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# Driven By Darkness, Drawn By Light: The Progression of Faith in the Poetry of John Greenleaf Whittier - Chapter 13 from "Good and Evil: Quaker Perspectives"

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## Chapter 13

# Driven By Darkness, Drawn By Light: The Progression of Faith in the Poetry of John Greenleaf Whittier

William Jolliff

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892) was one of the most widely published American poets of the nineteenth century, and he was arguably the most important American Quaker writer of his time. His books went through scores of editions: no home was complete without a gilt-edged, leather-bound volume of Whittier on the parlor table. Although he is no longer considered an artist of the first rank, his contributions to the history of American literature and the history of the American conscience retain significance. His masterwork, *Snow-Bound* (1865), remains widely anthologized; it stands as the definitive statement of the popular American conception of rural life during the early 1800s. His anti-slavery poems continue to be taught in schools, suggesting his continuing importance as a poet of commitment. Neither can his lyrics on homespun topics be overlooked. At their best, as in ‘Telling the Bees’, they persist in eliciting a deep and non-sentimental emotion from contemporary readers. It testifies to his excellence that even with the explosion of the American literary canon, Whittier, a white male traditionalist from New England, still captures a few moments in the typical college survey. Yet the aforementioned categories may not include his most lasting gift to American letters, a gift largely overlooked in academic circles: Whittier produced the most significant body of religious poetry by any nineteenth-century American.

Students of the poet’s life might attribute the perseverance of his poetry to a fascination with his rare character: he was a great and honorable public man. But most people reading his poems know little about his single-minded work for the abolition of slavery, the political power he wielded, or the integrity of his manner. Appropriately, his religious poetry survives not because of the saint who wrote it but because of the spirituality it reflects: the faith revealed in his poems demonstrates an increasing complexity, yet it consistently addresses its audience in language convivial with Christian orthodoxy, a language that is simple but never simplistic, carefully crafted but never contrived. Whittier’s artistic and ethical triumph was the transparent portrayal of a man making his way through the world with an unquenchable thirst for the good.

Though this image of Whittier as poet and idealist is a true one, the historical Whittier was far from the starry-eyed stereotype such attributions might suggest. Quite the contrary, as an editor, an abolitionist, a lobbyist – and as a prolific writer

of opinionated prose as well as poetry – he was a man of the world who inevitably defined his life through action rather than abstraction. Though he identified with orthodox Christian expression, he spent precious little energy on the intricacies of theology. He did not theologize about the nature or meaning of evil, but he consistently acted against it. Theological concepts, he believed, found their truest, and maybe their only, meaningful expression in the vigorous living of one's life. It may be most accurate, then, to say that he believed evil to be that which prevails when goodness fails; although he might not have fully agreed with his friend the Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson that 'Good is positive. Evil is merely privative' (Emerson, 1993, p. 105), which may be as useful a formulation as we are likely to discover.

In detailing, therefore, the poet's understanding of evil, we will necessarily follow a two-step route: first, to examine the particular darkness that drove him forward; and second, to examine the light by which he was drawn, that spiritual ideal toward which he intuitively persisted. The first will be observed most clearly in those poems that outline his reasoned and radical opposition to slavery; the latter, though more subtle, will become clear as we examine the faith progression demonstrated in his later religious poetry. For both steps, it will be helpful to understand his writings in relation to the model of faith development presented in James Fowler's *Stages of Faith* (1981).

According to Fowler, all humans are born with the capacity for faith. By faith, however, he does not refer to contents (i.e., a particular set of beliefs). Instead, faith refers to the ways people go about making and maintaining meaning in their lives. In other words, faith refers to how we go about understanding the world – how we interpret our experience and how we respond. As he writes:

Faith is a person's or group's way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person's way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose (Fowler, 1981, p. 4).

Though all people, according to Fowler, have the nascent capacity of faith, few will progress all the way through his six-stage model, and there is considerable variation between individuals concerning how the stages work. The first two stages will not concern this essay. Stage One, Intuitive–Projective Faith, is the egocentric and highly imaginative faith of early childhood. Stage Two, Mythical–Literal Faith, occurs when children begin to sort out the real from the unreal, and to identify with the stories of their own tradition – a playground sense of fairness characterizes this stage. Though it might be worthwhile to study the development of Whittier's childhood faith development, for our purposes here we will begin with those stages identified with late adolescence and adulthood. These will be defined and discussed as we discover them in Whittier's life and as they reveal themselves in the progression of his poems.

