to entirely overshadow the humanity of the others, giving the poems he dedicated to Quaker history an everlasting force, which, Schaedler theorizes, was the poet’s response to Ellis, who, in the early 1880s, had “challenged [his] historical accuracy.”<sup>159</sup> In view of the emphasis of this study, it ought to be borne in mind that Whittier drew

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<sup>157</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 130.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.

<sup>159</sup> Schaedler, p. 367.

from historical events and literary research and filled in the rest with his imagination so as to tell a realistic story that was pertinent to the point he wanted to make. The soul of his poetry lay in the tradition of familiar and direct storytelling rather than a solemn, detached poetic voice, covering a variety of subjects that he held dear in emotionally engaging tales, embellished with picturesque descriptions of the flora and fauna of rural New England.

Depending on the context of the narration, Whittier didn't refrain from taking an alternative approach to portraying Quakers by slightly changing their characterization: it is precisely what he did with Margaret Brewster, the woman who protested against the Puritan religious domination and persecution in the Old South Church in Boston in July 1677. Wearing a sackcloth and with her face painted black, she interrupted the sermon and warned of the impending danger of the "black pox,"<sup>160</sup> a sign of God's revenge, causing what Salem judge Sewall referred in his diary entry as the "greatest uproar (...) that I ever saw," where women screamed and fainted.<sup>161</sup> Needless to say, she was immediately arrested and whipped at a cart's tail, paraded through the streets. In "In the Old South," written in 1877, Whittier presented Margaret as looking like the "old-time sybils, "half-crazed and half-divine," standing dauntless and unafraid in her plead for religious tolerance in front of the stunned crowd before disappearing "like a ghost."<sup>162</sup> The poem represented another instance in which Whittier availed himself of his poetic license to alter the events in order to achieve a "dramatic end" and his desired message; in fact, in the historical records, the Quakeress appeared to have more say in the alarming presage (albeit ignored in a Cassandra-esque manner) than in the struggle against bigotry.<sup>163</sup> John Pickard reckons that the ballad, being part of Whittier's later poetry, shed some of its realism to make space for a "mellow romanticism" and a "polished diction."<sup>164</sup>

The version of Margaret Brewster portrayed in *Margaret Smith's Journal*, a novel in diary format published almost thirty years before, depicted her under a different light altogether, both because a reflection of the protagonist's point of view, a good-natured English maiden who related the scene ("yesterday a strange thing happened at the meeting house") and empathized with the "poor creature," described as "still [,] quiet [and] deathly pale" among the pitiless crowd, and because

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<sup>160</sup> Samuel G. Drake. *The History and Antiquities of Boston*, p. 429. Her premonition did indeed come true.

<sup>161</sup> Samuel Sewall. *Diary of Samuel Sewall. 1674-1729*, vol. 1, p. 43.

<sup>162</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 121.

<sup>163</sup> Kennedy. *John G. Whittier, the Poet of Freedom*, p. 291. As stated by the author, Whittier used as reference the "original accounts" of J. Besse (see note no. 162).

<sup>164</sup> John Pickard, p. 42.

Whittier did effectively change the Quakeress to fit his narrative.<sup>165</sup> In contrast to her bolder historical counterpart, the Margaret Brewster of the book became a lovely, gentle, thoughtful young lady who even managed to avoid physical punishment.

By “romanticizing” the character, the author was willing to show what Schaedler defines an “impartiality which contradict[ed] history,” that is to say, Whittier went to the extent of downplaying the Puritans’ brutal treatment of Quakers to balance the twist he gave to Margaret.<sup>166</sup> We are informed that the Brewsters, along with other Quakers who lived in the neighbourhood, coexisted peacefully with the Puritans who saw them as “lost souls” to be pitied rather than blamed, and whose seriousness had been considerably toned down compared to the gravity of the Friends.<sup>167</sup> Whittier also took an unexpected turn and abandoned the fictionalization of Endecott and Rawson as evil characters in favour of more agreeable men (it is to be noted that *Margaret Smith’s Journal* and “Cassandra Southwick” belonged to the same decade, the 1840s, and the *Journal* was originally published anonymously).<sup>168</sup> Indeed, one of the most relevant aspects of the book was the reversal of roles in regard to who condemned Quakers (and witches) and who, instead, held more tolerant attitudes toward them: while Whittier generally identified Puritan ministers as stirring up the townsfolk’s prejudices, in the *Journal* the “ignorance” of the masses was the one responsible for igniting the “hatred.”<sup>169</sup> For example, the readers are told that Margaret Brewster wasn’t whipped, but merely fined, because the magistrates “consider[ed] her youth and good behaviour” and didn’t go so far as “many of the people desired.”<sup>170</sup> Whittier nevertheless set the accounts of Margaret Smith, the protagonist, in 1678-79, almost twenty years after the most terrible persecutions, in order to create a less tense atmosphere and ensure an “objective handling” of the matter (witch-hunting, on the other hand, was still alive and well).<sup>171</sup>

In this study of colonial Puritan life he committed to a “documentary realism” to recount a collection of sketches and anecdotes of customs, people—including some historic personages of

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<sup>165</sup> John G. Whittier. *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, pp. 40-41.

<sup>166</sup> Schaedler, pp. 362-363. John Pickard argues that it was exactly such impartiality that gave “depth to the historical accuracy” (p. 128).

<sup>167</sup> In “Whittier’s Leaves from Margaret Smith’s Journal” William J. Kimbell contends that the Quaker poet undoubtedly “understood” the Puritan mind, with its inner conflict between “duty and emotion” which he “presented” objectively with its human contradictions (p. 283).

<sup>168</sup> Schaedler, p. 363.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> Whittier. *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 42.

<sup>171</sup> John Pickard, p. 120.



the Massachusetts Bay of the time, Sewall and Mather to name two— and the scenery of early New England as seen through the eyes of an outsider, the English maiden, on the occasion of a visit to her relatives in Newbury.<sup>172</sup> He wrote in an old-fashioned yet engaging style, analogous to seventeenth-century journals and memoirs, such as Sarah Kemble Knight's, which further contributed to the sense of "remoteness" and to the convincing portrayal of the period;<sup>173</sup> with respect to the latter, Underwood clarifies that it was the product of "personal knowledge," the "study of institutions," the reading of letters and biographies together with the "traditions told at ancient firesides."<sup>174</sup> In any case, Whittier's reliance on "melodrama and sentimentality" suggested his adherence to the literary trends of his time far more than to the "sterner" and "disciplined" models of the Colonial era.<sup>175</sup> With its overall message of tolerance and goodwill, the prose work aligned with Whittier's educational vision by having Margaret's (Smith) disposition remain untouched by the Puritans' prejudices against Quakers, Native Americans, and elderly women suspected to be witches; besides, (s)he didn't refrain from speaking her mind on political and religious questions, privileging common sense over obscure, esoteric explanations when facing the most trivial situations of the everyday life of Puritans.<sup>176</sup> Whittier wasn't as forgiving about Puritans' hostility to Natives as he had been about their relations with Quakers, as a matter of fact, he didn't hold back his dissatisfaction with the Friends' propensity for "excess":<sup>177</sup> one Sabbath day, Margaret shared her annoyance over another Quaker who disrupted the meeting, back in May, she had expressed her sympathy for the "poor heathens" who didn't "seem so exceeding bad as they (...) reported."<sup>178</sup> The latter's presence in the book led to a powerful and moving moment of tragedy and "pathos" when, faced with "the lost Indian heritage,"<sup>179</sup> an old Native American sorrowfully declared that it was all land that the Great Spirit had made for Indians, the river and the birch-trees,

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<sup>172</sup> Buell, p. 242. John Pickard commends Whittier's choice of point of view for his steering clear of the "monoton[y]" that Puritan diaries sometimes had when dealing with religious questions (p. 120).

<sup>173</sup> John Pickard, p. 122.

<sup>174</sup> Underwood, p. 181.

<sup>175</sup> John Pickard, p. 124.

<sup>176</sup> Buell, p. 242.

<sup>177</sup> John Pickard, p. 127

<sup>178</sup> Whittier. *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 16.

<sup>179</sup> John Pickard, p. 129

deers and squirrels, now stolen by the “white men” because the land the Great Spirit had given to them was not as beautiful as theirs.<sup>180</sup>

Naturally, in her journal pages, the young woman lingered on the most pleasant details of New England and its seasons as experienced during her year-long stay as well: in the entry of September 10 she commented that upon her return “I shall have tales to tell of my baking and brewing, of my pumpkin pies, and bread made [from] Indian corn, (...) of gathering of the wild fruit in the woods, and cranberries in the meadows.”<sup>181</sup>

In typical Whittier fashion, some of the best passages were the ones adapted from “historical or legendary sources,” such as the sinister happenings that had taken place at the house of Goody Morse, the woman reputed to be a witch and almost executed, whose story was based on true events recounted by the Mathers and local historians.<sup>182</sup> In a time when the widespread belief in “the supernatural agency of witchcraft (...) afforded a ready solution of every thing strange” Elizabeth Morse and her husband, William, a man who was said to be “very worthy, but credulous [and] unsuspecting,” were an elderly couple who resided in Newbury with their young grandson who engaged in all sorts of mischief, leading people to believe that the house was haunted.<sup>183</sup> In the autumn of 1679, shortly after becoming acquainted with their story, and with great pity for their plight, their neighbour, Caleb Powell, a navigator versed in the art of “astronomy [and] astrology” suspected it was indeed the rascal who played those tricks on his grandparents and decided to put a stop to his malicious japes.<sup>184</sup> But, in trying to prove it, he was himself accused of being a wizard, responsible for the hoaxes—he took the boy away with him and the unexplained events ceased as suddenly as they had broken out, which “plainly showed that this Powell had the wicked spirits in his keeping,” and that he could “chain them up, or let them out, as he pleased.”<sup>185</sup> Once the charges against him were dropped, nobody wanted to concede to him that the boy was guilty, Elizabeth Morse was then the next in line to be convicted: the public opinion soon turned on her, sadly demonstrating how the region was enduring what Clarence Hobbs called a “reign of terror,” where

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<sup>180</sup> Whittier. *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 119. The role of Native Americans and their culture in Whittier’s poetry will be discussed in the chapter three.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>182</sup> John Pickard, p. 124.

<sup>183</sup> Joshua Coffin. *A Sketch of the History of Newbury, Newburyport, and West Newbury, from 1635 to 1845*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>184</sup> Charles W. Upham. *Salem Witchcraft*, vol. 1, pp. 440-441. Whittier set the scene a year before.

<sup>185</sup> Whittier. *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 100.

“no one was safe” and “the honored citizen of one day often found himself doomed upon the next.”<sup>186</sup>

In this fictional treatment of witchcraft Whittier didn't overdramatize the unusual occurrences in the manner of the two Mathers, who took such realities very seriously; quite the opposite, he “ridicule[d] the validity of the spectral evidence” presented against Goody Morse, exemplifying how the delusion stemmed from ministers and witch-hunters who took advantage of the guillible rural population, creating a climate of hysteria and excitement, fueled by small-town secrets and superstitions, and the fear of the supernatural instilled from the pulpit.<sup>187</sup>

In the same matter-of-fact way, Whittier reported of another girl of Hampton, who, in the October of 1678, was thought to be bewitched, judging that, as Robert Pike said (the persecution opponent of “How the Women Went From Dover,” also a character in the *Journal*), her behaviour could be “sooner cured” by a “birch twig, smartly laid on,” than by “hanging (...) all the old women [of] the Colony.”<sup>188</sup> He returned to an exquisitely Dark Romantic tone only in the final pages of the book, for the ill-fated wedding of Rebecca Rawson, the daughter of the secretary, later abandoned and killed by an earthquake. It was a rainy, windy day of June, “exceeding cold for the season,” heralded by a series of omens which even the narrator, who disliked the groom, couldn't help but “secretly” believe: the mirror in the hall had been broken, the “family arms,” suspended over the fireplace had been “thrown down” and completely burned, except for “the head of the raven in the crest.”<sup>189</sup>

How the legacy of this past, the tales of witchcraft and the unknown, folk traditions and personal recollections merged with whimsical characters and the wonders of the lakes, forests and mountains of New England to bring to life a quintessential Whittier poem, whose essence reflected the soul of his homeland and its people, will now be explored.

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<sup>186</sup> Clarence W. Hobbs. *Lynn and Surroundings*, p. 53.

<sup>187</sup> John Pickard, p. 128.

<sup>188</sup> Whittier. *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 84.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189. It is common knowledge that the raven, sometimes called “the devil's bird,” whose plumage was changed from snow-white to pitch-black for its disobedience, has always been associated with, and foreteller of death (or seen as a messenger from the Otherworld); for more information on the origins of the evil presage see Frederick E. Hulme, *Natural History, Lore and Legend*, 1895, from p. 240 to p. 246.

### 2.3 A New World Arcadia

As a Fireside Poet, Whittier wrote for his readers who, in the cold New England evenings, gathered around the fireplace to enjoy his pleasant rhymes and the native scenes.<sup>190</sup> In an article penned by Robert Collyer, an Unitarian minister, in 1871, the poet, talking about Burns, his first introduction to poetry, explained how

I found that the things out of which poems came were not, as I had always imagined, somewhere away off (...), they were right there (...) among the people I knew. The common things of our common life I found were full of poetry. It was a new and a perfect revelation.<sup>191</sup>

“Mabel Martin. A Harvest Idyl” was the epitome of said epiphany and Whittier’s poetic aesthetic, telling the story of the sad daughter of a woman executed for witchcraft, rescued from her loneliness by an older, chivalrous man in a classic New England setting. Indeed, in the autumn of 1874, he went to the extent of considering it the “best poem of the kind” he had “ever written,” where history, nature, character sketching and imagination were blended together to create a solid example of regional poetry.<sup>192</sup> There was a legend in Whittier’s neighbourhood from which the ballad would seem to derive, based on the true story of Goody Martin, mother of the fictional Mabel, the only woman on “the north side of the Merrimack” hanged on Gallows Hill, whose real house-site was one of the main locations of the poem.<sup>193</sup> She lived in Amesbury, Mass., near the mouth of the Powwow river, and, being an elderly widow of confident demeanour, in need of help to run the homestead, she frequently encountered disrespect from her male neighbors. By the time of the witch’ hunt, Susannah was already reputed to be in league with the enemy; several citizens, including those who saw the moment as an opportunity to take revenge on her, testified against her: one of the witnesses, Sarah Atkinson, declared that, on an extremely rainy day, Goody Susie had come to her house in Newbury on foot, and “bragged and showed” her how she had managed to

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<sup>190</sup> Jane C. Nylander, in *Our Own Snug Fireside: Images of the New England Home, 1760-1860*, acknowledges that this precise image “became one of the (...) focal points of the romanticization of the New England home (p. 239).

<sup>191</sup> Robert Collyer. “A Talk with Whittier”, p. 527.

<sup>192</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 3, p. 324. The first draft of the poem had been published some years earlier with the title “The Witch’s Daughter.”

<sup>193</sup> Samuel Pickard, p. 598. Susannah Martin is the second witch mentioned in *Margaret Smith’s Journal* in the page before. In *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, Cotton Mather described her as one the most “wicked creatures in the world” (p. 148).

stay dry.<sup>194</sup> For this reason the Atkinson house, abandoned since the 1690s, became a “bugbear” for frightened children who, whenever they passed by it, began to run as fast as they could, “believing it haunted” by Goody Martin, who had been there.<sup>195</sup>

“Mabel Martin” is one of the ballads in which Whittier is said to have “traced” the path he travelled on, in this case, to get to Susannah’s cottage, thus adding his own personal touch to the storytelling.<sup>196</sup> This feature reinforces a valuable “multilayered” reading of Whittier’s poems, which captures, as if it were a photograph, the traces that the past had left on the region in Whittier’s time—the lore that periodically resurfaces in his poems as well as his contemporaries’ attitude toward it—and the very age of the poet himself which, to the readers of today, leaves the same impression of remoteness and mystique: the poems then, with their genuine simplicity and spontaneity, provide an interesting and reliable “timeline” of the history and landscape of New England.

The first section of the ballad begins with a description of the valley in all its glory, where pines and cedars cast their shadows on the meadows, surrounded by corn fields and the murmuring river; here and there, brown-roofed houses and their chimney tops “half hid in leaves” were standing on the tranquil hills and gentle green slopes, inhabited by the “farmer folk” who quietly worked in their orchards and vineyards, ignoring the temptation of the city’s wealth.<sup>197</sup> The poet appreciated these fellow Quakers, their traditional lifestyle and the strong family ties; inviting the reader to follow him on the journey, both imaginary and real, he proceeded to show the corner where Goody Martin’s cellar is located: the century-old walls, built in the “dim” colonial period, were covered by vines, around them there were burdocks, black nightshade and the sumac with its clusters of red berries.<sup>198</sup> Ultimately, as the sun is going down, he welcomes us to “sit with [him]” and listen to this idyl of the bygone days.

In the second section Whittier set the lifelike scene: it was harvest time in the valley and a husking bee was held in Esek Harden’s barn; young people gathered under the rising moon, shining through

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<sup>194</sup> Joseph Merrill. *History of Amesbury and Merrimac*, p. 133. Rebecca Davis, author of *Gleanings from Merrimac Valley*, reports that according to a neighbour, she was “no witch but an arrogant scold, as was her mother before her;” after all she had “no society save that of her hens” (pp. 50-51).

<sup>195</sup> Katharine Abbott. *Old Paths and Legends of New England*, p. 232.

<sup>196</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Whittier-Land*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>197</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 63-64.

<sup>198</sup> Whittier’s extensive knowledge of the flora of his whereabouts is certainly remarkable, considering his Colour-blindness.

the trees and the mows, they laughed, sang and told each other stories of the past.<sup>199</sup> But in this bright autumn night, isolated from the merrymaking, there was the “sweetest voice” and the “loveliest face” of them all, Mabel, whose “smile [was] sadder than her tears.<sup>200</sup> She was sitting alone in silence because no one would dare to befriend the daughter of a witch: less than a year had passed since the hanging of her mother and hardly anybody had bothered to feel sorry for her, in fact, they were convinced that the will of God had been fulfilled. The poet, empathizing with the orphan maiden, continued his storytelling with an account of the months Mabel, forlorn, spent mourning her loss: the “dreary” winter days and nights, the endless summer hours, and when autumn was at the door, neither the “sunset-tinted leaves” nor the “Indian Summer’s airs of balm” would awake her soul from the apathy she had fallen into.

In this third section Whittier abandoned the delightfully bucolic atmosphere to focus on the girl’s alienation from, and at the hands of, the very same community, letting its darker side emerge; she was banished from church, she “saw the horseshoe’s curved charm / To guard against her mother’s harm” (176-177) above her neighbours’ doors and, even at the husking party, she was taunted to the point of leaving in tears, hiding her face in the apron.<sup>201</sup> In the penultimate section the setting drastically changes, the poet added a gothic undertone that eerily reflected Mabel’s despair: she walked home through “the nameless terrors of the wood,” away from the “harvest lights of Harden[‘s]” and saw “her shadow gliding in the moon” as if she were being chased by a ghost in the windy night. Once she arrived, the impression was of a house “silent [and] wide in the moonbeams’ ghastly glare / Its windows had a dead man’s stare!” (236-237) while the shadow of the birch on the porch resembled a “spectral hand.” The chilling stillness was suddenly broken by “the night-cry of a boding bird” and Mabel, terrified, began to pray.

The ballad culminates in a truly heart-wrenching climax: after wondering whether the worthy Esek had the same contempt for her that the others had, Mabel begged God to die; she then soon heard the voice of her dear friend who, determined to put an end to the maiden’s sorrow, asked Mabel to marry him. The happy ending —connoted by the use of pleasant imagery, the couple returning to the barn, through the “dewy fields,” toward the glow of the lanterns, the harvest moon shining bright again in the autumn sky and the wind whispering “it [was] well”— aligned with the author’s

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<sup>199</sup> Hezekiah Butterworth captured some of these in *In Old New England; The Romance of a Colonial Fireside* (1895).

<sup>200</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>201</sup> For a more in-depth look at the origin and history of the horseshoe as a charm against witches and evil spirits see *The Magic of the Horse-Shoe* by Robert M. Lawrence (1898).

moral compass, having Esek stand up for Mabel in front of everyone (including the young woman who had accused the girl of having bewitched him) and promise her to be by her side.<sup>202</sup> Most importantly, Whittier never doubted Susannah Martin to be anything but a pious, innocent widow who suffered the tragic consequences of the prejudices that the Puritan society had against individuals perceived as different and who were, therefore, punished as such (“witch or not, God knows—not I”).

A ballad similar in theme and intent to “Mabel Martin” is “The Witch of Wenham,” written twenty years later, in 1877, which revisited the outbreak of witch-hunting in New England as experienced by a young woman, rumored to be “the witch of Wenham Lake” by the inhabitants of Naumkeag (the original Native American name of Salem). Abby Woodman, Whittier’s cousin, reveals that the tale was inspired by the sight of Prince house in Danvers, Mass., (near the poet’s late residence) in whose attic the suspected witch had been “confined overnight.”<sup>203</sup> During a ride around the lake with Abby’s adopted daughter, Phoebe, he “improvised” for her “a marvellous tale of the sad days of witchcraft” which he afterwards versified.<sup>204</sup> The ballad, in its combination of local history, literary influences, and meticulous attention to natural details, was yet another convincing example of Whittier’s mastery of regional material: “it seems one of my best,” he wrote to his editor, satisfied with the result.<sup>205</sup> Indeed, according to Helen Clarke the poet succeeded in letting his “fancies play about this grim (...) episode” creating a true New England romance evocative of the “days of chivalry” without losing its local character.<sup>206</sup>

In those colonial times the women ostracized from their communities were usually widows or spinsters, or, in the case of the protagonist of “The Witch of Wenham,” they were vilified because of their nubile status; in particular, Whittier chose to emphasise the distance between the vicious

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<sup>202</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 67.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>204</sup> Abby J. Woodman. *Reminiscences of John Greenleaf Whittier’s Life at Oak Knoll, Danvers, Mass.*, p. 22. He dedicated to little Phoebe a poem named “Red Riding-Hood” in which the sweet child wished to feed the animals in the cold winter weather: at sunset, on a snowy, windy day, she noticed the birds and the squirrels through the “frosty-starred” window and, feeling sorry for them, she asked permission to go out and give them nuts and corn. The second scene of the poem is thus the funny little girl “half lost within her boots” with her scarlet hood nearly disappearing in the deep snow, calling the squirrel from the hollow tree, “come, black old crow, —come, poor blue-jay, / Before your supper’s blown away!” (38-39). The poem ends with Whittier praying God to grant this future woman the same kindness and empathy of her childhood years (Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 408-409).

<sup>205</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 522. Speaking of influences, Adkins, in “Sources of some of Whittier’s Lines,” shows the resemblance between Whittier’s “The blind bats *on their leathern wings* / Went wheeling round and round” (163-164) and William Collins’s verse in “Ode to Evening,” “Now air is hushed, save where the weak-ey’d bat / With short shrill shriek flits by *on leathern wing*” (9-10, italics mine).

<sup>206</sup> Helen A. Clarke. *The Poets’ New England*, p. 110.

prejudices of the town's citizens and the gentleness and integrity of the fair maiden with dramatic passages that "illustrate[d] his complete understanding of the psychology of witchcraft and [provincial] superstition."<sup>207</sup> The first character in the ballad to voice her ghastly concerns about the woman is Andrew's mother (the young man enamoured of her, about to leave the house to go fishing), who warned him that he should beware of the "blue-eyed witch" sitting on the bank of the lake since

She weaves her golden hair; she sings  
Her spell-song low and faint;  
The wickedest witch in Salem jail  
Is to that girl a saint. (17-20)

He, however, couldn't agree less with her, for in his eyes the maiden had the noblest heart in all of Wenham, taking care of her mother and reading the Bible. After begging him vainly to stay, she blamed the "Wenham witch" for stealing the soul of her son, thus asking the reverend to lift the spell and let him be free. Another woman, Ann Putnam, swore that she had seen her perform an incantation "bare-armed, loose-haired" around a well, beneath the full moon, likewise, "many a goodwife" were present when she uttered some words that made the buttercups grow wings and "turn to yellow birds." Ironically, as predicted by the spirit of the age, her harmony with nature — the wild bees obeying her—, her meekness during sermon —when the "godly minister note[d] well" the spellbound young men staring at her— were taken by the townspeople as unmistakable evidence of her fall from grace, further tainting her reputation among them. What began as insidious household whispers soon escalated into action: once a Native American slave, Tituba, claimed that the young witch had signed the devil's book by the Quasycung river (today known as

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<sup>207</sup> John Pickard is also of the opinion that some of these (along with sections of "How The Women Went From Dover," with the exception of certain "sentimental touches" and digressions spoiling the lifelike descriptions of both figures and scenes) were the "best rendering of colonial customs" that Whittier ever composed (p. 76).



Parker River) and others recognized her spectre, the feared witch-hunter, likened to the fourth horseman of the Apocalypse, rode out on his gray horse to find her and bring her before the court.<sup>208</sup> Dr. Iola K. Eastburn, in her doctoral thesis, points out the sheer amount of influence that Heinrich Heine's famous "Die Lorelei" had on these initial scenes, especially the second and third stanza:

Die schönste Jungfrau sitzt  
Dort oben wunderbar,  
Ihr goldnes Geschmeide blitzet,  
Sie kämmt ihr goldenes Haar.

