Gettysburg Mourning

Jonathan Lear

1. Gettysburg as Difficult Reality

Cora Diamond uses the phrase “the difficulty of reality” to mark “experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome or astonishing in its inexplicability. We take things so. And the things we take so may simply not, to others, present the kind of difficulty—of being hard or impossible or agonizing to get one’s mind around.” Clearly, these are not difficulties in the ordinary sense of the term, meaning problems to be solved or resolved. Rather, they are challenges to the mind’s ability to encompass the reality it seeks to comprehend. In this essay, I would like to discuss difficulties I have been having with Gettysburg: difficulties in comprehending what happened there in the days and weeks after the famous Civil War battle; difficulties in comprehending Abraham Lincoln’s response, the Gettysburg Address. I have no difficulty with the thought that the historical facts make historical sense. Rather, I am troubled by a sense that something primordial went wrong, and we as a country remain haunted by it. Yet I am also worried that Alasdair MacIntyre is correct that it is our condition to live in the midst of shards of meaning and

thus that our normal forms of explanation will not get to the heart of this wrong.²

2. A Sense of Inexpressibility

By all accounts the aftermath of battle was grotesque.³
Eyewitness accounts repeatedly express inability to describe what they have seen even as they attempt to do so. Here is a selection of different eyewitness accounts, collected by Gregory Coco and published in his powerful book A Strange and Blighted Land:

“No words can depict the ghastly picture. The track of the great charge was marked by bodies of men in all possible positions, wounded, bleeding, dying and dead. Near the line where the final struggle occurred, the men lay in heaps, the wounded wriggling and groaning under the weight of the dead among whom they were entangled.” [SBL, p. 54; my emphasis]

“It would be impossible to give you a picture of all that we saw on the different parts of the field where the contest raged. The dead were scattered in all directions.” [SBL, p. 45; my emphasis]

2. See Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (Notre Dame, Ind., 2007).

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“Immediately after the battle were heavy rains, and in this valley, so much was the course of the stream obstructed that great ponds were formed where the waters were dammed up by the swollen corpses of Southern soldiery. The writer wandered over these fields immediately after the fierce strife had ceased, and the vivid impression of the horrible sights there beheld can never be effaced from the memory. Death in its ghastliest and most abhorrent forms, everywhere. Fester ing corpses at every step; some still unburied; some, hastily and rudely buried with so little of earth upon them that the appearance presented was almost as repulsive as where no attempt at burial had been made.” [SBL, p. 40]

“All around the barn, even within the house yard, within a few feet of the doors, were, in numbers, the scantily buried followers of the Confederate cause. Two hundred and seventy-five were buried behind the barn; a rebel colonel . . . was buried within a yard of the kitchen door. No pen can paint the awful picture of desolation, devastation and death that was presented here to the shuddering beholder who traversed these localities July 4, 5 and 6, 1863 . . . All was a trodden, miry waste with corpses at every step . . . When a description of a scene such as was presented on these fields . . . is attempted words have lost their power and language is weak.” [SBL, p. 41; my emphasis]

“The dead lay everywhere, and although not a half day has passed since they died, the stench is so great that we can neither eat, drink, nor sleep. Decomposition commences as soon as life is extinct. . . . No tongue can depict the carnage, and I cannot make it seem real.” [SBL, p. 56; my emphasis]

“The condition of things at Gettysburg after the battle beggars description.” [SBL, p. 114; my emphasis]

“No pen can describe the appearance of these woods. Those who did not see the wonderful sight can never realize it. The life was shot from every pore of these trees as effectually as from the men in gray who were piled beneath them. The latter were buried in wide, yawning trenches, all along that marshy valley.” [SBL, p. 19; my emphasis]

These writers are not apologizing for their own inability to describe the situation. They seem to be saying that in trying to grasp this experience, language runs up against its limits.

This experience of difficulty arose, I suspect, from two conjoined factors. First, there was a terrible breach in our familiar forms of living with
the dead. In general, we tolerate the death of others by enveloping them in rites and rituals. Rites may vary, but the sense that we need a ritual in order to live well with the dead strikes deep in our humanity. But in the aftermath of battle there were too many dead and dying to attend to in these ways—many of them enemies who, until they were shot, had been killing friends, loved ones, and allies. For a while, the citizens of Gettysburg—the visitors and onlookers, pickpockets and thieves, the witnesses and those who came to help—all of them lived amongst thousands of scantily buried and unburied dead. The situation was out of joint, and normal forms of meaning making were disrupted.

Second, because the dead were strewn all around, sensory experiences were overwhelming—visual, tactile, and olfactory:

“Sometimes bodies were so completely wrapped up with the fallen leaves that, unconsciously, I stepped upon them—the quivering of the loose flesh making my feet unsteady, and the thought of the awful pit below sending me away with no little amount of nervous terror.” [SBL, p. 24]

“The dead lay here so thick that it was with difficulty that we could walk without stepping on the lifeless forms. The features of all had turned black and maggots were crawling in and out of the gaping wounds.” [SBL, p. 33]

“There was about an acre or so of ground here where you could not walk without stepping over the bodies, and I saw perhaps a dozen cases where they were heaped one on top of the other.” [SBL, p. 53; my emphasis]

“They were only slightly covered with earth and you could feel the body by pressing the earth with your foot. One man’s left hand . . . stuck out of the grave looking like an old parched well worn buckskin glove.” [SBL, p. 43]

“Soldiers with their hands and feet sticking out of the ground, I do not say out of their graves for they had none, but were buried, if buried they were, where they lay by throwing a little dirt over their bodies; but the worst sight that I saw was a Con that had not been buried at all, most of his body was decayed, his head was disconnected from

his body and on the whole presented a most horrid[sic] sight.”
[SBL, p. 34]

