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The Confessions of Nat Turner: A Paratextual Analysis

Christopher Tomlins

This essay uses techniques advanced by the structuralist literary theorist Gerard Genette to examine the pamphlet, The Confessions of Nat Turner, written in the aftermath of the Turner slave rebellion (Southampton County, Virginia, August 1831). Like all documents generated in the course of master-class investigations of slave revolts – alleged or actual – The Confessions of Nat Turner raises obvious evidentiary quandaries: credibility, reliability, authenticity. Precisely what kind of historical source is this document? How should it be interrogated? What can it tell us? These questions become particularly important in light of controversies over the use of sources by historians of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy (Charleston 1822). Structuralist analysis suggests that The Confessions is a document containing at least two, and likely three, distinct texts, and that it is carefully composed to contain Nat Turner’s confession within a secure, interpretive frame intended to guide the confession’s reception, and to anticipate and deflect subversive readings of the Turner Rebellion.

Approximately two years ago I began research on the Turner Rebellion, a slave ‘insurrection’ as it was called at the time it occurred in August 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia. I say ‘research’; in fact my strategy has been to start out by exploring different aspects of the rebellion in a preliminary way by writing a series of working papers that I hope will reveal to me what I do not know, and what I should know.¹ Most of these papers make reference – either passing or detailed – to one particular source, a pamphlet published in November 1831 a few days after the

capture and execution of the insurrection's leader, Nat Turner. This pamphlet is purportedly the fruits of an extended conversation between the pamphlet's publisher, a local attorney named Thomas Ruffin Gray, and Turner himself while he was awaiting trial. In referencing this pamphlet I am hardly alone. The Turner Rebellion has spawned many commentaries, both historical and literary. Without exception, all accounts grant considerable prominence to Gray's pamphlet.\(^2\)

Gray's pamphlet is entitled, in full, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. As fully and voluntarily made to Thomas R. Gray, In the prison where he was confined, and acknowledged by him to be such when read before the Court of Southampton; with the certificate, under seal of the Court convened at Jerusalem, Nov. 5, 1831, for his trial. Also, An Authentic Account of the Whole Insurrection, With Lists of the Whites who were Murdered, And of the Negroes Brought before the Court of Southampton, and there Sentenced, &c.*\(^3\) Gray had gained access to Turner in jail on the evening of 1 November and continued to converse with him over the next two days. Immediately following Turner's trial on 5 November, Gray left Jerusalem for Richmond, seventy miles to the north, where, on 7 November, he attempted to arrange the printing of his manuscript. Unsuccessful in Richmond, he rode on to Washington D.C., a further 120 miles to the north, where on 10 November, 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 on 22 November in an edition of some 50,000 copies, priced twenty-five cents. A second edition was printed and published in

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\(^3\) *The Confessions of Nat Turner ...* (Baltimore: Lucas & Deaver, print., 1831), republished as *The Original Confessions of Nat Turner: A Facsimile of the 1831 Edition* (Ann Arbor, MI: Uniprint, 1967). See also *The Confessions of Nat Turner ...* (Richmond: T.W. White, Printer, 1832). In this essay, all references to the pamphlet are to the original 1831 edition.
Richmond the following year.\textsuperscript{4}

Gray’s pamphlet ‘immediately became the standard account’ of the Turner Rebellion.\textsuperscript{5} But like all documents generated in the course of master-class investigations of slave revolts, alleged or actual, The Confessions of Nat Turner raises obvious evidentiary quandaries: credibility, reliability, authenticity. Precisely what kind of historical source is this document, one must ask. How should it be interrogated? What can it tell us?

These questions are not posed idly. In 2001, the historian Michael Johnson aimed devastating criticism at three new histories of the Denmark Vesey slave conspiracy, thought to have occurred in 1822 in Charleston, South Carolina, because in Johnson’s view their authors – and by extension every other historian of the Vesey Conspiracy – had relied far too credulously upon the Official Report of the inquiry into the alleged plot undertaken by the Charleston Court of Magistrates and Freeholders.\textsuperscript{6} Invited to review the authors’ books, but moved by their facile (to Johnson) celebrations of Vesey as ‘a bold insurrectionist determined to free his people or die trying’, as well as by his own mounting doubts about the evidentiary basis upon which he had himself once taken much the same position, Johnson undertook a thorough examination of the manuscript sources from which the Official Report


had been constructed. He discovered that, 'far from being an impartial account of court proceedings, the *Official Report* is a document of advocacy, a public, retrospective statement of the prosecution's case against Denmark Vesey and the many other defendants. It must be read and interpreted with the suspicion warranted by special pleading'. Unfortunately, in their reliance upon this dubious document, historians of the Vesey conspiracy had 'failed to exercise due caution in reading the testimony of witnesses recorded by the conspiracy court'.

By depending uncritically on the very sources used to convict those accused for information about who they were, what they did, and what they hoped to do, historians had became 'unwitting co-conspirators with the court' in perpetuating the court's claim that there was indeed something called 'the Vesey conspiracy'. They had trusted law to produce empirical – though not political – truth, but in fact, the court had 'colluded with a handful of intimidated witnesses' to create an insurrection plot out of nothing more than suspicion and rumour. The Vesey conspiracy was a juridical witch hunt, prosecuted by the court in defense of its reputation after its initial peremptory accusations and hasty executions were criticised within Charleston's white community. 'Vesey and the other condemned black men were victims of an insurrection conspiracy conjured into being in 1822 by the court, its cooperative black witnesses, and its numerous white supporters'. The empty conspiracy claim had been 'kept alive ever since by historians eager to accept the court's judgments while rejecting its morality'. Historians seeking heroes in rumours of revolt were better advised 'to pay attention to the 'not guilty' pleas of almost all the men who went to the gallows, to their near silence in the court records, to their refusal to name names in order to save themselves. These men were heroes,' in Johnson's view, 'not because they were about to launch an insurrection but because they risked and accepted death rather than collaborate with the conspiratorial court'.

Johnson's conclusion challenged all historians of American slavery to cease their moral and ideological posturing and to use their sources – particularly their legal sources – more critically. 'Surely it is time to read the court's *Official Report* and the witnesses' testimony with the skepticism they richly deserve,' he wrote, 'and to respect the integrity of a past that sometimes confounds the reassuring expectations generated by our present-day convictions about the evil of slavery and the
legitimacy of blacks' claims to freedom and justice. Surely it is time to bring the court's conspiracy against Denmark Vesey and other black Charlestonians to an end.?

