

Review Symposium on Christopher Tomlins's *In the Matter of Nat Turner*

## Voices in Hostile Sources: *In The Matter of Nat Turner* and the Historiography of Reading Rebellion

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TOMLINS, CHRISTOPHER. *In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Speculative History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.

*This engagement with Christopher Tomlins's In the Matter of Nat Turner (2020) focuses on a key methodological issue faced by the author, namely how one reads and positions the "authentic voice" of a past subaltern subject, known to us only through a hostile written source. This challenge is well-known to social historians of the European middle ages, and this essay suggests various ways in which Tomlins's monograph contributes to existing debate, regarding both method and how one culturally situates and interprets the voice(s) thus identified, particularly with regard to the politics of apocalypticism.*

What, a reader may fairly ask, can a scholar of the European Middle Ages bring usefully to a discussion of Nat Turner, a Virginian enslaved man who led a violent rebellion in 1831? Alongside the many biblical, classical, and modern theoretical informants with which *In the Matter of Nat Turner* dances, a few medieval ghosts haunt both Chris Tomlins's analysis and the text—*The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a pamphlet published by Thomas Gray soon after Turner's uprising—that lies at the heart of Tomlins's book. There is Turner, figured as the lonely "knight of faith"<sup>1</sup> who, having experienced a transformative spiritual moment, must bear his revelatory knowledge and its dreadful responsibility until the time came to act. A white man, Etheldred Brantley, listened to Turner's earlier spiritual revelations and subsequently developed stigmata; an echo of St. Francis of Assisi, and various subsequent saints. We see Turner hiding, medieval hermit-like, in a certain "cave" following the collapse of the uprising. And in Gray's emphasis upon the indiscriminate "savagery" of the attacks, we see a rhetorical tactic beloved by medieval chroniclers as they sought to delegitimize the actions of those outside the polity, the "barbarians" who lay beyond order and morals and politics. Moreover, amidst Tomlins's recurrent engagement with a host of philosophical and critical theoretical literature, he explicitly cites the medieval image of Germanic *Herrschaft*—the unequal relations between lords and subjected-peasants—which the modern

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1. Here via Kierkegaard, himself inspired by his reading of medieval troubadour poets. See Olesen 2008.

medievalist Andrew Cole has persuasively argued structure and inform Hegel's account of subjectivity; thus perhaps bringing with it some ghosts of those unfree who died in much earlier violent uprisings against oppression (Cole 2004).

But for readers of this journal, likely more interesting than these potential inheritances and passing echoes are critical methodological issues of general application in history and the social sciences. Gray's pamphlet presents itself as a transcript of a conversation that he held with Turner whilst the latter was imprisoned, awaiting execution. Thus, what Tomlins faces and pursues in his close-reading and wide contextualization of Gray's presentation of Turner's words is a methodological problem very familiar to those who work on the pre-modern: how to recapture the voices of past subjects known to us only and entirely via hostile sources. Can the subaltern speak, or rather can the subaltern be heard when the archive is constructed by power? It is of course not a methodological issue faced only by medievalists; after all, two of the most important precursors—Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980), an analysis of the inquisitorial interrogation of a freethinker Italian miller, and Natalie Zemon Davis's *Fiction in the Archives* (1987), focused on the sociolegal fictions used by those writing to seek judicial pardon from the French monarchy—focus on texts produced in the period which we are accustomed, though perhaps without much warrant, to call “early modern.”<sup>2</sup> But it is a recurrent problem—one might say *the* recurrent problem—for all medieval social historians.