“I almost strangled from the effects of the smell caused partly by
the decomposed bodies. . . . You will remember the Rebels buried
their own dead here. Scarcely any graves were dug here. They
dragged them to where they could throw them into some crevices
and tumbled them in and threw a few stones on them and thus left
them.” [SBL, p. 36]

“The stench was almost unendurable, and the dead lay everywhere.
In one place more than 30 were gathered together and the look of
their bloated, blackened corpses was a thing to murder sleep.”
[SBL, p. 48]

“There was as many as 30 or 40 lay dead there of that Regt. They
had laid there 3 days in hot July weather. And I wish I never could
see another such sight. It is nothing to see men that have just been
killed. But every man was swolen as large as two men and purple &
Black. . . . I walked til I was tired and sick of the sights. To speak
safely there was a thousand dead horses that were all swolen and
the smell of the horses & men was dreadful.” [SBL, p. 50]

“When I was last there the fields had the appearance of a vast bone
yard. A few weeks ago the bodies became so decomposed that the
heads would drop off the men—would drop from the slightest
touch. Since then the heads have been kicked like footballs over the
field. The stench here is still intolerable.” [SBL, p. 60]

This last quotation comes from a letter written in October, and thus sug-
gests that the smell of death and decomposition persisted into the autumn.
Although it was a cold autumn day, I cannot help but wonder what, if any-
thing, penetrated into Lincoln’s olfactory consciousness a full month
later.

These powerful, repugnant sensory experiences do not reside in con-
sciousness all on their own. Such consciousness insists that it is emanat-
ing from reality. The retch-making, suffocating, disgusting, terrifying smell
insists that it is the smell of reality. The nauseating feel of one’s foot sink-
ing comes with the worry that one has stepped into a corpse. These expe-
riences pressure us to understand this reality even if, in the same experience,
they push us away from it all in disgust. This is an elemental structure of
being haunted: turning away from something too awful but failing because
one has not found an adequate way to leave it behind.
3. The First Burial

The first burial was carried out in haste and under an aura of necessity. The sun was hot, rain came in torrents, maggots and flies multiplied exponentially; the decomposition of thousands of bodies was occurring at an alarming rate. In addition to the seven thousand soldiers dead on the field, there were another four thousand surviving soldiers who would soon die from their wounds, not to mention three thousand dead horses strewn around the battlefield. The sense of necessity flowed from a threat to public health, as well as perhaps from a more inchoate sense that these bodies had to be put underground. It had to be done, and it had to be done right away. A few quotations convey the simplicity and the disgust of the undertaking.

“Some of the men buried the dead thus laid in rows; a shallow grave about a foot deep, [was dug] against the first man in a row and he was then laid down into it; a similar grave was dug where he had lain.” [SBL, p. 88]

“First we collected the dead men into rows, as usual laying one against another, heads all one way, Union and Confederate in separate rows.” [SBL, p. 89]

The dead “were so far decomposed that we had to run rails under the bodies, which, as they slid into the trenches, broke apart, to the horror and disgust of the whole party, and the stench still lingers in our nostrils. As many as ninety bodies were thus disposed of in one trench . . . most of them were tumbled in just as they fell, with not a prayer, eulogy or tear to distinguish them from so many animals.” [SBL, p. 87]

“They dug long trenches about ten inches deep, then would lay from fifty to one hundred in each trench, then throw clay along the middle of the rows of men leaving the head and feet entirely exposed.” [SBL, p. 94]

“The incident most vividly stamped upon my mind, was where I saw 108 Confederates put into a trench. Whisky had been issued to the Brigade Pioneers, as the stench was almost unbearable.” [SBL, p. 89]

“The stench on the battlefield was something indescribable, it would come up as if in waves and when at its worst the breath would stop

5. These numbers are very approximate and rounded to easily comprehensible numbers.
in the throat; the lungs could not take it in, and a sense of suffocation would be experienced.” [SBL, p. 89]

Thus were the dead buried the first time around. Some Union soldiers were given better burials by their comrades; when possible, headboards were inscribed in wood, maps were made to mark the burial sites, and so on. It had to be thus, more or less, and it could not remain thus for long.

4. Autumn Harvest

Civic leaders knew there had to be a second burial, this time symbolic. As early as 11 July, the governor of Pennsylvania visited the battle site. Shortly thereafter, David Wills—a then-prominent and now-famous lawyer—wrote to the Governor, as did David McConaughy, the president of the board of the Evergreen Cemetery and also a Gettysburg lawyer. At the same time, the Boston city council was considering purchasing a plot of land at Evergreen for burial of the Boston dead, and a representative of New York proposed that the Northern states who fought should contribute to a national cemetery (see SBL, pp. 114–19, and TRS, pp. 99–100). There are three important points to note. First, meticulous care was taken to separate the Union dead from the Confederate dead and to rebury only Union soldiers. Second, effort went into making this new burial space dignified, elegant, simple, and solemn. Third, the scene into which Lincoln placed himself when he came to speak at Gettysburg had a dreadful dimension that remained unacknowledged.

The separation of the dead began in earnest at the end of October. An order had been issued in August forbidding the exhumation of bodies for the remainder of August and September. By 26 October, when the digging up of bodies began, the process of decomposition was well advanced. Many of the soldiers could no longer be identified. Still, remnants of cloth or of a shoe, buttons, and the location of burial were used as the basis for separating the corpses that would be buried again from those that would not. Samuel Weaver, who oversaw the exhumation, attended to each corpse. At the end of his efforts, he wrote: “I firmly believe that there has not been a single mistake made in the removal of the soldiers to the Cemetery by taking the body of a rebel for a Union soldier” (quoted in SBL, p. 108). He was talking about the removal and reinterment of 3,512 corpses. Even today a guide at the National Cemetery will say that they think only nine mistakes were made. Whatever the ultimate accuracy of identifications, the point is that great care went into keeping Confederate bodies out.

