Future! Decline

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Abstract What sort of temporality does a prediction about the future suggest? What does it mean specifically to predict decline and to imagine the absence of a future? How does the meaning of the present change in the face of anxieties about decline and an uncertain or absent future that become more common in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? This essay addresses these questions through a reading of two poems that fantasize the imagined ruins of London: Thomas Littleton's "The State of England and the Once Flourishing City of London. In a Letter from an American Traveller, Dated from the Ruinous Portico of St. Paul's in the Year 2199, to a Friend Settled in Boston, the Metropolis of the Western Empire" (1780) and Anna Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812). Imagining the absence of a future in their place of composition, these poems attempt to make sense of their present moment. The displaced future and present emphases of these poems manifest anxiety about how to assess a range of concrete circumstances, affects, and intuitions to articulate a sense of what is happening and what might follow from that assessment of the present. The poetry of Littleton and Barbauld thus dovetails with the contemporary concerns of much recent work on the historiography of the present but in a way that suggests that this sort of history itself has a history, and the essay closes with an assessment of what that might mean.

Keywords ruin, future, decline, romantic poetry

The opening poem in *Poems by a Young Nobleman of Distinguished Abilities*, a little-known collection by the libertine aristocrat Thomas Littleton (1780: 1–16), bears an intriguing title: "The State of England and the Once Flour-

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ishing City of London. In a Letter from an American Traveller, Dated from the Ruinous Portico of St. Paul's in the Year 2199, to a Friend Settled in Boston, the Metropolis of the Western Empire." With its date set far in the future, Littleton's title resembles present-day science fiction in its eagerness to think about a future elsewhere, both temporally and spatially. And yet despite its curious title, the future the poem projects looks less like the kind of techno-fantasy we have come to expect from science fiction and instead very much like the antique past. Imagine that St. Paul's were to become the center of a ruined metropolis like the Pantheon of Rome, and one can easily picture a future four hundred years from the poem's composition. It will look, Littleton suggests, very much like the classical past, only with the London of Littleton's present in the place of Rome.

In this way, Littleton's poem recalls Anna Barbauld's later and, thanks to a recent revival of interest in Barbauld, better-known poem *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812), which also imagines the London of its present as a future ruin and tourist destination. In their anxious speculation about future ruin, these poems by Littleton and Barbauld deliberately juxtapose the immediate present of their compositions and past patterns of decay. They imply but do not recount a narrative of ruin, one that is at once inevitable and avoidable. Both poems might be understood as indicative of an increasing anxiety about the uncertain future that marks the later eighteenth century, and they might thus also be understood as part of the prehistory of similar anxieties in our present moment, including the impetus for this special issue itself.

What are the ideological and aesthetic implications of the appeal to the future in Littleton and Barbauld? How do their appeals to the future bear on their present moments? Questions like this align my essay with the concerns of this special issue and, more generally, with the rise of academic interest in such seemingly paradoxical categories as "the history of the future" and "the history of the present" in which this issue might be understood to participate.[1] My point in invoking late eighteenth-century futurism in connection with these concerns is to suggest, perhaps not surprisingly, that our own deep anxiety about the future and our own discourses about the history of the future and the history of the present themselves have a history. A careful reading of late eighteenth-century speculation about futurity might help us, among other things, understand how that history comes to bear on our

1. The history of the present is a concept generally associated with the work of Michel Foucault and is now the title of a successful academic journal, *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History*, begun in summer 2011. The history of the future as a concept reflects both efforts to think about how futurity has been conceived at past historical moments and how our contemporary moment thinks about futurity from our present vantage point. Both concerns are evident in this essay and those collected along with it.

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own present moment. This is not to propose something as oblique as a history of the history of the future or anything as comprehensive as a Foucauldian archaeology of concern with the future. Instead, what I hope to suggest is that there are many possible paths to our present and that our own anxieties about the future that we often associate with the particular perils of our current historical moment might not be as new—or as hopeless—as we take them to be.

For the German conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck, what distinguishes eighteenth-century anxieties about the future is that with the Enlightenment understanding of progress comes the possibility that the future will be fundamentally different from the past, because new ways of understanding the world create future possibilities that are conceived as new in a way that cannot be entirely derived from previous experience.[2] These changes produce what Koselleck calls *frühen Neuzeit*, a time sense characterized by a felt sense of acceleration, which makes it more difficult for those living in the eighteenth century to imagine the future, because what he calls the "space of experience" (the way people relate to their present) no longer matches the "horizon of expectation" (their imagination of a potential future). Because the rate of change in the space of experience is outstripped by changes in the horizon of expectation, time comes to be experienced as increasingly discontinuous, a "dynamic of a coexisting plurality of times," and the future becomes at once more open but also more unpredictable (Koselleck 1994: 282). For historical actors living through these changes in time sense, one way to foreclose an enhanced sense of openness and unpredictability would be to imagine a future of decline and ruin on the ancient model, a future that would be knowable because it repeats the (ancient) past.