In his maturity, Whittier reflected on the good fortune that resulted in his turning toward the great issue of his era, abolition, as his life's work: 'I cannot be sufficiently thankful to the divine Providence which ... turned me away so early from what Roger Williams calls "the world's great trinity, pleasure, profit, and honor", to

take side with the poor and oppressed' (Pollard, 1949, p. 252). We affirm, with the advantage of a longer historical lens, the accuracy of Whittier's hindsight. In the years before he embraced abolitionism in 1833 at age 25, Whittier was operating out of what Fowler calls Stage Three, Synthetic-Conventional Faith. At that stage, individuals have *uncritically* internalized the beliefs and values of their community. If asked, they can sincerely claim to hold such beliefs, but they may not be sure why. According to Fowler, many adults remain at this stage all their lives. In Whittier's case, he could readily spin out a ballad or a fiery editorial to advocate his family's Quaker ways, but he had not made the convictions his own. As a young writer and editor in his early twenties, he was a typical, sad young man having trouble 'finding himself', with his life and his mind moving in too many directions. He was trying to discover a way of making a living other than grinding out a subsistence on the family farm, to navigate a series of unsuccessful courtships, to make his reputation as a poet by publishing piles of verse in the popular press, and to gain fame as a newspaperman and occasional politician – all while maintaining some relationship with his Quaker ideals.

Success came too slowly, and he was extremely dissatisfied. In both positive and negative senses, he was clearly ambitious but lacked direction. And at times, even his ethical compass failed him. At the nadir of his struggle, in 1832 he went so far as to connive to gain a seat in the Massachusetts legislature through a complex set of manipulative delays and promises of participation in the 'spoils system' – the very political phenomenon that he had often condemned as an editor (Pollard, 1949, pp. 106–7). It was providential that soon after this political failure, the charismatic abolitionist editor William Lloyd Garrison, who had been the first to publish the young Quaker's adolescent verse, re-entered Whittier's life. Garrison's letter of March 22, 1833 – a letter which would prove to be the watershed event in Whittier's professional and spiritual progression – delivered this admonition: 'Whittier, enlist! – Your talents, zeal, influence – all are needed'. A few days later Whittier heard Garrison lecture on the obligation of Americans to demand the immediate abolition of slavery, and, as Pollard notes, 'Whittier seems at this time to have been won to active Abolitionism' (Pollard, 1949, p. 116).

Indeed, the young man took his new commitment to heart, and he put his heart into action. He began by writing and publishing one of the pivotal pamphlets of the abolitionist movement, *Justice and Expediency* (1833). Its arguments against the evil of slavery were not new, but they were lucid, and his self-published run of 500 copies soon spurred republication by the thousands. Thus Whittier's commitment to abolition was not only a sign of change in his inner life, but resulted in a kind of public confession, the consequences of which were sure: as John B. Pickard writes, 'Its publication had a profound and lasting effect on Whittier's life. It severely limited Whittier's hopes of political preferment, sharply curtailed the number of journals which would publish his verse, and earned him notoriety second only to that of Garrison and a few other abolitionists' (Pickard, 1975, p. 111). Had this publication not demonstrated his transformation clearly enough, it would have been made public when he signed a key abolitionist manifesto later that year: thirty years after the signing, Whittier stated, 'I am not insensible to literary reputation. I love, perhaps too well, the praise and good-will of my fellow-men; but I set a higher value on my

name as appended to the Anti-Slavery Declaration of 1833 than on the title page of any book (Pollard, 1949, p. 124). As Pollard succinctly puts it, Whittier 'got his true bearing on life only when his heart fully asserted itself and when, like a true Quaker, he embraced a cause' (Pollard, 1949, p. 37).

