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Race, American Enlightenment, and the End Times

Mark Alan Mattes

This chapter considers the epistemological and social limits of apocalyptic Enlightenment thought by focusing on three visions of present and future race relations in the American body politic. The first two are canonical, eighteenth-century “scenes of subjection”¹: Thomas Jefferson’s fear of a black planet in “Query XIV: Laws” of *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785/1787) and J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s apocalyptic scene of racial terror in the Charlestown section of *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782).² Whether expressing feelings of hopeful survival (Jefferson) or of continuing distress (Crèvecoeur) as the end times loom, both writers fail to substantively engage with or represent nonwhite experiences and visions of apocalypse. The third text is a critically neglected pamphlet, *Christ’s Millennium* (1811), written by a biracial herald of the end times, the emancipated former slave and early nineteenth-century Virginia landholder Christopher McPherson.³ The pamphlet’s apocalyptic jeremiad reads in part as a response to the suppression of black voices and the annihilation of black lives. McPherson’s pamphlet attempts to circumvent elite-personal-white circuits of communication closed off to him through uses of the very Enlightenment protocols of communication deployed by the white writers considered in the first half of this chapter.

¹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

² For scholarly treatments of these sections, start with Robert A. Ferguson, “‘Mysterious Obligation’: Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*,” *American Literature* 52.3 (1980): 381–406; Nancy V. Morrow, “The Problem of Slavery in the Polemic Literature of the American Enlightenment,” *Early American Literature* 20.3 (1985/1986): 236–255; Jeff Osborne, “American Antipathy and the Cruelties of Citizenship in Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*,” *Early American Literature* 42.3 (2007): 529–553; and Robert G. Parkinson, *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 583–588.

³ *Christ’s Millennium, Of One Thousand Years Commenced* (Richmond, 1811), henceforth cited parenthetically. An 1855 reprint of a second 1811 edition is titled *A Short History of The Life of Christopher McPherson*. The Huntington Library holds both texts.

Failures of sympathetic interracial communication, or *correspondence*, in *Notes* and *Letters* are expressed in apocalyptic diction.⁴ In the language of convulsing bodies – human and planetary – these texts register a subconscious recognition of black presence, of other ways of knowing and treating with evil, of recognizing what is horrific about racial slavery and racial inequality more generally. Such convulsions occur in the presence of what Crèvecoeur’s Farmer James calls a “living spectre”: black thought and experience.⁵ After examining Jefferson’s and Crèvecoeur’s apocalyptic convulsions, this chapter focuses on the histories, prophecies, documentary materials, and records of embodied experience in McPherson’s *Christ’s Millennium*. Apocalyptic revelation was crucial to McPherson’s theorization and “practice of citizenship.” Texts such as *Christ’s Millennium*, to quote Derrick Spires, are written “not simply as a response to white oppression but as a matter of course in the shaping of their [black] communities and in the process of meeting their own political, social, and cultural needs.”⁶ *Christ’s Millennium* is indeed an antiracist demand for access to the republic of letters. It is also about a person’s desire to be taken seriously as a prophet, to better his economic and legal standing in early nineteenth-century Virginia, and to improve the lives of a larger community of people of color.

Race War and Convulsive Communications

Enlightenment history culminates in many possible futures, perhaps none more apocalyptic than the race wars imagined in Jefferson’s *Notes* and Crèvecoeur’s *Letters*. In “Query XIV: Laws,” Jefferson recalls a failed proposal to revise Virginia’s laws to include an act “to emancipate all slaves born after passing the act.”⁷ Following the theoretical passage of the act, Jefferson imagines a postemancipation scheme of forced black migration to

⁴ I prefer the term “correspondence” over “communication” when describing the failed operations of Enlightenment sentiment. The sense of mutual understanding and reciprocity entailed by the term “correspondence” more directly speaks to the problem that this essay identifies in writings such as *Notes* and *Letters*: the failure to achieve a shared sense about what is being communicated.

⁵ J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 164; henceforth cited parenthetically. On the language of “convulsion” and repression in Jefferson, see Jonathan Elmer, “The Archive, the Native American, and Jefferson’s Convulsions,” *Diacritics* 28.4 (1998): 5–24.

⁶ Derrick R. Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 7.

