

## INTRODUCTION

*Where Will It End?*

Henry Brougham had little time for “thoughtless optimists” when it came to politics. Writing for the *Edinburgh Review* in 1818, he praised a recent book that advocated for emigration to the United States. Brougham was awed by Morris Birkbeck’s account of the scale and dynamism of the new nation. “A broad, deep, and rapid stream of population is running constantly towards the western parts of the Continent,” he wrote, casting emigration as a force of nature. He observed, dubiously, that “vast states” were forming “towards the Pacific Ocean, the growth of which as much exceeds in rapidity what we have been wont to admire on the shores of the Atlantic.” All this left at an “immeasurable distance” the “scarcely perceptible progress of our European societies.” It was little wonder that England had been left behind. Ravaged by poverty and austerity, Birkbeck’s book had suggested, the beleaguered nation was headed for political disaster. An English farmer (like the land-bound *villeins* “of old time”) had “no voice in the appointment of the legislature unless he happens to possess a freehold of forty shillings a year.” With “no elective franchise,” he could “scarcely be said to have a political existence” and had no concern with “public affairs.” It was thus “quite reasonable and just to secure a timely retreat from the approaching crisis – either of anarchy or despotism.” America’s population was exploding, while England faced decline and even catastrophe. But where, Brougham asked, was “this prodigious increase of numbers, this vast extension of dominion, to end?”<sup>1</sup>

Anticipating Alexis de Tocqueville a decade later, Brougham claimed that politics was less of a distraction in America. Men had “abundant occupation of their own, without thinking of the State.” But the success of the United States could also be attributed to something else: its “total want” of a familiar breed of politician. “The race of mere statesmen,” Brougham wrote, “so well known among us in the Old world, is wholly unknown in the New.” There was no shortage of political feeling; the Americans were (“no doubt”) “decided partisans, and warm political

combatants; but what project or chance can counterbalance, in their eyes, the benefits conferred by the Union, of cultivating their soil, and pursuing their traffic freely and gainfully, in their capacity of private individuals?" The "cautious and economical character" of the federal government seemed "admirably adapted to secure its hold over the affections of a rational and a frugal people." Indeed, "until the whole frame of society alters," Brougham ventured, "even a great increase of political characters will not enable those persons successfully to appeal to the bulk of the community, with the prospect of splitting the Union." A "preacher of insurrection" might "safely be left with such personages as the American farmers."<sup>2</sup>

We have become more familiar, in the years since Brougham wrote, with the prospect that established political unions will come to an end. In our own moment, long-standing decline and growing inequality have been met, on both sides of the Atlantic, by "preacher[s] of insurrection" and explosions of fervent feeling. We have become more familiar, too, with the prospect – if not the impending or already unfolding reality – that the world as we know it will come to an end. The fantasies about Western supremacy and perpetual growth that shaped previous centuries now confront acute challenges. This book took shape in the shadows cast by these developments. But its emphasis falls not only on decline and prospective disaster but on how closing horizons and ending lines provide opportunities to reexamine the targets of governance and the objectives of political activity: what we might call the ends of politics. In *The Last Man* (1826), Mary Shelley imagined a pandemic that destroys the human race, in what can be considered the first end-of-the-world novel. But in contrast with other fictional apocalypses, the dissolution of mankind begins, in *The Last Man*, with the peaceful unwinding of political institutions. In a version of the dynamic described in Brougham's review, the dwindling of the population restores England, in turn, to a kind of quasi-rural existence, as vocal male politicians suddenly vanish and new communities take shape in the rubble.<sup>3</sup>

This book examines writings by Lord Byron, Mary Shelley, and their circle that confronted the prospect of the world ending, from poems by Byron that pictured fallen empires, sinking islands, evacuated planets, and dying stars, to the making and unmaking of populations in *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*. Those writings, this study shows, intersected with and enclosed reflections upon political change. While overshadowed by the past – not least in the guise of a reconstituted Tory elite – the late Romantic age saw long-standing tensions come together with new prospects for

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political mobilization and legislative change. This book focuses on the period bracketed by Britain's 1815 victory at Waterloo and the passage of the 1832 Reform Act. From reform of parliament and the abolition of slavery to the ascent of liberal ideals and free trade, politics in the early nineteenth century underwent considerable and dramatic changes. My interest, however, is less in tying literary texts to historical specifics than in exploring literature's engagement with the multiple temporalities and vectors of change that "politics" enfolded.<sup>4</sup> In early nineteenth-century England, a newly democratic *ethos* (and liberal *telos*) promised an end to politics as usual. These political changes – which entailed, among other things, profound challenges to the standing of elite political men – amounted to endings, whether welcome or otherwise, that were also fresh beginnings. They converged, in the writings I examine here, with visions of the world coming to an end.

