THE BOSTON POET-LAUREATE:
OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

By S. Ichiyé Hayakawa

I

However well or ill Oliver Wendell Holmes’s belief that good poetry is only written under inspiration may apply to other writers, it most certainly applied to him. That “highest state of mental exaltation and the most crystalline clairvoyance . . . that lucid vision of one’s thought and all forms of expression which will be at once precise and musical, which is the poet’s special gift, however large or small in amount or value” came to him only once, as he himself has intimated, and that was when he wrote “The Chambered Nautilus”. Holmes spoke of writing a poem as a process something like having a fit: “you can’t have one when you wish you could . . . and you can’t help having it when it comes itself.” It would seem that Holmes really had only one authentic “fit” in his life.

There are some poets who can only write when they are “in the mood”, when they are “inspired”, when they are “compelled to”. There are other poets (happy fellows!) who can start writing in cold blood, but who get “into the mood” after they have written a few lines, the mere fact of setting pen to paper apparently inducing the mood through, perhaps, association. The third class of poets (perhaps the least fortunate, perhaps the most) can write at any time. Purely from the point of view of production, the first class of poets are an unhappy lot, unless their daimon is in the habit of seizing them fairly regularly and often. Perhaps most poets (at least, most of those I am acquainted with) belong to the second class; sometimes their “inspiration” is faulty, some-
times illusory, but it enables the poet to produce. As for the third class, it can quite conceivably be argued that they are not poets at all, and it is true that they frequently are not, if you mean by poet something more than a versifier; but it cannot be gainsaid that for a good, steady, trust-worthy source of poems for all occasions, felicitous, woeful, comical, convivial, tragic, pathetic, or hilarious, for all kinds of weddings, anniversaries, receptions, picnics, parties, Fourth of July celebrations, Mother's Day observances, unveilings of monuments, statues or pictures, birthdays, banquets, leave-takings, funerals, and dedication ceremonies, there is no better man than your poet of the third class, who does not need to wait for a capricious "nature" to take the pen out of his hands and write, since he can push the pen himself quite capably, on short notice, at any hour of the morning, noon, or evening. It was Oliver Wendell Holmes's ambiguous good fortune to be the best poet of this third class that has ever been produced by America—perhaps by any nation in the English-speaking world.

We, who are children and grandchildren of the romantic movement, have been to a great extent rendered unfit to enjoy the productions of this third class of poet. By the solemn assurances of romantic poets, and also by the nature of their poetry, we have become accustomed to the idea that "real" poetry ought to sweep us off our feet, take our breath away, arouse us to noble (or very ignoble) resolutions, blind us with the light that never was on land or sea, uncover the naked mystery of the universe, carry us off to Gramrye (and points west), or, in some way, to produce in us various emotional pyrotechnics. We are not accustomed to regarding poetry as capable of being a pleasant ornament, not the less pleasing for its extraneousness, to our social life. We want, unhappily, our poets to "say something". Perhaps a part of our discontent with contemporary verse is due to the unreasonableness of this demand on the part of readers (created by the poets themselves, however), and the fervid efforts of our poets to meet this demand. At any rate, "occasional verse" is little written at the present time, and rarely appreciated.
Before proceeding farther, however, it is necessary to distinguish "occasional verse" from other kinds of poetry. There is a sense in which all poems are "occasional" in that some definite occasion gives rise to the impulse that leads to the poem. Some poems are more dependent upon an occasion than others, for example, Milton's sonnet on his twenty-third birthday, or Keats's On First Looking into Chapman's Homer, or Pope's The Rape of the Lock. We are not accustomed to regarding these as "occasional" verses, however, because in these the occasion is merely the pretext, at most an opportunity, for the poet to write poetry. Poems so produced differ in no way from what we generally understand by poetry: the circumstances that gave them birth are simply more clearly indicated than usual.