There are, of course, important differences between The Confessions of Nat Turner and The Official Report. First and most obviously, there really was a Turner Rebellion. We are dealing with a real event rather than a plot, alleged or actual. Second, The Confessions of Nat Turner does not purport to be an official report of investigations undertaken by a public body and prepared at its request by its presiding officers. Still, the pamphlet does represent itself (like the Official Report), as a faithful record of Turner's verbal account of his actions and motivations, an account given voluntarily without the prompting of his white amanuensis while under detention awaiting trial on capital charges, and, though not commissioned, certified as accurate after the fact by the Southampton County Court. Hence, Johnson’s admonitions are as relevant to those who would rely on The Confessions as the urtext of the Turner Rebellion as they are to those who would write of the Vesey Conspiracy using the materials generated by the Charleston Court of Magistrates and Freeholders.

Narrowly, what trust can one have in the substance of Gray’s pamphlet as truthful description and explanation of the event, and as a guide to its leader’s motivation, given that it was compiled in camera by an opportunistic and impoverished local white attorney, desperate to trade on the notoriety of the Southampton County insurrection, whilst its subject was under legal duress? More broadly, accepting Johnson’s case for skepticism in the historian’s encounter with historical evidence, but


8 Parramore, Southampton County, 105-07, 119-20; Greenberg, 'Text and Context', 8-10.
also accepting that the document itself (like the Official Report) remains a valuable historical resource, how can it be used? Gray’s pamphlet is undoubtedly evidentiary, but evidence of what?

This narrow question of trust can be answered in different ways. First, one can examine the content of the pamphlet. In substance, it is a narrative account of Turner and of his rebellion. One can ask whether the narrative account that appears in the pamphlet is plausible in light of other evidence. Noting that the text ‘is riddled with difficult problems of authenticity and intentionality’, Eric Sundquist, for example, advises that ‘corroborating evidence must be pieced together and even then remains highly speculative’. Alternatively, one can elide the difficulties of corroboration by inquiring instead into the genre of literature to which the pamphlet belongs, and from the answer, infer Gray’s purpose in publishing it. Whether one ‘trusts’ its content then, becomes consequential upon what its content is designed to convey. This is the approach taken recently by Caleb Smith. The Confessions, he says, ‘belongs imperfectly to the genres of historical or autobiographical narrative’. Rather, the pamphlet ‘addresses itself to the public culture of justice, and its power, whether radical or reactionary, was in its performance of the ritualized speech acts of religion and the law’. This is to reach beyond the source as an empirical account of an event that is or is not ‘accurate’ and to ask instead after the intended function of the document. In Smith’s view, the pamphlet as a whole belongs to the genre of trial report, and should be trusted (or not) as such.

A third possibility exists, which also reaches beyond the narrow ‘trust’ question to the broader question of evidentiary use: an examination of

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11 Note that Smith’s identification of the pamphlet as a trial report still identifies it as a single text with a single purpose. The virtue of his approach is to open up the range of what that purpose might be. To what other literary genres might the pamphlet be appropriated, through which it might be read?
the form of the pamphlet, rather than of its substance or genre. What does the form of this text tell us about its purpose and identity? Here I want to concentrate on this third approach. In particular I want to point to some aspects of the pamphlet that have not attracted much attention, aspects that fall within what the structuralist literary theorist Gérard Genette has called ‘the paratext’.12

Essentially, Genette argues that every text comes accompanied by a paratext, within which the text is enfolded, which exists, as it were, as the fringe of the text, and which informs and indeed attempts entirely to control how the text is to be read. Genette divides paratext into two structural categories that he denotes the peritext and the epitext. Peritext refers to those paratextual elements that position text and reader in relation to each other: title, preface, authorial identification, dedication, chapter titles, epigraphs, design, typography and so forth – all of these are textual manipulations that function to point the text in a particular direction. Epitext refers to those paratextual elements that surround and inform the production and reception of the text – that is, its circumstances: print run, modes of dissemination, advertisements, reviews, authorial interviews, commentaries upon the text, critical disquisitions, and so on. Genette also employs the term hypotext to denote the sources of the text, the text before the text. Here I want to concentrate on the peritext. My interest is in the construction of the pamphlet as an artifact that creates (or attempts to create) the conditions upon which a reader enters into an engagement with it.13

*The Confessions of Nat Turner* is twenty-four pages in length. Though short, it is a complex document of multiple components. In order, it is composed as follows:

a) A title page, which doubles as the front outside cover (page 1). The title page is not uniform in presentation, employing multiple fonts of multiple sizes. As well as title, the page includes information

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13 This is not to say the pamphlet’s epitext is not worth interrogating. Indeed, as the works cited in above n 2, indicate, the pamphlet has a long and controversial history of reception, review and commentary, early in its life generating an oppositional tradition of apocrypha and literary embellishment, and later scholarly critique. For a nutshell account, see Smith, *Oracle*, 156-63.
about the pamphlet's origin: publisher, printer, time and place of production.

b) A statement of copyright (page 2).  

c) A two and a half page preface, headed 'TO THE PUBLIC'. The preface is signed, in capitals 'T. R. GRAY'. Under the name appears a statement of time and place, in italics, 'Jerusalem, Southampton, Va. Nov. 5, 1831' (pages 3-5).

d) A signed and sealed certification by six Southampton County Court Justices, appearing immediately below Gray's signature and time/place statement. The certification attests to the authenticity of the confession. It too is dated 5 November, at Jerusalem (page 5).  

14 The statement of copyright reads as follows:

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, TO WIT:

Be it remembered, That on this tenth day of November, Anno Domini eighteen hundred and thirty-one, Thomas R. Gray of the said District, deposited in this office the title of a book, which is in the words as following:

"The Confessions of Nat Turner, the leader of the late Insurrection in Southampton, Virginia, as fully and voluntarily made to Thomas R. Gray, in the prison where he was confined, and acknowledged by him to be such when read before the Court of Southampton; with the certificate, under seal, of the Court convened at Jerusalem, November 5, 1831, for his trial. Also, an authentic account of the whole insurrection, with lists of the whites who were murdered, and of the negroes brought before the Court of Southampton, and there sentenced, &c. the right whereof he claims as proprietor, in conformity with an Act of Congress, entitled "An act to amend the several acts respecting Copy Rights."

EDMUND J. LEE, Clerk of the District.

In testimony that the above is a true copy, from the record of the District Court for

(SEAL.) the District of Columbia, I, Edmund I.

Lee, the Clerk thereof, have hereunto set my hand and affixed the seal of my office, this 10th day of November, 1831.

Edmund J. Lee, C.D.C.