Sie kämmt es mit goldenem Kamme,  
Und singt ein Lied dabei;  
Das hat eine wundersame,  
Gewaltige Melodei.<sup>209</sup>

Whittier indeed was the Fireside poet that most "reflect[ed] in his verse his reading of other [writers]," although, as Dr. Eastburn clarifies, his overall interest in German culture didn't correspond to its authors' actual influence.<sup>210</sup> The second part of the ballad focuses on the young witch's vicissitude: she was in a dreamy mood, intent on "shaping for her bridal dress / Her mother's wedding gown" (117-118), all around her there were the serene lake, the birds and the psithurism of the trees—a blissful *leitmotif* that well accompanied her innocent nature—when the witch-hunter, showing utter disregard for the girl's plea to bid farewell to her mother, instructed her

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<sup>208</sup> Both Ann Putnam and Tituba were real people: the former was the daughter of a church member, one of the key witnesses at the witch trials, the latter worked for the minister of Salem, Reverend Samuel Parris. In 1692, Miss Putnam accused her of bewitching Parris's daughter and two other children, she initially denied and then confessed that "the devil [had] urged her to sign a book" to make a covenant with him and hurt them (Calef, p. 189). Tituba also named several rumoured witches in the village (among them Sarah Good and Sarah Osburn, they and Tituba were the first three witches of Salem to be arrested, she blamed them for persuading her to join them), hence escaping the death penalty and starting the greatest witch-hunt and hysteria in the region. It is thought that Mr. Parris perpetrated violence against her to extort his desired response; moreover, different historians linked her description of the devil—a man in a "tall hat with white hair and black clothes"—with her master, Parris (Katherine Howe. *The Penguin Book of Witches*, p. 90). The author even argues that Tituba's remarkable accuracy in chronicling the manifestations of witchcraft in New England was rather unusual for an "illiterate slave" since the details were "scholastic" and "too consistent," as if "com[ing] from someone else." She had presumably been instructed on the right words to use during her confession (95). The result was so convincing that magistrates took it as confirmation that "witches were around," (for she had been clever enough to say exactly what they wanted to hear) relying more on the deposition of a slave than that of a churchgoer (101). Tituba appeared in Longfellow's *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms* too; Giles was another victim of Putnam's delusions. To learn more about Tituba's story see "Tituba's Confession: The Multicultural Dimensions of the 1692 Salem Witch-Hunt" by Elaine G. Breslaw (1997). It is curious to note the presence of a yellow bird in Tituba's accounts, the same motif that Whittier associated with his witch's alleged sorcery.

<sup>209</sup> Iola K. Eastburn. *Whittier's Relation to German Life and Thought*, p. 95. According to German folklore, the Lorelei was a beautiful undine who used to sit on the rocky cliffs of the Rhine to lure sailors to their demise.

<sup>210</sup> Adkins. "Sources of some of Whittier's Lines," p. 242.

to follow him to Salem.<sup>211</sup> That night, alone in the dark attic of an old farmhouse, she prayed and “trembling asked” if in some “forgotten dream,”

Some secret thought or sin  
Had shut good angels from her heart  
And left the bad ones in? (150-152)

Helen Clarke specifies that such fear was not uncommon among people who were accused all of a sudden: in this moving moment Whittier realistically captured the haunting feelings of those condemned to the gallows tree.<sup>212</sup> He closed the second half of the ballad by having his helpless, hapless heroine find her happy ending; she managed to escape by sliding down the roof and avoided the trial with the help of her caring lover, who took her with him, along the “wild wood-paths,” to the more tolerant and compassionate Quakers in the distant town of Berwick (it goes without saying that the general consensus was that the fiend had personally intervened to save one of his league). It’s not hard to discern Whittier’s judgement in his final lines, where he spoke highly of the Quakers who, without hesitation, welcomed the “hunted maiden” to live with them, waiting for better times that only the following spring brought, when nature came to life again, and so did both young and old, “like souls escaped from hell.” It needs to be remembered that the poet’s critical portrait of these dark days in American history didn’t mar his enthusiasm for their deeply rooted traditions and rich folkloric legacy, kept alive through storytelling from generation to generation; even during his old age, he continued to be fascinated by the legends of “old New England” and the tales of his childhood, which offered him a pleasant diversion from the ongoing civil war and his loved ones’ deaths.<sup>213</sup> He also encouraged his acquaintances to write these “old stories,” because for him they were a remedy against the soulless materialism of his “matter of fact” age.<sup>214</sup> But Dr. Faye Ringel reports that, in the Gilded age, especially in the 1890s, “popular magazines” began to portray the region as a “backwater” whose population had become “sinister” and “inbred” and whose “backwoods perversions and family secrets” in the back of beyond were common themes in the

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<sup>211</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>212</sup> Clarke, p. 109.

<sup>213</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 3, p. 4.

<sup>214</sup> Wagenknecht, p. 132.

works of contemporary regionalists; for the first time the Merrimack valley “seemed [to be] left behind by history.”<sup>215</sup>

It was not until the 1820s, thanks to the waterfalls in the lower part of the valley, that a rapid development of manufacturing industry had “revolutionize[d] the region,” however, the westward expansion and the promises of the coastal cities, perceived as giving a better prospect of life to those complaining about the hardship of the country and its severe winters, led to a rural exodus; a gradual and steady economic decline ensued.<sup>216</sup> The resourceful westward-bound pioneers abandoned the land which remained in the hands of the more conservative families who worked on the hill farms of northern and western New England; its rural towns, including those connected by the railroad, shared the same fate: little by little their residents drifted away, in search of more lucrative jobs, sometimes in the mill towns in the south of the region; the thriving cultural centers were now sleepy villages, with silent streets and decaying homesteads (following the Gold Rush era, history repeated itself several decades later, when the communities of the Far West, their coal mines and the timber towns of the Pacific Northwest turned into ghost towns—a goldmine of legends and Native folklore).<sup>217</sup> Among the ones who stayed there were the women who experienced at first hand the repercussions of the Civil War: spinsters and widows living in “modest circumstances in village homes or on family farms (...) unwilling and unable to reap the benefits of the industrial age.”<sup>218</sup> Clifton Johnson, author and photographer, on one of his visits to the countryside, noticed how the “majority” of the log farmhouses that were actually still inhabited were old and weather-beaten and life on the farm was similar to that of fifty years earlier: New Englanders’ renowned thriftiness and strong work ethic, which had maximized their self-sufficiency, made it possible for the population of the interior uplands to survive the downfall of the second half of the century, when Atlantic coastal towns and urban centers ceased to rely on the crops harvested by these rural communities—and in exchange sold them manufactured goods—in

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<sup>215</sup> Faye J. Ringel. *A Companion to American Gothic*, pp. 145-146. The most famous (and controversial) article was “A New England Hill Town” written by Rollin L. Hartt for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1899 (Harold F. Wilson. *The Hill Country of Northern New England*, p. 151).

<sup>216</sup> Frederick J. Turner. “New England 1830-1850,” p. 154.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155. Here and there, the “wealthy summer resident” had built an estate (161).

<sup>218</sup> Nylander, p. 5.

favour of the wide array of produce provided by the western states.<sup>219</sup> In 1979 scholars from Brown University attempted to identify, by means of historical archeology, internal factors that, together with external ones, impacted New England's development, namely "ecological crises" stemming from the "environmental impact of rural industries [and] intensive agriculture," such as deforestation, which caused the demographic and economic regression since the land could sustain "few, if any" locals.<sup>220</sup>

The lyrical imagination of Whittier was always reconciled with his understanding of the unique heritage, landscape and social history of the Merrimack valley: "The Homestead," written in 1886, addressed this issue, exploring the theme of absence by capturing the impression that these abandoned homes left on the passer-by. These "melancholy spectacles," as he called them,<sup>221</sup> nestled against "the wooded hills" and were now "ghost[s] of a dead home (...) on wasted lands."<sup>222</sup> The bleak imagery begins immediately and conveyed Whittier's (and the general) feelings, setting a scene that contrasts with the memory of what the place once was and brings about a reflection upon the passage of time. There were the "forsaken" farm-fields where corn and rye, the "old-time harvests," used to grow in the summer, the unkempt gardens, and a "sad pathetic red rose" blooming beside a "roofless porch." Whittier continued to describe in crisp detail the somber sight, which a wild and untamed nature was taking back; the words that he used —"mould," "empty rooms," "dust," "snake," "spider"— shared little or no semantic associations with those the readers of Whittier are familiar with when talking about New England: a close reading of this passage could plausibly interpret the poet's choice of language as indicative of his view of his homeland, where the countryfolk and their merry-go-rounds of life were as much part of the soul of New England as its natural wonders. At the moment he was writing, in his late years, many of them were gone, and so was the world of his childhood and the rural zeitgeist, hence the lethargic atmosphere, only a dead-leaf echo of its former self —"the leaning barn, about to fall / Resounds no more on husking

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<sup>219</sup> Clifton Johnson. *A book of country, clouds, and sunshine*, p. 104. He denied any resemblance between the inhabitants, "as a class," and their stereotypical onstage and press portrayals (211). On the contrary, he commented rather negatively on the stubbornness of the urban proletariat who kept choosing "squalor in the city" over the "comfort in the country," even though the latter would be "much happier" and more satisfying than their usual crowded tenements, the noise and the bustle. But "the masses always follow the turn of the current whichever way it (...) runs" and the rustic life had the name of being "very lonesome." Johnson believed that nothing could be farther from the truth (Clifton Johnson. *The New England Country*, pp. 36-37).

<sup>220</sup> Peter Thorbahn and Stephen Mrozowski. "Ecological Dynamics and Rural New England Historical Sites," p. 131.

<sup>221</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 718.

<sup>222</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 135-136.

eves” (21-22). The next quatrain is charged with decidedly “provincial gothic” overtones, when the poet exclaimed:

So sad, so drear! It seems almost  
Some haunting Presence makes it sign;  
That down yon shadowy lane some ghost  
Might drive his spectral kine!

O home so desolate and lorn!  
Did all thy memories die with thee? (25-30)

The brooding tone of the lines introduces Whittier’s doubtful mood, where, with a series of warm and cozy images illustrating slow life in the homestead, he wondered whether any of that really happened because time had erased every trace of the past: weddings, the first fire of the season, maidens sitting at the spinning wheel, making “light their toil with mirth,” a child walking down the stairs and playing in the snow, the grandma knitting, “rocking to and fro” in her chair. On its part, nature kept “the home secrets well” from him: “the murmuring brook, the sighing breeze / The pine’s slow whisper, cannot tell” (45-46) the real story of the old homestead and of the passing of generations, so the poet couldn’t count on them either. In the second half of the poem Whittier invoked the spirit of his mother-land as he called forth a new age of prosperity and growth in New England’s forgotten uplands, where the “wanderers,” seeking fortune elsewhere, could return from mill and company towns to build their home “once more” and “reclaim the waste and outworn lands / And reign thereon as kings!” (75-76). It’s important to notice how, in his heartfelt plea, he resolved to present nature in its raw beauty, which resonated with the restored hope for the future of New England, amusing the fancy of the reader:

Come back to bayberry-scented slopes  
And fragrant fern, and ground-nut vine;  
Breathe airs blown over holt and copse  
Sweet with black birch and pine. (57-60)

Whittier believed that there was a societal and physical kind of freedom that only country living could provide, regardless of the wealth one accumulated from the work in the homestead. He

encouraged the repopulation of these areas, expressing his preference for their traditions, their humbleness and ingenuity over the cold indifference and alienation of modern city living.<sup>223</sup>

In *Songs of Labor and Reform*, a collection of highly spirited poems about countrymen and their industriousness composed in the mid- to late 1840s, he had already made a name of himself as a New England bard, the spokesman for the harsh yet idyllic provincial America of his homespun verses. These rustic portrayals of fishermen, huskers, drovers, lumbermen, ship-builders (and so on, foreshadowing the poetry of Whitman and Frost) had demonstrated the poet's ability to see the poetic and romantic in ordinary people going about their work in the pastures, snow-covered forests, hay barns... According to Stoddard, Whittier's genius lay precisely in this commitment in using native materials as the major sources of his subject matter, creating what he regards as "the most characteristic of all [the poet's] production."<sup>224</sup> The result was an anthology of poems of an exquisitely folk character and optimistic message, where he ennobled toil and toilers, inspired from and dedicated to his "Yankee Land."<sup>225</sup>

Whittier infused each of them with a rather cinematic quality, with the workers in the foreground and nature all around: in "The Huskers," for example, he delivered a slice of New England life and its picturesque scenery from the very first lines, enticing the readers to dive into the slowly unfolding poem that brings us directly into the heart(hs) of the Merrimack valley, "it was late in mild October, and the long autumnal rain / Had left the summer harvest-fields all green with grass again" (1-2).<sup>226</sup> We are told that the "first sharp frosts" had already fallen on the woodlands and wild meadows, among whose bright leaves and aster flowers laughing boys and girls passed their afternoons; as the glorious autumn day was nearing the end, the "merry huskers" arrived at the barns. Inside, lanterns were shining on the "pleasant scene," where the "old men" were reminiscing about the "good ol' days" and "happy children" were playing hide-and-seek, until they all came together to sing "The Corn Song," thanking God for the abundant harvest prepared for the winter storage in view of the cold months ahead. The crisp and colourful imagery of autumn helped bring the words to life, making it one of the finest seasonal poems written by Whittier.

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<sup>223</sup> An insight into Whittier's opinions on the latter can be found in his essays about the city of Lowell.

<sup>224</sup> Stoddard, p. 125.

<sup>225</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 677. In a letter to American poet and teacher Lucy Larcom, some twenty years later, he confessed that he "would rather chop woods than talk poetry, with strangers" because he barely tolerated fame. And, indeed, he thought the life of a "hard-working farmer (...) altogether more enviable than that of a writer or politician" (*Ibid. The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 3, p. 152).

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid. The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 363-364.

Similarly, he painted another charming, rustic picture of fall and early winter in New England in “The Lumbermen,” the verses dedicated to the hard-working loggers of the region:

Through the tall and naked timber,  
Column-like and old,  
Gleam the sunsets of November,  
From their skies of gold.<sup>227</sup> (5-8)

The speaker is one of the lumberjacks who, in the first stanzas, vividly introduced his familiar woods: the fallen leaves, floating on the water, the wild geese on their southbound journey, the moose on his nocturnal stroll. Here, in their “North-land,” he and his fellow lumbermen, glad of each other’s company, albeit nostalgic for the sake of the family they had left, had made their “camp of winter,” on the “mossy carpets” near mountains lakes and the Penobscot River, where there was always a “wild and solemn” music on windy nights, coming from the pine trees. The poem continues with the man encouraging his teamwork:

Up, my comrades! up and doing!  
Manhood’s rugged play  
Still renewing, bravely hewing  
Through the world our way![,]<sup>228</sup> (141-144)

confident that their efforts would be repaid after meeting their wives, daughters and sisters, “angels of our home,” again. Whittier, however, never glossed over the fact that this way of life was not for everyone: young people, in particular, longed for a change of surroundings: such was the theme of one of his most famous poems, “Maud Muller,” written in 1854, a few years after *Songs of Labor*, centered on the encounter (then unfolding as a wistful reverie and a sudden return to reality, the poem’s underlying message being the necessity to confront it) between Maud, a maiden born and raised in rural New England and a judge having a horse ride in the countryside. The “idyl” wasn’t based on a true story, as he specifically mentioned in the note preceding the lines, although “a hint of it” was inspired by the sight of a girl working in the hay fields while “resting under the shade of an apple-tree” during a summer journey along the coast of Maine with his sister.<sup>229</sup> Writing to Lydia

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<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 359-360.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361. In “Sources of some of Whittier’s Lines” Adkins stresses the similarity between Whittier’s ending and the final stanza of Longfellow’s 1838 “A Psalm of Life” (242).

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

Sigourney, who enjoyed that “exquisite ballad of the purest Saxon” very much, he wondered how those occasional and impromptu verses had found “more favor” than his “most elaborate pieces,” believing the former not worthy of being seriously analyzed.<sup>230</sup> The overall musicality, the well-known ending and the references to Sir Philip Sidney told otherwise; additionally, John Pickard commended his avoidance of “overelaboration” and sentimentality in his realistic examination and critical questioning of romantic love: the lack of definitive answer contributed to the “universality” and pathos of the ballad.<sup>231</sup> The simple story perfectly encapsulated the hopes and delusions of a young woman, the daughter of a German American farmer, who dreamt of living a different life somewhere else. She was working and singing but, in spite of the richness of nature all around her,

(...) when she glanced to the far-off town,  
White from its hill-slope looking down,

The sweet song died, and a vague unrest  
And a nameless longing filled her breast,—

A wish that she hardly dared to own,  
For something better than she had known. (7-12)

In his presentation of the character, Whittier used “wealth” to describe her beauty and healthy glow, a choice of word that purposefully contrasted with the idea of wealth Maud had. Her sentiment intensified the moment she met the judge, who stopped to greet her, asking for some water —the spot in which the scene took place and the girl’s disposition have so far resembled the account that Whittier had given of his fortuitous encounter. The judge marvelled at the arcadian landscape before him, “then talked of haying, and wondered whether / The cloud in the west would bring foul weather” (27-28) until he decided to leave. Charmed by him, she started daydreaming about being his wife, elated at the thought of all the things that he could provide; if she seemed to be far more concerned about the materialistic prospect of life (silks and wine), her genuine desire to help her family (a coat for his father, a boat for his brother) and the poor promptly redeemed her: her harmless indulgence was nothing compared to the challenges she would soon have to face. In a sadly ironic twist, we are told that the judge was yearning for the exact lifestyle that Maud wanted

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<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.* *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, p. 290.

<sup>231</sup> John Pickard, pp. 82-83. Pickard nevertheless acknowledges the ballad’s plain diction and unremarkable settings, the stereotypical portrayal of Maud and the “vague” characterization of the judge —the only thing we are told about his appearance is that he was “manly”—; he justifies Whittier’s stylistic choices because they represented “types” (84).



to abandon, but was forced by his family to marry within his social circle thus continuing to live for “power” —“so, closing his heart, the Judge rode on / And Maud was left on the field alone” (59-60). They never quite forgot that idealized day and both settled into a bittersweet life of what-ifs: he dreamt of “meadows and clover blooms” imagining Maud’s hazel eyes, full of “innocent surprise”;<sup>232</sup> she bore the marks of “sorrow, and childbirth pain” after marrying a peasant, and, sometimes, she still pretended to live the life of her dreams, with the Judge by her side, only to return, bereft, to her “burden[s]” again. According to John Pickard, the poignancy of the ballad lies “not in their failure to marry, but in their refusal to confront reality.”<sup>233</sup> By the end of the poem, Whittier gave the melancholic story —and social phenomenon— a different, and personal, perspective, which encouraged the reader to transcend these earthly matters, implying that, however sad our might-have-beens can be, the far more important promise of spiritual eternity awaits us all, confident that there will come a time when even those who don’t want to believe will open their eyes to see beyond the veil.

God pity them both! and pity us all,  
Who vainly the dreams of youth recall.

For of all sad words of tongue or pen,  
The saddest are these: “It might have been!”<sup>234</sup>

Ah, well! for us all some sweet hope lies  
Deeply buried from human eyes;

And, in the hereafter, angels may  
Roll the stone from its grave away! (103-110)

Having shed light on the poet’s attitude toward the changing socio-economic order of his homeland, the last part of this chapter will focus solely on the theme of nature in his regional poetry, since it occupied a significant place within his poetic corpus.

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<sup>232</sup> Here, Alwin Thaler, author of “Whittier and the English Poets,” draws a parallel between the lines “And the proud man sighed, with a secret pain, / Ah, that I were free again!” (75-76) and Sidney’s 33rd sonnet from *Astrophil and Stella*: “I might!— unhappy word— O me, I might, / And then would not, or could not, see my bliss;” (1-2) of 1591 (61).

<sup>233</sup> John Pickard, p. 83

<sup>234</sup> Thaler suggests these lines are the second strong influence of Sidney’s sonnet on Whittier: “How fair a day was near: O punish’d eyes, / That I had been more foolish, —or more wise!” (13-14) (61).

Whittier's New England was a place full of mystery and beauty, familiar and unknown at the same time; as evinced from his accurate records, full of local allusions, he was well acquainted with the geography of the country. His nature poetry aligned with the loco-descriptive poems currently in vogue, whose lyrics evoked the American Romantic predilection for the nation's natural wonders and tendency to correlate virtue with rurality.<sup>235</sup> Their subjects were descriptions of "a mountain, a river, (...) a town, (...) a journey" which inspired a personal meditation on morality, history or native legends —what Professor Buell calls a "dignification of the overlooked"—<sup>236</sup> and if the poem's overall meaning was not exceedingly profound, it nevertheless offered a charming rendition of the "landscape and its nuances" with a didactic end.<sup>237</sup> Sometimes, he even drew inspiration for his poems from correspondence with friends: it's the case of "The Mayflowers," composed after reading the note accompanying the flowers received as a gift from Plymouth on April 30th, 1856; his friend explained to him that the trailing arbutus was "*the* flower" for the inhabitants of the town, "all our people gather them at this season" to send them "to their friends who have them not" — they were especially meaningful to "all descendants of the Pilgrims and to all lovers of freedom,"<sup>238</sup> because they were the first (native) plant to "greet" the Pilgrims after their first, harsh winter.<sup>239</sup> Whittier's descriptions were extremely detailed, as if they belonged to travel books; they beautifully captured the local color and culture of nineteenth-century New England through his faithful topography and compelling imagery, which placed him in an "anthropological niche" just like the Lake poets:<sup>240</sup> in the note attached to the "The Maids of Attitash" of 1866, it is reported that Whittier told editor and publisher James Thomas Fields of a lake, Kimball's Pond, in the north of Amesbury that he deemed a "great deal prettier" than Wordsworth's St. Mary's Lake, from which a "glimpse of the Pawtuckaway range of mountains in Nottingham" could be seen and ash-tree, pine and maple groves were all around.<sup>241</sup> The poem was a convincing paean to nature in summertime

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<sup>235</sup> Buell. *The Environmental Imagination*, p. 57.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, *New England Literary Culture: from Revolution through Renaissance*, p. 285. An example is that of Whittier's nature poems "The Merrimac," "Sunset on the Bearcamp," "Storm on Lake Asquam," "Hazel Blossoms" and so on. Another common motif was that of the "great, ancient tree" and its symbolic meanings (306-307).

<sup>238</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 391.

<sup>239</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>240</sup> Clarke, p. 5. According to Stedman, such were the strength of Whittier as a poet, he was "one of them," sharing the genuine simplicity of traditional New England life, the "Yankee studies" of Lowell, for instance, were "perfect" but he already gave the impression of being, socially and intellectually, "miles above the people of the vale" (115-116).

<sup>241</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 253-254. Whittier had the honor of renaming the lake to "Attitash," an Indian word signifying "blueberries," after their abundance in the region.

and during the arrival of autumn, when two young maidens were sitting together in “idle mood,” picking berries and dreaming about their future love stories.

The poems set in countries he had never visited shared such qualities as well, thanks to his reading of travel books, which he thoroughly enjoyed, and his ability to attentively memorize “pictures” of scenery and people which were then minutely reproduced “as if he had not been compelled to rely upon the eyes of others.”<sup>242</sup> The evolution of Whittier’s treatment of nature as a prominent subject in his body of work is evident: in his early prose and poetry it existed only as a background for the tales of local folklore and superstition, it then became a protagonist of several of his poems and descriptive passages in many of his narrative and legendary ballads, which Winfield Scott often finds to be “the most satisfying parts,” compared to other stanzas, at times “repetitious.”<sup>243</sup>

These verses, like photographs, offered snapshots of the landscapes as experienced by Whittier during his contemplations; they were “representative” (rather than interpretative or impressionistic), direct, concrete and immediate,<sup>244</sup> reminding the readers of the “early school of English landscape painters.”<sup>245</sup> 1862’s “Mountain Pictures,” a poem in two parts, “Franconia from the Pemigewasset” and “Monadnock from Wachuset,” is a prime example of such traits: Whittier drew a powerful sketch of the mesmerizing mountains after a stormy night (whose incipit, “once more, O Mountains of the North, unveil...” echoes Milton’s “Lycidas” —“Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more, / Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere”—):<sup>246</sup>

[...] their tongues of fire, the great peaks seem so near,  
Burned clean of mist, so starkly bold and clear,  
I almost pause the wind in the pines to hear,  
The loose rock’s fall, the steps of browsing deer.<sup>247</sup> (18-21)

The poems were usually a starting point for a successive moral reflection on the inherent spiritual nature of mankind: John Pickard explains Whittier’s motives —and limits— as symptomatic of his

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<sup>242</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 359.

<sup>243</sup> Scott, pp. 266-267.

<sup>244</sup> Barrett Wendell. *Stelligeri, and Other Essays Concerning America*, p. 179.

<sup>245</sup> Clarke, p. 5.

<sup>246</sup> Adkins. “Sources of some of Whittier’s Lines,” p. 242.

<sup>247</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 156-157. Samuel Pickard, in Whittier’s biography, attributes the vivid images (and references) to the psychological impact the “[civil] war’s alarms” had on the pen of the poet (442).

“guilt,” stemming from his religious convictions, which required him to value and cherish man and morality over the material world; he, unlike his fellow Romantics, never responded “lyrically or sensuously” to nature, therefore his lines were romantic without the sentimentality in vogue in his generation.<sup>248</sup> The poem “The Seeking of the Waterfall,” for instance, reads:

To seek is better than to gain,  
The fond hope dies as we attain;  
Life’s fairest things are those which seem  
The best is that of which we dream.<sup>249</sup> (81-84)

In line with Pickard’s argument, Neil Stevens notices how trees, plants, and flowers were generally mentioned “in their relation to human life or as symbolic of human activity” —the sylvan setting of Goody Martin’s cellar and the lacustrine shores of the young witch of Wenham come to mind.<sup>250</sup> Nonetheless, the wonders of nature were by no means looked down on by the poet, the New England scenery being what Barrett Wendell calls the “most constant, lasting pleasure” of Whittier’s life.<sup>251</sup> Norman Foerster, author of *Nature in American Literature*, remarks that, as a matter of fact, Whittier considered natural beauty a source of moral value not in the sense of Ruskin’s and Keats’s “religion of beauty” but, quite the opposite, as physical manifestation of the divine creation and expression of its immortality.<sup>252</sup> Whittier, however, didn’t seek there an answer to his most profound questions; for them, he still relied on the soundness of his inward light; he remained true to his roots and instead of “read[ing] Earth,” he was content with “read[ing] his

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<sup>248</sup> John Pickard, p. 101.

<sup>249</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 162-163. Or these verses from the pensive “Sea Dream” (160-161):

I walk once more a haunted shore,  
A stranger, yet at home,  
A land of dreams I roam (35-37)  
(...)  
The change is ours alone;  
The saddest is my own.