Even more definitely dependent upon single events is the class of poetry I should like to term "private occasional poetry", to distinguish it from another form of occasional verse to be defined later. Private occasional poetry is essentially the same as poetry proper in its origination: a poet sees a situation, or is present at an event, and this gives rise to certain reflections or emotions which he feels constitute subject-matter for a poem. There would be no purpose in distinguishing this class from other poetry, except that a loose traditional usage has denoted by the term "occasional verse", among a number of other things, a definite class of poems in which such single events are viewed humorously, whimsically, gaily, or lightly. To this class belong such poems as Gray's On a Favorite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes, Matthew Prior's To My Lord Buckhurst, Very Young, Playing with a Cat, and his To a Lady: She refusing to continue a Dispute with me, and leaving me in the Argument, Leigh Hunt's Jennie Kissed Me When We Met, and Bishop King's To One Demanding Why Wine Sparkles. I should call these "occasional" because the traditional connotations of this term indicate the lightness of mood which is their distinguishing characteristic, "private" because the occasion is important enough to be cele-
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brated in a poem only because of what the poet has privately seen or felt in the occasion.

On the other hand, the class of poems I should like to indicate by the term "true" occasional poetry is written not for the sake of what the poet has to say on a given occasion, but in order to express public sentiments at a public occasion. The occasion is deemed important enough to be celebrated in a poem not by a single isolated opinion, but by a group of people, thinking and feeling alike. It is the distinctive feature of this "true", or "public occasional verse", as it might be called, that it does not express private emotions, but emotions shared with a number of other people. The poet, under these circumstances is the instrument of a group; he must so far as possible merge his feelings into those of the group. Consequently we properly think of this class of occasional verses as those which are written for public occasions, anniversaries, weddings, funerals, victories, and other events of public importance. What the poet writes must be expressive of the occasion and appropriate to it.

Since the emotions to be expressed are publicly shared, it almost goes without saying that they are, in proportion to the size of the public, likely to be commonplace emotions. In fact, sentiments which we are accustomed to regarding as "trite" are the only proper sphere of the occasional poet. Poetry ordinarily endeavors first, to communicate an emotion, or a shade of emotion, or to define a state of mind with which the reader is presumed to be as yet unfamiliar, or imperfectly familiar; or, secondly, if the emotion be one which "oft was thought", the poet may presume that his expression of it will clarify that emotion, or render articulate that which formerly was inexpressible or unexpressed. Public occasional verse is expected to do neither of these things. It does not communicate an emotion, because, since everyone is in the process of observing the public occasion, all the appropriate emotions are already in the reader's (or hearer's) mind before the poem is presented. For example, if the occasion is the birthday of a distinguished man, everyone is in a congratulatory mood, and heartily
wishes him long life; his services to humanity or the excellence of his character are recalled with appropriate sentiments of respect. This 
inanimity of attitude in the poetic audience before experiencing the poem constitutes a special condition facing the poet. Neither does the public occasional poem render articulate that which formerly was inexpressible or unexpressed, because the poem is only one of the ways in which this public feeling manifests itself. The other expressions may not be literary; they may take the form of hand-shakings, tears, orations, dinners, music, special costumes, ornaments, processions, meetings, religious observances, erection of monuments, etc., etc. The poet is never necessary. He may, sometimes, add a pleasing touch, and that is all that is expected of him.

The limitations set upon the author by these special conditions governing his art are far-reaching in their effects. He must not destroy that unanimity of sentiment, but seek to confirm it. If the poet expresses an individualized attitude toward the occasion, what he says may cast glory upon himself, on his subject, or, if he is a great poet, it may cause the occasion to be remembered centuries after it ought to have been forgotten. But for the immediate purposes of the occasion, the poet may be said to have failed in his task. If a poet writes so movingly that you don't feel like descending to the coarse materialistic business of coming downstairs to eat your dinner after you have read his work all afternoon, the probability is that he is an excellent poet; but if a banquet-poet declaims such touching verses that all the revellers burst into tears and leave their food untouched, he may be a great poet, but he is certainly a bad banquet-poet. The public occasional poet has no right to alter the character of public sentiments to suit his own ideas. He is compelled to be "trite" if the occasion demands it—and occasions invariably do.

