

Antebellum Anticipations of Annihilation

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“The slaveholders,” Frederick Douglass warned in an address in April 1849, “are sleeping on slumbering volcanoes.”¹ His language was so evocative that Herman Melville likely cribbed it in a novella about a shipboard uprising of African captives, writing that the enslaved were “like a slumbering volcano” that “suddenly let loose energies” hidden just beneath the deck.² The volcano represented a particularly evocative threat of civilizational collapse because archeological excavations at the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum had restarted in 1823, and news of the discoveries of human remains appeared in newspapers and periodicals throughout the Atlantic world.³ Volcanic ash blanketed these Roman cities when Mount Vesuvius erupted in the year 79, killing the inhabitants and preserving their homes, public buildings, and possessions. Nineteenth-century readers were riveted by the accounts of a lost civilization, a harbinger of the later fall of Rome described in Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789).⁴ In 1827, for instance,

¹ Frederick Douglass, “Slavery: The Slumbering Volcano. An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 23 April 1849,” *Frederick Douglass Papers: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 2: 1847–1854*, ed. John W. Blassingame (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 148–158; 151.

² Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno* [1855], ed. Wynn Kelley (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008), 58n16. Kelley and others have attributed Melville’s “volcano” reference to Douglass. William Gleason points out that descriptions of slaveholders sleeping atop slumbering volcanoes were “already so thick by the mid-1830s that at least one Southern respondent felt moved to rebut the repeated insinuation.” See Gleason, “Volcanoes and Meteors: Douglass, Melville, and the Poetics of Insurrection,” *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*, ed. Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 120 and 132n25.

³ Sharon La Boda, *International Dictionary of Historic Places: Southern Europe* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1995), 324; Annette Richardson, “Pompeii and Herculaneum,” *Encyclopedia of World History: The Ancient World, Prehistoric Era to 600 C.E., Volume I*, ed. Marsha E. Ackermann et al. (New York: Facts on File, 2008), 362–363. For references in the popular press in the United States at the time, see, for instance, “Latest Foreign Intelligence,” *Weekly Aurora* (September 13, 1815): 156; and “Relics of Antiquity,” *Charleston Courier* (July 31, 1827): 1.

⁴ Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* was reproduced in at least nine separate US editions between 1804 and 1852. The first of these was Edward Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, in Eight Volumes* (Philadelphia: William Y. Birch and Abraham Small, 1804–[1805]).

the British poet Felicia Hemans published “The Image in Lava,” a meditation on a mother and child, clasped together at the moment of their death and preserved in the negative space left by the ash that hardened around them as their bodies decomposed.⁵ Could such horrors descend in a moment upon American civilization? During the antebellum period, many answered with an emphatic yes.

The founding generation had been deeply concerned about the stability of the United States. “There never was a Democracy Yet that did not commit suicide,” former President John Adams cautioned South Carolinian John Taylor in 1814.⁶ But the example of antiquity provided for many in the United States a justification of their grand experiment in republican self-governance. Modern systems of self-government could be found, most notably in the Netherlands. But classical examples proved that self-governing systems could persist, thrive, and achieve world-historical preeminence. Members of the founding generation, then, often presented the United States as a second appearance of Rome or Athens – self-governing bodies of citizens presiding over powerful states. The revolutionary leader Joseph Warren had even worn a toga when he delivered the Boston Massacre oration against British military authority in 1775.⁷ As the United States passed from revolutionary nation to independent nation-state, however, many increasingly reflected on how such classical states had foundered and failed. The Roman Republic had been imperiled by uprisings of the enslaved during the so-called Servile Wars.⁸ And Rome’s republican government eroded and, finally, collapsed.⁹

⁵ Felicia Hemans, “The Image in Lava,” *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* 20 (July 1827): 255–256. For a discussion of the popularity of Hemans’s poem in the United States, see Andrew M. Stauffer, “An Image in Lava: Annotation, Sentiment, and the Traces of Nineteenth-Century Reading,” *PMLA* 134.1 (2019): 81–98.

⁶ John Adams to John Taylor, December 17, 1814, *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6371>.

⁷ Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, *The Problem of Democracy: The Presidents Adams Confront the Cult of Personality* (New York: Viking, 2019), 26.

