Abraham Lincoln's Indiana and the Spirit of Mortal

*Douglas L. Wilson**

Abraham Lincoln was fond of poetry. As a young man, he memorized and recited the best-known poems of Robert Burns, admired Lord Byron, and cultivated a taste for William Shakespeare that would last throughout his life. Perhaps more than any other president, the self-educated Lincoln invoked his familiarity with English verse, particularly the plays of Shakespeare, as a means of dealing with the pressures and burdens of office. But his favorite poem, which he would recite alongside passages from *Hamlet*, was so obscure that until the last months of his life he never knew it in an authoritative text or even knew the name of its author.

"Mortality" by the Scottish poet William Knox is better known by its first line, "O why should the spirit of mortal be proud?" but it is safe to say it is only known or remembered at all in association with Abraham Lincoln. This was true even in Lincoln's lifetime, when he was himself sometimes identified as the poem's author, an attribution he found flattering. "Beyond all question, I am not the author," he wrote to a correspondent. "I would give all I am worth, and go in debt, to be able to write so fine a piece as I think that is."[1] Judging by the number of times he is reported to have praised it, recited it, and dictated or copied it out for friends during the last twenty years of his life, it seems reasonable to conclude with David C. Mearns that this obscure poem "had a special meaning for Abraham Lincoln."[2]

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[1] Abraham Lincoln to Andrew Johnston, April 18, 1846, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (9 vols., New Brunswick, N.J., 1953), I, 378.

[2] David C. Mearns, " 'The Great Invention of the World': Mr. Lincoln and the Books he Read," in *Three Presidents and Their Books: The Reading of Jefferson, Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt*, by Arthur Bestor, David C. Mearns, and Jonathan Daniels (Urbana, Ill., 1955), 83.

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Lincoln's recitation of "Mortality" must have been extremely effective, to judge by the reactions of witnesses. One of the most revealing accounts is provided by Francis B. Carpenter, who engaged Lincoln in literary conversation while painting his portrait in the White House. Carpenter described an evening spent with Lincoln in his study, where the president began talking about Shakespeare and then read several of his favorite passages, something he did often and with great effect. "Relapsing into a sadder strain," Carpenter wrote, "he laid the book aside, and leaning back in his chair, said, 'There is a poem that has been a great favorite with me for years, to which my attention was first called when a young man, by a friend, and which I afterward saw and cut from a newspaper, and carried in my pocket, till by frequent reading I had it by heart. I would give a great deal,' he added, 'to know who wrote it, but I never could ascertain.' Then, half closing his eyes, he repeated the poem, 'Oh! why should the spirit of mortal be proud?' "[3] Carpenter's reaction was typical of Lincoln's listeners: he was surprised and delighted, and he asked for a copy of the text.

Unlike the special meaning of "Mortality" for Abraham Lincoln, the poem's meanings are not at all obscure. Its basic theme—that life is fleeting and death inevitable—is modulated in each of its fourteen quatrains and is accented by the framing question of the first and last lines:

> O why should the spirit of mortal be proud!
> Like a swift flying meteor—a fast flying cloud—
> A flash of the lightning—a break of the wave,
> He passeth from life to his rest in the grave.
>
> The leaves of the Oak, and the Willow shall fade,
> Be scattered around, and together be laid.
> And the young and the old, and the low and the high,
> Shall moulder to dust, and together shall lie.
>
> The infant a mother attended and loved—
> The mother that infant's affection who proved
> The husband that mother and infant who blest,
> Each—all are away to their dwellings of rest.
>
> The maid on whose brow, on whose cheek, in whose eye
> Shone beauty and pleasure—her triumphs are by;
> And alike from the memory of the living erased
> And the memory of mortals, who loved her and praised—
>
> The hand of the King, that the scepter hath borne,
> The brow of the priest that the mitre hath worn,
> The eye of the Sage, and the heart of the Brave,
> Are hidden, and lost in the depth of the grave—

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[3] F. B. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln: The Story of a Picture* (New York, 1866), 58.

The saint who enjoyed the communion of Heaven,
The sinner who dared to remain unforgiven;
The wise and the foolish, the gentle and just,
Have quietly mingled their bones in the dust—

The peasant whose lot was to sow and to reap.
The herdsman who climbed with his goats up the steep,
The beggar who wandered in search of his bread,
Have faded away like the grass that we tread.

So the multitude goes like the flower or weed,
That withers away to let other succeed,
So the multitude comes, even those we behold,
To repeat every tale that has often been told.