A stranger now, a world-worn man,  
Is he who bears my name;  
But thou, methinks, whose mortal life  
Immortal youth became,  
Art evermore the same. (51-57)

<sup>250</sup> Neil E. Stevens. “The Botany of New England Poets”, p. 139.

<sup>251</sup> Wendell, p. 176.

<sup>252</sup> Norman Foerster. *Nature in American Literature*, p. 27.

heart.”<sup>253</sup> As Clarke specifies, it’s also important not to mistake Whittier’s search for spirituality in nature for pantheism nor for Emersonian transcendentalism<sup>254</sup> —which the Quaker poet nevertheless appreciated; writing to Emerson in October 1853 he exclaimed: “I wish thou couldst have been with us the other day on the Merrimack. We wanted an interpreter of the mystery of glory about us.”<sup>255</sup> In the letter he had spoken of the “marvelous [autumn] weather” and “[his] painted woodlands,” wishing he were able to “put into words” the “hymn of gratitude” and the “unspeakable love” that the grandeur of autumn aroused in him: he believed that it was pointless to travel through Europe when “all that is beautiful may be seen from our own door-stone!”<sup>256</sup>

New England in the fall, the realm of “sombre firs and cedars [,] crimson maples [and] huckleberries” inspired some of Whittier’s best lyrics, where lights, shadows and colours blended together and changed according to the time of the day, and of the year.<sup>257</sup> He wrote them avoiding “witchery of phrase” (with some clichéd analogies between the passing of life and that of the seasons),<sup>258</sup> with a predilection for mundane episodes —in the manner of Wordsworth—, inspiring “major epiphanies,” of both philosophical and personal significance.<sup>259</sup> The scenery was austere yet solemn; on occasion, it was tinted with a certain melancholic or dreamy touch, springing from his awareness of living in an age of advancement —“or declin[e].”<sup>260</sup>

He expressed his concern about grim, faceless industrialism, whose mills and factories were destroying the integrity of nature and workers, and replacing pastoral craftsmanship: in 1855’s “The Barefoot Boy” he imagined the words an adult (the poet) addressed to a boy (his younger self), urging the youth to live to the fullest their happiest and most carefree years, among the simple and innocent beauty of nature in its pristine state, “cheerily, then, my little man / Live and laugh, as

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<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36. The author quoted Whittier’s lines from “Summer Pilgrimage”:

Yet not unblest is he who sees  
Shadows of God’s realities,  
And knows beyond this masquerade  
Of shape and color, light and shade,  
And dawn and set, and wax and wane,  
Eternal verities remain. (67-72)

<sup>254</sup> Clarke, p. 16.

<sup>255</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, p. 237.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> Clarke, p. 19.

<sup>258</sup> Foerster, p. 29

<sup>259</sup> Buell, *New England Literary Culture: from Revolution through Renaissance*, p. 287.

<sup>260</sup> Foerster, p. 36

boyhood can!” (83-84).<sup>261</sup> Whittier chose a simple vocabulary, suited to the topic of these verses; they were filled with autobiographical touches that recalled his early days in the family’s homestead and displayed his strong and affectionate ties to it. The musicality — perhaps second only to “The Ranger,” published the following year—, created by its rhythm, rhymes and cadence, enhanced the uplifting yet nostalgic message, “ah, that thou couldst know thy joy, / Ere it passes, barefoot boy!” (101-102). Throughout the lines, the jolly childhood of the man seemed to be coming back, through the eyes of the boy, because he too used to be like him; still, the speaker believed that the boy, “prince thou art,” had more than what the man, “only [a] republican,” could buy: “outward sunshine, inward joy,” nature connectedness —“she” answered him “all” he asked—, the knowledge, never taught in school, of her seasons and cycles, “of the wild bee’s morning chase, / Of the wild-flower’s time and place” (23-24). Appearing lost in his pleasant reminiscences, the speaker, in the midsection, demonstrated his sensibility to the sublime and the picturesque in nature and the landscape: when younger, nothing left him indifferent —“I was rich in flowers and trees, / Humming-birds and honey-bees” (50-51). The Arcadian vision of nature conceptualized in the poem is thus close to a return to a childhood perspective, “hand in hand with her he walks, / face to face with her he talks,” (42-43) away from the looming prospects of adulthood and modernity, where the barefoot boy would have to hide his feet (thus distancing himself from his natural state) with “prison cells of pride.” Whittier, however, maintained his optimism and held the manifest destiny of the American republic and the pure realm of nature in the New World, not in opposition, but in a direct, albeit delicate, relationship, as presented by the imagery of “On Receiving an Eagle’s Quill from Lake Superior.” The poem, written a couple of years before “The Barefoot Boy,” was a reflective piece on the spirit of the pioneers, suggested by the bird’s feather on his desk and the flights of his fancy during a winter twilight,

All day the darkness and the cold  
 Upon my heart have lain,  
 Like shadows on the winter sky,  
 Like frost upon the pane;<sup>262</sup> (1-4)

Here Whittier sympathized with Native Americans and acknowledged the inevitable changes that progress brought forth, sometimes to the detriment of their vast and unspoilt wilderness; their

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<sup>261</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 396-397. Stoddard praises this “character study” for having “no parallel in English poetry” (130).

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144-146.

presence in the poem was followed by an unmistakable sense of loss in regards to their disappearance:

Behind the sacred squaw's birch canoe,  
The steamer smokes and raves;  
And city lots are staked for sale  
Above old Indian graves. (37-40)

The role of Native Americans and their culture in Whittier's work dealing with New England history, nature and folklore is a theme further explored in this third chapter.





## CHAPTER THREE

### A Voice for the Wilderness

Whittier's portrayal and understanding of Native Americans, howbeit fairly one-dimensional, was an integral part of his prose and poetry, especially in relation to his pioneer work in documenting the folklore of the region, some of which had been directly influenced by them and their beliefs. He was among the first to recognize the importance of their legacy in the history of New England, valuing their relics and mythology which inspired a number of works throughout his career. Unlike Longfellow, Whittier's "drafts" were not "extensive," nor did he share Longfellow's ambition to make an "indigenous epic material" out of their tales and customs.<sup>263</sup> His Indian characters were stereotyped as "noble, romantic savage[s]" in consonance with the traditional fireside legends of the "Merrimack River country."<sup>264</sup> Along with the Native lore, the poet loosely focused on the tribes' cultural and physical erasure from the landscape, after the violent French and Indian wars.

On a more general note, he entirely opposed the Jacksonian policy of Indian removal—one of consequences of the westward expansion—: he defined the president a "bloodthirsty old man"<sup>265</sup> whom he had "never considered good for anything but Indian-fighting and who had now shown that he was not even good for that."<sup>266</sup> In 1830, in an article for the *Essex Gazette*, Whittier stated that Native Americans were "half civilized men" who couldn't be "removed from one wild forest to another" as if they were "hopeless barbarians,"<sup>267</sup> because the "honor of the nation [was] at stake."<sup>268</sup> Fifty years later, he advocated for an education program in order to hasten their assimilation given the impossibility of "guaranteeing reservations"; toward the end of his life, however, he began to believe that a quicker, even armed, resolution would end the "Indian Question" sooner.<sup>269</sup> Whittier also defended the early settlers' right to defend themselves against

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<sup>263</sup> Clarke, p. 77. Stedman comments that Longfellow had the clarity to understand that while American Indians weren't "poetical," their folklore "may be made so" (111).

<sup>264</sup> Jason A. Russell. "Aboriginal Element in Whittier's Writings," p. 217. As Wagenknecht points out, Whittier "criticized Cooper for his 'stock Indians'" even though his early works didn't do "nearly as well" (68).

<sup>265</sup> Wagenknecht, pp. 51-52.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70

<sup>267</sup> Natalie Joy. "The Indian's Cause," p. 220.

<sup>268</sup> Wagenknecht, p. 70.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

their brutal nocturnal attacks at the time of the first settlements (whereas the pioneers' unsolicited massacres remained unforgivable).

As evinced by *Margaret Smith's Journal*, the poet didn't entirely imbue his writings with a colonialist mentality, instead, he sometimes sided with them —similarly to how he behaved with slaves in reality, and with women accused of witchcraft in literature— against the prejudices and ordeals of both present and past, in which the Mathers, again, played a part: in a passage of *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Cotton Mather called the natives of New England “forlorn and wretched heathen[s]” and “miserable salvages” who, in all probability, “the devil [had] decoyed (...) hither, in hopes that the gospel of Lord Jesus Christ would never come here to destroy or disturb his *absolute empire* over them.”<sup>270</sup> Whittier's Margaret Smith didn't lack compassion for the Indian woman, going against the advice of her companions, who regarded them as inferiors; besides, in the *Journal*, the poet quoted two moments from Roger William's 1643 *A Key into the Language of America*, which Jason Russell deems as “very indicative” of Whittier's feelings “toward the red man”: he saw his Native Americans brothers and sisters as equals.<sup>271</sup>

### 3.1 Whittier's Insight into Puritan and Native Relations

From the seventeenth through the nineteenth century, Indigenous captivity narratives were a popular genre in American literature, where survival in the wilderness was a trope and Native Americans were degraded as “cruel savages” in order to justify the brutalities that Puritan colonists inflicted on them (then reciprocated). The heroines of these narratives were mostly women, such as Mary Rowlandson, who wrote the famous *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, and Hannah Duston, whose story was chronicled in Mather's *Magnalia* (who Cynthia Johnson calls “the quintessential American myth-maker”).<sup>272</sup> Mather, together with other Puritan ministers, celebrated in his sermons this woman who, after being abducted in the 1697's raid on Haverhill, scalped ten Catholic Abenakis (out of a family of twelve, to which she was assigned) in their sleep to avenge her dead baby and returned to the town with the gruesome proof of her deed.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Cotton Mather. *Magnalia Christi Americana*, vol. 1, p. 503.

<sup>271</sup> Russell, p. 219. According to the author, Whittier's description of the woman's hospitality and “gentle courtesy” resembled the style of Thoreau (218). Whittier agreed with William when he wrote that “Nature knoweth no difference between Europe and America in blood, birth, and bodies” (Whittier. *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 146).

<sup>272</sup> Cynthia B. Johnson. “Hawthorne's Hannah Dustan and Her Troubling American Myth,” p. 17.

<sup>273</sup> The event took place during King William's war, her husband arrived at the garrison saving their seven other children, while the newborn was killed by the Indians who smashed her head against a tree in front of her mother.

More than a century later, the biased account of Mather, the biblical allusions creating analogies between her and the heroic figure Jael (see the Book of Judges), gave way to a more problematic evaluation of her actions in Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and the Merrimack Rivers* and Hawthorne's "The Duston Family"; Whittier too revisited this episode of local history in the short story "The Mother's Revenge," published in *Legends of New England* in 1831. The antebellum writers struggled to justify Duston's cruel vengeance within the conventional framework of femininity accepted by their contemporary society and the "cult of domesticity"<sup>274</sup> —the fact that she, for instance, brought her scalps back with her to receive money, "fifty pounds (...) as a recompence [and] many presents of congratulation"— and transformed her into the quasi-villain of the story.<sup>275</sup> In particular, in the preface to his tale, Whittier compared the woman of his day and age to the Puritan heroine, who, when facing the worst, let go of her "pure" and "mild" character to display her "fortitude" and "power."<sup>276</sup> Whittier's character went through what Anne-Marie Weis defines an "Indianization" process, in which she seemed to be destined to suffer the same fate of Native Americans: at the time that Whittier was writing, neither they nor women of her kind, violent and independent, posed a "threat" any longer; the "'demon' lurking within this New England 'angel'" was nowhere to be seen,<sup>277</sup> because that type of women only belonged to the "stern race, which ha[d] passed away forever."<sup>278</sup>

Furthermore, Whittier went from "historical reality" to "historical romance," adding graphic details of Duston's tragedy and subsequent revenge ("and the dried leaves around were sprinkled with brains and blood"... "an insatiate longing for blood" (127), he purposefully avoided others, such as her reward or her killing women and children) and fostering awareness of the passage of time between his generation and hers.<sup>279</sup> In doing so, the "simple and unvarnished" story takes on a legend-like quality, whose "sacred legacy" is the only remaining memory of what is now lost in the "dim records of our 'twilight time,'" the one of "sublime courage" and "dark superstitions."<sup>280</sup> The

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<sup>274</sup> Anne-Marie Weis. "The Murderous Mother and the Solicitous Father: Violence, Jacksonian Family Values, and Hannah Duston's Captivity," p. 48.

<sup>275</sup> Cotton Mather. *Magnalia Christi Americana*, vol. 2, p. 552.

<sup>276</sup> John G. Whittier. *Legends of New England*, p. 125.

<sup>277</sup> Weis, p. 52. In several captivity narratives characters were "dehumanized" in the wilderness since Puritans believed the devil was hidden there, being its domain (Matthew W. Sivils. *A Companion to American Gothic*, p. 89).

<sup>278</sup> Whittier. *Legends of New England*, p. 131.

<sup>279</sup> Matthew W. Sivils. *A Companion to American Gothic*, p. 89.

<sup>280</sup> Whittier. *Legends of New England*, p. 130.

young Whittier “rationalized” Duston’s behaviour:<sup>281</sup> in calling Native Americans “fierce savages” he told a traditional (Gothic) story about the early settlers of the region, their “wonderful and romantic” happenings and their “sufferings and trials” in the wilderness which didn’t challenge the stereotypical representation of Indian-white relations.<sup>282</sup>

Haverhill, hometown of Whittier’s ancestors, was raided again by French, Abenaki and Algonquin warriors on a night of August 1708, during Queen Anne’s War, an episode of colonial history commemorated by the poet in both prose, “The Border War of 1708,” and poetry, “Pentucket. 1708.”<sup>283</sup> As soon as the attacks started, the inhabitants used to take refuge in the garrison houses to protect themselves, one of which, at the time of King Philip’s War, belonged to Thomas Whittier, the fearless pioneer; in point of fact, the Whittier family were never harmed by the Indians: they slept with their door open and always welcomed and respected them.<sup>284</sup> The poem, written in 1838, was built on the contrast between the idyllic landscape surrounding the scene and the cruelties perpetrated by the aggressors; the impression is that nature and its pace were seen almost as a balm for the wounded soul (and body), representing the only sense of stability in those uncertain times.

The first stanzas give a sketch of the town at sunset, its bordering lakes, the towering mountains, yet to be climbed, and the “wild, untravelled forest”; the townspeople were returning to their cottages and celebrating their *Feierabend* with “songs of praise” and “tones of mirth,” blissfully unaware of the danger about to befall them (out of a village of thirty households, sixteen of them were killed, others were carried into captivity).<sup>285</sup> As soon as night fell, silence settled over the wooden town (“so slept Pompeii...”) and the pleasant description of the Merrimack by moonlight was suddenly interrupted: “on the still air crept a sound / No bark of fox, nor rabbit’s bound” (41-42) and the brutal raid began. A drastic change of imagery marks the passage to the second half of the poem, where the poet vividly and strikingly presented the outrages committed by Native Americans under the French command, accelerating its rhythm:

Then smote the Indian tomahawk  
On crashing door and shattering lock;

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<sup>281</sup> Cynthia Johnson, p. 24.

<sup>282</sup> Whittier. *Legends of New England*, p. 126.

<sup>283</sup> A reference book for an initial study of the numerous Native American tribes and their location is *The Indian Tribes of North America* by John R. Swanton, 1952.

<sup>284</sup> Davis, p. 12.

<sup>285</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 8-9.

Then rang the rifle-shot, and then  
The shrill death-scream of stricken men,  
Sank the red axe in woman's brain,  
And childhood's cry arose in vain. (57-62)

The poem ends with the sad aftermath, illuminated by the first lights of the morning; Whittier refrained from attempting to embed his commentary, instead, he just documented what a survivor would see, leaving the readers to engage in their own meditation upon that fateful night, achieving a more poignant effect.

In the essay "The Border War of 1708," the poet briefly, yet compellingly, narrated another episode of the conflict; here too he included an unforgiving portrayal of Native Americans and their attitude toward their captives throughout their northward journey: when a young woman gave birth in the "cold, wintry forest" they threatened to kill the baby unless they could baptize it "after their fashion":

She gave the little innocent into their hands, when with mock solemnity they made the sign of the cross upon its forehead by gashing it with their knives, and afterwards barbarously put it to death before the eyes of its mother, (...) nothing so strongly excited the risibilities of these grim barbarians as the tears and cries of their victims, extorted by physical or mental agony. Capricious alike in their cruelties and their kindness, they treated some of their captives with forbearance and consideration and tormented others apparently without cause.<sup>286</sup>

The excerpt can easily be considered one of the most vocal passages he composed in defence of the Puritans; however, it needs to be noted that, on more than one occasion, the veracity of his historical account is ready to be called into question by the words "tradition says" or "there is a tradition that..." On the other hand, he nonchalantly let us know that during a second raid a Puritan woman left her baby behind her, "fearful that its cries would betray her place of concealment" (109) and humorously criticized two white soldiers for being "more experts in making love to [the villagers'] daughters, and drinking their best (...) cider, than in patrolling the woods" (107). On a general note, as stated in chapter two, Whittier was less than enthusiastic about Puritans' mores, and if they didn't receive the same colonial scrutiny as that he reserved for Native Americans, he didn't fail to share with his readers that it wasn't uncommon for young women held captive to marry Frenchmen in

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<sup>286</sup> John G. Whittier. *Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, pp. 102-103

Canada never to return, fascinated by their simple manners, a breath of fresh air compared with the severe and “grave” ways of their Puritan families (111).

Similarly, in the short story “Passaconaway,” written in the same period (1833), Whittier, demonstrating an attentive study of their customs and history, told a tale of religious divide, where the Puritans’ intolerance was compensated solely by the “fanaticism of the heretic”; even so, he gave the impression of being more interested in the “action of the Indians” coupled with the “romantic escape of the lovers” than in the Puritans themselves.<sup>287</sup> The tide started to turn after the publication of “Mogg Megone,” in 1834/1835: what had been meant to be an objective Indian narrative, based on reliable sources such as Folsom’s *History of Saco and Biddeford*, Williamson’s *The History of the State of Maine* and Experience Mayhew’s *Indian Converts*, revealed itself to be a continuous source of second thoughts.<sup>288</sup> He followed in Scott’s footsteps (his *Marmion* and *The Lady of the Lake*) by narrating the dramatic, fictional story of Mogg Megone, chief of the Saco Indians in the war of 1677, who scalped the lover of the woman he was promised to marry and whom she killed in return (she then killed herself too, out of remorse). Whittier’s Indian turned out to be the stereotypical Native American sachem appearing in colonial reports: brave, “suspicious,” drunken and “revengeful,” whose lust, clashing with the white man’s greed, wrought havoc in his own and other lives.<sup>289</sup>

Several years after, Whittier distanced himself from the violent tale, “carelessly written”:<sup>290</sup> not only was he unsatisfied with the ending, in a letter to Fields, in 1857, he even admitted that he would “kill Mogg Megone over again,” because, regardless of its merit, it was not “in good taste,” adding that he wouldn’t choose that subject matter anymore: “I have objections to it not merely from an artistic point of view but a moral one also.”<sup>291</sup> Indeed, in the prefatory note to the poem published in the editions of those years, Whittier specified that the story served as a “framework” for “sketches” of the scenery of the region and its first settlers; Samuel Pickard explains that never had the poet tried “so persistently and unsuccessfully to suppress any other poem” of his: he managed to move it

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<sup>287</sup> Schaedler, pp. 352-353. The story can be found in *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, at page 258.

<sup>288</sup> The poet loosely quoted Coleridge’s 1816 ballad *Christabel* too: “Blessed Mary! Who is she / Leaning against that maple-tree?” (Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 505) versus “Lady, lady, who! who was she, / That met thy child by the old oak tree?” (Samuel T. Coleridge. *Christabel*. London: Henry Frowde, 1907, p. 106).

<sup>289</sup> Stoddard, p. 112. “Sachem” was the name used by the Algonquian tribes of New England for the most important chief, head of their confederacy in the northeastern region.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>291</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, p. 325.

to the appendix of his collected works only in 1888, a few years before his death.<sup>292</sup> He then put border warfare and its romantic associations aside to focus on the fast disappearing lore of the tribes of Eastern New England.

“Mogg Megone,” however, remained one of the instances in which the poet described the early settlers of the colony uniquely in their “relation” to Native Americans, where their Puritan creed didn’t play a major role.<sup>293</sup> In “Patucket Falls,” arguably one of the most interesting prose pieces he wrote, he continued along the same path: he went to extent of rebuking the Puritans not on account of their “bigotry” and intolerance, but because of their indifference to the natural wonders around them,

in reading the journals and narratives of the early settlers of New England 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 [.]<sup>294</sup>

their bad literary taste —although educated, “they were sworn enemies of the Muses” (363)—, and not least of all, their unmerciful attitudes towards Native Americans.<sup>295</sup> The sketch eulogized the wild nature of the place and the “wilder man” inhabiting it, mourning “the great Patucket Falls” of “ye olden time”: he noticed how the river had been “tamed” by modernity, the “spirit of the falls” was now at the mercy of “Art” since Puritans (“Methinks I see them standing there in the golden light of a closing October day...”) didn’t care about that.<sup>296</sup> To them, the “great and howling” wilderness was valuable as long as its resources could be exploited, to be conquered as much as possible (362); there they “saw no beauty,” they “recognized no holy revelation.”<sup>297</sup> His romantic description of the “picturesque” Indian, “darting his birch canoe down the Falls of the Amoskeag or gliding in the deer-track of the forest” was a persuasive distancing of himself from his former literary treatment of them, respecting them for their connection with nature and bitterly

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<sup>292</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 203. A few days after the first exchange of letters, the poet replied to Fields, who didn’t share Whittier’s opinion on the matter, ironically referring to it as the “burden” of his “poetical sins” and the “ghosts of unlucky rhymes,” he, after all, had had “no business to make him” and it was “poetical justice” that he “shall haunt [him] like another Frankenstein” (Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, p. 326).

<sup>293</sup> Schaedler, p. 353.

<sup>294</sup> Whittier. *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 362. Pawtucket is an Algonquin word meaning “place of the falls”.

<sup>295</sup> Schaedler, p. 359.

<sup>296</sup> Whittier. *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, pp. 360-361.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.* *The Supernaturalism of New England*, p. 39.

acknowledging that, to the colonizers, they were nothing but “savage heathen[s]” (362). Yet, the prose piece is exemplary of the way Whittier made an argument for the need of a middle ground to bring Anglo-Saxons and Native Americans closer together: he continued the essay praising the Puritans, who, in spite of being “harsh and unlovely,” were virtuous people, “fitted 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 in the rough soil of New England. They lived a truer poetry than Homer or Virgil wrote. (363)

Whittier’s conflicting cultural position returned in the subsequent paragraphs, the moment he admitted that the Puritans didn’t consider the “rights of the poor Patuckets” (the Indian tribe settled in the area) at all when exploring the land, “doubtless prepared” to assert themselves against the “heathen inhabitants” —one hundred years later, by the first half of the eighteenth century, the tribe had already disappeared, their last descendant had abandoned the falls to live among the “strange Indians of the north” (364). In his final (unfortunate) take, which easily explains why Wagenknecht titled his book *A Portrait in Paradox*, Whittier fully endorsed the changes introduced by industrialization in the landscape: “were I not a very decided Yankee, I might possibly follow [Wordsworth’s] example” and protest against the “desacration” of Patucket Falls, against the “dams and mills,”<sup>298</sup> the truth was that

rocks and trees, rapids, cascades (...) are doubtless all very well; but on the whole, considering our seven months of frost, are not cotton shirts and woollen coats still better? As for the spirits of the river, the Merrimac Naiads, or whatever may be their name in Indian vocabulary [the unpleasantly dismissive tone is to be noted], they have no good reason for complaint; inasmuch as Nature (...) seems to have had an eye to the useful rather than the picturesque. (365)

The language used here sounds very contradictory compared to the initial romantic description of this corner of New England, where the trees were

gorgeous and glowing with the tints of autumn, — a mighty flower-garden, blossoming under the spell of the enchanter, Frost (...) and a steady murmur, low, deep voices of water, the softest, sweetest sound of Nature, blends with the sight of the south wind in the pine-tops. (361-362)

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<sup>298</sup> Wordsworth firmly opposed the building of a railway in the beautiful Lake District, aware that it would destroy its aesthetic and literary value.



The essay undeniably stands out for the poet's attempt to record a fragment of regional and natural history and for his personal statements, useful to further understand the poet's insight into his homeland's nature, culture and society: his Quaker moderation and reasonableness (it needs to be remembered that he was far from conservative by the standards of his time) kept him away from a bias against Puritans or Indians, judging them for their individual actions; he admired the qualities and condemned the excesses of both, just as he did with modernity and nature, seeking an harmonious combination between the two —having experienced at first hand the harsh reality of the winter in his youth (see the beginning of chapter one) and the challenges that progress, or lack thereof, posed to the rural population.

In the introduction to “The Midnight Attack,” the first short story of *Legends of New England*, his initial research on regional tales and folklore, Whittier touched upon the other side of industrialization too, the wisdom and traditions of the past that the modern zeitgeist was slowly leaving behind. In a solemn tone, he noted how New England had changed with the “passing by of a single century”; following the path of Brainard, he began collecting the old Indian and Puritan legends of the place, which, with an aura of romantic mystery and awe, told of the “perished race” of warriors and hunters who “battled with our fathers,” the “mighty people” who inhabited the American soil, with its “great lakes” and “hunting grounds,” and who had now “departed forever.”<sup>299</sup> By this point, another pattern of Whittier's stereotypical portrayal of Native Americans seems to emerge: whenever he considered them as a “separate” people, with their own customs and institutions, their connotations are certainly positive; however, as soon as they interacted with Puritans, his descriptions are rather derogatory, because they are linked to their murderous attacks on the frontier towns: in the next paragraph of the story, the words the narrator associated with them return to such descriptions as “merciless foe,” savage and heathen (9).<sup>300</sup> So scared were the villagers that it only took “the smoke of a distant fire,” “the bark of a dog in the deep woods” or “the uncertain light of stars and moon” giving to a “stump or bush” the resemblance of a man to alert them and start their night patrols.<sup>301</sup> Whittier actually admitted that, among New Englanders, fear —of the great outdoors, the devil, the suspected witches— was a distinctive characteristic of

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<sup>299</sup> Whittier. *Legends of New England*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>300</sup> The prose sketch narrated the wild chase of Captain Harmon and his rangers on the Kennebec River, looking for the “cursed red skin”: the Indians were then brutally killed and scalped in their sleep during a “sultry” summer evening of 1722 (10).

