Aberration of Mind

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Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War–Era South.

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News of Ruffin’s violent death in June 1865 shocked all Americans, but elicited no public elegiacs in print. Northern and Southern newspapers alike noted his passing, but, considering his stature, very little ink was spilled on the news of his death, probably because the news of the South’s surrender and the demobilization efforts preoccupied most Americans. One Philadelphia newspaper, observing that both the rebellious Confederacy and Ruffin had committed suicide, caustically remarked: “Both have gone out together.”¹ Importantly, his suicide was neither reviled nor valorized at the time it occurred.²

But in a little over a decade, Ruffin’s suicide had become a *cause célèbre* in Lost Cause circles. In 1877, Lost Cause propagandist George W. Bagby published a poem lamenting the disappearance of “the old Virginia gentleman.” He includes a stanza on Ruffin:

He was the first to fire the gun  
When Sumter was assailed,  
He it was who life disdained  
When our Great Cause had failed,  
And ever in the van of fight  
The foremost still he trod,  
Until on Appomattox’ height  
He gave his soul to God,  
Like a good Virginia gentleman,  
All of the olden time.³

In just a little over a decade, Ruffin’s self-inflicted death had become celebrated as a noble death and transformed into martyrdom, nostalgically reconfigured into a symbol of holy sacrifice.

Further indication that Ruffin had been elevated to Lost Cause martyrdom is found in the 1909 reminiscences of Virginian Sarah Rice Pryor, wife of a Confederate general, who recounted how Ruffin, “on hearing of Lee’s surrender, Cato-like, he destroyed himself.”⁴ Pryor’s allusion is to the classical suicide in 46 B.C.E. of Cato the Younger, whom Plutarch explained killed himself rather than live under the dominion of the corrupt and tyrannical Caesar.⁵
Pryor’s invocation of Cato was intended to convey a similar noble sacrifice: rather than live under the reign of a government anathema to his pro-slavery convictions, Ruffin, like Cato, chose to die. As one early Ruffin biographer explained: “He had staked his all and lost. The candle of an ardent life had been snuffed out by its own intensity, but the reflected wave of undying conviction will pass on through all eternity to light the path of posterity.”

The most popular incarnation of Ruffin’s suicide, originating in the late nineteenth century but having no basis in fact, has Ruffin draping himself in a Confederate flag before shooting himself, while another version has him buried with the flag. Neither account is based on extant sources from the time of his death; both are apocryphal. Although numerous scholarly sources, even those published in the past fifteen years, claim as fact that Ruffin wrapped himself in the flag before committing suicide, no contemporary account mentions it. Nor does Ruffin’s namesake, Edmund Ruffin Jr., reference this detail when writing to others about his father’s suicide shortly after the event. In fact, the first published reference to Ruffin dying enveloped in a Confederate flag seems to have appeared in an unrelated collection of letters on the Tyler family in 1885. Soon thereafter, in 1909, a short biographical entry on Ruffin repeated the flag reference: “As he had lived with his life wrapped in the interests of the South, so he died, his body wrapped in the folds of the ‘Stars and Bars,’ the conquered banner of the ‘Lost Cause.’” Subsequent allusions to the flag, namely in Avery Craven’s biography of Ruffin (1932), probably were based on this source.

War’s end forced a defeated and demoralized people to reconceive the meaning of suicide. Postwar white Southerners rejected the repugnant association of suicide with weakness, cowardice, and insanity, cultural markers of self-destruction in the antebellum and wartime South, opting for a new construction of suicide as heroic self-sacrifice, embodied by the self-inflicted death of Edmund Ruffin. This cultural reformulation of suicide would not have been possible without the catalyst of the Civil War, which played a significant role in destigmatizing suicide, in creating a space where news of a suicide provoked compassion, not ridicule, among former Confederates. Edmund Ruffin, in the minds of many, became a patriot who chose death, a final act of rebellion, rather than life under Yankee rule. Who would condemn him for his act of self-destruction? Who would cruelly denounce the self-inflicted fatal wounds of the many Confederate soldiers who returned home at war’s end? Who would condemn to eternal damnation the stalwart women of the homefront who collapsed under the weight of unprecedented responsibility and fear of an advancing enemy? In the wake of war and the perva-
sive despair that it ushered in, more postbellum Southerners came embraced the sentiment expressed by Ruffin twenty-five years earlier on the death of his good friend, Thomas Cocke: “It is not for man to judge of, but for God—and may the merciful God judge of it in mercy!”