This meticulousness was internally connected to the sense of dignity of the project. William Saunders, the architect of the cemetery, aimed to de-
sign a cemetery of “simple grandeur,” and the low markers radiating out in semicircles invite quiet respect (quoted in SBL, p. 112). The semicircles were divided into areas assigned to the states. There were almost a thousand soldiers who could not be identified by name or state, but insofar as a corpse could be identified by state, even if he was otherwise unidentifiable, he was located within the state plot. There were, of course, no allotments for the states that were in open rebellion. The cemetery conveys a sense of serenity, but that “serenity” was achieved by excluding thousands who were left to rot where they lay.

It was thus an uncanny scene Lincoln entered as he marched in procession with twenty thousand others towards the new cemetery up on Cemetery Hill. It is an exaggeration—but not a big one—to say that he needed to watch his step.

The cemetery was not finished. The aim was to bury no more than one hundred bodies a day. And Thursday, 19 November, was only three and a half weeks after the reburials had commenced. It is reasonable to assume that more than half the bodies that would eventually find their way to this cemetery were still out in the battlefields. The work of the diggers and undertakers would continue well into the spring of 1864. The notices now at the National Cemetery place Lincoln at the center of the semicircle, giving his address where the Soldier’s Monument stands. But historians and guides will tell you that this was not quite so. Though not certain, it is thought that the platform from which Lincoln spoke was approximately fifty yards back, in the adjacent Evergreen Cemetery. The soldiers’ cemetery was still a dug-up and unfinished place.

So, Lincoln placed himself in the midst of an unusual harvest. Bodies that were put in the ground in July were dug up in October and November, to be replanted in a special place. It was a selective harvest. Only about half the corpses on the battlefield would be moved, and they were chosen according to a principle. The idea was not simply to reinter (some but not all) of the battlefield dead but to reinter them in a special place, one officially designated for mourning. The others would be excluded. The dedication ceremony was thus an uncanny harvest festival: a division of the dead into those who were to be memorialized and those who were not. One must see Lincoln as an active participant in the division; his words facilitated the separation by aiming to vindicate it.

5. Lincoln’s Audience
The division that created an inside thereby established an outside. The cemetery is a dignified semicircle on a hill that opens up a vista onto rolling hills and fields and the country town. If one stands in the midst of the
cemetery and looks down, one can contemplate the dead whose bodily remains lie below discreet, understated markers. But if one looks up and out, the ever-widening semicircle establishes a field of vision. What does one see?

In that autumn of 1863, if one looked out and saw a beautiful country scene, that meant that one did not see the corpses of the enemy dead literally all around. Did it take effort not to see them? The architect, William Saunders, had a clear idea where the cemetery should end, and today fences mark that boundary, with a gate for visitors to enter and exit. But are human intentions strong enough to set boundaries for the dead? One cannot say that those corpses that lie beyond the established boundaries have nothing to do with the cemetery. The cemetery was created in the act of leaving them behind—or, at least, in attempting to.

If one stands in the cemetery with these thoughts in mind—now, approximately a century and a half after the battle—it becomes possible to see things differently. One can envisage a huge amphitheater of the dead extending out indefinitely into the countryside. The gorgeous semicircle of the official cemetery is the VIP section. It is meant to be a place of solemnity and dignity and honor. It is a place which encourages us—we, the living—to remember, to mourn, to let our minds wander. And thus on a visit my mind did wander, to the excluded dead, the scantily buried and unburied lying about the fields. Standing in the cemetery, looking out, I began to wonder: What if one of the unburied dead had somehow been able to listen to Lincoln’s speech? He would have heard a different speech from the one I learned growing up—though we would both have been exposed to the same words.

And yet, in both cases, the words were tied intimately to our bodies. In my elementary school the entire class learned the Gettysburg Address by heart, and we each spoke it out loud. Looking back, I am struck by what a corporeal experience that was; the words forming in my chest and working their way out, full-throatedly, in declamation. It was, I suspect, this literal incarnation of the Gettysburg Address in me that makes it so that I cannot go back to it without being reminded of my childhood. It was a period before the political assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Robert Kennedy; it was before anyone in my suburb had heard of a place called Vietnam. Whatever the injustices running through the country, it was a time and a neighborhood in which unambiguous patriotism came easily. So we had no idea, for instance, that the vindication we felt for being on the right side of the Civil War was a tool we used to keep ourselves blind to the racism in our midst.

In the Gettysburg Address of my childhood, the first and last sentences are in the foreground.
Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. . . . that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.6

The first sentence emphasizes the idea that America is a nation that derives not from powerful thugs’ false claim to have divine dispensation but from the free thought of free men. The nation was to be constituted by its dedication to the ideal of equality. This first sentence brings the meaning of America back to the Declaration of Independence—to the claim of self-evidence that all men are created equal and that they all have an inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The last sentence ties these rights to the possibility of democracy. It is as though a government of, by, and for the people is the proper political community in which to secure these rights.7 And, Lincoln suggests, the meaning of this battle is to secure a “new birth of freedom”: to renew the links between inalienable rights to freedom and equality with democracy as the political form that will make the realization of these rights possible. The link between equality and democracy is quickly made, and there is room to wonder whether a government of and by the people could ever be for the people. Still, it would be good if we could ever make it true.

But now, decades later, as I tried to imagine that unburied soldier listening, he ceased to be an indefinite unburied soldier and began to take on particular, concrete, bodily form. I could see him under a tree out in the distance and—though I won’t bother you with the other details of his life—I somehow knew his first name was Polynices and he came from a small town in the South named Thebes. For him, the emphasis of Lincoln’s address fell not on any one sentence or other but on Lincoln’s use of the plural pronoun and the definite article that run through his address:

*for those* who here gave their lives. . . . *the brave men, living and dead, who struggled here*, have consecrated it. . . . *but [the world] can never forget what they did here*. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which *they who fought here* have thus far

so nobly advanced. . . that from *these honored dead* we take increased devotion . . . that we here highly resolve that *these dead* shall not have died in vain. [“FT,” p. 263; my emphasis]

How, Polynices wanted to know, could Lincoln keep using the words “they” and “these” and “those” and leave him out? *There he was!*—or, at least, there his body was—and yet “these” and “those” did not seem to apply to him. How could this be?