<sup>301</sup> Whittier. *Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, p. 156.

the generation of their ancestors: they were wary, cautious, “schooled in the subtle strategy of Indian warfare.”<sup>302</sup>

He was of the opinion that no part of New England afforded a “wider field for the researchers of the Legendary” than the province of Maine, such as the short story in question, “one among many legends of the stranger rencounters” of the white man and the red man, as documented in the ancient records of the state.<sup>303</sup> Moreover, in “The Boy Captives. An Incident of the Indian War of 1695,” he observed that

amidst the stirring excitements of the present day, (...) simple legends of the past (...) have undoubtedly lost in a great degree their interest. The lore of the fireside is becoming obsolete, and with the octogenarian few who still linger among us, will perish the unwritten history of border life in New England. <sup>304</sup>

The passage is self-explanatory, revealing Whittier’s motives for dedicating his time to the transcription of these folktales; the story, written in a concise and engaging style, centres around the capture of two boys from Haverhill at the hands of Natives, and their fortunate escape before reaching Canada, the land of “bloody Indians,” most feared by the early settlers because, once there, lacking sustenance and direction, it was virtually impossible to get away, due to its wilderness, mountains, lakes and “almost impassable rivers” (159). If, for some captives, “death in the forest seemed preferable,” (162) in his most sympathetic depictions of Native Americans, Whittier didn’t fail to mention that, after growing fond of their “free, wild life in the woods” with them, children kidnapped during the border wars sometimes chose to stay with their new Indian family and friends rather than go back to their Puritan relatives and “civilization.”<sup>305</sup> As the “circumstances permitted,” Indian women were gentle, giving them roots and medicinal herbs and “tenderly watching over” them in the long winter nights.<sup>306</sup> In the 1860’s poem “The Truce of Piscataqua. 1675,” he imagined a similar story, where a young girl, “kindly treated” by the chief Squando, did in fact go back to her family after the agreement, but not without a moment of hesitation (“middleway her steps

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<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120. On the same occasion, the poet further commented on New Englanders’ apprehensive character, stating that they were indeed prudent, privileging their own well-being and avoiding recklessness “for the mere glory of sacrifice,” since they highly valued their lives and their “hard-gained property” (119).

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid. Legends of New England*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid. Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, p. 164. In his documenting of anecdotes and traditions of the past, he went to the extent of specifying the species of the groundnuts eaten by the protagonists.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid. The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 74.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid. Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, p. 160.

delayed”).<sup>307</sup> The Native American man wanted to bring the little maid to his wife, to make up for the death of their son, killed by the whites,

Mishanock, my little star!  
Come to Saco’s pine afar;  
Where the sad one waits at home,  
Wequashim, my moonlight, come! (126-129)

She left him, “sadly” and “half regretfully,” and, after receiving his necklace, cried on her way home, “doubting” and “trembling,” which prompted the fear that she had been bewitched by the devil.<sup>308</sup> In his weaving of episodes of regional history and elements of Native American lore, such as Manito(u), the supernatural spirit that, according to Algonquin religion, presided over the world, the spirit bird of the dead boy —“very mournful, very wild / Sang the totem of my child” (64-65)— and the use of Algonquin words, Whittier carried the readers back to the dim and distant past:

So, haply shall before thine eyes  
The dusty veil of centuries rise,  
The old, strange scenery overlay  
The tamer pictures of to-day,  
While, like the actors in a play,  
Pass in their ancient guise along  
The figures of my border song [...]. (20-26)

The poem stands as a compassionate portrayal of Native Americans, thanks to Whittier’s respect for their culture, traditions, and the empathic description of the sorrowful couple, mourning the loss of their child: Squando’s wife is said to sit “all alone,” “still as stone” in the wigwam, picturing her baby walking around, waiting in vain, while Squando, laying on the grave, had visions of his son, “well I knew the dreadful signs / In the whispers of the pines” (82-83). An important theme, which will resurface throughout the poems dedicated to them, is the American Indians’ connection with nature, standing in direct contrast to the Puritans’ aversion to it: here Whittier gave the readers glimpses into their deep reverence for what represented an active force and presence all along the seasons of the year and of their lives. In the final, significant passage, when the young maid had

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<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.* *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>308</sup> Many years later, he met her daughter and, recognizing his wampum necklace, gave her another gift, that night, touched by his act of kindness, she remembered him in her prayers (what was then a revolutionary act); neither of them ever forgot about each other.

already become a mother and a widow, the memory of her childhood days suddenly returned, “on the Indian’s wigwam-mat, / Blossom-crowned, again she sat” (192-193).<sup>309</sup> The thought of the west wind, the calling of the birds, and the whisper of the pines, nature in its prime, helped her to escape, albeit momentarily, from all her earthly struggles (a “chain”) to the “freedom of the woods”: the message, together with the heartfelt exchange between the fair Squando and the little girl, closed a poem which paid little attention to the Puritans —the only reference to them being Waldron and the “grim array” leaving the forest after the truce— to bring to light the raw humanity of their neighbours and the (romantic) comforting reminder that nature will always be there for those who need it.

Several years before, in 1837, the poet, in his treatment of Native American material, an essential part of the Americanism of his art, had touched upon a similar subject matter, this time related to the Indians’ relationship with nature after the advent of modernity and the gradual and inevitable disappearance of the tribes from the region: in “The Fountain,” Whittier told the story of an Indigenous man, a “lonely stranger,” who kept coming back to sit on the same spot, a “mossy seat” by an oak tree on a hill in Salisbury, to look at the scenery.<sup>310</sup> The poignancy of these lines lies in the man’s reaction to the rapid changes that industrialization had brought to the landscape, further conveyed by Whittier’s choice of adjectives with negative connotations (moody, gloomy) and the repetition of “sadly” to describe the disposition of the “strange man.” Indeed, the scene, however beautiful, wreathed in “autumn’s earliest frost,” had been left almost unrecognizable from the former splendor of the days of his youth, when deforestation had not yet destroyed the woodland, home of deers and eagles, and his people still lived there. He, “sadly, till the twilight shadow” gazed at his surroundings, but no trace remained of their wigwam fires, the only “sullen” smoke was coming from the “blackened forges”; the “swift” Powow, where their birch canoe used to glide was now crossed by “dark and gloomy bridges” and “where once the beaver swam, / Jarred the wheel and frowned the dam” (83-84). Instead of the “wood-bird’s merry singing” and the “hunter’s cheer” he heard the continuous noise of the hammers, which, at a certain point, compelled him to ask himself:

Could it be his fathers ever  
Loved to linger here?

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<sup>309</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 76.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8. The title comes from the “magic” water that poured from the roots of the tree, believed to give immortality to those who drank it.

These bare hills, this conquered river,  
Could they hold them dear,  
With their native loveliness  
Tamed and tortured into this? (91-96)

The “weary” Indian then turned away and never returned, and his visits became a folktale; we are not given any reason as to why he stopped coming, whether the unbearable sadness prevented him from doing so, or a new-found happiness had taken him elsewhere, to fish and hunt in the northern territories. In his narrative poem Whittier didn’t comprise a meditation upon the fate that awaited Native Americans after the arrival of the settlers and their idea of “civilization,” his thoughtful sensibility, however, shone through it, respectfully acknowledging the traumatizing effects of colonization on both them and their unbroken land. In the true tradition of storytelling, he continued to pass on the folklore of the region: the presence of Indigenous mythology and legends in these works remains, perhaps unintentionally, the greatest homage he paid to their sacred legacy.

### 3.2 The Folklore of Native Americans

When studying Whittier’s handling of American Indians myths and traditional stories, the knowledge of his sources, coupled with his characteristic topographical and naturalistic precision are among the most convincing qualities of his anthology. Once again, he composed a series of verses dedicated to the valley of the Merrimack, set in the picturesque and familiar landscape suffused with historical associations, nostalgic images and a folktale atmosphere: a convincing example is that of “The Bridal of Pennacook,” his most famous Indian idyl, adapted in 1844 from Morton’s 1637 “The New English Canaan.”<sup>311</sup> The poem, composed of eight sections, narrated an episode of Indian history, embellished with descriptive details of the natural surroundings, the wild and romantic region north of the Merrimack that belonged to the powerful Passaconaway, sachem and shaman of the Pennacook tribe. There, Whittier conveyed the “mossy sweetness” of the mountains all around,<sup>312</sup> with descriptions governed by a “vague” impression of the “sublime,”<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> The original account of the story can be found in Book I, chapter XI “Of the maintaining of their Reputation” and in Benjamin B. Thatcher’s 1831 *Indian Biography*, chapter XVI.

<sup>312</sup> Kennedy. *John Greenleaf Whittier: His Life, Genius, and Writings*, p. 234. As stated above, the numerous topographical references scattered throughout the poem —the lake of Winnepiseogee, mount Agiochook, Casco Bay, Moosehillock’s mountain range, the Pemigewasset river, Amoskeag falls...— were accurately given and strengthen the lifelike depictions of the place and time of the story,

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

centred around images of the wilderness and the wigwam (an example of the latter being the sixth and seventh stanzas of the first section and the beginning of the second one).<sup>314</sup>

In the introduction, written in blank verse, the poet narrates the adventure of a group of friends who, after wandering for “many days through the rough northern country,” admiring its scenic nature, are surprised by a thunderstorm on their way home and seek shelter in a “quiet inn”;<sup>315</sup> looking at the bookshelves, next to a “musty” stack of almanacs and a chronicle of border wars, the narrator finds an old-time story about the marriage of the “dusky” Weetamoo, daughter of Passaconaway, with the cold Winnepurkit, sachem of Saugus.<sup>316</sup> The first section of the poem, “The Merrimac,” opens with a picture of New England before the Mayflower, when its forests still didn’t know any other change than the “fall of leaves” and the valleys were “lovelier” than those which “the old poets sang of.” Here the narrator, in a solemn tone, commences his Indian legend, that of

A Yankee Paradise, unsung, unknown,  
To beautiful tradition; even their names,  
Whose melody yet lingers like the last  
Vibration of the red man’s requiem,  
Exchanged for syllables significant,  
Of cotton-mill and rail-car, will look kindly  
Upon this effort to call up the ghost  
Of our dim Past, and listen with pleased ear  
To the responses of the questioned Shade. (168-176)

This winter’s tale tells of the tragic fate of the young Indian woman who met death by drowning in the rapids of the river, seeking to go back to her husband who, because of his “grim anger of hard-hearted pride,” had refused to send a convoy to collect her.<sup>317</sup> Indeed, after her longed-for return to her dear father and native country, Winnepurkit’s warriors, waiting for her in her father’s territories, now belong to Passaconaway: owing to his reputation as a chief, Weetamoo’s husband declines the bashaba’s request to take her daughter away, believing that it is up to him to send his best men to

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<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234. According to Kennedy, these tend to be too “artificial” and “subjective” for a poem interested in evoking the simple pre-colonial past and the connection between Native Americans and their natural environment (*Ibid.*); Stoddard, instead, finds them too long, at times “insignificant,” distracting the reader’s attention from the story being told, with the result that, once the crescendo of the tale is reached, it has “lost all importance” and Whittier did justice “neither to himself nor to the old story” (120-121).

<sup>315</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

escort her daughter through the “old woods.” The man, greatly angered, refuses to comply and the broken-hearted bride, unbeknownst to her father (unwilling to let her go, for it has become a matter of honour), tries to find a way on her own, crossing the Merrimack with her canoe. The poem ends with the farewell song of the “Children of the Leaves,” a lament “of weird and wild beauty” sung by the Indian women to the dead princess, in which the poet includes a refrain written in Native American language.<sup>318</sup> In his version of the legend, Whittier, for poetry’s sake, dramatizes the life of the protagonist (whose real name was Wenunchus) when, in fact, tradition has it that she came back to her spouse; moreover, as Charles Beals points out, the marriage, before her homesickness, was a happy one —whereas the narrator reveals that “no warmth of heart” is given to the affectionate bride whenever the “hunter chief” arrives at their wigwam at night, although she is not bothered, for she has learnt the old teachings of her “race” that compels her to become “a slave”—<sup>319</sup> and the only account of the indignation of Passaconaway comes from the poet’s verses.<sup>320</sup>

There are two interesting passages in the poem, relevant for this study on nature and folklore: the first one, “but we, from Nature long exiled, / In our cold homes of Art and Thought” (402-403),<sup>321</sup> reminds the readers of society’s growing distance from the natural world, in contrast to Native Americans’ strong relationship with it, which permeated every aspect of their lives: even their language was rich with metaphors about “natural scenery,” “wild animals,” spirits and “totems,” different from that of “civilized life.”<sup>322</sup> The second passage, expressed in the lines

Lift we the twilight curtains of the Past,  
And, turning from familiar sight and sound,  
Sadly and full of reverence let us cast  
A glance upon Tradition’s shadowy ground, (213-216)

suggests another instance of Whittier’s passionate interest in preserving their disappearing cultural heritage, inextricably tied to the natural landscape. North American Indians’ folklore and legends were known among Natives and Anglo-Saxons alike: they were passed down through generations, such as the charm and mystery surrounding the figure of Passaconaway himself, whose stories the

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<sup>318</sup> Kennedy. *John Greenleaf Whittier: His Life, Genius, and Writings*, p. 237.

<sup>319</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>320</sup> Charles E. Beals. *Passaconaway in the White Mountains*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>321</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>322</sup> Kennedy. *John Greenleaf Whittier: His Life, Genius, and Writings*, p. 235.

“gray squaw” told by the fireside during the long winter nights, when the cold wind was blowing, “till the very child abed / Drew its bear-skin over head,” (282-283) scared by the flickering lights on the “trembling wall.”<sup>323</sup> But if Natives regarded them with awe, Puritans were overcome with fear, especially when these encompassed spiritual and supernatural elements, viewed as manifestations of the enemy. Indeed, ever since the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock, their perception of wilderness as the devil’s snare, both real and allegorical, had worked as a warning to be wary of any ancient malevolent presence lurking in the woods, including the unknown tribes, the “children of the devil,” who dwelled there and performed dark magic (Native Americans themselves “peopled” nature with good and evil spirits, in plants, animals, “the waterfall, the lake, the mist...” as well as the seasons).<sup>324</sup>

Throughout the seventeenth century, it was common knowledge among Puritans that they worshipped the devil: British traveller John Josselyn reported that their priests, named “powaws”, were “little better than witches, for they ha[d] familiar conference with him,”<sup>325</sup> by the same token, in his account of the natives of New England, Edward Winslow, Pilgrim and governor of Plymouth Colony, observed that the Panieses, “men of great courage and wisdom” (chiefs) made covenants with the fiend, to whom he “appeareth more familiarly than to others.”<sup>326</sup> In fact, Professor Alfred Cave explains that American Indians, like Puritans, “feared witchcraft” (ironically enough, they both happened to kill those suspected of it) and, contrary to popular belief, during their ceremonies, the powwow, they didn’t summoned the evil one, instead they, generally, invoked natural forces with a propitiatory purpose for harvest time, mid-winter, maple and the other important festivals of the year.<sup>327</sup> In his collection of Native American folktales and traditional stories, Whittier dedicated two early works to these annual shamanic celebrations: the first, “The Powwow,” published in

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<sup>323</sup> Not only was he a wise and powerful man, head of the confederacy, but he was also respected as sorcerer and healer, skilled in “the arts of necromancy” and other “mystical invocations” (Samuel A. Drake. *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore*, pp. 129-130).

<sup>324</sup> Whittier. *The Supernaturalism of New England*, pp. 3-4. In “Cultural Bias in the New England Puritans’ Perception of Indians” William S. Simmons points out that, unlike Indigenous “beliefs” about the “supernatural” powers of the first colonists, Puritan “commitment” about the demonic nature of Indian culture “intensified” rather than wavered (56).

<sup>325</sup> John Josselyn. *An Account of Two Voyages to New-England*, p. 104. In any case, Simmons specifies that Puritans believed that the evil spirit of Native American mythology wasn’t as potent as theirs (63). The folkloric creature that the Algonquian tribes resident along the northeastern coast and the Great Lakes dreaded the most was the Wendigo, a cannibal winter spirit haunting the forests of the region.

<sup>326</sup> Edward Winslow. *New England’s Memorial*, p. 488.

<sup>327</sup> Alfred A. Cave. “New England Puritan Misperceptions of Native American Shamanism,” pp. 18-19.



*Legends of New England*, narrated how, in 1690, the “good people” of Stratford, Connecticut, chased away the Indians from the promontory where they held their “strange” gatherings.<sup>328</sup>

The description of the Powwow, as seen through the eyes of the early settlers in all its uncanny and spectral power —there were “demons all on fire, rushing out of the sea”—, is accompanied by expressions (“it is said...”) that serve to distance the narrator from the Puritans’ account of the events —we, however, never fully expect him to openly endorse the American Indians’ perspective —, adding a note of scepticism that (regrettably) pierces the veil of mystery surrounding these otherworldly phenomena, as if the nineteenth-century man, for the sake of his credibility in modern society, couldn’t take them too seriously (79).<sup>329</sup> The result is a story written in a tone that is at once solemn and vaguely ironic, whose value is not the plot per se but the reproduction of the original legend by which it was inspired and the long tradition of storytelling through which it had been passed down.<sup>330</sup> In this respect, the following excerpt is one of the key moments of “The Powwow,” functioning as a “storytelling of storytelling”:

it was in very deed a fearful time. The old gossips of the neighbourhood gathered together every evening around some large, old-fashioned fire-place, where, with ghastly countenances whitening in the dim firelight, the marvellous legends which had been accumulating for more than half a century in the wild woods of the new country, were related, one after another, with hushed voices and tremulous gestures. The mysteries of the Indian worship —the frightful ceremonies of the Powwow — the incantations and sorceries of the prophets of the wilderness, and their revolting sacrifices to the Evil Being, were all made subjects of these nocturnal gatherings. (80-81)

Thus begins the tale (“t’was a night of November”) of the citizens of Stratford and their venture against the Indians, who after mistaking their exorcist for “some offended Power,” were never seen again near the town (84). The prose work is also an example of Burns’s influence on Whittier, whom he directly quoted —“that night a chield might understand / The De’il had business on his hand” (from the famous mock-epic poem “Tam O’Shanter”).

The second prose sketch is “Powow Hill. A Legend of Essex County,” published in the *New England Magazine* in 1832, during the “heyday of witchcraft subjects” when “strange sights were

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<sup>328</sup> Whittier. *Legends of New England*, p. 79.

<sup>329</sup> It is important to note that, in his tentatively multifaceted portrayal of Native Americans, not all of Whittier’s Indian characters approved of the powwows: in *Margaret Smith’s Journal*, for instance, “the best people of the tribe” believed it “sinful” and didn’t partake in the event (Whittier. *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 146).

<sup>330</sup> What Whittier essentially did in the book was take a legend and turn it into a new story.

seen.”<sup>331</sup> The legend is titled after the summit where Indians were said to worship their pagan gods and “practise their mysterious orgies,” the terror and scandal of the Christian folk dwelling in the vicinities before “our pious” and “worthy” ancestors “routed these heathen from the land.”<sup>332</sup> The story, obviously told from a Puritan viewpoint in a lightly satirical tone (particularly noticeable in the characterization of the protagonist), narrated the adventure of a bewitched Yankee man who, on the day of his wedding, arrived on his runaway horse at the top of the hill into the midst of the annual midnight powwow of Indian spectres.<sup>333</sup> There he witnessed the infamous ceremonial, the “marvellous legend” he had heard through the grapevine, which said that every time a powwow was held, whoever “blundered upon them” during their incantations was “never afterward heard of.”<sup>334</sup> He saw a bonfire with “strange figures” singing and dancing all around, then

a horrible grin sat upon their demoniacal profiles as they gleamed in the red glare of a flame that shot up in the midst of the circle, and the additional light of twenty or thirty pumpkin lanterns, stuck upon poles, and carved into Indian faces with all sorts of inhuman distortions. (419)

The eerie atmosphere, perfectly conveying the “provincial gothic” mood of the legend, prepares the way for the ghastly revelation, when the protagonist discovers he is expected to marry the infernal bride, so as to secure her dominion over earth; only thanks to his Yankee wit does he manage to find a way out of his hopeless situation: he throws his pocket Bible at the priest and they all suddenly vanish. The narrator ends his tale by stating that, to his knowledge, Powow Hill “has not been haunted since,” (421) echoing his initial reassurance that “mystery has disappeared before mechanism,” surviving, perhaps, only in the memory of “the oldest inhabitants”; therefore, the visitor of the “present day” will find no trace of the paranormal activity of Powow Hill (417).

One of the most interesting aspects of Whittier’s tale is that the legend was likely the precursor of the much more famous “Young Goodman Brown” written by Hawthorne: according to James Mathews, the latter could “owe a debt in origin or revision” to the version of the Quaker poet since it bears a close resemblance to “Powow Hill,” sharing elements such as the simple Yankee protagonist “as center of revelation, the waiting bride, the pagan ceremonial, materialized spirits,

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<sup>331</sup> James W. Mathews. “Hawthorne and the Periodical Tale: From Popular Lore to Art,” p. 152.

<sup>332</sup> John G. Whittier. “Powow Hill,” p. 416.

<sup>333</sup> Mathews, p. 153.

<sup>334</sup> Whittier. “Powow Hill,” pp. 417-418.

(...) and the atmosphere of a dream.”<sup>335</sup> Indeed, Whittier, in his “intuitive search” for poetic material in regional superstitions and beliefs (mostly oral sources) and in his effort to preserve the native heritage, participated in the myth making of the dark side of New England Romanticism preceding the well-known works of the Salem writer.<sup>336</sup> The poet, however, didn’t care to have the story reprinted with his other books, as he had no pretension about it; for such reason, it became one of the several prose sketches of his early years that he later discarded (see chapter one).<sup>337</sup>

There, too, Whittier acknowledged the sad legacy of the systematic removal of Native Americans: in a rather romantic passage he observed that, while the “same blue mountains far in the West,” the “same” dark woods and the “same blue ocean in the distant East” could still be seen from the summit of Powow Hill, the “smoke of the wigwam” and the “gliding canoe” were no more.<sup>338</sup> Similar, nostalgic imagery can be found in “The Last Norridgewock,” and in “The White Mountains” / “Mount Agio[co]chook” (the second being the same poem, slightly cut and edited). The latter, in particular, refer to the peaks that Americans Indians supposed to be the realm of “dreadful spirits” and therefore never climbed.<sup>339</sup> The poems, whose sketchy persona is an Indian of Whittier’s days paying his tribute to the haunted mountains and the “hunter-race” that passed away, was inspired by his readings of Josselyn:

The wigwam fires have all burned out,  
The moccasin hath left no track;  
Nor wolf nor wild-deer roam about  
The Saco and the Merrimack. (24-27)

In “The White Mountains” the Indian speaker contemplated the summit, dear to him as it was during his childhood, when he used to listen to the legends of long ago, ending with the touching question “wherefore should the red man stay?” (114-115); on the other hand, in “Mount Agiochook,” the narrator is comforted by the thought that “not vainly to the listening ear / The legends of thy past are told” (53-54) and that his gods still inhabit the mountain even after the “pale

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<sup>335</sup> Mathews, p. 153.

<sup>336</sup> Scott, p. 275.

<sup>337</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p.111.

<sup>338</sup> Whittier. “Powow Hill,” p. 417.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid. Legends of New England*, pp. 112-113. Agiocochook in Abenaki means “Home of the Great Spirit” or “Mother Goddess of the Storm,” after the Revolutionary War it was named “Mount Washington.”

face” scaled it.<sup>340</sup> When exploring the folklore, storytelling and spirituality of Native Americans, Whittier informed us that, even when the very last of “the red men” had disappeared from the region, the scene of their mystic ceremonies continued to be treated with “profound awe”;<sup>341</sup> he also expressed his regret that, besides some “hints” in the writings of Mayhew and the “curious little book” of Roger Williams (the aforementioned *A Key into the Language of America*), “our Puritan ancestors did not think it worth their while to hand down to us more of the simple and beautiful traditions and beliefs” of the Indians.<sup>342</sup>

He thus composed several poems drawing from the writings of Schoolcraft: “How the Robin Came. An Algonquin Legend” of 1886, for instance, consists of his retelling of the Chippewa folktale about the origin of the bird contained in *The Myth of Hiawatha and other Oral Legends*. By inviting his readers to sit by him and listen to his words, he brought the “strange,” old story back to life again, allowing a revival of these vanishing traditions as well as renewing interest in them, because evoked by the circumstances—in this case, a beautiful spring day and robins flying around the blossoms.<sup>343</sup> After his concise narration of the metamorphosis of an Indian boy, who had starved to death, into the bird, the poet ended the poem with his moral which, whether intentionally or not, resonates with Native Americans’ idea of storytelling: as Schoolcraft reported, some of their legends were invented for a teaching purpose, where the lesson, aimed at the “young folks” to whom the tale was told, was intended to replace the famous absence of all the “harsh methods” to bring up Indian children.<sup>344</sup> Whittier hence recommended:

If my young friends doubt that this  
Is the robin’s genesis,  
Not in vain is still the myth  
If a truth be found therewith:  
Unto gentleness belong  
Gifts unknown to pride and wrong;  
Happier far than hate is praise,  
He who sings than he who slays. (69-76)

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<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.* *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 490.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.* “Powow Hill,” p. 417.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.* *The Supernaturalism of New England*, p. 28.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.* *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 136-137.

<sup>344</sup> Henry R. Schoolcraft. *The Indian in his Wigwam*, p. 164.

