

INTRODUCTION

A New World in Ruins

*Gods of my country, Heroes of the land, you, Romulus, and you,
mother Vesta, who guard Tuscan Tiber and the Palatine of Rome,
at least do not prevent this young prince from succouring a world in
ruins!*

Virgil, *Georgics* [1:498–501]¹

At a seemingly arbitrary moment in their 1824 *History of the State of New-York*, John Van Ness Yates and Joseph White Moulton imagine a man, centuries into the future, stumbling upon the broken remains of a massive brick edifice. He gazes in wonder at this monolithic reminder that in ancient times a mysterious race known as the *Americans* unveiled the hidden powers of nature and built a civilization unsurpassed by all others. But for reasons unknown – perhaps a natural disaster, or divine retribution, or communal suicide – they vanished suddenly, and almost all knowledge of their republic has been scattered to the winds of time. The imagined man, a future archaeologist, stands in reverent awe of this once illustrious nation.

Such a setup might constitute the opening of yet another new post-apocalyptic film or novel, and yet this description comes from a US history book written almost two hundred years ago. Postapocalyptic fantasies have become familiar expressions of a twenty-first-century sensibility, but they were surprisingly popular among early nineteenth-century American writers as well. In *History of the State of New-York*, Yates, then New York Secretary of State, and Moulton, a young lawyer, attempt to give an exhaustive account of the deep history of their region. Following in the footsteps of Washington Irving, whose 1809 *History of New York* was a big hit (appearing in a fourth edition in 1824), they begin with the Universal

¹ Virgil, *Georgics*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 63 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916), 135.

Flood from the time of Noah, proceed through centuries of Native American residency, and describe the ensuing Dutch and English colonies. After entertaining extensive speculations regarding the origins of various Native American tribes, they offer a then-standard salute to the destined disappearance of the Indians. What comes next may surprise modern readers accustomed to viewing nationalist American rhetoric in terms of messianic exceptionalism. Yates and Moulton provide a vision of the eventual demise of the United States. “It may be our turn to reign for ages masters of the ascendant,” they muse, but eventually a period will arrive “when, by national degeneracy and criminality, we shall have become ripened for ruin.” At that time, “future barbarians” from “the northern hives” will pour down upon the United States just as the Goths descended upon Rome. “Then will recommence the dark ages of this continent,” they ominously declare:

During the succeeding reign of barbarism and of ignorance, the monuments of our civilization will slumber in forgetfulness, until the full circle of revolution will have been completed, and the sun of science shall have arisen to dispel the gloom, and civilization reappeared and resumed her ancient dominion. Then the future antiquary will pass over our State, view the remains of cities, temples, sepulchres, fortifications, mark the manifest vestiges of an unknown people, far more advanced in arts than the immediate pre-occupants of the soil, and as he approaches those works which will appear to him, from their broken culverts, shattered locks, and decayed banks, to have been artificial rivers, he will pause to contemplate this wonder. He will explore their extent, he will perceive their design; and, with intense interest and solicitude, exclaim: What eclipse of reason could have given birth to the wild fancy of uniting the great Caspian and Mediterranean seas of North America with the Atlantic Ocean! . . . Thus will he view those venerable remains, which will appear to him shrouded in impenetrable mystery, until at length he will perhaps discover, in the enclosure of some prostrate marble column, or amidst the rubbish of some half-buried ruins of ancient edifices, the means of unravelling the mystery, and of holding up to the admiration and emulation of new ages, the illustrious genius of our State and age. (97–98)

In this postapocalyptic fantasy, a future historian explores the very same region that James Fenimore Cooper was then beginning to mythologize in his frontier romances. Examining “broken culverts, shattered locks, and decayed banks,” the future archaeologist discovers the remains of the “artificial rivers” (what Cooper would call the “artificial waters”) of the Erie Canal, which was still under construction when Yates and Moulton’s book went to press (Cooper, *Mohicans* 147). The Erie Canal is significant

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not as a functional improvement of the living conditions of its builders and their descendants (who are, after all, destined to be destroyed by northern barbarians) but rather as a symbolic monument of American civilization, proof of grandeur by which future civilizations will learn to admire the “illustrious genius” of nineteenth-century New York. The bizarre passage thus reveals the authors’ conflicting desires to celebrate the power of America and to obliterate the record of its existence.