15 The justices' statement of certification reads as follows:

We the undersigned, members of the Court convened at Jerusalem, on Saturday, the 5th day of Nov. 1831, for the trial of Nat, alias Nat Turner, a negro slave, late the property of Putnam Moore, deceased, do hereby certify, that the confessions of Nat, to Thomas R. Gray, was read to him in our presence, and that Nat acknowledged the same to be full, free, and voluntary; and that furthermore, when called upon by the presiding Magistrate of the Court, to state if he had any thing to say, why sentence of death should not be passed upon him, replied he had nothing further than he had communicated to Mr. Gray.
e) A second certification appearing immediately below the first, also dated 5 November, confirming that the justices in question were indeed Justices of the Peace in and for Southampton County, signed and sealed by the Clerk of Court (pages 5-6). With the exception of the continuation lines of the Clerk's certificate, page 6 is blank.

f) A section of thirteen and a half pages, entitled 'CONFESSION'. A short, centred, intermediate line appears under the title, separating the title from the text. The first five lines of text comprise a brief introduction by an 'I' who is Thomas Ruffin Gray (page 7). They are separated by one blank line from the remainder which comprises a narrative spoken by an 'I' who is Nat Turner, addressed to Gray as amanuensis (pages 7-18). After eleven pages of narrative (which also contains an interjection, three interrogatories and one footnote) the 'I' who is Turner ceases to speak, and is seamlessly replaced at the beginning of the next paragraph by the 'I' who is Gray. This 'I' then offers two and a half pages of commentary on the preceding narrative (pages 18-20). Typographically, these pages of commentary are

Given under our hands and seals at Jerusalem, this 5th day of November, 1831.

JEREMIAH COBB, [Seal.]
THOMAS PRETLOW, [Seal.]
JAMES W. PARKER, [Seal.]
CARR BOWERS, [Seal.]
SAMUEL B. HINES, [Seal.]
ORRIS A. BROWNE, [Seal.]

16 The Clerk of Court's statement of certification reads as follows:

State of Virginia, Southampton County, to wit:

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, esqr'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.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the Court [Seal.] aforesaid, to be affixed this 5th day of November, 1831.

James Rochelle, C. S. C. C.
indistinguishable from the confession narrative. A second short, centred, intermediate line appears below the last line of the ‘Confession’ section, on page twenty.

g) A section of one and a quarter pages in the form of an unattributed and undated trial report (pages 20-21). This section begins on page twenty immediately below the short, centred, intermediate line that signifies the end of the ‘Confession’ section.

h) A section entitled ‘A list of persons murdered in the Insurrection, on the 21st and 22d of August, 1831’ (page 22).

i) A section entitled ‘A List of Negroes brought before the Court of Southampton, with their owners’ names, and sentence’ (pages 22-23).

j) A blank outside back cover (page 24).

Let us begin at the beginning, with the title, and examine each of its several elements. (i) The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. The title immediately announces that Turner, identified as the leader of the Southampton insurrection has confessed, hence that what the reader will encounter is not description or argumentation about the insurrection but a species of intimate knowledge of it. The statement that Nat Turner was leader of the insurrection is not contentious. Witnesses in earlier trials had already identified Nat as ‘the head of the insurgents’.

17 The use of the plural, ‘confessions’, is noteworthy. It is not uncommon to find the plural form used to describe the autobiographical apologia of a single individual. The most famous example, of course, is The Confessions of St Augustine. Still, the criminal confessions of individuals were far more commonly entitled ‘Confession’ (as the interior title of Turner’s confession narrative within the pamphlet is entitled). Of fifteen (non-duplicate) titles explicitly including the word ‘Confessions’ in Shaw & Shoemaker’s Early American Imprints (1801-1819), only two are attributable to single individuals, only one of which is a criminal confession. Of eighty-one (non-duplicate) titles explicitly including the word ‘Confession’ in the same source, thirty-nine are attributable to single individuals, of which twenty-nine are criminal confessions. See also below n 38.

18 See for example, Henry Irving Tragle, ed., The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), 188 (trial of Davy, late the property of Elizabeth Turner, 2d day of September, 1831).
(ii) As fully and voluntarily made to Thomas R. Gray, in the prison where he was confined, and acknowledged by him to be such when read before the Court of Southampton; with the certificate, under seal of the Court convened at Jerusalem, Nov. 5, 1831, for his trial. This phrasing both adverts to the wording of the justices’ certificate, which the reader will encounter within the pamphlet, and employs its language (which includes the plural ‘confessions’), but with two emendations: first, the justices’ certificate is not under seal of the Southampton County Court as such, but of six of the ten justices present at Turner’s trial. What is under seal of the Southampton County Court is the clerk’s certificate, which attests that the six were members of the court that tried Turner, and requires ‘that full faith and credit are due, and ought to be given to their acts as Justices of the peace aforesaid’. Second, the title states explicitly what is left implicit in the justices’ certificate, that the confession had been read before the court.

(iii) Also, An Authentic Account of the Whole Insurrection, With Lists of the Whites who were Murdered, And of the Negroes Brought before the Court of Southampton, and there Sentenced, &c. Here we encounter the title’s real puzzle. The pamphlet indeed includes lists of whites murdered and blacks charged. Yet it supplies no distinct ‘authentic account’ of the whole insurrection, to which the lists are appended, as the sentence beginning Also leads the reader to anticipate. The only account of the ‘whole insurrection’ is that which appears on pages 12-18 of the section entitled ‘Confession’ narrated by the ‘I’ who is Turner.

In other words, in a pamphlet of multiple interlocked components, each performing a single function, each carefully identified as such, in this one case we encounter instead a single component ('Confession') performing multiple functions - that of 'Confession' and, separately and simultaneously but only partially (pages 12-18, but not pages 7-11), that of 'Authentic Account of the Whole Insurrection'.

19 See above n 15. The full court numbered ten justices. Did four justices refuse to certify, or was a majority that included the presiding magistrate enough for a hurrying Gray? Or were the four non-signatory justices absent when the confession was read?

20 Taken individually, neither certificate does the whole work of certification alluded to by the singular “certificate” in the pamphlet’s title. Rather, the reader encounters an accumulation of certifications that collectively (a) attest to the circumstances to which the title alludes (the justices’ certificate) and (b) requires credence for their acts as justices of the peace, including the certification just granted (the clerk’s certificate).
The title page is also notable for the absence of a clear authorial claim. Confessions of one person (identified in large type) are made to another (identified in smaller type). Their authenticity is acknowledged in the title by the confitent and certified by the invoked authority of the county court. Authorship of the whole is not claimed by the confessor. Instead he signifies authorship only of one component part of the text – the preface – and does so by adding his name to the end of that part, within the body of the pamphlet. He also adds a self-identifiable closing commentary to the section narrated by the ‘I’ who is Turner. The commentary is continuous with the confession narrative. It elaborates upon the procedure followed in taking the confession, the character of the confitent, the reactions of the confessor; it adds some details of the insurrection that go unmentioned in the confession narrative. Neither confitent nor confessor signs the ‘Confession’ section. Gray records a claim of possession, of intellectual property, when he obtains his copyright in the federal district court for the District of Columbia, but he does so as proprietor of the work in question, not as author. The proprietary claim is realized on the pamphlet’s title page in the phrase ‘published by Thomas R. Gray’. All this suggests ambivalence about authorship, or a concern to disguise authorship, or, distinctly, a form of acknowledgement that the text actually has multiple intermingled authors.