Something had certainly changed. His embrace of abolitionism transformed his inherited Quaker beliefs into a personal, lived conviction: this turning toward the light focused his passion for writing, his compassion for fellow humans, and his deep religious conviction all on the goal of human betterment, particularly on the plight of the slave. He left behind that unattractive selfish ambition and acted upon his convictions. In Fowler's terms, Whittier was now operating in Stage Four, Individuative-Reflective Faith, that level at which one 'must begin to take seriously the burden of responsibility of his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes' (Fowler, 1981, p. 182). At this stage, individuals become critical of previous beliefs and learn to differentiate their authentically held convictions and those beliefs that were based only on social expectations. Such was the case with Whittier. As a young Quaker, simply agreeing that slavery was wrong was not a demanding belief; it could be easily held alongside the other beliefs of his socially progressive reference communities. But committing his life's energy toward the generally unpopular cause of abolition – *that* was a radical matter with far-reaching practical implications, and it demanded the strength of a personal conviction that could accept sacrifice.

Focusing now on his poetry, we see that from this point on, Whittier stopped his not particularly successful emulation of Robert Burns and other Romantics; their topics would be his topics no longer. When, in his own words, he transformed his 'gift of song' into a 'weapon in the war with wrong', his Individuative-Reflective Faith led him to do so with aggressive boldness and an apparent confidence in his knowledge of what evil is. Granted, some of Whittier's most powerful abolitionist poems make their effect by creating sympathy for the slave. But his most compelling pieces maintain a dominant tone not of sympathy but of righteous anger – a hatred of evil. This is in fact a typical stance for Individuative-Reflective Faith to take. With this stage, what Fowler calls the 'executive ego' has emerged, and that ego speaks and works clearly, even combatively, on behalf of its own commitments. This stage of faith constructs 'a perspective genuinely aware of social systems and institutions' (Fowler, 1981, p. 179) and reasons in terms of 'the impersonal imperatives of law, rules and the standards that govern social rules' (Fowler, 1981, p. 180). Operating in such a mindset, Whittier attacked his chosen dragon, slavery, with absolute confidence; and he quickly demonstrated his mastery of the invective.

Looking at the objects of his most strident attacks, we understand what he perceived to be evil. Most broadly, of course, evil was represented by slavery: the individual cruelties of slavery were easily sufficient to earn this description. But even more basically, race slavery as an institution assaulted that which is most essentially human: it denied the nature of humanity by treating that which is created in the image of God as something less than that. The poet's conviction against that wrong becomes clear in the logical ire of 'The Christian Slave' (1843); the most strident of all his abolitionist poems, it laments the irony that slaves would sometimes be advertised as 'Christian'. To describe a slave as 'A GOOD CHRISTIAN' or 'a Baptist Preacher'

admits, on one hand, the full humanity of slaves: they were capable of a personal relationship with the Creator. Simultaneously, however, such descriptions deny the slaves' full humanity: these spiritual beings were simply chattel. The strangest irony is that one might be a more sellable slave for having a more fully realized spirituality. Thus in Whittier's poem, the attribute which should have precluded the woman's being considered chattel is put forth as the very attribute which makes her more valuable as chattel. So the poem begins, 'A Christian! going, gone! / Who bids for God's own image?' and proceeds with bitter sarcasm (Whittier, 2000, p. 34).

A further degree down the scale of evil in Whittier's understanding of slavery was the betrayal of the truth – and the intentional misrepresentation of the Divine nature – by those who most clearly should have known better and taught otherwise: Christian leaders. Thus the poem 'Clerical Oppressors' (1836) is not only a condemnation of slavery and those who support it with their clerical office, but a deepened definition of evil. As its epigraph states, this poem is a response to a gathering of southern clerics in support of slavery. It damns their action for its conscious and therefore intentional misrepresentation of God and humans, and for its propagation of evil. The poet begins, 'Just God! and these are they / Who minister at thine altar, God of Right! / Men who their hands with prayer and blessing lay / On Israel's Ark of light!' (Whittier, 2000, p. 31). As a Quaker who did not believe in clericalism, Whittier had little sympathy for 'hireling ministry'; that a person would claim for himself this special relationship to God, thereby undercutting every person's relationship with God so valued by Whittier's religious impulse, was a problem on its own. But when that 'chosen' group would lend weighty support to the greatest offense to Christian principle – earning their 'hire' with 'the price of blood' – such people had chosen to 'barter truth away', and echoing Jesus, the poet would state, 'Woe to the priesthood!' (Whittier, 2000, p. 32).

