

## UC Irvine Law Review

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Volume 4

Issue 1 “Law As . . .” II, *History As Interface for the Interdisciplinary Study of Law*

Article 9

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3-2014

# Demonic Ambiguities: Enchantment and Disenchantment in Nat Turner’s Virginia

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### Recommended Citation

Christopher Tomlins, *Demonic Ambiguities: Enchantment and Disenchantment in Nat Turner’s Virginia*, 4 U.C. IRVINE L. REV. 175 (2014).

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.uci.edu/ucilr/vol4/iss1/9>

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# Demonic Ambiguities: Enchantment and Disenchantment in Nat Turner's Virginia

Christopher Tomlins\*

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*I, James Rochelle, Clerk of the County Court of Southampton in the State of Virginia, do hereby certify, that Jeremiah Cobb, Thomas Pretlow, James W. Parker, Carr Bowers, Samuel B. Hines, and Orris A. Browne, esq's., are acting Justices of the Peace, in and for the County aforesaid, and were members of the Court which convened at Jerusalem, on Saturday, the 5th day of November, 1831, for the trial of Nat, alias Nat Turner, a negro slave, late the property of Putnam Moore, deceased, who was tried and convicted, as an insurgent in the late insurrection in the county of Southampton aforesaid, and that full faith and credit are due, and ought to be given to their acts as Justices of the peace aforesaid.*

—James Rochelle, C.S.C.C. (1831)

*The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world' . . . From this we want to draw the lesson that nothing is gained by yearning and tarrying alone, and we shall act differently. We shall set to work and meet the 'demands of the day,' in human relations as well as in our vocation. This, however, is plain and simple, if each finds and obeys the demon who holds the fibers of his very life.*

—Max Weber (1918)

*Schuld (consider the demonic ambiguity of this word).*

—Walter Benjamin (1921)

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This Essay conjoins and inspects an unlikely array of three texts—the “Confession” of Nat Turner, Walter Benjamin’s fragment “Capitalism as Religion,” and Max Weber’s “Science as a Vocation.”<sup>1</sup> The second and third are used here as successive interpretive prisms through which to view the first. They are as unlike each other as each is unlike the “Confession,” except in one regard—the glance each casts at the demonic. Though abbreviated, those glances are of some significance for the meaning of the “full faith and credit” held due the acts of the Southampton County Court in convicting and condemning Turner.<sup>2</sup> Like guilt/debt, the demonically ambiguous meanings of *Schuld* that, for Benjamin, confirm capitalism’s religious—specifically its Christian—structure, the conjunction of faith and credit has its own demonic ambiguity, simultaneously sacralizing and secularizing the authority of the law.<sup>3</sup> In capitalism as Christianity, in religion as law, one encounters moments in which these demonic ambiguities—guilt/debt, faith/credit—suddenly collapse into states of overwhelming, indeed terrifying, simultaneity: economic and juridical, moral and psychological, profane and sacral.<sup>4</sup> In recognizing, at the end of his stern pronouncement of the world’s calculability, the demon “who holds the fibers of his very life,”<sup>5</sup> Weber accepts the

1. THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER, THE LEADER OF THE LATE INSURRECTION IN SOUTHAMPTON, VA, AS FULLY AND VOLUNTARILY MADE TO THOMAS R. GRAY (1831) [hereinafter GRAY], reprinted in THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER AND RELATED DOCUMENTS 44, 44–56 (Kenneth S. Greenberg ed., 1996); 1 WALTER BENJAMIN, *Capitalism as Religion*, in WALTER BENJAMIN: SELECTED WRITINGS, 1913–1926, at 288, 288–91 (Marcus Bullock & Michael W. Jennings eds., 1996); MAX WEBER, *Science as a Vocation*, in FROM MAX WEBER: ESSAYS IN SOCIOLOGY 129, 129–56 (H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills eds. & trans., 1946). A fourth text joins the group—briefly—in this Essay’s conclusion: THOMAS R. DEW, ABOLITION OF NEGRO SLAVERY (1832), reprinted in THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER AND RELATED DOCUMENTS, *supra*, at 112, 112–31.

2. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 42–43; see also Marianne Constable, *Law as Claim to Justice: Legal History and Legal Speech Acts*, 1 U.C. IRVINE L. REV. 631, 631–40 (2011) (discussing status of “technical” legal statement as action).

3. The German word *Schuld*, upon which Benjamin fixates in *Capitalism as Religion*, 1 BENJAMIN, *supra* note 1, has several meanings in English—blame, debt, fault, guilt, liability (rare), and trespass. See *Schuld: Dictionary / Wörterbuch*, BEOLINGUS, TU CHEMNITZ, dict.tu-chemnitz.de (search “schuld”) (last visited Jan. 29, 2013). The meaning at common law of “full faith and credit” is evidentiary—it attests to the authenticity of a document or the truth of a record or the confidence one may have in an agent’s representation of a principal. See Stephen E. Sachs, *Full Faith and Credit in the Early Congress*, 95 VA. L. REV. 1201, 1217–20 (2009). What is at issue in the English phrase is not the use of the formula but the significance of the words in the formula. See Peter Goodrich, *Specters of Law: Why the History of the Legal Spectacle Has Not Been Written*, 1 U.C. IRVINE L. REV. 773, 794 (2011) (discussing the law’s “double form,” at once economic and sacral); see also GIORGIO AGAMBEN, THE KINGDOM AND THE GLORY: FOR A THEOLOGICAL GENEALOGY OF ECONOMY AND GOVERNMENT (Lorenzo Chiesa & Matteo Mandarini trans., Stanford Univ. Press 2011) (2007).

4. Werner Hamacher, *Guilt History: Benjamin’s Fragment “Capitalism as Religion,”* 26 CARDOZO L. REV. 887, 900 (2005). In Benjamin’s usage, demonic references “a prehistorical state of human community dominated by law and guilt, along with a state that is both prereligious and pre-ethical.” GIORGIO AGAMBEN, POTENTIALITIES: COLLECTED ESSAYS IN PHILOSOPHY 149 (Daniel Heller-Roazen ed. & trans., 1999). Ambiguity (indistinction) is both “the dominant trait of the demonic sphere” and “the mark of law.” *Id.*

5. WEBER, *supra* note 1, at 156.

possibility of precisely this collapse into fusion: of disenchantment and enchantment, materiality and metaphysics, into one.

The Southampton slave rebellion of 1831—the event that calls Nat Turner’s confession forth—is such a moment.<sup>6</sup> It is a monad,<sup>7</sup> dialectics at a standstill.<sup>8</sup> But at its center lies a “precious but tasteless seed”<sup>9</sup>—the one statement of Turner’s that, in the whole affair, we can be confident comes to us, unmediated, out of his own mouth—“*Not guilty*,” reportedly adding “that he did not feel so.”<sup>10</sup> What might it mean that Turner did not feel guilty?

6. The Southampton Rebellion occurred in late August 1831 in the southern part of Southampton County, Virginia, close to the North Carolina border. In the early hours of August 22, the slave known as Nat Turner entered the house of his master, Joseph Travis, just west of the little town of Cross Keys, and with six confederates, killed all five occupants: Travis, his wife, and three children. During the next twelve hours, members of the group attacked a further fifteen farmsteads, killing most of their white occupants—some fifty-two people, largely women and children—and recruiting many of their slaves. By the afternoon of August 22, the rebels, approximately seventy in number, mounted and armed, mostly slaves but including a few free people of color, were within about three miles of the Southampton County seat, the town of Jerusalem, when they were confronted by a party of white militia who had ridden out from the town to investigate news of the uprising. This was the first in a series of skirmishes that over the next twenty-four hours completely dispersed Turner’s group, killing or capturing virtually all participants except Turner himself. Turner’s rebellion convulsed Virginia. Actual slave revolts, as distinct from purported conspiracies, are a rarity in American history. This was the most lethal. In the days after August 23 when news of the rebellion arrived in Richmond, Virginia’s governor, John Floyd, signed orders mobilizing several thousand militia, including cavalry and artillery companies. On his own authority, the Mayor of Norfolk sought assistance from federal troops quartered there. Fears of a general slave uprising were legion. In Southampton, approximately two hundred blacks became victims of retaliatory killings by the militia, numbers decapitated and their heads mounted on poles. Beginning August 31, some forty summary trials of slaves accused of participating in the “insurrection,” as it was called, took place in the Southampton County courthouse in Jerusalem, along with several remand hearings in the case of free people of color. Most of the forty-eight defendants were tried within a month of the rebellion. Twenty-eight were sentenced to death, ten with recommendations of commutation. Turner himself remained at large in the locality until the end of October when he was captured. He was tried on November 5 and hanged on November 11. See HENRY IRVING TRAGLE, *THE SOUTHAMPTON SLAVE REVOLT OF 1831: A COMPILATION OF SOURCE MATERIAL* (1971); *THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER AND RELATED DOCUMENTS*, *supra* note 1.

7. See 4 WALTER BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, in WALTER BENJAMIN: *SELECTED WRITINGS, 1938–1940*, at 389, 396 (Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings eds., Edmund Jephcott et al. trans., 2003).

8. See WALTER BENJAMIN, *THE ARCADES PROJECT 929–44* (Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin trans., 1999). The goal of the research of which this Essay is an initial fragment is to develop an account of the Turner Rebellion that makes use of the Benjaminian concept of “dialectical image,” which Roland Boer describes as “the caesura of the explosion out of history, waking from a dream,” by which one “seeks to break out of the myth and dream-work of capitalism.” ROLAND BOER, *CRITICISM OF HEAVEN: ON MARXISM AND THEOLOGY* 62 (Haymarket Books 2009) (2005).

9. See 4 BENJAMIN, *supra* note 7, at 396; 3 WALTER BENJAMIN, *The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*, in WALTER BENJAMIN: *SELECTED WRITINGS, 1935–1938*, at 143, 148 (Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings eds., Edmund Jephcott et al. trans., 2002).

10. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 56.