⁸ The popular American actor Edwin Forrest appeared in 1831 as the Roman gladiator Spartacus, a leader in the third and final of these conflicts, at the Tremont Street theater in Boston. He appeared only months after the largest slave uprising in US history, led by Nat Turner the previous August. See “Theatre: Fourth night of Mr. E. Forrest when he will appear in the character of Spartacus, in the new tragedy of The gladiator. Monday even. Nov. 14, 1831” ([Boston]: F.S. Hill, printer [1831]).

⁹ Catherine Steel, *The End of the Roman Republic, 146–44 BC: Conquest and Crisis* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), esp. 140–211; and Edward J. Watts, *Mortal Republic: How Rome Fell to Tyranny* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), esp. 271–282.

A similar fate had befallen democratic Athens.¹⁰ Natural disasters, uprisings by the enslaved, and autocracy – called Caesarism by the mid-nineteenth century – threatened modern republics as much as they had threatened their ancient antecedents.¹¹

Anxieties about civilizational collapse were reflected in literature and art, and black writers were particularly emphatic about the apocalyptic consequences of republican tyranny. To many during the antebellum period, the ultimate destruction of the Roman Republic demonstrated that a representative government built on a foundation of enslavement could not long survive. For David Walker, whose radical *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) prompted panic among Southern enslavers, the United States of America was a second, more precarious iteration of the Roman Republic. He writes, “I am indeed cheered . . . when I view that mighty son of Africa, HANNIBAL, one of the greatest generals of antiquity, who defeated and cut off so many thousands of the white Romans or murderers.”¹² Moreover, some hoped that the forces of the universe and its creator would contribute to the destruction of the United States. The revolutionary prophet Nat Turner, who in 1831 led the largest uprising by enslaved people in US history, claimed to have been prompted to act by a vision in the sky. This vision had been no hallucination. Others reported seeing the sky change colors as well.¹³ After his capture, moreover, Turner wondered aloud whether “the same ideas, and strange appearances about this time in the heavens might prompt others, as well as myself, to this undertaking?”¹⁴ In other words, Turner suggested that the universe itself was engaged in a coordinated effort to bring about the Last Judgment. Aptly, the strange celestial appearance Turner witnessed was likely produced by the eruption of a volcano.¹⁵

The United States of America appeared to be hurtling toward its apocalyptic end almost as soon as it became a nation, and many writers imagined that total, civilizational collapse was imminent. These fantasies

¹⁰ Michael Scott, *From Democrats to Kings: The Brutal Dawn of a New World from the Downfall of Athens to the Rise of Alexander the Great* (New York: Overlook, 2009), 251–256 and 269–288.

¹¹ Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 157–159.

¹² David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, Third and Last Edition* (Boston, MA: David Walker, 1830), 22–23.

¹³ “Domestic. From the Masonic Mirror,” *Middlesex Gazette* (Middletown, CT) (October 19, 1825): 2; “Phenomenon,” *Spectator* (New York, NY) (October 14, 1825): 2.

¹⁴ “Miscellany, the Confessions of Nat Turner,” *Essex Gazette* (Haverhill, MA) (January 7, 1832): 4.

¹⁵ “Shishaldin Reported Activity: Shishaldin 1824,” Alaska Volcano Observatory, accessed September 22, 2017, www.avo.alaska.edu/volcanoes/activity.php.

of oblivion were so widespread that some writers began to imagine what the United States might look like in the aftermath of its destruction – its people long dead and its monuments toppled and overgrown. A dream of national apocalypse had been born.

The Course of Empire

Slavery, many predicted, would bring about the death of the United States of America. But writers differed on the question of how and why slavery would bring about that end. Was slavery a national sin, condemning the United States to God's final judgment and, ultimately, to damnation? Or was slavery a national pathology, a festering wound that would infect the body politic and subject it to a natural cycle of decay? To predict the end, writers frequently looked to Christian scripture and to antiquity.

The English theologian Benjamin Wills Newton, for instance, regarded slavery as sin. He observed in 1853 that after planters discovered "that cotton could not be raised remuneratively without the labour of slaves," then the "darling principle" of liberty in the United States "was abandoned." Invoking the apocalyptic prophesies of John of Patmos in Revelation, the final book of the Christian Bible, Newton asked, "What will become of [America] when it drinks more deeply of the harlot's cup?"¹⁶ The answer was obvious if one read to the conclusion of the scripture: the American world would come to a bloody end. Such predictions were common. The black writer and speaker Maria W. Stewart, for instance, frequently drew upon Revelation to predict that the sin of slavery augured catastrophe for the American experiment. "O, ye great and mighty men of America, ye rich and powerful ones, many of you will call for the rocks and mountains to fall upon you, and to hide you from the wrath of the Lamb," she predicted.¹⁷ Yet while ubiquitous Protestant Christianity enabled writers to call upon an apocalyptic, scriptural register as they predicted the collapse of the United States, writers just as frequently predicted that secular conflict would destroy the new nation without the direct intervention of Jesus Christ.