Perhaps the poet's most heartfelt homage to Native American beliefs and culture remains "The Vanishers," the first one written after the death of his beloved sister in 1864 and dedicated to her: the poem is a delicate and artful interweaving of Western and Indigenous traditional knowledge, suggestive and elusive at the same time, centred around the folkloric creatures called "Puck-wud-jinnies" or "the vanishing little men" who, according to Algonquian folklore, lived in the forests. It was inspired by the simple legend, "sweetest of all childlike dreams," collected by American writer Elizabeth Oak Smith in the books of Schoolcraft.<sup>345</sup>

The verses, mystically leading into the "unknown realm beyond," function almost as a revelation, in which the pleasant images are not charged with unbearable sorrow, but with the consolatory promise that in the afterlife we'll be reunited again with our loved ones.<sup>346</sup> The Vanishers, whose beauty transcended the material world, represented the bridge between the two —"in the wind they whisper low / Of the Sunset Land of Souls" (23-24)—, being the glimpses of the "immortal youth" awaiting the narrator.<sup>347</sup> They were chased in vain, since they could appear and disappear at their own whim through the dark of "lowland firs," calling the fisherman and the hunter from their "cape and cliff"; however, thanks to their "far-heard voices sweet with truth," they were always a guide: the narrator then didn't lose hope that the "sought and seeker" would soon meet again in paradise. Whittier, wishing to have done "some sort" of justice to the legend, which he deemed "very beautiful,"<sup>348</sup> depicted these folkloric creatures as good-natured individuals, in line with the original folktales —the one reported by Mrs. Oak Smith, as narrated by Iagou, the famous Indian storyteller and the Odjibwa myth "The Puck-wud-jinnies" in which the protagonist, the "little wild man of the mountains," was indeed a kind soul, saving his sister, "Morning Star," from Manabozho, a trickster spirit.<sup>349</sup>

It is curious to note that, in the folklore of certain tribes, such as the Abenakis and the Algonquins, the Puck-wud-jinnies were instead believed to be rather mischievous creatures, even capable of

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<sup>345</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 157-158. Today such homage would instead be called cultural appropriation, albeit to a (very much) less problematic extent than Longfellow's *Hiawatha*.

<sup>346</sup> Underwood, p. 258. The author notes how Whittier's poem is vaguely reminiscent of Emerson's "The Forerunners" composed in the same years: the lines "long I followed happy guides / I could never reach their sides" (1-2) (Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, pp. 89-90) and "flitting, passing, seen and gone, / Never reached nor found at rest" (Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 157), for example, are quite similar —and so is the ending, where both the narrators were positively impacted by the presence of these creatures.

<sup>347</sup> The "Sunset Land" refers to the Native Americans' concept of heaven, a paradise in the west with mountains, forests and lakes, deers and buffaloes, where souls lived happily ever after (also mentioned in "The Last Norrdigewock).

<sup>348</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 481.

<sup>349</sup> Schoolcraft. *The Myth of Hiawatha and other Oral Legends*, pp. 93-94.

stealing children if mistreated. In this respect, they were akin to European gnomes and fairies, as Whittier himself wrote in *The Supernaturalism of New England*. Moreover, the poet was fascinated —“one [would] like to know more”— by Wetuomanit, the “domestic demon,” (he compared it to a Scottish Brownie, “gentle and useful”) who presided over “household affairs”, helped the newly married Native American women at “wigwam keeping,” warned of impending danger, and kept “evil spirits” at bay; as well as by Pumoolah, the spirit living with his immortal bride, daughter of the Penobscots, above the clouds in the Katahdin mountain, attainable only by the pure in heart. Whittier considered this lighter side of folklore to be far from the “nefandous and very devilish” portrayal that had been given by the “old” Puritans.<sup>350</sup>

Such lore, among Americans Indians, had survived from one generation to the next owing to the importance assigned to these legends and lodge tales, which were meant to “instruct” and amuse both young and old.<sup>351</sup> They were told by “oral chroniclers,” elderly men of wit, good memory and knowledge of life, who were also versed in recounting historical traditions.<sup>352</sup> Unfortunately, as Brainard pointed out in the introductory note to “The Black Fox of Salmon River,” a poem inspired by them, these fairytales held “little interest” for the vast majority of the Anglo-Saxon audience — in the nineteenth century folklore, as a field of study, had barely begun— as a consequence, the subject matter wasn’t as thoroughly explored in the pages of American literary men (and women) as its Puritan counterpart.<sup>353</sup> The ballad in question was greatly admired by Whittier, who praised its “wild and picturesque” beauty and regretted that more of the traditions of the “Red Men,” still lingering in the valley, had not been versified by his predecessor.<sup>354</sup> On his part, he reimagined and extended the enthralling story of the much-feared wild animal haunting the river in Connecticut, adding compelling elements of storytelling and folklore of both Puritan and Native culture which will prove rather useful for this study’s insight into Whittier’s oral sources in chapter four (being an integral part of his work). In his version, titled “The Black Fox,” he crafted a narrative characterized by a fast-paced rhythm heightening the suspense of the thrilling folktale, and a classic colonial gothic atmosphere, one of the best penned in his early career. The incipit immediately sets the tone of the “strange” legend: it is a “cold and cruel night” of a snowy winter in the rural New England of

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<sup>350</sup> Whittier. *The Supernaturalism of New England*, p. 28.

<sup>351</sup> Schoolcraft. *The Indian in his Wigwam*, p. 203.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>353</sup> Brainard, p. 141.

<sup>354</sup> Whittier. *The Supernaturalism of New England*, p. 29

the eighteenth century, when a family merrily gathers around the “ancient” fireplace; after a while, the young girl asks her grandmother, who is working on the spinning-wheel, to tell her and her brothers the story of the evening before, that of the “Black Fox”; she gladly agrees and begins her storytelling: the traditional, cozy spirit of the frame of the tale is thus suddenly interrupted by the eeriness of the wintry story about to be told.<sup>355</sup> The fox had been seen for the first time by their great-grandfather more than sixty years before, on “one bitter winter’s day” when all the trees were bare with the exception of the “dark, old hemlock”: the possible symbolic meaning of the tree is to be noted, commonly associated with death and inauspicious events due to its poisonous nature (the same imagery will be found in Frost’s “Dust of Snow”); the man had immediately recognized the “evil” in the creature and, being a hunter, he tried to kill it, but with no good result.<sup>356</sup> John Pickard deems Whittier’s choice of narrator an “excellent” one, owing to the old woman’s rustic descriptions and superstitious beliefs, which realistically captured the attitudes of small town people at the time of supernatural sights and apparitions, as this stanza exemplifies:<sup>357</sup>

And there was something horrible  
And fiendish in that yell;  
Our good old parson heard it once,  
And I have heard him tell  
That it might well be likened to  
A fearful cry from hell. (61-66)

Not a day had gone by without the wild animal returning to their woods, “spectre-like,” howling in the snowstorm: whenever the Indians heard the noise, they would shake their heads “mysteriously,” fearfully aware that something evil was lurking near them. Indeed, they believed that no one less than Hobomocko, the Manitou of death had cursed the animal and was thus impossible to catch — the very colour of its fur may be interpreted as symbolizing evil, creating a striking contrast with the snowy landscape surrounding the animal, since the colour white usually represents purity and goodness. Starting from that year, the fox kept coming back every winter, until two young hunters resolved to put an end to the hauntings, but, as dusk fell on the village and the hours went by, they still had not returned; the elderly lady gives an account of what would happen on such occasions: the settlers and the Indians gathered together,

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<sup>355</sup> *Ibid. Legends of New England*, pp. 116-117.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>357</sup> John Pickard, pp. 61-62.

And then our old men shook their heads,  
And the red Indians told  
Their tale of evil sorcery,  
Until our blood ran cold,  
The stories of their Powwah seers,  
And withered hags of old.<sup>358</sup> (115-120)

The Indians knew that their hunters would never come back again, because they had been killed; when spring arrived and the snow began to melt, they found their bodies, naked on the ground, far in the wilderness: from that moment on the Indian hunters always avoided that corner of the forest, not even animals dared to tread over their grave, and birds changed direction so as not to fly over it,

For people say that every year,  
When winter snows are spread  
All over the face of the frozen earth,  
And the forest leaves are shed,  
The Spectre-Fox comes forth and howls  
Above the hunters' bed.<sup>359</sup> (181-186)

The ballad ends without any explanation as to what truly happened to the young hunters, the authorial choice to leave it undisclosed strategically heightens the atmosphere of terror experienced by the inhabitants in those dark winters, —the impression given is perhaps more effective than that conveyed by the macabre details that appeared in other poems about violence and death—, and so does the absence of a final word on his contemporaries' perception of this unnamed evil; whether, to this day, the Black Fox is still haunting the river and the depths of the northern woods, it is up to us to wonder.

The role of storytelling and folklore of New England in the formation of Whittier as an author as well as in his poetic legacy, together with their importance as a source and pivotal theme of his poetry is the focus of the next chapter.

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<sup>358</sup> Whittier. *Legends of New England*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Pioneer Work of Whittier

This chapter focuses on the contribution that folklorist Whittier made to New England folklore and vernacular culture, recording original materials and sources whose historical and anthropological value remains one of the most significant achievements of his career.<sup>360</sup> As a matter of fact, the very word “folklore” didn’t exist until 1846, when it was first coined by English antiquarian William John Thoms, therefore the young Whittier began his treasury of fairytales and beliefs of the olden time at a point in history when the field was yet to be thoroughly investigated, becoming one of the pioneers in the Merrimack valley. Professor Richard Dorson specifies that folklore, in order to be identified as such within a literary work, needs to possess an “independent traditional life,” that is to say, it cannot be an invention of the author:<sup>361</sup> Whittier often adapted the already existing legends to suit his poetic fancy and purposes, in this case, the authentic elements of folklore that are worth further examination by scholars of New England lore are to be found in words and phrases referring to real locations or customs, as opposed to the (fictional) poem in its entirety —among the ones that I’ve reported so far, there are “The Devil’s Den,” “The Wishing Bridge” of Marblehead, the hanging a horseshoe to protect against Goody Martin...

It is to be noted that Whittier’s conception of poetry shared important characteristics with the perception of folklore as a whole too, such as the presence of morals as a key part of the story and the role they both play in representing —to use the words of Propp— the “art of the oppressed class.”<sup>362</sup> Rural towns and backwoods places were “honeycombed” with superstitions that modernity could not dispel:<sup>363</sup> as Washington Irving observed in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” these would “thrive best” in “sheltered, long-settled retreats,”<sup>364</sup> being a kind of “hereditary property” of the peasants, for whom ballads and local tales were still a favorite pastime.<sup>365</sup> The lore of their secluded valleys ranged from fantastical to practical, a prime example of the latter being the

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<sup>360</sup> Needless to say, it easily outweighs the literary quality of his verses.

<sup>361</sup> Richard Dorson. “Folklore in Literature: A Symposium,” p. 7.

<sup>362</sup> Vladimir Propp. *Theory and History of Folklore*, p. 5.

<sup>363</sup> Samuel A. Drake. *The Myths and Fables of To-Day*, p. 23.

<sup>364</sup> Washington Irving. “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” p. 131.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.* *The Works of Washington Irving*, vol. 2, p. 528. Indeed, the Merrimack River country had never known the “colonial magnificence” of Boston and Salem: its humble households shared little to nothing with the world of “old-family balls,” “rich foreign dresses,” “mahogany furniture” and “East India punch-bowls” (Kennedy. *John G. Whittier, the Poet of Freedom*, p. 21).

wide variety of old wives' tales and sayings collected by Clifton Johnson in *What They Say in New England* ("if a girl can comb and do up her hair neatly without looking in the glass, it is a sign she won't be an old maid"... "on Candlemas Day / Half the wood and half the hay").<sup>366</sup> The reader of Whittier comes across this old-time simplicity over and over again in his American folk ballads, owing to the humble upbringing of the poet himself, —he was "one of them"— and the lessons learnt from his predecessors: these narratives, peppered with anecdotes of local characters and familiar traditions, reflected the poet's knowledge of the peculiar legends and the curious, forgotten lore of the region in the manner of Scott and Burns (see, for instance, the introduction to the third canto of *Marmion*:

And ever, by the winter hearth,  
Old tales I heard of woe or mirth,  
Of lovers' slights, of ladies' charms,  
Of witches's spells, of warriors' arms;<sup>367</sup>

and the letter that the composer of "Auld Lang Syne" wrote to Dr. John Moore, when he talked of the "old woman" who, during his childhood, used to tell him songs and tales about "devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches [...]").<sup>368</sup> The influence of provincial gothic in vogue at the time — mastered by Hawthorne in *Twice Told Tales* and Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Oldtown Fireside Stories*, to name but two— further consolidated the literary depiction of rural New England as a sort of liminal space where natural and supernatural realms were blurred, and the hauntings of the past couldn't quite be shaken off. From the very beginning Whittier was fascinated by the "weird and subtle beauty" of Hawthorne's legendary tales, and acknowledged his own shortcomings as a writer: undoubtedly, his attempts were but a pale shadow (at times merely imitative) in comparison to the works penned by some of his contemporaries and his literary masters; even so, thanks to his storytelling, Whittier added a quieter but no less important voice to the collective literary effort to keep alive the spirit of New England.<sup>369</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> Clifton Johnson. *What They Say in New England*, pp. 128-129 and 29.

<sup>367</sup> Walter Scott. *Marmion*, p. 107

<sup>368</sup> Robert Burns. *The Complete Works of Robert Burns*, pp. 351-352.

<sup>369</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, p. 462. John Pickard actually deems Whittier's native ballads far more authentic than Longfellow's in terms of American-ness, because of the latter's predilection for European themes, the title of "pioneer" would then be well deserved, thanks to his early recognition of the potential of rustic material (p. 60).

#### 4.1 A Tradition of Folktales

A considerable insight into the poet's first interactions with the world of local bards and old country wanderers, with their strange stories about the mysterious happenings of isolated towns nestled among the dark woods of the American north, was given by Whittier himself in several of his prose and poetic works, along with glimpses of the social history of the valley of the Merrimack: husking bees, quilting parties, harvest dances, ice skating...<sup>370</sup> In the essay "Yankee Gypsies" he nostalgically described one of these moments, when twice a year, during his childhood, Jonathan Plummer from Newburyport, the "first and last minstrel of the valley," poet and peddler, used to visit the Quaker household to sell his goods and poems.<sup>371</sup> Here Whittier ironically informs us that the "Yankee troubadour" regarded natural disasters, forest fires, shipwrecks, drownings as "personal favors from Providence," furnishing him with material for his ballads: indeed, peddlers were an important conveyor of economic and cultural "exchanges" across antebellum America, due to their continuous travelling at a time when communication from town to town was virtually impossible.<sup>372</sup> They were thus generally welcomed by the inhabitants of rural New England, interrupting their "country seclusion" and becoming part of the local folklore—the Whittiers' farm wasn't the only one way out in the middle of nowhere—; they also represented the "living" symbol of a "new, Romantic ideology" that valued a "democratic" conception of "knowledge, nature and self-reliance" to all of the aspiring poets.<sup>373</sup>

Interestingly, Whittier chose to portray (and elevate) Plummer in relation to the world of a distant past—"minstrel," "troubadour"—instead of that of modern, urban society to which peddlers like him actually belonged,<sup>374</sup> arguably as a consequence of the "infinite satisfaction" that the young poet received from Plummer's readings and impromptu verses during his stay.<sup>375</sup> Peddlers and wanderers therefore contributed to much of the oral lore and foreign literature circulating in the small and remote villages of the uplands throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth century:

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<sup>370</sup> For a more general approach to the topic see *A Treasury of New England Folklore: Stories, Ballads and Traditions of Yankee Folk* by Benjamin A. Botkin (1947).

<sup>371</sup> Whittier. *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 334.

<sup>372</sup> Michael Cohen. *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth Century America*, p. 18.

<sup>373</sup> Matt Boehm. "Peddler Poets: Itinerant Print Dissemination and Literary Access in Antebellum America," p. 2.

<sup>374</sup> Cohen, p. 19.

<sup>375</sup> Whittier. *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 334.

Whittier wrote that it was a “wandering Scotchman” who first introduced him to the songs and poems of Burns.<sup>376</sup>

As hinted before, the second major source of legends and provincial oddities were the elders’ fireside tales, enshrouded in the mists of memory and always fuelling the imagination of the poet, delighting (and frightening) many a childish heart:

One dark, cloudy night, when our parents chanced to be absent, we were sitting with our aged grandmother in the fading light of the kitchen-fire, (...) in a state of excitement and terror by recounting to each other all the dismal stories we could remember of ghosts, witches, haunted houses and robbers;<sup>377</sup>

Echoing Irving’s statements, Kennedy explains that the Merrimack valley was, “or [had been] until recently” a cornucopia of legends “of the marvellous and the supernatural” which had been preserved unchanged over time due in large measure to the naturally secluded position of the valley and the conservative habits of thought and life of its populace.<sup>378</sup> Whittier grew up surrounded by these, being a constant presence in the homes of his neighbourhood: for instance, the biographer tells us that the belief in fairies still persisted among the New England peasantry when the poet was a child and so did the fear of witchcraft —“the railroad, the newspaper, and the influx of foreign population, have combined to (...) drive [ghost and witch] up into the mountainous districts.”<sup>379</sup> In this respect, in a letter to the Salem Village Gazette in October 1877, Whittier recounted the visit to “Witch Hill” in Danvers, where he saw “the skeleton of a tree” upon which witches had been hanged: “the sight and the stories told me made a deep impression,” amplifying his “already lively fears of an old woman” of the neighbourhood, supposed to be one too.<sup>380</sup> His boyish dread of Goody Mose —such was the name of the goodwife whose look would have made “the fortune of an English witch finder”— appears in other reminiscences of the poet, and wasn’t confined to the young: in *Gleanings from Merrimac Valley* Rebecca Davis narrates how the people of Rocks Village, Haverhill, believed that she could bewitch their cream so that they were left unable to churn butter, and how she used to sinisterly go around snuffing out candles when they gathered together

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<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 336-337.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 338.

<sup>378</sup> Kennedy. *John Greenleaf Whittier: His Life, Genius, and Writings*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>380</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 3, p. 378.

“for an evening’s enjoyment.”<sup>381</sup> This, in particular, was one of the first memories of local superstitions that the poet had, as he himself divulged in *The Supernaturalism of New England* (50), the second being the haunted Bridge of Country Brook —“no one who could avoid it ventured over it after dark”—<sup>382</sup>: even though it had been years, he still remembered the night when a woman came to the Whittier’s house in “great fright” after seeing a “headless ghost” crossing it;<sup>383</sup> the haunted place became a frequent reference in many of his uncollected poems. Indeed, in the essay “Charms and Fairy Faith,” he pondered on how

in our fixed, valley-sheltered, inland villages, —slumberous Rip Van Winkles, unprogressive and seldom visited— may be found the same old beliefs in omens, (...) witchcraft, and supernatural charms which our ancestors brought with them two centuries ago from Europe.<sup>384</sup>

The passage closely resembles the opening of the second chapter of *The Supernaturalism of New England*:

modern scepticism and philosophy have not yet eradicated the belief of supernatural visitation from the New England mind. Here and there —oftenest in our still, fixed, valley-sheltered, unvisited nooks and villages, the Rip Van Winkles of a progressive and restless population— may still be found devout believers worthy of the days of the two Mathers. (10)

One notes the reprise of Irving’s choice of words (and fictional character): in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” the region is said to be “sleepy,” with a “witchy influence” that holds a “spell” over the minds of the residents of the town, so as to keep them in a state of “continual reverie.”<sup>385</sup> In Whittier’s case, the imagery has a fairly negative connotation, evoking the —at times stereotypical— enlightenment dichotomy between the “dark night of reason” and the dawn of modern rationalism. As mentioned in chapter three, reader of the Quaker poet quite often encounters his ambivalent attitude toward myths and superstitions: see, for instance, the final paragraph of the essay,

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<sup>381</sup> Davis, p. 42.

<sup>382</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Whittier-Land*, p. 15.

<sup>383</sup> Davis, p. 34.

<sup>384</sup> Whittier. *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 386.

<sup>385</sup> Irving. “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”, pp. 9 and 13.

the wonderland of childhood must (...) be sought within the domains of truth. The strange facts of natural history, and the sweet mysteries of flowers and forests (...) 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; (397-398)

and that of “Yankee Gypsies,” when he argued that: “in the beautiful present the past is no longer needed” (344). In light of such statements, one cannot but wonder why Whittier devoted so much time to writing about regional legends and folklore, given his aversion to what he perceived to be a dangerous social influence —“in many a valley of rural New England there are children (...) still to be found not quite overtaken by the march of mind.”<sup>386</sup> Such a contradiction can be partially explained by taking into account the final pages of *The Supernaturalism of New England*, where we gather that Whittier, while fully endorsing the spirit of modernity and its success in overcoming the superstitions of the past and their fatal, disastrous consequences (witch-hunting, to name one), considered folklore as a pleasant diversion during the long autumnal evenings and, most importantly, as a form of escapism to counteract the ever-growing materialism of Western culture. According to Whittier, a “great truth” lies behind the need of supernaturalism in a society: it is “Nature herself repelling the slanders of the materialist” as well as “her everlasting protest” against the pervasive atheism of the age, whose contempt for spirituality, however, faith alone can resist, since the belief in superstitions is no longer justified (70).<sup>387</sup> For the purposes of this study, it is worth considering a second curious excerpt from “Charms and Fairy Faith”:

the practice of charms (...) is still, to some extent, continued in New England; (...) one of the most common of these ‘projects’ is as follows: a young woman goes down into the cellar, or into a dark room, with a mirror in her hand, and looking in it, sees the face of her future husband peering at her through the darkness; (386-387)

the superstition to which Whittier was referring in the passage, also appearing in Burns’s “Halloween,” was one of the most popular of the period, and continued to be a prevailing belief at least until the beginning of the twentieth century, as featured in many Victorian and Edwardian Halloween postcards and magazines (consider the example shown in figures 1 and 2, or page 10 of the *Evening Public Ledger of Philadelphia* of October 31, 1914).<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> Whittier. *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 388.

<sup>387</sup> From a logical standpoint, Whittier’s argumentation isn’t consistent, he attacked the meaning and power of folklore from an equally non-provable position; one might as well believe in both.

<sup>388</sup> Halloween used to revolve around love as much as black cats, witches and jack-o’-lanterns.



Figure 1: Halloween card by Fred C. Lounsbury, 1907



Figure 2: Victorian Halloween card

How Whittier became acquainted with the folklore traditions of his hometown comes up as a topic in other essays as well, such as “Magicians and Witch Folk”; nonetheless, it is his magnum opus, 1866’s “Snow-Bound. A Winter Idyl” that contains his most famous recollection of the nights when “dim-remembered fictions” took the “guise of present truth.”<sup>389</sup> In this long idyl he penned a charming, nostalgic scene of his childhood, when, in the midst of a December blizzard, the Whittier family and the village’s schoolmaster gathered around the fireplace to tell stories as a pastime until the snow melted and the merry party could finally rejoin the outer world. The pastoral poem, whose masterful literary precedent was Burns’s “Cotter’s Saturday Night,” eulogized the simple, close-to nature past that, with the advent of industrialization and urbanization, was rapidly receding into history and memories of distant days, giving a detailed account of the poet’s early relationship with storytelling in a classic New England setting. In the very preface to his work, Whittier expressed how this folk art was a “necessary resource” on those occasions, owing to the scarcity of reading materials: in the “lonely” homestead there were but a “few books,” an annual almanac and a “small weekly newspaper”; his father would then tell stories of his travels throughout the Canadian wilderness, his camping adventures among “wild beasts” and Indians and moonlight dances, while his mother recounted their fearful raids in their ancestors’ settlements, describing the “strange people” who lived on the Piscataqua and Choceco rivers and her childhood days, learning what flowers bloomed in the meadows and the forest.<sup>390</sup> His uncle, a lover of nature and the great outdoors, illiterate but wise in the “lore of fields and brooks,” delighted in entertaining them with his fair share of anecdotes about fishing and hunting expeditions, along with tales of “witchcraft and apparitions”; Whittier’s aunt, instead, used to reminisce about the apple-bees and husking frolics of her girlhood, “the sleigh-rides and the summer sails.”<sup>391</sup>

In its reproduction of the heart-warming atmosphere of a rustic New England country home, “Snow-Bound” was praised as the “most faithful picture of our northern winter”<sup>392</sup> —Whittier himself confessed to Lucy Larcom that “if [the poem] were not mine,” he “should call it pretty good”—<sup>393</sup>; these “Flemish pictures” of the past, Romantic par excellence in their “invoking a

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<sup>389</sup> Whittier. Quote from “Flowers in Winter,” *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 148-149.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.* *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 399-400.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 401-402.

<sup>392</sup> Stedman, p. 117. Additionally, it reflected a new stage of maturity in the poet’s outlook on life, where he abandoned his “childlike trust” in a “just and benevolent Providence” to face “death and disorder” and, especially in the first section, the “specter” of a “purposeless” and silent universe (Lewis H. Miller. “The Supernaturalism of Snow-Bound,” pp. 295-296).

<sup>393</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 3, p. 102.



remembered happiness” so as to “fill a present emptiness” (also echoing the strategy of the absent center discussed in chapter one) exemplified the importance of storytelling in keeping the tales and the heritage of past generations alive.<sup>394</sup> In this regard, the epigraph to the poem becomes all the more significant: in *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* Agrippa spoke of the hidden power of words, a concept which deeply resonates with the very role that storytelling plays in the idyl, where it transcends the dimension of time and change—and therefore death—and represents, along with firelight, a symbol of the warmth of love and togetherness, what Agrippa identified as the “Angels of Light,” that is to say, the “Good Spirits” who guard against the threatening darkness of the nocturnal snowstorm and of the pain for all that was already gone (his beloved mother and sister) and forgotten (“ye olde traditions”) by the time that Whittier was composing these verses.<sup>395</sup> In this wintry reverie, and, by extension, in the folklore writings of Whittier, where natural and supernatural forces combine, memory and imagination—both past and present—work as a protective spell, and will continue to do so as long as there are “listeners who will hear.”<sup>396</sup>

“Snow-Bound” refined the theme that he had treated twenty years earlier in “To My Sister,” the dedication of *The Supernaturalism of New England* published in 1847, in which he had employed similar imagery to remember when, next to the fireside, there were

(...) young eyes widening to the lore  
Of faery-folks and witches.  
Dear heart! the legend is not vain  
Which lights that holy hearth again,  
And calling back from care and pain,  
And death’s funereal sadness,  
Draws round its old familiar blaze  
The clustering groups of happier days.<sup>397</sup> (23-30)

#### 4.2 Whittier the Storyteller

Before dwelling on Whittier’s recreation of the traditional folklore of his native country, it is necessary to address the fact that, especially toward the end of his life, his not-so-subtle skepticism creeping into his stories about the supernatural gave space to a fresh perspective, open to

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<sup>394</sup> Buell, *New England Literary Culture: from Revolution through Renaissance*, p. 127.

