

## JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER.



WHITTIER'S BIRTHPLACE, NEAR HAVERHILL, MASS.

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER is in some respects the most American of all the American poets. To say that there are no traces of other literatures than our own in his writings, is to say too much; but it is safe to say that he has been less influenced by other literatures than any of our poets, with the exception, perhaps, of Bryant. When he is least original, as in his early Indian poems, we still feel that he is more than imitative; he reflects the books that he has read, but the impression which they leave on his mind is no more permanent than the shadow of a cloud on a mountain lake. Of his genius there never was any doubt; what was doubtful was the direction which it would take, and which would lead him to the kingdom of which he was to be the lord and master. It was not long before he discovered that he possessed a personality of his own; but it was only after many days, and much intellectual groping, that he discovered whither it was leading him. I have, I believe, a tolerably clear idea of the place that he occupies in American literature, and if the reader will follow me carefully, I hope to point out the steps by which he reached it.

It was no royal road which he pursued, but a succession of tangled paths and by-ways in which he was often bewildered, but through which he went on manfully—

“Beating his wings toward the golden bough.”

The life of Mr. Whittier has not been a remarkable one, though it has not been devoid of incidents and stormy mental struggles. If he had been born in the goodly state of Pennsylvania instead of Massachusetts, the burden of ancestral tradition would probably have rested more lightly on his shoulders. A Friend of Friends, he inherited centuries of Puritan aversion and persecution.

We are indebted to the Puritan Fathers for many things, but religious toleration is not among the number. One would have thought this the one virtue above all others which would have warmed their rugged natures; but it is the curse of persecution that it makes its sufferers persecutors in turn, the exceptions to this gloomy rule being few and far between. They have generally been found among the pietistic, non-resistant sects, notably among the fol-

lowers of Fox and Penn, who have generally been reprobated by the church militant, which has now confronted them with the standing army of Episcopacy, and now harassed them with the free lances of Dissent. If liberty of conscience came over in the *Mayflower*, it was a portion of her perishable cargo, and was soon disposed of, and never afterward imported, or, if imported, was confiscated before landing. Nowhere were moral revenue laws more strictly enforced than in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and against none with more rigor than against the Quakers. The drab coats and broad-brimmed hats were as hateful to the colonists as the feathers and the war-paint of the Indians. They were not to be exterminated, however, for there was an invincible strength in the doctrines of peace which they professed and practiced, and in the simple goodness of their lives. Shunned at first, it was not long before they were tolerated, and before their influence was felt in the milder manners of their Puritan neighbors, who gradually forgot the senseless animosities of their ancestors. Such I conceive to be the early colonial history of the Quakers, who succeeded in establishing themselves in Massachusetts and elsewhere; one family, in particular, on the banks of the Merrimac.

theory of heredity obtains a foothold among us, it is likely to be applied to them by our children. We have been told since Bryant's death that his mother was a descendant of John Alden, and I have somewhere read that Mr. Longfellow is an offshoot of the same vigorous stock. Of the ancestors of Mr. Whittier I know nothing, except that they were Friends, as I have intimated, and that they settled on the banks of the Merrimac. That they were men of probity and principle, goes without saying, for it was the characteristic of the peculiar people to which they belonged, and which frequently made them a standing rebuke to those about them. He was born at Haverhill, Massachusetts, on the 17th of December, 1807. He resided at the homestead of his family until his twentieth year, getting as much education as was then thought necessary,—a simple course of study in which the three R's were prominent, and the "higher branches," as they are now called, were conspicuous by their absence,—and making himself useful on the farm. As might be expected in a secluded rural district of New England sixty years ago, he had little aid from books. There were then no public libraries, no lyceums, reading clubs, nor debating societies. His father's library, as he tells us in



THE OLD SCHOOL-HOUSE, HAVERHILL, MASS.

This family was of no more consequence, in the eyes of its contemporaries, than the family of Shakspeare, a couple of centuries before, or the family of Burns, a century later; but it is of importance now, because it has produced that bright, consummate flower of the race—a poet.

We have not hitherto manifested much curiosity in regard to the genealogy of American men of letters; but if Dalton's

"Snow-Bound," consisted of only about a score of volumes, mostly relating to the doctrines of his sect and the lives of its founders. There was a single novel of a very harmless character, which was carefully hidden from the younger members of the family and

"Of poetry, or good or bad,  
A single book was all we had,

Where Ellwood's meek, drab-skirted muse,  
A stranger to the heathen Nine,  
Sang, in a somewhat nasal whine,  
The wars of David and the Jews."

One year of academy life was all the educa-

literature. Mr. Whittier's first publications were a little volume of prose and verse (selected, I presume, from his contributions to the "Review"), entitled "Legends of New England" (1831); and "Moll Pitcher," the



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tion he received, apart from that obtained at the district school, which was open only about twelve weeks in midwinter. Mr. Whittier's poem, "In School Days," gives a good description of the school-house.

It was not as a writer of verse that Mr. Whittier became known, outside of his limited circle of readers in the "Haverhill Gazette," but as a writer of prose in the columns of the "American Manufacturer," a journal in which tariffs and other questions of political economy were discussed, and of which he was the editor. He must have had some reputation as a thinker to have been intrusted with a paper of this character at the age of twenty-one—a paper which was likely to raise controversies in which no rustic pen could engage successfully, least of all a poetic one. It was published in the Athens of New England—Boston; and it must have increased his reputation, or he would not have been selected as the editor of the "New England Weekly Review," which was published in Hartford. It was a paper of some note at the time (1830), which had been edited by that clever journalist, George D. Prentice (who fancied all his life that he was a poet), and, later, if I am not mistaken, by J. G. C. Brainard, whose early death was a loss to American

date of which is not given. I have not seen the latter, which is said to have been a poetical tale, of which Mistress Mary Pitcher, the famous old witch of Nahant, was the heroine. Neither of these productions is of any importance, I imagine, though they are interesting as being the earliest of Mr. Whittier's recorded works, and as showing the bent of his mind at that period, and the class of subjects with which it sympathized. The first attempts of men of genius are always indicative of their powers, suggesting, as they do, possibilities which, in time, and under the influence of favorable stars, ripen into potent actualities. The child is father of the man, in literature as in other and less glorious careers, though we cannot always forecast the horoscope of the man from his nativity; for he may die young, like Chatterton, or live, like Dermody, and Maginn, and Mangan, and Poe.