⁷ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 137; henceforth cited parenthetically.

a colony in Africa and a promotion of white immigration to Virginia. Anticipating objections to this plan, Jefferson writes,

It will probably be asked, Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state, and thus save the expence of supplying, by importation of white settlers, the vacancies they will leave? Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race. (138)

For Jefferson, then, a failure to safeguard white privilege could result in race war and a black Virginian state, both of which he dreads with terror. Crèvecoeur's "Letter IX: Description of Charles-Town; Thoughts on Slavery; On Physical Evil; A Melancholy Scene" also dreads an apocalyptic race war, but more as a moral consequence of all that has gone before: "The history of the earth! doth it present any thing but crimes of the most heinous nature, committed from one end of the world to the other?" (159). The chief crime of the most heinous nature here is racial slavery. James, writing to Mr. F. B., foreshadows the culmination of this history of moral failure, asking,

Forced from their native country, cruelly treated when on board, and not less so on the plantations to which they are driven; is there anything in this treatment but what must kindle all the passions, sow the seeds of inveterate resentment, and nourish a wish of perpetual revenge? (157)

In such passages both Jefferson and Crèvecoeur imagine apocalyptic race war as the political result of the failure to establish sentiment-based, interracial correspondences necessary for a democratically inflected representational politics involving multiracial participation.

For Jefferson the failure to establish such correspondences is rooted, in part, in what he sees as "the real distinctions which nature has made" (138). Consider, for example, the passage that immediately follows Jefferson's vision of a black planet:

The first difference which strikes us is that of colour. Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. (138)

In this passage a conflated writer and reader – a universalist "us" – surgically violates an anonymous, representative black body, searching

for the biological cause of the supposed inferiority of dark-skinned people of African descent. What “we” find in Jefferson’s first-person-plural investigation is inscrutability itself: “that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race” (138). Inscrutability, according to Jefferson’s racist logic, is the natural outcome of black bodies themselves, and the basis for their exclusion from American democracy. If one cannot read a person – their thoughts, their intentions, their desires – then, Jefferson’s logic asserts, they are definitionally unfit for citizenship in a democratic republic, a system based on a participatory politics of representation.

In contrast to Jefferson’s a priori racism, one finds partial, if problematic, recognition of white culpability for past failures to establish sentiment-based correspondences with black lives in Crèvecoeur’s writing. In “Letter IX,” for example, Farmer James attempts to establish such a correspondence when, “horrid to think and painful to repeat, I perceived a negro, suspended in the cage, and left there to expire!” (164). Of this encounter with a black man being executed “on account of his having killed the overseer of the plantation” (165),⁸ James writes to Mr. F. B.:

The living spectre, though deprived of his eyes, could still distinctly hear, and, in his uncouth dialect, begged me to give him some water to allay his thirst. Humanity herself would have recoiled back with horror; she would have balanced whether to lessen such reliefless distress, or mercifully with one blow to end this dreadful scene of agonizing torture. Had I had a ball in my gun, I certainly should have dispatched him; but, finding myself unable to perform so kind an office, I sought, though trembling, to relieve him as well as I could. A shell ready fixed to a pole, which had been used by some negroes, presented itself to me; I filled it with water, and with trembling hands I guided it to the quivering lips of the wretched sufferer. (164)

In failing to consider cutting down and opening the cage, or seeking medical attention for the slave, James betrays his inability to establish the interracial correspondence that he seeks. He cannot see offering the water as simply an act of trust that the enslaved person’s request is a reasonable one, nor can he fathom his desire to hasten the execution by musket ball as a self-serving opportunity to shield himself from the “agonizing” horror of

⁸ Farmer James concludes by relaying his host’s disingenuous rationale on the enslaved person’s punishment, which speaks to eighteenth-century fears of race war: “They told me that the laws of self-preservation rendered such executions necessary” (165).

evil. Perhaps the most damning scenario made possible by James's logic of offering water-as-prolonging suffering is that the executioners themselves might have hoped to prolong the suffering of this person by making available the means to do so: a "shell ready fixed to a pole."

Only after finding that he lacks the equipment to relieve himself from witnessing suffering does James acquiesce to the enslaved person's request for water. Upon receiving his drink, the enslaved person makes a second request of James: "'Tankè you, whitè man, tankè you, putè somè poison and givè me.' How long have you been hanging there? I asked him" (164). When faced with a request to help hasten death, James instead asks for additional information about the enslaved person's suffering, thus prolonging that suffering. James never asks *why* the condemned man is in the cage in the first place, and ultimately turns his thoughts back to himself: "Oppressed with the reflections which this shocking spectacle afforded me, I mustered strength enough to walk away, and soon reached the house at which I intended to dine" (164–165). Farmer James's actions here foreclose an interracial correspondence with the enslaved man through a false sense of a binary choice in how he might help this person, a presumptuous self-serving understanding of such help, and a failure to listen to a black person's expressed desires.

