

AFTER THE DEATH OF JOHN BROWN

AT the services held in Concord, Massachusetts, December 2, 1859, in commemoration of John Brown, executed that day, Mr. Thoreau said:] So universal and widely related is any transcendent moral greatness, and so nearly identical with greatness everywhere and in every age, — as a pyramid contracts the nearer you approach its apex, — that, when I now look over my commonplace-book of poetry, I find that the best of it is oftenest applicable, in part or wholly, to the case of Captain Brown. Only what is true, and strong, and solemnly earnest will recommend itself to our mood at this time. Almost any noble verse may be read, either as his elegy or eulogy, or be made the text of an oration on him. Indeed, such are now discovered to be the parts of a universal liturgy, applicable to those rare cases of heroes and martyrs for which the ritual of no church has provided. This is the formula established on high, — their burial service, — to which every great genius has contributed its stanza or line. As Marvell wrote: —

“When the sword glitters o’er the judge’s head,
And fear has coward churchmen silencèd,
Then is the poet’s time; ’t is then he draws,
And single fights forsaken virtue’s cause;
He, when the wheel of empire whirlleth back,
And though the world’s disjointed axle crack,
Sings still of ancient rights and better times,
Seeks suffering good, arraigns successful crimes.”

The sense of grand poetry, read by the light of this event, is brought out distinctly like an invisible writing held to the fire: —

“All heads must come
To the cold tomb, —
Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet and blossom in the dust.”

We have heard that the Boston lady who recently visited our hero in prison found him wearing still the clothes, all cut and torn by sabres and by bayonet-thrusts, in which he had been taken prisoner; and thus he had gone to his trial; and without a hat. She spent her time in prison mending those clothes, and, for a memento, brought home a pin covered with blood.

What are the clothes that endure?

“The garments lasting evermore
Are works of mercy to the poor;
And neither tetter, time, nor moth
Shall fray that silk or fret this cloth.”

The well-known verses called “The Soul’s Errand,” supposed, by some, to have been written by Sir Walter Raleigh when he was expecting to be executed the following day, are at least worthy of such an origin, and are equally applicable to the present case. [Mr. Thoreau then read these verses, as well as a number of poetical passages selected by another citizen of Concord, and closed with the following translation from Tacitus made by himself.]

“You, Agricola, are fortunate, not only because your life was glorious, but because your death was timely. As they tell us who heard your last words, unchanged

and willing you accepted your fate; as if, as far as in your power, you would make the emperor appear innocent. But, besides the bitterness of having lost a parent, it adds to our grief, that it was not permitted us to minister to your health, . . . to gaze on your countenance, and receive your last embrace; surely, we might have caught some words and commands which we could have treasured in the inmost part of our souls. This is our pain, this our wound. . . . You were buried with the fewer tears, and in your last earthly light your eyes looked around for something which they did not see.

“If there is any abode for the spirits of the pious, if, as wise men suppose, great souls are not extinguished with the body, may you rest placidly, and call your family from weak regrets and womanly laments to the contemplation of your virtues, which must not be lamented, either silently or aloud. Let us honor you by our admiration rather than by short-lived praises, and, if nature aid us, by our emulation of you. That is true honor, that the piety of whoever is most akin to you. This also I would teach your family, so to venerate your memory as to call to mind all your actions and words, and embrace your character and the form of your soul rather than of your body; not because I think that statues which are made of marble or brass are to be condemned, but as the features of men, so images of the features are frail and perishable. The form of the soul is eternal; and this we can retain and express, not by a foreign material and art, but by our own lives. Whatever of Agricola we have loved, whatever we have admired,

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remains, and will remain, in the minds of men and the records of history, through the eternity of ages. For oblivion will overtake many of the ancients, as if they were inglorious and ignoble: Agricola, described and transmitted to posterity, will survive.”