John Hay
Columbia University

Dissertation Prospectus

**Ruins in the Wilderness: The Development of American Post-Apocalyptic Fiction**

The post-apocalyptic scenario is now a common element of twenty-first-century literature and film. Books like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and films like *9* (2009) and *The Book of Eli* (2010), present similar pictures of the future: in the aftermath of a massive global catastrophe—a plague, an asteroid impact, nuclear war—a small band of survivors must eke out a living and begin the long, slow process of rebuilding. Such a scenario only became popular over the last thirty years (the term "post-apocalyptic" was first used in a 1982 review of the film *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior*), but post-apocalyptic novels have been appearing since the late nineteenth century, and many of the central themes of these stories are even older. The 1950s, following Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the rapid growth of American and Soviet nuclear stockpiles, saw a surge of post-apocalyptic literature in America. In fact, American science-fiction magazines were saturated with such stories.[1] But while this may have been the first time in world history that human beings possessed the power to destroy all human life, the themes of post-apocalyptic literature had long been established; in this case, technology was not the driving force behind literary imagination. A novel like Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) contained nearly all the thematic elements that would come to characterize post-apocalyptic stories and films in the later twentieth century. For my doctoral dissertation, I want to trace the development of these themes as they emerge,

[1] By 1952, H. L. Gold, editor of *Galaxy Science Fiction*, complained that "[o]ver 90% of stories submitted still nag away at atomic, hydrogen and bacteriological war, the post-atomic world, reversion to barbarism, mutant children killed because they have only ten toes and fingers instead of twelve. . . . The temptation is strong to write: 'Look, fellers, the end isn't here yet.'"

particularly in the nineteenth century, focusing especially on American literature but keeping in mind the transatlantic nature of such development.

The nineteenth century is an important era for post-apocalyptic thinking. As the Christian worldview began to collapse under numerous pressures (such as German higher criticism and Darwinian evolutionary theory), the certainty of eschatology was replaced by an uncertain post-eschatology. While predictions of the Apocalypse had always enjoyed some popularity, it had only then become possible to imagine a failed apocalypse, one that would leave behind scattered survivors in a meaningless wasteland. Yet a failed conclusion can be an opportunity for a new beginning, and post-apocalyptic tales often draw on themes common to the literature of antebellum America, particularly in their depictions of educated strangers working together in the wilderness to build a new civilization.

This project will look primarily at two strains of American literature. The first is the rise of the post-apocalyptic novel, a type of novel that begins to appear in the 1880s and continues to the modern day. It is a type that receives an impetus from the rise of secularism, a boost from the atomic bomb, and a lasting relevancy from the post-industrial atmosphere of modern America. The second strain is early American nationalistic fiction. In the period leading to the "American Renaissance," during the early part of the nineteenth century, American writers struggled to develop their craft in a land that, as they perceived it, lacked the cultural institutions of Old Europe. As members of a "New World," American authors could not, like their European contemporaries, draw on such inspiring elements as ruins and relics of the ancient past. Writers at this time faced a situation not unlike the protagonists in post-apocalyptic novels: they needed to lay claim to some sense of a shared deep history in order to visualize themselves as a community with a future.

While I do not see my project as guided by a specific critical framework, I do see my work occupying a position somewhere between a history of ideas and an intellectual genealogy. The "idea" that I want to follow regards a certain attitude about the ancient past—particularly, an affinity for ancient ruins—which has large implications for how both American writers and post-apocalyptic characters address problems of communal bonding and goal-oriented progress. My interest in the attitudes of nineteenth-century American writers toward the (non-)history of the American landscape draws from older work by classic American literary critics like Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx, while my interest in the way post-apocalyptic characters develop a sense of historical narrative draws from the work of critics like Fredric Jameson and Hayden White. I thus see my project as being able to integrate strains of critical thought from separate schools.

The dissertation will be composed of five chapters. The first will offer a survey and analysis of the twentieth-century post-apocalyptic narrative, tracing its evolution through close readings of three novels: London's *The Scarlet Plague*, George Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949), and David Brin's *The Postman* (1985). Seeking for the origins of such post-apocalyptic scenarios, the second chapter will examine the "Last Man" vogue in early-nineteenth-century British literature, a vogue heavily indebted to both *Robinson Crusoe* and the geological worldview of the time. Special attention will be paid to Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* (1826) and the impact of "Last Man" stories on American fiction. In the third chapter, I will focus on the anxieties (and solutions) of American Romantic writers like Irving and Cooper who, unlike their European peers, did not have a deep cultural history—did not have any ancient ruins—to which to turn for artistic inspiration. I will continue to investigate this phenomenon in the fourth chapter, in which I will explore a phenomena I call "ruins in the wilderness" that occurs when a frontier adventurer, believing himself to be in "virgin" territory, nevertheless

stumbles upon vestiges of a deep cultural past (a theme occurring repeatedly in Melville's work). In the final chapter, I will suggest some ways in which the plots of twentieth-century post-apocalyptic narratives echo the historical dilemma faced by their nineteenth-century forerunners who focused on the political task of providing a sense of community in a strange new world populated with isolated individuals.