What further limitations the conditions of occasional verse impose upon the poet are readily apparent. The poet obviously is compelled to make no startling innovations in thought or in technique. Even as he shares the community's sentiments, he must
share the community's ideas as to what constitutes the "correct" way of expressing these sentiments. He may, if he is a good occasional poet, transcend the current notions of correctness, but he may never violate them. His rhetoric must be such that the community may regard it as appropriately rhetorical; his figures of speech must remain fairly close to the public ideas of what is fittingly poetical. A daring metaphor or simile, apt as it may be, is just as likely to be a fault as a virtue. As Hazlitt says, "In a court-poem all should be trite and on an approved model."

The qualities that make for success in occasional poetry are to a considerable degree harmful to the "real" poet. The ability to merge one's individuality so that one feels and thinks like the group is rare in most poets and artists who are, first of all, usually conspicuous for being not indistinguishable from the group. Milton's Lycidas, for example, is a poem written for the expression of a public grief—other local poets were writing on the same subject—but it is a great poem mainly for the reasons that make it an indifferent success as a public occasional poem. John Webster's A Monumental Column, written on the death of Prince Henry, adheres more closely to the occasion than Lycidas does; but the tangled conceits and numerous not-too-readily understood references make it a far better expression of Webster's mind than of the English public grief. On the other hand, a comparatively undistinguished poem like Matthew Prior's Prologue, Spoken at Court Before the Queen, on Her Majesty's Birth-Day, 1704, is an excellent expression of public sentiments, eminently suitable in both subject-matter and style, to be "spoken at Court"; here the poet's talents are made completely the instruments of the avowed sentiments of the courtiers.

Perhaps the greatest "public occasional poems" in the English language are Tennyson's Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington and The Charge of the Light Brigade. In the former it would seem that those very qualities which our younger critics find the matter
with Tennyson make for the greatness of the poem. At no other time has the pomp and decorous circumstance which English sentiment demands upon public occasions been so magnificently expressed. Tennyson was able to express all the appropriate sentiments of the occasion in an inspired way because he was for the moment an Englishman among Englishmen, a Victorian among Victorians, a patriotic mourner among patriotic mourners. This poem demonstrates that when the occasion is great enough, the public sentiment profound enough, and the talented poet shares thoroughly the great mass emotion, a public occasional poem can be great poetry. Such a coincidence of favorable circumstances is, however, extremely rare.

The chief trouble with having one's reputation rest upon public occasional verse is that, except in the extremely rare occasions as in Tennyson's *Ode* (and, to some extent, in Marvell's *Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland* and Kipling's *Recessional*), the poem is bound to die with the event. The seventieth birthday of John Greenleaf Whittier, the opening of the New City Library, the golden anniversary of a friend's wedding, the meeting of the National Sanitary Association, the twentieth reunion of the class of '29, are all events unique in history, never to be repeated under identical circumstances. The poem written for such occasions must of necessity die with the occasion. And when the poet dies, and the occasions are all forgotten? Except in the most abnormal of circumstances, his memory must die also. As in the case of the artist who designed the programs for last summer's charity ball, his work is cherished only so long as sentiment remembers the occasion; it is kept for the memories that attach to it, not for its intrinsic value; and when the last cherisher of keepsakes that was present at the occasion dies, it goes in the dust heap, or else into the attic, to be recovered for a moment at some future time by chance or curiosity, only to be forgotten again.

III

The bulk of Oliver Wendell Holmes's poetry, being of this
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genre, is bound to be forgotten. It already has few readers left. But since it is a rare example of its kind in American literature, it deserves at least a kindly and sympathetic farewell before it fades into complete oblivion.

The enjoyment of occasional verse imposes special conditions upon the reader, as its writing does upon the poet. The reader must, as he reads the poem or before, try to put himself into the frame of mind that the occasion demanded. He may attempt to recall the physical setting in which the poem was first declaimed, read, or distributed: if he wishes to enjoy the poem, he must share imaginatively the sentiments of that public whose feelings were being expressed. It follows that he must be prepared to accept mass sentiments (even sentimentalities) which he may not be accustomed to regarding as poetic. He must look for nothing startling in style or technique: a quaint or cleverly-turned phrase or sentiment is the most he may expect in the way of originality.