Yet as strange as Yates and Moulton’s vision may seem, it was not uncommon for Americans in the 1820s to assert that the Erie Canal was “equal to the Pyramids of Egypt, or the wall of China.”² Such assertions were not without reason. The 363-mile-long Canal, stretching between Buffalo and Albany, was an engineering marvel – one of the first icons of what historian David Nye calls the “technological sublime.”³ “Imagination, in this case, lags behind reality, and the utmost stretch of poetic vision becomes embodied into existence,” remarked Governor DeWitt Clinton during the Canal’s construction, which began in 1817; by 1825 transport was possible between Lake Erie and the Hudson River.⁴ The total transformation – of the natural landscape, of the political geography, of the regional economy – was enormous. Continuing to build 600 miles of additional canals throughout the state, New Yorkers essentially “engineered a new environment.”⁵ It was a state venture of national significance, a public undertaking believed to rival the great projects of the ancient and modern worlds. But for many, this national greatness meant that the Canal would outlast the republic that built and maintained it.

As Yates and Moulton’s passage reveals, literary expressions of patriotic pride were not always characterized by a national exceptionalism that preached eternal ascendancy. Many US authors, especially in the early decades of the nineteenth century, sought a form of national posthumous glory. Assuming that the republic would assuredly *not* usher in a millennial utopia, they worried about how the United States, following its inevitable

² Isaac Candler, *A Summary View of America* (London: Cadell, 1824), 122. Philip Freneau, for example, in an 1822 poem on the Canal, claimed that “No China’s wall, though stretching far, / With this vast object can compare.” Freneau, “Stanzas on the Great Western Canal of the State of New York,” *New Brunswick Fredonian* (8 August 1822); reprinted in *The Erie Canal Reader, 1790–1950*, ed. Roger W. Hecht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 27.

³ David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

⁴ Hibernicus [DeWitt Clinton], *Letters on the Natural History and Internal Resources of the State of New-York* (New York: Bliss and White, 1822), 9.

⁵ David Stradling, *The Nature of New York: An Environmental History of the Empire State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 47.

expiration, would be judged by the denizens of a distant futurity. So when in 1843 Daniel Webster commemorated the completed Bunker Hill Monument by declaring that it would remain standing tall as a marker of America's moral might after "civilization should be subverted. . . by a new deluge of barbarism," he was not making an unusual claim. Webster was working within an established tradition of national postapocalyptic fantasies.⁶

This book examines instances of such postapocalyptic fantasies to establish the complex plurality of national narratives American antebellum authors adopted to historicize their own moment in time. Since the Second World War, scholars of American literature have insisted that nineteenth-century Americans combined a providential theology with nationalist politics to create an exceptionalist role for the United States within – or, more properly, outside the bounds of – world history. According to the structural model of the American jeremiad, the United States became a Redeemer Nation, a Chosen People with a Manifest Destiny to spread democracy and capitalism across the continent and, later, the whole world, ushering in a New Jerusalem and presaging the Second Coming of Christ. A tacit acceptance of this mythology characterized American Studies during the early years of the Cold War; for the last several decades, critics have regularly described such an exceptionalist outlook as the imperial ideology of an oppressive, slave-holding, genocidal nation-state.⁷

A key text in this critical evolution has been Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad*, first published in 1978. Bercovitch identified the American jeremiad as a rhetorical form that asserts an exceptional community; it begins by announcing a crisis threatening the very existence of a population and concludes with the assurance that the community will persevere and make progress toward perfection because it is specially chosen by God. The very presence of the crisis serves to affirm the exceptional nature of the group under the logic that God tries and tests only

⁶ *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster*, 18 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1903), 1:263. See also John Hay, "Broken Hearths: Melville's *Israel Potter* and the Bunker Hill Monument," *New England Quarterly* 89.2 (June 2016): 192–221.

⁷ Representative mid-century criticism would include F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941), Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955), Perry Miller's *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956), and Ernest Lee Tuveson's *Redeemer Nation* (1968). For the later turn against the assumptions underlying such earlier works, see the essays collected in *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism*, ed. Donald E. Pease and Amy Kaplan (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), and *Revisionary Interventions into the Americanist Canon*, ed. Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

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those he has selected for salvation. In the same manner that an individual may be “born again,” the nation may regenerate continually over time. Bercovitch’s text operates as a transition between two eras in American literary scholarship. In claiming the status of the American jeremiad as a national ideology, it repeats the mid-century critical model of characterizing a singular American culture according to a monolithic myth or structuring device. It unifies scattered moments – Boston in the 1630s, Philadelphia in the 1770s, New York in the 1850s, Washington in the 1940s – as parts of a coherent national culture, and it accounts for what Frederick Jackson Turner (in his famous frontier thesis) called “perennial rebirth.”⁸ But in his insistence on a rhetorical (rather than a genetic, geographic, or politico-legal) element as the shared national trait, Bercovitch opened the door for a generation of “New Americanists” who set out to critique the exceptionalist ideology that Bercovitch had identified.