**Chapter One: The Post-Apocalyptic Narrative**

The first chapter of the dissertation will provide a history of the post-apocalyptic genre. The element common to all post-apocalyptic narratives is a global catastrophe after which a small percentage of the original population remains. In other words, these tales are characteristically accounts not of the end of the world but rather of the aftermath of what was almost the end of humanity. One of the most common fictional ways to bring about such an "incomplete apocalypse" is nuclear war, and much of the popularity of the post-apocalyptic genre owes its origins to the glut of speculative fiction produced in the Atomic Age. Yet the first novel to follow the aftermath of an incomplete apocalypse is arguably Richard Jefferies's *After London*, published in 1885, and the basic conventions of the post-apocalyptic narrative have all appeared by the time that the first nuclear bomb detonates in 1945.

I will here look at the evolution of the post-apocalyptic narrative through three stages of development, centering my analysis on readings of three different novels. The first stage regards the genre's relation to turn-of-the-century socialist utopias. These utopias (sometimes pastoral in nature) were often conceived as the natural outcome of historical development. Post-apocalyptic narratives, on the other hand, offer a radical break (via global catastrophe) with historical development; the post-apocalyptic environment has a deep history (the land may be saturated

with the ruins of the past), but it is also "new" because all sense of historical continuity has been lost.[2] Several authors who had written socialist utopias, including Jack London and Upton Sinclair, also wrote post-apocalyptic novels, and I will focus on London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912).

The second stage follows the use of nuclear weapons in the Second World War, and I will use George Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949) as a prime example. This stage is an era of much greater awareness of post-apocalyptic stories as the genre flourishes. I will also engage with literary critics like Brian Aldiss and W. Warren Wagar who analyze tales of secular apocalypse in the Cold War era, particularly focusing on Aldiss's idea of the "cosy catastrophe" and Wagar's distinction between American and British visions of the post-apocalyptic future.

The third stage, closest to our own moment, includes the rise of the punk movement, increased awareness of environmental concerns, the close of the Cold War, and the transition to a post-industrial society. My central text here will be David Brin's *The Postman*, published in 1985 and later made into a film of the same name starring Kevin Costner in 1997.

**Chapter Two: Last Men and Footprints in the Sand**

In tracing the development of the post-apocalyptic theme in American literature, I will center my remarks in this chapter on both the vogue for "Last Man" narratives at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a vogue culminating in Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* (1826), and the rise of a mature geology, a science which gave the "Last Man" theme special relevance at the time. "Last Man" tales focus on the extinction of the human race, the possibility of which,

[2] There is, perhaps, a connection to be made here with modernism's call to "make it new." Frank Kermode offers some useful analysis of this phenomenon in *The Sense of an Ending.*

at that time, could be recognized by natural philosophers who had seen proofs of the extinction of many other species in the geological record.

Beginning with Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville's *Le dernier homme* (1805) and ending with Shelley's novel, this literary movement focused on the last surviving human being, a Robinson Crusoe-figure with no hope of rescue.[3] The movement is notable for its imagining of secular apocalypse, though such a phenomenon had arguably been the subject of intense interest as far back as the late seventeenth century, when Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1684) stimulated debate among British philosophers over how God might bring about the events described in the Book of Revelation without suspending natural laws. Burnet is especially important to my work because, as Marjorie Hope Nicolson persuasively argued in *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* (1959), he writes at a historical turning point for aesthetics; he considered mountains and ruins to be ugly, but at the same time he felt a certain sublime exhilaration in their presence. This shift to a Romantic aesthetics, in which ancient ruins become associated with majesty rather than rubbish, sets the tone for Shelley's novel, which portrays the struggle between the individual and Nature.

My ultimate goal in this chapter is to reveal the impact that early nineteenth-century geology in general and "Last Man" stories in particular had on American literature of the time. James Fenimore Cooper is perhaps the most relevant author here. While he did not write of worldwide extinction, he explored the Robinson Crusoe theme in *The Crater* (1847), a novel that also made use of the Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830) to describe the sudden formation and subsidence of volcanic islands. Cooper was certainly interested in some forms of

[3] W. Warren Wagar claims that the Last Man is "an anti-Crusoe, conquered rather than conquering, crushed by his solitude, and sure of his defeat."

extinction, and it is notable that his most famous work, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), appeared in the same year as Shelley's similarly titled *The Last Man*.

**Chapter 3: American Ruins**

The ancient ruins valued by English Romantics like Shelley were conspicuously absent in America; nineteenth-century American writers and critics like Henry James were fond of pointing out that America possessed no "ivied ruins" to stimulate literary creativity. Yet American writers had an incredible knack for creating such ruins. There were many attempts to invoke some kind of ancient American past—for example, by referencing the mythical Mound Builders, as the poet William Cullen Bryant had done. Nineteenth-century American writers could also observe rapid changes in technology (steamboats, trains, telegraphs) that made "ancient ruins" of monuments erected only several generations before. Some reflected on more personal ruins, as the poet-geologist James Gates Percival did in "On Viewing, One Summer Evening, the House of My Birth, in a State of Desertion" (1823). In fact, the theme in which a storyteller, poet, or literary character would visit his or her childhood home, only to find it in a state of decay, persisted throughout nineteenth-century American literature (its most famous example being Rip Van Winkle). This theme allows the writer to observe the rootlessness of American life and the rapid pace of change in the American environment, all the while elaborating on a deep personal connection to a historical object. In a sense, the American writer merely substitutes the log cabin for the crumbling abbey.