It was the era of unsuccessful journals, daily, weekly, and otherwise; so I take it for granted that the "New England Weekly Review" lingered, and died a natural death. Mr. Whittier, at any rate, severed his connection with it, and engaged in other undertakings, and during the next five years he was alternately a biographer, a politician, a farmer, and a legislator. He published in

1832 a Memoir of Brainard, which was prefixed to the second edition of his "Literary Remains," and in 1833 an essay entitled "Justice and Expediency, or Slavery considered with a View to its Abolition." There was something about the young Quaker that commended him to the respect of his fellow-townsmen, who elected him their representative in the State Legislature. He had made his mark, in a certain sense, and had ventured in two intellectual paths in which he was hereafter to walk,—the neglected, shadowy by-way of early legendary lore, and the dangerous road of political controversy, in which few were courageous enough to be seen. He was a bold man forty years ago who dared avow himself an abolitionist. Love of justice in the abstract, pursuit of politics in the concrete, and journalism in its various departments, are all excellent things; but, with due respect to the men of letters who have distinguished themselves therein, they are not literature. Mr. Whittier had made his mark, as I have said, but, strictly speaking, he was not yet an author. The work that he had hitherto performed was experimental and tentative; what would he do next? what was wanted? what could he do best? That he put these questions to himself is extremely probable, and that they were soon answered, in a measure, is certain.

American literature was in the formative

element of thought was peculiar to the New World? What did it possess, either in the present or the past, out of which a characteristic and distinctive literature could be builded? American poetry, which chiefly concerns us now, had busied itself at intervals with the aboriginal inhabitants of the Continent. Freneau was among our earliest writers of verse who felt that there was, or might be, poetic possibilities in the Indian, and that he did not develop them into a poem of any length was doubtless owing to the fact that he was rather a political singer than a poet. He was read by Campbell, who was not above stealing from him, and who also detected the poetic side of the Indian nature. "Gertrude of Wyoming" is a pathetic poem, though it is absurd in its want of local coloring, and the Oneida chief who figures in it,

"The stoic of the woods, the man without a tear," is, indeed, a vigorous and life-like sketch, which ranks among the happiest creations of Campbell's genius. This poem was at once reprinted here, and was immediately popular, being, as it was, a revelation of the poetic value of certain episodes in our Colonial history. The next Indian poem of any account was the "Yamoyden" of Sands and Eastman, which attracted a fair share of attention and received more praise than it was entitled to from patriotic critics.



THE POET'S STUDY AT AMESBURY.

stage of its existence half a century ago. No one could say exactly what it was, or what it was likely to be. That it should differ from English literature was admitted by all, but wherein should it differ? What

Bryant, then, as now, the first of our poets, was the first to perceive the proper poetic place of the red man, and his relation to the white race by whom he had been conquered. The few Indian poems which he

had written were exquisite, but they were too quiet, I suspect, to strike their readers, who looked for narratives instead of suggestions and reflections, and who wanted to be interested in historical incidents. They were ready to welcome any one who satisfied, or seemed to satisfy, their uncritical demands, and our poets and versifiers were anxious to accommodate them. The recognition of this expectancy, rather than a

latter by the maiden, and her subsequent remorse,—given these, it is not difficult to work out the story of "Mogg Megone," which is hardly a tragic one, though it is based upon deeds of violence, and is certainly not a poetical one, in spite of the metrical form in which it is cast. It is easily though carelessly written, and is noticeable for the affluence of its descriptions.

The material and spiritual life of Mr.



VIEW FROM THE PORCH AT OAK KNOLL, DANVERS, MASS.

natural inclination to gratify it, beguiled Mr. Whittier into the writing of his third volume, "Mogg Megone," which was published in his twenty-eighth year, 1835.

It is founded on fact, as the saying is,—at any rate as regards the existence of its hero, Mogg Megone, who was a leader among the Saco Indians in the bloody war of 1677 (I am following Mr. Whittier's notes), who attacked and captured the garrison at Black Point, October 12th of that year; and cut off, at the same time, a party of Englishmen near Saco River. Besides Mogg Megone, who is the average Indian chief of colonial records,—brave, suspicious, revengeful, and drunken,—we have John Bonython a white outlaw, his daughter Ruth, whose lover Mogg Megone has slain and scalped, and a Jesuit priest, of whom Père Ralle, one of the most indefatigable French missionaries, was the original. These four shadows, the murder of Ruth's lover by the Indian, the murder of the

Whittier, at this time and later, is not so clear to me as I wish it were, and as it would have been if he had arranged his poems in the order in which they were written, and not under arbitrary headings and classifications. "Mogg Megone" was followed by "Lays of Home," in 1843; by "The Stranger in Lowell," in 1845; and "Supernaturalism in New England," in 1847, the two last in prose. While these works were in progress Mr. Whittier changed his residence, and enrolled himself as an active worker among the abolitionists, in 1838-9. He edited the "Pennsylvania Freeman," an anti-slavery journal published in Philadelphia, and so little to the satisfaction of those who were opposed to its teachings that his office was sacked and burned by a mob. He afterward acted as one of the secretaries of the Anti-Slavery Society, and edited the "Anti-Slavery Reporter." His last editorial connections were with the "Lowell Standard," and the "National Era." To consider Mr.

Whittier at this period simply as a poet, would be as unjust as to consider him simply as a moralist; the fact being that he was both a poet and a moralist, the former by virtue of his genius, the latter by virtue of his Quaker ancestry, his social surroundings and proclivities, and the condition of his country.

His anti-slavery poems, which were collected by him under the title of "Voices of Freedom," cover a period of fifteen years, the earliest bearing the date of 1833, and the latest



UNDER THE OAKS AT OAK KNOLL.

that of 1848. The majority of them (there are thirty-eight in all) come under the head of occasional poems. They are earnestly written, but as the events which suggested them were of a temporary character, one has to stimulate an interest to read them now, and this not so much because the vexed question which so fiercely agitated the poet is happily an obsolete one, as because in grappling with it he forgot to be a poet. There is no unconquerable antagonism between poetry and morality, but the perfect fusion of these intellectual qualities demands a kind of genius which Mr. Whittier did not at

this time possess. Whether it be of a higher or lower order, need not be discussed; that it is of a different order, sufficiently explains the poetical deficiencies of his early anti-slavery poems. He was carried away by his indignation, which was righteous enough, but unfortunately it was not inspiration. I should except, perhaps, from this critical condemnation, the "Farewell of a Virginia Slave Mother to her Daughters sold into Southern Bondage," and "Massachusetts to Virginia." A stanza of the former will show its quality, and recall the poem itself to the memory of our older readers:

"Gone, gone,—sold and gone,  
To the rice-swamp, dank and lone.  
Where the slave-whip ceaseless swings,  
Where the noisome insect stings,  
Where the fever demon strews  
Poison with the falling dews,  
Where the sickly sunbeams glare,  
Through the hot and misty air,—  
Gone, gone,—sold and gone,  
To the rice-swamp dank and lone,  
From Virginia's hills and waters,—  
Woe is me, my stolen daughters!"

