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Final Paper

*This Republic of Suffering:
Death and The American Civil War*
A Review

“The work of death was Civil War America’s most fundamental and most demanding undertaking.”¹

Summary Overview

Drew Gilpin Faust’s *This Republic of Suffering: Death and The American Civil War* is an ambitious and thought provoking read. Faust tackles a subject that has not been widely written about: the “death ways” of the American Civil War generation.²

Faust divides her study of the newly transformed *ars moriendi* into nine areas in the chapters that follow her preface entitled *the Work of Death*. The actual process of an individual soldier’s death is explained in *Dying*. The war’s destructive force on its participants and the conditioning of soldiers to kill is retold in *Killing*; the struggle to provide the dead with acceptable burial in *Burying*; the challenges in identifying the dead in *Naming*; the process of mourning and its transformative powers on mourners in *Realizing*; the aftermath of the war and its affects on the traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs concerning death in *Believing and Doubting*; the tremendous work and responsibility of the government in caring for the dead, in *Accounting*; and the struggle of Americans to comprehend the vastness of destruction is described in *Numbering*. Faust concludes her work with a powerful and sobering conclusion in the book’s epilogue, *Surviving*.

The Work of Death

Faust assures us that death’s significance for the Civil War generation further became more central at this time; the war’s massive and unprecedented carnage created a “violation of prevailing assumptions” about mid-century death ways: the questions of who should die, when, where and under which circumstances” were radically and irrevocably transformed.³ For instance, a soldier was five times likely to die than if he had not entered military service.⁴ No longer an

¹ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and The American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008), xviii.

² “Death ways” is a term used by David Hackett Fischer throughout his work *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* to describe a culture’s rites, rituals and attitudes towards death and dying.

³ Faust, xii

⁴ *Ibid.*

experience undertaken by individuals or families, mourning became one of “the most widely shared” experiences of the war.⁵

Dying and Killing

Faust first explores the work of death in the role of the participants of death, those soldiers experiencing the “business end” of the work of death as active “diers.” Most notable in the process of preparing for death was an attempt to continue the traditions of *ars moriendi* in the face of this destructive war. The Good Death was central to the mid-nineteenth century American experience, as men and women strove to prepare for the afterlife. In their wartime experience, dying became a central preoccupation; for the soldier it “assumed clear preeminence over killing” in his “emotional and moral universe.”⁶ The soldier needed to be both ready and willing to die; turning to culture, codes of masculinity, patriotism, and religion to fortify himself for that possibility of death.⁷

War challenged rites and practices that were not to be quickly undertaken, and as many soldiers were killed suddenly in the intense action of battle, their comrades made pains to write condolence letters to the deceased’s loved ones. Seeking to make absent loved ones “virtual witnesses to the dying moments they had been denied,” these soldiers attempted to “mend the fissures war had introduced into the fabric of the Good Death” for the families of the slain.⁸ Condolence letters usually addressed the deceased’s professions of religion; sudden death robbed many soldiers the opportunity to have “life-defining” deathbed experiences, in which they would otherwise reveal the status of their souls in their last earthly utterances.⁹ To reassure these families on the home front that their loved ones would indeed live on in spirit, comrades included detailed evidence of sanctified behavior displayed by the deceased.¹⁰ In short, the *ars moriendi* continued, though transformed; others acted as surrogates when comrades were dying and families could not be with them in this intimate process. Americans held “tenaciously to deeply rooted beliefs” enabling soldiers and their loved ones comprehend “a slaughter that was almost unbearable.”¹¹

Faust also gives us valuable insight into the human psyche in the process of killing. Soldiers are active in dispatching their enemy; human agency is required in war as killing is not a

⁵ Faust, xiii.

⁶ Faust, 6.

⁷ Faust, 5.

⁸ Faust, 15.

⁹ Faust, 15-18.

¹⁰ Faust, 22.

¹¹ Faust, 31.

passive process. Throughout her chapter on killing, Faust thoroughly proves her assertion that killing required intellectual, and psychological work, in overcoming religious and emotional constraints, and in adapting to the particular exigencies of war: technology, tactics, and logistics.¹² To some degree ideology, and principles of duty alongside reflexive killing (i.e. out of vengeance, or self-defense) seemed to legitimize the soldier's primary function: killing the enemy.¹³ Attempts to dehumanize the enemy played no small part in getting citizens of the republic to destroy the rebellion on one side, whereas it was central to Confederates in their warfare against African American soldiers; who in their view threatened the very foundations of Southern Civilization.¹⁴