For we are the same our fathers have been,
We see the same sights our fathers have seen,
We drink the same stream, and view the same sun,
And run the same course our fathers have run—

The thoughts we are thinking our fathers would think,
From the death we are shrinking our fathers would shrink;
To the life we are clinging they also would cling,
But it speeds from us all like a bird on the wing—

They loved, but the story we can not unfold,
The scorned, but the heart of the haughty is cold,
They grieved, but no wail from their slumber will come,
They joyed, but the tongue of their gladness is dumb—

They died! Aye, they died. We things that are now—
That walk on the turf that lies over their brow,
And make in their dwellings a transient abode,
Meet the things that they met on their pilgrimage road.

Yea, hope and despondency, pleasure and pain,
Are mingled together in sun shine and rain—
And the smile, and the tear, and the song, and the dirge,
Still follow each other like surge upon surge—

Tis the wink of an eye, tis the draught of a breath
From the blossom of health to the paleness of death—
From the gilded saloon to the bier and the shroud—
O why should the spirit of mortal be proud?[4]

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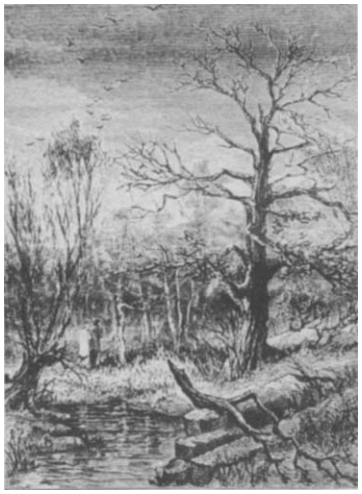
[4] The text cited here is that written out by Lincoln in 1849 for Lois E. Newhall and is transcribed from the photographic reproduction in Maurice Boyd, *William Knox and Abraham Lincoln: The Story of a Poetic Legacy* (Denver, 1966), xiv-xvii. This version differs slightly from the authoritative text of the poem in the extremely rare collected edition of Knox's poetry (1847), which is reproduced in Boyd. Another version in Lincoln's hand, written out for Ellen M. Hutchison Stanton during Lincoln's presidency and reproduced by Boyd, is lacking stanza 7; the version dictated to Francis B. Carpenter lacked stanzas 4 and 7. The earliest known Lincoln version, dictated to his law clerk Gibson Harris between 1845 and 1847, is in the Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield.

THE INDIANA ABRAHAM LINCOLN MOVED TO AS A BOY OF EIGHT HE LATER DESCRIBED AS "AN UNBROKEN FOREST." REVISITING THE SCENE MANY YEARS LATER, HE WROTE: "THAT PART OF THE COUNTRY IS, WITHIN ITSELF, AS UNPOETICAL AS ANY SPOT OF THE EARTH; BUT STILL, SEEING IT AND ITS OBJECTS AND INHABITANTS AROUSED FEELINGS IN ME WHICH WERE CERTAINLY POETRY."

Engravings throughout text reproduced from William Knox, *Oh, Why Should the Spirit of Mortal Be Proud?* (Boston, 1877), n.p.; collections of Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.



Intended by the poet as a recapitulation of the third chapter of Job and the first chapter of Ecclesiastes, its Old Testament fatalism is unremitting and notably unrelieved by any suggestion of an afterlife. The fate of humankind—low or high, young or old—is that of the leaves: both "shall moulder to dust." Human joy and grief, love and scorn, are all mere repetitions of one's forebears and come to nothing. The predominant fact of life is death. Pride in so transient a thing as a mortal is obviously misplaced.

There can be little doubt that there was a connection between Lincoln's affinity for "Mortality" and his recurrent melancholy. Indeed, one of the most conspicuous features of Lincoln's personal demeanor was his frequent lapses into moods of profound depression. He seems to have been subject to these spells from an early date, though he probably attempted to disguise them at first. He told a fellow legislator in his New Salem, Illinois, days "that although he appeared to enjoy life rapturusly[,] Still he was the victim of terrible melancholly. He sought Company and indulged in fun and hilarity without restraint, or Stint as to time[.] Still when by himself, he told me that he was so overcome with mental depression, that he never dare carry a knife in his pocket."[5] Albert J. Beveridge noted that those who rode the circuit with Lincoln all referred to these moods. "Everybody observed his absymal sadness. His gloom was not periodical and succeeded by weeks of brightness, but was made manifest every day, yet interwoven with hours

[5] Robert L. Wilson to William H. Herndon, February 10, 1866, Herndon-Weik Collection (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.).

of abnormal gayety—black despondency and boisterous humor following one another like cloud and sunshine in a day of doubtful storm."[6] Jesse W. Weik thought these reports must be exaggerated, so he made a point of questioning those who knew Lincoln best: John T. Stuart, James H. Matheny, James C. Conkling, Samuel H. Treat, David Davis, Leonard Swett, Henry C. Whitney, and others. Their responses convinced Weik "that men who never saw him could scarcely realize this tendency to melancholy."[7]

