

## *Critical Response*

### *I*

## Playing with the Dead: A Response to Jonathan Lear

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Jonathan Lear takes Cora Diamond's use of John Updike's phrase "the difficulty of reality" to mark "challenges to the mind's ability to encompass the reality it seeks to comprehend." "These," writes Lear, "are not *difficulties* in the ordinary sense of the term, meaning problems to be solved or resolved" (Jonathan Lear, "Gettysburg Mourning," *Critical Inquiry* 45 [Autumn 2018]: 97). Rather, they are "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" (quoted on p. 97).

Lear treats the famous Civil War battle and Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as difficult realities of this special kind—as confounding our "normal forms of explanation" and challenging contemporary American political life, whose coherence depends on a shared grasp of Gettysburg's meaning (p. 98).

The issues are unquestionably important. But Lear's way of raising them is itself significant because, for him, the issues remain murky if assessed only on the basis of established facts or beliefs or opinions. We need something other than historical knowledge or moral judgment—an addition Lear calls "ethical imagination"—in order to better grasp the issues at stake (p. 119). The view that thinking about our reality can require us to exercise a power for ethical imagination, or speculative thinking, beyond available theoretical and practical resources is now under tremendous pressure in

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the humanities. Lear's essay offers a valuable chance to test our entitlement to such thinking. If such speculation is to be more than idle—capable of projecting claims to knowledge into the arena of democratic judgment—then it must sustain and profit from counterpoints of the sort that I will try to offer here.

1

First, a summary of Lear's essay.

For Lear, the difficulty of Gettysburg arises from two conjoined factors. First, "there was a terrible breach in our familiar forms of living with the dead" in the aftermath of Gettysburg; the dead were too numerous, brothers mixed in as enemies (p. 99). Second, "sensory experiences were overwhelming—visual, tactile, and olfactory" (p. 100). This "retch-making, suffocating, disgusting, terrifying smell" is experienced as a demand to "understand this reality" (p. 101).

These are two sides of the same difficulty: living with the dead. Although this challenge presented itself at Gettysburg in distinct ways, it is not unique to Gettysburg—"the sense that we need a ritual in order to live well with the dead strikes deep in our humanity" (p. 100). This need is both primordial and historically indexed to Gettysburg in significant ways.

On the one hand, Lear is "troubled by a sense that something primordial went wrong" and that "we as a country remain haunted by it" (p. 97).<sup>1</sup> The need to care for the dead is primordial, Lear means, insofar as it not only bespeaks a custom or family duty but also goes to the heart of human self-understanding. If the (ancient) family's most sacred duty is to bury its own dead, this is because the ancient family takes shape around a primordial need to make sense of individual mortality.

On the other hand, there lies the historical exclusion of the dead Confederate soldiers from burial at Gettysburg and Lincoln's tacit endorsement of this. A moral and politically objectionable train of consequences follow. "It is a bitter irony," writes Lear, "but our failure to find a respectful way to

1. "This is an instance of a wrong so elemental that I suspect it is prior to any law that might forbid or explain it" (p. 111). One sees what Lear means; the "wrong" of failing to care for the dead hardly seems mere flouting of local custom. But do other wrongs belong on a list of the "elemental-primordial," and how do we determine the parameters of such a list? More on this shortly.

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bury the Confederate dead (*without* thereby honoring them) contributed to sustaining racism in our country” (p. 116).

Given this, our current political task, according to Lear, is to create “imaginative routes of de-glorification and de-idealization that nevertheless allow us to remember” (pp. 120–21). This would entail the recognition that living with the dead means not just carrying out certain obligations—say, disposing of corpses in sanctioned ways—but also psychologically dynamic reflection on the meaning and worth of those obligations.

To this end, Lear calls for “carving out a realm of imagination”—a job, he thinks, “for poets and artists, writers and philosophers, willing to put their talent to good political use” (p. 121). By “political use,” Lear means creative activity that would not only be received as artistic work but which would furnish ways for us all to remember without thereby honoring.