This question is importantly not about Lincoln the man—his psychology, motives, or character. The source of puzzlement and pain is not the individual. Nor is it a question about what he (or anyone else living at that time) could or should have done. Polynices’s question, as I understand it, is instead semantic—it is about the relation of language to world. How could it be that in this ghastly field of death and suffering any use of “these dead” or “those who died here” or “they who fought here” could single out one group and exclude another? How can language possibly work this way? Diamond says that what presents a difficulty to one person—“of being hard or impossible or agonizing to get one’s mind around”—may leave others unpuzzled. “What’s the problem?,” I imagine one of the untroubled saying. “‘These dead’ is short for ‘these Union dead,’” and from the context of Lincoln’s speech one can tell that it is they whom Lincoln is describing. The scene may be dreadful, but there is no problem in picking out the right group with the phrase ‘these dead.’”

But from the point of view of the troubled the fact that there seems to be no problem is part of the problem. How could it be, Polynices wants to know, that this sort of contraction could be so easily expressed and so easily understood? The normal conversational implication of “these dead” and “those who died here” is universal—covering all who died in this area at this time. It would be one thing if all the Confederates had died in a different location—in the neighboring town, for instance. But in Gettysburg they were right there—literally decomposing before one’s eyes if one were to look. Nor can one say that Lincoln was talking about “these dead” located in the cemetery. At the time of speaking a majority of the Union dead were not yet there. They were still scattered in the fields amidst their former enemies. And even if the separation had been complete, the painful question would not go away: the masses of Confederate dead just outside the gates would be, as best they could, insisting on their presence. For someone experiencing the difficulty of reality there is a grotesque misfit between the words Lincoln uttered and the reality they purported to encompass. It is as though reality overwhelms the words that are trying to encompass it.
6. Failure of Imagination

What would it be to detect a failure of imagination—not one person or another’s failure, but a failure that pervades a form of life—from inside that failure? One way, I suspect, is to come up against something sickening in its lack of fit. Do we, as a culture, lack the imaginative resources to deal with the unburied dead? Do we lack a shared capacity to mourn our enemies?

Of course, one might well think that the issue is not about our capacity to mourn but about desire, emotion, and will. There was widespread fury throughout the North at the Southern rebellion. They were the enemy, rebellious traitors, invaders. These dead had been killers of those who were being laid to rest in the cemetery—and one should not be surprised by the fury and lack of sympathy of their mourners. Why should we mourn the killers of our loved ones? This was farmland; and, unlike today, even people who worked in town understood their relation to the land. Many of the Confederate dead would be ploughed up when the farmers did their planting. There was no interest in mourning them. Lincoln, for his part, was furious that General George Gordon Meade did not destroy Robert E. Lee’s entire army. In Lincoln’s estimation Meade could have ended the war right there; allowing Lee to “escape” meant that “the war will be prolonged indefinitely.” To put it mildly, Lincoln’s mind was not on the Confederate dead; he wanted Meade to kill the ones who were still alive. And he wanted to stiffen the resolve of those who would fight for the Union. The war was far from over and the outcome was uncertain. No doubt Lincoln had various strategies in mind as he crafted the Gettysburg Address—and I have no interest in challenging any of them. There are plenty of historically grounded reasons why he acted as he did.

The question I am asking arises at a different level. My question is: Does this entire intelligible framework—of emotions and decisions, interest and lack of interest, strategies, care and lack of care—have the intelligibility it has because it rests in the midst of a culturally shared imaginary field that is itself impoverished? This question cannot be answered by citing more good reasons for Lincoln’s decisions and actions. The issue of incapacity is not about a psychological inability of any individual; it concerns a restricted field of imaginative possibilities for living with the dead. This being so, we should expect not to be able to observe it directly—for we are living in its midst—but for it to show up obliquely, perhaps in unusual and stressful circumstances. Perhaps that incapacity would show up as a source

of suffering—at least, for some—when our enemies are at the same time supposed to be part of us; part of who we were, are, and will be. This is what might happen when the victors insist that the war was civil. The unburied dead were fighting to withdraw from common citizenship with those who killed them, those whom they would have killed. The Union soldiers who killed them did so in the name of insisting that they, the Confederates, as well as their loved ones and descendants, must remain fellow citizens—till death do us part. How, one might wonder, could leaving those dead unburied be the end of the matter?

The question then is not about making sense of the emotional lives of those who did not want to mourn the Confederate dead. Nor is it about judging them in any way. It is not about moral criticism. The question is whether this lack of interest in mourning—or even the refusal to mourn—shows us something about the forms of mourning that are available in the culture. Perhaps in part we do not want to mourn because our routes of mourning only go down certain paths. Our modes of memorializing the dead tend in the direction of celebrating them—of honoring, glorifying, and idealizing them. We are deficient in modes of mourning that publicly acknowledge that these dead count as part of us—and that we thus have responsibilities to take them into account even if we do not want to honor them. Perhaps such a memorialization would capture other aspects of these people’s lives—allowing us to see that the terrible cause they pursued was not the sum total of their lives. This form of remembrance would, if successful, avoid sentimentality; it would avoid aestheticizing their lives into objects of touristic interest; it would hold fast to representing their failure while not obliterating them through demonization; it would recognize that they were trying to live a significant life and that they count as part of who we were and where we have come from—whether we like it or not. It is not clear what such remembrance would look like; but it is clear that Lincoln, in the Gettysburg Address, did not try.