Slavery presented itself as the precipitating cause of civilizational destruction, in part, because many believed that the political body of the

¹⁶ Benjamin Wills Newton, *Thoughts on the Apocalypse* (London: Houlston and Sons, 1853), 328. See Revelation 17:4.

¹⁷ Revelation 6:16. Maria W. Stewart, *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 39; see also 50 and 63.

United States necessarily contained the seeds of its own future death. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century political theorists frequently sought to discover the roots of civilizational ruin in the structure and organization of societies themselves. Many subscribed to a cyclical theory of history, one in which the political body is analogous to a natural body. And natural bodies, of course, experience cycles of growth and decay. Certainly, such a body *could* be destroyed by external causes, such as an invasion. But a particular society's death would more likely result from an infection exacerbated by its own festering contradictions.¹⁸

Such sacred and secular predictions of the apocalypse converged during the antebellum period. As the literary scholar John Hay has observed, "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" perspectives.¹⁹ Predictions of a future apocalypse, as a result, were by turns grounded in an examination of history, archeology, biblical prophecy, or other discourses. Often, such predictions were clear about the precipitating cause of the onrushing apocalypse (slavery) and its ultimate consequences (civilizational collapse), but they were frequently vague about the instruments by which the American republic would be destroyed. Perhaps a volcano would destroy America. Or a meteor. Or a race war. The American painter Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire* paintings (1833–1836) illustrate this widespread interest not in the ultimate causes of civilizational destruction but in its natural inevitability. Across the first three paintings, the viewer sees the evolution of a society from the savage to the pastoral to the "Consummation" of empire. Then, across the final two paintings, the viewer sees first the destruction of the empire in war and, second, its "Desolation" as it lies in ruins. Cole's painting sends mixed messages about the causes of the apocalyptic final conflict. Visually recalling the sack of Rome by the Vandals in 455, the painting also points to the possibility that subject peoples have risen up against their social superiors or that brother has been pitted against brother in a civil war. The confusion, some art historians have suggested, is intentional. Cole's interest lay in the way civilizations pass through decadence into dissolution, not in making specific predictions.²⁰ Like Cole,

¹⁸ Stow Persons, "The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly* 6.2 (1954): 147–163; John Hay, *Postapocalyptic Fantasies in Antebellum American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 99.

¹⁹ Hay, *Postapocalyptic Fantasies*, 8.

²⁰ For a discussion, see Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser and Tim Barringer, *Thomas Cole's Journey: Atlantic Crossings* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 56–58. Red and green are the

moreover, many writers and artists during the antebellum period imagined a time when the artifacts of the American empire – the Bunker Hill memorial, for instance, or the Erie Canal – would be discovered and excavated, just as archeologists were unearthing the monuments of Pompeii and Herculaneum.²¹

Imagining a future of American ruin contextualized the ruins of antiquity, enabling black writers, in particular, to position the ascendancy of the United States in a wider temporal frame. For the radical abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet, such a frame enabled one to see the former and future greatness of Africans. “Let us ascend that sublime eminence,” he wrote, “that we may view the vast empire of ruin that is scarcely discernable through the mists of former ages.”²² Garnet frequently called upon his listeners and readers to recall the greatness of black people in antiquity. Herodotus, he pointed out, explained that the ancient Egyptians “were black, and had woolly hair.” African civilizations had risen to great heights in the ancient world and would rise again, Garnet predicted.²³ For writers such as Garnet, the ancient world provided what the literary scholar John Levi Barnard refers to as “black classicism.” If the American republic was imagined by its supporters to function as a second coming of Greece or Rome, black classicists could point to Roman ruins as a marker of antiquity’s failed experiment in producing representative governments built upon the enslavement and exploitation of others. Empires of slavery, as Garnet observed, tended inexorably toward ruin.²⁴

The critique leveled by black classicists became increasingly important as Southern political theorists in the 1830s and afterward defended the slave system as a necessary component of what they called Greek democracy, a political form ostensibly more stable than the mass democracy of Northern cities or the Roman-inflected republicanism of the revolutionary generation. So-called Greek democracy was premised on shared governance by racial equals and the subjection of their social inferiors. John C. Calhoun, the most prominent theorist of this form of government, rejected the belief that human beings were born free and equal in a state of

colors of the shirts worn by the two children play-fighting in “Consummation,” the third painting. These are the colors of the warring factions’ banners in “Destruction,” the fourth painting.