<sup>395</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 399.

<sup>396</sup> Lewis H. Miller. “The Supernaturalism of Snow-Bound,” p. 302.

<sup>397</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 391.

possibilities: he was ready to believe “anything of this kind” that could be “well authenticated,” as a result of his new-found interest and approval of the works done by the scientists studying the “realm of telepathy” for the Society for Psychical Research, founded in London in 1882.<sup>398</sup> In the essay “Modern Magic” he had indeed declared that he was not willing to “reject at once everything which cannot be explained in consistency with a strictly material philosophy” since “our whole life is circled about with mystery.”<sup>399</sup>

This shift toward a constructive approach in his later treatment of literary material certainly enhanced his credibility as writer of folklore far more than any criticism by fellow authors — Hawthorne’s harsh, albeit accurate, review of Whittier’s *The Supernaturalism of New England* comes to mind, when he remarked that if Whittier “cannot believe” his own ghost stories while he is telling them, he “had better leave the task to somebody else,” without resorting to the exaggerated condescension of an “austere” schoolmaster “before or after the narrative, and often in the midst of it.”<sup>400</sup> According to the Salem writer, who understood that Whittier’s attitude toward the topic had always stemmed from his “stern sense of duty” —which he didn’t compromise, not even for the sake of romance, or poetry, “it is a matter of conscience with him to do so”—, the Quaker’s self-limiting beliefs prevented him from fully expressing his potential.<sup>401</sup> One of the consequences is that, in the monograph, his style doesn’t possess the “simplicity” that this genre requires: instead of the avuncular tone of a fireside story —“as simple as the babble of an old woman to her grandchild, as they sit in the smoky glow of a deep chimney-corner”— Whittier, making use of his extensive reading and learning, wrote in a manner that can be seen as almost too sophisticated for the subject matter, which doesn’t need an “array of authorities” to validate itself.<sup>402</sup>

The legendary lore of New England, as narrated by Whittier, was, for the most part, based on historical events and characters as well as everyday provincial life taken from written and oral

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<sup>398</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Whittier-Land*, p. 83. Whittier was by no means the only author to be engaged in these researches —they collected tales of signs and wonders, omens, apparitions, “witchcraft and spiritualism” (Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 3, p. 535)— among the most notable members of the society were Mark Twain, Carl Gustav Jung, Arthur Conan Doyle, Alfred Lord Tennyson etc. More informations can be found at the following page of the University of Cambridge: <https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/departments/archives-modern-and-medieval-manuscripts-and-university-archives-0>. Accessed 7 November 2022.

<sup>399</sup> Whittier. *The Stranger in Lowell*, p. 104.

<sup>400</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne. “Two Uncollected Reviews by Hawthorne” pp. 506-507. As a matter of fact, Wagenknecht reveals that the Salem writer liked Whittier “as a man” although he “cared nothing for his writings” —he actually liked the book in question, deeming it a somewhat worthy contribution to the state of rural superstitions—, the Quaker poet, for his part, professed that Hawthorne never “seemed to be doing anything, yet he did not like being disturbed at it” (112).

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*

sources; Kennedy notes that, once read or heard, the stories would be revisited at a later time, when they were already “somewhat vague” and coloured with glowing “hues of romance.”<sup>403</sup>

Similarly to Hawthorne, who happened to record in his *American Note-Books* the conversations he had with old islanders who told him of the ancient legends of the place,<sup>404</sup> Whittier, apart from his folklore ballads, dedicated several chapters of his works on New England superstitions and beliefs to the local oddities and backstories that he had been collecting over time. It is particularly telling that, whenever he recorded one of the “marvels” that occurred in his vicinity, he placed an important emphasis on how the victims and/or the witnesses were actually people of sound mind, reliable and sincere, who were identified by a series of favourable appellations to convince the reader of their seriousness and legitimize the validity of their claim; owing to the fact that most of these were actual neighbours of the poet, ladies and gentleman with whom he was personally acquainted, I personally discard the possibility of Whittier being ironic all along —“a much-lamented friend of mine, a sober and intelligent farmer...”<sup>405</sup> For instance, after giving a quaint, brief description of the Great Pond in the East parish of Haverhill,<sup>406</sup> one of the “loveliest” of New England, he gravely announces that “here, too, has the shadow of the supernatural fallen” and proceeds to give an account of the paranormal sightings as experienced by a lady of “good intelligence,” a “staid” and “unimaginative church-member”; similarly, there was one “worthy” man who was afraid to pass by the ruins of a mill alone, since it had long had the reputation of being haunted and horseshoes, and “in consequence,” had been “nailed over its doors.”<sup>407</sup> He wrote of the premonition and tragedy that had overtaken a “worthy” and respectable widow living in his neighbourhood who saw the “spectre” of her daughter just before the latter’s death, and of an analogous circumstance witnessed by an “esteemed friend, a lady of strong mind, not at all troubled with nervous sensibility.”<sup>408</sup>

Whittier employed the same stylistic strategies earlier in his career too: in the 1833’s article “New-England Superstitions,” he reported the confession that a “very honest and intelligent neighbor of

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<sup>403</sup> Kennedy. *John G. Whittier, the Poet of Freedom*, p. 295.

<sup>404</sup> Dorson, p. 5.

<sup>405</sup> Whittier. “New-England Superstitions,” p. 28.

<sup>406</sup> It was later named Kenoza Lake, the word for “pickerel” in Native American language, to which he also dedicated a poem (George W. Chase. *The History of Haverhill*, p. xii).

<sup>407</sup> Whittier. *The Supernaturalism of New England*, pp. 37-38. Many of these seem to befall when the veil between day and night is the thinnest.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

mine” once made to him, when he sensed that his brother was dying, drowning in the Merrimack (27), and that of another “most exemplary Christian” who revealed that his brother, a “worthy” and “highly-esteemed” inhabitant of the town, had been troubled by omens of his own death right before his sudden departure (30). It is worth mentioning the formulaic repetition of statements such as: “I have heard many similar relations” (27), “I could mention half a dozen other places within a few miles (...) celebrated for [their uncommon] sights and sounds” (29), following each anecdote to testify to the abundance of these outlandish claims within the Merrimack Valley:<sup>409</sup> on a winter evening, he had listened “hour after hour” to “minute descriptions” of other-wordly sights — meteors, lights dancing in graveyards and “lonely places” (28). As expected from a prose piece of the young Whittier, he referred to them as “effects of a disordered imagination” and, driven by his contrarian beliefs, he concluded the article by reminding the reader that “even in our enlightened age and community, the delusions of the past still linger around us,” disrupting the crescendo because confronted with the necessity to separate himself from the folklore and folkways of his fellow countrymen —he, however, admitted how well personal warnings of impending death and doom resisted the advent and spread of scientific thought (30-31).

In his first attempts at regional storytelling and provincial gothic, some of his verses were inspired by episodes of local tragedies: albeit not satisfied with the final outcome, in 1834’s “Suicide Pond” he narrated the legend of the “dark and dismal” pond in Haverhill believed to be haunted by the spirit of the deceased Hannah Chase, a twenty-two years old girl who met death by drowning on June 13th, 1819.<sup>410</sup> It was said that the sweet girl, “loved by the villagers all,” decided to end her own life after her wealthy family opposed her relationship with a hired boy of lower social rank; she had hinted at her suicide plan to a schoolmate (“strangely whispered her dark design”), but her wording had been so “wild and vague” that she had paid little attention to them.<sup>411</sup> The “gloomy” shore of the pond, whose vegetation had grown untamed since the morning they found her body floating in the water, was unanimously avoided by the passerby, whose merry whistles and laughs died on the lips: fearful glances were thrown at the silent spot and nobody dared to rest under its old, mossy willow.<sup>412</sup> The reason was that in the “cold, forsaken glen” the maidens of the village were convinced that, in the summer, as soon as night fell, a “misty form,” resembling a human

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<sup>409</sup> See *The Supernaturalism of New England* too: “I could easily mention other cases” (11), “I have heard many similar stories” (38).

<sup>410</sup> Davis, pp. 58-59.

<sup>411</sup> Whittier. *Ballads and Other Poems*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

body, would rise from that “loathsome” pond to linger over it, as if it were fog under the moonlight, and “like a meteor glides to the startled view” it would suddenly dissipate; a faint cry was heard too, reminiscent of the night the girl died, taking her secret story away with her: her wailing spirit, on the other hand, had been coming back to haunt those who stayed. The obvious lack of poetic quality of these verses does not undermine the significance of Whittier’s recording, the poem being one of the rare (I suspect the only) accounts of a legend which wouldn’t have otherwise survived the sands of time.

The folktale echoes another folklore poem belonging to his early period, “The Unquiet Sleeper,” published in *Legends of New England* and centered around the legend of a New Hampshire hunter who, around fifty years before, had died all of a sudden. Nobody knew where he went and what he did that fatal day, after leaving his family at dawn, but, once they found the corpse, it was clear that an “evil deed had been done on him.”<sup>413</sup> According to the story circulating in his neighbourhood at the time Whittier was writing, every year, in the “dead of the night” on the anniversary of his death, “strange cries,” of the most “appalling and unearthly nature,” were heard rising “fearfully” from the hunter’s grave, carried by the autumn wind to the village, “like the howl of a demon” trying to break free from the mossy burial-ground.<sup>414</sup>

In the repertoire of ghost stories and eerie folklore of New England, Whittier often indicated his sources and influences, among them, “good old” Abram Morrison, the Irish Quaker nostalgically commemorated in the homonymous ballad, whose storytelling became one of the “quaintest” and “drollest” memories of his childhood:

Much we loved his stories told  
Of a country strange and old,  
Where the fairies danced till dawn,  
And the goblin Leprecaun  
Looked, we thought, like Morrison.<sup>415</sup> (56-60)

Whittier also points out that Morrison was the first to celebrate the joy and simplicity of life in the Merrimack Valley (verses 66 to 70), capturing the zeitgeist of an age that, half a century later —the poem is dated 1884— was already lost and, with it, the American folk heroes that had long been a

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<sup>413</sup> *Ibid. Legends of New England*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid. The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 413-414.

homely presence to the rural youth and the catalyst for the pioneer work that Whittier and his contemporary writers, in translating oral tradition into written form, have done in the nascent field of folklore studies —“broken is the mound that run / Men like Abram Morrison (124-125).<sup>416</sup> Indeed, in the preface to *Legends of New England*, he summarized his aims and results —New England being “rich in traditionary lore,” he had attempted to “present in an interesting form” some of its popular folktales—, explaining that, since the field was a “new one” and he had “but partially explored it,” leaving “the task of rescuing these [superstitions] from oblivion to some more fortunate individual.”<sup>417</sup>

As previously reported, other poems were inspired by stories heard in his younger years: “The New Wife and the Old” of 1843, for example, owes its genesis to a “venerable family visitor,” an elderly lady who recounted the ominous tale of a “Yankee Faust,” General Jonathan Moulton of Hampton, New Hampshire, supposed by his neighbours to be in “league with the adversary.”<sup>418</sup> Indeed, as he stated in *The Supernaturalism of New England*, the elders of the region “yet tell” his “marvellous stories” (31). In the ballad, Whittier immortalized one of the three legends circulating about this controversial eighteenth-century historical figure (he participated in the French-Indian and Revolutionary Wars and George Washington paid tribute to him), that of his second marriage to a younger woman, Sarah Emery, who was surprised in her sleep by the ghost of the late Mrs. Moulton, Abigail, who wanted to recover her wedding ring and her bracelet; the first wife had indeed died under “suspicious circumstances” while his husband was lusting after the maiden who was taking care of her —“blooming girl and manhood gray, / Autumn in the arms of May!” (5-6)—;

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<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 415.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid. Legends of New England*, pp. 3-4. With respect to his last statement, Samuel Pickard reveals that, when older, whenever Whittier got his hands on a copy of the book, he would destroy it; one time, in the midst of one of his self-deprecatory moods, he bought a copy with the sole intention of burning it because, after flipping through it, it seemed to him that somebody else had written it. (*Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 92).

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid. The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 21-22. After Moulton’s mansion burned to the ground, it was speculated that the devil was behind it: tradition said that Moulton, being a covetous man, had sold his soul in exchange for immense wealth; once the devil appeared to him, sliding down the chimney under the form of a man “dressed from top to toe in black velvet,” the general was confident that he could trick him, so as to amass even more money. The deal ensured that, every month, Moulton would have his boots filled with golden coins —he signed the “fatal list” which he was “astonished to see numbered some of the highest personages of the province”—, but, one morning, ignoring the devil’s admonition and unwilling to quench his insatiable thirst —“his neighbours regarded him first with envy, then with aversion, at last with fear”—, he thought he knew better and cut off the soles of the largest pair he had found in the village: when the gold began to fill the entire room, the fiend, realizing that he had been deceived, foamed with rage, then gave “a horrible grin, and disappeared”; that very night the house was destroyed by the fire and the gold vanished altogether (for a complete version of the legend one should consult Samuel A. Drake, *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore*, from p. 324 to p. 327). Another legend surrounded the general’s death: since “strange rumours” circulated, to disprove them, the coffin was opened but found not to contain any human remains; at the moment of Moulton’s demise, along with his soul, the enemy had claimed his body too (*Ibid.*, p. 328).

the jewels were never seen again.<sup>419</sup> The first half of the ballad is infused with a conventional gothic atmosphere: the dark chambers, the night wind blowing through the trees of the graveyard, the “icy cold spectral hands” touching the newlywed bride and the dead woman talking to her; in the second half, however, the suspense built so far is slowly broken by Whittier’s deliberate choice to leave behind the narration of that witching hour, the “terror and wonder” of the new Mrs. Moulton, to add a moral component to the ballad, focusing on an “examination of the sinful conscience” of the general as well as “musing” on the reasons for the deceased wife’s macabre return.<sup>420</sup>

These verses vaguely resemble one of the earliest poems Whittier composed inspired by supernatural themes, “The Demon Lady” of 1831-1832, which he called a “wild, Coleridge-like fragment” in which a young lord, contrarily to his family’s expectations, marries a lowborn woman only to regret it when he realizes that she, in fact, is not who he expected her to be and he is murdered on the night of his wedding.<sup>421</sup> For instance, the lines “the guests are gone, the lamps are dim, / The long cold hall gives back no tread”<sup>422</sup> (88-89) eerily echo the incipit of the previous ballad: “dark the halls, and cold the feast, / Gone the bridemaids, gone the priest” (1-2). Here too the poet imagined a sinister tale containing typical gothic and romantic elements: the ivy-covered walls of the castle, the “gray sea mist,” the gloomy mountains, the reader being told that, when the wolves were howling in the distance,

He met her in the greenwood shade,  
And in the solemn moon-light only,  
Where rock and tangled forest made  
Their place of meeting lonely.<sup>423</sup> (1-4)

An interesting aspect of Whittier’s folklore writings is the correspondence that followed their publication, in this case, the letter he received several years later, in 1888, from the great-granddaughter of Sarah Emery, who was curious about the poet’s sources for the “The New Wife and the Old”; another letter had been sent by a lady who was spending the summer at their “old

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<sup>419</sup> Samuel A. Drake. *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore*, p. 328. It is to be noted that there was a fourteen-year age gap between the two (Moulton was born in 1726, Emery in 1740, they married in 1776, when she was thirty-six years old, a year after Smith’s death), therefore Whittier’s metaphor is not the most precise.

<sup>420</sup> John Pickard, p. 67. In his review of the ballad, Hawthorne notes that it had been polished too much, at the expense of its rusticity (506-507).

<sup>421</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 73.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.* “The Demon Lady”, p. 5.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

house in Hampton,” and it affirmed that “strange noises were heard in the rooms,” together with the “steps and rustling dress of a woman unseen on the stairs”; so frightened were the handmaids that the reverend was called to exorcise the ghost.<sup>424</sup>

A similar instance occurred when the ballad of “The Sycamores” was published in 1857: the poem in question is a warm tribute to another storyteller, Hugh Tallant, the fiddler and “wanderer from the green fields of Erin”<sup>425</sup> who became part of the local lore after planting a row of trees on the left bank of the Merrimack in 1739, and entertaining with his jolly songs the “swains and lasses” of Haverhill on the “moonlit eves” of summer —“only this, of poor Hugh Tallant, / Hath tradition handed down” (63-64).<sup>426</sup> The poem, tinged with nostalgic hues, “fast the rural grace retreats,” brings back yet another snippet of the past in the valley: in the wintertime, the merry Irishman used to enthral the youth with his fireside tales, the grim Yorkshire legends and the “mountain myths” of Wales —“of the brown dwarfs, and the fairies / Dancing in their moorland rings!” (55-56).<sup>427</sup> Whittier indeed noted that, by the mid-nineteenth century, fairy belief had essentially disappeared in the region, even though, as he admitted in *The Supernaturalism of New England*, it had never had “much hold upon the Yankee mind” to begin with, since the Puritan forefathers were versed in “less poetical” and “grimmer” superstitions (25-26).

Fairy lore had started around the 1720s with the arrival of the Irish in New Hampshire, lingered for some time in a “melancholic” state and died away; according to the poet, the last Yankee fairy tale dated some fifty years before the writing of the essay, in a country inn that was believed to be inhabited —and therefore blessed— by them but, after the initial excitement wore off and some “rude” townsfolk exposed them as the three daughters of the tavern’s landlady, many people began to challenge the veracity of the event in question: “had the place been traversed by a ghost, or disturbed by a witch, they could have acquiesced in it very quietly, but this outlandish belief in fairies was altogether an over task for Yankee credulity.” Fairies were thus said to have left this atmosphere of suspicion and doubt and returned to the rolling hills of England and “ould” Ireland. (27-28). Whittier’s account echoes Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, when Reverend John Wilson wonders if Pearl is one of “those naughty elfs or fairies, whom we thought to have left behind us

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<sup>424</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 296.

<sup>425</sup> Benjamin L. Mirick. *The History of Haverhill, Massachusetts*, p. 139.

<sup>426</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.



(...) in merry old England,<sup>428</sup> or when her mother, Hester, sweetly observes how “strangely beautiful” Pearl looks with “those wild-flowers in her hair! It is as if one of the fairies, whom we left in our dear old England, had decked her out to meet us”;<sup>429</sup> in *Margaret*, novelist Sylvester Judd also remarked that there are “no fairies in our meadows, and no elves to spirit away our children.”<sup>430</sup>

The letter received by Whittier in response to “The Sycamores” had been sent by none other than Caroline Tallant, the descendant of the Irish pioneer, who at the time was a teacher living in Nantucket; she queried whether the subject of the ballad was her own ancestor, since Whittier initially spelled “Tallant” as “Talent” (as found in the records of Haverhill) and she didn’t herself know much of the real story.<sup>431</sup> The poet, flattered by her interest in his work, revealed that, as a matter of fact, the Irishman had been to him just a “pleasant myth” and a “shadowy phantom of tradition” up until the perusal of her letter; he then reassured her that, without a doubt, the protagonist was her great-grandfather, backing up his argument with evidence that he collected —“I wish [the latter facts] had been before me, as well as those of thy own letter, when I was writing [the poem].”<sup>432</sup> He eventually resolved that the tradition of the “merry troubadour” had been “pretty correctly given.”<sup>433</sup>

The correspondence is an instance of what Whittier’s pioneer work in preserving the folklore thriving in the inland regions of the country achieved, one that helped to shape a collective identity of rural New England: Caroline Tallant soon enthusiastically declared that her forebear had planted the sycamores because

he loved trees and flowers, and birds, and everything beautiful, natural, and free, and I am going to have him sainted for it (...) Saint Hugh’s day shall be duly honoured with Thanksgiving festivities. His ballad shall be read, and we will not forget (...) the memory of the singer who has sung of him.”<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne. *The Scarlet Letter*, p. 131.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 253-254.

<sup>430</sup> Sylvester Judd. *Margaret*, p. 39.

<sup>431</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 397-398.

<sup>432</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, p. 344.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>434</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 401. Caroline Tallant, however, maintained that the “only spot we call our home” remained Ireland.

An issue briefly addressed in the letter, but of no minor relevance, is the theme of reality versus storytelling in Whittier's folklore poems, the former sometimes abandoned for the sake of poetic fancy, which, nonetheless, can undermine the authenticity of the provincial lore as presented by the poet—he himself told Caroline Tallant that she was “at liberty to alter” the family's surname however she pleased—;<sup>435</sup> the most exemplary case is “Moll Pitcher. A Poem,” named after the famous clairvoyant, in which he changed her characterization to make her more evil than she actually was: an old, gray “hag” with a crooked nose and chin and witch-like shrewishness.<sup>436</sup> Moll Pitcher (1738-1813) was the most celebrated fortune-teller of New England and far beyond, a gift inherited from her grandfather, the wizard of Marblehead, who, during thunderstorms, used to walk in the graveyard of the village to guide ships into the harbour safe and sound; similarly, she was consulted by sailors, adventurers and lovers, and, as Upham states, there was always a certain “air of romance” surrounding the scenes where she would practice her “mystic art.”<sup>437</sup> It is to be noted that Whittier limited his sources to a single work, Upham's sceptical account—whom he quoted in the explanatory notes to the poem: “her memory will be perpetuated in the annals of credulity and imposture” (28)—, yet in Lewis and Newhall's *History of Lynn* it is related how Moll Pitcher, born Mary Di(a)mond, came from a well-connected, respectable family and chose to marry into poverty; she was thoughtful, at times melancholic, and there was “nothing disreputable in her life and character.”<sup>438</sup> Hobbs clarifies that the accuracy of their description is due to Lewis's personal acquaintance with the woman.<sup>439</sup> She took up work to support her family, her husband, Robert Pitcher, a shoemaker, and her children, reading tea leaves and palms in her lonely cottage to those who believed in omens and “dreams of superstition,” from the “simple rustic from the wilds of New Hampshire” to the “wealthy noble from Europe.”<sup>440</sup> Interestingly, as Charles Leland points out in

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<sup>435</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, p. 344.

<sup>436</sup> Whittier. “Moll Pitcher. A Poem,” p. 6.

<sup>437</sup> Upham. *Salem Witchcraft*, vol. 2, p. 521. Sidney Perley reports that the majority of her meetings were held secretly: the visitors would look for “the place where the big whale bones were to be seen” and knew that there was their destination (“Moll Pitcher,” p. 35).

<sup>438</sup> Alonzo Lewis and James R. Newhall. *History of Lynn*, p. 374.

<sup>439</sup> Hobbs, p. 56.

<sup>440</sup> Lewis and Newhall, p. 375. The authors, however, agree that, had she lived in “the days of alleged witchcraft,” she would have been unceremoniously hanged; Hobbs states (exactly) the same (p. 55), he additionally believes that, in all likelihood, she had “little regard” to these rituals, using them as a ploy to “gain time” while studying her customers to determine what they wished for the most (57). Perley indeed explains that when Mrs. Pitcher was young, girls were denied a proper education, she was thus bound to learn “elsewhere” and in alternative ways (p. 34).

*The Algonquin Legends of New England*, she might have been inspired by the Indian witch named the “Evil Pitcher,” famous in the folklore of the Native tribes of the region.<sup>441</sup>

The mystique of her persona survived in several poems and stories: Whittier’s, in particular, tells of a young woman whose secret lover was away at sea to seek fortune so as to marry her; one day, looking for reassurance about his well-being, she goes to see the witch of Nahant —“the heart is strong, but passion stronger / And love than human pride is longer” (65-66).<sup>442</sup> Moll, unbeknownst to her, harbours malice and enmity against the maiden who previously scorned her, and, for revenge, she deceives her into believing that he is shipwrecked. Convinced by her words, she starts to wander “up and down the rocky shores,” waiting for the ship that never shows and descending into madness until the day he finally returns and her sanity is restored.<sup>443</sup> The long poem ends some years later with Moll Pitcher dying alone and forlorn in her hut at twilight in the presence of the maiden’s child, half in fear, half in sorrow.<sup>444</sup>

The tale was inserted in a wider frame in which Whittier meditated on the end of New England’s “romance,” both supernatural —the “dim” ghosts who have disappeared from the “shadowy” glen, the “cautious good man” who no longer needs to hang the horseshoe over his doorway— and human —the abandoned houses, now roofless and decayed— as well as on the generational change in traditional magical practices: in Whittier’s time, witches were “no longer old,” quite the contrary, they were dainty girls who entertained themselves with harmless “glammarye” and, as a consequence the “modern Yankee” could no longer see spells, omens or mysteries.<sup>445</sup> Being an early work, both themes will be better explored in his later poems; the second one is especially reminiscent of the essay “Charms and Fairy Faith” where Whittier detailed the “amusing juvenile glammary” in vogue among schoolmates who looked into mirrors to see their future husbands (387, see page 89 of this thesis). At a later moment he actually regretted the anonymous publication of the pamphlet, done in all its “original negligence”<sup>446</sup> —he arguably wrote more compelling poems, for

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<sup>441</sup> Charles G. Leland. *The Algonquin Legends of New England*, p. 36.

<sup>442</sup> Whittier. “Moll Pitcher. A Poem,” p. 6.

<sup>443</sup> Samuel A. Drake. *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore*, p. 147.

<sup>444</sup> Whittier. “Moll Pitcher. A Poem,” p. 27

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9. In a letter to Lydia H. Sigourney he indeed remarked how the title had “little connection” with the subject of the poem (*The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, p. 76).