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21 Thus, there is no reference on the title page to a preface authored by Thomas Ruffin Gray.

22 Notably of escapees, including several assisted by faithful slaves. *Confessions*, 19-20.

23 The pamphlet is rich in signatures: the copyright, the two certificates, and the preface are all signed. The confession is not signed, nor is the trial report.

24 Gray’s copyright was granted in accordance with the terms of the federal ‘act to amend the several acts respecting copyrights’ enacted by the 21st Congress, 3 February 1831. Section 1 of the act provides ‘That from and after the passing of this act, any person or persons, being a citizen or citizens of the United States, or resident therein, who shall be the author or authors of any book or books, map, chart, or musical composition, which may be now made or composed, and not printed and published, or shall hereafter be made or composed, or who shall invent, design, etch, engrave, work, or cause to be engraved, etched, or worked from his own design, any print or engraving, and the executors, administrators, or legal assigns of such person or persons, shall have the sole right and liberty of printing, reprinting, publishing, and vending such book or books, map, chart, musical composition, print, cut, or engraving, in whole or in part, for the term of twenty-eight years from the time of recording the title thereof, in the manner hereinafter directed.’ Section 3 of the act introduces a distinction between ‘author’ and ‘proprietor’. Section 4 of the act provides that either an ‘author’ or a ‘proprietor’ may
Following the statement of copyright (page 2) comes the one section to which Gray explicitly lays claim as author in his own right, the two and a half page preface, which addresses a definitive audience, ‘To The Public’ (pages 3-5). The preface instructs the reader in how the remainder of the text is to be read and understood, and what conclusions are to be drawn from that reading. It represents the text as, variously: a response to ‘public curiosity’; the answer to a ‘mystery’; a ‘useful lesson as to the operations of a mind’; a demonstration of ‘the policy of our laws in restraint of this class of our population’, and of the law’s watchful guardianship of the security of all; proof that the events detailed in the body of the text (the ‘account of the whole insurrection’) were ‘entirely local’, and that they were motivated not by ‘revenge or sudden anger’ but were the offspring of one man’s ‘gloomy fanaticism’; finally, as a means to the removal of ‘doubts and conjectures from the public mind which otherwise must have remained’. Along with the title page, these instructions create the framework of conditions upon which the text is to be encountered. The care with which Gray instructs the reader in how to read what is to come evidences concern that the text may otherwise escape, that an uninstructed reader may respond unpredictably to what is being presented.

The preface is followed immediately (pages 5-6) by not one, but two further invocations of textual authenticity - the certifications of the six Southampton County justices and of the clerk of court. By confirming that the text is indeed what Gray says it is, these certifications add to the text’s empirical authority. By conforming in appearance to standing gubernatorial instructions that evidence in the trial of slaves charged in connection with the revolt ‘be taken verbatim as given in Court and that it be so certified’, they grant Gray’s pamphlet quasi-official status. They have the benefit of the act by depositing ‘a printed copy of the title of such book, or books, map, chart, musical composition, print, cut, or engraving, in the clerk’s office of the district court of the district wherein the author or proprietor shall reside’, the clerk being ‘directed and required to record the same thereof forthwith, in a book to be kept for that purpose’. The purpose of the distinction between author and proprietor is to allow a person who has ownership of a work but is not the author of the work, or not the sole author of the work, to have the benefit of the act in the manner and form directed by Section 4. As we have seen (above n 14), Gray obtains copyright in the manner and form directed, but as ‘proprietor’ not ‘author’.

Confessions, 3-5.

The relevant gubernatorial instruction was transmitted from the Executive Department of the Government of Virginia to the Clerks of the County Courts of Southampton, Isle of
also add weight to the cage that Gray is building around the text, to control it and shape its meaning. Their position – situated immediately after Gray’s signed preface and separated from the next section, headed ‘Confession’, by nearly a full blank page – makes them as much a certification of Gray’s prefatory instructions as the authenticity of the confession narrative.

In substance, the first certification repeats what Gray has just told the reader about the circumstances in which the text has come to be, while the second certification authenticates the first. The positioning of the statement of time and place that follows the attribution of Gray’s authorship of the preface, ‘Jerusalem, Southampton, Va. Nov. 5, 1831’, is such that it could stand as the header for the first certification as time/place stamp of Gray’s signature – particularly as it is not positioned under Gray’s name (right justified), but instead matches both in position (left justified) and type (set in italics), the header on the second certification, State of Virginia, Southampton County, to wit:. In other words, both certifications are linked typographically at least as much to the preface as to what they ostensibly authenticate; the confession narrative that follows the preface.27

This confession narrative begins on page seven and runs for thirteen and a half pages, in a section entitled not ‘Confessions’, as in the pamphlet

Wight, Nansemond, Sussex, and Prince George Counties on 26 September, 1831 (that is, after many of the Southampton trials had taken place), as follows: ‘Sir: I am instructed by the Governor to request that upon the trial of such slaves as may be condemned in the County Court of ______ the utmost accuracy may be observed in taking down and certifying the evidence to this Department. It is important that the evidence be taken verbatim as given in Court and that it be so certified’. It is conceivable that Virginia Governor John Floyd emphasized the necessity for certification precisely because of the legal controversy detailed by Michael Johnson surrounding the procedures of the Charleston Court of Magistrates and Freeholders nine years before. See Johnson, ‘Denmark Vesey’, 935-39. It is also worth noting that in 1831 the man whom Johnson identifies as the leading amplifier of the Vesey conspiracy, the Intendant (Mayor) of Charleston, James Hamilton, Jr., had become governor of South Carolina and was an occasional correspondent of Floyd. Michael Johnson, ‘Reading Evidence’, The William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser., 59 (1, 2002): 193-202, 201; Charles H. Ambler, The Life and Diary of John Floyd, Governor of Virginia, an Apostle of Secession and the Father of the Oregon Country (Richmond: Richmond Press, Inc., Printers, 1918), 89-90, 143.

Note that the steady accumulation of date/place stamps conveys powerfully the impression that the entire manuscript – not just the confession (but not the undated trial report) – was complete and in final draft on 5 November.
title, but ‘CONFESION’ (pages 7-20). The narrative is divisible into four component parts: a five line introduction written by the ‘I’ who is Gray (page 7); an eleven page narrative spoken by an ‘I’ who is Turner to Gray as amanuensis (pages 7-18), which is itself divisible into two sections, the break occurring from the bottom of page 11 to the top of page 12; and the two and half pages of commentary (pages 18-20) by the ‘I’ who is Gray, which follow on seamlessly from the end of the narrative delivered by the ‘I’ who is Turner.

