

Gary Wills' book on Lincoln's Gettysburg address and the tradition of Greek funeral orations has advanced significantly our understanding of the ways in which classicism impacted the discourse of the American Civil War, a discourse that left a tangible imprint also on the design of the cemetery at Gettysburg. In this paper, I would like to draw attention to another Civil War cemetery—Arlington National Cemetery—and the rhetoric and symbols of ancient religion inscribed and reinscribed on this landmark in the course of Civil War and, in its aftermath, on healing the body politic. My discussion will focus on a famous monument at Arlington: the Confederate Memorial sculpted by Moses Jacob Ezekiel.

Ezekiel's monument sits in a cemetery full of changing valences: the property belonged first to the family of George Washington, later to Robert E. Lee. During the Civil War, associations with Lee and the South led to its "desecration" and use as a burial ground for those who fought against Lee and as a colony for former slaves (Freedman's Village). Arlington quickly outpaced Gettysburg for the sheer volume of its burials, the vast majority of them belonging to Union soldiers. A Confederate section was officially authorized at Arlington only in 1900, when, as any good spin-doctor like Augustus knew, a shift in focus to an external threat such as, in this case, the Spanish-American War became a remarkably effective way to mend the wounds of civil stasis. It is in this context of healing the body politic that Ezekiel's monument was commissioned and finally dedicated in 1914, nearly fifty years after the civil war had officially ended.

Ezekiel's monument is a tour de force in bronze of figures and symbols from pagan and Judeo-Christian traditions: Athena/Minerva assists a half-naked female figure in vaguely classical garb (personification of the South) leaning on a shield; behind them angels blow trumpets; above them Libertas extends an olive wreath; shields, palm fronds, and tripods gird the monument; and inscriptions quote the book of Isaiah ("swords into plowshares," 2:4) as well as Lucan's famous words about Cato, fallen hero of another civil war (1.128). Ezekiel's monument belongs clearly to the post-Civil War southern tradition celebrating the Lost Cause and, as such, stands in stark contrast to monuments like the Soldier's Memorial at Gettysburg, dedicated in 1865 and situated in the center of the cemetery there. The latter monument seems to draw more fully on Roman rather than Greek precedents—potentially a deliberate association of the newly victorious Union with Rome, a nation that managed to overcome civil stasis, as opposed to associations of the former Confederacy with ancient Greece, particularly Athens, whose Golden Age came to an end largely because of civil unrest.

The Confederate Memorial, the career of Ezekiel himself (a Jew who fought in the Confederate army and later moved to Rome where he was steeped in classical traditions), and the larger cemetery at Arlington form a fruitful nexus for reflecting on the matrices of meaning generated by the appropriation of the classical past, particularly its religious symbols, by a nation divided both during and long after the Civil War.