The "end of the world" can mean the failure of institutions and collapse of society, the end of the human species, the ruin and demise of Planet Earth, and the biblical Apocalypse that ends historical time. These formulations are distinct but overlapping. They coincide (and clash) in complex ways. The collapse of political and social institutions, for example, may have a negligible impact on nonhuman animals and natural environments; indeed, fewer people and less human activity may have beneficial consequences for planetary life writ large. Approached from the perspective of ecocriticism, environmentalism, or "the Anthropocene," we have only one world: Planet Earth.<sup>5</sup> But more than one world may be at issue in talk of the "end of the world." The demise of this planet, in some versions of evangelical Christianity, hastens the onset of the world to come. Rather than fixing this planet, meanwhile, some techno-utopian fantasists have focused on the prospect of escaping to Mars or the moon, turning their back on the problems of this world in the pursuit of another. Apocalyptic rhetoric has become especially widespread in discussions of contemporary politics. "The only thing that is the end of the world," Barack Obama stated in the final weeks of 2016, "is the end of the world."<sup>6</sup> What we call the "end of the world," Obama's comments remind us, almost invariably falls short of irrecoverable collapse, let alone the Apocalypse of biblical eschatology (the "End of the World" that structured Christian thought in the premodern West).<sup>7</sup> Yet catastrophe and world-ending continue to infuse our perception of present-day reality and to inflect our understanding of prospective futures. That may result, as Obama seems to imply, in overblown analogies and an inflated sense of doom. Recent developments have accentuated a belief that established institutions and existing forms of

political agency are exhausted. The already shaky claim that mankind had reached the end of history has now been further discredited. But the claim that the end of the world is nigh might be said to have taken its place. Where before, the only way was up, or straight ahead, into a fantasized state of irreversible stasis – with the supposed global triumph of liberal democracy – now, the only way ahead can seem to be a series of slow or steep declines, accelerating and converging catastrophes.

Claims that the world is doomed may be no less dubious – at least in political terms – than claims that we have reached history’s end.<sup>8</sup> In teasing apart these converging rhetorics, separating out these visions of the end of the world, we not only maintain a sense of proportion. Crisis may also provide practical opportunities and imaginative vehicles for change, prompting reevaluation, and opening pathways for other possible futures. Those futures can, of course, amount to more of the same – or worse. As Naomi Klein has stringently argued, crisis affords special opportunity to vested interests, who exploit disorienting “shock” to entrench inequitable systems.<sup>9</sup> No sane person wants to see catastrophe. Yet as Klein has also shown, crisis may afford the opportunity to revisit our political priorities. Disasters, whether natural or man-made, may reaffirm the need for local organizing and international solidarity, creating new political, social, and economic orders while further discrediting neoliberal capitalism and related hegemonies.<sup>10</sup> The global response to Covid presents a recent example of the elusive potential nested within unexpected disruption. Although plenty of people were still forced to go into work, the onset of the pandemic also saw relentless activity and global interchange give way to somnolent streets and empty skies. Indeed, the early phases of lockdown witnessed tableaux eerily reminiscent of Shelley’s *Last Man*, as iconic sites from the Vatican to Wall Street fell silent and animals took over abandoned streets, reclaiming a world evacuated of mankind.<sup>11</sup> Literature, this book argues, creates disaster-free spaces of rethinking, in which the world can be confronted and imagined anew, whether by way of the impasses created by sudden ruptures and looming absences or through more subtle changes and adjustments: tremors of anticipated transformation, fleeting disruptions to the status quo, flickering glimpses of an alternative world.<sup>12</sup> *The Last Man* plays out at length one version of what might happen when the world as we know it ceases to be. Both in elaborate and more understated ways, all the writings discussed in this book contemplate what might result from dislodging or uprooting things as they are. That begins with the political systems organized around individual men.