Here, let us say, is a country fair, with all the local gentry out in gigs and carriages, parasols and gay dresses; here the senator or congressman of the district, with frock-coat and silver-mounted stick, the masculine odors of Havana cigars and bay-rum surrounding his august person; here the rural populace in their Sunday best, triumphant with their displays of prize pumpkins, cattle, patchwork quilts, and home-made pickles. The great event of the week is a ploughing match, the climax of the fair: all the robust farmers of the country, the young and strong, as well as the old, experienced, and crafty, plough in competition, displaying their strength and skill. But deeper than the spirit of friendly emulation that stirs the competitors and spectators is the public complacence in the hard-won fruits of agriculture, a genuine pride in successful labor. Somehow, everyone feels, the bounteous crop and the strength of the ploughmen attest to the pleasure of God at the sight of honest toil and conscientious husbandry. Oliver Wendell Holmes, as "chairman of the committee on the ploughing match", graciously sends his tribute to the ploughmen, a warm and kindly compliment such as makes the farmer regard his calloused hands with a pleasant
feeling that they are badges of honor, and repays him for the heavy memory of sweating and irksome toil in the summer sun.

Clear the brown path, to meet his coulter's gleam!
Lo! on he comes, behind his smoking team,
With toil's bright dew-drops on his sunburnt brow,
The lord of earth, the hero of the plough!

First in the field before the reddening sun,
Last in the shadows when the day is done,
Line after line, along the bursting sod,
Marks the broad acres where his feet have trod;
Still, where he treads, the stubborn clods divide,
The smooth, fresh furrow opens deep and wide; . . .
Till the wide field one billowy waste appears,
And wearied hands unbind the panting steers.

These are the hands whose sturdy labor brings
The peasant's food, the golden pomp of kings;
This is the page, whose letters shall be seen
Changed by the sun to words of living green;
This is the scholar, whose immortal pen
Spells the first lesson hunger taught to men;
These are the lines which heaven-commanded Toil
Shows on his deed,—the charter of the soil

Again, here is a scene in a private dining-room at Parker's Hotel in Boston. Clergymen, historians, merchants, statesmen, physicians, and other men of dignity and repute in the community, are tonight "boys" of the Class of '29. Forgetting for the moment the cares of their various offices, they are reliving their youth, the "good old days" of college. They gossip about the absent members, exchange reminiscences, recount oft-told tales, and laugh at all the old jokes over again, not because they are any longer funny, but because they have become a part of the ritual consecrating their group memory and their long friendship. Perhaps they are also furtively counting in each other's gray hairs the record of

their own rapid approach to old age. In the centre of the group is Oliver Wendell Holmes, who, as class poet, wrote verses for every class reunion from 1831 to 1889. On these occasions of mingled jollity and sadness—the sadness increasing with the years as the class grew smaller—Holmes was always to be relied upon to express the sentiments of the class. Perhaps no college class in history has ever had so dependable and faithful a class poet.

It is difficult to select from his "Poems of the Class of '29" some that are better than others; as examples of "public occasional" verse, they are all excellent. A few excerpts will show how appropriately Holmes manages to give voice to the group sentiment.

You've worn the judge's ermined robe;
You've taught your name to half the globe;
You've sung mankind a deathless strain;
You've made the dead past live again:
The world may call you what it will,
But you and I are Joe and Bill.

The chaffing young folks stare and say
"See those old buffers, bent and gray,—
They talk like fellows in their teens!"
Mad, poor old boys! 'That's what it means,"—
And shake their heads; they little know
The throbbing hearts of Bill and Joe!—

How Bill forgets his hour of pride,
While Joe sits smiling at his side;
How Joe, in spite of time's disguise,
Finds the old schoolmate in his eyes,—
Those calm, stern eyes that melt and fill
As Joe looks fondly up at Bill.

