

1865
ABRAHAM LINCOLN, FROM THE ODE RECITED
AT THE HARVARD COMMEMORATION

by James Russell Lowell

From The Ode Recited at the Harvard Commemoration, 21 July, 1865.

LIFE may be given in many ways,
And loyalty to Truth be sealed
As bravely in the closet as the field,
So bountiful is Fate;
But then to stand beside her,
When craven churls deride her,
To front a lie in arms and not to yield,
This shows, methinks, God's plan
And measure of a stalwart man,
Limbed like the old heroic breeds,
Who stands self-poised on manhood's solid earth,
Not forced to frame excuses for his birth,
Fed from within with all the strength he needs.

Such was he, our Martyr-Chief,
Whom late the Nation he had led,
With ashes on her head,
Wept with the passion of an angry grief:
Forgive me, if from present things I turn
To speak what in my heart will beat and burn,
And hang my wreath on his world-honored urn.
Nature, they say, doth dote,
And cannot make a man
Save on some worn-out plan,
Repeating us by rote:
For him her Old-World moulds aside she threw,
And, choosing sweet clay from the breast
Of the unexhausted West,
With stuff untainted shaped a hero new,
Wise, steadfast in the strength of God, and true.
How beautiful to see
Once more a shepherd of mankind indeed,
Who loved his charge, but never loved to lead;
One whose meek flock the people joyed to be,
Not lured by any cheat of birth,
But by his clear-grained human worth,
And brave old wisdom of sincerity!
They knew that outward grace is dust;
They could not choose but trust
In that sure-footed mind's unfaltering skill,
And supple-tempered will
That bent like perfect steel to spring again and thrust.
His was no lonely mountain-peak of mind,
Thrusting to thin air o'er our cloudy bars,
A sea-mark now, now lost in vapors blind;
Broad prairie rather, genial, level-lined,
Fruitful and friendly for all human kind,
Yet also nigh to heaven and loved of loftiest stars.
Nothing of Europe here,

Or, then, of Europe fronting mornward still,
 Ere any names of Serf and Peer
 Could Nature's equal scheme deface
 And thwart her genial will;
 Here was a type of the true elder race,
And one of Plutarch's men talked with us face to face.
 I praise him not; it were too late;
And some innative weakness there must be
In him who condescends to victory
Such as the Present gives, and cannot wait,
 Safe in himself as in a fate.
 So always firmly he:
 He knew to bide his time,
 And can his fame abide,
Still patient in his simple faith sublime,
 Till the wise years decide.
 Great captains, with their guns and drums,
 Disturb our judgment for the hour,
 But at last silence comes;
These all are gone, and, standing like a tower,
Our children shall behold his fame,
 The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man,
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,
 New birth of our new soil, the first American.

THE END