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“This is not the apocalypse,” President Obama told White House staff members the day after the 2016 presidential election.<sup>13</sup> But despite hopeful assertions to the contrary, a sense of dread, decline, and doom remained pervasive for the remainder of that decade (and, it seems safe to say, beyond). Recent events, from the vote for Brexit to the election of Trump, had shown that political upsets and the abrupt collapse of certainties – amidst a gathering whirlwind of global upheaval, technological change, and dis- and misinformation – could feel very much like the end of the world. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt showed how the cascade of events might coincide with torrents of false information to wash away any sense of fixity and truth, unleashing violence and terror.<sup>14</sup> In our own time, the chaotic state of politics has (so to speak) drowned out and sucked the oxygen of attention away from environmental catastrophe. Partisan and ideological division obscure collective predicaments, distracting from the need for large-scale action in the face of environmental peril. Political failure can redouble feelings of impotence, giving rise to depression and helplessness rivaling that of once-hopeful radicals after the failure of the French Revolution. But as this book sets out to show, there are many ends of the world – each demanding that we reimagine the ends of politics. Literature, at the same time, imagines its own worlds. Beyond their ultimate political implications, the endings and fresh openings explored here give rise to meditations on mankind and its limits, including the reorientation of perspectives beyond our species and this world altogether – to alternative sources of meaning or the broken solace that comes from staring into the void. The writings of Byron, Mary Shelley, and their circle will not offer solutions to what ails us. But they serve as a prelude to more recent efforts to think and feel our way through a newly hopeless-seeming human condition. They also make valuable contributions to that undertaking in their own right, as fusions of political thought and literary poetics able to administer, as Keats wrote of the scenes sealed on the Grecian urn, to those “in midst of other woes.”<sup>15</sup>

**Shelley's "Tale" and the Spirit of the Age**

In February 1825, Mary Shelley approached a sitting member of parliament with a modest proposal. “I have often wished to be present at a debate in the House of Commons,” Shelley wrote to MP John Cam Hobhouse. Expressing particular interest in a recent debate between Brougham and George Canning over a petition supporting Catholic rights, she stated that the “animated discussions now going on” and “the splendid eloquence displayed” were “beyond words objects of attraction.” Shelley emphasized

her capacities as an attentive listener of animated men in the 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein*. (“Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and [Percy] Shelley,” she recalled of her time at Lake Geneva, “to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener.”)<sup>16</sup> But Shelley’s letter to Hobhouse, while ostensibly demure, was also quietly assertive. Attendance at parliament would be invaluable, she wrote, for the “Tale” at which she was then at work. Her letter concluded by conveying her desire to attend the “strangers gallery” where visitors were permitted to observe parliamentary debates: “I hear that there is a place, over the roof of St. Stephens where you senators permit us to hear, not seen.” She concluded by apologizing in advance for seeming too forward in her request to visit the hallowed chamber of English politics and to view its lofty “senators.”<sup>17</sup>

*The Spirit of the Age* appeared the same year. William Hazlitt’s group portrait of the late Romantic period featured extended depictions of Cobbett, Godwin, and Wordsworth – to name just the prominent Williams. As that subset of eminent men makes clear, Hazlitt included figures from the world of letters and from the world of politics. Alongside Sir Walter Scott and other literary lions, Hazlitt profiled political figures ranging from Godwin and Cobbett to the aging radical Horne Tooke and the conservative cleric Thomas Malthus. *The Spirit of the Age* also included shorter sketches of Canning, Brougham, the radical stalwart Sir Francis Burdett, and the evangelical abolitionist William Wilberforce. The opening pages of *The Spirit of the Age* referenced Hobhouse as a vigorous exemplar of popular “hustings” politics. The book began with a portrait of Jeremy Bentham, presented as a political thinker who cast his eyes on wide horizons and distant nations. The portrait of “Lord Byron” had a special status in the collection, which appeared the year after the poet’s death in Greece.

In 1826, the year after the appearance of Hazlitt’s book, Shelley published her novel heralding the end of the world. *The Last Man*, set in late twenty-first-century England, witnesses the human species succumb to a mysterious wave of global illness. But the opening volume of Shelley’s novel had, as I have noted, a prominent political dimension. Anticipated in her desire to visit the House of Commons – this was the “Tale” at which she was at work when she wrote to Hobhouse – the book depicts factions of “royalists,” “aristocrats,” and “democrats” contending to lead England after the abolition of the monarchy, which the book optimistically dates to 2073. The futuristic world of *The Last Man* alluded, in both direct and veiled ways, to contemporary political debate, from brewing arguments for parliamentary reform and expanded suffrage to the more radical visions of

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change associated with the French Revolution and independence movements taking shape across Europe and the Americas. Aside from its engagement with Godwinian radicalism and Benthamite reform – and its glimpses at the kind of male-dominated worlds familiar to Shelley and her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft – the novel includes characters based directly on Percy Shelley and Byron. *The Last Man* scrambled and recombined these various elements of the late Romantic age, which Shelley exported to a distant future and presented against the backdrop of dramatic changes to mankind's standing in the world, amounting to the end of "man" as such.

