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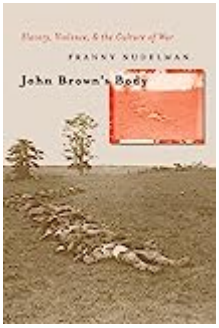

Franny Nudelman. *John Brown's Body: Slavery, Violence, and the Culture of War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. x + 226 pp. $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5557-7; $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2883-0.

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Published on H-CivWar (January, 2007)

The Death of Nationalism

More than 620,000 soldiers lost their lives during America's Civil War. This human cost exceeded all other wars combined in the nation's history. Such massive casualties have long fascinated American scholars. Robert Penn Warren, Edward Ayers, and James McPherson have all linked civil war violence to the regeneration of American political ideals.[1] Such scholars follow in hallowed footsteps. In what was to become his most famous speech, President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address insisted "that these dead shall not have died in vain–that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom."

Franny Nudelman, an associate orofessor of English at the University of Virginia, is uncomfortable with this traditional linkage of blood sacrifice and national identity. *John Brown's Body* is one of a series of recent historical works seeking to break with traditional approaches toward America's Great War, especially its nationalist, heroic, and tragic dimensions. Their alternative focus is upon social and cultural topics that fit uneasily into the established narrative.[2] Published in the series Cultural Studies of the United States edited by Alan Trachtenberg, Nudelman's book joins a growing scholarly trend examining the American Civil War outside of its traditional framework.

John Brown's Body examines the role of death in the making of national identity. Using Benedict Anderson's influential notion of "imagined political community," Nudelman shows how the corpse, "an object of commemorative practice and discursive meditation," facilitated the development of familial and national emotional attachments among nineteenth century Americans.[3] At the same time, Nudelman is interested in "how the war dead reveal the limits of such devotion" (p. 177). It is the transformation of mass casualties into new nationhood that is reflected in the book's title. The popular song "John Brown's Body" registers the transformation of a moldering body in the grave into an onward marching soul. As such, "the popular tune exemplifies the tendency of nationalist culture to abstract the effects of violence" (p. 2). The author seeks to reverse this trajectory by focusing upon the first part, the corpse and other dead bodies. Professor Nudelman's methodology draws largely from the Foucauldian notion of the

body as a medium of power, in this case the dead body or corpse as representative of real suffering as well as an abstraction for nationalism.[4] These topics–corpses, battlefield dead, dissection, executions, mourning, and violence–loom large in the book's index. In particular, Nudelman scours "the culture of slavery and war to find those rare moments when the dead appear unavailable to transformation-beyond redemption–because I want to make the simple point that far from breeding life, or strengthening community, violence wreaks havoc on our physical and conceptual worlds" (p. 3).

This short book is organized into an introduction, five chapters, and an epilogue spanning 176 pages. The first chapter deals with the regenerative violence of John Brown, how his "martyrdom prefigured a wartime nationalism" (p. 17), and the ways in which Brown's public stature grew notwithstanding Virginia Governor Henry Wise's best efforts to the contrary. The heart of the book consists of the following three chapters organized around those "rare moments" in three discursive contexts of science, sentiment, and punishment respectively. Chapter 2 examines body dissection as racial violence and its literary rupture in Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" (1856), David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829), Thomas Gray's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), and the published prison letters of Harpers Ferry black rebel John Copeland. These texts all produced a "radically expanded interiority for the insurgent spirit" (p. 42). It remains unclear, however, what more we learn about these important black revolts and their representative texts through Nudelman's treatment. In addition, it is hard to know why the author uses Charles Wiltse's 1965 edition version of Walker's *Appeal* when the most authoritative version has been available since 2000.[5]

Chapter 3 contrasts civil war poetry, specifically Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps* and its "contribution to a nationalist aesthetic of silence and abstraction" (p. 73), with a series of poetic anthologies by Sallie Brock, Richard White, and others characterized by veracity, immediacy, and ordinariness. I found this to be the most engaging part of the book. Chapter 4 examines photographs of dead corpses, and refutes the argument that these photographs shocked contemporaries with the contention that photographs of dead bodies established a new technological distancing of death far removed from its familial ante-bellum pattern. The author makes much of the contrast between the photographs in Alexander Gardiner's *Sketch Book* (1866) narrating war as means to national power, and the "poignant and repulsive" (p. 129) images of soldiers' wounds depicted in Thomas Roches's photographs. Having dealt with science and sentiment, chapter 5, oddly titled "After Emancipation," probes punishment, specifically the theatrics of military executions for desertion and rape, and contrasts their major purpose of enforcing state discipline with the questioning of this discipline and its subversion in illustrated weeklies and satirical pictorial envelopes. The point about the disproportionate number of black soldiers who received punishment in the Union army is an important critique of the existing historical literature still primarily concerned with demonstrating the contribution of black soldiers to the Union war effort. The epilogue contrasts Julie Ward Howe's 1861 war anthem with her 1869 *Appeal to Womanhood*, to demonstrate how an "antebellum utopianism, which imagined the many ways that individuals, martyrs among them, might remake the world, was solely tested by the carnage of war" (p. 171).