We know that Lincoln handwrote five copies—the first two before he delivered the address, the last three afterwards. It is the last copy—the so-called Bliss copy, written in 1864—that has come to be memorialized as the definitive text; this is the version inscribed at the Lincoln Memorial. One might be tempted to think that the second draft—known as the Hay copy—written just before he spoke comes the closest to what he said and that the later drafts come as secondary revisions. But it might equally be true that he spoke differently than the written text before him and corrected that in later drafts. There is no way of knowing which copy most accurately captures what he said. But there is a significant comma in the first draft, the Nicolay copy, that gets omitted in subsequent versions: “We
come to dedicate a portion of it, as a final resting place for those who died here, that the nation might live."

By the time of the second draft the second comma is omitted: “We have come to dedicate a portion of it as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live.”

That second comma in the Nicolay copy, the first draft, holds open the thought that we need a final resting place for those who died here—that is, for all who died here—in order for our nation to live. This is the beginning of a profound thought: that strange and counterintuitive and even offensive as it first might seem, we need to provide a final resting place even for those who fought against us (in part because they nevertheless are us)—in spite of, and acknowledging, the fact that they killed our loved ones and our heroes. And we need to do this not simply out of elemental human decency but in order that our nation might live.

On this reading, the vitality of the nation depends on our finding adequate ways to offer a final resting place for the Confederate dead. The possibility of this reading is eliminated in the second draft with the removal of the comma. The aim is now specified as dedicating a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. That is certainly not what the Confederates had been doing. So this sentence becomes a statement of the principle of division and separation. And it shapes the reading of the remainder of the Gettysburg Address, making it clear that the Confederate dead are not those whom he is talking about.

The Address famously begins: “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” (my emphasis). So Lincoln describes the nation as a family affair. If it is “our fathers” who founded this nation, then it would seem that those who fought each other were “brothers” and “sisters”—even if the fight was about whether or how this nation should endure. It would seem that Lincoln is creating this brotherhood (and sisterhood?) in the way he conceives the nation.

It will not do to say that the true children are the ones who endorse the proposition that all men are created equal. This strains at the idea of family. It is internal to the idea of family that you are stuck with them. You may not like them; you may despise them and think they have betrayed the family’s values; you may not want to live with them; you may be forever

estranged from them—but that does not unmake them as family. This kind of impotence might be the stuff of tragedy, but that only shows the potency of family. In any case, Lincoln would not go down this route. He conceives the conflict as “a great civil war” (“FT,” p. 263). And he makes the Union a matter of life and death. His refusal to tolerate secession is tantamount to insisting that you must be an American whether you like it or not. But if you must be part of the nation, then you are among the children of “our fathers” who founded it.

But then it is Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address who helps to transform that unburied soldier into a Polynices. That dead, unburied Confederate corpse over there is not just a former enemy; he was a brother, a son—at least, according to Lincoln’s conception—and but for us his unborn children would have been not just our fellow citizens but also our relatives. There thus hangs over this scene the specter of a primordial wrong—refusing to bury a family member—that transcends the human customs or laws of the day. This is the stuff of Sophoclean tragedy. Of course, we no longer believe in the gods of ancient Greece, and thus it can no longer make sense to us that we have broken their laws. But that only means that a former explanation of primordial wrong no longer works for us; it does not mean that the primordial wrong vanishes. This is an instance of a wrong so elemental that I suspect it is prior to any law that might forbid or explain it.

Lincoln is of course an astonishing human being and a great figure in the history of American democracy. He was a morally and religiously serious person who had a stunning ability to get things done politically in highly contested—though democratically governed—situations. He is a great statesman of democracy. So it might at first seem utterly wrong, unfair, even obscene to compare him to the tyrant Creon. Nevertheless, by giving the Gettysburg Address in Gettysburg, he puts himself in a Creon-like position. He is certainly not a tyrant, for he accedes to and even vindicates the will of the Northern demos, but in so doing he establishes himself as a leader of those who refuse to bury properly the rebellious dead sons. The idea that he is simply silent on the matter is not tenable. The surrounding dead are there. If anything could count as a nonsuperstitious confrontation with the dead, this would be it. In the fields of Gettysburg, Lincoln’s use of the expression “these honored dead” has to mean these and not those.

11. It is in the nature of confrontation that there is no third option: one may accede to the demand; one may refuse it; but trying to ignore it ends up being a form of refusal. Consider the beggar who asks one for money. It is illusory to think that saying nothing explicit (and doing nothing) about the Confederate dead could count as mere abstention.
Lincoln says: “The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here” (“FT,” p. 263). From the context it is inescapable that Lincoln intends “they” to refer to the Union dead. His claim is false in two ways. First, the Gettysburg Address is long remembered—and it will be remembered for as long as American history continues to matter. Second, the opposition between “what we say” and “what they did” cannot be sustained. Insofar as we can never forget what they did, it will be via an interpretation of what happened and why it mattered. It is difficult to know how we would remember these battles without the Gettysburg Address to frame them. Of course, there are always the antiquarian interests of who stood where when, who shot whom, and how they fell. There is an aesthetic dimension that fascinates people in scenes of death and destruction. But as to the impossibility of forgetting—“we can never forget”—there must be a meaning—“what they did here”—that serves as an imperative to remember. Such a meaning is what the Gettysburg Address purports to offer.

But what about those who do not fall under the term they: those who fought against they whom we can never forget? The Gettysburg Address is officially silent on the matter, but again—given the situation, it cannot leave them out. We the descendants are enjoined to remember “the brave men, living and dead, who struggled here,” those who have “consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract” (“FT,” p. 263). The Confederate dead are excluded from these descriptions. We are to remember them, if at all, as giving the occasion for the bravery and dedication of the Union soldiers whom “we can never forget.” In this way, the “we can never forget” becomes itself a form of forgetting.

7. Dedication

The aim of the Gettysburg Address is to shift the audience’s understanding of what this dedication is about. The audience came to the ceremony thinking they were at the dedication of a cemetery, but Lincoln argues that the cemetery needs no further act of dedication. Rather, we should see the battles, the war, and the bravery of these men as providing the occasion for us to dedicate ourselves.