Whether Lincoln was seriously suicidal when he told Robert Wilson that he dared not carry a pocketknife is not certain, but the association of his despondent moods with the contemplation of death would eventually become evident. His closest friends were concerned for his safety as well as his sanity when he lapsed into despondency after the death of Ann Rutledge. And the agony of his emotional crisis over his engagement to Mary Todd caused him to contemplate death and possibly even suicide as a remedy. But his temporary moods were more than tinged with morbidity; as Beveridge has pointed out, they were "strongly colored by apprehension of personal disaster. 'Billy, I fear that I shall meet with some terrible end,' he said to his partner William H. Herndon upon coming out of one of these fits of dejection."[8]

What is notable here is that these moods or spells were often associated with a recurrence to poetry. Though Lincoln's stories were known for their humor, his favorite poems were most often sad. His attraction for Oliver Wendell Holmes's "The Last Leaf" was such that some regarded it as his favorite, particularly the fourth stanza:

> The mossy marbles rest
> On lips that he has pressed
> In their bloom;
> And the names he loved to hear
> Have been carved for many a year
> On the tomb.

Lincoln told Carpenter: "For pure pathos, in my judgment, there is nothing finer than those six lines in the English language!"[9] He also evinced a partiality for Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," which

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[6] Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809–1858* (2 vols., Boston, 1928), I, 521.

[7] Jesse W. Weik, *The Real Lincoln: A Portrait* (Boston, 1922), 112.

[8] Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln*, I, 524. Herndon referred to Lincoln's predisposition to melancholy as a "morbid condition." Weik, *The Real Lincoln*, 113.

[9] Carpenter, *Six Months in the White House*, 59. Several people mention Lincoln's fondness for this poem, but Henry Clay Whitney singles it out as Lincoln's "all the year round" favorite. Henry Clay Whitney, *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln* (1892; rev. ed., Caldwell, Idaho, 1940), 425.

he often recited. "The music of Lincoln's thought," wrote John G. Nicolay, "was always in a minor key."[10]

But the poem most closely associated with Lincoln's melancholy by those who knew him was Knox's "Mortality," a title so little recognized that the poem is almost always referred to by its first line, "O why should the spirit of mortal be proud?" Harriet Chapman, who lived with the Lincolns in Springfield for a time, remarked on his spells and the fact they would sometimes "be broken by a quotation from a favorite poem like 'Mortality,' 'The Last Leaf,' or 'The burrial of Sir Tom [John] Moore.' "[11] Judge Lawrence Weldon, who as a young man traveled with Lincoln on the circuit, described Lincoln's habit of rising early before the other lawyers and seating himself before the fire. There the others would find him, "his mind apparently concentrated on some subject, and with the saddest expression I have ever seen in a human being's eyes."[12] Weldon remembered that on one of these occasions Lincoln "quoted aloud and at length the poem called 'Immortality.' "[13] During his presidency, Lincoln recited and praised the poem so often that it was sometimes reprinted and attributed to him. By then it had taken on a special importance for Lincoln, for he is reported to have told a group of friends that the poem was his "constant companion; indeed, I may say it is continually present with me, as it crosses my mind whenever I have relief from anxiety."[14]

Lincoln's law partner and biographer, William H. Herndon, thought he had discovered the special meaning that "Mortality" held for Lincoln. In gathering information on the early years in New Salem, Herndon unexpectedly came across the story of Lincoln's tragic love affair with Ann Rutledge, something he had previously known nothing about. From two dozen informants Herndon gathered overwhelming testimony that Lincoln not only courted and became engaged to Rutledge but that he became temporarily deranged with grief after her death in 1835.[15] When he further discovered that Lincoln had known Jason Duncan, the man who

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[10] Quoted in Helen Nicolay, *Personal Traits of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1912), 367.

[11] Harriet Chapman to Herndon, November 21, 1866, Herndon-Weik Collection; quoted by Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln*, I, 507.

[12] Quoted in Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln*, I, 523.

[13] Quoted in *Herndon's Life of Lincoln: The History and Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln as Originally Written by William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik*, ed. Paul M. Angle (Cleveland, 1949), 257. Strangely, Herndon and other contemporaries believed the title of the poem was "Immortality."

[14] Reported by William D. Kelley in Allen Thorndyke Rice, ed., *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time* (New York, 1886), 268. See Boyd, *Knox and Lincoln*, xv-xviii, for references to Lincoln's recitations of the poem during his presidential years and much other useful information on the poem, though the reader is warned that Boyd's citations are not always accurate.