## 2

A distinctive feature of Lear’s essay is its insistence on *both* the primordial and the historically-specific dimensions. I mention this upfront because one could read Lear’s essay more straightforwardly than I will do—namely, as *only* a lament about our current political impasse, its connection to Gettysburg and its potential melioration. On such a reading, “Gettysburg Mourning” decries America’s failure of moral-political imagination—a self-division between an arrogantly condescending North and a South that, stung by that condescension, retreats in bad conscience into its casting as a “basket of deplorables” (p. 114). Although Lear’s essay lends itself to such an interpretation, I want to take up “Gettysburg Mourning” as more than a high-minded scolding. For I share Lear’s sense of primordial wrongs as our historical-contemporary impasse—an interconnection between a specific political impasse and matters of general human significance.

At issue generally, or so I will argue, is whether a sharable human present can make its own past intelligible, and thereby livable, at a moment when the establishment of facts and received practical wisdom seem unable to make this possible. Can what Lear calls “ethical imagination”—or speculative thinking—project itself beyond areas of established knowledge and morality, into a space of broader social judgment, by engaging the specific issues raised at Gettysburg?

These are the stakes that I want to address.

## 3

A first question: Can we simply imagine our way forward, through poetic-creative acts turned to political ends, as Lear urges?

Judging by the sheer quantity of politically concerned artistry, many feel themselves capable of performing such healing. And perhaps—when he

summons artists and writers to “carve out a realm of imagination we sorely need”—Lear is just calling for more ethically imaginative spectacles or discourses (p. 121). But—given that our culture is saturated with compelling sights and sounds, ready to expand our imagination toward any number of political ends—if that is all Lear means, then he is asking us to bring coals to Newcastle.

For evidence that Lear has something else in mind, consider this passage:

Mourning . . . 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. . . . 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. . . . While play is in progress, a certain freedom from being brought back to reality is tolerated, sometimes encouraged. Mourning may be heartfelt and unbearably sad, but there is also a dimension of playing with the dead . . . perhaps opening up new imaginative routes in life. [P. 119]

Here, again, the broader issue: How to live with the past when established historical knowledge and received practical wisdom seem unable to make this possible? We need artists and poets, Lear wants to say, to perhaps open new imaginative routes out of a difficult past, so that we can remember traumas without having to repeat them.

The need seems undeniable. But the urgency of the need does nothing to guarantee that the imaginative talents of poets or philosophers can be bidden to satisfy it.

As an example, consider Maya Lin’s Vietnam Memorial—which has arguably managed more than any other American public monument to confront, in the work, the task of memorializing without glorifying to which Lear enjoins us. Yet Lin herself doubts that whatever work memorials do results from calls for artistic-imaginative efforts. “[Memorials] are not authored as a rule. The monuments happen. They are practically phenomena once they go out into the public domain.”<sup>2</sup>

I do not deny that artistry sometimes satisfies political ends in the way Lear wants. I wonder, rather, whether Lear’s *call* for such advancement can be straightforwardly heeded. Can imaginative work be directed or bidden and still be credible in the required sense? Here is John Berger

2. Maya Lin, “Open Discussion,” interview with The Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities in *Grounds for Remembering: Monuments, Memorials, Texts*, ed. Christina M. Gillis (Berkeley, 1995), p. 39, [townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/publications/OP03\\_Grounds\\_for\\_Remembering.pdf](http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/publications/OP03_Grounds_for_Remembering.pdf)

expressing my worry, conversely, writing of Russian war photographs from the 1940s:

What makes these photographs so tragic and extraordinary is that, looking at them, one is convinced that they were not taken to please generals, to boost the morale or a civilian public. . . . They were images addressed to those suffering what they depict. And given this integrity towards and with their subject matter, such photographs later became a memorial.<sup>3</sup>

The notion that artistic-poetic talents are instrumentally conjurable toward ethical-political ends seems insufficiently attentive to how imaginative works form complicated responses to—or complex matrixes for understanding—ethical crises as the very sort of problems that do not necessarily admit political solutions. If imaginative works sometimes manage to do politically important work, then it is doubtful they do so by being directed by anyone to do this. In this sense, Lear’s directive seems to me idle, perhaps even a misdirection.