As Tomlins develops tools particular to his task, he thus joins with a wider methodological debate. His close attention to the “paratexts” of the *Confessions*, his decomposition of the pamphlet into its component parts and features (Tomlins 2020, 31–47), look familiar to a medievalist, an expert example of the work of a manuscript codicologist, identifying precursor texts, the stages of composition and compilation, breaking down the alluring coherence of “the text.” When he turns to the centerpiece of the material, the words that are presented as Turner's own speech, Tomlins faces a question familiar to those of us who work on medieval heretics, rebels and the like, a question which is ethical and political as much as methodological: how much of this speech do I ascribe to the independent agency of the confessing subject, how much to the prompting and framing of the hostile interrogator? How do I justify my choices, and how should I interpret and situate the wider meaning of those words I decide to rescue from their archival cage?

The pamphlet tells us that Turner's words were “read [back] to him in our presence, and that Nat acknowledged the same to be full, free, and voluntary”; this process of “authorization” being exactly—*exactly*—that found in the case of those subjected to “inquisition into heretical wickedness” in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Gray and Nat 1831, 5). But that attestation by the deponent does not mean that the inquisitor, and all he carries with him, vanishes from the scene. Nor does it mean that the deponent speaks words that are *only* theirs, for their speech is surely informed and shaped by the wider world from which they come, as well as their present troubled circumstances. The subject's words surely cannot be theirs alone, yet neither would we wish to dissolve them into an amorphous sea of “culture.” Thus the interpretive allure of *mentalité*—the concept of a specific “way of thinking” shared within a particular place

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2. On the politics of periodization, see Davis 2017.

and period, rooted in the medievalism of the French *Annales* school, and drawn upon intermittently by Tomlins—has sometimes fallen under critique, as liable to lose the sense of challenge that the particular subaltern voice might proffer (Rancière 1994).

With medieval inquisitors one can track the kinds of framing processes—the specific interrogatories and advice on procedure—that they brought to bear, and can compare across a very large set of material where confessions conform and where they deviate from a formulaic pattern. This can help us in our attempts to “sift” the voices, though perhaps we may best conceive the speech of the deponent as still the product of the interrogation, not simply the uncovering of some “authentic” prior voice. At the same time, the process of enquiry may produce “excess” speech beyond the immediate needs, demands, and expectations of the interrogator or interlocutor, and perhaps we may on occasion see the inquisitor as discomfited or unbalanced by the voice they prompt but cannot fully contain; the voice of the deponent thus acknowledged to be demanded and constrained *and yet still breaking free* in some respects at least.<sup>3</sup>

One then wonders at Thomas Gray and his perspective, so brilliantly laid bare and excavated by Tomlins. One wonders whether at points Gray’s experience of the person of Nat Turner (so quickly and familiarly named “Nat” in Gray’s text), the complexity and power of Turner’s words, and eventually even the text of the pamphlet itself somehow exceed and escape from the bonds Gray had imagined for them. As noted above, Gray emphasizes the bestial, barbaric nature of the violence committed by the rebels. But at other points he attests firmly to Turner’s extraordinary personal qualities, his intellect and charisma. Thus Gray finds himself defending Turner: “It has been said he was ignorant and cowardly, and that his object was to murder and rob for the purpose of obtaining money to make his escape”; not so, says Gray, he was “never known to have a dollar in his life; [nor] to swear an oath, or drink a drop of spirits. As to his ignorance, he certainly never had the advantages of education, but he can read and write . . . and for natural intelligence and quickness of apprehension, is surpassed by few men I have ever seen.” And not a coward: when apprehended at gunpoint, his decision to surrender “shews the decision of his character,” seeing it better to hope for future escape than pointlessly fight (Gray 1831, 18). Gray, reflecting on the effect Turner’s narrating had upon him, famously states: “I looked on him and my blood curdled in my veins” (*ibid.*, 19). Tomlins suggests, toward his conclusion, that Gray is here unnerved by his encounter with Turner’s transcendence into the “metaphysical world of his own faith,” where Turner is able to exercise decisive “choice” and thus a kind of sovereignty, and that Gray thus encounters Turner as “the Real; or what is the same thing, his own lack gazing back at him” (if I have understood him correctly, Tomlins is here evoking a mixture of Hegel and psychoanalytic theory) (Tomlins 2020, 212).