If I were writing as a moralist, I should, of course, take a moral view of Mr. Whittier's anti-slavery poems, and should, no doubt, find much to praise in them. Animated by the spirit of freedom, they are vehement, but not intemperate, in expression, and there is no gainsaying the justice of the cause they maintain. That they accomplished much or little toward the abolition of slavery is no reason why they should not have been written, nor why they should be passed over in silence. Holding the opinions that he did, and having the temperament that he had, Mr. Whittier could no more have stifled his fiery denunciations of slavery than the old Hebrew seers could have stifled their dark and fateful prophesies. We all have convictions, and honest men follow them, no matter whither they lead. We can afford to let health and wealth and fame miss us; but we cannot afford to neglect our duties. Least of all can the poets, for they, above all other men, are dedicated to the worship of the implacable goddess,

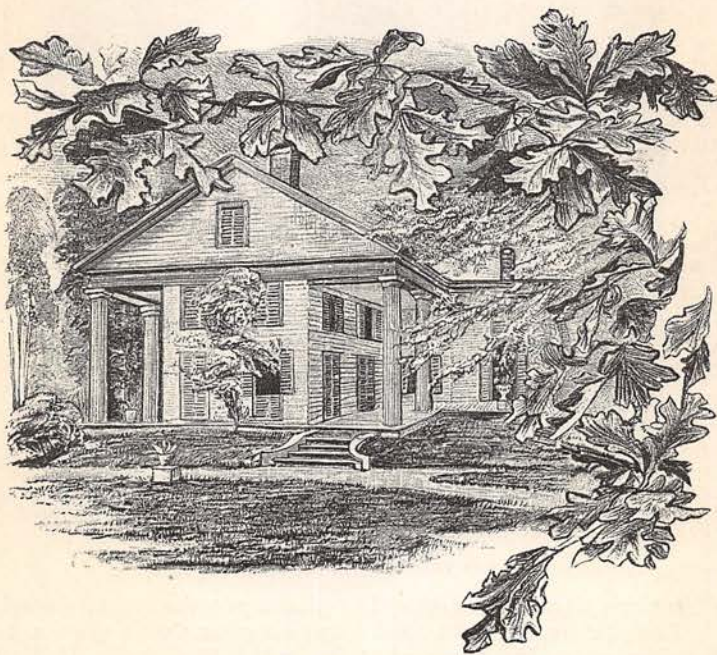
"Stern daughter of the voice of God."

Granting this, as I must, I cannot bring myself to admire Mr. Whittier's anti-slavery poetry. I do not so much wish it unwritten as that the time spent in writing it had

been spent in more delightful tasks. I speak for myself, of course, as a critic and a lover of poetical poetry.

If the moralist was strong in Mr. Whittier during the fifteen years that he allowed himself to support the anti-slavery cause by his verse, he by no means slumbered as a poet. His poems written during that period, published under the name of "Lays of Home," more than confirmed the favorable impression that had been created by "Mogg Megone." If the original editions of his writings were before me, I could speak of these poems with more certainty than at present, when I have to content myself with his "Complete Poetical Works" (1876), in which I know not where to look for them, though I presume they are to be found under the headings of "Legendary" and "Miscellaneous." What first strikes one in reading

are four ballads, if I may call them such, which stand out among Mr. Whittier's early productions as specimens of his objective art. I refer to the pathetic story of "Cassandra Southwick;" the tragic episode of "St. John;" the adventure of Goodman Macy and the fugitive Quaker celebrated in "The Exiles"; and the strange spiritual study of "The New Wife and the Old." We feel, in reading these poems, that we are in contact with creations: we have escaped abstractions, and have embraced human beings. We feel the individuality of Cassandra Southwick, who is a veritable woman, noble in her tribulations, and glorious in her triumph, which is simply that of womanhood. It is she who relates her story and not her poet, who has no more to do with it than the chorus of a Greek tragedy with the actors of the tragedy



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them is the positive and admirable growth of their author, who has now thoroughly mastered the *technique* of the poetic art.

The motive of these poems, and of "Pau-tucket," is partly natural description, and partly historical recollection. The Indian element, which crops out in the last, underlies "The Funeral Tree of the Sokokis," and "The Fountain," which are imaginatively suggestive. Belonging to the period

itself; he is an on-looker and infrequent expositor, but not an actor. "The New Wife and the Old" is a remarkable poem, which has for its theme the profoundest of mortal relations, and which clutches at the relations and sympathies of the worlds of life and death.

The poems which Mr. Whittier has arranged under the head of "Miscellaneous" in the collected edition of his Poetical

Works exhibit all, or nearly all, the qualities by which his ripest poetry is distinguished. "The Knight of St. John" is at once a ballad, and a study of spiritual experience, such as Tennyson presents in "St. Agnes" and "Sir Galahad." It is followed by a group of seven poems, the inspiration

spared. He sauntered about the sacred places in a domino, which was mistaken for the prophetic mantle. This fell upon the shoulders of another, who inherited a serious nature, and was not afraid to question himself in regard to his relations to his Maker.



THE VISTA VIEW AT OAK KNOLL.

of which is drawn from Hebraic writings and associations. Two of them, "Ezekiel," and "The Wife of Manoah to her Husband," are valuable and permanent additions to English sacred poetry.