[15] See Douglas L. Wilson, "Abraham Lincoln, Ann Rutledge and the Evidence of Herndon's Informants," *Civil War History*, XXXVI (December, 1990), 301-24.

first showed Lincoln the poem, in New Salem, Herndon conceived a bold hypothesis. "I've found out the history of the poem called 'Immortality,' " Herndon wrote to a friend. "The facts which I shall reveal, for the first time in the world, throw a footlight on Mr. Lincoln's sad life . . . ."[16]

The footlight came in a lecture Herndon delivered in Springfield on November 16, 1866, which he had printed for distribution in advance and entitled "*Abraham Lincoln. Miss Ann Rutledge. New Salem. Pioneering, and THE Poem.*" In a "pre-Raphaelite" mode of address as eccentric as his title, Herndon speculated that Lincoln's famous melancholy was precipitated by the death of Ann Rutledge and that "O why should the spirit of mortal be proud?" shown to him at the time, became fixed in his mind and was thereafter recited in memoriam of Ann, the only woman he ever loved. This hypothesis and other aspects of the lecture offended the Lincoln family and much of his nineteenth-century audience and consequently earned Herndon a name for irresponsible speculation that continues to this day. As John Y. Simon has put it, Herndon had "grossly mishandled a major incident in the Lincoln story," from which "neither [his] reputation nor that of Ann Rutledge ever recovered."[17]

In his biography, published twenty-three years later, Herndon put forward a more moderate version of his theory: "It was shortly after this [Lincoln's derangement at the death of Ann Rutledge] that Dr. Jason Duncan placed in Lincoln's hands a poem called 'Immortality.' . . . He committed these lines to memory, and any reference to or mention of Miss Rutledge would suggest them, as if 'to celebrate a grief which lay with continual heaviness on his heart.' There is no question that from this time forward Mr. Lincoln's spells of melancholy became more intense than ever."[18] Herndon had thus satisfied himself that the significance of Lincoln's favorite poem and his peculiar affinity for it lay deep in his great partner's psyche, that it bore a direct relationship to the traumatic death of his first love, Ann Rutledge, and that the poem's hold on Lincoln was therefore datable from shortly after her

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[16] Herndon to Charles H. Hart, November 1, 1866, in Emanuel Hertz, ed., *The Hidden Lincoln: From the Letters and Papers of William H. Herndon* (New York, 1938), 35.

[17] John Y. Simon, "Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, XI (1990), 15. I am grateful to Mr. Simon for kindly making his text available in advance of publication.

[18] *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*, 114. It should be noted that Herndon believed Lincoln's melancholy was hereditary and "part of his nature." See Weik, *The Real Lincoln*, 113.

death. Herndon's conjecture is intriguing, and he had collected reliable testimony that lent it credence. The most telling was Isaac Cogdal's reported conversation with Lincoln in 1860–1861 in which the president-elect admitted not only that he had loved Ann dearly but that he still thought of her often.[19] As David C. Mearns allowed, if we can accept the reality of Lincoln's romance with Ann Rutledge, Lincoln's attachment to the poem is thus "perfectly explained."[20]

But even though recent scholarship has demonstrated that basic elements of the Rutledge romance can be confidently accepted, there are other factual difficulties that make Herndon's theory altogether unlikely. His biographer, David Donald, thought Herndon had no reason to think that Lincoln had known "Mortality" at New Salem, but he was mistaken.[21] The key to Herndon's theory is the role of Jason Duncan, the man that Lincoln had identified as the person who first showed him the poem as a young man.[22] Herndon had no idea who Duncan was or how or when he was acquainted with Lincoln, but by a persistence that was characteristic of his investigations, Herndon tracked Duncan down late in 1866 and subsequently corresponded with him.[23] Only one letter from Duncan survives in the Herndon-Weik Collection, a rather full reminiscence of his nearly three years in New Salem as a close personal friend of Lincoln's. No mention is made, however, of the thing Herndon was most interested in, namely, the Knox poem. Moreover, while Duncan volunteered that he "knew [Lincoln] had great partialities for Miss Ann Rutledge," he reported that he left New Salem in the autumn of 1834 and says nothing about the love affair or Ann's death, which occurred a year later.[24]

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[19] Undated interview with Isaac Cogdal, Herndon-Weik Collection. For a defense of the credibility of this witness and his testimony, see Wilson, "Lincoln, Rutledge, and Herndon's Informants," 315-17.