The reworked meaning of suicide in the New South converged seamlessly with the racial politics of the post-emancipation era, signaling a glorification of white Southern suicide as a legitimate response to the negro menace. The year 1915 marked the release of the epic film *The Birth of a Nation*, the romantic rendering of the emergence of the racial terrorist organization, the Ku Klux Klan, directed by D. W. Griffith. One of the most suspenseful scenes in the movie is the pursuit of the virginal white teen, Flora Cameron, by the bestial, predatory Gus, a former slave, crazed with the political and social power he has newly acquired with his freedom. Emboldened by talk of social equality, he declares to a startled Flora that he wishes to marry her and make good on the promise of true equality. Instinctively perceiving a sexual threat, Flora takes off through the woods in a panicked effort to evade Gus’s untoward overtures. The melodramatic chase follows a frantic Flora as she races to escape, her would-be rapist in pursuit. Eventually Flora finds herself trapped: on one side, a steep, rocky cliff, and on the other, Gus. She must choose: either she surrenders to the black beast rapist, loses her virginity, but lives (although forever tainted by the act of being despoiled by a black man) or she jumps to her death (and is spared the embarrassment, humiliation, and permanent stain of being raped by a black man). Flora chooses death. (See figure 14.)

Griffith’s celluloid creation plumbed closely to his literary inspiration, Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* (1905), for much of the movie, but the suicide scene of Flora differs markedly from the original version. In the novel, the lovely white young girl—Marion is her name—is actually raped. Four “black brutes” break into the home she shares with her mother, and they are clear they have no interest in money or valuables: it is Marion they want. Readers are spared the grisly details, but find Marion awakening from her unconscious state, fully cognizant she has been violated by her bestial attackers. In consultation with her mother, she decides there is only one course of action to follow: she must die. Marion changes into a “spotless white” dress (further marking her virginity and innocence, as if the audience failed to grasp that fact) and makes her way to the woods with her mother, who asks Marion if she is afraid to die. “No; death is sweet, now.” The thought of living after having been raped by black men is “torture.” “This shame I can never forget, nor will the world forget. Death is the only way.” And with that, her dying declaration, she and her mother join hands, step off the cliff together, and enter “the opal gates of death.” (See figure 15.)
The glorification of suicide in these early twentieth-century representations, one in film, the other literary, represents a new and radically different view of suicide. In the early South, suicide was perceived as a repugnant act, cowardly, sinful, and shameful. Most Southerners adhered to the religious proscription against suicide that treated the act as a form of murder dooming victims to eternal death. Evidence suggests that within the country as a whole, rigid and odious attitudes toward suicide eased some, allowing for the decriminalization of suicide in the new nation, for example. Yet, as Richard Bell has shown, the impulse toward more enlightened views on suicide was turned back by a religious and nationalistic orthodoxy that viewed self-destruction as selfish, immoral, and detrimental to the well-being of the nation.\textsuperscript{13}

It took a civil war for Southerners to begin reconsidering their near-universal moral and religious aversion to suicide. The war brought about an increase in suicidal activity, or at least that was the perception among many postwar Southerners. Some newspapers simply noted the uptick in suicidal activity, such as the story in the  \textit{Atlanta Weekly Sun} in 1871 that posed the rhetorical question “Is suicide epidemical?” in response to “an epidemic of suicide [that] is prevalent in the country.”\textsuperscript{14} Another report two years later remarked on the nonchalance with which people responded to news of sui-
cides as well as their putative causes: “Suicides have become so frequent that people take the most frivolous excuse for ‘shuffling off this mortal coil,’ with the coolest sort of indifference.”\textsuperscript{15} The \textit{Richmond Whig} in 1866 referred to a national “suicide epidemic” and listed a number of self-murders from throughout the country.\textsuperscript{16} “The crime of suicide,” wrote the \textit{Tri-weekly Sumter (Ga.) Republican} in 1870, “is becoming frightfully common.”\textsuperscript{17} In fact, one writer levied a charge of sensationalism against newspapers that, to his mind, had gone so far as to characterize “self-destruction in the light of heroism.”\textsuperscript{18} A few sources went further and attributed the ostensible “suicide mania” to the late civil war. A Raleigh newspaper, for instance, acknowledged during the war that “anguish of the mind has driven thousands to suicide.”\textsuperscript{19} Josiah Gorgas, the chief ordinance officer for the Confederacy and later president of the University of Alabama, commented on the high number of suicides in the South in 1867. “I can now understand how those poor, doomed, wretches whose self destruction we daily see chronicled are forced to their doom. To
many, annihilation must be the only thing left. Nothing is so terrible as despair.”

