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THE POETRY OF J. G. WHITTIER (*)

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The late venerable author of the "Christian Year," who filled so well the Chair of Poetry in the University of Oxford, makes an important distinction between primary and secondary poets. In the first class he includes those who write from a sort of poetic impulse. "They sing," as one of his reviewers has well expressed it, "because they cannot help it. There is a melody within them which will out,—a fire in the blood which cannot be suppressed." The second class comprises those who, not possessing the divine, innate *afflatus* which compels the outpourings of the first and higher class, have made themselves poets; or, like some of their fellow-artists with the pencil, have been made by circumstances,—by superior learning, combined with a musical ear and a taste for literary culture; or by an intense admiration for the works of great masters awaking within them a consciousness of their own powers.

This is certainly a very attractive theory. It is, moreover, a fine scholarly exposition of the great fact that there exist a host of learned men with a skill in composition and felicity of language greater than many poets possess, who yet never, or rarely, exercise their gifts, because of the absence of that divine enthusiasm to which reference has been made, impelling them to give vent to the constraining spirit within. If, however, I were called upon to judge of the theory by the poet-lecturer's own appli-

cation of it, I should pronounce against it, as being, at best, partial and unsatisfactory in application. A principle which places Scott and Burns above Dante and Milton, at once stamps itself as defective, and will never command general acceptance in the republic of letters.

In regard, however, to all literary canons, there is just this practical difficulty,—that every critic has his own peculiar tastes and prejudices, which guide and mould their operation. And I incline to think that Mr. Keble's theory is faulty,—that is, his application of it. But it is far from my purpose to dispute either the one or the other. On the contrary, his principles of classification have been brought forward as an interesting illustration of a similar analysis, which, it appears to me, might be advantageously used to distinguish not merely the works of one poet from another, but also different portions of the writings of the same author.

This distinction may be briefly described. One class consists of those who, like Mr. Keble's primary poets, write under the influence of strong emotion,—a kind of innate enthusiasm, or *quasi* prophetic condition, which, like the "Deus" in Virgil's Sibil, overmasters them, and impels them to pour forth their

"Full and burning hearts

In song."

These utterances are not always of one class or grade of poetry. But whether they be the "thunderous chimes" of

"The mournful Tuscan's haunted rhyme,"

or the simpler, yet equally earnest and forcible lines of the New England poet, whose works are before us, they are all marked with a strongly emotional character. And as they frequently embody prognosti

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1. The Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier. In two volumes. 1862.

2. In War Time, and other Poems. By John Greenleaf Whittier. 18 mo. 1866.

3. Snow-Bound; a Winter Idyll. By the same. 1866.

4. The Tent on the Beach, and other Poems. By the same. 1867.—Boston: Ticknor & Fields.