The introduction serves as yet another component in the cage of control Gray is building around the text of the confession. It is very carefully phrased: ‘Agreeable to his own appointment, on the evening he was committed to prison, with permission of the jailer, I visited NAT on Tuesday the 1st November, when, without being questioned at all, he commenced his narrative in the following words:—’. Gray’s introduction puts in place the final set of conditions upon which the narrative is to be ‘released’ to the reader – the sixth component condition of the narrative’s existence, all of which have collectively monitored its coming-to-be and its encounter with a waiting reader. By describing the circumstances (exact time and place) under which the narrative was obtained, the introduction stresses once again the text’s authenticity. It also stresses that the narrative was not produced as an answer to a prompt, but was offered spontaneously (‘without being questioned at all’), that it came directly from its source as an unmediated, volunteered (‘agreeable to his own appointment’) stream of consciousness (‘he commenced his narrative in the following words’), and that the narrative was the authored possession of the identified narrator (‘he commenced his narrative’).

The narrator himself is given a startlingly large, direct, and animate presence (‘NAT’) but is also secured and controlled (‘with the permission of the jailer’). Only after obtruding these final conditions, all stated not only below the heading, ‘CONFESION’, but also below the intervening intermediate line rather than above it, (thus an intrusion upon the typographical space reserved for the confession narrative itself), does Gray finally permit the actual narration to begin. It concludes on page 18, in a sentence that stresses that the narrator who has been released to

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28 The previous five are: title, copyright, preface, justices’ certificate, clerk’s certificate.

29 The succession of date/place stamps effectively ‘notarize’ each component of the pamphlet.
narrate has been taken back under control, both physical and moral: 'I am here loaded with chains, and willing to suffer the fate that awaits me'. Gray then underscores the resumption of that control by immediately beginning his own concluding commentary, without any distinguishing break, only a new paragraph, with a sentence that stresses he is back in charge: 'I here proceeded to make some inquiries of him, after assuring him of the certain death that awaited him'.

Thus the 'Confession' section is itself bracketed by an introduction and conclusion written by Gray, just as it is also bracketed in the pamphlet by Gray's preface – which matches his conclusion to the 'Confession' section (they are almost exactly the same length – the preface is 995 words, the commentary 1,105) – and by the final substantive component of the pamphlet; the trial report. All this underscores how the confession narrative itself is surrounded, caged, by multiple controlling devices which urge the reader to read it in a particular way. The composition of the pamphlet suggests that the confession narrative is a dangerous and potentially unruly text that requires the deployment of multiple rings of security and imposed meaning. The urgency of resuming control of the text is emphasized by the typographic immediacy that Gray's commentary assumes in relation to the narrative. No break is allowed. Just as Gray's introduction intrudes into the space of the confession narrative, so does his commentary on it. Typographically and structurally, Gray is a participant in the confession narrative.

Just how much Gray is participating in the confession narrative becomes clear from the division in the narrative. This division occurs at the point of transition from the narrator's account of his life, beliefs, thoughts, and motivations during the thirty years of his life prior to the commencement of the insurrection (pages 7-11), to the narrator's account of the sequence of events – inception, killings, encounters, movements from place to place, skirmishes, and final flight – that comprised the insurrection itself (pages 12-18). We should note that the first section of the narrative contains all of Gray's self-identified interventions in the narrative – an explanatory interjection in the text on page 7, a footnote

30 Confessions, 18.

31 The narrative reads 'And my father and mother strengthened me in this my first impression, saying in my presence, I was intended for some great purpose, which they had always thought from certain marks on my head and breast—' at which point Gray self-consciously breaks in '[a parcel of excrescences which I believe are not at all uncommon, particularly among negroes, as I have seen several with the same. In this
Tomlins: *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

on page 8,\(^32\) and interrogatories on pages 9 and 11.\(^33\) The narrative itself appears without any paragraph breaks, except at the point of transition on pages 11-12. A short paragraph that ends in Gray’s final interrogatory at the top of page 12 provides the transition.\(^34\) The narrative then, quite abruptly, changes character.

The two parts of the confession narrative, either side of the bridging paragraph, are quite distinct in textual appearance, in punctuation, grammar, and syntax. The form of Pages 7-11 is discontinuous, staccato, and non-linear. Sentences interrupt and spill into each other;

case he has either cut them off or they have nearly disappeared]’ before the narrative resumes ‘—My grand mother, who was very religious, and to whom I was much attached—’ and so on. *Confessions*, 7.

\(^32\) The narrative reads ‘all my time, not devoted to my master’s service, was spent either in prayer, or in making experiments in casting different things in moulds made of earth, in attempting to make paper, gunpowder, and many other experiments, that although I could not perfect, yet convinced me of its practicability if I had the means’. Gray adds an asterisk at the end of the sentence and footnotes the statement as follows: ‘When questioned as to the manner of manufacturing those different articles, he was found well informed on the subject’.

\(^33\) Both interrogatories are wrapped into the text of the narrative as interruptions. Thus on page 9: ‘As I was praying one day at my plough, the spirit spoke to me, saying, “Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you”. Question—what do you mean by the Spirit. Ans. The Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days—and I was greatly astonished’ and so on. On page 11: ‘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 borne 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. Ques. Do you not find yourself mistaken now? Ans. Was not Christ crucified. And by signs in the heavens that it would make known to me when I should commence the great work’ and so on.

\(^34\) The paragraph reads as follows:

Since the commencement of 1830, I had been living with Mr. Joseph Travis, who was to me a kind master, and placed the greatest confidence in me; in fact, I had no cause to complain of his treatment to me. On Saturday evening, the 20th of August, it was agreed between Henry, Hark and myself, to prepare a dinner the next day for the men we expected, and then to concert a plan, as we had not yet determined on any. Hark, on the following morning, brought a pig, and Henry brandy, and being joined by Sam, Nelson, Will and Jack, they prepared in the woods a dinner, where, about three o’clock, I joined them.