It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we
here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.
[“FT,” p. 263, my emphasis]

In what sense shall our resolutions have anything to do with whether or not these dead shall have died in vain? Does the value and meaning of their lives depend on what we resolve to do next?

The most attractive interpretation of Lincoln’s words is, I think, this: The brave men who struggled and died here—meaning, for him, the Union soldiers—did so because they had dedicated themselves to the founding ideals of this country, the principles of equality and freedom as realized in a democratic republic. They were willing to risk their lives for these ideals; they died so that these ideals might continue to endure, realized in this nation. If, then, we now dedicate ourselves to maintaining these ideals we continue the unfinished project to which they dedicated themselves. Through our continued efforts the ideals maintain a life that transcends any of our individual lives, and that transcendence gives meaning to our mortal lives insofar as in the limited time we are (or were) alive, we dedicated our lives to those ideals. The dead Union soldiers gave their lives so that these ideals would survive—and by now so dedicating ourselves, we contribute to the success of their fundamental project.

But I worry about framing that thought in terms of our resolving that they should not have died in vain. The real issue for us is not whether they shall have died in vain but whether we shall. The suggestion that the meaningfulness of the lives of the Union dead depends on our future resolve edges in the direction of a guilt-based commitment; as though the issue is what I owe to the dead, as opposed to what I owe to the ideals that we commonly seek to instantiate.

The Confederate dead are, of course, left out of this dedicatory exchange. The unspoken thought is that they did die in vain—and there is nothing now to be done about it. There is an ambiguity in the thought “they . . . died in vain.” Slavery is a terrible evil, and it is altogether good that attempts to sustain it were vain. Insofar as dying “in vain” means they died fighting for a cause that turned out to have been in vain—true, and thank goodness. But I am struck by how easy it is to slip from that thought to the thought that their lives were in vain. These are different thoughts—the first true, the second presumptuous. If we only know one fact about a man, that he fought and died on the Confederate side at Gettysburg, how could we possibly be in a position to judge the meaningfulness of his life? But the mind slips so easily from one thought to the other it is difficult to know what we are thinking when we think, “they died in vain.” Is this slippage a sign that we lack appropriate conceptual resources to experience the re-
ality of enemy dead? Is there room to think of them as anything more than a basket of deplorables? The question is whether the culture lacks the capacity to create an intermediate imaginative space in which one can memorialize without thereby honoring.

8. Is the Gettysburg Address a Rhetorical Success?

In one sense the answer must be, obviously yes. The speech is an icon of American political oratory. I have spent most of my life feeling moved by it. But if we think of rhetorical success as determined by the power of a speech to get its auditors to move in the direction that the speech itself commends, then the answer to the question is less clear. The speech enjoins its audience to _dedicate themselves_ to the causes of equality and democracy in this nation. It enjoins the audience to _resolve_ that “these men” have not died in vain. I am not a social scientist, but my anecdotal sense in observing people listening to the Gettysburg Address is that the stirring language of the speech gets in the way of its purpose. People who hear the address feel stirred by the sense of this all being about a higher purpose, and being so stirred is pleasurable. It is what Søren Kierkegaard imagined as aesthetic pleasure. And aesthetic pleasure can take the place of ethical commitment. Rather than using the address as an occasion to dedicate oneself to the difficult work of promoting equality, one feels good in hearing about it. It can seem as though we are thereby participating in the dedication, and in that way an ethical task is covered over and sentimentality substituted for it.

What would it mean for the Gettysburg Address to be a rhetorical success? We the audience would have to recognize that being stirred is not enough. We would have to experience ourselves as _addressed_—that is, as confronted by the address. As with any confrontation there is no third option; one either accedes to the suggestion—the request or demand—or one does not. And we would have to recognize that Lincoln’s injunction requires sustained ethical and political commitment. If that is what is required, it is a serious question how often the Gettysburg Address has succeeded in its task.

9. A Fantastic Failure

There is a further question inherent to whether the Gettysburg Address might succeed. Is there something internally problematic in what Lincoln enjoins us to do? What if dedicating ourselves “to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced” requires that we undo and redo the very cemetery we are trying to dedicate? What if resolving that “these dead have not died in vain” requires that we cease concentrating solely on them and concentrate on finding significance in the
lives of those others who were dedicated to a despicable cause? The Gettysburg Address seems to pull us in contradictory directions. On the one hand we are enjoined to dedicate ourselves to promoting a Union constituted by ideals of freedom and equality. On the other hand, we are enjoined to do this by excluding (or tolerating the exclusion of) dead whose citizenly ancestors we share and whose descendants we insist be our fellow citizens. Lincoln was committed to the indivisibility of the United States. It would seem that, in consistency, one ought to insist that any purported act of secession is a fantasy, a failed act. But we participate in that fantasy insofar as we treat the Confederate dead as other than our fellow citizens.

It is a tempting thought that in the autumn of 1863 it was politically impossible for the people of Gettysburg and, more generally, of the North to provide a decent burial for the Confederate dead. A few remarkable voices argued that our common humanity dictated that we construct a proper, though separate, resting place for the enemy dead. But they spoke as lone voices. Though there was widespread lack of sympathy, it is, I think, a mistake to think of sympathy as the missing ingredient—as the lack that kept the Gettysburg population from providing a decent burial. To assume that we can isolate the missing thing is to assume that our imaginative and conceptual world is fine as it is. By contrast, I want to suggest that the problem of the unburied Confederate dead not being a problem indicates that all is not well with the conceptual and imaginative resources with which we experience reality and its difficulties.

10. Antigones

The route mapped out by the Gettysburg Address—glorifying “these honored dead,” excluding the others—had terrible political consequences.