[20] Mearns, " 'The Great Invention of the World': Mr. Lincoln and the Books he Read," 85. For a critical re-examination of the Ann Rutledge affair in Lincoln scholarship, see Simon, "Lincoln and Rutledge." For a discussion of Herndon's evidence, see Wilson, "Lincoln, Rutledge, and Herndon's Informants."

[21] David Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon* (New York, 1948), 229.

[22] This was reported by Francis B. Carpenter, whose reminiscences of Lincoln were collected and published as *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln* in 1866. For the reference to Jason Duncan, see p. 59.

[23] For the search for Duncan and the many false leads Herndon turned up before locating his man, see the letters to Herndon from William G. Greene, R. B. Rutledge, John M. Rutledge, A. Y. Ellis, David Turnham, and the statements of J. Gain[e]s Green, W. G. Greene, and Royal Clary for the period September-November, 1866, Herndon-Weik Collection.

[24] Undated statement, Herndon-Weik Collection. Duncan says that he came to New Salem at the same time Lincoln did and lodged with him for some time. For confirmation of the friendship of Duncan and Lincoln, see the statement of J. Gaines Green, October 5, 1866, *ibid.*

In his 1866 lecture, Herndon said Lincoln had been shown the poem in September, 1833, and that he then took it up two years later at the time of Ann's death. What evidence Herndon had for this is not apparent, but in his biography, as seen, he changed the time of Lincoln's first acquaintance with the poem to after Rutledge's death in 1835.[25] None of the surviving documentation supports either conclusion. Nor does there seem to be any testimony to support Herndon's contention in his lecture that Lincoln began reciting the poem to his friends at this time. Often abused for taking positions that subsequently proved to be fully warranted, Herndon's strong intuition about Lincoln's attachment to "THE POEM" seems here to have caused him to overreach his evidence.

A series of letters that Herndon may never have seen puts "Mortality" and Lincoln's attraction for it in a different light. In 1846 and 1847 Lincoln sent four letters to a lawyer and political associate, Andrew Johnston of Quincy, Illinois, enclosing some poetry in each of them.[26] In the first letter, dated February 24, 1846, Lincoln included the text of "Mortality," which Johnston had previously requested. But Lincoln seems to have had a further motive for writing. "By the way," he asked Johnston, "how would you like to see a piece of poetry of my own making?"[27] Johnston must have expressed interest, for each of the next three letters contained what Lincoln described as a separate division or canto of a longer poem written by himself.[28]

Lincoln had been something of a poet much of his life. In a provocative essay, "Lincoln and the Riddle of Death," Robert V. Bruce has called attention to some verses written in Lincoln's commonplace book of 1824–1826:

> Time what an emty vaper tis and days how swift they are
> swift as an indian arrow fly on like a shooting star
> the present moment Just is here then slides away in haste
> that we can never say they're ours but only say they're past.

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[25] In a manuscript that may have been prepared for the use of his collaborator, Jesse W. Weik, Herndon first wrote, "Some years before this Doct Jason Duncan placed in his hands a poem . . ." but subsequently changed this to "Some year after . . . ." See undated manuscript, "Miss Rutledge & Lincoln," Herndon-Weik Collection.

[26] These four letters to Andrew Johnston were all first published after Herndon's death. See *Collected Works*, I, 366-70, 377-79, 384-89, 392.

[27] Lincoln to Andrew Johnston, February 24, 1846, *Collected Works*, I, 367.

[28] In addition to the first canto discussed here, Beveridge notes an interesting phenomenon in connection with Lincoln's poetry: "More than once after a successful political contest he indulged in the making of verses. Lincoln did this when Hardin withdrew from the fight for the congressional nomination, and again when he had beaten Cartwright at the polls." Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln*, I, 383. One might add to this the light-hearted quatrain he got off after Lee's defeat at Gettysburg. See "Verses on Lee's Invasion of the North," Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln: Supplement, 1832–1865* (Westport, Conn., 1974), 194.

Bruce suggests that "Lincoln may have composed those lines; he was known as a versifier in those days, and the spelling and grammar are certainly original."[29] Lincoln was indeed known as such in his boyhood in Indiana, and these verses sound what would become, with the mature Lincoln, a very familiar theme. Lincoln himself recited some of his Indiana verses to his friends in New Salem in the 1830s,[30] and Herndon discovered that there were old friends in Indiana who could still remember and recite some of his verses thirty-five years after he had moved away.[31]

Though very little of Lincoln's verse survives, Gibson Harris testified that when he was a clerk in Lincoln's law office between 1845 and 1847, he found in a drawer a substantial manuscript of what appeared to be original poetry in Lincoln's hand. As he remembered, these "stanzaed effusions . . . were all, or nearly all, iambics and pensive in tone." Lincoln would not discuss them, but Herndon told Harris, "Yes, he has sometimes scribbled verses, I believe, but he seems unwilling to have it known."[32] Lincoln's letters to Johnston of this same period seem to represent a cautious venturing in another direction.