Crèvecoeur's choice to render James's writing in the passive voice provides additional evidence that his interaction with the enslaved person is meant as a subtle criticism of Anglo-American myopias about black lives. In the middle of his account of the encounter with the caged man, James writes, "A shell ready fixed to a pole, which had been used by some negroes, presented itself to me." This line speaks to black presence and spatial mobility (however constrained, of course), strongly suggesting that the caged man would likely have encountered a range of people, black and white, while being executed. However, James's passive voice – "A shell . . . presented itself to me" – both registers and renders unfathomable to the American farmer the possibility that the shell not only was used by black people but was in fact placed there by black people in the first place, perhaps even for the express purpose of allowing passersby to render the condemned man a mercy.

The political significance of the passive voice and the shell can be further understood by returning to Crèvecoeur's (and Jefferson's) key term for describing the sensory, bodily experience of losing control: *convulsion*. Consider how James commandeers F. B.'s attention earlier in "Letter IX" by invoking the apocalypse and linking it to fear of a race war:

View this globe often convulsed both from within and without; pouring forth from several mouths, rivers of boiling matter, which are imperceptibly leaving immense subterranean graves, wherein millions will one day perish! . . . On this little shell, how very few are the spots where man can live and flourish? . . . the poison of slavery, the fury of despotism, and the rage of superstition, are all combined against man! (161)

Similarly, convulsions ripple through James's own body upon encountering the caged, enslaved person: "I found myself suddenly arrested by the power of affright and terror; my nerves were convulsed; I trembled, I stood motionless, involuntarily contemplating the fate of this negro in all its dismal latitude" (164). James's contemplation of the condemned man's experience is not agentive. He is not a knowing subject in command of his faculties, using the powers of sentiment to comprehend "the fate of this negro." Like the shell, which according to James, "presented itself to me," James linguistically renders himself a mere object. He is not in conscious control. He is convulsed by a sympathetic "trembling," but instead of illuminating the situation, he misinterprets the scene before him while denying culpability.

Perhaps the most undercutting moment to James's claim that he remains sensible to the pain of others comes before he even realizes that a black man is slowly dying in a cage. James hears "a sound, resembling a deep rough voice, [that] uttered, as I thought, a few inarticulate monosyllables" (163). Claiming he could not understand what was being said by this "inarticulate" voice, there is no attempt to hear black utterance as a reasonable expression of pain. There is no sense on James's part that this black person deploys sentiment rationally. Instead, James places blame for failed correspondence on black shoulders rather than upon his own rationalizations and misreadings.

Yet Crèvecoeur's *Letters* is not completely despairing. James's retrospective narration of his encounter suggests that he is unsure that what he heard was indeed "inarticulate," even if he "thought" so at the time. Such moments of retrospective doubt, far after the initial experience of convulsion, remind us that there is still hope. Crèvecoeur's strategic use of the past tense clings to the promise that one may yet recognize how failures of correspondence with others can stem from the problematic constitution of ourselves as subjects rather than from the supposedly natural truth of epistemologically inscrutable, "inarticulate" others.

Whether by a sentiment-based recognition of slavery's immorality that speaks for "inarticulate" blackness or by a flat-out denial of citizenship to inscrutable bodies, both Crèvecoeur's *Letters* and Jefferson's *Notes* charge

a (white) republic of letters with responsibility for managing the perceived apocalyptic threat of black illegibility. As a range of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century black writers from Phillis Wheatley to David Walker point out in their own apocalyptic writings, however, Enlightenment-era claims about racial illegibility are projections of white limitations and prejudices. This chapter illuminates such antiracist criticisms in *Christ's Millennium*, a doomsday pamphlet by the African American writer Christopher McPherson.

Letters from an African American Prophet

Christopher McPherson was born in Virginia around 1763 to Clarinda, an enslaved woman owned by a widow named Winston, and a white merchant named Charles McPherson.⁹ He was eventually sold to another merchant, David Ross, who gave Christopher a formal education. McPherson worked as a teacher for two years before going into Ross's direct employ as a clerk. Ross became the commercial agent for Virginia, and during the American Revolution both McPherson and Ross served the revolutionary cause. In 1792 Ross manumitted McPherson, who moved with Ross to Fluvanna County, Virginia, to serve as Ross's storekeeper and later continued as his clerk.