Ah, pensive scholar, what is fame?
A fitful tongue of leaping flame;
A giddy whirlwind's fickle gust,
That lifts a pinch of mortal dust;
A few swift years, and who can show
Which dust was Bill and which was Joe? . . .
No matter; while our home is here
No sounding name is half so dear;
When fades at length our lingering day,
Who cares what pompous tombstones say?
Read on the hearts that love us still,
Hic facet Joe.  Hic facet Bill.  (1868)\(^1\)

Has there any old fellow got mixed with the boys?
If there has, take him out, without making a noise.
Hang the Almanac's cheat and the Catalogue's spite!
Old Time is a liar! We're twenty to-night!

We're twenty! We're twenty! Who says we are more?
He's tipsy,—young jackanapes!—show him the door!
"Gray temples at twenty?"—Yes! white if we please;
Where the snow-flakes fall thickest there's nothing can freeze!

Though on the once unfurrowed brows the harrow-teeth of Time
may show,
Though all the strain of crippling years the halting feet of rhyme
may show,
We look and hear with melting hearts, for what we all remember is
The morn of Spring, nor heed how chill the sky of gray November is.

Thanks to the gracious powers above from all mankind that singled
us,
And dropped the pearl of friendship in the cup they kindly mingled
us,
And bound us in a wreath of flowers with hoops of steel knit under
it;—
Nor time, nor space, nor chance, nor change, nor death himself shall
sunder it!  (1875)\(^3\)

How narrow the circle that holds us to-night!
How many the loved ones that greet us no more,
As we meet like the stragglers that come from the fight,
Like the mariners flung from a wreck on the shore!

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We look through the twilight for those we have lost;
The stream rolls between us, and yet they seem near;
Already outnumbered by those who have crossed,
Our band is transplanted, its home is not here!

They smile on us still—is it only a dream?—
While fondly or proudly their names we recall;
They beckon—they come—they are crossing the stream—
Lo! the Shadows! the Shadows! room—room for them all! (1880)

The Play is over. While the light
Yet lingers in the darkening hall,
I come to say a last Good-night
Before the final Exeunt all.

We gathered once, a joyous throng:
The jovial toasts went gayly round;
With jests, and laugh, and shout, and song,
We made the floors and walls resound.

We come with feeble steps and slow,
A little band of four or five,
Left from the wrecks of long ago,
Still pleased to find ourselves alive...

Why mourn that we, the favored few
Whom grasping Time so long has spared
Life's sweet illusions to pursue,
The common lot of age have shared?

In every pulse of Friendship's heart
There breeds unfelt a throb of pain,—
One hour must rend its links apart,
Though years on years have forged the chain. (1889)

In 1890 the class met for the last time; there were only three of 
"the Boys" left, S. F. Smith, the author of America, the Reverend

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1 Ibid., p. 143.
2 Ibid., p. 148.
Samuel May, the abolitionist, and Holmes. The meeting was, as usual, held at Parker’s; but no poem was read. How strong the influence of Holmes’s verses was in cementing the friendships of the class of ’29 and keeping them so close together for over sixty years after their graduation, only a member of the class could tell. We are able to conjecture, however, that the influence was a great one, and if occasional verse may be judged not only by its expression of a group unanimity, but by its power to maintain that unanimity, we are certainly safe in regarding Holmes’s work as eminently examples of its kind.

It hardly seems necessary to enumerate the different kinds of occasions for which Holmes wrote verses. Meetings of Harvard alumni, dinners in honor of foreign diplomats, centennial observances for illustrious dead, cornerstone ceremonies, birthdays, funerals, dedications of monuments, conventions and meetings of every kind of altruistic or deserving organization, all kinds of events giving rise to public sentiments, are celebrated in Holmes’s poetry. To read the index of his poems is not unlike reading a calendar of public events. Holmes’s reputation as a writer of occasional verse was extremely wide, and grew wider as his affability about responding to requests for poems became known. He received requests from all quarters, and at all times, and rarely refused. There are very few occasions on which I have found record of his refusing: one was in 1892, when he felt that he was too old to write a poem for an occasion as important as the Gettysburg celebration; another was when he was asked to write a poem introductory to a prize-fight. On one occasion, we are told, he sent a verse by telegraph to San Francisco, in order that it might be read at a banquet.