Faust tells us that Black soldiers themselves approached the war's violence differently than their white contemporaries; they fought to define and claim their humanity in spite of the slave system that dehumanized slaves and freedmen alike.¹⁵ African American soldiers were fighting not to merely end a rebellion, but to balance accounts; they fought for "God, race, and country" to be equated with "righteousness, equality, and citizenship."¹⁶

War was not a natural disaster, but man-made; "the product of human choice and human agency."¹⁷ Faust describes soldiers who become changed men in the face of this unprecedented slaughter: they weep, or become calloused, numbed, hardened men. They repress their basic human feelings and their compassion, and some even start to enjoy killing; they become "machines...without moral compass or responsibility." They enter a state of "living death" that made even these survivors "casualties of war."¹⁸

Burying, Naming, Realizing

"What should be done with the body?"¹⁹ That is the primary focus of Faust's chapter *Burying*. The war produced so many casualties that the ability to simply dispose of them became a nightmare. The problem "defied both administrative imagination and logistical capacity." Faust explores the efforts to preserve the humanity of the dead and the living as they tackle this profound crisis: in what ways can decent burials or rituals befitting the dead be carried out?²⁰ Faust traces the various attempts to bury the dead ranging from makeshift cemeteries on or near

¹² Faust, 33, 38-42.

¹³ Faust, 34-37.

¹⁴ Faust, 43-47.

¹⁵ Faust, 47-48,53-55.

¹⁶ Faust, 53.

¹⁷ Faust, 55.

¹⁸ Faust, 58-59,60.

¹⁹ Faust, 61

²⁰ Faust, 62.

battlefields, to somewhat organized burying grounds established by field hospitals, to the first efforts to create specialized permanent military burial grounds. Also described here is the continual role of African Americans civilians and soldiers in ‘burial details.’ Further described are methods used for embalming and transportation of the deceased to their homes. Faust also discusses the evolution of military records-keeping for deceased soldiers starting with the somewhat idealistic General Order no. 33, and ending with descriptions of the more typical means employed: lists drawn from memory, or kept by company commanders and regimental chaplains. Further explained are the more common burial methods employed, ranging from mass graves, to the employment of blankets and knapsacks to bury comrades when coffins were not available. Faust further describes differing practices between the burial of officers and enlisted men or of Union or rebel dead.²¹ The government’s later attempt to locate and reinter many of these hastily buried soldiers in national cemeteries “acknowledged a new public importance for the dead.”²²

“The disposition of the Civil War Dead made an accurate accounting of the fallen impossible.” As a result thousands perished “without any record of their names,” merely marked on headstones by the word “Unknown.”²³ Faust’s chapter *Naming* illustrates how soldiers took pains to be identified and some of the more common problems experienced by those seeking to verify the fate of loved ones, and the later problem of identifying those whose remains were buried without any positive identification. Faust recognizes the vastly important (and in many narratives severely underrepresented) work of the US Sanitary Commission in its attempt to aid bereaved families, as they agonize with “incapacitating uncertainty” the fates of their loved ones.²⁴ Without *realizing* –to use her term- the fate of the soldier mourning is impossible for the spouse, child or parent; “Civil War fatalities belonged ultimately to the survivors.”²⁵ The public’s displays of mourning gave rise to new conventions or modifications of existing modes; in the blockaded South ingenuity grew out of necessity as Southern widows could not import the latest styles from Europe.²⁶ Perhaps the most important transformation Faust describes here is of the new roles taken on by the survivors: as widows, orphans, as a community- and even a nation of mourners.²⁷

²¹ Or in many cases the non-burial of rebel dead. Faust, 72-73.

²² Faust, 101.

²³ Faust, 102.

²⁴ Faust, 131.

²⁵ Faust, 143.

²⁶ Faust, 146-150.

²⁷ Faust, 162-163. President Lincoln’s death included.

Believing and Doubting

The war took a toll on the beliefs of soldiers and their families as the carnage destroyed beyond recognition or even annihilated bodies. Where had all those young men gone? What happens to the soul if a body ceases to exist...can it be resurrected on the Judgment Day? If God is benevolent why would He allow such horror to unfold? In *Believing and Doubting* Faust explores quintessential questions like these that wracked the minds of Civil War Americans as they wrestle with the new destructive powers unleashed by the war, as well as the consequences of that destruction. At first it seemed the religious conventions of the day fell short of the realities of the war. A transformation occurs however: earlier beliefs may have been “powerfully challenged,” but they also became “fervently reaffirmed” as the war progressed.²⁸ For many survivors and victims alike, death became redefined as “eternal life,” and heaven into a an “eternal family reunion.”²⁹ In this grim conflict a soldier’s death became to many “the vehicle of salvation” to achieve “God’s design of freedom,” for some white Northerners and for African Americans it served to achieve emancipation, and still to others it became the means to achieve “inspired nationhood.”³⁰