As Donald Pease has shown, American exceptionalism is both a “fantasy” and a “classificatory scheme” that brings together different descriptions of what might set America apart from other nations and cultures. Among its many permutations, Pease notes, “American exceptionalism has been taken to mean that America is ‘distinctive’ (meaning merely different), or ‘unique’ (meaning anomalous), or ‘exemplary’ (meaning a model for other nations to follow), or that it is ‘exempt’ from the laws of historical progress (meaning that it is an ‘exception’ to the laws and rules governing the development of other nations).”⁹ The last meaning has been the bugbear of much critical scholarship. The American jeremiad posited a national narrative prefigured by the life of Christ; as such, declarations of American national identity have been yoked to a millennial model that situates the United States outside of secular history. Much fruitful work in antebellum American literary scholarship of the past few decades has been dedicated to identifying this exceptionalism – promoted both by nineteenth-century writers and by twentieth-century critics – and suggesting that, as the handmaiden of exceptionalism, a nationalist outlook should be replaced by a postnationalist or planetary sensibility.¹⁰

⁸ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (1920; New York: Holt, 1962), 2.

⁹ Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 8–9.

¹⁰ See, for example, John Carlos Rowe, ed., *Post-Nationalist American Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and David Noble, *Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

But a growing corpus of new scholarship, commonly gathered under the heading of the *temporal turn*, would suggest that no single, overarching, monolithic historical narrative or rhetorical trope was representative of decades of American discourse. This new movement, known as “American temporality studies,” is a reevaluation, as one critic explains, of “the cultural politics of time in nineteenth-century texts” and a response to Benedict Anderson’s claim (*à la* Walter Benjamin) that the temporal mode of the modern nation is essentially empty and homogeneous.¹¹ Studies by Dana Luciano, Thomas Allen, Lloyd Pratt, Peter Coviello, and Cindy Weinstein have shown that temporality was richly diverse in the antebellum era, and that American writers experienced time and historicity in multiple overlapping forms.¹² Many sought to combine the notion of linear progress with a cyclical course of empire, resulting in odd temporal dimensions that conflated accepted history with future prophecy. Allen, for instance, argues that a single national narrative of unlimited ascendance was not the rule and that the construction of nationality was rather “an ongoing negotiation, in narrative, of heterogeneous temporal modes” (4). Similarly, Pratt insists that the heterogeneous temporalities of the era resisted national consolidation and imbued American literature – a multifaceted literature of intersecting genres – with a modernist sensibility, reflecting what he calls “the heterochronic time of modernity” (199). Furthermore, according to historian Nick Yablon, “traditional conceptions of time” were disrupted by the presence of “untimely ruins” in the nineteenth-century American landscape, anachronistic vestiges that evoked a “multilayered and multi-directional temporality” (12). Such recent scholarship has thus unearthed a panoply of historical perspectives attesting to the myriad ways in which US authors have felt time.

Yet the critical works of the temporal turn have only begun to address the manner in which antebellum American writers understood their position in history. A truly rigorous historicist methodology must account for the attempts by the authors under examination to do their

¹¹ Holly Jackson, “The New American Temporality Studies: Narrative and National Times in the Nineteenth Century,” *Criticism* 53.2 (2011): 323–330; 323.

¹² Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Allen, *A Republic in Time* (2008); Pratt, *Archives of American Time* (2010); Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow’s Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Cindy Weinstein, *Time, Tense, and American Literature: When Is Now?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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own historicizing. How did antebellum writers situate their texts historically, not only by gesturing to a contemporary cultural context but by constructing both a shared past *and* a shared destiny? This book provides a metahistoricist account by attending to the postapocalyptic fantasies entertained in print in the early decades of the nineteenth century in the United States. Rich and wonderful works like Yates and Moulton's *History of the State of New-York* placed the nation-state in a convoluted world-historical narrative that spurned a simple temporal trajectory. The tendency to do so was not restricted to minor or marginal figures; prominent American authors – such as James Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, and Henry David Thoreau – articulated complex notions about their compatriots' and their own relation to the past and to the future, and critical recognition of this fact is long overdue.