Perhaps nothing contributed so much to the charm of Holmes’s occasional verses as his child-like and happy acceptance of the

pleasures of society and the admiration and love of his friends. He knew himself that most of the poems he wrote were of little value as poetry, but good nature and the love of his neighbors made him reluctant to refuse a poem when one was requested. And even in his old age, when his success was universally acknowledged, he seems to have worked just as hard to present as excellent a poem as possible. Slight as the themes of many of these verses are, and easy as are their sentiments, it does not appear that he ever contented himself with a slovenly or hasty piece of work. It will be noticed that when a poem is an impromptu, he always took care to label it such in its published form. The following observation made by William Winter, who met him one evening entering a banquet room where he was to deliver a poem, is an indication of Holmes's character, and throws much light on the success of his occasional verse. "He was as eagerly interested and as tremulously nervous as a young girl might be, going to her first reception, and he was as ingenuous and winning as a little child; yet he was a man of seventy, and he was speaking to a man but little more than half his age."1 A man so charmingly capable of entering into social occasions without cynicism, scepticism, or even the normal amount of grown-up detachment or haughtiness, is almost divinely appointed to express heartily, enthusiastically, and convincingly, the appropriate agreeable, idealistic, or touching sentiments of a society.

IV

It goes almost without saying that the qualities which made Holmes an excellent occasional poet make his "serious" poetry unsatisfying. A man who said, "The older I grow the more I find myself like other people," is likely, as time goes on, not to express more and more universal truths, but more and more popular sentiments. The triteness of sentiment that makes his verses ap-

appropriate to occasions makes his serious lyrics commonplace and undistinguished. For certain shades of delicate pathos, as in "Under the Violets", Holmes was capable of tender and appropriate expression:

And gray old trees of hugest limb
    Shall wheel their circling shadows round
To make the scorching sunlight dim
    That drinks the greenness from the ground,
And drop their dead leaves on her mound.

When o'er their boughs the squirrels run,
    And through their leaves the robins call,
And, ripening in the autumn sun,
    The acorns and the chestnuts fall,
Doubt not that she will heed them all.

For her the morning choir shall sing
    Its matins from the branches high,
And every minstrel-voice of Spring,
    That trills beneath the April sky,
Shall greet her with its earliest cry.

When, turning round their dial-track,
    Eastward the lengthening shadows pass,
Her little mourners, clad in black,
    The crickets, sliding through the grass,
Shall pipe for her an evening mass.

At last the rootlets of the trees
    Shall find the prison where she lies,
And bear the buried dust they seize
    In leaves and blossoms to the skies.
So may the soul that warmed it rise!

No one will question the competence and sincerity of a poem like this. But it is far indeed from being great poetry, although it is one of his best. Its most striking fault to a reader today is its diffuseness. The magnificent economy of Wordsworth's

1 Complete Poetical Works, p. 163.
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No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Roll’d round in earth’s diurnal course
With rocks, and stones, and trees . . .

is something that Holmes was not capable of. In the philosophical poem, "Wind-Clouds and Star-Drifts", this want of compression is felt most strongly. We might be able to read with patience the long passages of argument which this poem contains, if they led to moments of impassioned insight. Wordsworth’s Prelude is fully readable for all its length, because what some people call its prosy passages are not prosy at all in the light of the revelations they lead to, and form the background for. Holmes is constantly making up for the lack of inspiration by taking recourse to rhetorical utterance:

Brother, thy heart is troubled at my word;
Sister, I see the cloud is on thy brow.
He will not blame me, He who sends not peace,
But sends a sword, and bids us strike amain
At Error’s gilded crest, where in the van
Of earth’s great army, mingling with the best
And bravest of its leaders, shouting loud
The battle-cries that yesterday have led
The host of Truth to victory, but to-day
Are watchwords of the laggard and the slave,
He leads his dazzled cohorts. . .