I would—I think—like to believe this; and it is certainly a potential reading. In the following paragraph Gray turns again to the “fiend-like barbarity” of the violence, and the few who escaped, emphasizing the salvation of a little girl who had hidden from the rebels, who when asked how she had survived “replied with the utmost simplicity, ‘The Lord helped her’” (Gray 1831, 19). Here, I would suggest, we find Gray textually

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3. For an exploration of these issues, see Arnold 2001; for translation of selected medieval documents relating to inquisition, see Arnold and Biller 2016.

retightening the bonds, framing and reconstraining Turner's words and deeds, as one violently "fanatical" prophet is superseded by the providential and gentle intervention of the divine. And shortly after, Gray works to reassure his readership in conclusion that the whole awful episode is complete and finished: "Few indeed, were those who escaped their work of death. But fortunate for society, the hand of retributive justice has overtaken them; and not one that was known to be concerned has escaped" (ibid., 20). So Gray's more troubled and in some sense "positive" earlier representation of Turner is, when set within its overall textual frame, part of a larger narrative move from wonder and perhaps even awe at the inexplicable ("wondrous to relate," as various medieval chroniclers would put it) to the reassertion of order and narrative closure.

Thus as scholars, as readers, we have as ever a choice: to emphasize the overall narrative and its framing, and thus more broadly the order of the archive, or to proffer more urgently the moments of disruption and excess that punctuate the text. This is a choice very familiar to those who deal with pre-modern revolts, most of which end, as with the Southampton County uprising, with the execution of the participants and the reassertion of order, and many of which are known to us only through sources hostile toward and often uncomprehending of those involved in rebelling (Justice 1994; Firnhaber-Baker 2017).

Part of Tomlins's project is to show that there was a logic and an intellectual universe behind Turner's actions. This is again a familiar issue for medievalists, faced with a long historiographical legacy of dismissing all pre-modern revolt as "primitive," naïve, or driven solely through desperation; not in any proper sense "political." At the same time of course Tomlins emphasizes that we must understand Turner as not simply a reader of the Bible (the gospel of Luke in particular, as he brilliantly demonstrates), but as a participant in an apocalyptic sacred time, the uprising and its violence embracing the post-millennial final battle. Recent work on medieval revolts has in fact demonstrated that the majority were *not* religiously inspired, but rather more clearly framed around practical issues of "justice" and "liberty" (Cohn 2006). But some of course were in a broad sense clear precursors (albeit with important theological differences) to Turner's divine mission: from the peasant-led Capuciati ("White hoods") uprising in southern France in the 1180s (Arnold, 2009) to the shepherd Hans Behem preaching insurrection in Niklashausen, Germany, in 1476 (Wunderli 1992), we find the subaltern and the unfree inspired to violent action following an apocalyptic revelation (in these two particular examples, delivered to the leaders by an apparition of the Virgin Mary).

In those and other cases, familiar methodological issues arise: we know of events only through the words of hostile chroniclers or, in the case of Hans Behem, spies sent to report on his insurrectionary words. We must attempt to piece together the logic and, as importantly, the emotional call to revolt. In so doing we must decide how "the apocalyptic" should be viewed: as preeminent sign of pre-modern, pre-political credulity? Or as an available language for action and, perhaps, legitimation? Or both and neither, simultaneously, depending on the specific moment within the course of revolt or the specific context of speech rendered and recorded?

Tomlins's focus on Turner's apocalypticism is very present in the early parts of his monograph (chapter 2 in particular); I can add a tiny footnote to his exegesis, pointing out that the recurrent "work of death" deployed in Gray's/Turner's *Confessions* might be seen as having biblical precedent, not in the gospel of Luke but that of Mark: in Mark

13:12, Jesus talks of the eventual apocalypse, “And the brother shall betray his brother unto death, and the father his son; and children shall rise up against their parents and shall work their death,” in the language of the pre-modern Douay-Rheims Bible which medievalists tend to favor. It is rendered differently in the King James translation (“shall cause them to be put to death”), and it would be interesting to know whether any alternative translations circulated in the Methodist circles that informed Turner. The specific emphasis on necessary, indeed inevitable, spiritual violence overthrowing family and hierarchy is nonetheless suggestive.