The transition from poems like these to "My Soul and I" was a natural one, and, to a genius like Mr. Whittier's, inevitable. Mr. N. P. Willis, when a young man, attempted Scriptural poems, and had been greatly overpraised for his attempts, which missed all that was characteristic in the Biblical writings, for which he substituted a kind of poetic elegance that could well have been

I am not theologian enough to have an opinion other than a poetical one concerning "My Soul and I," but, poetically speaking, it seems to me a noteworthy production,—a solemn canticle in which the religious nature of the writer struggles to express itself, and does so, though neither so clearly nor so forcibly as in similar poems of a later date. I know of nothing in American poetry which it resembles, and which could have suggested it. (The question of originality,—let me say, once for all,—never occurs to me in reading the poetry of Mr. Whittier, who never reminds me of



any other poet, living or dead, being at all times and on all subjects, his own simple, natural, manly self.)

The affectionate simplicity of Mr. Whittier's nature is seen in the poems which he addressed to his personal friends, and to those whose life pursuits ran in the same channels as his own moral sympathies. Among his miscellaneous poems of this period are one addressed to Follen ("On reading his Essay on the Future State") and another to the poet Pierpont, whose "Airs of Palestine" delighted his childhood, and whose song, he says,

"Hath a rude martial tone, a blow in every thought."

The largeness of his genius was manifested in "Randolph of Roanoke," a magnificent tribute to the memory of that great man, and all the more so in that it was wrung from the lips of an opponent. As a piece of character-painting I know not where to look for its equal, and the marvel is that the portrait of this great slave-holder should have been drawn so justly by such a partisan as Whittier. Great men recognize each other, however, and never more readily than when the differences between them are radical and conscientious. The Quaker poet saw the Virginia slave-holder as he was—a man to be known and respected.

The Portuguese poet Camoëns wrote some of his poems in two languages,—Portuguese and Spanish,—or, to speak more exactly, occasionally employed both those languages in the same poem. He compared this intellectual feat to walking with one foot in Portugal and the other in Spain. I am reminded of this curious literary freak by the early poems of Mr. Whittier, which illustrated the life of the Present and reproduced the life of the Past. It is not easy to say which had the stronger claim upon his sympathy, for Cassandra Southwick, dead generations before, was as vital in his song as John Randolph, whose dust was scarcely cold. Drawn from the beginning to the legendary lore of New England, he could not be made to see that its aboriginal lore was not equally valuable for poetic purposes. He discarded in "Mogg Megone" the romance which poets and novelists had thrown around the Indian; but the Indian and his belongings still interested his imagination, and would not be laid until made the subject of another poem. He selected an episode which was in itself poetical, or at any rate which might be made so; and

proceeded to write his second Indian story, "The Bridal of Pennacook." His thesis, which he found in Morton's "New Canaan," is thus stated by himself, in one of the notes to this poem:

"Winnepurkit, otherwise called George, Sachem of Saugus, married a daughter of Passaconaway, the great Pennacook chieftain, in 1662. The wedding took place at Pennacook (now Concord, N. H.), and the ceremonies closed with a great feast. According to the usages of the chiefs, Passaconaway ordered a select number of his men to accompany the newly married couple to the dwelling of the husband, where in turn there was another great feast. Some time after the wife of Winnepurkit expressing a desire to visit her father's house, was permitted to go, accompanied by a brave escort of her husband's chief men. But when she wished to return, her father sent a messenger to Saugus, informing her husband, and asking him to come and take her away. He returned for answer that he had escorted his wife to her father's house in a style that became a chief, and that now, if she wished to return, her father must send her back in the same way. This Passaconaway refused to do, and it is said that here terminated the connection of his daughter with the Saugus chief."

There is, I think, a poem in this prose statement of "The Bridal of Pennacook," but Mr. Whittier has somehow missed it; possibly because he has indulged too largely in external description. He has divided the subject into eight parts, or sections, and has expended his strength upon each, instead of subordinating them to their proper places, and to the general harmony and unity of the poem. The details of these sections, picturesque and otherwise, occupy us too much in the reading, and prevent us from concentrating our attention upon the story itself. We have a feeling, too, that the poet obtrudes himself (unconsciously, of course) and that the manifestations of his personality are as unnecessary as they are unartistic. He does not allow the story to tell itself, but insists upon telling it in an arbitrary fashion of his own, and dwells so long upon insignificant points that when the chief point—the wifely devotion of his heroine—is reached, it has lost all importance. He has bestowed too much care upon some parts of his narratives, and too little upon others, and by so doing has shaken our confidence in his judgment. He vexes us, in short, for he has done justice neither to himself nor to the old story which he undertook to tell.

The primitive colonial and aboriginal life which Mr. Whittier failed to reproduce in "The Bridal of Pennacook" and "Mogg Megone," was thoroughly mastered by him

in his next volume of prose, "Margaret Smith's Journal." It purports to be the writing of a young English maiden on a visit to the Province of Massachusetts Bay, in 1678-9, and who jotted down in her journal whatever struck her as being likely to interest her friends in England. She seized the salient points of colonial life, and described the social and religious condition of the colonists, who were much exercised by Quakers and witchcraft. Mistress Margaret contrives to impart her personality to her writing, which is delightful reading,—simple, unaffected, womanly, preserving everywhere the local color of the period and the antique flavor of the old colonial records. "Margaret Smith's Journal" is one of a book-shelf of modern antiques, and one of the best, I am inclined to think, being as faithful a reproduction of a by-gone time as "Lady Willoughby's Diary," or "The Maiden and Married Life of Mary Powell."

The writings of Mr. Whittier have hitherto confined themselves to three phases of our national life and history, *viz.*: to the picturesque savagery of the red men, to episodes of the colonial life of the Puritans and Quakers, and to the consideration of the evils of slavery. His Indian poems are not remarkable, though they are as good as any we have, with the exception, perhaps, of some of Bryant's, which hardly rise above the level of lyrics. His legendary poems are glimpses of the struggle between a set form of faith and the freedom of conscience; and, while they are poetically just to both sides, they leave no doubt in the mind on which side the poet's sympathies are ranged. (What part could a Quaker take, pray, but the part of the wronged and the oppressed—the part of his ancestors and brethren? I say brethren advisably, for the New England Quaker of forty years ago was rather a tolerated than a respected member of the community.) His anti-slavery poems were earnest and indignant; earnest in their maintenance of the freedom of all men without regard to color, and indignant at the persecutions of those who sought to restore the rights which had been wrested from them. It was not necessary to be an abolitionist to be moved by these anti-slavery productions of Mr. Whittier; but it was necessary to be a very ardent one in order to find them, or make them, poetical. They were wrung from his heart—torn from his soul; but, strange to say, they made no mark in our literature; they contained no unforgettable verse—no line which the world would not

willingly let die. The poet was so overpowered by his inspiration that he forgot to deliver his message.