#### 4

My doubts are also rooted in my sense that mourning—Lear’s paradigm for ethically imaginative “play”—is itself forged in, or as, insufficiencies in ritual ways of caring for the dead. The Sophoclean-mythic framework employed by Lear can make this difficult to see. For, in *Antigone*, everything turns on the raw act of burial—“something *done*.”<sup>4</sup> Whether or how Antigone mourns Polyneices in Lear’s playfully “imaginative” sense is less clear. There is an unacknowledged tension in Lear’s essay between the sheer doing of funerary rites and the imaginative work of mourning. I do not mean to suggest that one of our finest readers of Sigmund Freud is unaware of such a tension. I mean, rather, that the Sophoclean-mythic scaffold on which Lear relies might prevent a proper framing of the issues. (This seems to have been Freud’s view, too, insofar as he turns in *Mourning and Melancholia* to *Hamlet*, rather than to Sophocles.)

Now, perhaps all Lear means is that some gesture toward the Confederate dead at Gettysburg would have sent the right signal: namely, that the copresence of the South in our nation was worth fighting for. In that case, the required mourning need not have been all that imaginative—somber words, officiously uttered by Lincoln, might have done the trick. But if that

3. John Berger, “Uses of Photography,” in *Selected Essays of John Berger* (New York, 2008), p. 44. My thanks to Adam Rosen-Carole for this reference.

4. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Michael Inwood (New York, 2018), p. 178 n. 452.

is Lear's point—in which case Lear would be lamenting the fact that it is now too late for this, too late to avoid the present racism and antagonism that he sees following Gettysburg—then he is doing no more than expressing an exorbitant wish for a past he knows cannot be ours.

But Lear is not only lamenting Lincoln's failure to avert subsequent racism and antagonism. He is reckoning with this antagonism as part of an inheritance, along with the monuments to the Confederacy, that we cannot simply wish away.<sup>5</sup> So, again, the basic issue: How to take up that difficult past in the present with an awareness of the inadequacy of our inherited ways carrying this out?

Like Freud, I find myself turning to William Shakespeare, rather than to Sophocles, for help. For, in *Hamlet*, mourning as psychic-imaginative play (the problem of melancholia) emerges when mourning as routine objective duty proves insufficient. Old Hamlet was properly buried; yet, Hamlet's mourning has just begun. So, it is not that funerary rites went undone, leaving ethically imaginative human beings to somehow pick up the pieces (with the help of artists or poets, say). Rather, ethically imaginative human beings themselves appear on the scene, and their ethical imaginations develop wildly, as bearers of insufficient rituals.

Another upshot, as *Hamlet* shows, is that "playing with the dead" is not only, as Lear suggests, an imaginative activity in which "a certain freedom from being brought back to reality is tolerated" (p. 119). This imaginative dimension can also take shape as a very real, corporeal—"corpse-oreal"—playing with the dead: lugging Polonius's guts, mistreating Ophelia's corpse at her funeral, tossing about disinterred skulls.

Contrary to Lear's urging, the ethical imagination specific to mourning may be incapable of ameliorating the primordial wrong he identifies in the aftermath of Gettysburg—at least, insofar as mourning as imaginative play itself can entail imaginative (mis)treatment of corpses.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, Lear's focus on imaginative forms of mourning—as how we playfully take up the past in the present—might be itself constraining our understanding of matters. Mourning can remain an insuperable psychic and objective need without thereby remaining up to the task of adequately mediating our collective self-understanding.<sup>7</sup>

5. "These monuments too—along with their unjust glorifications—are part of our past" (p. 120).

6. See Paul A. Kottman, "On Hamlet," *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare: Disinheriting the Globe* (Baltimore, 2009), pp. 44–77 and "Self-Uncertainty as Self-Realization" in *Shakespeare's Hamlet: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Tzachi Zamir (New York, 2018).

7. In part 2 of Kottman, *Love as Human Freedom* (Stanford, Calif., 2017), pp. 23–70, I argue that care for the dead fails, over time, to meet the fundamental demands of sense-making that it was called upon to perform and suggest implications of this for our self-understanding.

## 5

At the center of Lear's essay is a critique of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

To write a critique of the Gettysburg Address is—for an American readership—a bit like insulting your best friend's mother. And Lear goes so far as to suggest that the address sowed "division" rather than union, that Lincoln "did not try" to remember the Confederate dead, that the author of the Emancipation Proclamation contributed indirectly to the perpetuation of racism in the US (pp. 104, 109).

It is hard to escape the sense that, "in mourning [Lincoln's] lost opportunity" at Gettysburg, Lear cannot quite let go of a wildly implausible counterfactual (p. 118). Had Lincoln sowed inclusion rather than exclusion, then untold historical suffering could have been avoided. Such a notion is—and I take this to be self-evident and so will not argue the point—preposterous.