In the second half of this book, I offer a reading of Shelley's novel that takes seriously its attention to politics. Two features of that argument may be outlined here. In the first instance, *The Last Man* focuses on the last *men*. The opening volume is overshadowed by the Byronic politician Lord Raymond and former heir to the throne Adrian, an effete idealist who shares features with Percy Shelley. An unduly narrow approach to the novel has led critics to brush past these early scenes. But read in more expansive terms, they draw our attention to a second feature of the book: the complex political resonances that accompany its picture of a world without mankind. *The Last Man* invites readings that attend to universals and current preoccupations, with recent interpretations emphasizing viral illness, interspecies community, refugee crisis, natural disaster, and apocalypse. To be sure, the ultimate horizons of Shelley's novel strayed far beyond politics. But in leaping to totalizing frames, universalizing questions, and current concerns, critics have obscured the political dimensions of *The Last Man*. Even the novel's account of a prepolitical, natural state and its visions of an evacuated planet, I propose, have complex political implications.

No less than *The Spirit of the Age* the previous year, *The Last Man* drew together the competing impulses, time frames, and agendas – as well as some of the specific personalities – that were reshaping politics in early nineteenth-century England. Like *The Spirit of the Age*, the novel engaged Godwin's political utopianism, Cobbett's populist rancor, Wordsworth's rustic idealism, and Bentham's visions of the "New World." Yet the novel's overarching narrative and the wider theme announced by its title also leave us with a puzzle. Why did Shelley make the fulfillment of certain radical ambitions (and debates about the viability of political institutions, even after their reform) the starting point for a novel concerned with the demise of mankind? Why portray recent changes to the ends of politics in proximity to mankind's final days on Earth? *The Last Man* joined with other works by Mary Shelley and Byron, this study argues, in imagining the

spirit of the age as the sense of an ending. These writings and the wider print-political and cultural-affective spheres in which they took shape countenanced various prospects for the end of the world, from the dissolution of institutions and collapse of society to the demise and extinction of the human species to the exhaustion (or conflagration) of the planet. These reflections on world ending were intertwined, this book proposes, with thinking about the future of politics at the outset of the nineteenth-century “Age of Reform.”<sup>18</sup> As the first half of this book emphasizes, that began with the nuts and bolts of politics: parties, institutions, and legislation, practical reforms, radical aspirations, and conservative reaction. Rather than pointing only to catastrophe, encounters with ends and endings could be generative, pointing to the waning importance of political lineages rooted in the past (waning importance that, as we know from our own experience, does not preclude stubborn persistence) or challenging efforts to sweep resistance and unrest into a buried past. Endings offered a means, in particular, to reflect upon the gains and losses associated with the transition into a new era of liberal governance. These reflections on coming to an end acquire renewed importance during our own time, as visions of political and planetary end-times converge once again.

### **Byron’s Lastness and the End of the Race**

Although this book is not, for the most part, concerned with the Americas, the early United States offers some instructive ways of thinking about political modernity. In local histories starting in the 1820s, Jean O’Brien has detailed, “New Englanders scripted themselves as modern people looking to the future, creating order out of chaos and forging modern societies and cultures that broke from the past.” The Indigenous peoples of those lands had no continuing place in those stories, which “implicitly argued that Indians and Indian ways could not be acknowledged as legitimate, ongoing, and part of the landscape of the future.” “Firsting” and “Lasting” became critical tools in what O’Brien, adapting Bruno Latour, frames as a battle over who and what gets to be “modern.” James Fenimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* (1826) exemplified a wider tendency to dwell upon the supposed “Last of X” as a means to consign Indians to a premodern or uncivilized past (and to erase or elide the challenges their continued presence posed to this newly evacuated modernity).<sup>19</sup> In his final published poem, *The Island* (1823), Byron imagined an encounter with native peoples that evaded these tendencies, I argue in this book’s final chapter, by imagining a world in which England