If there were an evil still worse than twisting truth to support evil, it was this: to have the potential to end or limit that evil, but to choose otherwise. That was the sorry choice of Senator Daniel Webster, the subject of Whittier's best abolitionist poem, 'Ichabod' (1850). Early in his career as an editor, abolitionist, and lobbyist, Whittier had trusted Webster's sound politics and good moral sense. What made Webster's evil the greatest, then, was his betrayal of his gift: in Whittier's mind, Webster knew the right but chose otherwise: when he used his powerful influence to guarantee passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, he had placed his own desire to preserve the union above his understanding of good and evil. In response, Whittier performed that most pitiless of acts: he damned him with public pity: '[P]itying tears, not scorn and wrath / Befit his fall!' Whittier states, 'When he who might / Have lighted up and led his age, / Falls back in night' (Whittier, 2000, p. 47). Thus he gave the senator the epithet *Ichabod*, which means *lost glory*.

In Whittier's anti-slavery poems, then, we see suggested an outline of what the poet most clearly considered evil: to do others harm; to devalue or deny the divine nature of all humanity; to misrepresent the nature of God; and, finally, to refuse to address such evils when it is within one's power to do so. The moral imperatives of that era were clear. But as the period of Whittier's most energetic abolitionist involvement passed and the nation moved into wartime and the post-war era, the either/or approach of political invective faded from Whittier's work. As it did,

we begin to find among the prolific poet's many themes great devotional poems that demonstrate the fruit of growing spiritual complexity. Just as clearly as the imprecatory abolitionist poems demonstrate the Individuative-Reflective Faith with its ethical simplicity, these more reflective and complex later works would suggest Stage Five, Conjunctive Faith.

At this stage, according to Fowler, disillusionment and an increased understanding of life's complexities 'press one toward a more dialectical and multileveled approach to life truth' (Fowler, 1981, p. 183). He writes that as a

way of seeing, of knowing, of committing, [Conjunctive Faith] moves beyond the dichotomizing logic of Stage 4's 'either/or'. It sees both (or the many) sides of an issue simultaneously. Conjunctive Faith suspects the things are organically related to each other; it attends to the pattern of interrelatedness in things, trying to avoid force-fitting to its own prior mind set (Fowler, 1981, p. 185).

Conjunctive Faith reasons dialectically and accepts other belief systems on their own terms; unlike more exclusivistic understandings of Christianity, it does not force other beliefs to accommodate. For such faith to function, though, the believer must have realized detachment enough to allow 'an intimacy in knowing that celebrates, reverence and attends to the "wisdom" evolved in things as they are, before seeking to modify, control or order them to fit prior categories' (Fowler p. 185).

It is perhaps providential that just as Whittier's abolitionist poems were the most fitting words for the abolitionist era, the more theologically complex poems of his middle age also found a ready audience: a poetry informed by the attributes of Conjunctive Faith was exactly what his public needed. Traditional Christian orthodoxy had taken a beating among his contemporaries; no serious thinker could retain the literalistic readings of the Bible, which had previously been the stuff of American popular religion, and the nature of public discussion had changed. Questions once squeezed into silence by biblical literalism were rising to the surface, increasing anxiety among Christians; the challenges of new science, higher biblical criticism, and comparative religious study were powerful in their newness. Such doubt-inducing issues could only intensify those perennial theological questions, such queries as 'Why does God let bad things happen?' and 'Will I really see my loved ones again in heaven?' Whittier's fame guaranteed him a place in popular discussion; and as we keep in mind the traits Fowler assigns to Conjunctive Faith, we see them repeatedly exemplified in the poet's most characteristic verse. While they give us no further definition of evil, they do suggest an idea of evil's opposite – the light that would draw Whittier forward.