## I. CONFESSION

Nat Turner's confession has two halves and two personalities—unsurprisingly, for it was a joint effort. The confession was written by an opportunistic and impoverished Jerusalem attorney, Thomas Ruffin Gray, who gained access to Turner in jail awaiting trial. Within three weeks, the confession had been published as a pamphlet with supplementary material.<sup>11</sup> By the time he met with Turner, Gray had already accumulated considerable independent knowledge of the events of the Southampton Rebellion, and the second half of the confession (literally a blow-by-blow narrative of the rebellion) bears Gray's mark in both matters of detail and form of expression.<sup>12</sup> But the first half of the confession dwells on Turner's life from his birth until the rebellion, about which Gray knew much less.<sup>13</sup>

The first half of the confession grants access to Turner's life history as a narrative of three braided threads. The first thread tells of the ascent of a severely ascetic personality to a state of grace. This is a story of self-isolation, withdrawal from others, "austerity of . . . life and manners," "fasting," continual prayer, developing spirituality,<sup>14</sup> and at last assurance of election: "I sought more than ever to obtain true holiness before the great day of judgment should appear . . . I began to receive true knowledge of the faith. And from the first steps of righteousness until the last, *was I made perfect*; and the Holy Ghost was with me . . ." <sup>15</sup> The second thread, a crucial component of an ascetic protestant life,

11. See *id.* For a critical account of Gray's *Confessions* that calls into question many of its claims to authenticity, see Daniel S. Fabricant, *Thomas R. Gray and William Styron: Finally, a Critical Look at the 1831 Confessions of Nat Turner*, 37 AM. J. LEGAL HIST. 332 (1993).

12. See *infra* text accompanying notes 115–126; see also David F. Allmendinger, Jr., *The Construction of The Confessions of Nat Turner*, in NAT TURNER: A SLAVE REBELLION IN HISTORY AND MEMORY 24, 24–42 (Kenneth S. Greenberg ed., 2003).

13. Allmendinger, Jr., *supra* note 12, at 39–40; see also Anthony Santoro, *The Prophet in his Own Words: Nat Turner's Biblical Construction*, 116 VA. MAG. HIST. & BIOGRAPHY 114, 116 (2008) (describing the *Confessions* as "a schizophrenic text").

14. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 45–47.

15. *Id.* at 45 (emphasis added); see MAX WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism*, in THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE "SPIRIT" OF CAPITALISM AND OTHER WRITINGS 1, 28, 74, 96, 99, 100 (Peter Baehr & Gordon C. Wells eds. & trans., 2002) (discussing characteristics of ascetic Protestantism). Turner's self-description is prototypical Calvinist asceticism—for example, Weber comments on "the striking frequency of the warnings, especially in English Puritan literature, against placing any trust in the help and friendship of men." *Id.* at 74 (leavened by the eighteenth century pietism of Methodism and the Baptist movement). Of Methodism, Weber writes as follows: "According to Wesley's doctrine, which represents a logical development of the doctrine of sanctification, but is a decided departure from the orthodox version, a person reborn . . . can now, in *this* life, through the workings of grace, come to the consciousness of *perfection*, or sinlessness." *Id.* at 96. Of the Baptist movement, stressing Baptist belief in "the *inward appropriation*" of Christ's work of redemption, Weber writes: "[T]his appropriation is the result of individual *revelation*, the working of the divine spirit in the individual, and *only* in this way. It is offered to everyone and the only requirement is to wait on the spirit and not to resist its coming by sinful attachment to the world." *Id.* at 99. Weber emphasizes that Baptist belief sees "the Holy Spirit working in the daily lives of the faithful . . . speak[ing] directly to the individual if he is willing to listen." *Id.* at 100. Weber adds that without the inner light, "the natural man . . . remains a purely creaturely being." *Id.*; see RANDOLPH

asks that life's central question: what is my calling? This is a question that is, for obvious reasons, acutely problematic for a slave to answer. It was doubly problematic for Turner. As he reported:

[I]t had been said . . . in my childhood . . . *I would never be of any use to any one as a slave. Now finding I had arrived to man's estate, and was a slave . . . I began to direct my attention to . . . the purpose for which, by this time, I felt assured I was intended.*<sup>16</sup>

The third thread results from Turner's eventual formulation of an answer to that question. Late-dawning maturation of conscious messianic purpose reads fulfillment into the life story from its inception.

It is important to keep these threads distinct. Most readings do not—the confession is usually read as a single linear account in which the life's final events appear as if an outcome ordained from infancy. This is an error. It accepts the analysand's self-organization as a fact pattern rather than retrospection. Turner's ascent to grace and his search for his calling both become utterly central in his life long before they are spun into any fatal relationship to intimations of interracial violence. Understanding his ascent and his search is the key to understanding him.

Turner's introspective search for his life's spiritual meaning begins in early adulthood,<sup>17</sup> signified by his preoccupation with Christ's Sermon on the Mount and in particular with *Luke* 12:31, "[S]eek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you."<sup>18</sup> Prayer brings an initial revelation—"the spirit spoke to me"—that affirms the admonition to seek God's kingdom.<sup>19</sup> Further intense prayer brings, two years later, the same revelation, "which fully confirmed

FERGUSON SCULLY, *RELIGION AND THE MAKING OF NAT TURNER'S VIRGINIA: BAPTIST COMMUNITY AND CONFLICT, 1740–1840* (2008) (discussing the salience of Methodist and Baptist religiosity in southeastern Virginia); MECHAL SOBEL, *TRABELIN' ON: THE SLAVE JOURNEY TO AN AFRO-BAPTIST FAITH* (1979); see also JAMES SIDBURY, *READING, REVELATION AND REBELLION: THE TEXTUAL COMMUNITIES OF GABRIEL, DENMARK VESEY, AND NAT TURNER*, reprinted in *THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER AND RELATED DOCUMENTS*, *supra* note 1, at 118–19 (discussing the significance of religion in slave rebellion).

16. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 46 (emphasis added). Turner reports it was said of him as a child, "I had too much sense to be raised," which one may interpret as direct advice to his master to get rid of him. See WEBER, *supra* note 15, at 28–36, 77–87 (discussing the crucial importance of the calling to ascetic Protestantism).

17. "[H]aving arrived to man's estate." GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 45. (It is noteworthy that Turner claimed to know precisely when he had been born—October 2, 1800. Most slaves did not know their dates of birth.) If arrival "to man's estate" can be taken to indicate he had turned twenty-one, this suggests Turner's religiosity began to intensify around 1821.

18. Which Turner remembers (displacing "God" and "Heaven") as "[s]eek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you." *Id.* *Matthew* 6:33 is similar—"seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you"—but it contains more variations from Turner's version than *Luke* does. *Matthew* 6:33.

19. Turner identifies "the spirit" as "[t]he Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days," GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 46, or, in other words, as a direct manifestation of the God of the Old Testament. See, e.g., *Numbers* 11:24–29; 1 *Samuel* 10:5–10; *Joel* 2:28 (recapitulated in *Acts* 2:17).

me in the impression that I was ordained for *some* great purpose.”<sup>20</sup> But *what* purpose remains unknown.

It is at this point that Turner first directly confronts the contradiction between his quest for his calling and his slavery: On the one hand, he has become confident in his eventual ordination “for some great purpose.”<sup>21</sup> On the other, he carries with him the childhood prediction that he “would never be of any use to any one as a slave.”<sup>22</sup> The two propositions seem irreconcilable.<sup>23</sup> Turner’s sensible solution is to resolve the contradiction by absconding.<sup>24</sup> He is confident in the correctness of his solution, certainly enough to hint at his intentions beforehand, boasting to his “fellow servants” that “something was about to happen that would terminate in fulfilling the great promise that had been made to me.”<sup>25</sup> By running away, Turner would cease to be a slave and hence remove the obstacle to fulfillment of God’s “promise.”

But Turner had misunderstood God. And so, “After remaining in the woods thirty days I returned.”<sup>26</sup> God had made Turner no promise; rather, He had instructed him that his purpose was to seek His kingdom. Turner had failed to obey. “[T]he Spirit appeared to me and said I had my wishes directed to the things of this world, not to the kingdom of Heaven, and that I should return to the service of my earthly master.”<sup>27</sup> For a third time, in other words, he had been admonished to seek God’s kingdom, and this time with the unmistakable injunction to do God’s will, whatever that might entail, rather than interpret that will to suit himself, as a “promise” with earthly consequence. Turner observes in self-reproach, once more referencing *Luke’s* rendition of the Sermon on the Mount, “[H]e who knoweth his Master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes . . . ,”<sup>28</sup> adding the words that the spirit had spoken to him, “[A]nd thus have I chastened you.”<sup>29</sup>

This key passage of the confession has been interpreted as a kind of *tu*

20. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 46 (emphasis added).

21. *Id.* at 7.

22. *Id.* at 8.

23. Note the profound contradiction that the believing slave faced in living up to ascetic Protestantism’s demand for “absolute self-control.” WEBER, *supra* note 15, at 81.

24. This moment—which is one of stress in Turner’s worldly life—appears to follow the death of Samuel Turner and Turner’s sale away from the household of his birth to Thomas Moore (ca. 1822). Turner reports being “placed under an overseer, from whom I ran away.” GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 46.

25. *Id.* Having been sold to Moore, Turner had been removed from the household in which he had grown up, where his mother had also been located, and was now among strangers. Turner may have sought status in his new situation by bragging of his intentions to abscond.

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*; see also *Luke* 12:47 (“And that servant, which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not *himself*, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.”). In this part of the Sermon, as reported (only) by Luke, Christ enjoins his followers to do his will rather than fall prey to their own self-serving inclinations. *Luke* 12:41–48.

29. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 46.

*quoque*: Turner, speaking in his cell, reminds his interrogator of the hypocrisy of white slaveholders who maintain their institution despite recognizing its evil; Turner the rebel has indeed rebuked them, beaten them “with many stripes.”<sup>30</sup> But that reading, though clearly available and not inappropriate, should not obscure the moment’s other layers. Turner here is speaking of his own abject failure to understand God’s will, his shallow interpretation of his revelations as “promises” rather than injunctions pointing him toward a state of grace. His reappearance at Thomas Moore’s plantation after a month’s absence no doubt earned him a whipping, accompanied by the incredulity of his fellow slaves, who “murmured” against him.<sup>31</sup> Turner is at this point profoundly isolated, humiliated, and quite conceivably—given God’s reproof—unable to comprehend the meaning of his revelations. He has been chastened spiritually while in the wilderness and physically on his return. On the other hand, “when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, *that we should not be condemned with the world.*”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, God has quite pointedly resolved the contradiction between Turner’s slavery and his quest. By requiring that he return to his earthly master, God has indicated that it is *as a slave* that—if at all—Turner will realize his purpose.