12. See for example John Townsend Trowbridge’s and Governor Ruben Fenton’s comments quoted in Faust, This Republic of Suffering, pp. 237–38. See also Trowbridge, The South: A Tour of Its Battle-fields and Ruined Cities in 1865 (2015). Ironically, perhaps the most eloquent plea I have read came from General Meade, who led the Union forces at Gettysburg. Speaking in July 1869, he said of the Confederate dead:

Why should we not collect [the Confederate bodies] in some suitable place? I do not ask that a monument be erected over them. I do not ask that we should in any way indorse their cause or their conduct, or entertain other than feelings of condemnation for their cause. But, they are dead; they have gone before their Maker to be judged. In all civilized countries it is usual to bury the dead with decency and respect, and even to fallen enemies respectful burial is accorded in death. I earnestly hope that this suggestion may have some influence throughout this broad land, for this is only one among a hundred crowded battle fields. Some persons may be designated by the government, if necessary, to collect these neglected bones and bury them without commemorative monuments, but simply indicate that below sleep the misguided men who fell in battle for a cause over which we triumphed. [Quoted in Coco, A Strange and Blighted Land, p. 390 n. 89].
One immediate consequence was the creation of a sisterhood of Antigones in the South. As Faust recounts in *This Republic of Suffering*, women’s memorial associations sprung up throughout the South, and though their official mission was to rebury and honor the Confederate dead, they “became a means of keeping sectionalist identity not just alive but strong” (*TRS*, p. 238). “Ensuring the immortality of the fallen and of their memory,” Faust says, “became a means of perpetuating Southern resistance to Northern domination and to the reconstruction of Southern society” (*TRS*, p. 243). In the case of Gettysburg, the Hollywood Memorial Association of the Ladies of Richmond made it their business to secure proper reburials for Lincoln’s unintended audience (see *SBL*, pp. 134–48). The reinterments occurred eight to ten years after the battle, in the period 1871–1873. The reinterments on the Gettysburg side were directed by Rufus Weaver—the son of Samuel Weaver, who oversaw the original reburials of the Union dead at Gettysburg. Weaver sent the remains of 2,273 Confederate bodies to Hollywood Cemetery, and altogether he exhumed 2,935 Confederate bodies for reburial. He was never fully paid for his efforts (see *SBL*, pp. 140–41).

What the Southern Antigones held in common with the Northern Creons was an imaginative field in which the only adequate forms of memorialization necessarily included celebration, glorification, and idealization. Not only did each graveyard give occasion for resentment against the North, each provided a focus for glorifying the nobility and ideals of the “lost cause.” In his remarkable, painful book *Race and Reunion*, David Blight shows in detail how postwar efforts at reconciling North and South were often accomplished at the expense of promoting racial equality. It is a bitter irony, but our failure to find a respectful way to bury the Confederate dead (without thereby honoring them) contributed to sustaining racism in our country.

11. New Birth

At the end of his address, Lincoln concludes that we should use the occasion to “highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom” (“FT,” p. 263; my emphasis). Lincoln does not use the word “rebirth.” A rebirth suggests *repetition* of the original birthing act. But the first birth was fundamentally

flawed: male slaveholders celebrating equality for all. A “new birth” opens the hope of a re-creation without a bare repetition.

This form of hope is the essence of mourning. Mourning is the way we live with the dead such that—in remembering and continuing to imagine them—their memories sustain us to go on living in creative and life-fulfilling ways. The term mourning suggests health: it signifies facing the difficult reality of death, experiencing the sorrow of loss, yet being ultimately committed to a return to and embrace of life. We take it that this is what it is for humans to live well with respect to our own pasts. We may not know in detail what such living well consists in, but we know a characteristic failure: namely, being stuck in the past, haunted by it, feeling pressured to repeat it without quite understanding what we are doing. When he found such a condition in the individual, Sigmund Freud called it melancholia. And it at least raises the question of whether a society as a whole can get stuck in an analogous relation to its past.

Lincoln exhorted his audience to a new birth of freedom on the occasion of dedicating a cemetery. Cemeteries are places designed to encourage mourning. So Lincoln, in his words and in his deed—standing just there to give the Gettysburg Address—linked mourning in the broad sense of using the past as the basis for a new birth in freedom with mourning in the narrow sense of relating to these dead, buried right here, in this cemetery. Why should the two go together? On a familiar interpretation, the sacrifice of “these honored dead” provides the occasion for us to dedicate ourselves to the ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy that are the founding ideals of America—even if we may only imperfectly realize what living in liberty, equality, and democracy consists in. But this interpretation leaves unexamined what constitutes the activity of dedicating ourselves. A sincere, self-conscious declaration is not sufficient. Dedicating ourselves must show up in a committed form of living that endures over time.


15. See for example Richard Rorty, Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Stanley Cavell, This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures After Emerson After Wittgenstein (Chicago, 1989); Wills, Lincoln at Gettysburg; and Burt, Lincoln’s Tragic Pragmatism.

16. As Kierkegaard has shown in so many of his works, it is not unusual for the feeling of sincerity in making a declaration to make one feel good—and that is the end of it. Again, that “heartfelt” moment of dedication is all too often overwhelmed by other desires and emotions. See for example Søren Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard: Concluding Unscientific Postscript, trans. and ed. Alastair Hanney (New York, 2009).
is a steadfastness we would need to achieve—and thus there are questions as to what such steadfastness amounts to and how we could ever achieve and sustain it. One can imagine national cemeteries as sites of return and renewal; places for our minds to wander, spaces for conversations with the dead as well as with the living. They could be places that facilitate acts of rededication over time, that give substance to the idea that we are indeed dedicating ourselves. But then what damage do we suffer, in our attempts at rededication, from the fact that the Confederate dead are by and large missing in public spaces dedicated to mourning? This is an erasure of memory in the social world analogous to repression that we find in individuals. Whatever we think about this ethically speaking, there is a further question of whether we could ever succeed in such a project. It may be a bitter irony—a lesson we do not want to learn—but the exclusion of Confederate dead from national places of mourning contributed to a separation of Northern and Southern cultures and to increased racism and inequality. In the South, Confederate dead have been idealized and glorified; in the North, many arrogantly look down on the South as ignorant and bigoted—and use that trope to exculpate themselves of racism in their own eyes. That exclusion has led to sentimentalism about the nobility of the Southern cause—a wistful nostalgia for what is “gone with the wind.” This is the return of the repressed in distorted form.