²¹ Hay, *Postapocalyptic Fantasies*, 8–9.

²² Henry Highland Garnet, *The Past and the Present Condition, and the Destiny, of the Colored Race: A Discourse Delivered at the Fifteenth Anniversary of the Female Benevolent Society of Troy, N.Y., Feb 14, 1848* (Troy, NY: J.C. Kneeland, 1848), 5.

²³ Garnet, *Past and Present Condition*, 7, 25.

²⁴ John Levi Barnard, *Empire of Ruin: Black Classicism and American Imperial Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 19.

nature and then freely contracted their way into human society. For Calhoun all human beings were born into relations of obligation with one another. Societies, then, were constituted for the collective benefit of those people with the power to constitute them. Democracy, in short, did not derive from the natural rights of all human beings. Rather, it was the expression of a collective, ongoing social agreement. The American realization of so-called Greek democracy was stable, Calhoun surmised, because those in a position of power were bound together by shared culture, shared interests, and shared desires. As one of Calhoun's close allies and correspondents warned, the American political class could not lose sight of its common interests. If they did, "then indeed, will our days be numbered. And like Greece and Rome, It will be written, the United States, *WAS*."²⁵ Greek democracy was stable so long as its citizens recognized their shared interest in restraining the ostensibly subsovereign peoples over whom they ruled. Based as it was on the subjection of others, this form of tyrannical democracy depended on the unity and common action of the governing class. The collapse of democracy in antiquity, Calhoun and others believed, had resulted not from any fundamental tension within slaveholding democracies but from factionalism within the ruling class.²⁶

Yet black classicists and Greek democrats alike recognized that a future of civilizational collapse in the United States was possible, even likely. Of course, they differed in their views about the desirability of such an apocalyptic transformation. As repeated attempts to reach a compromise over the question of slavery's expansion failed to resolve the issue, moreover, many came to regard apocalypse as a foregone conclusion. By the 1850s, writers, poets, and politicians grew increasingly messianic in their predictions of doom.

Instruments of Apocalypse

Nat Turner was hardly the only person to watch the sky for signs of the apocalypse. In a narrative about his Illinois childhood in the 1850s, the

²⁵ Wilson Lumpkin to John C. Calhoun, November 18, 1847, in *Correspondence of John C. Calhoun*, ed. J. Franklin Jameson (Washington, DC: American Historical Association and Government Printing Office, 1900), 1135–1139, quotation on 1137.

²⁶ C. E. Merriam, "The Political Theory of Calhoun," *Journal of Sociology* 7.5 (1902): 577–594. The foundational discussion of Greek democracy as US political theory can be found in Vernon Louis Parrington, Jr., *Main Currents in American Thought, Volume II: The Romantic Revolution in America* (1927; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 99–103.

composer Francis Grierson reflected on the appearance of “Donati’s Comet,” which was visible even in daylight hours as it made a close pass with the earth in the autumn of 1858. Grierson reflected that rural people in Illinois were terrified at the “noiseless march” of the celestial body. “While it frightened some into silence,” he wrote, “it made others loquacious.”²⁷ The comet remained visible from Illinois throughout October, when a former US congressional representative named Abraham Lincoln debated Stephen Douglas in a campaign for the US Senate. Lincoln warned that disputes about the spread of slavery in the United States were coming to a point of crisis. Invoking the language of Jesus Christ from the Gospel of Saint Matthew, Lincoln explained that “‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ I believe this Government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.”²⁸ Douglas had, in fact, repeated this language back to Lincoln throughout their debates, possibly hoping that the Illinois congressman’s quasi-apocalyptic language would frighten voters. Lincoln turned Douglas’s repetitious quotations into a joke: “Judge Douglas,” he explained, must have found this biblical quotation “extremely offensive.” Lincoln continued, “He has warred upon [the ‘house divided’ passage] as Satan wars upon the Bible.”²⁹ Yet Douglas was nonetheless correct in imagining that many Illinois voters were concerned about the stability of the union, even of the world itself. As Donati’s Comet edged closer and closer to the earth that September and October, Grierson reported, more than one person “sat with folded hands awaiting the end.” Even Lincoln himself spent time standing outside, gazing at the approaching celestial body – albeit with greater detachment than those who predicted the end of the world.³⁰