This acute moment of psychological crisis and self-examination produces Turner’s most intense vision to this point:

I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams—and I heard a voice saying, “Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it.”<sup>33</sup>

The vision has two clear textual points of reference, the Book of *Revelation* and once again *Luke*. The appearance of *Revelation* at this point in Turner’s spiritual odyssey is highly significant. *Revelation* is:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants *things which must shortly come to pass*; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John;

Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw.<sup>34</sup>

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30. *Id.*; see, e.g., Santoro, *supra* note 13, at 139 (“Turner presents God as chastening and white society as the recipient of that punishment.”); ERIC J. SUNDQUIST, *TO WAKE THE NATIONS: RACE IN THE MAKING OF AMERICAN LITERATURE* 59 (1993) (“Here Turner appropriates and overturns one of proslavery’s favorite passages, transfiguring a text of racist subjugation into his own prophetic call to revolt.”).

31. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 46.

32. 1 *Corinthians* 11:32 (emphasis added).

33. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 10.

34. *Revelation* 1:1 (emphasis added). The “John” referred to here may be John the Evangelist, author of the fourth Gospel, but is more likely a distinct person who identifies himself in *Revelation* 1:9 as “John . . . in the isle that is called Patmos.” It is worth noting that like *Revelation*, Turner’s confession *reveals* rather than “confesses.” The homology between textual reference and Turner’s communicative act is, I think, significant.



John's account of his revelation begins:

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice,  
as of a trumpet,

Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou  
seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in  
Asia . . . .<sup>35</sup>

From this moment onward *Revelation* will be the dominant influence on  
Turner's eschatology.

*Revelation's* apocalyptic conflict and blood imagery supplies Turner's vision  
with most of its visual cues, largely from the opening of the fifth and sixth seals:

And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of  
them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which  
they held:

And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and  
true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on  
the earth?

And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto  
them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow  
servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should  
be fulfilled.

And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a  
great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the  
moon became as blood . . . .<sup>36</sup>

From *Luke*, meanwhile, comes the vision's voice, specifically the voice of  
another John—John the Baptist—preaching repentance and the coming of the  
Messiah,

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the

35. *Revelation* 1:10–11.

36. *Revelation* 6:9–12. But see also *Revelation* 7:13–15, and of course, *Revelation* 16:4, “And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of waters; and they became blood.” Turner's imagery also invokes the *Olivet Discourse*, found in *Mark* 13, *Matthew* 24, and *Luke* 21, which occurs immediately prior to the climactic account in the synoptic gospels of Christ's Passion and foreshadows the apocalypse of *Revelation*. According to *Mark* 13:7–8, 24–27, Christ informs certain of his disciples:

[Y]e shall hear of wars and rumors of wars . . . . [I] [N]ation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be earthquakes in divers places, and there shall be famines and troubles: these *are* the beginnings of sorrows. [I] . . . [I] [A]fter that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, [I] And the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken. [I] And then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. [I] And then shall he send his angels, and shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven.

*Mark* 13:7–8, 24–27. *Matthew* 24:6–7, 29–31 is virtually identical. *Luke* 21:9–11, 25–28 is similar, but less graphic: “[S]igns in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring . . . .” *Luke* 21:25. Nowhere in the *Olivet Discourse*, however, does one encounter *Revelation's* blood imagery.

Lord, make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways *shall be* made smooth . . . .<sup>37</sup>

Onto these twinned moments of intense eschatological anticipation, poised on the cusp of apocalyptic redemption, Turner imposes a specific coding—"white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle." If this is an intimation of the direction his "great purpose"<sup>38</sup> would ultimately take, however, it is both turned around<sup>39</sup> and also isolated.<sup>40</sup> Turner's preoccupation is not with the creaturely world, it is to learn God's will. He resumes, as far as possible for one in his situation, his ascetic withdrawal from the world. His objective is to "serv[e] the Spirit more fully."<sup>41</sup> They commune once again, and Turner at last begins to understand the meaning of God's creation—"the elements, the revolution of the planets, the operation of tides, and changes of the seasons."<sup>42</sup> He becomes ever more confident of his own spiritual maturity, his capacity to obtain "true holiness," his ability to receive "true knowledge of the faith." He experiences grace. "And from the first steps of righteousness until the last was I made perfect; and the Holy Ghost was with me . . . ."<sup>43</sup> It is difficult to read these words as anything other than the description of an experience, and a temporality, at once sacral and ecstatic. Turner is at last at one with the—necessarily eternal—Will of God.

Turner's experience of grace is accompanied by apocalyptic visions once again informed by *Revelation*. "Behold me as I stand in the Heavens" the Holy Ghost commands him:<sup>44</sup>

37. *Luke* 3:4–5.

38. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 46.

39. After all, the white spirits of *Revelation* have been made white "in the blood of the Lamb." *Revelation* 7:14. They are the souls of men saved from tribulation, who serve God "day and night," who

shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. [/] For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.

*Revelation* 7:15–17. Neither Testament of the Bible, meanwhile, furnishes a single positive connotation for blackness of any kind, or darkness of spirit. All this notwithstanding, it is commonly assumed that here was a "decisive revelation of the racial violence to come." SOBEL, *supra* note 15, at 163.

40. A letter of 1 November 1831 describing Turner's capture and initial examination, printed in the *Richmond Enquirer* of 8 November 1831, claims the examination revealed that "the idea of emancipating the blacks" did not become part of his thinking until late in the previous year. THE RICHMOND ENQUIRER (Richmond, Va.), Nov. 8, 1831, reprinted in TRAGLE, *supra* note 6, at 136, 137. His revelations "he considered for a long time only as a call to superior righteousness." *Id.* But this may have been an attempt to associate the rebellion with the creation of the *Liberator* and/or the circulation of Walker's *Appeal*.

41. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 47.

42. *Id.* Turner refers to an encounter in 1825 in which the Spirit imparts this knowledge. *Id.*

43. *Id.*

44. *Id.*

Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they *also* which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. . . .

. . . .

And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.<sup>45</sup>

Turner sees the “lights of the Saviour’s hands” stretched across the sky “even as they were extended on the cross on Calvary for the redemption of sinners.”<sup>46</sup> He says that the “children of darkness” name the lights wrongly.<sup>47</sup> *Revelation* explains that the seven stars are “the angels of the seven churches” to which Christ instructs John to write.<sup>48</sup> Throughout *Revelation* 2 and 3, Christ—through John—warns the seven churches to repent “from whence thou art fallen.” Only those who “have not defiled their garments . . . shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.”<sup>49</sup> Turner speaks of “the forms of men in different attitudes,” and of finding the forms of men, and hieroglyphic characters, and numbers represented in blood fallen from the heavens.<sup>50</sup> *Revelation*’s account of humanity’s tribulation is, of course, suffused with men in different attitudes and forms (agonized, contorted, condemned, saved, worshipping), with a profusion of characters and numbers, and with “the blood of Christ . . . shed on this earth . . . ascended to heaven for the salvation of sinners . . . now returning to earth again in the form of dew.”<sup>51</sup>

The meaning Turner ascribes to his vision is understandably apocalyptic, anticipating the imminent return of Christ—“the Saviour was about to lay down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and the great day of judgment was at hand.”<sup>52</sup> Turner is told by the Spirit to seek his own baptism. He shares his knowledge of what is to come with a white man, identified (parenthetically) as Etheldred T. Brantley, and both are baptized by the Spirit.<sup>53</sup> As the coincidence of

45. *Revelation* 1:7, 16. Note that the sword in Christ’s mouth signifies the power of his words—an image that is repeated time after time. See *Revelation* 1:16, 2:12, 16. In particular, see *Revelation* 19:15, “[O]ut of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations . . .,” and see also *Revelation* 19:21. Note also that throughout the rebellion, and until captured, Turner carries “a small light sword” even though it proves virtually useless as a weapon. THE RICHMOND ENQUIRER (Richmond, Va.), Nov. 8, 1831, reprinted in TRAGLE, *supra* note 6, at 137; see also GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 49–50. In his confession Turner’s words become his sword.

46. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 47.

47. *Id.*

48. *Revelation* 1:20; see also *Revelation* 1:11.

49. *Revelation* 3:4.

50. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 47.

51. *Id.*; see also *Revelation* 1:5 (“And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood.”); *Revelation* 8:7 (“The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth . . .”).

52. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 47.

53. *Id.*

second coming and last judgment indicate, Turner's eschatology has taken on a distinctly postmillennialist slant. The apocalyptic tension is tightened even further in the wake of Turner's baptism, when:

[O]n the 12th of May, 1828, I heard a loud noise in the heavens,<sup>54</sup> and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened,<sup>55</sup> and Christ had laid down the yoke he had born for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.<sup>56</sup>

From this point onward, Turner is living entirely in sacred space and time, beyond Armageddon, his calling—at last clarified—to fight the final battle against Satan “loosed a little season” and all those he had deceived, so that the Last Judgment could take place<sup>57</sup> and the new Jerusalem appear:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

....

He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.<sup>58</sup>

Turner now waits, in silence, for a sign to commence the battle with Satan—“to arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons.”<sup>59</sup> When the sign appears (the February 1831 solar eclipse) a “seal” is removed from

54. On the “loud noise in the heavens,” see *Matthew* 24:31, “[A]nd he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet. . . .”

55. See *Revelation* 20:1–3 (“And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. [/] And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, [/] And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: *and after that he must be loosed a little season.*” (emphasis added)).

56. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 47–48. The serpent is, of course, the serpent of Genesis, the cause of the fall of man that, read allegorically in light of the New Testament, becomes the reason for the redemptive appearance of Christ. See BOER, *supra* note 8, at 68. In *Revelation* the final loosening of the serpent after Christ's thousand-year reign on earth presages the Last Judgment. See *Revelation* 20:1–3. As he does throughout the confession, Turner combines *Revelation* with *Luke*, here *Luke* 13:22–30.