Near the end of the 1790s, McPherson left Ross and converted to Christianity. He received his appointment as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" in March 1799, and he began spreading word of the coming end times as described in the Book of Revelation. Through early 1800 McPherson discharged this appointment. He led two processions in Norfolk and Portsmouth, the latter ending with his public baptism in the city's river. He also wrote about his heavenly appointment and apocalyptic visions in a July 8, 1799, letter to President John Adams. In November McPherson visited Philadelphia to request (unsuccessfully) a direct audience with Adams. In January he wrote to Adams directly and reached out through intermediaries such as US Senators Stephen T. Mason and Wilson Cary Nicholas. Never receiving a reply or an audience with President Adams, McPherson did receive a letter from

⁹ My sketch of McPherson's life draws upon Edmund Berkley Jr., "Prophet without Honor: Christopher McPherson, Free Person of Color," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 77.2 (1969): 180–190; Monique Prince, "Summary," *A Short History of the Life of Christopher McPherson*, Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/mcpherson/summary.html>; and Brendan Wolfe, "Christopher McPherson," *Encyclopedia Virginia* (Virginia Humanities, 2018), www.encyclopediavirginia.org/McPherson_Christopher_ca_1763-1817.

Vice President Thomas Jefferson, which he used to gain an introduction to James Madison. McPherson recounted, “I sat at table, evening and morning with Mr. Madison, his lady and company, and enjoyed a full share of the conversation” (*Christ’s Millennium* 19).

In the early 1800s, McPherson tempered his evangelicalism and, capitalizing on his growing public reputation, clerked for the US Congress and for a range of government officials in Virginia, including the jurist George Wythe. Quite remarkably for a man of color in his times, he delivered testimony in court over and against white men, executed the will of a white man, and accumulated significant landholdings. He also married a woman of color named Polly.

A series of reversals, however, began in 1810, including the passage of a new law that functionally prohibited the use of carriages by people of color unless acting as servants. McPherson, who relied upon the use of carriages for his business dealings, unsuccessfully petitioned against the law.¹⁰ As Monique Prince observes, these later years saw additional “hardships – including imprisonment, difficulty in obtaining property, and even committal to a mental asylum – endured as a result of his religious fervor and race.”¹¹ From 1810 to 1812, McPherson renewed his efforts at spreading word of the end times, taking advantage of a brief uptick in the popularity of figures whom Susan Juster calls early American “doomsayers,” especially the biracial prophet Nimrod Hughes.¹² In *Christ’s Millennium* McPherson reasserted that he was heavenly appointed in 1799 as the prophet foretold by John the Evangelist in Revelation 19, and he reiterated Hughes’s apocalyptic message that one-third of humanity would be destroyed on June 4, 1812.

The apocalyptic mode and religious enthusiasm of *Christ’s Millennium* were crucial to McPherson’s calibration of the rhetorics and media practices by which he navigated nineteenth-century circuits of communication in a white republic of letters. Consider, for example, his dedication, which immediately invokes the Enlightenment-universalist parameters of the correspondence he hoped to achieve: “TO ALL THE INHABITERS OF EARTH, AND MORE ESPECIALLY TO THE CITIZENS OF THESE UNITED STATES” (3). The address to citizen, state, and earth expresses an evangelical desire for conversion in spiritual and political belief, hoping to make the world over in the image of the US political

¹⁰ Berkeley, “Prophet without Honor,” 185–186. ¹¹ Prince, “Summary.”

¹² Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 178–215.

system, which he believed constituted a “New Zion, the New Jerusalem spoken of in Holy Writ” (37). Elsewhere in his pamphlet, he addressed letters to specific heads of state, as well as to “the Emperors, Kings and Potentates of every nation on the Earth” (45). McPherson took Enlightenment universalism to its ideal conclusion in these public missives, asking for the political enfranchisement of the whole world. In one such letter, he declares that “the constitution and government of these United States meets the smile of Heaven above any other on earth, and it is recommended to all of you to copy after that model, by ballot, in peace, love and justice” (46).