Q. Why were you so backward in joining them.

A. The same reason that had caused me not to mix with them for years before.
punctuation, grammar, and syntax are all very rough. The narrative is presented in multiple incomplete sentences joined together with dashes. The following is typical:

—My grand mother, who was very religious, and to whom I was much attached—my master, who belonged to the church, and other religious persons who visited the house, and whom I often saw at prayers, noticing the singularity of my manners, I suppose, and my uncommon intelligence for a child, remarked I had too much sense to be raised, and if I was, I would never be of any service to any one as a slave—

To a mind like mine, restless, inquisitive and observant of every thing that was passing, it is easy to suppose that religion was the subject to which it would be directed, and although this subject principally occupied my thoughts—there was nothing that I saw or heard of to which my attention was not directed—The manner in which I learned to read and write, not only had great influence on my own mind, as I acquired it with the most perfect ease, so much so, that I have no recollection whatever of learning the alphabet—but to the astonishment of the family, one day, when a book was shewn me to keep me from crying, I began spelling the names of different objects—this was a source of wonder to all in the neighborhood, particularly the blacks—and this learning was constantly improved at all opportunities—when I got large enough to go to work, while employed, I was reflecting on many things that would present themselves to my imagination, and whenever an opportunity occurred of looking at a book, when the school children were getting their lessons, I would find many things that the fertility of my own imagination had depicted to me before; all my time, not devoted to my master's service, was spent either in prayer, or in making experiments in casting different things in moulds made of earth, in attempting to make paper, gunpowder, and many other experiments, that although I could not perfect, yet convinced me of its practicability if I had the means.35

From page 12 onward, the narrative is a linear progression, written in

35 Confessions, 7-8.
complete sentences, carefully composed, and punctuated in standard form, separated by periods, with only one outbreak of dashes.\textsuperscript{36} The following is typical:

We remained some time at the barn, where we paraded; I formed them in a line as soldiers, and after carrying them through all the manoeuvres I was master of, marched them off to Mr. Salathul Francis', about six hundred yards distant. Sam and Will went to the door and knocked. Mr. Francis asked who was there, Sam replied it was him, and he had a letter for him, on which he got up and came to the door; they immediately seized him, and dragging him out a little from the door, he was dispatched by repeated blows on the head; there was no other white person in the family. We started from there for Mrs. Reese's, maintaining the most perfect silence on our march, where finding the door unlocked, we entered, and murdered Mrs. Reese in her bed, while sleeping; her son awoke, but it was only to sleep the sleep of death, he had only time to say who is that, and he was no more. From Mrs. Reese's we went to Mrs. Turner's, a mile distant, which we reached about sunrise, on Monday morning. Henry, Austin, and Sam, went to the still, where, finding Mr. Peebles, Austin shot him, and the rest of us went to the house; as we approached, the family discovered us, and shut the door. Vain hope! Will, with one stroke of his axe, opened it, and we entered and found Mrs. Turner and Mrs. Newsome in the middle of a room, almost frightened to death. Will immediately killed Mrs. Turner, with one blow of his axe. I took Mrs. Newsome by the hand, and with the sword I had when I was apprehended, I struck her several blows over the head, but not being able to kill her, as the sword was dull. Will turning around and discovering it, despatched her also.\textsuperscript{37}

The two sections are also marked by completely distinct temporal rhythms. The first section is relatively indifferent to the passage of time

\textsuperscript{36} The reintroduction of dashes occurs on pages 14-15, where they appear in three distinct clumps, intermingled with complete, fully punctuated, and syntactically correct sentences.

\textsuperscript{37} Confessions, 12-13.
and the sequence of events. The narrator states at one point, ‘Several years rolled around, in which many events occurred to strengthen me in this my belief’. The events themselves are not described. The second section – like the profusion of notarial place/date stamps that accompany the pamphlet’s various authorizing components – is obsessed with temporality and sequence. From page 12 onward, the narrative is a highly methodical, highly detailed, one-thing-after-another account of the progress and ultimate collapse of the insurrection.

This analysis suggests that the confession narrative is in fact two distinct texts; hence, perhaps, ‘Confessions’. The first part discussed matters of which Gray could have had little prior knowledge – Turner’s childhood and upbringing, his beliefs and motivations. Its central theme is the ascent of an ascetic personality to a state of ecstatic religious grace and the intellectual consequences attending that outcome. The untidy syntax and ungrammatical composition suggest haste in writing from notes taken verbatim as the narrator spoke, with explicitly recorded clarifications (the interrogatories, the interjection, the footnote). The second section discusses matters of which, by the time he met with Turner, Gray had already accumulated considerable independent knowledge. The writing in this section is relaxed, confident, and grammatically and syntactically sophisticated. It contains flashes of mordant humor.

Gray had been with the first party of militia who rode out from Jerusalem on the morning of Monday 22 August in search of the rebels, and he had spent days on the scene, followed by weeks at the Southampton County Courthouse during September and October. He had served as counsel to four defendants and so had had ample opportunity to observe the trials and hear the testimony of others. He had already written one lengthy and detailed report on the insurrection, published by the Richmond Constitutional Whig in the form of an anonymous letter from ‘a gentleman well conversant with the scenes he describes’. He had had

38 Confessions, 9.

39 That is, it is both a confession of faith and, separately, a criminal confession. See above n 17.

40 Allmendinger, ‘Construction’, 24-42.

41 Tragle, ed., The Southampton Slave Revolt, 177-221, 229-44.

access to other published reports and to local people. He might well have attended the preliminary examination of Turner undertaken before Southampton committing magistrates James Trezvant and James W. Parker by Commonwealth Attorney Meriwether Brodnax that took place on 31 October immediately following Turner's capture.\textsuperscript{43} Armed with this profusion of sources, Gray had already had ample opportunity prior to his meetings with Turner to construct an account of the events that would comprise the 'Turner Rebellion'. The second half of the narrative, literally a blow-by-blow, real time account of the rebellion, bears all the signs of careful, methodical preparation.\textsuperscript{44}

This analysis answers the puzzle of the title. The phrase \textit{Also, An Authentic Account of the Whole Insurrection} suggests Gray sought, indirectly, credit for the composition of the confession narrative's account of the rebellion by distinguishing it from the confession narrative itself. The 'also' betrays pride of authorship. Gray's goal in interviewing Turner was to improve on the account he had already authored (anonymously) in the \textit{Constitutional Whig}, to seek confirmation and supplementary detail on the progress of the insurrection itself. The careful composition of the second half of the narrative indicates that this part of the document was largely complete prior to Gray's encounter with Turner. The two appended lists 'of persons murdered in the Insurrection, on 21 and 22 August, 1831' (page 22), and 'of Negroes brought before the Court of Southampton, with their owners' names, and sentence' (pages 22-23), are entirely Gray's composition, added as proof positive that this is indeed the fullest 'account of the whole insurrection' available.

In turn, all this suggests that the poor and hasty composition of the first section of the narrative signifies this section was Turner's own account

\textsuperscript{43} Allmendinger, 'Construction', 31-36; Fabricant 'A Critical Look', 338-40, 344-46.