For example, Fowler states that this stage is characterized by a 'reclaiming and reworking' of one's past, in which the believer gives new attention to that social unconscious which was developed in the tradition in which he was nurtured (Fowler, 1981, p. 197). This tendency is suggested in Whittier's renewed celebration of Quakerism clearly portrayed in such poems as 'First Day Thoughts' (1853), which honors the traditional meeting in the manner of Friends. The waiting in silence, the 'still small voice', the heart that will 'strive with each besetting sin', the 'wandering' soul seeking 'the path of duty' – all find their place as the poem recounts typical

characteristics of Quaker worship (Whittier, 2000, pp. 230–31). Two additional poems which Whittier published in 1879 issues of Lyman Abbott's popular *Christian Union* magazine, 'The Word' and 'The Book', also pay tribute to this tradition (Woodwell, 1985, p. 432). Then as now, many Christians referred to the Bible as 'The Word', but Whittier here reclaims the Quaker preference. The *Word* is not the Bible but the voice of the Holy Spirit, the guide that allows one to read the scripture – 'The picture-writing of the world's gray seers, / The myths and parables of the primal years' – in a beneficial way (Whittier, 2000, p. 254). Here too, Whittier emphasizes his Quaker 'hatred of cant and doubt of human creeds', a theme that recurs in his poems. It is important to note for our purpose here that his anti-creedalism reflects not only Whittier's Quakerism but the dialectical nature of Conjunctive Faith. In 'The Book' he restates this theme from another angle. There is a truth that is deeper, more universal and pervasive than anything we read in creeds, and it is in such a light that the Bible must be read: 'But only when on form and word obscure / Falls from above the white supernal light / We read the mystic characters aright, / And life informs the silent portraiture' (Whittier, 2000, p. 255). Clearly the light to which Whittier was drawn was beyond any sectarian exclusivism – he believed that religious understanding could and would necessarily change; but with equal clarity, he advocated that changes could be absorbed within a traditional manner of worship. Such a complexity distinguishes Whittier's Quakerism from the rigid evangelicalism that challenged the sect from within and the encroaching modernism that threatened from without.

Another trait of Conjunctive Faith is that it purposefully 'maintains vulnerability to the strange truths of those who are "other"' (Fowler, 1981, p. 198). Unlike the either/or ethic of Individuative–Reflective Faith, Conjunctive Faith does not defend itself against other views; it attends to other positions with the supposition that they might in fact be correct. The 1865 poem 'The Eternal Goodness' (Whittier, 2000, pp. 244–7) demonstrates that trait well. In metered argument, the speaker respects the truths his opponents stress, and he even seems to admire their Calvinistic scholasticism, their 'logic linked and strong'; but clearly he chooses a tentativeness antithetical to theological confidence. He prefers the 'hushed feet' of unknowing to the arguments that seem with 'boldness shod', just as he prefers to dwell upon God's 'pitying love' rather than divine 'justice'. Similarly, he fully understands by his own experience the same tendency toward sin that his Calvinist friends perceive, for he humbly admits that within himself, 'Too dark you cannot paint the sin'. He rejects their creed not because he does not believe in sin, but because he perceives that creeds are reductionistic and therefore betray a misperception of God. His poem is a corrective, just as Conjunctive Faith may be considered a corrective to Individuative–Reflective Faith. According to Fowler, Conjunctive Faith 'knows that the symbols, stories, doctrines and liturgies offered by [one's] own or other traditions are inevitably partial, limited to a particular people's experience of God and incomplete. ...' (Whittier, 2000, p. 186). Whittier parallels this idea in verse: 'Who fathoms the Eternal Thought? / Who talks of scheme and plan? / The Lord is God! He needeth not / The poor device of man'. Typically, he attempts to transcend both positions in the enduring faith that 'God is good'; as the poem concludes, he addresses his listeners as 'brothers', and even asks them to pray for him, so that, should his faith



be vain, he might find their 'sure and safer way'. This poem clearly exemplifies that strength of Conjunctive Faith that Fowler calls the 'ironic imagination', the capacity to embrace one's own beliefs while 'simultaneously recognizing that they are relative, partial, and inevitably distorting apprehensions of transcendent reality' (Whittier, 2000, p. 198).

