

Public and Poetic Uses of "Solitude" in the Works of J. G. Whittier

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Among American poets of the nineteenth century, John Greenleaf Whittier was second, if to anyone at all, only to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in popularity and public presence. Today, Whittier is almost forgotten, both as a poet and as a political activist. Poems such as "The Barefoot Boy," "Snow-Bound," "Barbara Frietchie" or "Maud Muller" had once been considered fully authentic and poetically successful expressions of American experience, but they disappeared from the canon with the onset of modernism. The nature and extent of this rapid change in critical and public appreciation is fascinating in itself, but it is only the necessary backdrop to my talk, in which I will outline some of the uses of "solitude" in Whittier's poetry, and also in the popular perception of his public poetic "persona," as represented in contemporary newspaper coverage. Whittier, as a Quaker, was aware of the concept of solitude. He was familiar with William Penn's *Some Fruits of Solitude*, a collection of spiritual reflections, and of course with the entire practice of Quaker piety, which relied strongly on notions of individual worship and a spiritual withdrawal from the institutions of religion. Closely connected to "solitude" was the appreciation of "silence" – which, not surprisingly, presented conflicts for him as a poet. To counter this, Whittier developed several strategies, above all justifying writing poetry by using it to address topics such as abolition or other reform activities. In his poems, he often presents outsiders and solitary characters, often exiled or following the "philosopher's advice to withdraw into oneself in order to take one's place in existence" (Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*). In the later part of his public life, Whittier was seen almost as a secular saint, a sage who, for his audience, embodied ethical probity and clarity. At the same time, his popular image was reinforced by anecdotes of his celibate domestic life. Based on the analysis of his quasi-religiously infused poetics, and his public perception, I contend in my talk that Whittier's loss of popularity by the beginning of the twentieth century marked not just an aesthetic revolution, but also a secular intellectual and moral transformation that should question our assumptions about a continuous "American" cultural tradition.