57. Condemning “the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars” to their second—which is to say eternal—death. *Revelation* 20:13–15, 21:8.

58. *Revelation* 21:1–4, 7.

59. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 48.

his lips,<sup>60</sup> and he at once communicates his God-given purpose to four confidants. The enormity of the task defies imagination—“Many were the plans formed and rejected by us.”<sup>61</sup> Turner nearly buckles under the burden; he becomes sick with tension.<sup>62</sup> A plan is concocted, hurriedly and haphazardly, only after a second unambiguous sign (an atmospheric distortion of the sun’s appearance that occurred on August 13).<sup>63</sup> “The work of death” begins immediately.<sup>64</sup>

Asked by Gray whether, chained in his cell, his fate does not prove him mistaken, Turner’s curt reply, “was not Christ crucified,”<sup>65</sup> confirms the third and final thread of his narrative. The life account Turner has composed as he awaits trial reads as a life, from birth, like Christ’s, of preparation—in Turner’s case preparation for the fight against Satan, for “overcoming,” and election as God’s son:<sup>66</sup> a precocious infant gifted with uncanny knowledge;<sup>67</sup> an inspired youth; an adult tested in the wilderness,<sup>68</sup> come to grace and baptism,<sup>69</sup> confronted in his maturity by an immense task that nearly breaks him,<sup>70</sup> on the outcome of which rides the salvation of all.

60. Here too *Luke* and *Revelation* combine. The removal of the “seal” from Turner’s lips recalls the story of Zacharias, father of John the Baptist, whom the Angel Gabriel decreed “shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed,” that is, until the birth of John, upon which “his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God.” *Luke* 1:20, 64. The removal of the seal also recalls the removal of *Revelation*’s seventh and final seal, which signifies the imminence of humanity’s tribulation, and also the removal of the seal upon the serpent, whose “loosening” signifies the imminence of the Last Judgment. *See Revelation* 8:1–13, 20:3.

61. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 48.

62. *Id.*

63. *Id.* Drewry writes, “The sun’s disk seemed, on rising, to have changed from its usual brilliant golden color to a pale, greenish tint, which soon gave place to cerulean blue, and this also to a silvery white, all owing to some change or derangement of the atmosphere of the sun.” WILLIAM SIDNEY DREWRY, *THE SOUTHAMPTON INSURRECTION* 34 (Johnson Publ’g Co. 1968) (1900).

64. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 41.

65. *Id.* at 48.

66. *See Revelation* 21:7 (“He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.”).

67. *See Luke* 2:40, 46–47 (“And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him. [/] . . . [/] And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. [/] And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers.”).

68. *See Luke* 4:2–13 (describing Jesus wandering the desert for forty days while being tempted by the devil).

69. *See Luke* 3:21–22 (describing the baptism of Jesus). Turner states that he was baptized “by the Spirit.” GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 47. It is worth noting that of the four gospels, only *Luke* does *not* specify that Christ was baptized by John the Baptist, who according to *Luke* had already been imprisoned by Herod. *Luke* 3:19–20. Rather Jesus “being baptized”—note the passive construction—“and praying, the heaven was opened, [/] And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him.” *Luke* 3:21–22.

70. *See Luke* 22:42, 44, describing Christ’s suffering on the Mount of Olives: “Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. . . . [/] And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” In referencing Christ’s crucifixion, Turner’s reply to Gray’s question validates his own action by situating it in relation to the central event of the entire Christian-apocalyptic

## II. CAPITALISM AS RELIGION

Turner's trial took place on November 5, 1831, before a bench of ten magistrates, Jeremiah Cobb Esq. presiding.<sup>71</sup> Gray's *Confessions of Nat Turner* includes a statement in which Cobb and five other members of the bench attest to their presence that day when the confession composed by Gray was read to Turner and acknowledged by him.<sup>72</sup> It also includes what purports to be a verbatim transcription of the statement Cobb made at the conclusion of the trial in sentencing Turner to hang. Toward the end of a short but forceful peroration, Cobb accuses Turner of depriving Southampton County "of many of our most valuable citizens" and of forcing them (and his deceased black confederates) "from Time to Eternity." Perhaps infuriated by Turner's plea, or his confession, or most likely their juxtaposition, Cobb labels him "Borne down by this load of guilt." Cobb, one might say, sentences Turner to an emphatic death—"hung by the neck until you are dead! dead! dead"—but as emphatically he sentences Turner to everlasting guilt: "the blood of all cries aloud, and calls upon you, as the author of their misfortune."<sup>73</sup> Particularly in light of Turner's confession, how might Cobb's words, the climactic "acts" of the court for which its clerk, James Rochelle, demands of the world "full faith and credit," be understood?<sup>74</sup> How can we "stretch" them, historically and philosophically?

sequence he has just related to Gray. In other words, he could not have been mistaken because Christ had indeed been crucified.

71. THE NORFOLK HERALD (Norfolk, Va.), Nov. 9, 1831, reprinted in TRAGLE, *supra* note 6, at 221–23.

72. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 42–43. The six justices so attesting were Jeremiah Cobb, Thomas Pretlow, James W. Parker, Carr Bowers, Samuel B. Hines, and Orris A. Browne. The four justices who did not attest were James D. Massenburg, Robert Goodwin, James Trezvant, and Richard Urquardt. Daniel Fabricant points out, correctly, that the trial record is not consistent with this attestation and accuses Gray of "outright distortion of the court proceedings." Fabricant, *supra* note 11, at 332, 343. There are four possibilities: first, that the confession was indeed read to Turner and acknowledged by him in the presence of the signatory justices, but not as part of the trial proceedings; second, that the account (greatly abbreviated in the trial record) of Turner's precommitment examination given to the court by James Trezvant, one of the two examining magistrates (the other was James W. Parker) in fact relied on or referenced Gray's manuscript, which it indeed appears to track in many elements; third, that Gray obtained the justices' attestation by willfully misleading them about the provenance of what they had heard; or fourth, that the six justices conspired with Gray to present an account of what transpired in court that was not only false but easily proven so by reference to the court's own record. Though the third or even the fourth possibilities cannot be discounted, either the first or the second, or some combination of them, seems more likely.

73. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 56–57.

74. *See id.* at 42–43 (stating "that full faith and credit are due, and ought to be given to their acts as Justices of the peace aforesaid"). Benjamin writes of such acts that they occur within an order (law) "which is merely a residue of the demonic stage of human existence," which is to say the stage of nature, of the creaturely, of myth and of fate, the stage of "the endless pagan chain of guilt and atonement," the stage prior to:

[T]he purity of the man who has expiated his sins, who is reconciled with the pure god. . . . Fate shows itself, therefore, in the view of life, as condemned, as having essentially first been condemned and then become guilty. Goethe summarizes both phases in the words 'the poor man you let become guilty.' Law condemns not to punishment but

In a brilliant commentary on Walter Benjamin's fragment, "Capitalism as Religion," Werner Hamacher annexes the text to the ancient Greek equation of time and guilt,<sup>75</sup> which Benjamin discusses in contemporary notes on the concept of history in which he describes guilt as "the highest category" of world history. Benjamin's notes continue as follows:

Every world-historical moment is indebted and indebting. Cause and effect can never be decisive categories for the structure of world history, because they cannot determine any totality. Logic has to prove the principle that no totality as such can be either cause or effect. It is a mistake of the rationalistic conception of history to view any historical totality (that is, a state of the world) as cause or effect. A state of the world is, however, always guilty with regard to some later one.<sup>76</sup>

How is this "guilt-history" related to "Capitalism as Religion"? Hamacher explains, "If the task of a critique of history can only be satisfied by a critique of guilt-history"—history's highest category—"then the privileged object of this critique must be Christianity as the religion of guilt-economy, and capitalism as the system of a deterministic debt-religion."<sup>77</sup>

Benjamin's fragment attributes a religious form to capitalism. By this he means "not merely, as Weber believes" that capitalism is "a formation *conditioned* by religion" but that in allaying "the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers," capitalism is "an essentially religious phenomenon."<sup>78</sup> Benjamin identifies capitalism with Christianity, upon which, in the West, it is parasitic—so much so that "Christianity's history is essentially that of its parasite."<sup>79</sup> Characteristically, Benjamin's point is not straightforward, containing a hidden double negative: by Benjamin's Judaic definition of religion, capitalism is not a religion at all; but then neither is Christianity. The religious identity he attributes to both is that of "so-called" religions.

So understood, capitalism's religious structure has three features, all

to guilt. Fate is the guilt context of the living. It corresponds to the natural condition of the living . . .

1 WALTER BENJAMIN, *Fate and Character*, in WALTER BENJAMIN: SELECTED WRITINGS, 1913–1926, *supra* note 1, at 201, 203–04; *see also* Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 887.

75. Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 887–89. Thus, according to Anaximander (ca. 610–546 BC), "Where the source of things is, to that place they must also pass away, according to necessity, for they must pay penance and be judged for their injustices, in accordance with the ordinance of time." FRIEDRICH WILHELM NIETZSCHE, *PHILOSOPHY IN THE TRAGIC AGE OF THE GREEKS* 45 (1962).

76. Walter Benjamin, *Zur Geschichtsphilosophie. Historik und Politik*, in 6 WALTER BENJAMIN, *GESAMMELTE SCHRIFTEN* 92 (Rolf Tiedemann & Herman Schweppenhäuser eds., 1977), *translated in* Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 890. Hamacher elaborates: "Guilt is not a mechanical cause; it is, however, a making or letting happen, as giving occasion, release and production . . ." *Id.*

77. Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 893. Christianity as religion thus instantiates "the endless pagan chain of guilt and atonement." 1 BENJAMIN, *supra* note 74, at 203.

78. 1 BENJAMIN, *supra* note 1, at 288 (emphasis added).