Such an ability to hold apparent contradictions simultaneously edges toward yet another attribute of Conjunctive Faith: in Fowler's words, it is '[a]live to paradox and the truth in apparent contradiction' (Fowler, 1981, p. 198). The poem 'Trust' (1853) testifies to Whittier's own struggle and acceptance of God's will, and is also a statement of his encouragement to others. Easy belief for the thinking Christian had ceased in Whittier's day, as in our own. Thus he begins with a heart-felt exclamation: 'Those same old baffling questions! O my friend, / I cannot answer them' (Whittier, 2000, p. 233). His own soul, he confesses, has been unable to discover the 'great and solemn meanings', to solve the 'awful riddles', and he states, 'I have no answer for myself or thee'. His conclusion transcends logic, however, into pure faith, and it is a truth he learned, he admits, at his mother's knee: "'All is of God that is, and is to be; / And God is good". Let this suffice us still / Resting in childlike trust upon His will / Who moves to His great ends unthwarted by the ill' (Whittier, 2000, pp. 233-4). At first glance, this might seem to be naïve belief, but grounded in Conjunctive Faith, it becomes what Fowler has termed, borrowing a word from Ricoeur, a 'second naiveté' in which 'symbolic power is reunited with conceptual meanings', as one reworks one's past, prompted by the 'deeper self' (Fowler, 1981, p. 197). The truth he learned at his mother's knee has not changed; he simply understands it more deeply.

Whittier's most intimate spirituality suggests another trait of Conjunctive Faith: it can 'appreciate symbols, myths, and rituals (its own and others') because it has been grasped, in some measure, by the depth of reality to which they refer' (Fowler, 2000, p. 198). With this difficult phrase, Fowler refers to something akin to mystical experience, a depth of experience like that referred to in Whittier's 'The River Path' (1860). Though the poem begins as a typical walk-in-the-woods lyric, it quickly becomes something more. The speaker and his companion are walking at dusk, when they turn a corner and encounter a glowing vista, 'a dream of day without its glare', and they stand in the darkness looking into the light. Whittier scrambles through 16 more couplets trying to wrap language around the significance of the vision, and at last arrives at a metaphor of standing between two worlds: the 'shadowy with the sunlit side' is 'allied'; the heavenly and the earthly have come together (Whittier, 2000, pp. 241-3). An even more mysterious experience of the real that stands behind symbols is the subject of 'A Mystery' (1875). In that poem, the speaker walks alone in the wilderness, beguiled by a feeling of having been there before: 'No clue of memory led me on, / But well the ways I knew; / A feeling of familiar things / With every footstep grew'. At last he confesses that a 'presence, strange at once and known, / Walked with me as my guide; / The skirts of some forgotten life / Trailed noiseless at my side' (Whittier, 2000, p. 251). Such experiences indicate a difficult truth of Conjunctive Faith: 'the conscious ego is not master in its own house. ... [it] recognizes the task of integrating or reconciling conscious and unconscious' (Fowler, 1981, p. 186). Conjunctive Faith can embrace such mystery because it 'attends to the pattern of the interrelatedness of things' and it has gained the detachment necessary

‘to let reality speak its word, regardless of the impact of that word on the security or self-esteem of the knower’ (Fowler, 1981, p. 185). Whittier did not write easily of mystical experience; when he did so, his words have weight.

Indeed, though his faith is expressed in common ways, his was never an easy faith. As noted, nineteenth-century Christians were confronting – in addition to a radically changing economy, population shifts from rural village to city, and dehumanizing industrial technologies – advances in biblical criticism and a plethora of scientific discoveries that made traditional, literalistic biblical interpretation impossible. Some lost their faith; others retreated into fundamentalism. Whittier’s *Conjunctive Faith* allowed him to avoid both fruitless extremes. Though he felt keenly the confusion and anxiety of his peers, he dealt wisely with the challenges of his time. ‘Requirement’ (1881), for example, is impressive in its straightforward reflection of the poet’s grappling with a changing theological context. Though grounded in typically Christian language, it goes beyond typical theology. Echoing Saint Paul, Whittier writes, ‘We live by Faith’, then is quick to add, ‘but Faith is not the slave / Of text and legend’. Whittier maintains his traditional approach to religion, but he is not about to disregard modern scientific and biblical scholarship in order to maintain an outdated reading of scripture. He persists in his belief that all truth, new and old, is God’s truth, that ‘Reason’s voice and God’s, / Nature’s and Duty’s, never are at odds’. In a list that sounds as commonly orthodox as one can imagine, the poet catalogues what he believes God does require:

What asks our Father of His children, save  
Justice and mercy and humility,  
A reasonable service of good deeds,  
Pure living, tenderness to human needs,  
Reverence and trust, and prayer for light to see  
The Master’s footprints in our daily ways?  
No knotted scourge nor sacrificial knife,  
But the calm beauty of an ordered life. . .  
Firm-rooted in the faith that God is Good (Whittier, 2000, p. 257).