12. What Is It to Mourn a Lost Opportunity?

If we have been stuck in an unhealthy cultural imaginary in which we either remember (via idealization) or try to forget (by exclusion), how might we open up this choice? The question is whether there is room in our culture to develop shared forms of mourning that hold in abeyance—and thus give us some relief from—our normal practices of assigning praise and blame. It seems to me that the grammar of mourning a lost opportunity is importantly different from that of criticizing a lost opportunity. In criticizing a lost opportunity—in this case, the opportunity of providing dignified burial for the Confederate dead—we are committing ourselves to the idea that that opportunity was really there. We are saying that Lincoln could have and perhaps should have acted otherwise. This is the realm of moral judgment. By contrast, in mourning a lost opportunity, we need not insist that there were possibilities back then. We can simply leave that issue aside. We do not have to judge it either way. For in mourning we may take a Sabbath rest from the weekday practices of praise and blame. We can mull things over. The lost opportunity that we mourn may be nothing more than something we can imagine as we mourn an era that we wish to make our past. The emphasis here is not on judging others in the past.
but on imagining ourselves forward to a culture we can share. This is a realm of ethical imagination.\textsuperscript{17}

Mourning, I believe, is an activity of ethical imagination, and it thus bears a relation to the past different from that of history. Though history is of course a contested domain, broadly speaking, it is constituted by acceptance of certain responsibilities: to figure out what happened, to be responsive to reasons and evidence and thoughtful criticisms. Mourning too has responsibilities to the past—let us say for short, facing up to it—but it is also an arena of play, of imagined conversations and utterly fanciful what ifs. It is a mode in which we can talk and listen to ghosts, can let memories take on a life that would not be allowed under the constraints of being realistic. While play is in progress, a certain freedom from being brought back to reality is tolerated, sometimes encouraged.\textsuperscript{18} Mourning may be heartfelt and unbearably sad, but there is also a dimension of playing with the dead. And playing with the past. The aim of mourning is to mourn but then eventually to rejoin life, perhaps reanimating forms of living that had become automatic—perhaps opening up new imaginative routes in life.

This is a realm that tends to go missing, almost without notice. I shall close with one example taken from the potentially fruitful struggles that are going on now over naming, renaming, commemoration, and memory. Consider this \textit{Wall Street Journal} account of the conflict concerning the removal of the statue of Lee in Charlottesville: “Supporters of the symbols say they want to honor Civil War bravery and portray history fully, however unpleasant. Critics say the symbols whitewash the region’s past of slavery and segregation.”\textsuperscript{19} I could have picked any number of other examples from a mainstream newspaper trying to cover both sides of a conflict. The rhetoric of the passage—“Supporters say . . . Critics say”—supports the illusion that all sides are being taken into account and that thus nothing is missing. The real problem here is not that there might be yet another side that needs to be reported but that this framework supports the illusion that


the realm of praise and blame is all there is. So framed, the struggle does not allow room for other forms of imaginary activity.

“Supporters of the symbols say they want to honor Civil War bravery.” But what would it be to do this? Supporters assume they know—it would be to leave the statues in place—but the question is difficult and requires thought and imagination. There is a tradition going back to Socrates that insists that bravery requires more than standing fast or taking calculated risks in front of a warlike enemy. It also requires good judgment. A brave person needs to understand the cause she or he is fighting for, and it needs to be a good cause. On this line of thought, those who stand fast for a terrible cause—in this case, slavery—could not be brave. At best they are tragically mistaken. Similarly, those young men who went off to war in a haze of adolescent confusion and passion could not be brave—even if their side supported a good cause—because their understanding of what they were doing was so limited. To be sure, this is a severe criterion, and there may be good reasons for relaxing the standard. But even entertaining it makes it problematic whom we would honor, or why, if we set out to honor Civil War bravery. Simply leaving the statues in place could not be an answer to this problem.

Suppose that we relax that standard and recognize as “brave” those who stood fast for their cause and took risks for their side. If this is what bravery has become, there is a new question: why should we honor that? Remember it, take account of it in a historical reckoning, yes. But if those are the tasks of memorialization, it is doubtful that simply leaving the statue in place could be a way to accomplish them.

“Critics say the symbols whitewash the region’s past of slavery and segregation”: This criticism is correct. Monuments to Confederate soldiers were by and large installed twenty to eighty years after the end of the Civil War, and they aimed at idealization and glorification. The social context was one of racism, segregation, Jim Crow laws, and glorification of the “lost cause” of the Civil War. Critics are correct when they say that these monuments are not simply memories of our past—“however unpleasant”—but have themselves historical roots in the glorification of injustice. The monuments were never about portraying history fully—and to claim that that is the issue is not correct.

The problem for the critics is what to do about it. One lesson that can be drawn from the past few thousand years of warring with each other is that trying to get rid of memory by obliterating it tends not to work. The problems are driven underground and they emerge in some other form, still unresolved. These monuments too—along with their unjust glorifications—are part of our past. We need to create imaginative routes of de-
glorification and de-idealization that nevertheless allow us to remember. In this essay I have tried to exemplify this value that I am commending. But how we would continue and succeed at this task is a matter for poets and artists, writers and philosophers, willing to put their talent to good political use. It seems to me that one important lesson of Gettysburg—and of the Gettysburg Address—is that we have had limited practice in carving out a realm of imagination that we sorely need.