In the second letter to Johnston, dated April 18, 1846, Lincoln combined an explanation of what he knew about "Mortality" with an account of the circumstances in which he was led to compose the original canto he was sending to Johnston. After denying authorship of "Mortality," he told Johnston: "I met it in a straggling form in a newspaper last summer, and I remember to have seen it once before, about fifteen years ago, and this is all I know about it."[33] "About fifteen years ago" would put his first acquaintance with the poem at about the time he first arrived in New Salem in 1831, within a month of when Jason Duncan arrived. The letter then turned immediately to the poem Lincoln was including: "The piece of poetry of my own

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[29] Robert V. Bruce, *Lincoln and the Riddle of Death* (Fort Wayne, 1981), 1. The arrangement of the lines is by Bruce, to whose stimulating essay I am indebted for a number of references and insights.

[30] See W. G. Greene to Herndon, January 23, 1866, Herndon-Weik Collection: "I am not positive as to the year he wrote potery in relation to Mrs Noah *Gordon* & her *Geese* my impression is that it was 1825 I have seen the poetry it was charmingly good I thought he was well pleased with his effort himself." Presumably this refers to Lincoln's Indiana period, judging from the date Greene gives it, but there was a Noah Gordon in the New Salem neighborhood when Lincoln lived there.

[31] For example, see the verses remembered by Elizabeth Crawford in Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 294-95, 367.

[32] Gibson William Harris, "My Recollections of Abraham Lincoln," *The Farm and Fireside* (January 15, 1905), 24. I am grateful to Roger D. Bridges for bringing this material and Harris's dictated copy of "Mortality" to my attention.

[33] Lincoln to Andrew Johnston, April 18, 1846, *Collected Works*, I, 378.

which I alluded to, I was led to write under the following circumstances. In the fall of 1844, thinking I might aid some to carry the State of Indiana for Mr. Clay, I went into the neighborhood in that State in which I was raised, where my mother and only sister were buried, and from which I had been absent about fifteen years. That part of the country is, within itself, as unpoetical as any spot of earth; but still, seeing it and its objects and inhabitants aroused feelings in me which were certainly poetry; though whether my expression of those feeling is poetry is quite another question."[34] The original verses thus described constitute a forty-line poem beginning "My childhood's home I see again."[35]

The association of "Mortality" with his own poem about his return to southwest Indiana can hardly have been accidental. Lincoln's poem begins with the pleasures of memory and moves toward a dramatic recognition of death as the principal force in the passage of time. Memory, the poem says, purifies and transforms the past:

> And, freed from all that's earthly vile,
> Seem hallowed, pure, and bright,
> Like scenes in some enchanted isle
> All bathed in liquid light.[36]

But to come to terms with the reality of the present, the poet is forced to acknowledge the overwhelming presence of death.

> The friends I left that parting day,
> How changed, as time has sped!
> Young childhood grown, strong manhood gray,
> And half of all are dead.
>
> I hear the loved survivors tell
> How nought from death could save,
> Till every sound appears a knell,
> And every spot a grave.

The swiftness of time and the all-conquering grave are, of course, the predominating motifs of "Mortality," the poem that Lin-

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[34] *Ibid.*

[35] *Ibid.*, 378-79. Lincoln subsequently sent two more cantos: the first was a description of the madness and pitiable condition of an Indiana contemporary, Matthew Gentry; the other, a description of a frontier bear hunt. Though separate and sufficiently distinct from "My childhood home I see again," both of these pieces were apparently conceived as parts of a retrospective poem about Indiana, which may never have been completed.

[36] *Ibid.*, 378. The text exists in two slightly different versions. The one given here was printed in the Quincy *Whig*, May 5, 1847, and is presumed by the editors of the *Collected Works* to represent a revision of the manuscript version in Lincoln's hand in the Library of Congress. The anonymous editors of *The Collected Poetry of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield, Ill., 1971) presume the opposite.

coln says he had first seen some fifteen years previously.[37] Though his characterization of the poem as appearing in "a straggling form" may mean that he remembered its proper form from his previous acquaintance with it, the implication of what Lincoln told Johnston seems to be that he had taken little cognizance of the poem in the fifteen intervening years. Herndon convinced himself that Lincoln recited it frequently from the time of Ann Rutledge's death, though Lincoln's closest friend of the ensuing years, Joshua F. Speed, may not even have recognized it.[38] But the second time around, in the summer of 1845, there is no question that "Mortality" made a profound impression on Lincoln. Gibson Harris remembered that in his two years at Lincoln's law office, which began in September, 1845, it was Lincoln's "favorite of favorites." "Many a time at the office did he recite this poem, in whole or in part; for a while I actually thought he had written it, so nearly did it resemble, in tone and meter, one of several compositions of his own that I had found in the office desk."[39]