79. *Id.* at 289; *see also id.* at 290 ("The Christianity of the Reformation period did not favor the growth of capitalism; instead it transformed itself into capitalism.").

extremes. First, like all so-called religions, it is “purely cultic,” bereft of a theology.<sup>80</sup> “In capitalism, things have a meaning only in their relationship to the cult . . .” (for example, valuable citizens).<sup>81</sup> Second, it is unending, celebrated “*sans [t]rêve et sans merci* . . . There is no day that is not a feast day . . .”<sup>82</sup> Third, “the cult makes guilt pervasive.”<sup>83</sup> Here, in what Hamacher calls “a structure of belief and behavior, of law and economy, pursuing, like every other cult within the context of myth, the sole aim of organizing ‘the guilt- and debt-nexus of the living,’”<sup>84</sup> lies capitalism’s alleviation of the “anxieties, torments, and disturbances”<sup>85</sup> of its followers. “Capitalism is a system for the attribution of guilt as well as debt, just as all pagan cult-religions that precede it . . . just as Christianity that goes along and identifies with it.”<sup>86</sup> Religious form and economic form are syncretized, identified, fused in the production, accumulation, and universalization<sup>87</sup> of guilt:

Capitalism is probably the first instance of a cult that creates guilt, not atonement. In this respect, this religious system is caught up in the headlong rush of a larger movement. A vast sense of guilt that is unable to find relief seizes on the cult, not to atone for this guilt but to make it universal, to hammer it into the conscious mind, so as once and for all to include God in the system of guilt and thereby awaken in Him an interest in the process of atonement.<sup>88</sup>

The “vast sense of guilt” that seizes upon the cult of capitalism is well described in the Calvinist Confession of Faith, adopted in 1646 after three years of deliberation by the Westminster Assembly of the (Reformed) Church of England:

Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.<sup>89</sup>

Some were, by God’s immutable purpose, determined before the foundation of the world, predestined “out of His mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works” to everlasting life.<sup>90</sup> To the rest “God was

80. *Id.* at 288.

81. *Id.* at 288. Similarly, in Christianity things have meaning only in their relation to the cult of Christ.

82. *Id.* at 288. Bullock and Jennings follow the *Gesammelte Schriften* in rendering the quotation in this sentence “*sans rêve et sans merci*”—without dream or mercy. Hamacher prefers to follow Uwe Steiner’s contention that the quotation should read *sans trêve et sans merci*—without rest and without mercy. See Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 897 n.19.

83. 1 BENJAMIN, *supra* note 1, at 288.

84. Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 895.

85. 1 BENJAMIN, *supra* note 1, at 288.

86. Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 895.

87. *Id.* at 900.

88. 1 BENJAMIN, *supra* note 1, at 288–89.

89. WEBER, *supra* note 15, at 70.

90. *Id.* at 70–71.



pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin . . . .”<sup>91</sup> As Weber writes:

This doctrine, with all the pathos of its inhumanity, had one principle consequence for the mood of a generation which yielded to its magnificent logic: it engendered, for each individual, a feeling of tremendous inner loneliness. In what was for the people of the Reformation age the most crucial concern of life, their eternal salvation, man was obliged to tread his path alone toward a destiny which had been decreed from all eternity. *No one and nothing could help him.*<sup>92</sup>

How, Weber asked, could the isolated despairing individuals created by the Calvinist conception of God feed the social organization of capitalism? Precisely by their acceptance of the accompanying conception that the world existed solely “to serve the self-glorification of *God*” and that God “willed the social achievement of the Christian, *because* it was his will that the social structure of life should accord with his commands and be organized in such a way as to achieve this purpose.”<sup>93</sup> The principal representation of Christian obedience? Labor in a calling, the methodical asceticism of which also served as the means “to strive for the subjective certainty of one’s election and justification in daily struggle.”<sup>94</sup>

Here then we encounter once more the morphology of election to grace, but with a difference, that unlike Turner’s ecstatic consciousness of his own perfection, the Calvinist must labor constantly against soul-corroding doubt, engage in constant self-examination: “elect or reprobate?”<sup>95</sup> Hence the “vast sense of guilt.”<sup>96</sup> But Benjamin goes far beyond any mere “interest” of God in atonement. Capitalism implicates God in the entire guilt/debt-burden. It is not without significance that both the Geneva Bible (1599) and the King James translation (1611) have Christ teach the multitude on the Mount to demand that God “forgive us our debts,”<sup>97</sup> that He take on His shoulders all the deficits of the world in what Nietzsche called:

91. *Id.* at 71.

92. *Id.* at 73 (emphasis added).

93. *Id.* at 75.

94. *Id.* at 77.

95. *Id.* at 79.

96. 1 BENJAMIN, *supra* note 1, at 288; *see also id.* at 290 (“Worries: a mental illness characteristic of the age of capitalism. Spiritual (not material) hopelessness . . . . A condition that is so bereft of hope causes guilt feelings. ‘Worries’ are the index of the sense of guilt induced by a despair that is communal, not individual and material, in origin.”).

97. *Matthew* 6:12. In the *Luther Bibel* (1545), the verse reads, “*Und vergib uns unsere Schuld, wie wir unseren Schuldigern vergeben.*” *Matthew* 6:12 (Luther Bibel). In German, as we have seen, *Schuld* means both guilt and debt simultaneously. In English, in contrast, the terminology tends to shift around. *See* Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 887 n.1. Thus in William Tyndale’s *New Testament* (1525), the first modern English translation, the word used is “trespasses.” *See Matthew* 6 (Tyndale *New Testament*). In the Wycliffe Bible (c.1350), however, the verse reads (Middle English), “[A]nd foryvue to vs oure dettis, as we foryvuun to oure dettouris . . . .” *Matthew* 6 (Wycliffe Bible). In the Wessex (or West Saxon)

[T]hat master-stroke of Christianity: God himself sacrificing himself for the guilt of man; God himself making himself paid; God being alone able to redeem from man what for man himself has become irredeemable—the creditor sacrificing himself for his debtor, from *love* (would you believe it?), from love for his debtor!<sup>98</sup>

Christianity as capitalism (capitalism as cultic religion) promises redemption, Benjamin argues, but cannot deliver because its God—the redeemer—is Himself irredeemably guilty.

The nature of the religious movement which is capitalism entails endurance right to the end, to the point where God, too, finally takes on the entire burden of guilt, to the point where the universe has been taken over by that despair which is actually its secret *hope*. Capitalism is entirely without precedent, in that it is a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction. It is the expansion of despair, until despair becomes a religious state of the world in the hope that this will lead to salvation.<sup>99</sup>

As Hamacher puts it, succinctly, “God Himself has fallen from Himself . . . .”<sup>100</sup>

Benjamin argues that there is no resolution to the ever-intensifying agony of despair that capitalism-as-religion produces. It cannot be reformed from within. In the most trenchant argument for capitalism’s “reform” available—Marx’s claim for the transfiguration of its most advanced stage into socialism—“the capitalism that refuses to change course becomes socialism by means of the simple and compound interest that are functions of *Schuld* [debt].”<sup>101</sup> Nor, in its universality, can there exist a position outside the cult from which to renounce the cult. Instead, in the completeness of despair, in its complete destruction of all existence, the cult annihilates itself:

The “utter guilt” of capital’s divinity is thus the ultimate moment of a jump back to its origin where it becomes . . . the ‘not’ of guilt. At the origin, the law of retribution does not rule, but that of guilt’s annihilation. Out of the Christianity of capital, in its self-devastation emerges the Messianism of forgiveness . . . If the guilt-history is precisely a history of annihilation . . . then it is at the same time the history of the annihilation

Gospels (c.900), it reads (Old English), “[A]nd forgyf us ure gyltas, swa swa wē forgyfað iurum gyltendum . . . .” *Matthew* 6:12 (West Saxon I Gospels).

98. 10 FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *THE WORKS OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE: A GENEALOGY OF MORALS* 118 (Alexander Tille ed., William A. Housemann trans., 1897); see also Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 904.

99. 1 BENJAMIN, *supra* note 1, at 289.

100. Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 909.

101. 1 BENJAMIN, *supra* note 1, at 289. Hamacher notes that Benjamin “interprets the historical process that transforms the one mode of production into the other as a debt-progression according to the metaphors of interest and compound interest, and thereby interprets history in the age of capital religion as debt history. The socialism projected by Marx can only become a more advanced state in the debt history of capital . . . .” Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 906.

of history. This immanent rebound accomplishes itself and becomes history in a sense that is contrary to that of “guilt-history”—It comes about not as reform or reformation, but as the true revolution eliminating at every moment the traces of the guilt-system. The nothing of this counter-history is time itself as the time to come.<sup>102</sup>

So apparently abstruse an engagement in philosophy of history may seem to court obscurity when employed as an interpretive prism on empirical events.<sup>103</sup> We must recognize, however, that in Turner’s confession—its first half at any rate—and in the Southampton County Court’s response to it, we are dealing, quite precisely, with philosophies of history at least as much as with historical events. Hence, resort to one kind of apocalyptic philosophy of (world) history to unravel another may be worthwhile.

With this in mind, consider first the philosophy manifest in Turner’s utterly fractile statement *that he did not feel guilty*. Turner is stating that he is the *not* of the “load of guilt” that the court insists he bear for the dispatch of “valuable citizens” from “time to eternity.” In his half of the confession, Turner has determinedly located himself beyond the cultic guilt/debt nexus in which the court (with its demands that its acts be worshipped and credited) is so plainly embedded. Having spoken through his confession he has “nothing more to say.”<sup>104</sup>

How can Turner stand beyond that nexus, which, we have seen, Benjamin holds unredeemable, unreformable, unrenounceable—a perfect, hence inescapable, fusion of the economic and the juridical with the moral and the psychological?<sup>105</sup> Consider the “moment” of Turner’s decision in *his* terms: “I heard a loud noise in the heavens and the Spirit *instantly* appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened and Christ had laid down the yoke he had born for the

102. Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 915–16. On “origin”—a concept of major importance in Benjamin’s philosophy—see WALTER BENJAMIN, *THE ORIGIN OF GERMAN TRAGIC DRAMA* (John Osborne trans., Verso 2009) (1963). In an equally brilliant commentary on Benjamin’s fragment, Samuel Weber argues that the *Umkehr* (reversal) to which Hamacher here attaches such significance is not guilt’s self-annihilation but rather capitalism’s annihilation of everything that is not *Bilanz*—that is, the “balance sheet”/“the bottom line” that “installs commercial calculation as the model of knowledge . . . link[ing] the invisible ‘faith’ of the individual to the phenomenal world of capitalism.” SAMUEL WEBER, *TARGETS OF OPPORTUNITY: ON THE MILITARIZATION OF THINKING* 118–19, 123 (2005). Even Weber, however, cannot quite bear the “infinite and yet immanent” agony of the endless bottom line, and so finds hope in the very absence of an end, just as Hamacher does in the possibility that the time to come is time as irreducible deferral—“the breaking off of succession between cause and effect”—messianic forgiveness. *Id.* at 123, 133; Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 918, 916–20.