The Postapocalyptic Fantasy: Semi-Secular Timescapes

Is this the end? We do not, and cannot, believe it. [...] For, if so, to what purpose that long drama of History, in which we seem to see the Hand of the Dramaturgist? Surely, the end of a Fifth Act should be obvious, satisfying to one's sense of the complete: but History, so far, long as it has been, resembles rather a Prologue than a Fifth Act. Can it be that the Manager, utterly dissatisfied, would sweep all off, and "hang up" the piece for ever?

M. P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (1901)

Applying the term *postapocalyptic* to texts from the antebellum period is, of course, an anachronistic move. The term is of recent vintage (it seems to originate with a 1982 review of the film *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior*), and the themes and formulae have become so widespread as to have now reached a point of cultural saturation, constituting a recognizable narrative genre in which a small number of characters navigate the terrain of an utterly destroyed domain. "Everyone knows how the world ends," writes Michael Chabon. "First radiation, plague, an asteroid, or some other cataclysm kills most of humankind. The remnants mutate, lapse into feudalism, or revert to prehistoric brutality. Old cults are revived with their knives and brutal gods, while tiny noble bands cling to the tatters of the lost civilization, preserving knowledge of machinery, agriculture, and the missionary position against some future renaissance, and confronting their ancestors' legacy

of greatness and destruction.”¹³ Since the tremendous success of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), new postapocalyptic titles have been appearing on a monthly basis – often with films already in development. The last decade alone has seen an explosion of books, plays, films, television shows, and video games that revel in the disorienting chaos of a post-cataclysmic world.¹⁴

In order to grasp why early nineteenth-century American texts might also be profitably described as postapocalyptic, it is important to note the ways in which religious, secular, and scientific discourses intersected in the antebellum United States. Especially for those interested in crafting historical narratives spanning past, present, and future, this era featured clashes and combinations of many different traditional perspectives. The Enlightenment ethos of statesmen like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison augured the revival of a classical republicanism undergirded by a cyclical model of the rise and fall of civilizations. Even as late as 1841, Ralph Waldo Emerson could confidently assume that someday the towns and cities of America would be “rotted” and “all gone,” the natural consequences of societal lifecycles (*Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* 216). But the explosive growth of evangelical Christianity in the developing western regions of the United States in the early nineteenth century promised an ongoing awakening of religious sensibility that would continue to impose a sacred order on the country’s unfolding history and an exceptional status on the nation’s lifespan. Thus in 1863, in the midst of the devastating Civil War, Abraham Lincoln could confidently declare American immortality – that the nation “shall not perish from the earth” (324).¹⁵ The later canonization of texts like the Gettysburg Address has perhaps obscured the existence of a host of works affirming the inevitable expiration of America. Many antebellum authors promoted patriotism while insisting that America must obey the laws of history just like any other nation.

As many scholars have noted, secularism developed in the United States not as a clear alternative to a religious worldview but rather as a complex mélange of discourses, messily incorporating new views arising

¹³ Michael Chabon, “After the Apocalypse,” Rev. of *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy, *New York Review of Books* 54 (15 February 2007): 24–26; 24.

¹⁴ “Fiction in the Age of Amazon,” notes Mark McGurl, contains “innumerable scenarios of apocalypse, postapocalyptic survival, and world rebuilding.” McGurl, “Everything and Less: Fiction in the Age of Amazon,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 77.3 (2016): 447–471; 460.

¹⁵ In *The Cycles of American History* (1986; New York: Mariner, 1999), Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., memorably classified these two perspectives as “America as Experiment” and “America as Destiny,” urging his readers to return to the former – an “urgent sense of the precariousness of the national existence” prevalent in the early years of the republic (7).

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from German biblical criticism, the comparative study of religions, and modern geology.¹⁶ *Postapocalyptic* visions, which have received little scholarly attention, thus bear a relation to the *apocalyptic* themes in American literature that seem to be an inexhaustible source for critical investigation.¹⁷ The strong strain of Protestantism running throughout American cultural history has produced a long array of prominent end-times tableaux, from Michael Wigglesworth's 1662 *The Day of Doom* (according to Perry Miller, "the first best seller in the annals of the American book trade") to the more recent *Left Behind* series.¹⁸ Final forecasts constitute one of America's oldest literary genres, and popular prognostications have included comets, volcanoes, plagues, bombs, and many other imaginative means of destroying the world. Eschatological enthusiasm is currently characteristic of both the secular and the religious, and "apocaholics" can be found across the nation.¹⁹