In contrast, when Tomlins turns his gaze outward to the wider dynamics of labor and capital in his Epilogue, and as the sociopolitical theories of Max Weber and Walter Benjamin become more present to the main text, religion starts to look more like ideology in fancy dress. “Turner’s decision to act—to hack into slavery’s monadic ineffability, to blast it out of the continuum of history—stands in world-historical contrast to [defender of slavery Thomas] Dew’s rationalist rigor mortis. In decision lies fulfilment” (Tomlins 2002, 216). I am attracted, as throughout, by Tomlins’s assertion of Turner’s agency. But I wonder whether the full force of the apocalyptic, the logic of its transformative and self-obliterating transcendence, has been left behind here. And I am doubtful about the sense of the apocalyptic as a sustainable basis for political inspiration, with which (I think) Tomlins’s text flirts on occasion, as he uses Turner’s uprising as an opportunity to meditate more broadly on political theory. One may recall Jacques Derrida’s troubled yearning, in *Specters of Marx*, for “a messianism without religion, a messianic moreover without messianism, an idea of justice,” arguing ultimately for “an affirmative way of thinking of the messianic and emancipatory promise as promise: as *promise* and not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design” (Derrida 1994, 102, 125–26). That is, recognizing the transformative change promised by apocalypse, but recognizing also how one may become trapped within its destructive logic.

Two and a half thoughts follow for me here. One—as with the medieval rebels briefly noted above—is the question of the authenticity of the voices in the record, and perhaps we might say their authenticity *even to themselves in their own moment*. That is, does “the apocalyptic” enter our text solely because it is the governing logic and vibrant *mentalité* of Turner; or does it lurk for all horrified recorders and commentators when they see the possibility of their own world thrown upside down? And, when it is voiced by those in rebellion, are they possessed by the holy spirit and simply become conduits for that discourse (puppets to a certain *mentalité*); or should we still consider whether it is deployed—at moments at least—wittingly and tactically, to legitimate the previously unthinkable and potentially inspire others to consider the prospect of a radically changed new world?

A second thought is to ask how we should understand the temporal logic of the apocalyptic when it opens up within the messy, aleatory real world of our protagonists, rather than the more controllable, imagined world of a revelatory text. Tomlins draws powerfully upon the theorist Michel de Certeau’s distinction between “tactics” and “strategies”: the latter form of action possible only to those who have their own “proper place” within existing structures of power, whereas the subaltern (like Turner and his band) who lack such a position are limited to using more fluid and transitory “tactics,” usually under time pressure (Tomlins 2020, 111–13). But as we reflect here on the

nature of the “rebel voice” and the wider logic or *mentalité* that informs its speech, I am also reminded of a different idea within de Certeau’s work, in his *Possession at Loudun* (an account of a group of nuns who became convinced they were possessed by devils in seventeenth-century France). There, in exploring the interconnections of religiosity, civic tensions, and sexuality, de Certeau talks about how the rupture of the possession—less violent, but no less shocking than Turner’s uprising—“reveals something that existed, but it also and especially permits—makes possible—something that did not exist before . . . . Something happens that cannot be reduced to what was before. Thus what takes place becomes an event. It has its own rules, which displace previous divisions” (de Certeau 1996, 23). Moreover what transpires “enfolds the participants in its logic”—that is, they are overcome (or allow themselves to be overcome) by roles they play defined by powerful ur-scripts which, however, cannot easily be controlled and may prompt a cascade of subsequent action (or, we must add, may equally *fail* so to do).<sup>4</sup> And, perhaps most importantly, when such an “event” —bringing the supernatural into the present moment—is opened up, its collapse and ending are foreshadowed, clear perhaps to its participants even as they first step onto stage, the inevitability of collapse written into the incompatibility of temporalities. “Once put into circulation, the words of the beyond are no longer anything but human words” (ibid., 51).