The electioneering trip to his unpoetical childhood neighborhood in Indiana in October, 1844, is an obscure event in Lincoln biography, and very little is known of what transpired, except that he gave some speeches and renewed old friendships.[40] But something important seems to have come out of the Indiana experience, and the rediscovery of the poem "Mortality" the following summer may have crystalized it in Lincoln's mind and given it expression. He had come very far in the world since leaving Indiana in 1830. From his hardscrabble beginnings with nothing to encourage education, he had risen to surprising heights. He had become educated; he had gained a profession; and he had achieved, by his political efforts, a measure of recognition. As Benjamin Thomas observes: "He had been disciplined by marriage and family responsibilities and by four years of association with Stephen T. Logan. He had regained his mental balance after the fiasco of

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[37] Though only an approximation, this estimate of fifteen years clearly places the date well before the death of Ann Rutledge, which would have been only ten years prior to Lincoln's rediscovery of the poem in the summer of 1845.

[38] Herndon seems to have raised the question of where Lincoln learned "Mortality" with Speed at the time he was looking for Duncan and bearing down on the Ann Rutledge affair. See J. F. Speed to Herndon, September 13, 1866, Herndon-Weik Collection: "I know nothing of where he learned the Poem alluded to."

[39] Harris, "Recollections of Abraham Lincoln," 24.

[40] Nathaniel Grigsby, a childhood friend, gave Herndon a brief account of Lincoln's 1844 visit. See Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 368. A notice of his speech at Rockport appears in *Collected Works*, I, 341-42.

'the fatal first of January.' Home life and political disappointments had taught him patience and self-control. He had come to the front in politics against strong and determined rivals."[41] Of the man who became his law partner about the time of this trip, Herndon says, "Mr. Lincoln had unbounded and unlimited confidence in his own mental powers, he was himself and wholly self-reliant, asking no man anything."[42] What this confident and self-reliant man encountered in his boyhood home in Indiana was probably as unexpected as it was unforgettable—the humbling fact of his own mortality.

This is not, of course, to say that Lincoln had never confronted the fact or the prospect of death before 1844. He had endured devastating losses through the deaths of his mother, his only sister, and his fiancée Ann Rutledge, and had contemplated self-destruction as a means of escaping his torturous mental depression. But having survived these traumatic events and surmounted the formidable obstacles of poverty, ignorance, and obscurity, his experience in Indiana in 1844 seems to have presented him with the reality of his *own* mortality in a new perspective.

The profound emotional effect that Lincoln felt on his visit to Indiana calls to mind the plight of one of Lincoln's idols, Thomas Jefferson, when stationed for five years as a diplomat in Paris. Replying to a correspondent whose letter had reported much local news, including the death of some of his acquaintances, Jefferson conjures up a fate for himself that is almost exactly that of Lincoln's: "Fancy to yourself," he tells his correspondent, "a being who is withdrawn from his connections of blood, of marriage, or friendship, of acquaintance in all their gradations, who for years should hear nothing of what has passed among them, who returns again to see them and finds the one half dead. This strikes him like a pestilence sweeping off the half of mankind. Events which had they come to him one by one and in detail he would have weathered as other people do, when presented to his mind all at once are overwhelming."[43]

If Lincoln's beguilement with "Mortality" in the summer of 1845 was prompted by what had happened to him on his trip to Indiana the previous fall, his poem "My childhood home I see again" may be regarded as an autobiographical record of that incident. It appears to be an enactment of why the spirit of mortal should not be proud. The poem's most forceful passages are of the boyhood friends he expected to see and the startling changes

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[41] Benjamin Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* (New York, 1968), 110.

[42] Herndon to Jesse W. Weik, October 8, 1881, published in Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 84.

[43] Thomas Jefferson to James Currie, Paris, September 27, 1785, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (24 vols. to date, Princeton, N.J., 1950–), VIII, 558.

time had interposed: "Young childhood grown, strong manhood gray, / And half of all are dead." The poem tells how listening to the "survivors" speak of those who have died magnifies the sense of mortality and produces the sensation that every sound is a death knell, "And every spot a grave." To visit old friends and familiar places is hardly to bask in the honors of the present or even relive the pleasures of the past, for the poem ends:

> I range the fields with pensive tread,
> And pace the hollow rooms,
> And feel (companion of the dead)
> I'm living in the tombs.