Mr. Whittier understood the merits and defects of his poems quite as well as, if not better than, most of his critics, and he took an accurate measure of himself in a "Proem," which was written in November, 1847, and was, without doubt, the prologue to one of his volumes of verse, and probably to a collected edition of his poetical works. He loves the songs of Spenser and Sidney, he tells his readers; but he tries in vain to breathe their marvelous notes. They must not expect these, for he has nothing to offer them but the jarring words of one whose rhyme had beaten the hurried tune of labor, and the rugged and stormy march of duty.

"Of mystic beauty, dreamy grace,  
No rounded art the lack supplies;  
Unskilled the subtle lines to trace,  
Or softer shades of Nature's face,  
I view her common forms with unanointed eyes.

"Nor mine the seer-like power to show  
The secrets of the heart and mind;  
To drop the plummet-line below  
Our common world of joy and woe,  
A more intense despair, or brighter hope to find.

"Yet here at least an earnest sense  
Of human right and weal is shown;  
A hate of tyranny intense,  
And hearty in its vehemence,  
As if my brother's pain and sorrow were my own.

"Oh Freedom! If to me belong  
Nor mighty Milton's gift divine,  
Nor Marvell's wit and graceful song,  
Still with a love as deep and strong  
As theirs, I lay, like them, my best gifts on thy  
shrine!"

Mr. Whittier's next collection, "Songs of Labor and Other Poems" (1850), marked a change in his practice, if not in his theory, of poetry. He had succeeded in emancipating himself from himself, and had become a writer of objective poems—poems, that is, which were written for their own sake, and not for the sake of any emotion in his own mind. He had mastered his powers, which willingly obeyed his creative impulses, and had set them to work upon material themes, which concern us, and ought to concern us, in spite of all that subjective poets may urge to the contrary. Schiller was the first modern poet who perceived the poetry of common things, and in his "Song of the Bell" he struck the key-note of a succession of similar songs which have not yet celebrated all the employments of this work-a-day world of ours. This impassioned lyric

was the model of Mr. Longfellow in his "Building of the Ship," and of Mr. Whittier in his "Songs of Labor," though it is less apparent in the last, which deal with the poetic capabilities of seven different kinds of labor, instead of one, and in a manner which was original with Mr. Whittier, who is a better artist, I think, than the German master, in that his work is more obvious, more picturesque, and more generally intelligible. The human associations which cluster around ship-builders, shoe-makers, drovers, fishermen, and the like, are more definite than those which cluster around the molders and casters of bells.

Mr. Whittier was wiser than he knew, I think, when he resolved to be the poet of Labor. A lesser poet would not have ventured to do so, for he would not have considered it poetical, and even if he could have persuaded himself that it was, he would not have been able to distinguish its poetic from its prosaic element. It belongs to a class of subjects which are not in themselves poetical, though they are made so when the imagination is brought to bear upon them. There is nothing poetical in the act of making shoes, or of driving cattle. Let us see what Mr. Whittier finds in these laborious facts, and what they suggest to him. What does he say to you, disciples of St. Crispin, and fellow-members of the gentle craft of leather?

"For you, along the Spanish main  
A hundred keels are ploughing;  
For you, the Indian on the plain  
His lasso-coil is throwing;  
For you, deep glens with hemlock dark  
The woodman's fire is lighting;  
For you, upon the oak's gray bark,  
The woodman's axe is smiting.

"For you, from Carolina's pine,  
The rosin-gum is stealing;  
For you, the dark-eyed Florentine,  
Her silken skein is reeling:  
For you, the dizzy goatherd roams,  
His rugged Alpine ledges;  
For you, round all her shepherd homes,  
Bloom England's thorny hedges."

The alchemy which has extracted these stanzas from sole leather, waxed ends, and pegs, ought at least to extract sunbeams from cucumbers.

The associations which cluster around the labors of mankind the world over are poetical, though poets are required to detect them, for they are never found on the surface. They differ among different races, and at different times, but they are substantially the same, nevertheless, for they attach

themselves to humanity. They are detected by poets, as I have said, but not by poets of the highest order, who cultivate the idealities and sublimities of their art, and with whom song is literature rather than inspiration. They appeal to the born singers, who never lose their sympathy with the people from whom they spring, no matter how lettered they may afterward become, nor their power of seeing beauty in common things, but who preserve to the end the vision and the faculty divine. Such a poet is Mr. Whittier, who is thoroughly at home in his "Songs of Labor," which have always seemed to me the most characteristic of all his productions, and those by which foreign readers would most readily recognize him as an American poet. They would select, I think, as distinctive of his genius and his country, "The Drovers," "The Fishermen," "The Huskers," and "The Lumbermen."

The "Songs of Labor" are followed (in the complete edition of Mr. Whittier's poetical works) by upward of fifty poems which are ranged under the head of "Miscellaneous." They are divided into classes or groups, "The Angels of Buena Vista," "Barclay of Ury," "The Legend of St. Mark," and "Calef in Boston" ranking among legendary poems; "Worship," "Lines Accompanying Manuscripts Presented to a Friend," "Channing," "To the Memory of Charles B. Storrs," and "Memories," among personal poems; and "The Reward," "To Pius IX," "The Men of Old," "The Peace Convention at Brussels," and "Seed-time and Harvest," among didactic poems. There is a ripeness of thought about these productions which I do not find in Mr. Whittier's earlier verse, and a noticeable grace and beauty of expression which leave nothing to be desired. "Hampton's Beach," for example, is one of Mr. Whittier's faultless poems, its indication of outward nature and its suggestion of a spiritual mood being alike perfect. If one wishes to see how the sea from shore has affected two poets, and to feel at the same time their dissimilarity of genius, he should read "Hampton Beach" before or after reading Shelley's "Stanzas Written in Dejection Near Naples."