The attitude that American writers exhibit toward ancient ruins undergoes a shift in the middle of the century. Earlier writers, particularly the American Romantic poets, often employ ruins in a more personal way to reflect on the transition from childhood to adulthood. Later

authors, perhaps beginning with Cooper, start to realize the potential of distinctly "American" ruins to provide a cohesive historical narrative for what was then a loosely bound nation. Such ruins become particularly available after the Civil War, when they can be used both to solidify a national history and to lament the increasing movement of the population from the farms to the cities.

**Chapter 4: Ruins in the Wilderness and the Historizing Sense**

There is a theme in nineteenth-century American literature that I call "ruins in the wilderness." The theme is a cross between Leo Marx's "machine in the garden" and Defoe's "footprint in the sand." Basically, there will come a moment when a character wanders off into the woods and assumes that he is roving through "virgin territory," land untouched by mankind. (For example, Melville's Pierre mistakenly believes that he is the discoverer of a large rock near his house.) Then he will come across the remains of an old cabin and feel a shocking sense of history possessed by the landscape. This is the paradox of the American frontier: there is of course a very real sense in which America did not have a cultural history like Europe's, but by the nineteenth century the American continent had long been inhabited by both Native Americans and European settlers alike. There may not have been any castles, but the land was not virgin. Tocqueville was perhaps the first to identify the "ruins in the wilderness" theme. He explains that American frontiersmen move so quickly that the wilderness seems to close up again behind them as they move forward. When Tocqueville takes a walk through the woods in upstate New York, exploring what he thinks is uncharted territory, he stumbles across the remains of a cabin and exclaims, "Are ruins, then, already here?"

What is important in the "ruins in the wilderness" theme is what I will call the "historizing sense" (following Melville's term the "realizing sense," which he uses in *Redburn* to describe the effect of visiting a place that had previously existed only in the imagination). The sudden discovery of ruins immediately expands the character's sense of history, bringing to mind a larger narrative of human development. History becomes "real" in a way that it had not been before. This will become especially important in a post-apocalyptic landscape (like that of David Brin's *The Postman*), when characters need a sense of history in order both to understand their present situation and to move forward into the future. Perhaps the best known example of the historizing sense is Charlton Heston's discovery of the Statue of Liberty in the film *The Planet of the Apes* (a scene absent from Pierre Boulle's novel).[4]

**Chapter 5: The American Author and the Post-Apocalyptic Hero**

My final chapter will connect the problem of ruins in nineteenth-century American literature with the development of twentieth-century post-apocalyptic tales. Simply put, post-apocalyptic tales provide those missing American ruins by offering a landscape filled with the rubble of well-known monuments (the Golden Gate Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, etc.) Yet there is also a connection between the nineteenth-century authors and the post-apocalyptic protagonists. Both face the challenge of unifying individuals who find themselves in a wild landscape, a challenge that can be overcome by emphasizing the importance of a larger historical narrative. Just as many nineteenth-century American authors were concerned with constructing

[4] Unlike *The Postman*, *The Planet of the Apes* is set long after the "apocalyptic" event. Given two types of post-apocalyptic stories, those set in the immediate aftermath and those set long after the global catastrophe, history plays two distinct roles. For the first type, history can provide characters with a sense of narrative that strengthens communal bonds and allows them to work toward future goals. For the second type, history must often be "discovered," and the tales can resemble detective fiction in which a rogue character searches for the mysterious origins of present conditions.

a "national narrative,"[5] many post-apocalyptic protagonists try to offer their companions both a richer sense of their historical situation and an awareness of their future predicaments. Indeed, post-apocalyptic heroes are often students of history and literature rather than scientists and engineers.

This final chapter will allow me to address some critical works more explicitly. Hayden White is especially important; I will rely on his idea that communities are forged primarily through a shared sense of historical narrative to support the connection between nineteenth-century authors and post-apocalyptic protagonists. Also, because I am arguing for the significance of a historizing sense, Frank Kermode's reflections in *The Sense of an Ending* are valuable to my description of a post-apocalyptic environment in which the status of beginnings and endings has been disrupted.

**Tentative Schedule**

May 15, 2011: first chapter completed (ensuring eligibility for 5th-year fellowship)
September 2011: second chapter completed
January 2012: third chapter completed; go to the MLA convention
May 2012: fourth chapter completed
September 2012: fifth chapter completed
January 2013: entire dissertation revised, polished, and completed; go to MLA convention and make sure to get a job

[5] The term "national narrative" is Jonathan Arac's, taken from his book, *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative, 1820-1860*. National narrative flourished during the first half of the nineteenth-century; it "told the story of the nation's colonial beginnings and looked forward to its future as a model for the world."

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