So, Lear also invites us to suspend moral judgments about Lincoln. Let us follow him in treating Gettysburg as mythical, not just as historical:

In criticizing . . . the opportunity of providing dignified burial for the Confederate dead . . . 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 can simply leave that issue aside. . . . For in mourning we may take a Sabbath rest from the weekday practices of praise and blame. . . . This is a realm of ethical imagination. [Pp. 118–19]

Recall Aristotle's distinction between history and tragedy; the latter surpasses the former in raising issues of universal significance.<sup>8</sup> Our need for tragic myth is most pressing when historical knowledge or collective moral wisdom does not suffice to make the past inheritable.

While Lear does not write a tragedy, he does cast one. Imagine, says Lear, an unburied Confederate soldier is Polyneices, from the southern town of Thebes. The aftermath of Gettysburg is "the stuff of Sophoclean tragedy," and "the creation of a sisterhood of Antigones in the South" is forged around the reinterment of their Confederate-Polyneices brothers (pp. 111, 116). Lincoln "put himself in a Creon-like position" by establishing himself as "a leader of those who refuse to bury properly the rebellious dead sons" (p. 111).

Lear sheepishly writes that "it might at first seem utterly wrong, unfair, even obscene to compare him to the tyrant Creon," as Lincoln is a "great statesman of democracy" (p. 111). But what if this casting were pursued more thoroughly than Lear envisions?

8. See Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (New York, 1997).

Consider that—according to Lear—Lincoln stands diametrically opposed to the loosely Hegelian Creon in one key respect. In conceiving the conflict “as a great civil war,” Lear’s Lincoln did not insist on the primacy of political decree over family duty. Instead, Lincoln saw the “union” as “a family affair.” “If it is ‘our fathers’ who founded this nation,” writes Lear, “then it would seem that those who fought each other were ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’” (p. 110). (To be clear: I do not mean that the historical Lincoln or Civil War historians need to agree with Lear on this point.)

Lear notes, “it is internal to the idea of family that you are stuck with them. . . . You may not want to live with them. . . . You may be forever estranged from them—but that does not unmake them as family” (pp. 110–11). Family cannot be unmade, not even by death. This “being stuck with one another” transcends whatever we do in life. Family is stuck together forever, living and dead.

So, the question is: How to treat those with whom we are stuck, living and dead?

Lear’s answer to this question is sympathetic to Antigone’s view of things. Lear sees Lincoln as “Creon-like” because Lincoln, betraying his *family* rhetoric, turns “that unburied soldier into a Polynices” by excluding him (p. 111). Like Antigone, Lear sees the family bond as organized around care for the dead—again, the rights of burial and mourning are a primordial (prepolitical) human way to acknowledge corpses as ours.

But what if Lincoln’s Creonesque ethical imagination were wider than Lear recognizes? What if Lincoln was trying to answer Lear’s questions? How are we to treat those with whom we are stuck but from whom we are perhaps forever estranged—over the issue of slavery, for instance?

For Lear and Antigone, the deepest answer to such questions follows the family member’s death. Antigone: Bury the brothers. Lear: Bury them; mourn imaginatively by remembering without honoring. Both answers are constrained by a notion of family that grasps the brother only as dead. From Lear’s and Antigone’s perspective, only once the brother has died can the ethical stakes be adequately addressed.

From Creon’s (or Lear’s Lincoln’s) point of view, however, there is another option—one that grasps family as living and breathing. Lincoln’s answer to the same question is: Kill them. Kill them because they are family and leave them to the vultures. After all, if they are someone’s else’s family, then they are someone else’s problem. And to emphasize that treatment of family is not wholly determined by grasping individuals as *dead*—burial is withheld; mourning, foregone.

Fratricide and a refusal of the rights of burial may be ethically awful, but it is not for that reason ethically unimaginative. Fratricide may even

be excusable, as Niccolò Machiavelli famously argued, when the founding of the republic is at stake.<sup>9</sup> If republics matter—and if limiting family bonds is a way to measure that—then Lear’s Lincoln might have embraced his casting as Creon with gusto.

