Postapocalyptic Fantasies in Antebellum American Literature

JOHN HAY
POSTAPOCALYPTIC FANTASIES IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICAN LITERATURE

Even before the Civil War, American writers were imagining life after a massive global catastrophe. For many, the blank slate of the American continent was instead a wreckage-strewn wasteland, a new world in ruins. Bringing together epic and lyric poems, fictional tales, travel narratives, and scientific texts, Postapocalyptic Fantasies in Antebellum American Literature reveals that US authors who enthusiastically celebrated the myths of primeval wilderness and virgin land also frequently resorted to speculations about the annihilation of civilizations, past and future. By examining such postapocalyptic fantasies, this study recovers an antebellum rhetoric untethered to claims for historical exceptionalism—a patriotic rhetoric that celebrates America while denying the United States a unique position outside of world history. As the scientific field of natural history produced new theories regarding biological extinction, geological transformation, and environmental collapse, American writers responded with wild visions of the ancient past and the distant future.

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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

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, sepulchers, 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
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.” 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.”

“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. 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.” 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

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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.

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.  

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.

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

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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).
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.” 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).” 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 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. 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. 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 multidirectional 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

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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 renascence, and confronting their ancestors’ legacy
of greatness and destruction.” 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.

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). 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

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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).
from German biblical criticism, the comparative study of religions, and modern geology. 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. 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. 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.

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.” 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

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

puriﬁcation and renewal operate outside the Christian metanarrative.  

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. 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. Postapocalyptic fantasies challenge the neatness of narrative and thus reveal a crisis in meaning.

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 non-ﬁction) 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. This literary nationalism accompanied a contemporaneous strain of religious nationalism that turned soldiers into saints and promoted a civil theology. 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

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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, 1965). 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 Judaico-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 Judaico-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).


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.


the world were one and the same – a belief seemingly vindicated during the twentieth century, when the Cold War nuclear strategy of “Mutually Assured Destruction” ensured that the overthrow of the United States would mean the annihilation of all life on earth.27 American declension narratives have thus overwhelmingly tended to envision a post-American future characterized by wasteland – a civilization replaced by savages, a metropolis replaced by wilderness.28

But the rise of the historical sciences in the early nineteenth century created alternative accounts that challenged the authority of any singular religious national narrative, and extreme western expansion undermined the establishment of a stable national identity governed by a sense of place. Gesturing to the strong but frustrated desires for a national American literature in this era, Gerald Kennedy describes US authors between 1820 and 1850 as grappling with “an inchoate collective identity.”29 The instability of an incipient democratic republic strained the possibilities for texts that might be considered representative by widespread consensus. Literary nationalism was thus more aspirational than actual, an assortment of patriotic sentiments rather than a coherent historical vision. Writers engaging in what Lauren Berlant has called “the fantasy-work of national identity” were repeatedly driven to bizarre, ambiguous, and even self-destructive national fantasies.30

While for many the term fantasy conjures Freudian notions of unconscious wish-fulfillment, on a national (rather than individual) level it can refer to the “wild and unpredictable” element of any imagined political identity.31 Following the deeply influential work of Benedict Anderson, scholars now commonly think of the nation-state as an “imagined community” and investigate the characteristics of the

28 In Eclipse of Empires: World History in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013), Patricia Jane Roylance argues that US authors expressed anxiety about the future of their country by penning “narratives of imperial eclipse,” accounts drawn from world history in which a once-dominant civilization is surpassed by an emerging power (I). Despite such anxiety, however, antebellum Americans rarely identified a possible cultural successor, imagining the downfall of the United States as an absolute desolation rather than as a transfer of power.
29 J. Gerald Kennedy, Strange Nation: Literary Nationalism and Cultural Conflict in the Age of Poe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 11.
“national imaginary.” But works of the imagination are often spurred by an unruly enthusiasm that cannot be contained by a simple narrative structure; fantasies allow for a much wider sphere of opportunity and potentiality (a deeper past and a more distant future) to remain centripetally tethered to the national imaginary. They extend routine imaginings to occasionally absurd lengths. Such fantasies are more akin to thought experiments than to full-blown fictions, speculative possibilities rather than unreal expectations, excessive visions rather than fundamental perspectives. In practice, they are frequently short flights of fancy, appearing either as fugitive periodical publications or as brief digressions in longer works. In antebellum American literature, postapocalyptic fantasies can be found in a wide variety of texts – not only poems and prose fictions, but also orations, diaries, letters, sermons, histories, travelogues, scientific treatises, and philosophical disquisitions.