Gorgas’s reflection goes beyond merely acknowledging the vast suffering he observed in the defeated South as measured in suicides. He conceded that the “daily” incidents of self-destruction summoned in him feelings of empathy for the “poor, doomed, wretches” and transformed his thinking about suicide: “I can now understand,” he intoned, implying the acts of suicide led to the acquisition of compassion and understanding about motives and circumstances of those who had taken their lives. “Annihilation” had become a logical response to unprecedented suffering and anguish. Gorgas, like countless others, had become sensitized to men and women who took their own lives, which helped chip away at the stigma of suicide. Women on the homefront fantasized about death as a way to escape the heavy weight of added responsibility, deprivation, enemy invasion, and the emotional scars of loss. Some women acted on those fantasies. Incidents of soldiers who died by their own hands forced Southerners to face the harsh dictates against self-murder and its association with unmanliness and cowardice. Soldier suicides came to be viewed as another casualty of war, an understandable if tragic result of horrific conditions of war. After the war, as physically and psychologically wounded veterans tried to reintegrate into civilian life and encountered obstacles to their return to normalcy, foremost, the challenge to reclaim masculine prerogatives like protecting and providing for their families, ex-Confederates increasingly turned to self-inflicted death as a way to escape their pain and failure as men. Confederate women, too, faced unprecedented challenges in the chaotic and volatile postwar period, which often overburdened them with unfamiliar roles and responsibilities that taxed many beyond their capacity to survive, resulting in institutionalization or, even extreme cases, suicide.

Against this backdrop of extraordinary suffering and increased suicidal activity, ex-Confederates surveyed the damage amidst the human and physical ruins and assessed the costs of secession and war to the region. What did all the suffering mean? In order to avoid seeing the sacrifices to the Confederate cause as futile, wrong-headed, or wasted, white Southerners began weaving a narrative of the war that allowed them to embrace the cause as honorable and claim that those who died while serving the cause had died heroically. Beginning in the 1870s, as ex-Confederates began to spin the war as a gallant Lost Cause, a newly reconfigured definition of suicide emerged from the imaginations of white Southerners, one that jettisoned the negative connotations and replaced them with laudatory ones. Political suicide, or even individual suicide in a political setting, was now seen as honorable and heroic. War-related suicide was reworked as a symbol of sacrifice and heroism. In
war, suicide and suffering had become the twin markers of victimization and defeat. Because suicide had become all too common during and after the war, white Southerners had to find ways to divest the act of its negative connotations like weakness, sinfulness, and cowardice, associations that had long stigmatized the act in the minds of most Americans. They had no choice but to embrace suicide and revamp it as a heroic (white) act.

Simultaneously, suicide emerged in the New South as a marker of racial superiority that further anchored the act to a neo-Confederate identity. Heroic suicide had to be cordoned off for whites only, though; African Americans, believed by Southern whites to be intellectually inferior and morally depraved, were incapable of committing an act that required bravery and reflected honor. If whites intended to lay claim to suicide as an indicator of civilized and superior peoples, they had to find ways to exclude blacks from participating in a noble act. They did this first by denying that blacks committed suicide. Second, in those (rare) situations when black suicide was undeniable, white Southerners withheld legitimacy. Blacks committed suicide, not because of depression (a symptom of advanced [white] civilizations) or as a noble act (they were cowardly by nature), but out of animalistic, uncontrollable mania, reflecting their natural state. Southern blacks, lacking self-control, killed themselves because they were crazed out of their minds and no longer under the constraints of enslavement. African Americans who died by their own hands were quite literally maniacs, suffering from freedom-induced mania. By contrast, melancholic whites chose self-murder after rational contemplation, something of which African Americans were incapable. Whereas the suicide of Edmund Ruffin was transformed into an act of patriotism, a gallant feat of defiance, symbolized by the fictional draping of the Confederate flag around him before he pulled the trigger, black suicides were either denied or cast as pathological acts of lunacy.

Suffering and suicide in the nineteenth-century South became inextricably bound to the tenets of the Lost Cause ideology after the war. Confederate Southerners, experiencing an unprecedented and relentless torrent of suffering, collectively and individually, had begun to see suicide as a plausible alternative to life. Simply put, voluntary death put an end to suffering. It also served an important ideological function in fashioning a Confederate identity that outlived the war and nation. Heroic suicide helped launch Confederate nationalism and became central to the Lost Cause ethos of sacrifice, instilling meaning into the vast suffering in the failed effort at independence.
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