My point in indulging Lear’s speculative reading of a mythic Lincoln—in the face of historical scholarship that might have reservations about presenting matters in this way—is to demonstrate that a problem with Lear’s reading of Lincoln is not that it is too imaginative but that it is perhaps not imaginative enough. It is not imaginative enough because it might fail to consider how civil war and fratricidal desecration can be politically and ethically imaginative activities.

In fact, perhaps we should regard the American Civil War itself as a struggle to grasp another difficult reality, another primordial wrong.

## 6

Lear asks: “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?” Lear answers his own question by suggesting that we detect such failures when we “come up against something sickening in its lack of fit” (p. 108).<sup>10</sup> Such “experiences pressure us to understand this reality even if . . . they push us away from it all in disgust” (p. 101). A pile of unburied Confederate brothers counts for Lear as the sickening detection of a failure of collective ethical imagination.

Still, the uncomfortable fact remains: The pile was not treated as unfittingly sickening by the founders of the Gettysburg cemetery. This might mean that the cemetery’s founders behaved barbarically, that Gettysburg cemetery, if not Lincoln himself, memorializes barbarism. The reader might be forgiven for thinking that Lear is making just this accusation because he believes that “there hangs” over the cemetery “the specter of a primordial wrong . . . so elemental that . . . it is prior to any law that might

9. See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, trans. Ninian Hill Thompson (London, 1883), pp. 41–45.

10. Lear writes squeamishly of “Lincoln’s olfactory consciousness” (p. 101). But my hunch is that the opening of Colm Tóibín’s *House of Names*, which begins in Clytemnestra’s voice, gets us closer to Lincoln’s “olfactory consciousness” than Lear does:

I have been acquainted with the smell of death. . . . Maybe the smell has entered my body and been welcomed there like an old friend come to visit. . . . I gave orders that the bodies should remain in the open under the sun a day or two until the sweetness gave way to stench. And I liked the flies that came (Colm Toibin, *House of Names* [New York, 2017], p. 1).

Lincoln—who must have visited many battlefields as president—would have been acquainted with the smell of death.

forbid or explain it” (p. 111). But, if so, then one might expect Lear to call for the historical materialism outlined by Walter Benjamin: “There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. . . . Barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. The historical materialist therefore . . . regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet Lear does not present Gettysburg as “history written by the victor” in need of against-the-grain brushing. Instead, Lear is convinced that the cause of the South was wrong. This means that Lear prompts a different question to Benjamin’s: How to discern barbarism in times of civil war?

For Thomas Hobbes, another name for uncivilized, apolitical barbarism is Civil War. And Lear indicates: “there was widespread fury throughout the North at the Southern rebellion” at the time of the Gettysburg cemetery’s founding. He acknowledges the “desire, emotion, and will” to kill the surviving Confederate soldiers, rather than to mourn or bury the dead ones (p. 108). “There are plenty of historically grounded reasons” for Lincoln’s actions and for the war itself. Lear emphasizes that he has “no interest” in contesting these reasons (p. 108). “Slavery is a terrible evil, and it is altogether good that attempts to sustain it were in vain” (p. 113).

Slavery is indeed terrible. But is slavery, for Lear, as terrible as the primordial wrong of denying burial rights? Is slavery an elemental wrong, barbaric? If there are two primordial wrongs, then there can be more than two. I worry that Lear’s position leaves us with *one* primordial wrong—denying burial rights—a position that relegates *other* wrongs, especially chattel slavery, to the status of “terrible” rather than primordially wrong.

For Lear, however, the question “arises at a different level”:

My question is: Does this entire intelligible framework—of emotions and decisions, interest and lack of interest, strategies . . .—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 . . . *concerns a restricted field of imaginative possibilities for living with the dead.*” [P. 108; my emphasis]

Lear’s train of thought seems to be that a restricted field of imaginative possibilities for living with the dead perhaps constrains the “entire intelligible

11. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” trans. Harry Zohn, in vol. 4 of *Selected Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), p. 392.

framework” within which we adjudicate the Civil War, Gettysburg, Lincoln’s actions. In other words, our ability to judge the “reasons” at issue—“good reasons” such as abolishing “the terrible evil of slavery,” as well as whatever actions such “reasons” might demand—is perhaps constrained by our field of imaginative possibilities for living with the dead.