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

this one is wholly devoid of style and concision— and, just as he had done with other works of his, he banned its reprint and distribution.<sup>447</sup>

It goes without saying that the poet's stereotypical portrayal of Moll Pitcher as an old crone, living in a dark room with her spinning-wheel and her "birchen" broom (7), perfectly suited his imagination; his fairly derogatory comment on how "no Druid of ancient Britain (...) no Scald of the North (...) ever acquired a more diabolical reputation" (28) than Moll Pitcher herself was proven wrong but, in this case, the problem of credibility is quickly resolved by taking into account several other sources that attest otherwise (Whittier's relationship with Scandinavian culture is discussed in the last section of the chapter). On this matter, it is to be specified that Whittier was by no means alone in his misleading sketch of Moll Pitcher: Hawthorne too, in *The Blithedale Romance*, described her as the "old witch of Lynn," with a broomstick in her hand, proud of her necromantic art;<sup>448</sup> in *The House of the Seven Gables*, instead, she is said to have imprisoned the grandfather of Judge Pyncheon, after enchanting an oaken chair.<sup>449</sup>

Having said that, the poems in question were more of an exception than the rule in Whittier's anthology, where the folklore behind the verses was unequivocally stated and properly represented: in "Telling the Bees" of 1858, one of his most successful poems, the very title, suggested by Lowell because complementing the aim of the ballad, referred to the tradition of informing the bees of the important events taking place in the household —births, marriages, deaths— to make sure they wouldn't die, stop their production of honey or leave for another keeper; a verse was also added for the "purpose of introducing" the expression "telling the bees" thus preserving the folkloric event in its original form.<sup>450</sup> The "remarkable" belief, among the most popular and documented lore of Western culture, plays a central role in the poem, being the first element that disrupts the narrator's tranquil arrival at the homestead of his beloved after a month of absence.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Tilton, p. 307.

<sup>448</sup> Hawthorne. *The Blithedale Romance*, pp. 299-300.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.* *The House of the Seven Gables*, p. 309.

<sup>450</sup> Whittier. *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, p. 364. Pamela M. Cole explains that this custom was usually observed in time of mourning in the rural districts of New England, although some performed it during marriages as well, giving a piece of wedding-cake to the bees because, as "members of the family, they were entitled to such attentions and were supposed to resent the neglect" of their keepers ("New England Weddings," p. 107). The lore is still very much alive and well, as attested by several articles published recently, on the occasion of the death of Elizabeth II, see, for example, Daniel Victor. "When the Queen Died, Someone had to Tell the Bees," *The New York Times*, 19 September 2022 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/13/world/europe/bees-queen-elizabeth.html>) or Saman Javed. "Royal beekeeper informs Buckingham Palace bees that the Queen has died," *The Independent*, 10 September 2022 (<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/royal-family/royal-beekeeper-bees-queen-death-b2164345.html>). Accessed 2 December 2022.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.* *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 59-60.

The first half of the poem, composed of fourteen ballad-like stanzas, focuses on the natural imagery of the garden as seen by the protagonist at three different moments, his visit to the farm a year after the tragedy, upon his return, and when he first left. In particular, we are told how everything has blissfully remained the same —the “same sun glows,” the “same sweet clover smell in the breeze”—: the nostalgic, albeit pleasant, emotion that this recollection conveys stands in sharp contrast with his retelling of the fatal day. He poignantly remembers the moment in which his attention was drawn to the hired girl, draping the hives with a “shred of black,” a sign of mourning; his first thoughts went to his beloved, Mary, whom he imagined to be in the house, grieving the loss of her elderly grandfather; the next thing he saw, however, was the man sitting with his cane on the door steps outside, followed by the hired girl, who began to chant: “stay at home, pretty bees, fly not hence! / Mistress Mary is dead and gone!” (55-56).

The strength of this simple poem lies in its abrupt ending, what Professor Buell calls the theme of the “absent centre,” the fact that the reader is never given concrete knowledge or understanding of what happened next, nor given any insight into how the narrator reacted to the death of his beloved —whereas we are told that he was trembling as soon as he assumed that her grandfather was dead, since he was aware of the significance of the hired girl’s gesture. The lack of resolution thus leaves the reader with a sense of wonder as to whether the incompleteness of the protagonist’s retrospective narration implies that he has not yet “come to terms” with her passing and he “cannot bear to confront the experience again” even though a year has gone by since the painful realization.<sup>452</sup> The poem, conceived as a friendly conversation between the narrator and an unspecified interlocutor —whom he encourages to follow, with a series of almost childish “here is the place,” “there is the house,” “there are the beehives”—, is also characterized by a strong autobiographical component: the setting “minutely” described Whittier’s farm, and the loss relived by the narrating voice is that of the poet’s mother, who died shortly before the publication of these verses.<sup>453</sup> The theme of grief, barely hinted at, seems to be conveyed by the images more than words, connected by a series of “ands” —the nature all around, so beautiful yet so indifferent to human woes, “and the same brook sings of a year ago”—; the bittersweet tone slowly becomes more and more haunting, “and the song [the hired girl] was singing ever since in my ear sounds on,” especially when the silence that follows is not to be unequivocally interpreted as a quiet acceptance

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<sup>452</sup> Buell, *New England Literary Culture: from Revolution through Renaissance*, p. 124.

<sup>453</sup> Whittier, *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 59-60. John Pickard is of the opinion that it is precisely the poem’s “artlessness” that demonstrates Whittier’s “mastery of simple narration” (p. 58).

of death. This final lingering feeling, summed with the story in its entirety, impeccably evokes the universal experience of the narrator's overwhelming pain in those fateful moments in which not even words can express it.

In other poems, folklore veers from being part or source of the story to being the story: in "The Palatine" and "The Dead Ship of Harpswell," Whittier reported two sea legends of the region as they were handed down to him by word of mouth:<sup>454</sup> the former, a ballad composed in 1867, owes its origin to the homonymous phantom ship, whose century-old legend, one of the most famous at the time, was told to the poet by his friend Joseph P. Hazard of Newport, Rhode Island in 1865.<sup>455</sup> The nautical folklore of the coastal state had it that, in the period between Christmas Day and New Year's Eve of 1750 (1755 or 1720, depending on the source), a Dutch ship directed to Philadelphia, full of wealthy German passengers from the Palatinate region of Germany—hence the name—, had been taken hostage and robbed by the crew after the unexpected death of the captain; the few who survived managed to land on Block Island, R. I., with the exception of a woman, Mary Van Der Line, who refused to abandon her belongings; the vessel was set on fire by the crew on a stormy night of winter and she perished there. The legend goes that her shrieks could be heard far off, growing "fainter and fainter" as the minutes passed.<sup>456</sup>

The story served to explain the mysterious appearance of strange lights at sea, electrostatic phenomena similar to St. Elmo's fire, that bore a resemblance to the "The Palatine" ablaze at night: it was believed that the spirits of those who had died there kept returning to haunt the island; the sightings continued regularly into the middle of the nineteenth century, as witnessed by many "respectable people"<sup>457</sup> and attested in the letter of physician Aaron C. Willey of Block Island.<sup>458</sup> The last one was spotted by the same J. Hazard in Narragansett Pier, R. I., some decades later; after that, it was rumoured that the "unquiet" souls had finally found peace.<sup>459</sup> These ghastly scenes were immediately regarded with superstitious awe and terror: it is reported that they "caused great excitement among the simple fishermen" who discovered that the ship's appearance "heralded

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<sup>454</sup> In this regard, Hawthorne actually judged the maritime lore of the New England coast to be more interesting and apt to be reproduced in poetic language than that of its inland districts ("Two Uncollected Reviews by Hawthorne," p. 507).

<sup>455</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 527.

<sup>456</sup> Kennedy. *John G. Whittier, the Poet of Freedom*, p. 245.

<sup>457</sup> Edward E. Pettee. *Block Island, Rhode Island*, p. 99.

<sup>458</sup> William P. Sheffield. *A Historical Sketch of Block Island*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>459</sup> Pettee, p. 100.

storm and disaster”<sup>460</sup>; if the “better-informed” never gave much credit to this omen, islanders “only shrugged their shoulders,” convinced that the evident similarity between the eerie lights and the “mysterious way” in which the doomed vessel first arrived, coupled with their predictable return, left room for no other explanation.<sup>461</sup> It is worth mentioning that these supernatural phenomena were documented by John Winthrop in *The History of New England* too: it was a November midnight, year 1643, near Boston, when two lights were seen coming from the water resembling a human being, they moved and vanished just as suddenly as they appeared; a week later they were spotted again, this time moon-shaped, and

a voice was heard upon the water (...) calling out in a most dreadful manner, boy, boy, come away, come away: and it suddenly shifted from one place to another a great distance, about twenty times. It was heard by [several] godly persons.<sup>462</sup>

Naturally, in Winthrop’s society, these “prodigies” were attributed to a man, versed in the art of necromancy, who was suspected to have murdered another man, although never proven guilty.<sup>463</sup>

Whittier’s ballad revived the popularity of the sea lore, becoming a classic reading in Block Island; even so, the version of the legend conveyed by the poet sparked controversy and invited backlash from some of the islanders whose ancestors had been —perhaps erroneously— portrayed as the treacherous and cruel seamen who invaded the ship, seized the goods and starved the ill-fated emigrants to death, throwing their bodies into the ocean. The poem had indeed been naively faithful to the folklore recorded in Hazard’s letter, for Whittier ignored the existence of a second variant; he thus apologized specifying that it was “very possible” that his correspondent, a worthy gentleman, had reported the “current tradition on the mainland” as he had heard it, and he himself never meant to “misrepresent the facts of history.”<sup>464</sup> Curiously enough, Kennedy informs us that this letter of apology, addressed to one Block Islander, has always been withheld from the public.<sup>465</sup> In point of fact, Block Island had long had the reputation as a place to avoid, which only worsened in the wake of the tragic event and eerie lights: “sailors always shook their heads” when they spoke of the island

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<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>461</sup> Samuel A. Drake. *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore*, p. 409.

<sup>462</sup> John Winthrop. *The History of New England*, vol. 2 pp. 152-153.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>464</sup> Kennedy. *John G. Whittier, the Poet of Freedom*, pp. 249-250.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*

and a common saying among mariners was: “I would rather be wrecked anywhere than upon [there].”<sup>466</sup> Its inhabitants, either farmers or fishermen, industrious and “sober,” appeared to have been left behind by modernity: for almost two centuries they were “cut off from regular communication with the mainland”;<sup>467</sup> additionally, their social isolation resulted in intermarriage being a common practice among them and its consequences were “naturally unfavourable” to their physical development.<sup>468</sup> In this —undeniably gothic— setting, where old men were “mending their nets of twine” and old wives were “rocking weirdly to and fro,” Whittier shows how “quaint tradition” and “legend strange” lived on “unchallenged”: in his dark folktale, the poet pictures the elderly islanders talking together of dreams, the “lost ship Palatine” and its dreaded “ghost of fire.”<sup>469</sup> As Kennedy notes, storytelling was indeed a favourite pastime in such a secluded place where folklore was of “great historical value” and memory was cultivated to an “astonishing extent” by local fishermen, in the absence of a written record of their past; for this reason, legends were bound to be twisted overtime.<sup>470</sup>

Only Reverend S. Livermore took the mainland’s misrepresentation of the legend very much to heart: in *The History of Block Island* he dedicated several pages to the cause in the attempt to disprove the version that painted Block Islanders in the most unfavourable light, claiming how, contrary to “poetic fiction” and “barbarous work,” they were as of “pure morals” as any other part of “Puritan New England,” welcoming the survivors with nothing but kindness.<sup>471</sup> Moreover, some of the elders he interviewed had no recollection of “ever having heard any account” of the burning of the vessel: “all they pretend to know about [it] is contained in their notions of the Palatine Light.” The author therefore theorized that the mainland’s understanding of the happenings owed much to three passengers’ version of the story, whose truthfulness had never been questioned enough: “Dutch Kattern,” a woman feared by the islanders because supposed to be a witch, an “opium eater” and a “maniac.”<sup>472</sup> In a rather unpleasant manner, the reverend went to the extent of indicating the legend as an invention of this “low-bred” woman, who wanted to avenge her shipwreck, and whose

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<sup>466</sup> Samuel A. Drake. *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore*, p. 406.

<sup>467</sup> Kennedy. *John G. Whittier, the Poet of Freedom*, p. 250.

<sup>468</sup> Samuel A. Drake. *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore*, p. 406.

<sup>469</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 258-259.

<sup>470</sup> Kennedy. *John G. Whittier, the Poet of Freedom*, p. 250.

<sup>471</sup> Samuel T. Livermore. *A History of Block Island*, pp. 113-114.

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.



testimony added nothing more than a “cargo of lies to feed the fancies of the poets” and of the “phantom-chasers of posterity” (121). Consequently, Livermore contended that the tale had yet to be authenticated, finding it “intolerable” that a peaceful, law-abiding community could be so earnestly “reduced” to a crew of pirates (121). In light of the problematic legacy of “The Palatine” folklore, government officials resolved to sort out the issue by consulting the archives of the state and those in Rotterdam, but the research proved unsuccessful.<sup>473</sup>

However, Whittier’s ballad once again elicited a peculiar response from one of his readers: two years after its publication, he received a letter signed by Mr. Benjamin Corydon, aged ninety-two, who told the poet of that dreary midwinter night, in particular how, as soon as the passengers “got ashore” and fell on their knees “thanking God for saving them from drowning,” the islanders “rushed upon them and murdered them all.”<sup>474</sup> But the “Almighty” avenged this deed on them and every year, on the anniversary of their death, a phantom vessel would return, passing down by the island as long as any of the slayers were living; it then disappeared for good.<sup>475</sup> Given that this last disclosure aligns with the more haunting version of the legend and seems to go against (almost) everything that other witnesses had reported, it is safe to say that the true story of “The Palatine” remains, to this day, a mystery.

The tale of “The Dead Ship of Harpswell,” written in 1866, had instead been recounted twenty years before by a lady, Marion Pearl, the “fair-haired girl” who, at the time, was teaching near the place where the legend was supposed to have happened, in Casco Bay, Maine.<sup>476</sup> In the letter, she had documented the “people, habits, superstitions, and legends of Orr’s Island,” among them, that of the “flying Yankee,” the spectre ship that interested the poet for its “weird suggestiveness.”<sup>477</sup> Whittier was sure that, at the moment she was writing, the folktale was still “talked of on the island by the aged people”; he nevertheless voiced his doubts as to whether the mysterious tale continued to circulate since “the new generation are ashamed of the fireside lore of their grandmothers.”<sup>478</sup> These words marks a significant —and promising— change from his early attitude toward the importance of regional folklore; his legendary poems, in particular, were positively affected by this

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<sup>473</sup> Charles Lanman. *Recollections of Curious Characters and Pleasant Places*, p. 298.

<sup>474</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 527.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>476</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 257-258.

<sup>477</sup> Samuel A. Drake. *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore*, p. 457.

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.*

shift of perspective, becoming more compelling and engaging. The one in question revived and retold to the public the ominous story of the ship that, just like the Flying Dutchman, sailed but was never afterwards heard from; its ghost, however, was sometimes seen entering the bay on days of mist and fog: it was then that the inhabitants of the Isle of Orr knew that a relative of the seamen that had vanished the first time was about to die, for the vessel had returned to reunite them with their beloved ones.

A third ballad that Whittier dedicated to dark nautical folklore was “The Wreck of the Rivermouth,” composed in 1864 and set two hundred years before, in the colonial era. It narrated the misadventure of Goody Cole of Hampton, the woman charged, whipped and imprisoned several times for witchcraft, who was suspected to have inadvertently cursed the boat of a “party of merry-makers” who were shipwrecked off the Isles of Shoals after the unexpected arrival of a thunderstorm.<sup>479</sup> The ballad, rich in local color and imagery (the scent of the “pines of Rye,” cod fishing, the ocean waves reflecting the golden sun), eloquently captures the balminess of a summer day in the New England seaside meadows, with the boat sailing down Hampton river, the mowers listening to the songs of the merry group, and Goody Cole, sitting by her door with her “wheel atwirl.”<sup>480</sup> When they pass by her, the group taunts her —“fie on the witch!”—: it is necessary to distinguish their stereotypical perception of the old woman, she’s “cursed,” with a “wicked” head and snake-like eyes, versus Whittier’s portrayal of her, a “bent,” “blear-eyed poor old soul.” Indeed, in the poem, he placed particular emphasis on the humanity of Eunice Cole,

She clasped her hands with a grip of pain,  
The tear on her cheek was not of rain:  
“They are lost,” she muttered, “boat and crew!  
Lord, forgive me! my words were true!” (76-80)

whose premonitory words —“the broth will be cold that waits at home; / For it’s one to go, but another to come!” (39-40)— were rooted in elderly wisdom rather than in an actual hex. Goody

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<sup>479</sup> Charles Skinner. *Myths and Legends of Our Own Land*, vol. 2, p. 19. Whittier narrated the release of Goody Cole from Ipswich jail in “The Changeling,” thanks to a man who managed to convince her wife that their newborn had not, in fact, been stolen by witches who had come down the chimney in the “shape of an owl or bat” to exchange the baby in the cradle with a wicked creature (*The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 251-252). The changeling legend is one of the most popular in European folklore, it was fairly widespread in Puritan New England during the witchcraft hysteria; even Heinrich Kraemer briefly discussed it in 1487’s notorious *Malleus Maleficarum* (p. 192).

<sup>480</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 245-246. The summery scene dramatically comes to an end when the boat crashes against Rivermouth Rocks during the storm, believed to have been summoned by the “mad old witch-wife,” followed by the tragic death of the friends in the dark sea and their funeral.

Cole, by reason of the prejudices of her age, was condemned to die as she lived: alone; she was thought to be the one behind the oddities and misfortunes happening in the neighbourhood, feared by the townsfolk who were confident that their sole explanation was her “familiarity” with the devil<sup>481</sup> —the mere mention of her name was enough to “hush crying children into silence”—<sup>482</sup> her reputation was tainted by unfounded allegations that not even her factual innocence managed to dispel. According to the local folklore, after her death, a stake was put through her, in order to exorcize the evil that possessed her.

Similarly to his Quaker poems, Whittier used this historical and ideological Puritan setting several times for his works about the lore of the past, always careful to distance himself from his sources while maintaining his impartiality —“I have in many instances alluded to the superstition and bigotry of our ancestors (...) but no one can accuse me of having done injustice to their memories.”<sup>483</sup> He revisited some of the episodes narrated by Cotton Mather, whom Professor Ringel regards as America’s “first writer of folkloric horror”:<sup>484</sup> in this case, there’s a subtle irony in Whittier’s versification of Mather’s accounts, for what used to be an instrument of moral dissuasion, reinforcing Puritans’ sense of themselves as God’s chosen beacon of light against the dark temptations of evil to which the so-called witches had weakly and culpably succumbed, two centuries later became for Whittier (just as for Hawthorne) the shared symbol of a past that ought not to be repeated. The poet, however, advocated charity over an uncompromising condemnation of the “victims” of the superstitions of the past, since

we are too prone to forget our own follies, while wondering over those of the generations which have preceded us (...) and in the midst of self-congratulations upon our age of light and progress, is it not well to consider that they, who a century from this time shall look back upon our records, may possibly find as much to condemn and sorrow over, as we do in scanning the history of our ancestors?<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> Upham. *Salem Withcraft*, vol. 1, p. 438.

<sup>482</sup> Samuel A. Drake. *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore*, p. 328. As Katherine Howe points out, the life of Goody Cole, the poor, childless widow, became a “cautionary tale” to all the women who belonged to a culture that valued them as long as they were mothers and housewives (p. 172).

<sup>483</sup> Whittier. *Legends of New England*, p. 3.

<sup>484</sup> Ringel, p. 140.

<sup>485</sup> Whittier. *The Supernaturalism of New England*, pp. vii-viii.

The statement strongly resonates with what Professor George L. Kittredge wrote in *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (1929), when he stressed that what happened in Salem was not symptomatic of “exceptional” bigotry or superstition,

our forefathers believed in witchcraft, not because they were Puritans, not because they were Colonials, not because they were New Englanders, —but because they were men of their time. They shared the feelings and beliefs of the best hearts and wisest heads of the seventeenth century. What more can be asked of them?<sup>486</sup>

In his early treatment of New England Puritan folklore, Whittier romantically poetized and brought back some of the local lore recorded in Mather’s *Magnalia*, such as “The Spectre Ship,” a legend of Salem that continued to be preserved by the “old descendants of the Puritans,”<sup>487</sup> and “The Weird Gathering,” a poem reminiscent of the later Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” in its telling of a nocturnal coven of witches, Indians and gypsies in a “haunted glen” near Naumkeag (the old name for Salem) interrupted by a young woman who asks them to bewitch her seducer.<sup>488</sup> In the poem, his underlying scepticism towards the subject matter and the ironic appellative for Mather, “learned divine,” are confined to the introductory note, letting the story unfold itself: Schaedler observes how the young poet used “every Gothic trick” to make the “witchery convincing and terrifying to the reader.”<sup>489</sup> While the outcome is far from being the best of the genre, this early composition exemplifies the pioneer work of Whittier, whose storytelling had been “widely known” before that of his greater contemporaries, anticipating and influencing the creation of some of their magnum opus.<sup>490</sup>

The most significant work inspired by Mather’s prose remains 1857’s “The Garrison of Cape Ann,” where he delivers his most nuanced explanation as to why he decided to dust off the lore of the past. Similar to “Mabel Martin. A Harvest Idyl” (written in the same year), all the themes of a quintessential Whittier ballad —the surrounding nature, bringing forth reminiscences of both the

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<sup>486</sup> George L. Kittredge. *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, p. 338.

<sup>487</sup> Whittier. *Legends of New England*, p. 86. The legend tells of a ship that sailed from Salem to England, with a odd and solitary young man and woman on board who some feared to be a demon with his “human prey” (88). The ship was lost at sea during the same journey and reappeared once more as a phantom vessel with a ghastly crew: no one but the eerie couple was alive; “long shall Naumkeag annals tell the story of that night” (92).

<sup>488</sup> She was then hanged at the gallows. As he himself explained, the phenomenon of witchcraft was “principally confined” to Essex county, Massachusetts (*Ibid.*, pp. 15-16).

<sup>489</sup> Schaedler, p. 352.

<sup>490</sup> Van Wyck Brooks. *The Flowering of New England*, p. 398.

poet's life and of a long gone time, local history and folklore— come together cohesively to unfold the uncanny story of Mather's *Magnalia*:<sup>491</sup>

With the memory of that morning by the summer sea I blend  
A wild and wondrous story, by the younger Mather penned,  
In that quaint *Magnalia Christi*, with all strange and marvellous things,  
Heaped up huge and undigested, like the chaos Ovid sings.

Dear to me these far, faint glimpses of the dual life of old,  
Inward, grand with awe and reverence; outward, mean and coarse and cold;  
Gleams of mystic beauty playing over dull and vulgar clay,  
Golden-threaded fancies weaving in a web of hodden gray.

The great eventful Present hides the Past; but through the din  
Of its loud life hints and echoes from the life behind steal in;  
And the lore of home and fireside, and the legendary rhyme,  
Make the task of duty lighter which the true man owes his time.

So, with something of the feeling which the Covenanters knew,  
When with pious chisel wandering Scotland's moorland graveyards through,  
From the graves of old traditions I part the blackberry-vines,  
Wipe the moss from off the headstones, and retouch the faded lines.<sup>492</sup> (9-24)

The refined quality of the imagery and the mood of these verses recall the words of Samuel A. Drake, who acknowledges that "Mr. Whittier" was "seldom happier" than when treating the

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<sup>491</sup> The episode, titled "A faithful account of many wonderful and surprising things which happened in the town of Gloucester, in the year 1692" can be found in *Magnalia Christi Americana*, vol. 2, from p. 538 to p. 540. It tells of the mysterious midsummer sightings, as witnessed by many "credible persons" near the garrison of Cape Ann, in Essex county. There, Ebenezer Bapson and his family sought refuge after leaving their home because of several Indians and Frenchmen attempting to break in for unknown reasons. The townsfolk soon discovered that these warriors could never be mortally wounded, and were therefore supposed to be spectres sent by the enemy, especially once they were seen coming out of an orchard where they seemed to have performed "some strange incantations" (Samuel A. Drake. *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore*, p. 256). Mather himself reputed Sagamores, the Algonquin chiefs, to be "sorcerers" and "conjurers" in league with demons, thus responsible for the war made by "the spirits of the invisible world upon the people of New England" of the same year (537). The attacks on the garrison continued for a month, although neither persons nor property were damaged; they then disappeared for good. Whittier poetized the colonial legend in "The Spectre Warriors" in his early "Legends of New England" too.

<sup>492</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 52-53. The strong tradition of storytelling in the region makes a return a couple of stanzas later, in relation to the men who patrolled the garrison, who Whittier imagined as passing time ("long they sat and talked together") telling each other the eerie lore of the past (the "spectre-ship of Salem," the "ghostly sights and noises," signs and wonders) and of their present day as well as anecdotes on the marvels of the nature all around:

Of the marvellous valley hidden in the depths of Gloucester woods,  
Full of plants that love the summer, —blooms of warmer latitudes;  
Where the Arctic birch his braided by the tropic's flowery vines,  
And the white magnolia-blossoms star the twilight of the pines! (41-44)

“legendary lore extracted from the old chronicles” where he succeeded, in the manner of Scott, in combining the “spirit of the antiquary” with that of the poet.<sup>493</sup> After his concise yet effective narration, he ends the ballad as if closing and completing a circle: he echoes his initial words which become a symbol of continuation and return to reality after his musings and telling of the legend, the final stanzas being the second part of his meditation on the legacy of the past and the importance of preserving its traditions:

So to us who walk in summer through the cool and sea-blown town,  
From the childhood of its people comes the solemn legend down.  
Not in vain the ancient fiction, in whose moral lives the youth  
And the fitness and the freshness of an undecaying truth.<sup>494</sup> (81-84)

If the spectres of the past were visible entities, Whittier deems the phantoms of the present to be the hauntings of the mind, the dark patterns of fear and torment that we wish to free ourselves from; going from a real to a spiritual battle, the answer to overcome them remains the same, the power of prayer:

In the dark we cry like children; and no answer from on high,  
Breaks the crystal spheres of silence, and not white wings downward fly;  
But the heavenly help we pray for comes to faith, and not to sight,  
And our prayers themselves drive backward all the spirits of the night! (89-92)

In particular, the “spirits of the night” recall their antithetical “Angels of Light,” the concept introduced in the later “Snow-Bound. A Winter Idyl,” where, just like faith, storytelling will become for Whittier a second guiding light against the threatening darkness: the tragedies and mistakes of history recorded in his colonial poems that we need to learn from and not repeat, the mourning of what is gone but immortalized forever in his homely poetry.