But a *postapocalyptic* fantasy features a significant difference from the simply apocalyptic; it involves an enormous, potentially global disaster that suddenly destroys most *but not all* human beings. For example, Van Tassel Sutphen's novel *The Doomsman* (1906) refers to an uncertain catastrophe "both sudden and overwhelming" from which "only an infinitesimal portion of the [human] race escaped."²⁰ Following such a cataclysm, an incomplete end of the world, the few survivors would struggle to persevere and perhaps attempt to rebuild civilization (rather than allow the human race to fade away into oblivion by the refusal or inability to procreate). Stories of this stripe are as old as recorded history, as evidenced by the flood myths of figures such as Noah and Deucalion, but these myths of

¹⁶ Critical literature on the growth of secularism in America is considerable in its extent. For a good recent account of the complex nature of the development of secular attitudes and habits, see John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

¹⁷ A few select titles might include Lakshmi Mani, *The Apocalyptic Vision in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction: A Study of Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981); Lois P. Zamora, ed., *The Apocalyptic Vision in America* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1982); Douglas Robinson, *American Apocalypses: The Image of the End of the World in American Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Maxine Lavon Montgomery, *The Apocalypse in African-American Fiction* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996); Elizabeth K. Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination* (Lanham: Lexington, 2008); and Kevin Pelletier, *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism: Love and Fear in U.S. Antebellum Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

¹⁸ Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (New York: Harper, 1956), 218.

¹⁹ "Apocaholic" is a term coined by Gary Alexander in 2007; see his "Apocaholics Anonymous" website.

²⁰ Van Tassel Sutphen, *The Doomsman* (1906; Boston: Gregg, 1975), 15. More recently, Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars* (New York: Knopf, 2012) relies on a plague that swiftly kills the great majority of the world population — "ninety nine point whatever" (203).

purification and renewal operate outside the Christian metanarrative.²¹ For the Protestant tradition so prevalent throughout US history, the Universal Deluge in the Book of Genesis marks the beginning of a linear progression, and the Book of Revelation (the Apocalypse of John) foretells its end.²² A postapocalyptic fantasy rejects such narrative closure and coherence in favor of a chaotic and potentially meaningless chronology, complementing a secular (perhaps Authorless) concept of history. As Frank Kermode has argued, one must experience a “concordance of beginning, middle, and end” in order to make sense of the world.²³ Postapocalyptic fantasies challenge the neatness of narrative and thus reveal a crisis in meaning.²⁴

This disruption of a universal ordering of time was palpable in the early decades of the nineteenth century in the United States. In the period following the War of 1812, US periodicals were saturated with calls for the development of a recognizably American (rather than English) literature. Consequently, as Jonathan Arac has persuasively argued, the dominant narrative genre (for both fiction and nonfiction) during the 1820s and 1830s was the “national narrative,” a structure that provided a broad historical context in which America itself might implicitly serve as a developing protagonist.²⁵ This literary nationalism accompanied a contemporaneous strain of religious nationalism that turned soldiers into saints and promoted a civil theology.²⁶ Such religious nationalism was explicitly exceptionalist, viewing the US nation as a chosen community and fostering a providential understanding of apocalypse. According to this increasingly popular perspective, the end of America and the end of

²¹ For a classic analysis of flood myths and other cyclical patterns of destruction and regeneration from cultures around the world, see Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper, 1963). As Warren Wagar explains, the essential disaster of a postapocalyptic fiction appears “not as a restatement of Biblical eschatology, but as a creative act of the secular imagination” (5).

²² “The end will come only once because, in the Judaeo-Christian world-view, time is linear and irreversible,” writes John R. May in *Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972). “This is the uniqueness of Judaeo-Christianity in the perspective of world religions. It has accepted the irreversibility of time, the terror of history. It sees the value of the historical hour for salvation” (11–12).

²³ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1967; London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 35.

²⁴ Another critic has noted recently that “many science-fiction end-of-the-world stories contain extensive meditations on the meaninglessness of the disaster. It is as if behind the overtly human attempts to respond, survive, and make meaning, there is another pull, a pull toward the anonymous tautology of the disaster.” Eugene Thacker, “Notes on Extinction and Existence,” *Configurations* 20 (2012): 137–148; 142.

²⁵ Jonathan Arac, *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative, 1820–1860* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 2–3.

²⁶ Sam Haselby, *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).