103. But note the terms *The Liberator* chose for its response to news of the Southampton rebellion: “Wo to this guilty land, unless she speedily repents of her evil doings! The blood of millions of her sons cries aloud for redress! IMMEDIATE EMANCIAPATION can alone save her from the vengeance of Heaven, and cancel the debt of ages!” *THE LIBERATOR* (Boston, Mass.), Sept. 3 1831, reprinted in TRAGLE, *supra* note 6, at 64.

104. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 56; see also 1 BENJAMIN, *supra* note 1, at 290 (describing law as “heathen”); 1 BENJAMIN, *supra* note 74, at 203–204.

105. Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 900.

sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent.”<sup>106</sup> In apocalyptic Christian terms, the final battle against Satan immediately precedes the Last Judgment, when all forms of existence known hitherto are annihilated,<sup>107</sup> when “whosoever . . . not found written in the book of life [is] cast into the lake of fire,”<sup>108</sup> leaving only pure origin and end, “Alpha and Omega”: God’s eternal, forgiving, reign over man.<sup>109</sup> In Benjaminian terms, God’s final abandonment of His burden of guilt (laying down the yoke) may be taken to signify the moment of “jump back” to origin—a distinct representation of the “not” of guilt—and the emergence of messianic forgiveness. Ignore for the moment Benjamin’s dismissal of Christianity as merely “so-called” religion. The parallelism between the two representations of extremity is remarkable:

If [liberation] is neither possible within the guilt-relations of the capital religion nor without them, then it is possible in a place—and only here—where these relations have reached an extreme that belongs neither to these relations themselves nor to their outside. The possibility of liberation from guilt can thus only be located at the very extreme of guilt. This extreme would be the outer- and innermost limit upon which guilt is no longer itself and yet is nothing other than itself, where it is—as guilt—freed of itself.<sup>110</sup>

Consider, finally, “decision” itself, which for Benjamin is transcendent, an index of human freedom, without “demonic,” which is to say natural or “creaturely,” ambiguity: “only the decision, not the choice, is inscribed in the book of life. For choice is natural and can even belong to the elements; decision is transcendent.”<sup>111</sup> We know that as a slave in the empirical, creaturely life-world, Turner did not have choice. We have seen that in the philosophical world in which he lived, decision—pondering, eventually finding, his purpose in God’s scheme—became his. Is this why Gray seems so fascinated by Turner, by his “natural intelligence and quickness of apprehension . . . surpassed by few men I have ever seen”? As a slave, Turner realizes his purpose—to fight against the Serpent—is decision.<sup>112</sup> No wonder one can sense the stark truth in Gray’s famous involuntary shudder: “clothed with rags and covered with chains; yet

106. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 47–48 (emphasis added). Note the importance of a temporality of instantaneity to the concept of “jump back”/“immanent rebound.”

107. See Revelation 20:11 (“And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, *from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.*” (emphasis added)).

108. Revelation 20:15.

109. Revelation 1:8; see also 1 WALTER BENJAMIN, *Critique of Violence*, in WALTER BENJAMIN: SELECTED WRITINGS, 1913–1926, *supra* note 1, at 236, 249–52; 3 WALTER BENJAMIN, *Theological-Political Fragment*, in WALTER BENJAMIN: SELECTED WRITINGS, 1935–1938, *supra* note 9, at 305, 305–06.

110. Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 907.

111. 1 WALTER BENJAMIN, *Goethe’s Elective Affinities*, in WALTER BENJAMIN: SELECTED WRITINGS, 1913–1926, *supra* note 1, at 297, 346; see also Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 892–93, 900.

112. Interestingly, Gray writes (positively) of “the decision of his character.” See GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 54.

daring to raise his manacled hands to heaven, with a spirit soaring above the attributes of man; I looked on him and my blood curdled in my veins.”<sup>113</sup>

### III. SCIENCE AS A VOCATION

Nat Turner’s purpose in revealing his life story was to open men’s eyes to the sacred space and time in which he and they lived and would die. Thomas Ruffin Gray’s immediate purpose in composing *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was to make himself some money by trading on the notoriety of the Southampton County “insurrection.”<sup>114</sup> There was, however, more to his labors than money-making. Gray desired to present himself as an authoritative participant in Turner’s capture and condemnation and to use that authority to overwrite Turner’s revelation with a competing and—necessarily, under the circumstances—commanding theory of the events and their cause.<sup>115</sup>

Gray had been with the first party of white militia who rode out from Jerusalem on the morning of Monday, August 22, in search of the rebels, and he had spent days on the scene, followed by weeks at the Southampton County Courthouse.<sup>116</sup> By the time he met Turner face-to-face, forty-three trials and remand hearings (in the case of free people of color) had already taken place involving forty-eight defendants. Twenty-eight death sentences were handed down, ten with recommendations of commutation. The court had appointed Gray as counsel to four defendants, and he had had ample opportunity to observe the trials and hear the testimony of others.<sup>117</sup> Gray had already written one lengthy and detailed report on the insurrection, published by the Richmond *Constitutional Whig* in the form of an unsigned letter from “a gentleman well conversant with the scenes he describes.”<sup>118</sup> He had access to other published reports, to local people, and to a bundle of papers “given up by [Turner’s] wife, under the lash.”<sup>119</sup> He may

113. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 54–55; *see also supra* text accompanying note 102. One may understand the first half of Turner’s confession as the counter-history which reveals the “not” of his “not guilty” precisely as “time itself as the time to come.” Hence the triple significance of his response to Gray, “was not Christ crucified”: the statement repudiates the allegation of self-delusion—Christ’s crucifixion was no divine “error”; it confirms Turner’s sacrificial innocence—like Christ, Turner will die for others; and it is predictive—Turner’s execution, like Christ’s, signifies messianic forgiveness (time to come).

114. THOMAS C. PARRAMORE, *SOUTHAMPTON COUNTY VIRGINIA* 107, 112 (1978).

115. The pamphlet’s “apparatus” of authority is formidable: notarized statement of copyright; certified statement of a majority of the justices of the Southampton County Court who tried and convicted Turner; Turner’s “Confession”; what purports to be a transcript of Turner’s trial (giving a prominent role to the confession taken by Gray) and pronouncement of sentence; a list of the deceased whites; and a list of blacks brought before the court, and their disposition. *See* GRAY, *supra* note 1.

116. *See* Allmendinger, Jr., *supra* note 12, at 24.

117. *See* TRAGLE, *supra* note 6, at 229–45.

118. THE CONSTITUTIONAL WHIG (Richmond, Va.), Sept. 26, 1831, *reprinted in* TRAGLE, *supra* note 6, at 90.

119. *Id.* at 92.

well have attended Turner's preliminary examination conducted by magistrates James Trezvant and James W. Parker on October 31, following his capture.<sup>120</sup>

Armed with this profusion of resources, Gray applies rational, empirical criteria to the rebellion. He takes a moment of empirical *blur*—darkness and blinding light, heat and dust, wild elation and panic, excitement and terror, alcohol and blood, confusion, chaos—and methodically *organizes* it. His account is an *accounting*, blow-by-blow, step-by-step, with careful lists of the deceased whites and captured blacks. That is, by making the rebellion calculable, Gray seeks to make it knowable. By turning the rebellion into knowledge, he establishes the terms on which it shall be known. This goal is evident in the structure of the confession itself. The first half (Turner's half) has a discontinuous, staccato, nonlinear form; sentences, frequently ungrammatical, interrupt and spill into each other; punctuation is rough and basic. One can readily imagine the first half as largely a reproduction of notes hurriedly taken as Turner spoke (whether during his preliminary examination or during his extended jail cell conversation with Gray, or both). There are few signs that this part of the manuscript was extensively rewritten by Gray after the event. The second half of the confession (beginning at "Since the commencement of 1830 . . ." <sup>121</sup>) is a complete contrast. It is written confidently in full grammatical sentences and skillfully punctuated. It is a careful, comprehensive, graphic, real-time, linear narrative of the succession of encounters and killings that have ever since constituted the Southampton Insurrection as empirical event.<sup>122</sup> This half of the confession contains neither mystery nor metaphysics. Its temporality is mechanical and sequential. Its account of motivation—from the slave Will's statement at Turner's Cabin Pond meeting on the evening of August 21 that he was resolved to join the group because "his life was worth no more than others, and his liberty as dear to him," to Turner's account of his final surrender to Benjamin Phipps—is unrelievedly rational and secular.<sup>123</sup> There is very little in this half of the confession that Gray did not already know. Indeed, in a factual sense, given Gray's extensive research and the trials he had attended, he probably knew a lot more about what had occurred during the forty-eight hours following the Cabin Pond meeting than Turner did.<sup>124</sup> It is likely that this half of the confession was largely written prior to Turner's capture and revised in light of Turner's own account in examination and

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120. *Id.* at 90–99; Allmendinger, Jr., *supra* note 12, at 26–27, 31–36. Daniel Fabricant argues that Gray indeed had access to the justices' examination, but his evidence—an unsigned letter to the *Richmond Enquirer* revealing knowledge of, and participation in, the preliminary examination, which Fabricant attributes to Gray—has also been attributed by David Allmendinger to William C. Parker, whom Allmendinger identifies (at 35–36) as a previous anonymous correspondent of the *Enquirer*. See Fabricant, *supra* note 11, at 345–46.

121. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 48.

122. See Allmendinger, Jr., *supra* note 12, at 132.

123. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 48, 53.