The work of fantasy can allow the writer to imagine the destruction of America without letting go of a commitment to national greatness. By invoking a disaster of biblical proportions inside a secular framework, postapocalyptic fantasy acknowledges national mortality while gesturing to the historical immortality possible through literature. Unlike the jeremiad, which urges listeners to reflect upon their behavior in order to avert an impending catastrophe, the postapocalyptic fantasy can assure an audience that a coming cataclysm will affirm their present excellence. In an 1835 New-England Magazine article titled “My Journal,” Henry Cleveland prefaces an unremarkable account of a trip to Niagara Falls with a vision of the country two thousand years into the future, in which a traveler gazes at the “stupendous ruin” of the Erie Canal and realizes that “a mightier race must have once held the soil.” Why that powerful race has disappeared is seemingly unimportant, as Cleveland offers no cautionary words to his contemporaries. “In the meantime,” he blithely observes, “our villages will grow up into cities; our cities will be adorned with architecture and sculpture; our lands will teem with the richness of full cultivation, and

33 Michael A. Elliott has thus recently identified “historical fantasy” as an activity propelled by an “unruly and inchoate” enthusiasm in his essay “Strangely Interested: The Work of Historical Fantasy,” American Literature 87.1 (March 2015): 137–157; 139.
34 “A fantasy,” noted Lionel Trilling, “may be distinguished from the representation of something that actually exists, but it is not opposed to ‘reality’ and not an ‘escape’ from reality.” Trilling, The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society (1950; Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1957), 168, n. 7.
universal wealth will display its creative and beautifying power over the whole country.” But what must happen to this utopian progress narrative if a denizen of the thirty-ninth century will view the Erie Canal as the work of a superior civilization? Like Yates and Moulton before him, Cleveland simply affirms that his vision stems from patriotic pride. “Such are the dreams in which a lover of his country will occasionally indulge, though wild they be.”

As such examples begin to reveal, while the postapocalyptic genre is certainly flourishing in the twenty-first-century, its origins run deep into the early years of the nineteenth century. Many antebellum authors envisioned future scenarios in which unspecified disasters would suddenly destroy much of the civilized world while nevertheless leaving behind a small remnant to slowly repopulate the earth. Many others believed that they were already living out such a fantasy, seeing in the American continent not a blank slate of virgin soil but a wreckage-strewn wasteland with a mysterious natural history. In both cases, writers tended to conflate well-known exceptionalist mantras about novelty and rebirth with less-acknowledged themes of antiquity and degeneration. They fashioned America as a new world in ruins.

While the popularity of postapocalyptic fantasizing is not limited to America, its pervasiveness in the United States is unusually strong: such fantasizing is common to rich and poor, liberals and conservatives, Christians and nonbelievers, people of every race, class, and creed. Perhaps one indicator of its prevalence is the television show Doomsday Preppers (2012–2014), which ran for four seasons on the National Geographic Channel. Each episode of this reality series consisted of a few interviews with Americans (sometimes individuals but often families) who were preparing for impending world catastrophe: they give tips about stockpiling food, designing evacuation strategies, hoarding firearms and ammunition, and sharpening their short-range shooting skills. At each episode’s conclusion, an unseen panel of judges evaluates the subjects’ chances of survival and offers advice for improving their odds. What is most remarkable about this show is the introduction of each featured subject. In addition to name and hometown, viewers are also provided

37 See, for example, Chuck Raasch, “For ‘Preppers,’ Every Day Could Be Doomsday,” USA Today (13 November 2012), Web.
the subject’s belief regarding how the known world will likely end. Convictions span several kinds of disaster scenarios, including worldwide economic collapse, environmental catastrophe, mass terrorism, nuclear war, and the wrath of God. Especially interesting is the fact that undergirding such varied beliefs in the coming end is a shared faith in minority survival. “Anticipating the end of the world is humanity’s oldest pastime,” writes David Mitchell, but only in the comparatively recent past have people with such different apocalyptic perspectives shared the conviction that they will continue to survive after everyone else has been destroyed. Even those who believe that the coming cataclysm will be at least indirectly due to divine vengeance still imagine an incomplete apocalypse, one that allows for a few survivors to straggle into an unknown future.

This book focuses on postapocalyptic fantasies, but postapocalyptic is not just another “post-” term to describe the contemporary cultural situation, a merely inevitable addition to a list that includes postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, postcapitalism, postracism, posthumanism, and postnationalism. (At least one critic has begun referring to “post-everything American Studies.”) In fact, as the title and overall theme of Doomsday Preppers underscores, the pre- is more important than the post-. Taking pre-apocalyptic action (“prepping”) is a way of performing a belief in a postapocalyptic future.

How does one describe the expectation not of a theologically ordained conclusion but simply of an immense, impending, potentially survivable catastrophe? Postapocalyptic is a useful term because of its dual nature. On the one hand, it is a temporal term, referring to a period after (“post-”) the apocalypse (often understood secularly as a massive disaster). On the other hand – and at the same time – it suggests a manner of thinking through or past the apocalyptic form of history without completely escaping from it, a semi-secular ordering of the world. The Apocalypse has traditionally been an event by which the world’s Creator interrupts the laws of nature and judges the entire human race once and for all. It is the end of history and the beginning of eternity. Postapocalyptic fantasies imagine something else, though something not unrelated. They see a disastrous future with far less certainty of divine authorial control.
