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."[1] 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

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1. Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," *Partial Answers* 1 (June 2003): 2–3.

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

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."[8] 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

8. Lincoln, letter to George G. Meade, 14 July 1863, *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings 1859–1865*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York, 1989), p. 479. This letter was not sent.

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."[9]

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."[10]

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

9. Lincoln, "Nicolay Copy of the Gettysburg Address, 1863," Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/exhibits/gettysburg-address/exhibition-items.html#obj4, p. 1.

10. Lincoln, "'Hay Draft' of the Gettysburg Address, 1863," Library of Congress www.loc.gov/exhibits/gettysburg-address/exhibition-items.html#obj5, p. 1

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.

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.[12] 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.[13] 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

13. See David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002).

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.[14] 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.[15] But this interpretation leaves unexamined what constitutes the activity of dedicating ourselves. A sincere, self-conscious declaration is not sufficient.[16] *Dedicating ourselves* must show up in a committed form of living that endures over time. There

14. See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1984), 24:243–58, and Jonathan Lear, *Freud* (New York, 2015).

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.[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.[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 *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."[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

17. For the distinction between the moral and the ethical see for example Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), esp. chap. 10, "Morality the Peculiar Institution," pp. 174–96. I have tried to bring together notions of mourning and play in Lear, *The Idea of a Philosophical Anthropology* (Assen, 2017). See also Hans W. Loewald, "Internalization, Separation, Mourning, and the Superego," in *Papers on Psychoanalysis* (New Haven, Conn., 1980), pp. 257–76.

18. See D. W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" and "The Location of Cultural Experience," in *Playing and Reality* (New York, 2005), pp. 1–34, 128–39. And see Lear, *The Idea of a Philosophical Anthropology*.

19. Cameron McWhirter and Jennifer Levitz, "In Fight over Confederate Symbols, Some Backers Feel New Unease," *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 Aug. 2017, www.wsj.com/articles/in-fight-over-confederate-symbols-some-backers-feel-new-unease-1502726503

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 deglorification 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.