As sincere and well-intentioned as this may be, it is bad verse. And Holmes’s serious endeavors are full of such rhetorical blunderings. His theory that poetry was prose dressed up in evening-clothes led naturally to a neo-classic faith in the usefulness of poetic diction. There is nothing more useful to the public occasional poet than a widely-accepted conventional poetic diction: the poet has a means ready at hand to express public sentiments and induce the right frame of mind. For the poet writing in a private capacity, however, a conventional diction is extremely dangerous;

1 ibid., pp. 179-180.
he must originate, even if out of traditional materials, his own poetic diction; and even then he must take care lest he begin to "imitate himself", that is, substitute his diction for genuine thought or emotion. Holmes's serious verse shows time and again what happens to a poet who has mastered too well traditional modes of expression. In his verses are to be found the echoes of the poetic diction of the entire eighteenth century, and half the nineteenth, and in this respect he bears a distressing similarity to third-rate minor writers such as Dorothea Felicia Hemans, William Godfrey Saxe, Alan Cunningham, and other nonentities dear to the hearts of editors of primary school readers. Nowhere is the unfortunate effect of this poetic diction to be seen more clearly than in the poems written during the Civil War. A small dictionary of poetic bromides could be made up from his verses: "Stain not the scroll that emblazons their fame!" "fair heritage spotless descended", "Freedom stands gasping", "God calls you—answer NOW", "Let the fountain of mercy flow Alike for helpless friend and foe", "Hark! 'tis the voice", "What if the storm-clouds blow?" "And is the old flag flying still?" "Blow, trumpets, your summons, till sluggards awake!" We cannot blame the Civil War for this, however, because such diction was always present in Holmes's verse. The habit of personifying abstractions (Memory, Fancy, Freedom, Humility that bows her head, pure, pale Virtue, florid peace, etc.) is manifest in his earliest poems, and stayed with him to the end. Rhetorical devices, such as the apostrophe ("Yet rest, ye wanderers of the deep!"), the question and answer

"Speak, pilot of the storm-tost bark!
May I thy peril share?
—O landsman, there are fearful seas
The brave alone may dare!"

and melodramatic exclamations such as Hark! On, on! Yes! No! Nay! Stay! Chide not! as well as archaisms and conventions such as yon, o'er, mine eyes, manly tear, ye, thou, thee, 'tis, lo! to sweep the lyre, memories that cling, eve (evening), orb (sun, or moon, or eye),
are constantly used. It is not simply the presence of the "poetic" phrases and usages that annoys the contemporary reader; after all, most of these devices are to be found in Tennyson, Swinburne, Arnold, Keats, Shelley, Pope, or any of the more highly thought of poets of the last two centuries, and we enjoy them none the less for these devices. It is the fact that Holmes never has enough distinction of thought or style to transmute these poetic commonplaces into poetry.

"Yes, in the sea of life enisled . . ."

In this short line there are three examples of unadvisable poetic diction, the apostrophe to no one in particular, which is a naive device to get us into the middle of things at once; a trite metaphor; an obvious poetic archaism. Nevertheless, we never think of objecting to the poem on this score.

Amid all the third-rate prettiness that is to be found in the collected edition of Holmes's works, there are a few poems, however, that stand out as distinctly better than the rest. "The Voiceless", though by no means a great poem, is not third-rate. In it Holmes celebrates the pathos of those who have deep emotions but cannot express them.

O hearts that break and give no sign
Save whitening lip and fading tresses,
Till Death pours out his longed-for wine
Slow-dropped from Misery's crushing presses,—
If singing breath or echoing chord
To every hidden pang were given,
What endless melodies were poured,
As sad as earth, as sweet as heaven!¹

On this subject of poetic inarticulateness, Holmes always manages to be genuinely tender and sympathetic, as the following lines from "To the Poets who only Read and Listen" further indicate:

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¹ Ibid., p. 99.
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We that have sung perchance may find
Our little meed of praise,
And round our pallid temples bind
The wreath of fading bays:

Ah, Poet, who has never spent
Thy breath in idle strains,
For thee the dewdrop morning lent
Still in thy heart remains;

Unwasted, in its perfumed cell
It waits the evening gale;
Then to the azure whence it fell
Its lingering sweets exhale.