The poets of America are distinguished from the poets of Europe by the reserve which they have always maintained in regard to themselves. It is not impossible that the future historian of our literature may detect their personality in their writings, but he will never, I think, find their writings autobi-

ographic. They held such and such opinions, he may declare, as such and such poems show; but if he is wise, he will abstain from determining what manner of men they were, and by what emotions they were governed. I do not pretend to account for their reticence, which can hardly be considered a national trait. I merely mention it to deplore it, for I am interested in knowing the inner lives of men of genius. Mr. Whittier's poetry does not help me to an understanding of this concealed life of his, but he hints at it, if I am not mistaken, in the poem entitled "Memories," which lies like a pearl among the lesser jewels scattered over his legendary and didactic poems, and which is inexpressibly beautiful and pathetic. It is like a palimpsest whose original writing has been effaced that something later might be copied in its stead, present pains of memory over the departed pleasures of hope, lamentations in place of canticles. To those who can read between the lines, where the mystery is, it is a passport into the uncreated, or destroyed, world of possibilities.

Mr. Whittier is given to the writing of occasional poems, and, if he is not so successful in this journalistic walk of verse as some of his contemporaries it is because his cleverness is not equal to his genius. When he does succeed, as in his lines on "Randolph of Roanoke," and in "Ichabod," he ranks among the greatest masters of poetic portraiture. A great man sat for his portrait in "Ichabod,"—a man whom New England still delights to honor for his great intellectual endowments, but who fell from his high estate because he dared to differ with New England in a question of political morals. How far he was right, and how far he was wrong, is a problem which does not concern me. I leave it to the Muse of History, who is less hasty in reaching conclusions, and in pronouncing judgment, than the more impassioned Muse of Song. I content myself with saying that Webster disappointed the moral sense of New England by the stand he took about the Fugitive Slave Law, and was sternly and sadly reprobated, even by his admirers. Mr. Whittier grieved over his defection, but with a noble manliness that was as honorable to Webster as to himself. He was too great to revile and insult him, though he lamented him as we lament the dead.

"Of all we loved and honored, naught  
Save power remains,—  
A fallen angel's pride of thought,  
Still strong in chains.

"All else is gone; from those great eyes  
The soul is fled;  
When faith is lost, when honor dies,  
The man is dead!

"Then, pay the reverence of old days  
To his dead fame;  
Walk backward, with averted gaze,  
And hide the shame!"

I hardly know how to characterize some of Mr. Whittier's poems, such, for example, as the leading poem in his next collection, "The Chapel of the Hermits and other Poems" (1852). "The Chapel of the Hermits" is based upon an incident related in a note to St. Pierre's *Études de la Nature*:

"We arrived at the habitation of the hermits a little before they sat down to their table, and while they were still at church. J. J. Rousseau proposed to me to offer up our devotions. The hermits were reciting the Litanies of Providence, which are remarkably beautiful. After we had addressed our prayers to God, and the hermits were proceeding to the refectory, Rousseau said to me, with his heart overflowing, 'At this moment I experience what is said in the Gospel: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." There is here a feeling of peace and happiness which penetrates the soul.' I said, 'If Fenelon had lived you would have been a Catholic.' He exclaimed, with tears in his eyes, 'Oh, if Fenelon were alive, I would struggle to get into his service, even as a lackey!'"

I am not prepared to say that this little incident is too slight to base a poem on; but I think that no poem based on it is likely to make a mark in literature, for, no matter how it may be treated, it still remains a trifle. Its strongest suggestion is the contrast afforded by the characters of Rousseau and St. Pierre, and the dramatic propriety of the opinions which they utter, and which certainly ought to be rememberable. I do not feel this contrast as I could wish in Mr. Whittier's poem, and I am not impressed by the conversation of his theologians. The art of saying things, which is so conspicuous in "Ichabod" and "Randolph of Roanoke" is as absent here as it is gloriously present in the poem which succeeds it,— "Questions of Life,"—and which abounds in felicitous thoughts and expressions. The poet questions nature in regard to himself, but obtains no answer. He questions men; but they are silent:

"Alas! the dead retain their trust;  
Dust hath no answer from the dust."

Nothing answers him, for his heart, like that of the prophet, hath gone too far in this

world, and he thinketh to comprehend the way of the Most High.

"Here let me pause, my quest forego;  
Enough for me to feel and know  
That He in whom the cause and end,  
The past and future, meet and blend,—  
Who, girt with his immensities,  
Our vast and star-hung system sees  
Small as the clustered Pleiades,—  
Moves not alone the heavenly choirs,  
But waves the spring-time's grassy spires;  
Guards not archangel feet alone,  
But deigns to guide and keep my own;  
Speaks not alone the words of fate  
Which worlds destroy, and worlds create,  
But whispers in my spirit's ear,  
In tones of love, or warning fear,  
A language none beside may hear."

The ethical or moral element which is the motive and inspiration of such poems as "The Chapel of the Hermits," is never absent for any length of time from Mr. Whittier's poetry. I do not place it among high poetic endowments, though it may be allied to them; nor do I think it is always wisely employed by Mr. Whittier. If there ever was a time when poets were moral teachers, that time has long since past. They are at most lay preachers now, and that not of set purpose, but by indirection. Mr. Whittier did not perceive this as clearly as could be wished, and his poetry has suffered in consequence. "The Hermit of the Thebaid"—a little apologue in his next collection, "The Panorama, and Other Poems" (1856)—is an example in point. The poem is too long by seven stanzas, the stanzas in question being those which open the poem, to which they are prefixed by way of text, stating in different forms the thesis which the poem is expected to prove,—in other words, the meaning of the apologue. Mr. Whittier should have trusted entirely to his subject, which contained within itself all his readers should know; their understanding of it did not concern him, but themselves. I find this overmuchness of explanation in other American poets, but never in Bryant, whose greatness as a poetic artist has never been fully understood.

"The Hermit of Thebaid" is one of a particular class of Mr. Whittier's poems which are nearly faultless, and which are permanent additions to the ethical poems of all nations. They lend such value as they possess to the writings of the mystics and the poets of the East; and lucky is the poet who finds them and perceives their poetic significance, as Mr. Whittier does. A new element appears in this collection of Mr. Whittier's verse, in "The Barefoot

Boy," an exquisite character study which, as far as my recollection goes, has no parallel in English poetry. The old anti-slavery element is here in a new form, in the poem entitled "The Haschish," which is an admirable piece of humorous sarcasm:

"The preacher eats, and straight appears  
His Bible in a new translation;  
Its angels negro overseers,  
And Heaven itself a snug plantation!

"The man of peace, about whose dreams  
The sweet millennial angels cluster,  
Tastes the mad weed, and plots and schemes,  
A raving Cuban fillibuster!"