The last source of Whittier’s folklore ballads that should be mentioned comes, of course, from Scottish lore, what got the young poet interested in the genre in the first place: 1871’s “The Sisters” is a Yankee rendition of the traditional murder ballad of the “Twa Sisters”;<sup>495</sup> in his version the sororicide is replaced by a rivalry of the two maidens for the same man. The provincial gothic

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<sup>493</sup> Samuel A. Drake. *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore*, p. 258.

<sup>494</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 54.

<sup>495</sup> For more information about the several Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian variants of the tale see Francis J. Child 1882’s “The English and Scottish Popular Ballads,” vol. 1, from p. 118 to p. 141.

atmosphere of the poem, set on the New England rocky coast, heightens the intensity of the vernacular dialogue and creates an emotional and thematic resonance: in the middle of the night, a violent thunderstorm awakens the two sisters; the younger, Annie, walks to the window and hears a voice; Rhoda, however, dismisses her, telling her to go back to sleep —“no good comes of watching a storm”— especially when she’s not the one whose lover is away at sea.<sup>496</sup> Annie is convinced that the voice is that of Rhoda’s fiancé, calling her; once she hears it again, her tears and sense of impending tragedy greatly anger Rhoda who shoots down her fears by saying that, were it the case, she would rather have him dead —“if he did I would pray the wind and sea / To keep him forever from thee and me!” (35-36). At last, a “dreadful blast” resembling the “cry of a dying man” comes from the sea and, by then, Annie is certain that he passed away; she cannot help but feel relieved, for she has managed to confess her love and is comforted by the thought that, with his death, she will always belong to him, being the one whose fondness was real —“little will reck that heart of thine; / it loved him not with a love like mine” (55-56). The dark ballad, which started in medias res, ends as abruptly as it began; the reader is not given any further insight into what exactly happens after (or before) the heated conversation; the suspense, coupled with the sinister atmosphere, succeeds in making the ballad one of Whittier’s most compelling works.

As Stoddard emphasized, Whittier was never “so much himself” as when composing his legendary and narrative stories;<sup>497</sup> the presence of elements of rural folklore in the poet’s storytelling greatly enhanced the cultural value of his writings: the very purpose of *The Supernaturalism of New England* was, for instance, to collect material useful for the “essayist and poet” (vii) who sought to record the lore of the region. The authenticity of his storytelling was positively influenced by his moving away from his initial contradictions: if in *Legends of New England* he claimed that “the days of faery are over” since witches were “extinct” and the “tale of enchantment” and “supernatural visitation” had finally “lost their hold on the minds of the great multitude” (63-64), in the later *The Supernaturalism of New England* he admitted that witchcraft was “still practiced to a very great extent” among the people of his native country and proceeded to dedicate the entirety of the essay to various “manifestations” of magic of his childhood and present days (45) —“since my last chapter was written, a scene of genuine *diablerie* has been enacted in the goodly and respectable town of Pepperell (...) a veritable witch, riding o’ nights in this cold autumnal moonlight...” (62)—; if in *Legends of New England* apparitions, omens and wonders were declared

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<sup>496</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>497</sup> Stoddard, p. 131.

to be no longer “troublesome” in this “matter-of-fact age” (64), in *The Supernaturalism of New England* we are instead told that signs and omens of “change and disaster” were so popular in rural districts that the author “rarely met with a person entirely free” from the influence of superstition (16) —“there are those yet living in this neighbourhood who remember, and relate with awe (...) the story of the GHOST CHILD!” (10). In spite of its evident flaws —digressions, anticlimactic passages about his own considerations undermining the credibility of everything written up to that point, at times exceedingly melodramatic too, “the poetry of Time has gone by forever, and we have only the sober prose left us” (64)—, *Legends of New England* remains one of the first significant attempts by a native of the Merrimack Valley to preserve its lore for posterity and weave it into storytelling. Following the example of Irving and Brainard, in *The Supernaturalism of New England* he continued to demonstrate his knowledge and firm grasp of local history and superstitions; there he moved toward a more objective portrayal of the material: while distancing himself from endorsing superstitious beliefs lured by the “comparatively innocent nature” and “poetic beauty” of traditions (ix), a lighthearted irony successfully replaced his cold skepticism and makes the reading experience a more engaging one —“some of my unbelieving readers will doubtless smile at this...” (11). In his later works he embraced the lighter side of folklore and its benevolent potential to document past traditions and further explore their social, cultural and historical context. Before drawing a few conclusions on the legacy of Whittier’s storytelling, a brief insight is given into his poems dedicated to Scandinavian folklore.

#### 4.2.1 The Norse Revival of the Age

As in the case of Irish and Scottish folklore, still surviving in New England at the time that he was writing,<sup>498</sup> Whittier’s interest in Northern legends and folktales was not uncommon in those years, thanks to their popularity within the Romantic literary milieu and Romantic nationalism; New England patriotism was no exception in this respect: some maintained that the Puritans were descendants of the Goths, whose spirit had “guided the Mayflower” across the ocean.<sup>499</sup> As a consequence, the history and mythology of Scandinavia —especially Norse sagas— became a subject of serious study, intense discussion and fascination.<sup>500</sup> Professor O. Falnes notes that New

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<sup>498</sup> Whittier. *The Supernaturalism of New England*, p. 56

<sup>499</sup> Oscar J. Falnes. “New England Interest in Scandinavian Culture and the Norsemen,” pp. 212-214.

<sup>500</sup> In *The American Discovery of the Norse*, Erik I. Thurin actually specifies that quite a few of the “circulating ideas” about the “nature and historical background” of the sagas were “misconceptions” (85).



England writers —Lowell, to name but one— often called attention to the similarities between the “medieval Northmen and the modern New Englander,” such as those concerning maritime affairs.<sup>501</sup> Moreover, a (fairly disputed) theory that quickly gained ground was that of the Norse discovery of America, originally named “Vinland,” which seemed to be corroborated by archeological findings in the Narragansett region indicating where their landfall had been; as a result, sagas and documents “relevant to the discoveries” began to be reprinted in several languages (224) and in the second half of the century a statue in honour of Leif Erickson, the Norse explorer, was commissioned. By December 1876, a “Scandinavian Memorial Association” was founded, among its most prominent members there were Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell and Holmes (238-239). One of the alleged Viking finds, located in Newport, R. I., was commemorated by Longfellow in the 1841 narrative poem “The Skeleton in Armor,” the poet was famously interested in the topic and Whittier, in the manner of Longfellow (albeit without the same skill), enthusiastically dedicated a number of poetic works to the issue too. In “The Norsemen,” written the same year, the remains of a statue found in the town of Bradford, on the Merrimack, and (mistakenly) supposed to be of Norse origin, inspired the speaker to re-imagine his native valley as it would have looked when Viking explorers still inhabited it.<sup>502</sup>

Whittier’s beliefs, however, always prevented him from overtly preaching the glory of the Northmen —whereas the authorities of Harvard University talked of the “glorious Norse Icelandic culture” akin to a “bright northern light” shining to the “rest of the world.”<sup>503</sup> Quite the contrary, according to the Quaker poet, because of a religion that valued the “strong” over the “good” and that was glad to “sing the praises” of some “coarse debauch or pitiless slaughter,” the heroes of the “heathen” sagas were “beastly revellers” and cruel, “ferocious plunderers,” their heroines nothing more than “unsexed hoidens,” “very dangerous and unsatisfactory companions for any other than the fire-eating Vikings.”<sup>504</sup> It took the success of Christianization and its “work of civilization” for Whittier to picture Icelanders as “gentle” church-goers, “beguiling” their long nights of winter with

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<sup>501</sup> Falnes, pp. 216-217.

<sup>502</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>503</sup> Falnes, p. 242.

<sup>504</sup> Whittier. *Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, p. 148.

the very sagas that “thrilled with not unpleasing horror the hearts of the old Norse sea-robbers”<sup>505</sup> instead of his initial stereotype assumptions that they were “rude, savage minds.”<sup>506</sup>

As he himself wrote to Selma Borg, a Finnish translator, in 1873, he had always felt a “good deal of interest” in North-European literature and had read “everything” he could find in translation.<sup>507</sup> Needless to say, Whittier cherished the early modern folklore of Scandinavia more than the ancient sagas, product of the “gloomy Northern imagination”;<sup>508</sup> a further —and most compelling— indication of such interest is his polished retelling of three Nordic folktales, where the lure of a foreign land entwined with the charm of a fairytale: “King Volmer and Elsie,” “Kallundborg Church” and “The Brown Dwarf of Rügen.” In the first poem, published in 1872, Whittier the storyteller put “Yankee words” to the ballad of “Herr Volmer and Elsie” (or “Henrick and Elsie”) written by Danish poet Christian Winther; he had received W. Howitt’s literal prose translation from a Danish friend and “made a nice thing of it.”<sup>509</sup> The ballad is undoubtedly a pleasant rendition of the original, especially when both poets shared a predilection for the “life of the people” and whose subjects were “naïve, strong and life-like”<sup>510</sup> —“in the garden of her father, little Elsie sits and spins / And, singing with the early birds, her daily tasks begins” (17-18).<sup>511</sup> Similarly, in 1865’s “Kallundborg Church” he versified a second popular Danish folktale, which he deemed perfect for a “Norland Christmas hearth”: the “wild tale” of the North told of the nobleman Esbern Snare who built the church with the help of a troll, Fin, in order to marry his lover; he, however, must guess the troll’s name before the building is complete, otherwise he’ll have to give him his eyes and his heart —“of the Troll of the Church they sing the rune / By the Northern Sea in the harvest

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<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.* *The Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 1, pp. 385-386.

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>507</sup> Ernest J. Moyné. “John Greenleaf Whittier and Finland,” p. 53.

<sup>508</sup> Whittier. *Prose Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, vol. 2, p. 149.

<sup>509</sup> Samuel Pickard. *Life and Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 575.

<sup>510</sup> William Howitt. *The Literature and Romance of Northern Europe*, vol. 2, p. 227.

<sup>511</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 112. The story told of the humble maiden who judiciously declines King Valdemar IV’s proposal to live her life lavishly with him; she stays true to her roots and remains faithful to her lover, the king’s young squire, to the point of requesting the king to prove his intentions by renouncing his wealth and joining her lifestyle —“I tempt no more fair Elsie! your heart I know is true.” After his benediction, Elsie and Henrik warmly reunite, “none saw the fond embracing, save, shining from afar, / The Golden Goose that watched them from the tower of Valdemar” (109-110) (p. 114).

moon” (81-82).<sup>512</sup> Lastly, in the 1888 ballad of “The Brown Dwarf of Rügen,” Whittier vividly interpreted the folklore of E. Arndt’s *Märchen*, read in his copy of Keightley’s *The Fairy Mythology*,<sup>513</sup> to tell the lively story of a young maiden, Lisbeth, wandering through the “haunted” Nine Hills of Ramin, on the Baltic Sea, and being kidnapped by trolls —“that day” the harvesters knew of “evil voices in the air”—; she will be taken back home only five years later by her playmate, John, who resolves to look for her whatever it takes:

Now of old the isle of Rügen was full of Dwarfs and Trolls,  
The brown-faced little Earth-men, the people without souls;

And for every man and woman in Rügen’s island found  
Walking in air and sunshine, a Troll was underground.<sup>514</sup> (7-10)

Here, Whittier intended the quaint ballad to have a moral core too, as he suggested in his notes, warning his young readers that “bad companionship” and “evil habits” are more to be feared “now than the Elves and Trolls who frightened the children” of a time gone by.

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<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 255-256. As the final day is coming closer, he becomes increasingly desperate until he happens to hear —“for more than spell of Elf or Troll / Is a maiden’s prayer for her lover’s soul” (63-64)— the troll’s wife singing a lullaby to their newborn and mentioning his name —“tie still, barn min! / Imorgen kommer Fin, Fa’er din.” He thus says it out loud when the troll is about to finish, which causes the creature to vanish into thin air. The legend, explaining why Kalundborg Church was built missing half pillar, can be found in B. Thorpe’s *Northern Mythology*, vol. 2, pp. 248-249 and T. Keightley’s *The Fairy Mythology*, pp. 116-117. Other versions of the legend circulate in Scandinavian countries, in Norway, for instance, the protagonist are St. Olaf and a giant; the German folktale of Rumpelstiltskin also resembles its Scandinavian counterpart (Kennedy. *John G. Whittier; the Poet of Freedom*, p. 275).

<sup>513</sup> Eastburn, pp. 132-133.

<sup>514</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, pp. 138-139. John notices the trolls dancing “by moonlight merrily in a ring” and catches and wears one of their magic caps, thus becoming their master. He enters the “elfin under-land” where Lisbeth was working as a servant with other kidnapped children; together, they manage to escape and live happily ever after —“and never sang the birds so sweet in Ramin’s wood before / And never washed the waves so soft along the Baltic shore” (69-70) (p.140). As to the title of the ballad, Thomas Keightley explains that the inhabitants of the island believed in the existence of three kinds of dwarfs: White, Brown and Black. White Dwarfs, the prettiest of the them all, had a gentle and innocent disposition, they would spend the winter quietly in their hills and the spring admiring the blossoms; invisible to humans, they could bewilder the travellers with their sweet music. Brown Dwarfs were “very handsome,” cheerful and “good-natured,” even though they were said to “play all kinds of tricks,” taking the shape of owls to scare thieves and lovers —White Dwarfs, on the other hand, would transform into butterflies or white doves. Black Dwarfs, instead, were ugly and ill-disposed, taking delight in doing “mischief to mankind” and in sitting under elder trees in the summer, screaming like “crying children” in the “woods and marshes” before their reunions. The Dwarfs arrived in the region once the Giants, who had created the hills, disappeared. (*The Fairy Mythology*, from p. 174 to p. 178, for the original version of the folktale see from p. 178 to p. 194).



## CONCLUSION

It has been said that when the quintessential New England has “ceased to exist,” it will live on in the poems of Whittier:<sup>515</sup> his storytelling immortalized the history, folklore and nature of the Merrimack Valley within a Romantic frame, capturing the essence and sentiment of the rural ethos. I argue that the interest of his writings lies in the cultural account of the customs and manners of a people and an age, more than in their literary value: just like photographs, or diary entries, his impressions of landscapes, recordings of quotidian interactions, and memories of the past focused predominantly on episodes of domestic life rather than on the grand historical moments, becoming the voice of the natives of the valley. According to journalist Franklin B. Sanborn, Whittier was the poet of the county of Essex who lived the closest to them, hence treasuring the region’s old and present traditions with “fidelity” to homely details, the qualities of the locale, and doing in verse what Hawthorne achieved in prose.<sup>516</sup> Today, more than a century later, it is safe to say that the legacy of Whittier cannot be equated with Hawthorne, since the former’s plain telling of his surroundings is very far from the meanings of the woods of Robert Frost and the allegories of the maypoles of the Salem writer. I argue that, at this moment in time, the readers of Whittier should approach his accessible writings in much the same spirit that they read tomes of local lore and anecdotes on the valley: not because of the groundbreaking or revolutionary quality of the verses, but because of hidden gems that an enthusiast of the subject might find in Whittier’s poetry.

The role of this type of storytelling became of paramount importance in the century where the younger generations of “city-dwellers” nostalgically reminisced about their days and tales of childhood; the Household Poets, Whittier among them, succeeded in bringing back and reviving the dear romance of “painted autumn woodlands,” the “snow-bound evenings under the lamp” and the “pumpkin pies of old,” when country living was progressively abandoned.<sup>517</sup> Not for nothing, literary critic Van Wyck Brooks states that New England emigrants “carried Whittier with them” just as Scottish ones did with Burns, and this was the reason for Whittier’s popularity.<sup>518</sup>

And maidens in the far-off twilights,  
Singing my words to breeze and stream,

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<sup>515</sup> Kennedy. *John Greenleaf Whittier: His Life, Genius, and Writings*, p. 312.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 334-335.

<sup>517</sup> Brooks, p. 407.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*

Shall wonder if the old-time Mary  
Were real, or the rhymer's dream!<sup>519</sup> (45-48)

As President Charles W. Eliot of Harvard College affirmed, those who “love their country” will “thank” Whittier for his verses,<sup>520</sup> which he penned down questing after the same charm to which Scottish poets were committed, namely the valuing of simplicity and the “common joys and sorrows,”<sup>521</sup> without failing to express the country's issues and his sense of social and moral justice as dictated by his beliefs. In examining his legacy —“who knows but that my idle verses / May leave some trace by Merrimac!” (31-32), he wondered in “The First Flowers”—<sup>522</sup>, I presented a selection of his works that most exemplified the poet's responsiveness to his surroundings and social milieu, thus becoming one of the pioneers in the collection and preservation of the local lore and legends, owing to his knowledge and appreciation of regional material and scenery which, by then, started to become the main subject of several literary works and non-literary studies. A non-secondary contribution of his legendary poems to the new field is that the New England of haunted houses and much-feared witches narrated in his folklore ballads quickly appealed to the curiosity of several of his readers, who shared anecdotes from their personal experiences, thereby continuing the perpetuation of the local oral heritage with other significant sources of regional lore and interest for posterity —“I tell the tale as 'twas told me.”<sup>523</sup>

Today the Fireside poets hardly attract much criticism or debate: most of what needs to be said about their narrative poems has been said already, moreover, they are critically passé in that

contemporary taste does not esteem the genres [they] favored —the ballad, idyll, pastoral romance, and moral fable— nor does it highly regard the stylistic strengths [their] contemporaries praised — clarity, grace, musicality, masterful versification, and memorability.<sup>524</sup>

They also embody a sense of traditional and moral values —as well as romantic, idealistic visions of local and national identity— from which the current mainstream Western society seems to try hard to distance itself. As poet Dana Gioia explains, their poetry lost much of its appeal with the

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<sup>519</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 153.

<sup>520</sup> Underwood, p. 313.

<sup>521</sup> Winfield Townley Scott, p. 260.

<sup>522</sup> Whittier. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, p. 153.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Supernaturalism of New England*, p. 11.

<sup>524</sup> Dana Gioia. “Longfellow in the Aftermath of Modernism,” pp. 68-69.

advent of Modernism and its appraisal of narrative poems as “obsolete” and contradictory, the very opposite of its conception of poetry, namely, a predilection for a “hermetic aesthetic” comprised of “compression, intensity, complexity (...) ellipsis” and a private expression of art.<sup>525</sup> This simplification resists to this day and is indicative of how much Modernism(’s bias) continues to successfully influence our “perceptions” of the past (80); one of the consequences of such revision was that authors like Longfellow and Whittier and their “blandly unmemorable” poems were wholly relegated to the background: their genres were “marginalized,” their prosody rejected—in favour of free verse, the “only true American measure” (94)—and their “public voice” was deemed “vulgar” (80-81) owing to their “overtly musical meters” suitable for popular poetry but not “high art” (94-95).

Given these premises, I believe that Whittier, from a literary standpoint, does not bid fair to enter the canon soon; however, if we shift the focus to today’s (sub)culture(s), a reevaluation of the Fireside poets could be on the horizon: a virtual phenomenon that has garnered considerable interest among teenagers and young adults in recent years is that of internet-born aesthetic movements, namely, a collection of moodboards, playlists, books, movies, etc. that happen to be reminiscent of the aesthetic in question.<sup>526</sup> These (niche) interests are especially driven by escapism and nostalgia, it should come as no surprise then, that one of the most popular, *Cottagecore*, the twenty-first century virtual celebration of pastoralism, succeeded in becoming mainstream during and after the 2020 Covid pandemic.<sup>527</sup> Since the 2010s the cottagecore “community” has idealized a quiet, sustainable nature-oriented lifestyle<sup>528</sup> in which even the daydreamers who cannot afford to retreat into the woods or stroll in the countryside can bake, knit or garden as far as their physical and economic possibilities allow them to—or, eventually, simply engage in make-believe with heartwarming visuals of lavender fields, gingham dresses and picnics with homemade pies and honey (consider the example shown in figure 3).

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<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>526</sup> In *The Atlantic*’s article of February 5, 2021, “Cottagecore Was Just the Beginning” by Kaitlyn Tiffany, it is explained how, in the age of social media, it is common for these generations to refine their own sense of self through “choosing and arranging images” (<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2021/02/aesthetics-wiki-cottagecore-tumblr-tiktok/617923/>. Accessed 1 February 2023).

<sup>527</sup> For instance, it has been reported that the likes on “cottagecore” posts increased of 500% on Tumblr, a micro-blogging platform, in 2020 (Anita Rao Kashi, “‘Cottagecore’ and the rise of the modern rural fantasy,” *BBC*, 9 December 2020, available at <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20201208-cottagecore-and-the-rise-of-the-modern-rural-fantasy>. Accessed 1 February 2023).

<sup>528</sup> The cottagecore trend is not to be interpreted through alt-right lenses and, ideally, it should represent a safe space for people from diverse backgrounds who take delight in past traditions (see BBC. “What’s it like to be ‘cottagecore’” available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zygbsk7>. Accessed 1 February 2023).



Figure 3: a *cottagecore* moodboard as found on Pinterest.

In this romanticized framework, slow living is embraced by those who seek to escape the fast-paced demands of today’s ultra-productive, consumer-based society and reappropriate their lives with an emphasis on authenticity, emotional well-being and reconnection with the natural world.<sup>529</sup> These nostalgic fantasies of whimsical woodlands and rustic living are, of course, by no means new: a literary (and artistic) tradition featuring visions of Arcadia has surfaced over and over again throughout history; in times of great distress, or political and social change and upheaval, these movements have been a proper counter-culture to modernity, reacting to the increasingly

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<sup>529</sup> Cottagecore is, of course, occasionally spoiled by brands and influencers who seek to capitalize on it; moreover it has been criticized for being too performative for a trend that advocates for reality over filtered posts and down-to-earthness over nine-hundred-euro-Zimmermann dresses (see Maura Judkis, “Cottagecore, cluttercore, goblincore — deep down, it’s about who we think we are,” *The Washington Post*, 13 September 2021, available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/cottagecore-goblincore-cluttercore/2021/09/09/4656e958-09b6-11ec-aea1-42a8138f132a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/cottagecore-goblincore-cluttercore/2021/09/09/4656e958-09b6-11ec-aea1-42a8138f132a_story.html). Accessed 1 February 2023). It also goes without saying that slow living is not a prerogative of those who enjoy the aesthetic. Nor is it new, see, for example, the Danish concept of “hygge” that gained widespread popularity in 2016 and refers to the enjoyment involved with cherishing life simple pleasures, both alone and in company (Anna Altman, “The Year of Hygge, the Danish Obsession with Getting Cozy,” *The New Yorker*, 18 December 2016, available at <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-year-of-hygge-the-danish-obsession-with-getting-cozy>. Accessed 1 February 2023).



unstoppable advance of industrialization or, in this case, hyper-technological postmetropolises. The anxieties of the present and the fear of the unknown are mitigated (or momentarily suppressed) by the illusion that the bittersweet memory of a comforting past, as well as the soothing promise of a better future elsewhere, intrinsically represent a safe harbour to which the distressed mind can return at any time.<sup>530</sup> Indeed, escapism was one of the reasons behind Whittier's folk writings (see page 47 of this thesis), which were a faithful company to the poet during the hard times of the Civil War, and, together with the attempt to bridge the apartness of humans from nature, continues to positively influence all those who, just like the Romantics and the Transcendentalists before them, strive for an alternative to a highly commodified existence, whether it be growing one's own food or moving to the mountains.

As previously stated, another useful aspect of these subcultures is the significant amount of references and suggestions that (almost) each aesthetic offers; therefore, it is by no means difficult to people interested in cottagecore to find new recommendations for music (that of English singer-songwriter Vashti Bunyan, for instance), books (those of Beatrix Potter, *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri, *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy M. Montgomery, *Little Women* by Louisa M. Alcott...) tv series (1969's *Moomin*) or movies (Peter Weir's 1975 *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, or Studio Ghibli's 1988 *My Neighbor Totoro*<sup>531</sup> and 1989 *Kiki's Delivery Service*...) that evoke the preferred aesthetic. I thus believe that, as of today, the poetry of Whittier most certainly deserves a spot in that cozy corner of the internet, thanks to his verses that resonate with many of the qualities of the cottagecore subculture<sup>532</sup> —the titles mentioned are, ultimately, classics but far from holding the spotlight in terms of critical appraisal. The Quaker poet too, then, can be reconsidered within a context where a gentle plot and the aesthetic pleasurability of the scenery and small-town living are appreciated more than an avant-garde content. It is a comfort reading, combining period escapism with folklore tales that vividly capture —and let us see— the wonderful and the strange in the familiar.

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<sup>530</sup> More information can be found in Megan Marples's article "Cottagecore has us yearning for a bygone era that never was," *CNN*, 7 February 2021, available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/07/health/cottagecore-nostalgia-mental-health-wellness/index.html> and Angelica Frey's mini-essay "Cottagecore Debuted 2300 Years Ago," *JSTOR Daily*, 11 November 2020, available at <https://daily.jstor.org/cottagecore-debuted-2300-years-ago/>. Accessed 2 February 2023.

<sup>531</sup> In 2015's short essay "My Neighbor Totoro. The Healing of Nature, the Nature of Healing" written by Kosuke Fujiki for *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, the author throws light on the 1990s success of the animated movie, which portrays a 1950s Japanese rural summer scene where "village life is in harmony with nature" and immediately appealed to the older generations' sense of nostalgia for what had been lost after decades of urbanization and progress, as well as to the younger ones, "no longer in contact with natural landscapes" in their day-to-day life, thus revealing the "bleakness" of modernity and its "estrangement" from nature by depicting a reality which was under "threat of disappearance" (156) (the entire essay can be read here: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/resilience.2.3.0152>).

<sup>532</sup> It is interesting to notice that in both nature is central albeit "tamed."

As for Whittier the man, and his career as a poet, looking back to what he —more or less— accomplished remains a reminder that our worth as human beings, and our right to cherish everything that is beautiful and holy in the wonders of nature and existence, is not, and will not ever be, defined by our earthly success: after all, he set a “higher value” on his name as “appended to the Anti-Slavery Declaration of 1833,” than on the “title-page of any book.”<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>533</sup> Underwood, p. 244.

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