And thus to my half-thought: whilst Tomlins absolutely persuades me that Turner’s inspiration and script was apocalyptic and Lukan, and quite brilliantly excavates a sense of Turner’s intellectual life from Gray’s text, are there yet other voices left untended therein? Was Turner’s script the script of all the slaves involved? I do not mean so much those who actively shunned joining, but those who were also part of the violence, who appear in the text, but whose voices are fainter and largely unmarked. What, as historians, do we do with them? Gray’s text, in parallel with medieval chroniclers’ representations of heresies and rebellions, emphasizes not just Turner’s centrality, but his authorship of events as the sole, wicked ringleader. And yet others were involved, and whilst Turner informs them, apparently a few months before, of his revelations, what exactly they make of this (in contrast to the stigmatically marked enthusiasm of the white man Brantley) is unclear, and their specific prompts to action remain harder to discern. And yet perhaps they are not entirely silent. Here is what Turner says about joining his comrades in the woods on the eve of the uprising: “I saluted them on coming up, and asked Will how came he there, he answered, his life was worth no more than others, and his liberty as dear to him. I asked him if he thought to obtain it? He said he would, or loose [sic] his life” (Gray 1831, 12). Here for the only time a word of much import to rebels of many periods and many places enters the text: liberty.

There is a strand of Christo-centric imagery upon which pre-modern rebels drew recurrently over many centuries, as a means to assert equality and liberty in a culture that used orthodox Christianity to emphasize the immutability of hierarchy and subservience: that “God made all free with His precious blood shedding,” as English rebels put it in 1549 (Wood 2007, 70–88). It is interesting that none of Turner’s recurrent ‘blood

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4. There is perhaps a hope of such a cascade on Turner’s part: asked by Gray whether there was any general plan, given some other disturbances in other locales, he said no, “but can you not think the same ideas, and strange appearances about this time in the heaven’s might prompt others, as well as myself, to this undertaking?” (Gray 1831, 18).

imagery' (as Tomlins terms a repeated rhetorical figure within the text of the pamphlet) draws upon this tradition. His sense of sacrifice, his messianism, perhaps looked entirely to the next world, or rather to the cessation of all worlds save eternal Heaven. But are we permitted to suggest that something like it, something with a more worldly end point intended, may have been in the minds of some of his comrades?

*In the Matter of Nat Turner* is an extraordinary book. It produces a form of historiographical "montage" (as Walter Benjamin termed his collage-like textual methodology) whilst retaining a deep engagement with archival research, and does so to multiple effective ends: allowing a sustained engagement between serious historical research and multiple strands of critical theory; de-centering the authority of the authorial voice; and ensuring that the reader be reminded that they too must *work* at interpreting the central text rather than simply consume a version of it.<sup>5</sup> As I have noted here, it grapples with the challenges of our sources, and the more profound (and interlinked) challenges of how we interpret the resistances of the past. Tomlins counsels us in conclusion to "always be ready to read what was never written"; that is, as I would understand it, to be attentive both to the silences of our sources and to the possibilities that existed within a past moment, even if at that point they failed in fact to unfold (Tomlins 2020, 218). To these I would add just one final thought. The historian's task can be to rescue past voices; but it can also be to bear witness to what is unknowable, unrelatable, unnarratable, to experience and suffering which can never fully be captured by our present words. When we listen for what was "never written" we must also be a little wary of projecting our own enthusiasms into the spaces, and must sometimes allow ourselves to hear the silences—the impossibility of making fully present those who have now gone, the impossibility of perhaps any of us being fully being present even to ourselves—as just that: silence.

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5. Has any book since David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) required the reader to pay such close attention to what is going on in very lengthy endnotes?

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