Indeed, comets not only appeared in the sky during this period. They appeared in literature, and in literature they sometimes brought about the same civilizational destruction that Illinois farmers had imagined with dread. Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion,” first published in *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1839, depicts a comet strike igniting the earth’s atmosphere. As Poe’s narrator describes it, “The whole incumbent mass of ether in which we existed burst

²⁷ Francis Grierson, *The Valley of Shadows: Reflections of the Lincoln Country, 1858–1863* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 53.

²⁸ Harold Holzer, ed., *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates: The First Complete, Unexpurgated Text* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 349. The often-repeated reference comes from Matthew 12:25.

²⁹ Holzer, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 349.

³⁰ Grierson, *Valley of Shadows*, 53. For Lincoln’s reaction to the comet, see Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates that Defined America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 183–185.

at once into a species of intense flame.”³¹ Life on earth was extinguished. Poe was reportedly inspired to write the story by the sudden popularity of the Millerite movement, a millenarian Christian revival led by the Rev. William Miller.³² Counting ahead from the book of Daniel, Miller surmised that the world would end in 1843 or 1844. Granted, the Millerites were not directly aligned with the antislavery movement, nor did they explicitly associate the coming apocalypse with the sin of slavery. Despite the purely theological character of their apocalyptic predictions, however, many Millerites held antislavery views. Indeed, despite William Miller’s doctrinal skepticism of political reform, many black people – including some black abolitionists – were drawn to the Millerite message about God’s impending, righteous judgment.³³ Millerite prophecies echoed those made by black activists, such as Maria W. Stewart, who saw in American hypocrisy a deep sin that augured catastrophe for the United States.

Such premonitions of catastrophe persisted throughout the prewar period, and their roots could be traced to the eighteenth-century nation-building project. The United States of America would be a republic, but a republic of slaveholders. Its representative government would be like those of Athens or Rome, both of which collapsed in antiquity. At times, then, members of the founding generation and their immediate decedents seemed convinced that the United States would collapse – they only wondered about the instruments by which this civilizational destruction would be brought about. Would slavery ignite a race war, or would the supernatural intervention of a divine power send a comet hurtling toward the earth? Decades earlier, Thomas Jefferson had expressed concern that God’s judgment might be visited upon the United States, but he, too, had wondered what form such judgment would take. Jefferson explained in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785):

Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest.³⁴

³¹ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion,” *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine* 5,6 (1839): 321–323; 323.

³² Robert S. Levine, *Race, Transnationalism, and Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 71.

³³ Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: Norton, 1997), 80–81.

³⁴ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia, PA: Prichard and Hall, 1787), 173.

Jefferson's warning about a potential "revolution of the wheel of fortune" would be echoed by generations of writers who followed him. Indeed, David Walker would quote "Mr. Jefferson" specifically when he reminded his readers that "Jesus Christ . . . is the God of justice."³⁵ And yet, like Jefferson, Walker declined to make a specific prediction about the forces that would bring about a change of fortunes in the United States. His discussion of enslaved populations and of the potential for violence echoed Jefferson's concerned reflection on the "numbers, nature, and natural means" of enslaved people. Yet Walker's scriptural references – like those of Maria W. Stewart and of the Millerites – pointed to the potential for supernatural interference by the Almighty.³⁶

Premonitions of doom, coupled with a confusion about the means by which that doom would be realized, persisted throughout the antebellum period. Frederick Douglass cautioned that the United States sat atop a slumbering volcano. Maria W. Stewart warned of God's righteous judgment. And John C. Calhoun and his allies warned that democracies collapse when their ruling classes descend into factionalism, as they had in Athens and Rome. By the middle of the 1850s, moreover, pro- and antislavery violence had become routine. Violence broke out in Kansas, in northern Virginia, and even on the floor of the US Senate.³⁷ Apocalyptic upheaval appeared imminent. In many ways, it was.³⁸

The Coming of the Lord

Reviewing a company of Union soldiers in November 1861, the author Julia Ward Howe overheard several singing "John Brown's Body," a hymn to the recently martyred radical abolitionist. Brown had led a raid on a US military armory, hoping to ignite a revolution. He failed. But his failure had left him a martyr to the cause of abolition. And that day in November, the Boston minister James Freeman Clarke reportedly suggested that Howe should "write some good words" to the tune of "John Brown's

³⁵ Walker, *Appeal*, 14. ³⁶ Walker, *Appeal*, 82–83.