The sources for *John Brown's Body* are eclectic and include violence studies, death studies, and cultural studies, as well as civil war songs, poems, illustrations, and photographs. It should be noted that the identification of historical documents, books, and other sources is difficult because of the absence of a bibliography. This is annoying to those interested in locating the documentary basis of the book who must sift through a half-remembered note to locate an exact citation.

There appear to be three major objectives to this book. Most obviously, the work adds its voice to those who wish to debunk the heroic/tragic narrative of the American Civil War.[6] Moreover, Nudelman seeks to not only "offer historical context for how we continue to think about death in war," but also to "move toward a methodology that reverses the trajectory of abstraction by reconsidering the process of idealization in light of some of the war's particulars" (p. 12). Finally, the author hopes that people in the future will attend to the "effects of violence" and "allow their actions to be transformed by what they learn" (p. 176).

I must challenge some of Nudelman's interpretations. In several places (pp. 150, 152, 156), the author describes emancipation as a state process when many historians argue that it represented a complicated historical process involving self-emancipating slaves and the federal government.[7] Furthermore, I would disagree with the author's view of painter Thomas Waterman Wood's triptych of an ex-slave being changed into a soldier and a wounded veteran as suggesting ultimate dependency on the state (pp. 156-160). Most contemporaries, I think, would have seen an image of loyalty to the federal gov-

ernment. In addition, the author's deconstruction of ex-slave Tripp's whipping in the movie *Glory* (1989) is ingenious, except it fails to make the obvious point that the 54th Massachusetts Regiment was comprised of free black northern men.

Fanny Nudelman's *John Brown's Body* raises numerous issues. I will comment on four. There seems to be a major problem documenting those "rare moments" of counter-narrative. In critiquing the argument that photographs of the dead shocked contemporaries, Nudelman makes the reasonable point that it "is not only impossible to gauge the effects of these photographs but also difficult to determine their popularity" (p. 200). Yet, the same criticism may be leveled at the author's own argument for popular responses toward disruptive texts, poems, illustrations, and photographs. Where is Nudelman's evidence that Boche's photographs elicited mass distaste? Moreover, it is hard to avoid the impression that the Civil War's violence did not build beliefs in belonging and nationhood. Indeed, my impression is that at times Nudelman does not seem entirely convinced by her own argument.

While I agree that there is little emotional difference over the loss of a loved one, is there not an important political difference between the deaths of ordinary and extra-ordinary people? Surely the corpses of John Brown and Abraham Lincoln were much more important to the stuff of Union nationalism than those other dead bodies of 360,000 Yankees? The former Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic's unofficial public funeral in Belgrade last March drew a crowd of over 50,000 people. Was this not the death of nationalism? Moreover, it must be emphasized that revolutionary violence is not the same thing as violence in the name of the state. Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and John Brown were all trying to overthrow the American slave system. This tradition of revolutionary violence was deliberately destructive rather than regenerative of a nation's ideals. Even if there is an argument for its subversive nature beyond the obvious point that it was subversive, both Turner and Brown were depicted as "mad" rather than ideal Americans, a description that continues to resonate today in the minds of many Americans.

Finally, I am surprised at the absence of any serious discussion, or even suggestive commentary, on the most recent manifestation of the problem the author is trying to address in a book published at least one year into the illegal invasion of Iraq. One of the book's aims–that people learn from the effects of violence–could have been better met if the author had focused more on questions of contemporary wartime violence, regenerative nationalism, and those "rare moments" of challenge. After all, the state explains military deaths as the price to be paid for spreading freedom, while at the same time refusing public coverage of returning coffins. In response, the mothers of dead soldiers question the loss of their loved ones, mainstream news organizations report daily on the battlefield casualties, while photograph specials on injured soldiers in the progressive media are poignant reminders of the havoc and loss of wartime violence on a personal level.[8]

John Brown's Body has a place in that historical literature which seeks to challenge the grand narrative of the American Civil War. I would recommend this book to students, educators, scholars, and readers eager for such alternative approaches. Unfortunately, this book and those like it will fly over the heads of most American readers, for whom Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, the dramatic surrender at Appomattox, and the deaths of over 620,000 soldiers continue to inspire unquestioning awe. One is struck by the irony that cultural studies in U.S. history remain distinctly unpopular with American readers. The death of nationalism is alive and well.

Notes

[1]. Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961: Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983); Edward Ayers, "Worrying about the Civil War," in *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History*, ed. Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998); and James M. Mcpherson, *What They Fought For, 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994).

[2]. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989); Timothy Sweet, *Traces of War: Poetry, Photography, and the Crisis of the Union* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990); and Alice Fahs, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

[3]. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6-7.

[4]. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; New York: Vintage, 1995), 11, 33.

[5]. *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, ed. Peter P. Hinks (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

[6]. For a provocative study of the reality of suffering as a basis for tragedy, see Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

[7]. Ira Berlin et al., *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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Citation: Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie. Review of Nudelman, Franny, *John Brown's Body: Slavery, Violence, and the Culture of War*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. January, 2007.

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