124. See Allmendinger, Jr., *supra* note 12, at 42.

conversation.<sup>125</sup> Gray indicates that after hearing Turner's account he "began a cross-examination, and found his statement corroborated by every circumstance coming within my own knowledge or the confessions of others."<sup>126</sup>

Gray might have left the first half "rough" in his haste to have his pamphlet published,<sup>127</sup> or he might have thought Turner's revelations ludicrous and not worth recomposition. He might have thought his intended audience would be more interested in establishing responsibility for the trail of white death and destruction than the demented ramblings of a primitive. In fact, whether intended or not, the contrast between the two halves of the confession completely serves Gray's purposes. First, the rational and empirical second half of the confession overwhelms the metaphysics of the first half. It restores secular temporal and spatial order. Second, it provides explanation. "Every thing connected with this sad affair was wrapt in mystery, until Nat Turner, the leader of this ferocious band, whose name has resounded throughout our widely extended empire, was captured."<sup>128</sup> Once captured, Turner reveals himself not as a rational and calculating, hence all the more dangerous, adversary but as "a gloomy fanatic . . . bewildered, and overwrought . . . endeavoring to grapple with things beyond [his] reach."<sup>129</sup> Here was no systematic plan, no widespread conspiracy, no revenge for a (deniable but comprehensible) tally of oppressions and injustices, no inherent systemic failure. The explanation why a "calm and peaceful" society was suddenly cleft apart by "woe and death" is sheer chance—the random visitation upon "valuable citizens" of the savage irrationality of a (single) mind "bewildered and confounded, and finally corrupted and led to the conception and perpetration of the most atrocious and heart-rending deeds."<sup>130</sup> The proper response, hence, is not panic or self-questioning but redoubled dependence upon precisely the positivist rationality on display in the pamphlet. Gray's account "is calculated . . . to demonstrate the policy of our laws in restraint of this class of our population,

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125. See *supra* text accompanying note 11. It is worth revisiting the title of Gray's pamphlet in two respects. First, although only one section of the pamphlet is entitled "Confession" the pamphlet as a whole is described in the plural, *Confessions*. Second, the title refers to the presentation of *An Authentic Account of the Whole Insurrection* as if it is a distinct section of the pamphlet: *Also . . .* But there is no account of the whole insurrection in the pamphlet other than that provided by the second half of the "Confession." Both the use of the plural *Confessions* and the implied distinction between the "Confession" and the *Authentic Account* suggest Gray's authorship of the second half of the "Confession."

126. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 54.

127. Immediately following the trial on November 5, Gray left Jerusalem for Richmond, seventy miles to the north, where on November 7 he attempted to arrange the printing of his manuscript. Unsuccessful in Richmond, he rode on to Washington D.C., a further 110 miles to the north, where on November 10 he obtained copyright for his pamphlet. The pamphlet itself was printed in Baltimore, another forty miles northeast of Washington, by the firm of Lucas and Deaver. It was published November 22 in an edition of some fifty thousand copies. See PARRAMORE, *supra* note 114, at 112.

128. GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 40.

129. *Id.* at 41.

130. *Id.* at 41, 42.

and to induce all those entrusted with their execution, as well as our citizens generally, to see that they are strictly and rigidly enforced.”<sup>131</sup>

From a Weberian perspective, Gray’s purpose and achievement in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is “disenchantment.” The trope is the theme of Weber’s “Science as a Vocation” and one of the best known of his observations of modernity. “The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization,” Weber observed, “and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world.’”<sup>132</sup> Rationalization and intellectualization were the products of scientific progress—“our common fate and, more, our common goal.” Their practical meaning was not that humanity had, per se, acquired “an increased and general knowledge” of the conditions under which it lived. Rather, their meaning lay in altered conditions for the acquisition of knowledge—in “the knowledge or belief that if one but wished” to acquire knowledge of the conditions under which one lived “one *could* learn it at any time.” Weber characterized this momentous alteration in human understanding of the capacity and means to know as an alteration in the world’s *calculability*. It meant “there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play . . . that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.” Calculability had disenchanting the world. “One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits . . . Technical means and calculations perform the service.”<sup>133</sup>

Weber’s position was not normative. Disenchantment was not a process to be approved or regretted. It was the way of the world. In Thomas Ruffin Gray’s case, in contrast, normativity stood uppermost—the crushing of blood-curdling fanaticism (recall his shudder) beneath the ordered rationality of empirical explanation and positive law.

Among Gray’s allies in the enterprise of orderliness were of course the justices of the Southampton County Court, objective and impartial in their execution of the law, “listening with unwearied patience to a multitude of witnesses, and to long and elaborate arguments of counsel,” who likewise contrasted their “justice” to Turner’s “fanaticism,”<sup>134</sup> other commentators,<sup>135</sup> and state agencies, not least Virginia Governor John Floyd.

Floyd’s letters and diary entries for late August and September 1831 are full of the bustle and relay of executive command. Information is received, arrangements made, “men, arms, ammunition, etc.” ordered into the field.<sup>136</sup>

131. *Id.* at 41.

132. WEBER, *supra* note 1, at 155.

133. *Id.* at 138–39.

134. THE CONSTITUTIONAL WHIG (Richmond, Va.), Sept. 26, 1831, *reprinted in* TRAGLE, *supra* note 6, at 98; GRAY, *supra* note 1, at 57.

135. Notably James Trezvant and William C. Parker, both of whom, like Gray, wrote lengthy reports on the events for regional newspapers. *See* Allmendinger, Jr., *supra* note 12, at 25–36.

136. Reports dispatching “Captain Randolph with a fine troop of cavalry and Captain John B. Richardson with light artillery,” both from Richmond, “and two companies of Infantry from Norfolk and Portsmouth” together with “one thousand stand of arms” for the use of Southampton and



Floyd never displays the least doubt that the insurrection will be crushed—his biggest concern is the “wretched and abominable” state constitution, which keeps putting “vain and foolish ceremony” in his way. “I must first require advice of Council, and then disregard it, if I please.”<sup>137</sup> By early September, Floyd’s diary entries recording the disposition of his forces have become routine, interspersed with remarks on the stream of sentencing records arriving from Southampton for gubernatorial approval and comments on his own health. On September 7, momentarily alarmed by a report of insubordination amongst “negroes” in Northampton and Accomack, a tired and feverish Floyd allows himself to wonder whether “this insurrection in Southampton is to lead to much more disastrous consequences than is at this time apprehended by anybody,” but what he has on his mind is likely revealed by a letter written five days earlier, as much as by momentary and unsubstantiated rumors of revolt: “what the effect of this insurrection is to be upon the commercial credit of the state, upon individual credit, is a point of view not all pleasant, to say nothing upon interest upon loans for the state itself, should she ever wish to borrow.”<sup>138</sup>

Once more, then, we find ourselves enmeshed in credit and debt history. Here, alongside the credit (returns on rational juridical action) claimed on behalf of the Southampton justices, Floyd’s epistolary anxieties (his torment? his disturbance?) grant us a glimpse of credit’s vaster workings—the funding of the state’s valuable citizens, of the state itself, “should she ever wish to borrow.”<sup>139</sup> Marx is our guide. “The public debt becomes one of the most powerful levers of primitive accumulation. As with the stroke of an enchanter’s wand, it endows barren money with the power of breeding, and thus turns it into capital.” Hence “[p]ublic credit becomes the *credo* of capital . . . want of faith in the national debt takes the place of the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, which may not be forgiven.” Elsewhere Marx elaborates further on the “theogeny” of capital accumulation:

In simple circulation, C-M-C, the value of commodities [C] attained at the most a form independent of their use values, *i.e.* the form of money [M]; but that same value now in the circulation M-C-M, or the circulation of capital, suddenly presents itself as an independent substance . . . instead of simply representing the relations of commodities, it enters now, so to say, into private relations with itself. It differentiates itself as original value from itself as surplus-value; as the father differentiates himself from himself quâ the son, yet both are one and of one age: for only by the surplus value of £10 does the £100 originally advanced

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Sussex country volunteers, “with a good supply of ammunition.” JOHN FLOYD, THE DIARY OF GOVERNOR JOHN FLOYD, AUGUST 1831, TWENTY-THIRD DAY, *reprinted in* TRAGLE, *supra* note 6, at 252. Tragle reproduces Floyd’s Diary for 22 August 1831–26 January 1832.

137. *Id.*

138. *Id.* at 254; Letter from John Floyd to Colonel W. J. Worth, Commanding 1st Battalion U.S. 2nd Artillery, Norfolk, Va. (Sept. 6, 1831), *in* TRAGLE, *supra* note 6, at 272.

139. FLOYD, *supra* note 136, at 271.

become capital, and so soon as this takes place, so soon as the son, and by the son, the father, is begotten, so soon does their difference vanish, and they again become one, £110.<sup>140</sup>

Barren money becomes fertile, as Hamacher remarks, in “a sacramental process of indebteding that endows capital with productivity . . . a generative process within God Himself.”<sup>141</sup>

The mechanics of debt—of “advanced” or “credited” money—compose the process by which value transforms itself into surplus value—which is what defines value as value to begin with. This transformation is the process of a god’s genesis out of something that is not—a theogeny out of self-incurred debts. And more precisely, it is a theogeny out of credit, a credit that is itself drawn from unpaid labor, exploitation, colonization, theft and murder, legalized under the laws of the privileged.<sup>142</sup>

In Governor Floyd’s sudden anxiety for the bottom line,<sup>143</sup> we can observe guilt and debt, faith and credit, the economic, the juridical, the psychological, and the sacral, all collapsing into each other before our eyes, fusing—despite his own and Gray’s best efforts—in august simultaneity. Could the “faith” of creditors in the economic viability of citizens and state falter just because of a ragged bunch of unfaithful slaves and their demented prophet-leader? No wonder we find Weber at the end of his analysis of the world’s calculability pausing to call to our attention the demon “who holds the fibers of his very life.”<sup>144</sup> No wonder Virginia felt it was dancing to the strings of Nat Turner.

#### CONCLUSION

It is well known that, as a result of the Southampton Rebellion, the Virginia legislature held a lengthy debate in January and February 1832 on the possibility of slavery’s gradual elimination from the state, either by colonization or emancipation.<sup>145</sup> The debate provoked Thomas Roderick Dew of the College of William & Mary to write a lengthy critique of the eliminationist case—“Abolition of Negro Slavery”—from the impeccably disenchanting perspective of “political law.”<sup>146</sup> Dew thought the very idea of debating abolition was imprudent to the

140. 1 KARL MARX, *CAPITAL: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CAPITALIST PRODUCTION* (Frederick Engels ed., Samuel Moore & Edward Aveling trans., 1961); *see also* IAN BAUCOM, *SPECTERS OF THE ATLANTIC: FINANCE CAPITAL, SLAVERY, AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY* 24–27 (2005).