In writing this pamphlet and advocating for a literal, universal perpetuation of a grand experiment in government, McPherson defies Jefferson’s claims that people of color cannot engage intellectually with Eurocentric Enlightenment. His address to the public, moreover, contravenes Crèvecoeur’s fear that the plight of black people, while tragic, will ultimately be inaccessible to white auditors. And in conveying these antiracist ideas, McPherson offers his own millennial vision. Indeed, he was not content with the political status quo in the United States, and he expresses this discontent in his preface. Further establishing the rationalist Enlightenment underpinnings of his political advocacy, and quoting from the *Virginia Declaration of Rights* (1776), McPherson writes, “I am well aware that, in a country where ‘the freedom of the press is one of the great bulwarks of liberty, and can never be retrained but by despotic governments,’ and also in an age of reason and light that mankind would readily detect and expose any attempt towards imposition” (4).¹³ McPherson’s assumed role as protector of liberty is not abstract. Here and throughout the pamphlet, he strives to protect liberty and communicate an apocalyptic prophecy, and he relates how white would-be interlocutors have actively stymied his efforts to do both. The pamphlet is a means of “expos[ing]” these attempts to impede the spread of his own enlightened thinking. McPherson advocates for the US political system, and he is at pains to point out that he is *the* ethical actor in that system. It is white men, he argues, who fail to engage in the correspondences required for the Enlightenment experiment in representative government to succeed.

McPherson’s main target was John Adams. Near the middle of his pamphlet, he included a section titled “SUBSTANCE OF THE

¹³ See *Virginia Declaration of Rights* (1776), National Archives, www.archives.gov/founding-docs/virginia-declaration-of-rights.

CONVERSION *AND COMMISSION*, GIVEN TO CHRISTOPHER MCPHERSON,” which he wrote while incarcerated (30). After his account of the terrific “manifestations” accompanying the revelation “that I was now [my Saviour’s] son . . . and I was to represent him on earth, and was to establish the *millennium, his kingdom in the world*,” the now named “Pherson, son of Christ” details his efforts in late 1799 and early 1800 to fulfill God’s plan (33). During this moment in his pamphlet, McPherson reveals he had not forgotten Adams’s snubs in July and November 1799. McPherson writes, “In the fall of 1799, I was commanded of the spirit, and went to Philadelphia and delivered a message in writing to John Adams, the then president, addressed to himself and the Senate of the United States, *requesting them to do a certain thing, which, by the bye, they did not do*” (34–35).

Adams’s recalcitrant attitude and actions toward McPherson were part of a larger set of obstacles and thwarted attempts in forging correspondences with white people. In a particularly compelling passage, McPherson links one such attempt to his later imprisonment. When he brought petition against the 1810 ordinance restricting the use of carriages by free people of color, he included his earlier warning to Adams about the end times in his brief. McPherson writes,

[T]he Holy Spirit commanded me, and I brought before [the committee for courts of justice] the copy of the message presented to President Adams, for the Assembly of Virginia to act upon it; and to impress more strongly the idea of its importance, I put with it all the documents belonging to it, and sealed it with seven black seals. *The committee reported my petition as reasonable, but it was lost in the Assembly, by a majority of three.* And so far from their acting on the message, that some time afterwards, when looking among my papers, which are in custody of the master of the rolls of the Assembly, *the letter and all its contents were missing, and no one could give any account of them.* Since then, myself and wife have been *wrongfully and shamefully imprisoned*, and otherwise I have, *myself, been very roughly handled by public officers of this State.* (35–36)

McPherson’s criticism of the state’s loss of his letter, its ominous portent communicated by the seven seals of Revelation, and his subsequent imprisonment, is a powerful illustration of how people of color experienced the failures of white men to reciprocate attempts at interracial correspondence.

Conclusion

McPherson’s writing is not only an antiracist criticism of unenlightened white men delivered to an abstract republic of letters. It is also a record of

his actions to improve black lives through the practice of Enlightenment ideals. In addition to letters, court petitions, and pamphlets, McPherson made handbills, public spectacles, and newspapers part of his evangelical media strategy, and he attempted to open a school for free and enslaved men of color. Perhaps the greatest example of his dedication to grounding Enlightenment ideals in the practice of citizenship was his commentary on a failed 1810 petition to create a new burial ground for free people of color in Richmond.