We are also given insight into the war’s transformative powers on the American literary mind. Bierce, Melville, Whitman, Dickinson, and other well-known figures sought to grasp meaning from the unimaginable slaughter; for many the “riddle of death” still eluded them; in the end, the war’s horror, its aftermath and its victims’ and survivors’ suffering “exceeded language and understanding.”³¹

Accounting and Numbering and Surviving

Death was omnipresent. In an era of quantitative fascination, counting seemed for some Americans a way to grasp the “magnitude of sorrow” and to reflect on the larger meaning of loss from individual grief to a national grief.³² Casualty reports, compiled from numerous federal and rebel sources were codified; statisticians revised and adjusted, corrected and retallied them, until the counts of Union and Confederate dead were generally agreed upon.³³ Where bodies no longer existed or could not be located, a deceased soldier’s name upon a list was for his survivors “like a

²⁸ Faust, 172.

²⁹ Faust, 177-180.

³⁰ Faust, 189-191

³¹ Faust, 209.

³² Faust, 250-251.

³³ Faust, 255.

name upon a grave,” perhaps a poor substitution, but nonetheless “a repository of memory,” and a “gesture of immortality;” these numbers and names “possessed a human face.”³⁴

Faust tells us that the shared suffering across the republic was one that transcended “persisting differences” pertaining to interpretations of race, citizenship, and nationhood. This realization of death and the attempt to honor the sacrifice of the citizen soldiers, federal and rebel alike, served as the “ground on which North and South would ultimately reunite.”³⁵ The establishment by Confederate widows, private citizens in the north, and the Federal government of cemeteries for the nation’s military dead led to a hitherto unseen memorialization of those that risk and sacrifice their lives for the state or the nation.³⁶

Mourners, both northern and southern became the instruments of the Civil War dead’s immortality, whilst the dead became a presence that could not be ignored,” a “constituency of the slain,” which acted as a “force” that shaped “American public life for at least a century to come.”³⁷

In the years after the war, at the very heart of the attempt to understand this carnage was a central twofold question that dominated the war’s popular culture: How could the meaning of so many deaths be understood and could an individual’s death continue to matter amid the loss of so many?³⁸ Counting the dead equalized rank, but numbers undermined individuality: “naming individualized the dead; counting aggregated them.”³⁹

Thesis

Drew Gilpin Faust certainly renders her evidence in a thoughtful and persuasive manner, carefully researching her points. Like a 19th century patchwork quilt, she threads together a composite masterpiece in which no strand is broken and no cord unwound. Few if any questions surface in what could certainly be deemed the definitive and exhaustive study on this topic. Faust proves her central thesis in each chapter while rendering careful evidence to prove each chapter’s own thesis.

The central theme of the work is that during this time period Americans undertook the work of death,” as active participants as agents of death as “killers” or as “diers,” as survivors, they undertake new identities, children into orphans, wives into widows; so too does society as a whole take on a new identity. The American Civil War generation’s experience in “working with

³⁴ Faust, 259-260.

³⁵ Faust, 209.

³⁶ Faust, xiii.

³⁷ Faust, 248-249.

³⁸ Faust, 262.

³⁹ Faust, 264.

death” irrevocably transformed American society, culture, and politics in what Faust calls “a broader republic of shared suffering.”⁴⁰

Learning Curve

Having already developed a considerable knowledge of the political and military aspects of the American Civil War, I found Faust’s book extremely informative in its depiction of what has in Civil War scholarship been an area of much needed expansion. While the war’s destructive effects on American civilization and society have of course been explored, the specific characteristics which emerged surrounding the culture of death and mourning during our greatest national crisis has not.

Faust takes a new approach to explaining the modernity ushered in by the war; whereas many readers can with much certitude point to the new weaponry and technologies or national institutions that arose from the conflict, Faust gives us perhaps a more relevant and poignant prognosis: The war created a “new and different moral universe,” where “unimaginable destruction” became “daily experience;” where “doubt threatened to overpower faith;” where “language seemed powerless to explain” and “humans unable to comprehend” the very meaning of life and death itself.⁴¹ These very feelings of grief, helplessness, insignificance, and loss immediately felt and shared by the people of the mid-nineteenth century United States is usually lost on the modern reader; Drew Gilpin Faust has artfully wrought this narrative so that these powerful sentiments resurface to the forefront of our minds.