\textsuperscript{44} 'Much of what Gray knew before [his meetings with Turner] found its way into The Confessions of Nat Turner'. Allmendinger, 'Construction', 37. Note that in syntax and grammar, Gray's self-identified interventions in the first half are correct, unlike the text into which they intrude, but like the text of the second half. What is at issue here is not whether the confession is an accurate account of what happened on 21 and 22 August, 1831, but how that account was composed, and to what extent the manner of its composition differs from the confession's account of Turner's life and motivations. Analysis of variation in the composition of the confession permits one to determine how and to what extent it may be used as historical evidence relevant to the Turner Rebellion and to the intellectual persona of Nat Turner.
of his upbringing, beliefs, and motivations, heard for the first time during the jail cell encounter. In this section Gray is indeed amanuensis scribbling notes, rather than author seeking confirmation. Given the demands of travel to Richmond, and thence to Washington and Baltimore – at least 250 miles, all told, and the first 200 traveled in four days – Gray had little opportunity to make this section of the narrative more artful. Nor had he any real motivation to do so. From Gray’s point of view Turner had condemned himself as a confused religious fanatic.\(^45\)

The bridging paragraph between the two sections describes the meeting at which the insurrection is set in motion – a meeting of which Gray would have had independent knowledge from the testimony of others already tried who had been there, but about which he had one question: ‘Why were you so backward [late] in joining them’.\(^46\) This interrogatory, situated at the end of the bridging paragraph, is the last explicit interrogatory in the entire confession narrative.\(^47\)

When Gray’s ‘I’ resumes full control on page 18, after the narrative’s close, he reports that many more questions were asked, and a cross examination undertaken, all confirming the account given in the narrative. Unlike the interrogatories cited in the text of the narrative, which are open inquiries, the purpose of this reported questioning is to press the reader once more toward the reading of the Turner rebellion already announced in the preface – a local event, not part of ‘any extensive or concerted plan’, the offspring of ‘a complete fanatic’.\(^48\) Gray’s concluding commentary ends by assuring the reader that all is over, and all is well. It repeats the stress in the preface on ‘removing doubts and conjectures’, and on the law’s watchful guardianship, by invoking ‘the hand of retributive justice’ which, ‘fortunate for society ... has overtaken them’. The law has indeed exercised watchful guardianship. ‘Not one that was known to be concerned has escaped’.\(^49\) The structural cage that

\(^{45}\) Gray was known as ‘a scoffer at religion’. Parramore, *Southampton County*, 120 (quoting an obituary in the *Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald*, 27 August 1845).

\(^{46}\) See above n 34.

\(^{47}\) It is also the only interrogatory that is not an interruption, wrapped into the text. Situated at the conclusion of the preceding cleanly-written paragraph it heralds the full emergence of the confession narrative’s second author.

\(^{48}\) *Confessions*, 18.

\(^{49}\) *Confessions*, 20.
There follows the final component of the pamphlet, the section of 1½ pages that takes the form of an unattributed report of *The Commonwealth vs. Nat Turner* in the Southampton County Court (pages 20-21). This section confirms the claim entered in the immediately preceding section on behalf of remorseless retributive justice, in that it rings down the curtain on the one 'known to be concerned' who had until that moment escaped, namely Turner himself.

The trial report has occasioned much comment, directed to the extent to which it departs from the trial record that appears in the Southampton County Court Minute Book, primarily by presenting the Confession 'as given to Mr. Gray', as if it had been entered into evidence. Because there is no indication in the trial record that it was so entered, the trial record is held to cast doubt on the elaborate string of authentications obtained by Gray prior to his departure for Richmond, and so on the credibility of the pamphlet itself. Perhaps Gray made the whole thing up.


51 This is the conclusion of the novelist Sharon Ewell Foster in *The Resurrection of Nat Turner: Part One, The Witnesses and Part Two, The Testimony* (New York: Howard Books, 2011-12). One cannot discount the possibility that indeed Gray did make the whole thing up, or at least that he forged the certifications. The structural analysis that discloses the multiplicity of component parts in the pamphlet suggests fabrication is unlikely. Had Gray made the whole thing up, from start to finish, the document would have been more uniform, less complex, in composition. Nor is it likely that Gray forged the certifications of the six justices and the Clerk of Court. Had he done so his fledgling legal career (he had been admitted only eight months earlier) - his only real source of income - would have been over. Perhaps, then, the Justices, the Clerk, and Gray all conspired to fabricate the pamphlet. So wide a conspiracy would carry substantial risks of discovery, particularly in light of a gubernatorial injunction intended to ensure procedural probity. However, Johnson's analysis of the Vesey affair certainly suggests a locality's white notables were quite capable of endless duplicity when alarmed by the possibility of slave resistance, and when criticised by others for their actions. As Philip Morgan reminds us in his commentary on Johnson's analysis, we must always be cautioned by Bertram Wyatt-Brown's words: 'Bertram Wyatt-Brown has described prosecutions of black insurgency as a communal rite, a celebration of white solidarity, in which individual slaves were sacrificed to the sacred concept of white supremacy. He emphasises that "the standards of evidence used in court trials were so low, the means of obtaining damaging testimony so dubious, the impotence of constituted authority so evident, that insurrectionary prosecutions at law must be seen as a religious more than a
The discrepancies between Gray's report and the trial record indicate that Gray indeed wrote up his own trial report - a novelty in itself - and used it to highlight the confession he had obtained. If that is the case, Gray was doing no more on a single occasion than early nineteenth century court reporters did routinely. He was approximating and elaborating upon the bare record of a proceeding. As to the certificate of the six Southampton County Court justices, it attests 'that the confessions of Nat, to Thomas R. Gray, was read to him in our presence' and that when called upon to state why sentence of death should not be passed upon him, Nat 'replied he had nothing further than he had communicated to Mr. Gray'. The certificate certainly implies, but does not state explicitly, that all this occurred in court.

For its part, Gray's trial report states that sworn evidence given by Levi Waller during the trial was given '(agreeably to Nat's own Confession)' and that James Trezvant, the examining and committing magistrate, 'narrated Nat's Confession to him, as follows (his Confession as given to Mr. Gray.)' The italics and parentheses suggest dissimulation, even deceit, but not fabrication. They suggest desire to create, shorthand, the impression of similitude and harmony between what occurred at the trial and what was recorded in the pamphlet, hence authority for the pamphlet. They suggest - particularly the parentheses, and the word agreeably - that the material in the pamphlet was a reliable stand-in for what had been given in evidence in court, not that the material in the pamphlet was what had been given in court. Concretely, they suggest

normal criminal process". Insurrectionary scares led to frenzied white action carried out in an atmosphere of panic and hysteria. Philip D Morgan, 'Conspiracy Scare's, The William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser., 59 (1, 2002): 159-166, 163, citing Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 402. Against this, one can note that the atmosphere of Turner's capture and trial was not one of panic and hysteria - almost ten weeks had passed since the rebellion, ten weeks consumed by trials, hearings, and executions. If not sated, the white community was hardly frenzied. In that atmosphere a conspiracy of notables to frame Turner seems unlikely. Nor, as I have already suggested, does the ineffably complex Confessions readily lend itself to the charge of fabrication.