With its apocalyptic tones, direct attention to the treatment of black bodies, retrospective narration, and invocation of an instrument of execution, this passage bears an uncanny resemblance to Farmer James's remembrance of his encounter with the enslaved man in Crèvecoeur's *Letters*. However, unlike Crèvecoeur, McPherson's text is, as Spires puts it, "reparative in [its] articulation of . . . what could still be."¹⁴ McPherson writes,

I had an inspection, the other day, made of the present burying ground . . . where every heavy rain commits ravages upon some one grave or another, and some coffins have already been washed away . . . and in a very few years the major part of them will no doubt be washed down into the current of James river; added to this, many graves are on private property adjoining, liable to be taken up and thrown away, whenever the ground is wanted by its owners, (this is owing, either to confined space, or want of knowledge of what was public ground;) and furthermore, we may add the humiliating circumstance, that this is the very express *gallows ground where malefactors are interred*. I ruminated on this ghastly scene; and now, thought I, were I in a barbarous land, and such a sight like this was to present itself to my view, I should exclaim to myself, these are a poor, ignorant people. The blessing even of a solitary ray of gospel light has never shone upon them, neither has civilization, nor the age of reason, made any approaches towards their savage habitations.

Notwithstanding *they* had perfect knowledge of the situation of this offensive place, the rulers of the city had taken up out of her grave, last spring, a woman, a poor widow, the second day after she was buried, *in her own Bonafide ground on an eminence*, and carried down to this mock of a grave yard. Shocking to humanity! O! God, is it thus, the bodies of the heirs of heaven, my beloved brethren are treated in this land of light and liberty! Avert it, I most fervently beseech thee, my Lord and my God. (26)

Yoking together strains of biblical millennialism and rational knowledge in phrases such as "a solitary ray of gospel light has never shown upon them" and "is it thus, the bodies of the heirs of heaven . . . are treated in this land

¹⁴ Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship*, 12.

of light and liberty!” McPherson calls out white depredations upon Richmond’s free black community. While invoking the hallmark language and imagery of Enlightenment writing – light and dark, civilization and savagery, age of reason, liberty – his contribution is very much unlike the texts discussed earlier in this chapter. McPherson does not just seek to avoid the apocalypse; he takes action.

When McPherson asks God, “[I]s it thus, the bodies of the heirs of heaven . . . are treated in this land of light and liberty!” the answer is clearly affirmative. His question is, however, neither rhetorical nor moot. Something can be done. First, he appeals to God Himself to turn back time: “Avert it, I most fervently beseech thee, my Lord and my God.” Then, God obliges as he takes action by serving as God’s emissary, critiquing the limits of white reason in failing to recognize the rights of free people of color in Virginia:

And even whilst all this was staring *him* in the face, one of the honorable members of the common hall, undertook to reason with me, and said that the present yard might be extended, and that the gallows might be moved a little further off, and that the poor house ground contemplated for the new burying ground, was too valuable for the purpose. (26)

The importance of property in this criticism cannot be underestimated. In McPherson’s view, the white prerogatives of land ownership and political office in Richmond are fundamentally set against black political agency. Earlier, he describes white landowners illegally encroaching upon the graveyard’s “public ground” while wrongly claiming private ownership. Later, when he describes the woman disinterred from “*her own Bonafide ground,*” he invokes black property rights – rights that underwrite individual liberalism and its attendant freedoms – life and liberty – which writers such as Jefferson took for granted. Moreover, McPherson yokes the violation of such rights to a violation of black bodily autonomy that is “shocking to humanity!”

In calling attention to these violations, one feels the political force of McPherson’s rejoinder to the myopically privileged “reason” of “one of the honorable members of the common hall”: “I replied to *him*, that the free people of color in Richmond, never would, by any means, consent to be buried in that wasting gallows ground” (26). Here his term “consent” invokes the practice of representative democracy as a right and a powerful counter to the illegal and immoral actions of Richmond’s white landholders and politicians.

McPherson concludes his reflection on the graveyard by returning to his apocalyptic prophecy:

I therefore hope, that these serious injuries may fully impress themselves on the minds of the honorable committee . . . I hope the honorable the committee [*sic*] for courts of justice, will see the propriety of granting me ample justice, *and have the letter with the seven seals opened*. As I have already said, I now say again, that the contents thereof regards the justice due me, them and others. (26–27)

He argues that the court will be convinced to accept his earlier petition for a new burial ground if they open the seven seals. He implies that the revelation contained within would bring about a new millennium: the realized promise of Enlightenment itself. For McPherson, though, this is not the promise that white men will finally become knowing subjects. Rather, black writing and print hold out the promise of fulfilling the “political, social, and cultural needs”¹⁵ of people of color, what McPherson himself called “the justice due me, them and others” (27).

¹⁵ Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship*, 7.