It is not given to many poets to know what they do best, and the few who possess that knowledge are seldom content to be guided by it. The weakness of modern poets,—or one of their weaknesses,—is the desire to write long poems, as if poetry were measured by quantity and not quality. Another weakness is a studied avoidance of simple every-day themes. Mr. Whittier has mistaken his powers as little as any American poet, but he has not always cultivated them wisely, or he would have written ten narrative poems where he has written one. I use the word narrative in a large sense as covering a class of poems of which story-telling is the chief motive, and which directly appeal to the human sympathies of their readers. Such a poem (to draw an illustration from Mr. Whittier) is the touching ballad of "Cassandra Southwick." Another is "Barclay of Ury." Mr. Whittier is the first American poet, I believe, who was deeply impressed by the inspiration of subjects like these, and they have amply rewarded the poetic pains he has bestowed upon them. I am not sure, indeed, that his fame will not ultimately rest upon some three or four of them. Say upon "Maud Muller," "Skipper Ireson's Ride," and "Telling the Bees." They had no prototypes in American poetry, and if they have had successors, these successors have come from the pen of Mr. Whittier, who is never so much himself as when writing narrative and legendary stories.

Mr. Whittier is one of the few American poets who have succeeded in obtaining the suffrages of the reading public and of the literary class. Men of letters respect his work for its sincerity, simplicity, and downright manliness, and average readers of poetry respect it because they can understand it. There is not a grown man and woman in the land who does not readily enter into the aspiration and discontent of "Maud

Muller," and into the glowing patriotism of "Barbara Frietchie." Whether the incident which is the inspiration of the latter ever occurred, is more than doubtful; nevertheless, the poem is one that the world will not willingly let die. The reputation of such poems is immediate and permanent, and beyond criticism, favorable or otherwise; the touch of nature in them is beyond all art. I should never think of comparing "Barbara Frietchie" with Bryant's "O Mother of a Mighty Race," but I am sure that it has a thousand readers where Bryant's poem has one. Bryant seldom reached the hearts of his countrymen, but his best poems appealed to what was loftiest in their intellects.

If I wished to give an intelligent foreigner an idea of Mr. Whittier's genius, and an idea of the characteristics of American poetry at the same time, I should ask him to read Mr. Whittier's "Snow-bound" (1865). This exquisite poem has no prototype in English literature, unless Burns's "Cotter's Saturday Night" be one, and it will be long, I fear, before it has a companion-piece. It can be fully appreciated only by those who are New England born and on whose heads the snows of fifty or sixty winters have fallen. One must have been snow-bound in order to recognize the faithfulness of Mr. Whittier's pictures of winter life and landscape, and to enjoy the simple pleasures of a country homestead in a great snow-storm. There was nothing to do, while it lasted, but to keep in-doors, and nothing to do, when it had ceased, but to dig one's way out into the little world of the village again. The snow-bound family whom he describes was his father's family, who are clearly set before us in their different individualities, and their conversation is such as they no doubt indulged in, for it is thoroughly in keeping with the time and the place. Father Whittier told stories of camping on the wooded side of Memphremagog, of idyllic ease beneath the hemlock trees of St. François, and of moonlight dances to the sound of a violin, and similar pleasures of memory. Mother Whittier (who ran the new-knit stocking heel) told how the Indian hordes came down on Cochecho, and how her own great-uncle bore his cruel scalp-mark to fourscore. Then the uncle spoke of what he had seen and known in the lore of woods and fields, of which he was a loving student. The unmarried aunt had her tales of huskings and apple-bees, of summer sails and sleigh-rides. And the poet's sisters

were there, snow-bound now, alas, in "death's eternal cold." There, too, was the village school-master, whom everybody liked, and who could turn his hand to anything. They were a pleasant company, and pleasantly situated, all things considered. For while the north wind roared without, the red logs blazed before them, and the flames roared up the great throat of the chimney, while the house-dog laid his drowsy head on his paws, and the dark silhouette of the cat was drawn on the wall.

"And, for the winter fireside meet,  
Between the andiron's straddling feet,  
The mug of cider simmered slow,  
The apples sputtered in a row.  
And, there at hand, the basket stood  
With nuts from brown October's wood."

The materials upon which "Snow-bound" is based are of the slightest order, and the wonder is that any poet, even the most skillful one, could have made a poem out of them. I should not say that Mr. Whittier was a skillful poet, but he has made a poem which will live, and can no more be rivaled by any winter poetry that may be written hereafter than "Thanatopsis" can be rivaled as a meditation on the universality of death. The characters in this little idyl are carefully drawn, and the quiet of the homestead during the storm is in striking contrast to the out-door bustle which succeeds it. There is no evidence anywhere that the poem cost a moment's labor; everything is naturally introduced, and the reflections, which are manly and pathetic, are among the finest that Mr. Whittier has ever written. "Snow-bound" at once authenticated itself as an idyl of New England life and manners.

In "The Tent on the Beach and Other Poems" (1867), we had Mr. Whittier in his character of a story-teller again, with a wider range than he had hitherto shown in his choice of subjects. He added variety to the tales that were told in "The Tent on the Beach," by a frame-work of verse, similar to that employed by Mr. Longfellow in his "Tales of a Wayside Inn," but he added nothing to the poetic value of the tales themselves by this frame-work, or by the conversation which his summer guests held in the intervals of narration. It is not difficult to recognize three of them, Mr. James T. Fields being the "lettered magnate" who could

"well the market value tell  
Of poet and philosopher;"

Mr. Whittier himself being the dreamer,

"Who, with a mission to fulfill,  
Had left the Muses' haunts to turn  
The crank of an opinion mill;"

and Mr. Bayard Taylor, the gentleman whose Arab face was tanned by tropic suns and boreal frost, and who

"In idling mood had from him hurled  
The poor squeezed orange of the world."

The literary workmanship of Mr. Whittier has improved, I think, from year to year, and in reading his last volume we may be sure that we have the best art of which he is capable. I do not rank him high as an artist, though he has art enough to answer his purposes generally. Poetry seems never to have been a pursuit with him, but a charge which was entrusted to him, and which he was to deliver when the spirit moved him, well or ill, as it happened, but honestly, earnestly and prayerfully. He has a noble vein of sacred poetry in his nature, and, had he chosen, might have enriched the world's store of hymnology as no other living poet could have done. His seriousness of soul, the intense morality of his genius, accounts, I think, for his defects as a poetical artist, in such poems as "The Chapel of the Hermits," for example, in "Among the Hills, and Other Poems" (1868), in "Miriam, and Other Poems" (1870), and in "The Pennsylvanian Pilgrim, and other Poems" (1872). The motives of these poems, especially the last, seem to

me too slight for the superstructures which he had builded upon and around them. I question indeed whether he would have selected Francis Daniel Pastorius as a hero if he had not drawn up the first protest made in America by a religious body against negro slavery. That Mr. Whittier has written a charming poem about him I admit, but I see nothing heroic in him, though he was a remarkable man.