County court proceedings were not routinely reported, except occasionally (and briefly) in local newspapers. The same applied to most state trial courts. State appellate court decision were reported, but reports remained nominate, taken in longhand or using phonetic shorthand, throughout the nineteenth century. The first non-private, non-nominate reports to appear were those of the United States Supreme Court, in 1874. In substance, Gray's trial report, largely devoid of procedural technicality, somewhat resembles a newspaper report of a local case of great notoriety.
that Turner ‘confessed’ before Parker and Trezvant on 31 October, and to Gray during their encounter between 1 and 3 November and that his serial confessions were not much different in substance, although they may well have been different in length and detail given Gray’s considerable independent knowledge of the rebellion and the extent of his conversations with Turner.\(^{53}\)

Thomas Ruffin Gray’s pamphlet is a closed, self-authenticating world. Its multiple components serve as a controlled iterative string intended to substantiate all the claims made in the pamphlet’s title: that The Confessions were those of Nat Turner, that Turner had been the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va., that the Confessions had been fully and voluntarily made to Thomas R. Gray, In the prison where he was confined, that they had been acknowledged by him to be such when read before the Court of Southampton, and, perhaps most important to Gray, that the pamphlet was, independently of Turner, Also, An Authentic Account of the Whole Insurrection. Structural critique allows one to penetrate this self-authenticating world through a process of textual mortification – not, that is, by evaluating or interpreting the text as a thing in itself, but by corroding it and rendering it a rubble of fragments such that its fragments of truth may be extracted.\(^{54}\) By exposing the paratextual conditions of the pamphlet’s existence, and their frictions and inconsistencies, one can produce from amid Gray’s interlocutions and interpolations the likelihood that, in Eric Sundquist’s words, ‘Nat Turner’s voice remains strongly present’.\(^{55}\)

\(^{53}\) The abbreviated report of Trezvant’s testimony in the trial record does not suggest major discrepancy between that testimony and the tenor of the confession narrative, except in including the statement ‘that his comrades and even he were impressed with a belief that he could by the imposition of his hands cure disease’. No such belief is reported in the confession narrative. See Tragle, ed., The Southampton Slave Revolt, 222. The trial record also includes Trezvant’s statement ‘that the prisoner was at the time in confinement but no threats or promises were held out to him to make any disclosures’. This stands in marked contrast to Gray’s statement in The Confessions, 18, that ‘I proceeded to make some inquiries of him, after assuring him of the certain death that awaited him’. On the significance of this difference, see Fabricant, ‘A Critical Look’, 348.

\(^{54}\) See Christopher Tomlins, ‘After Critical Legal History: Scope, Scale, Structure’, Annual Review of Law and Social Science, 8 (2012): 31-68, 42. It is worth emphasising the difference between this approach and post-structural emphases on textual plasticity and the contingency and indeterminacy of language.

\(^{55}\) Sundquist, To Wake the Nations, 37.
Still, it is another voice, adverse to Turner's, that lends independent support to the proposition that Gray's pamphlet is indeed a fruitful source through which to engage with the meaning of Nat Turner's 'fierce rebellion' and the legal response to it. More than half of the trial report that concludes Gray's pamphlet is given over to a speech attributed to the presiding magistrate, Jeremiah Cobb, sentencing Turner to hang. The trial record contents itself with a banal boilerplate statement of the death sentence: 'Therefore it is considered by the Court that he be taken hence to the Jail from whence he was taken therein to remain until ... taken by the Sheriff to the usual place of execution and there be hanged by the neck until he be dead' adding 'And the Court values the said slave to the sum of three hundred and seventy five dollars'. In contrast, as Caleb Smith has noted, the speech that Gray's report attributes to Cobb is 'a vehement oration', an elaborately performative summoning of 'the transcendent voice of the law' that 'transforms a rote legal procedure into a dramatic ceremony of justice'.

Smith's conclusion, as we have seen, is that what matters here is recognition that, as such, the entire pamphlet is performing the genre of trial report, speaking to 'the public culture of justice', not whether it is a 'true' confession, or a trustworthy account of the insurrection. Smith, however, misstates the reported speech in one key aspect. 'Quoting from Gray's version of the confession', he writes, 'the judge uses Turner's words against him: "your own confession tells us that [your hands] were stained with the blood of a master; in your own language 'too indulgent"'. But these words – too indulgent – do not appear anywhere in Gray's version of the confession.

Gray, as trial reporter, appears to be recording faithfully what Cobb, the presiding magistrate actually said, referencing words given in evidence before him – words from the preliminary examination placed in evidence by James Trezvant. In doing so, Gray has revealed the degree of his own dissimulation: the confession he had heard was not before the court. But in exposing himself he has furnished us with reasonable grounds for believing that his pamphlet indeed conveys to us something of the reality

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56 Tragle, ed., *The Southampton Slave Revolt*, 223. With minimal variation the same formulaic clerical statement summarises every capital sentence handed down during the trials occasioned by the rebellion.

57 Smith, *Oracle*, 161, 162, 163.

of the charged voice of Jeremiah Cobb, just as we have reasonable grounds for believing it conveys something of the reality of the charged voice of Nat Turner.

Thus we discover yet another author lurking in the iterative multiplicity of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Jeremiah Cobb joins Nat Turner and Thomas Ruffin Gray. Small wonder that when Gray obtained his copyright he labeled himself the text’s proprietor rather than its author. His was a text crowded with authors – far too many to claim authorial rights for himself alone.

What Gérard Genette has to say about the importance of a text’s paratextual aspects seems to me to have particular force when applied to legal, or in this case quasi-legal, texts. Legal texts almost invariably possess a hugely elaborated, grandly formulaic peritext of structural and compositional authority. They also move constantly within an epitextual penumbra of production, projection, reception, interpretation and reinterpretation. In this, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* performs all the functions of a composite legal text. Much more than just a trial report, it is a ‘case’ with appended ‘materials,’ a bundle of texts gathered together, endowed with authority, intended to instruct, and constructed so as to instruct in a particular way.

It is also worth noting, however, that in the early 1990s, the Australian literary critic Marie Maclean situated paratext in the study of thresholds and liminality.59 As she wrote then, the signs and fringes that accompany a text constitute a threshold, or frame, that interposes between the text, and any context within which it finds itself, and that bends (or attempts to bend), its reception by that context, just as an apparently transparent (hence notionally invisible) lens bends light. Maclean cites the philosopher Michel Serres’ observations on liminality: ‘A door opens or closes a threshold which is held to be such because at this spot a law is overturned: on one side reigns a certain rule, on the other begins a new law, so that the door rests on its hinges on a neutral line where the two rules of law balance and cancel each other ... The singular site is a part of neither this world nor the other or else it belongs to both’.60 What is so

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important about the paratext is the alterity in reading that it anticipates, and which its task is to deflect.

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