The former friends and neighbors by whom the moderately triumphant Lincoln had expected to be greeted were greatly changed—and half of all were dead.

Lincoln became a very different man in the course of the next twenty years, and yet his attachment to "Mortality" remained; if anything, it deepened. One of the things that makes it difficult to fathom this connection is the difference in sensibility between Lincoln's time and today. Lincoln's taste was very much a product of the nineteenth century, with its notorious appetite for sorrow and sentimentality artfully laid on. As a result, the poem that to a twentieth-century reader may seem a "jingle" and a "tedious dirge"[44] was to Lincoln a very different thing. The anapestic meter that the twentieth-century reader may regard as artificial and inappropriate to its subject, he seems to have found soothing. Sentiments that may seem to later generations lugubrious or depressing actually consoled him in times of anxiety and grief. Far from sounding trite or bathetic, this poem, Lincoln told a friend, "sounded as much like true poetry as anything he had ever heard."[45]

What Lincoln got from this poem is not easy to specify, though it is undoubtedly related to his chronic melancholy and his well-established preoccupation with death. By his own testimony, the poem crossed his mind whenever he experienced "relief from anxiety."[46] His eulogy on Zachary Taylor in 1850, which he concluded by quoting six stanzas of "Mortality," yields further clues.[47] Immediately before quoting these lines Lincoln observed: "The death of the late President may not be without its use, in reminding us, that *we*, too, must die. Death, abstractly considered, is the same with the high as with the low; but practically, we are not so much aroused to the contemplation of our own mortal natures, by the fall

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[44] Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon*, 229.
[45] *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*, 257-58.
[46] See note 14.
[47] *Collected Works*, II, 90. The stanzas quoted are 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, and 14.

of *many* undistinguished, as that of *one* great, and well known, name. By the latter, we are forced to muse, and ponder, sadly: 'Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud!' "[48]

At the time of his trip to Indiana in 1844, and perhaps in succeeding years as well, the one great name that filled the mind of the inordinately ambitious and self-confident Abraham Lincoln was his own. That half of all the people he had known as a boy (and were thus in a position to appreciate his success) should have been claimed by death was a shock for which, as his autobiographical poem suggests, he was wholly unprepared. As he confessed to his friend Johnston, seeing those things had aroused strong feelings. The experience forced him to see himself not as the returning prodigal but as a "companion of the dead." For a man who had once professed the "doctrine of necessity" and was inclined toward fatalism, this unexpected confrontation with mortality may have resulted in something like a revelation. Death was inevitable. It was not, as his previous experience had led him to think, an unlucky misfortune for the victim or an undeserved affliction for the bereft; it was rather an irreducible fact—the crowning fact of all human striving, no matter how vaunted or satisfying or successful. Such a discovery was not without its consolations, and these would prove even more useful later on. But the prodigal's pride had been misplaced, and his mood was caught by a poem he realized he had been shown fifteen years earlier, soon after leaving his childhood home in Indiana, but whose meaning he had been unprepared by experience to appreciate.

Seeing the inception of Lincoln's affinity for "Mortality" in this context holds out the possibility of enhancing one's understanding of his development, for it helps to explain how and in what circumstances a touchstone expression became firmly established in his consciousness. From 1845 onwards, "Mortality" served as an emotional tonic for a man subject to recurrent and virtually disabling melancholy. He recited it frequently for his friends and invoked it as a means of relief from anxiety in times of despondency and grief. Its appeal, to be sure, was partly aesthetic, but it must also have been grounded in an identification with the basic imagery of the poem—fathers and sons, time, birth and death, and the earth—imagery that James Hurt has argued is "thematically continuous" in Lincoln's writings from the Lyceum speech of 1838 to the Gettysburg address.[49] The poem was undoubtedly related to what

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[48] *Ibid.* The author has edited the punctuation of the newspaper text slightly to make the line "Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud" appear the object of "ponder," as he believes was Lincoln's intention, rather than as a title for the poem, as the newspaper rendered it.

[49] James Hurt, "All the Living and the Dead: Lincoln's Imagery," *American Literature*, LII (November, 1980), 380.

Bruce has aptly characterized as the "haunting sense of human transience and ultimate helplessness—a sense in which all men are indeed equal—[that] deepened [Lincoln's] compassion, forbearance, and ability to comprehend both the extent and the bounds of what was possible in the brevity of life."[50] For Abraham Lincoln, Knox's "Mortality" seemed to lay out the facts of life and death in a way that assuaged his anguish, which, as his life unfolded toward greatness, was an anguish that embraced an ever-widening circle of mortality.

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[50] Bruce, *Lincoln and the Riddle of Death*, 23.