Throughout Faust creates for us a vivid and macabre journey of citizens wrestling with the aftermath of this “world of death” created by the war. She introduces us to lesser known persons of great importance like Edmund Whitman of the US Army’s Quartermaster’s Department, who had traversed perhaps thirty thousand miles in his search for the dead or Confederate survivors like Mrs. William McFarland, who led the movement among women of the South to care for the Confederate dead. Still others enter the story, like the US Burial Corps and countless units of US Colored Troops who worked tirelessly to reclaim, identify, or reinter the hundreds of thousands of slain still littering the fields of epic battles and smaller skirmishes. These extraordinary men and women play an instrumental role in the nation’s struggle to identify, account for, and finally lay to rest the slain. Their journey is in many ways as momentous as the

⁴⁰ Faust, xiv-xv.

⁴¹ Faust, 267.

war that caused it. The story of the war's dead did not end with the end of hostilities, for the very meaning of the war had "come to inhere in its cost," in both the nation's value and importance.⁴²

The story of Arlington House and its iconic cemetery is never mentioned in this book; other cemeteries, perhaps lesser known to the general reader are given much coverage here to reemphasize how many plots of land had been set aside to accommodate so many bodies -Faust adeptly gives several examples of locations that serve as the final resting place of so many Union and Confederate dead and their exact numbers.

Something that was particularly surprising to me was the number of graves and makeshift cemeteries that were subject to degradations from vengeful Southrons; it was these desecrated graves of federal dead that served as the impetus for Generals commanding Southern departments like Major General George Thomas, and later the US Congress to resolve to secure "suitable burial places in which they may be properly interred."⁴³ It was in the face of this vandalism in which this newly found paternal obligation to the dead arose, culminating in to the National Cemeteries Act that led to the transformation of this reinternment project from one of private individuals like Clara Barton, and US Army officers -like Captain James Moore or the Military Division of Tennessee's chief quartermaster Edmund Whitman- to a full scale national effort with federal funding. As Faust tells us, the very "purpose of the war" and the survivors' treatment of its dead "were inextricable."⁴⁴

Perhaps another thing that surprised me was the negligent and in some cases contemptuous treatment of rebel dead by those seeking to bury the Union's dead. Agents of the government made note of but did little to bury the corpses of Confederates lying scattered across the several southern states.

Also surprising was the Southern war dead's 'role' in perpetuating the sectional divide. It is in spite of the federal government's "differentiated treatment" of leaving rebels' remains unattended to, that Southerners were compelled to make their own cemeteries; and they were only successful because of their private crusades. In their effort to honor the Confederate dead, they did what federal institutions resources *would* not. The government's exclusion of honoring Southern war dead and the South's reaction to it kept "sectional identity and energy not just alive but strong."⁴⁵ So began the "Lost Cause" as a long-enduring element of Southern culture.

Today Americans generally take for granted the role of the government in accounting for the "lives it claims in its service." It was this war that created the policies that "led to today's

⁴² Faust, 268.

⁴³ Faust, 223.

⁴⁴ Faust, 232.

⁴⁵ Faust, 238.

commitment” to identify and return “every soldier killed in the line of duty.”⁴⁶ Whereas our American public is widely aware of Dover Airbase’s importance in fulfilling this duty, regularly reminded by powerful and sobering images of coffins draped with our flag, Faust reminds her readers that the nascent rituals and dedication surrounding the care for our nation’s military dead began here with the American Civil War.⁴⁷

A Thoughtful Endorsement

Scholars and casual readers alike, especially those who have a passion for the American Civil War are not to be disappointed by this book. I would absolutely recommend it to any reader interested in this episode of our nation’s history, as the author brilliantly demonstrates the transformative power of the war on not only our national character, but on our obligations of citizenship, and the government’s obligations to its military dead, its surviving citizen soldiers, and their families. I am rarely emotionally drained or exhausted after reading about the American Civil War or its destructive power, but in continuing through Faust’s book I found that I required a great deal of fortitude. She transports us into the midst of a veritable “republic of suffering,” and we experience the sometimes heart wrenching pain of the nation’s grieving families, the universal sense of loss throughout the nation, and even the despair of the defeated rebels. At other times she gives us spine-chilling accounts of the unmitigated horror experienced by the citizens and soldiers of Civil War America as they lose not just their dead, but also “their own lives as they had understood them before the war.”⁴⁸ Through Faust’s book the Civil War generation speaks to us now, in the face of our modern era of warfare; it is still relevant to us today as our nation’s sons and now daughters continue to serve the republic, and when necessary lay their “last full measure of devotion” before the altar of freedom.

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⁴⁶ Faust, 271

⁴⁷ See especially Faust, Chapter 7, *Accounting*, pp.211-249.

⁴⁸ Faust, 268.