³⁷ Joanne B. Freeman, *The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War* (New York: Picador, 2019), 177, 208, 221.

³⁸ See, for instance, Edmund Ruffin, *Anticipations of the Future, to Serve as Lessons for the Present Time* (Richmond, VA: J.W. Randolph, 1860). Ruffin's novel predicts that Civil War becomes inevitable by 1864. The South and the border states combine to isolate New England, ultimately winning the war. For more on the violence of the 1850s, see Stanley Harold, *Border War: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

Body.”³⁹ She did. And her lyrics – the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” – have since formed a core element of the liturgy of the American civic religion. The “Battle Hymn,” moreover, calls for a war of abolition by invoking the Christian apocalypse. Howe writes, “He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat; / He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat: / Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet! / Our God is marching on.”⁴⁰ Trumpets precede the Last Judgment in the book of Revelation. The end of the world is nigh, Howe’s song explains, and young men in arms will stand before the Lord and offer an account of themselves. Indeed, Howe’s inclusion of imagery from Revelation contributed to what Richard Brodhead has called the “routinization of apocalypse” in American culture.⁴¹ The song was once even considered as a possible national anthem.⁴²

Howe’s “Battle Hymn,” like the writing of earlier abolitionists, described the conflict over slavery in apocalyptic terms. And, indeed, the violence of the Civil War was in many ways apocalyptic. The Union and Confederacy would mobilize nearly 3,000,000 soldiers between 1861 and 1865. More than 620,000 of them would die, about 2 percent of the American population. One in five Southern white men of military age would die.⁴³ The war would transform the United States government, upend American society, and reconstitute the nation as a new and different political entity.

It would not, however, put an end to premonitions of future violence – quite the opposite. When apocalyptic predictions were realized in the conflagration of the Civil War, some writers were confirmed in their belief that any political order was unstable and impermanent. In *Battle-pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866), Herman Melville returns to the metaphor of race relations as slumbering volcano, a metaphor he had offered up a decade before in his novella *Benito Cereno* (1855). Melville speculates about the widespread unease that accompanied the peace of 1865. He asks: “Why is

³⁹ Elaine Showalter, “Whitman, Melville, and Julia Ward Howe: A Tale of Three Bicentennials,” *New York Review of Books*, May 27, 2019, accessed May 29, 2019, www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/05/27/whitman-melville-julia-ward-howe-a-tale-of-three-bicentennials/.

⁴⁰ Julia Ward Howe, “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” *Atlantic Monthly* 9 (February 1862): 10.

⁴¹ Richard H. Brodhead, “Millennium, Prophecy, and the Energies of Social Transformation: The Case of Nat Turner,” *Imagining the End: Visions of Apocalypse from the Ancient Middle East to Modern America*, ed. Abbas Amanat and Magnus T. Bernhardsson (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 212–233; 213.

⁴² John Stauffer and Benjamin Soskis, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic: A Biography of the Song That Marches On* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), iv–v.

⁴³ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2008), xi, 3.

not the cessation of war now at length attended with the settled calm of peace? Wherefore in a clear sky do we still turn our eyes toward the South, as the Neapolitan, months after the eruption, turns his toward Vesuvius? Do we dread lest the repose be deceptive? In the recent convulsion has the crater but shifted?"⁴⁴ Like the Neapolitan who survives the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum but wonders if another eruption might bring about a sudden and cataclysmic end to his world, the white Northerner must wonder if another, final cataclysm will follow the Civil War. Perched upon a tiny planet whose orbit intersected with the orbits of comets, built upon the crust of a planet susceptible to sudden eruptions of lava and ash, and organized around the contradictory political principles of freedom and tyranny, the United States of America was precarious, endangered, and, quite possibly, doomed.

⁴⁴ Herman Melville, *Battle-pieces and Aspects of the War* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1866), 267–268.