141. *See* Hamacher, *supra* note 4, at 902–03.

142. *Id.*

143. WEBER, *supra* note 15, at 123. Tragle notes how “all questions pertaining to the revolt became, so to speak, ‘business transactions.’” Letter from Brigadier General Eppes to the Adjutant General of Virginia, *in* TRAGLE, *supra* note 6, at 427.

144. WEBER, *supra* note 1, at 156.

145. *See* ALISON GOODYEAR FREEHLING, *DRIFT TOWARD DISSOLUTION: THE VIRGINIA SLAVERY DEBATE OF 1831–1832* (1982).

146. Dew was professor of political law at the College of William & Mary. DEW, *supra* note 1, at 112.

highest degree, but “in its zeal for discussion,” the legislature had “boldly set aside all prudential considerations.” Well and good. “The seal has now been broken.”<sup>147</sup>

Like Thomas Ruffin Gray, only more so, Dew sought to bring order of a particular kind to chaos, to enlist “the empire of reason” to repel another outbreak of fanaticism—abolitionist proposals that Dew labeled products of “excitement and apprehension.”<sup>148</sup> The result was proof to his own satisfaction that the abolition of slavery in Virginia was an impossibility: “every plan of emancipation and deportation which we can possibly conceive, is totally impracticable.” Virginia’s slaves were simply too valuable. Take them away and “you pull down the atlas that upholds the whole system.” The state would be ruined. “Virginia will be a desert.”<sup>149</sup>

There are odd but interesting parallels between the disenchanted world of Dew’s political economy and the sacred space and time in which Nat Turner dwelled. Both Dew and Turner “spoke out” on matters they judged of immense importance but only after the removal of a seal.<sup>150</sup> Both were preoccupied with numbers that they invested with crucial significance. (Some of their numbers were the same.)<sup>151</sup> Both remarked on how difficult it was “to fall upon any definite plan which can for a moment command . . . approbation.”<sup>152</sup>

For Dew, the difficulty was decisive: like it or not, there was simply no means to abolish slavery in Virginia. In contrast, Turner and his confederates eventually decided on a plan and attempted immediately to put it into effect.<sup>153</sup> In two senses, the failure of that attempt seems to prove Dew right. First, their failure was undoubtedly “an unerring symptom of the difficulty and impracticability of the whole.”<sup>154</sup> Second, failure provided proof that slaves were indeed far too valuable to surrender. As law provided, all the rebellious slaves

147. *Id.* at 116–18.

148. *Id.* at 116. “We will go further, and assert that [the abolitionists’] arguments, in most cases, were of a wild and intemperate character, based upon false principles, and assumptions of the most vicious and alarming kind, subversive of the rights of property and the order and tranquility of society, and portending to the whole slave-owning country—if they ever shall be followed out in practice—inevitable and ruinous consequences.” *Id.* at 117.

149. *Id.* at 117, 120, 131. Dew held that his conclusions were “sustained by facts and reasoning as irresistible as the demonstration of the mathematician.” *Id.* at 117.

150. *See supra* text accompanying notes 60 and 147.

151. Dew estimated populations, their increase, their value, and the cost of reducing them in size. *See DEW, supra* note 1, at 119–21, 125, 129–31. For his part, Turner thought the numbers 6000, 30,000 and 80,000 of particular importance. The last of these was reportedly his estimate of the white population of “the country.” It is unclear what Turner took “the country” to be—the county, the cross-border region, the state, or some particular section of it, or the federal union. If 6000 was his estimate of the local (county) white population it was quite accurate. For Dew, meanwhile, 6000 was both the estimated annual increase of Virginia’s slave and free colored populations, and the estimated number of slaves “exported” elsewhere, an “efflux . . . salutary to the state, and . . . an abundant source of wealth . . .” *Id.* at 122.

152. *See id.* at 129; *cf. supra* text accompanying notes 61, 63.

153. *See supra* text at notes 61–64.

154. *See DEW, supra* note 1, at 129.

condemned to death were valued by the Southampton County Court. The least valuable were Daniel at \$100 (the first slave hung) and Lucy at \$275<sup>155</sup>—the only woman condemned. The most valuable, at \$600, was Frank, a blacksmith.<sup>156</sup> The median valuation of the thirty condemned was \$400, the mean was \$376.66.<sup>157</sup> In this respect at least, Turner himself, valued at \$375, was average.<sup>158</sup> Dew valued the entire Virginia slave population as of the 1830 census at \$94 million, the average slave being worth in his estimation only \$200.<sup>159</sup> Were one to use the Southampton valuations rather than Dew's, the Virginia slave population would have been worth \$177 million, only adding to the weight of Dew's argument that the state's slaves were too valuable to free. Had all the Southampton condemned been executed or transported they would have cost the state \$11,300 in compensation to their owners,<sup>160</sup> only adding to the anxieties of Governor Floyd.

In Dew's calculus of Virginia slavery's value (which is reminiscent of a contemporary's attempt to calculate, on the basis of a small and nonscientifically drawn sample, its efficiency<sup>161</sup>), we see one of the workings of the chattel principle—"the property principle, the bill of sale principle"—the principle of the priced person.<sup>162</sup> The principle has many other applications useful to the examination of the intersection of capitalism and slavery; perhaps the most pungent is commodity fetishism, the culturalized fiction of the animate commodity.<sup>163</sup>

But in the case of slavery, of course, the animate commodity is not fiction at all but fact. And in their very existence these factitious fetishized commodities (which always seem to appear, in American history, amid portentous enumerations<sup>164</sup>) frustrate Dew's rationality—just as they had obstinately intruded upon Gray's—as indeed Dew's "Abolition of Negro Slavery" demonstrates. As

155. From the summary of trial records, *reprinted in* TRAGLE, *supra* note 6, at 237.

156. *Id.* at 241.

157. Calculated from the tabular summary of trial records, *id.* at 229–45.

158. *Id.*

159. See DEW, *supra* note 1, at 119–20.

160. Calculated from the tabular summary of trial records, *id.* at 229–45.

161. See Christopher L. Tomlins, *In Nat Turner's Shadow: Reflections on the Norfolk Dry Dock Affair of 1830–1831*, 33 LAB. HIST. 494 (1992).

162. JAMES W. C. PENNINGTON, *THE FUGITIVE BLACKSMITH; OR, EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF JAMES W. C. PENNINGTON, PASTOR OF A PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, NEW YORK, FORMERLY A SLAVE IN THE STATE OF MARYLAND, UNITED STATES*, at iv (Charles Gilpin ed., Negro Univ. Press 1971) (1849); see WALTER JOHNSON, *SOUL BY SOUL: LIFE INSIDE THE ANTEBELLUM SLAVE MARKET* (1999).

163. See Edward E. Baptist, "Cuffy," "Fancy Maids," and "One-Eyed Men": Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States, 106 AM. HIST. REV. 1619, 1620–24, 1630 (2001) (discussing commodity fetishism as applied to antebellum slavery); see also MICHAEL T. TAUSSIG, *THE DEVIL AND COMMODITY FETISHISM IN SOUTH AMERICA* 23–36 (1980); Arthur Ripstein, *Commodity Fetishism*, 17 CANADIAN J. PHIL. 733 (1987) (arguing that commodity fetishism is not an epistemic illusion (false appearance) but a "truth" of capitalist social relations).

164. See, e.g., U.S. CONST. art. I, § 2, cl. 3 ("three fifths of all other persons"); see also Christopher L. Tomlins, *The Threepenny Constitution (and the Question of Justice)*, 58 ALA. L. REV. 979, 986–88 (2007).

his political economy of property rights in priced people remorselessly shoots down solution after solution, plan after plan, Dew becomes more and more obsessed by the utter impossibility of actually doing anything at all. “All of these plans merit nothing more than the appellation of *vain juggling legislative conceits*, unworthy of a wise statesman.”<sup>165</sup> Dew’s essay does not so much defend slavery as define paralysis. It is not that he does not desire a solution to Virginia’s “great difficulty,” its ordeal-by-bondage. Rather, his rationality deprives him of one. “All these puerile conceits fall far short of surmounting the great difficulty which, like Memnon, is *eternally present and cannot be removed*.”<sup>166</sup>

Memnon? Pausânias, the 2nd Century (CE) Greek geographer, writes in his *Description of Greece*:

At Thebes, in Egypt, when you have crossed the Nile . . . you come to a seated image which gives out a sound. Most people name it Memnon; for they say that Memnon marched from Ethiopia to Egypt and onward as far as Susa . . . . This image Cambyses cut in two; and now the part from the head to the middle of the body is thrown down; but the rest of it remains seated, and every day at sunrise it reverberates.<sup>167</sup>

Eternally present. Cannot be removed. Another glance. Another demon. Once more, guilt/debt, faith/credit, the economic, the juridical, the moral, the psychological, and the sacral collapse into each other, fused in interminable stasis. Turner’s decision to hack into this metaphysical singularity stands in world-historical contrast to Dew’s rationalist rigor mortis. In decision lies fulfillment.<sup>168</sup>

Why did Memnon’s reverberations haunt Thomas Roderick Dew? What was the sound that the broken, thrown-down statue of an Ethiopian warrior-king made when touched by the rising sun every day, day after day? Pausânias says it was like “the breaking of the string of a lute or lyre.”<sup>169</sup> Perhaps that was what Turner’s voice sounded like in Southampton County’s courtroom—the breaking of an “endless pagan chain of guilt and atonement.”<sup>170</sup> *Not guilty*.

165. See DEW, *supra* note 1, at 130.

166. *Id.* (emphasis added).

167. 1 PAUSÂNIAS, PAUSANIAS’S DESCRIPTION OF GREECE 64 (J. G. Frazer trans., 1913).

168. See WALTER BENJAMIN, “*Trauerspiel and Tragedy*,” in WALTER BENJAMIN: EARLY WRITINGS, 1910–1917, at 241–44 (Howard Eiland et al. trans., 2011) (discussing simultaneity, time and fulfillment (messianic time)); 4 BENJAMIN, *supra* note 7, at 396–97.

169. PAUSÂNIAS, *supra* note 167, at 64.

170. 1 BENJAMIN, *supra* note 1, at 203.