Though he uses particular Christian language, his list of ‘requirements’ is universal; it could be shared by most religions. Typical of *Conjunctive Faith* is confidence ‘in the reality mediated by its own tradition and in the awareness that that reality overflows its mediation’ (Fowler, 1981, p. 187). While expressing his belief in Christian terms, what Whittier values as the greatest good is not the particular language of a religion but the reality behind the symbols, reflecting again that he has been grasped by ‘the depth of reality to which [religious symbols] refer’ (Fowler, 1981, p. 198).

Finally, the poem ‘Adjustment’ (1884) testifies to the sophistication of Whittier’s faith; that he wrote it as he approached 80 speaks to the persistent vitality of that faith. The poet argues without apology that religion must evolve: ‘The tree of Faith its bare, dry boughs must shed / That nearer heaven living ones may climb’, he contends. The ‘troubled times’ that others lament are in reality a blessing: ‘an angel sent of God’ to roil the waters of the world ‘with life’. From his mature spiritual perspective, such shifting theological strands were natural and good: ‘the strong tides come and go.’ So his response to a changing world is far from despair:

Therefore I trust, although to outward sense  
 Both true and false seem shaken; I will hold  
 with newer light my reverence for the old  
 And calmly wait the births of Providence.  
 No gain is lost; the clear-eyed saints look down  
 Untroubled on the wreck of schemes and creeds;  
 Love yet remains. ... (Whittier, 2000, p. 261).

This is Conjunctive Faith at its plainest, and Whittier at his theological best. The particulars upon which faith *seems* to depend may change, but the universals do not. Whittier maintains reverence for the old, but 'with newer light'. The 'clear-eyed' saints, he tells us, are untroubled by 'the wreck of schemes and creeds'. And why? Because '[l]ove yet remains'.

In conclusion, we readily admit that Whittier was no academic philosopher. Still, having considered carefully the darkness by which he was driven and the light by which he was drawn, we can determine his clear ethical parameters. Written from the perspective of Individuative-Reflective Faith, his abolitionist poems have presented a clear indication of what he considered to be evil: to do others harm, to devalue or deny the divine nature of all humanity, and to refuse to correct wrongs when it is within one's power to do so. And his religious poems, reflecting his progression into a Conjunctive Faith, have presented clearly his understanding of the good; while it would be inconsistent with such an understanding to attempt to define evil in any absolute sense, we can suggest that for Whittier, to do evil would have been to go against the progression of faith his poems express: to refuse to admit moral complexities; to force others to conform to one's own thinking; to refuse to accommodate the beliefs of others; to commit oneself to rigid, unchanging perspective; to reject participation in spiritual mystery; and to overlook the persistent goodness of God. Such a definition by opposition, however, is not one the poet would have undertaken. His preference was to work hard for the good – and let evil atrophy.

It is worth mentioning finally that Fowler briefly suggests a sixth stage of faith development, though he writes very sparingly about it. Few people, he notes, ever reach the final level he calls *Universalizing Faith*; and those who do so have 'a special grace that makes them seem more lucid, more simple, and yet somehow more fully human than the rest of us .... Life is both loved and held too loosely. Such persons are ready for fellowship with persons at any of the other stages and from any other faith tradition' (Fowler, 1981, p. 201). Such a saintly description of any human would seem to beg for disappointment. Nevertheless, in reflecting upon Whittier's journey – his purposeful life; his relentless work; the depth of his faith development that work reflects; and, maybe especially, the broad appeal, both critical and popular, that he maintained even to the end of his life – one is tempted to suggest that he was the embodiment of just such a Universalizing Faith. It is not without significance that on his deathbed, after medicine was deemed to be no longer effective, he would often breathe, 'Love – love to all the world'.