Perhaps. But for this to be true, or to have the force of an argument rather than conjecture, we would need to know why “our field of imaginative possibilities of living with the dead” is more constraining, say, than the field of imaginative possibilities for living with chattel slaves, with the trafficking of human beings, with the difficult realities of life on the plantations.

In suggesting that the very intelligibility of the reasons for the Civil War and for “Lincoln’s decisions and actions”—chief among them, chattel slavery’s abolition—is perhaps constrained by our imaginative possibilities of living with the dead, Lear seemingly infers that the primordial wrong of denying burial rights “show[s] up as a source of suffering” somehow more “elemental” than the wrong of slavery (pp. 108, 108–9, 110). Indeed, so much more elemental that it determines the entire horizon within which the cause of abolition, and the “decisions and actions” such a cause might demand, becomes intelligible.

Let me say at once: I do not believe that Lear—or anyone—could offer an argument that makes good on such a suggestion. But because Lear does not offer an argument—he only implies the inference, perhaps inadvertently—I will not offer a counterargument. Let me, instead, raise a question in return—for the sake of detecting a form of life’s failure of imagination from within.

Referring to what he calls Lincoln’s “nonsuperstitious *confrontation* with the dead,” Lear writes: “It is in the nature of confrontation that there is no third option” (p. 111). In Lear’s view, the basic confrontation of Gettysburg is between mourning inclusively, on one hand, and, on the other, “Lincoln’s use of the expression ‘these *honored* dead’ . . . to mean *these* and *not those*,” Northern, not Confederate. The fundamental confrontation at issue—the basic *contemporary* ethical conflict thrown up by Gettysburg, for Lear—lies between exclusionary mourning and a capacious form of mourning, “in which one can memorialize without thereby honoring” (p. 114).

I agree with Lear that failures of moral imagination abound and that the “activity of ethical imagination . . . bears a relation to the past different from that of history” (p. 119). But we cannot adequately face up to the difficulty realities at Gettysburg unless and until we clearly grasp the conflict for what it is and remains.

So, it is over the nature of Gettysburg's conflict that I wish to express a last disagreement with Lear.

## 7

As I see it, Gettysburg and its aftermath reveal a conflict between two primordial wrongs, two difficult realities, which challenge our imaginative possibilities for living with them.

One wrong is civil war itself, latent in Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes* or Sophocles's *Antigone*: the tragedy of civil war and fraternal conflict that, because both civil *and* familial, confounds our ways of determining when violence is legitimate, if killing is slaughter. A first-order question for any political community is determining conditions under which the state has a legitimate claim to coercive violence. Any actual civil war indicates the unsettledness of that question, hence the tenuousness of the state. Contemporary American gun culture is another manifestation.

As such, civil war also confounds our ways of reckoning with what the living owe the dead. When the state cannot decide matters, civil strife presses the primordial question of what the living owe the dead as an issue of familial or tribal or racial division. What is owed by which living to which dead?

Gettysburg compounds this ancient wrong, as already indicated, insofar as the American Civil War may itself also be a practical attempt to grasp—to come to grips with—*another* wrong that is at least as wrong as civil war itself.

This other wrong is the historically unprecedented wrong of the Atlantic slave trade, and its ongoing ramifications, from global capitalism to entrenched racism to colonialism. Lear refers twice in his essay to slavery. But we are talking not about slavery as some ahistorical abstraction, nor are we talking about ancient forms of slavery or servitude. We are talking about the unprecedented character of the chattel slave trade. American slavery remains a “difficult reality” all its own, one that continues to confound our ways of making sense of it.

Lear refers to “a sense of inexpressibility” at Gettysburg. “Language runs up against its limits” (p. 99). In that spirit, let me close by citing Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1844 “An Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies”: “Language must be raked, the secrets of the slaughter-houses and infamous holes that cannot front the day, must be ransacked, to tell what negro-slavery has been.”<sup>12</sup>

12. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “An Address . . . on . . . the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies,” in *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven, Conn., 1995), p. 9.

If we have yet to adequately reckon with Gettysburg then this is not only, as Lear urges, because we have yet to expand our imaginations toward new forms of mourning. More probably, we have not expanded our ethical imagination enough to grasp, truly grasp, the wrong of chattel slavery.

The pain demanded by *that* expansion of our ethical imagination remains, four score and seven years and more, at the heart of our conflict.