Dr. W. S. Knickerbocker has remarked, in an excellent recent article on Holmes’s poetry, upon the sense of frustration that haunted Holmes; it seems that a deep sense of the mediocrity of his own verses and the certain knowledge of the transitoriness of his reputation made Holmes more uneasy as he grew older. He was naturally not content with being the favorite writer of occasional verses: “It seems to me that I have done almost enough of this work; too much, some of my friends will say, perhaps. But it has been as much from good nature as from vanity that I have so often got up and jangled my small string of bells. I hold it to be a gift of a certain value to be able to give that slight passing spasm of pleasure which a few ringing couplets often cause, read at the right moment. Though they are for the most part to poetry as the beating of a drum or the tinkling of a triangle is to the harmony of a band, yet it is not everybody who can get their limited significance out of these humble instruments. I think, however, that I have made myself almost too common by my readiness to oblige people on all sorts of occasions.”

Holmes was himself, in a sense, one of these inarticulate poets

1 Ibid., p. 293.
2 The Sewanee Review, XLI (1933), pp. 454-466.
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with whom he sympathized—he wrote enough, but had expressed few sentiments that rose from the depths of his being. It is not without significance that his better work expresses statements of, or sympathy with, inarticulateness. In "Musa" he addresses the Muse in the following wistful tones:

O my lost beauty!—hast thou folded quite
Thy wings of morning light
Beyond those iron gates
Where Life crowds hurrying to the haggard Fates,
And Age upon his mound of ashes waits
To chill our fiery dreams,
Hot from the heart of youth plunged in his icy streams?

Leave me not fading in these weeds of care,
Whose flowers are silvered hair!
Have I not loved thee long,
Though my young lips have often done thee wrong,
And vexed thy heaven-tuned ear with careless song?
Ah, wilt thou yet return,
Bearing thy rose-hued torch, and bid thine altar burn?1

There was ample reason for him to address her thus wistfully.

"The Chambered Nautilus" is a real exception among Holmes's poems. We can readily believe what he has said about the feeling of exaltation he experienced when writing it. It is the one artistic masterpiece that his collected verse includes. Short as it is, it states his most profound beliefs, his humanistic, non-religious, ethical idealism. The careful stages of logic by which the poem builds itself up to its message attest to an intellectual discipline in the artist no less than an ethical. In sensuous appeal, Holmes's poetry is usually deficient, despite his earnest endeavors in some of his nature poems to supply vivid, concrete details,—as a rule, these details are reminiscent of the observations of other poets, than of natural beauties directly perceived. In "The Chambered Nautilus", however, the fact that the poem is built upon a myth which "poets feign" is a great help. First hand observation is not

1 Collected Poetical Works, p. 150.
expected in the treatment of such a myth: literary reminiscences are. Therefore the flavor of English romanticism such as the following lines carry, far from weakening the poem, strengthen its delicately fanciful opening:

The venturous bark that flings
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
In gulfs enchanted, where the Siren sings,
And coral reefs lie bare,
Where the cold sea-maids rise to sun their streaming hair.\(^1\)

Infrequent but admiring references to Cowley, Marvell, and George Herbert\(^2\) indicate that Holmes was not unfamiliar with metaphysical poetry. With his amazing aptitude for daring similes that are the spice of his prose, with his quick intellectual curiosity, with his love of analysis which the romantic fashions of poetry in his time rarely permitted him to indulge except in prose, there seems to be more than a possibility that Holmes’s poetic gifts might have flourished more richly had he lived in a time when “metaphysical” poetry was popular. Although not as involved in its intellectual convolutions as metaphysical poetry usually is, “The Chambered Nautilus” is an excellent example of the typically metaphysical “conceit” worked out with complete sureness of taste and judgement.

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2 See *The Post at the Breakfast-Table*, p. 110; *Our Hundred Days in Europe*, pp. 110, 125-7; *The Guardian Angel*, p. 214; *Pages from an Old Volume of Life*, pp. 264-5.