What I like best in Mr. Whittier's poetry I have endeavored to indicate, though I have by no means consulted my liking alone. It has been my aim, as it was certainly my business, to judge his work from his own point of view,—in other words, to put myself in his place. I fear I have not succeeded at all times. I know I have not succeeded as well as he would have done had he analyzed the poetry of Mr. Longfellow, say, or Mr. Lowell. He is a remarkable critic of character as he proved in his "Randolph of Roanoke," in "Ichabod," in "Summer," and in the poem entitled "My Namesake," a keen, searching examination of his mental qualities and of the intention and scope of his poetry. It is more accurate and more comprehensive than any criticism on his genius that I can hope to write, and it states, I am inclined to think, what will be the just verdict of Posterity. No living poet—certainly no living American poet—can more safely trust his work and his memory to the keeping of that august Power than John Greenleaf Whittier.

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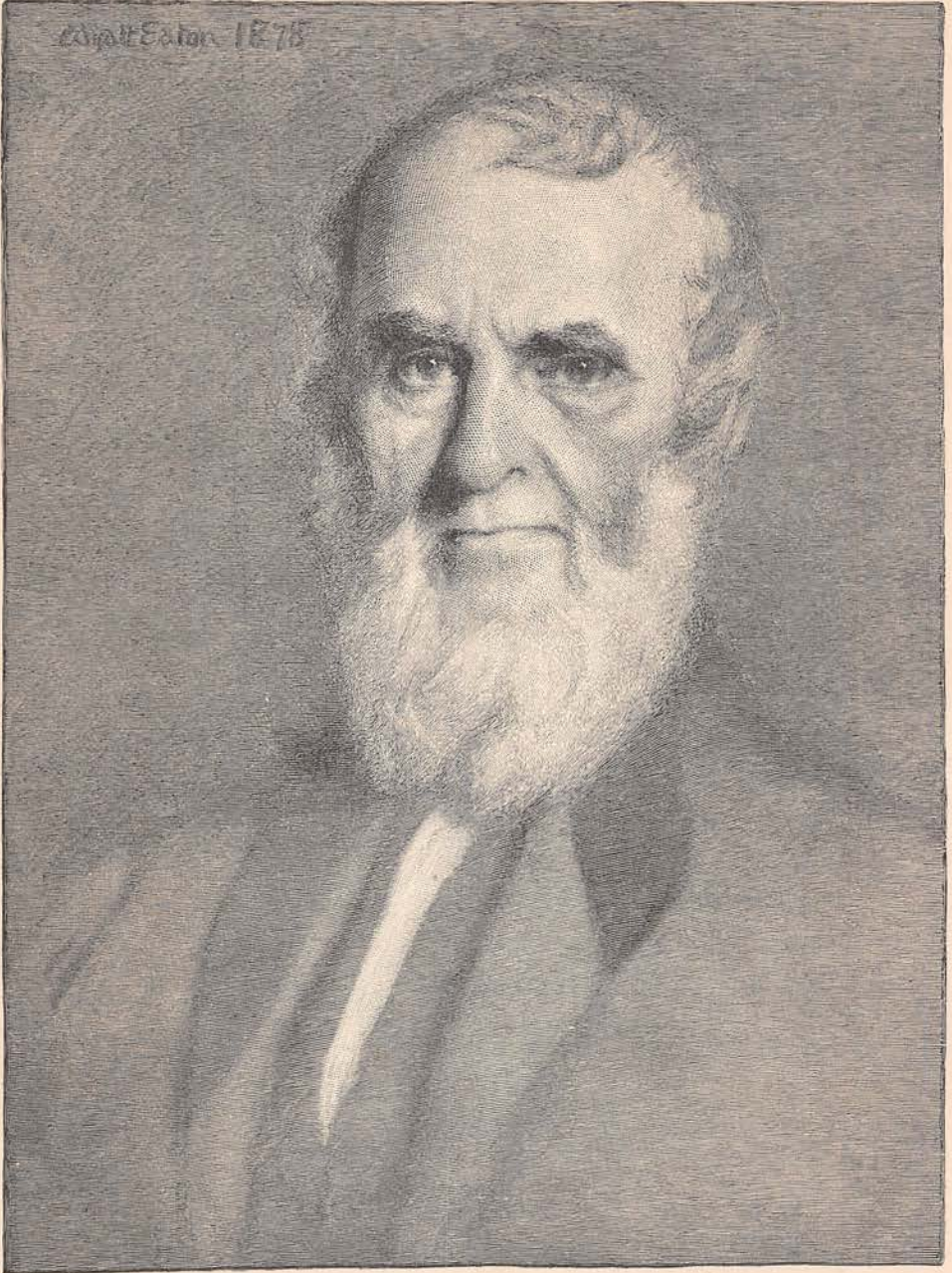
SHADOW-EVIDENCE.

SWIFT o'er the sunny grass,  
I saw a shadow pass  
                    With subtle charm;  
So quick, so full of life,  
With thrilling joy so rife,  
I started lest, unknown,  
My step—ere it was flown—  
                    Had done it harm.

Why look up to the blue?  
The bird was gone, I knew,  
                    Far out of sight.  
Steady, and keen of wing,  
The slight, impassioned thing,  
Intent on a goal unknown,  
Had held its course alone,  
                    In silent flight.

Dear little bird, and fleet,  
Flinging down at my feet  
                    Shadow for song:  
More sure am I of thee—  
Unseen, unheard by me—  
Than of some things felt and known  
And guarded as my own  
                    All my life long.

Wm. Eaton 1875





Not by the page word-painted,  
Let life be banned or sancted,  
Deeper than written scroll  
The colors of the soul.

Sweeter than any song  
My songs that found no tongue,  
Nobler than any fact  
My wish that failed of act.

John G. Whittier

Sixth Mo. 11. 1879.