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and *its* institutions no longer existed. In *Frankenstein*, I argue in the same chapter, Shelley had her characters retreat to the North Pole as a site beyond Europe and its ruinous political legacies. But both authors were going against the grain. In the coming century, a growing emphasis on forward movement made little room for alternative trajectories – an emphasis that became especially acute in America and related imperial contexts. Apparent across a “broad canvas of cultural expression in the nineteenth century” and exemplified by sentimentalized appeals to dying races, “lastness” produced progress narratives and racialized conceptions of historical time that helped shape a future closed off from the past.<sup>20</sup>

The late Romantic age in England saw varied and clashing visions of the future. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a concern with progress was shared by philosophers, historiographers, and the newly emergent mass public.<sup>21</sup> The conjectural history of the Scottish Enlightenment had advanced a stadial theory for human advancement. But the upheaval of the global age of revolutions radically reconfigured – and even exploded – existing progress narratives.<sup>22</sup> With the French Revolution, Reinhart Koselleck writes, “the previous world of social and political experience, still bound up in the sequence of generations, was blown apart.”<sup>23</sup> During the late Romantic age in England, overlapping groups of activists, artists, philosophers, and visionaries remained invested in ideas of human progress. Those investments – whether inflected by philosophical thinking and conjectural history or driven by radical hopes and popular mobilization – were bound up with the practical belief that politics could continue moving forward: what we would today recognize, broadly speaking, as the tenets of progressive politics. Although indebted to the spirit of change inaugurated by the French Revolution (including self-described “Jacobins” and such groups as the London Corresponding Society), the early nineteenth-century emphasis on forward political movement had multiple axes, from the “march of intellect” to evangelical abolitionism to Bentham’s elaboration of Godwinian ideals into practical agendas for reform. Demands for parliamentary reform had deep histories and complexly overlaid networks while antislavery organizing and demands for abolition were driven by an expansive transatlantic coalition, including the writings of Black Atlantic authors. Politics in this moment was driven, that is to say, not only by stadial theories or the world-historical force imputed to events in France but by diverse actors and heterogeneous networks engaging multiple time frames and vectors of change.

Reformist views were not universally held, of course, even among those on the “Whig” end of the political spectrum. Many resisted the

disintegration of old structures and the ushering in, whether gradual or instantaneous, of a transformed political future. There were also those who fell into none of these camps. The figures on whom I focus in this book carried around visions of the last men in and beyond politics. But that did not mean they were wholly resistant to change. These backward-looking reflections, neither fully reactionary nor entirely hostile to progress, were infused with an indeterminate political promise. That was the case, this book argues, for reflections by and upon one man in particular. The death of Lord Byron in 1824 echoed like a thunderclap through the age memorialized by Hazlitt the following year. Byron's exile from England and eventual death in Greece were widely discussed and mourned. Contemporary representations established Byron's reputation down to this day, from rakish dandy and early celebrity to globe-trotting dilettante and freedom fighter.<sup>24</sup> His death saw personal outpourings of grief and the renewal of scandal. The later years of Byron's life and responses to his death also brought his importance as a political figure into renewed focus. He became a symbol of doomed revolutionary hopes. But what Byron's lifelong commitment to "opposition" would have looked like, had he lived, also became an intriguing question. Looking to events during his lifetime and developments since his death, writers developed speculative accounts of Byron living into subsequent decades. Those accounts – which included fictionalized treatments of the poet's future life – imagined Byron returning to England to revive his political ambitions or voyaging elsewhere in the globe and portrayed him, variously, as a radical reformer and populist figurehead or as an aristocratic relic and political dinosaur (who had turned out, despite his Whig credentials, a "Tory at last," as he had jibed of Robert Southey). Byron, for his own part, remained haunted by his retreat from Whig politics. But he did not remain wedded to any static political role. The public efforts to imagine his political future echoed the private writings and personal reflections in which Byron asked what he might have accomplished politically by returning to England rather than seeking out revolutionary movements and other horizons overseas.

As Byron anticipated in his 1816 poem "Prometheus," he became "a symbol and a sign" of resistance. But his writings also capture a more elusive and ambiguous sense of faded possibility and renewed potential. Both tendencies can be discerned in one of his final poems. Written in January 1824, the poem known as "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year" has been overshadowed by the fact that Byron died a few