We can see clear evidence of this in Littleton's (1780: 3) poem, which begins with the traveler making his way into London through a countryside returned to nature with "broken paths and rugged ways, / Uncultivated regions." While St. Paul's remains standing (hence the dateline of the imagined letter), this projected state of ruin contrasts with past commercial glory:

Th' Exchange of London; where the golden streams
Of vivid commerce from the trading winds
Levant and Ponent, north and south effus'd
Were in a centre fix'd: where ev'ry day

2. For Koselleck (1994: 279), the particular combination of Copernican Revolution and changes in science, the development of new technologies of communication and transportation, the increasing discovery of the globe and the so-called uneven development of its peoples, and the dissolution of long-standing social orders with the impact of industry and capital exposes "the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous, or, perhaps, rather, of the nonsimultaneous occurring simultaneously."

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> Ten thousand merchants, learn'd in the art
> Of nursing, and improving wealth, conven'd,
> To settle on the wide and stable base
> Of liberty, and public good, their own
> And happy England's welfare.
> (Ibid.: 3–4)

The passage offers what had by the late eighteenth century become a familiar defense of commerce, namely, that the pursuit of trade perpetuates the individual and national welfare simultaneously.[3] And yet it also acknowledges the possibility that the pursuit of commercial wealth may not produce perpetual prosperity. The trick here is one of tenses. Using the perfect tense for a description instead of the present transposes a present scene into the completed past. It makes the present into history and turns Littleton into a historian of the present. In this way, Littleton's unusual device of an imagined future ruin—it is, as far as I can tell, the first English poem to use this trope that will emerge just afterward in the visual arts, as I discuss below—becomes a rather conventional means of perpetuating anxieties about luxury and that Enlightenment myth of *doux commerce*, the suggestion that commercial prosperity establishes a solid base for "liberty" that enhances not only a nation's welfare but that of all who trade with it. Despite his emphasis on how commerce brings shared prosperity and mutual benefit, Littleton (ibid.: 10) locates the culmination of Britain's prosperity, "thy brightest day," in the defeat of the French in the Seven Years' War (1756–63). After this, "Voluptuous vice, and soul-dissolving ease, / With luxury her handmaid" spread their "malign" influence, producing what Littleton (ibid.: 5) had earlier described as "the fall of public credit." Britain's imagined fall will thus be due not to external events but to self-ruin: "'twas thyself / That kill'd thyself" (ibid.: 6). With the decline of British liberty, law, and empire, Littleton imagines the transfer of power as part of a traditional *translatio imperii* (translation, or movement, of empire) westward to America, whose fate, he suggests, is to extend the principles of the British Empire beyond the fame of Greece and Rome and through all nations into a global empire.

Littleton's poem was published in 1780 and would therefore appear to reflect events of the recent American war. In its year of publication, the outcome of that war was uncertain, but the Americans had won a major victory over British forces at Saratoga (1777), and the French had entered the war on the American side (1778). The end of the poem, however, offers a dateline of March 21, 1771, at which point Britain's relationship with its

3. For a brief and eloquent articulation of this position, see Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's *Spectator* essay no. 69, "The Royal Exchange," in Ross 1982: 437–40.

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colonies was tense but had not yet developed into outright warfare. The distinction is important because as confidently as Littleton presents us with a vision of a "Western Empire" centered in Boston, it remains unclear whether this is part of a new, separately governed empire or a continuation of the British Empire with its center now located elsewhere than London. At the core of Littleton's poem is a gore-clotted spirit who appears holding a broken spear and a copy of the Magna Carta. This spirit is a reminder of ancient liberties and the virtues of old. With the spirit's monitory presence, Littleton implies that the ruin he describes can be deferred. He suggests that the fall of Britain is not inevitable but avoidable and that the Western Empire projected for Boston may be just that: a new administrative outpost of a global empire whose imperial center remains elsewhere, in the east, in London.

Unlike Littleton's "State of England in 2199," Barbauld's (2001: 161–73) later *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* takes its date from the present and does not offer a concrete date for its vision of the future. Like Littleton's poem, however, it also predicts that London will become a ruin visited by future travelers, and Barbauld too offers her poem as a warning meant to provoke change in the hope of avoiding the future she imagines. Whereas for Littleton ruin is to be avoided through the return to past virtues and through a renewed cooperation and common purpose between Britain and its North American colonies, for Barbauld ruin will be produced by the continued participation in European warfare, which, she suggests, chokes the main source of national prosperity: commerce. Both poems thus understand commerce as the source of national wealth, and both poems imagine a future in which tourists will travel to a ruined London much like their contemporaries visit the ruins of Rome on the grand tour. In each case, the course of empire follows the sun from east to west and is dominated by the New World, while the current British Empire becomes the antiquity of the future.

Because Barbauld's poem is much less explicit about the specificity of its horizon of expectation—about the timeline in which this situation will be achieved—and because it is much more explicit in its characterization of the causes and outcomes of a ruined London, it is worth attending in detail to the complex temporality of her prediction. In this sense, the present essay is meant to suggest how the anticipation of decline can be understood in relation to new Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment ways of experiencing time as described by Koselleck and others but also as a problem of temporal prediction. My title, "Future! Decline," places forceful emphasis on the future and especially on the imagination of futurity, but since that imagined future is one of decline and translation, it further implies the prediction of a future elsewhere. But how can one be in a position to predict or forecast the onset of decline, to imagine a future elsewhere? What sort of relationship

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to time, to narrative, to historical events allows one to say with confidence when decline will occur? Further, how does the anticipation of futurity, even when its purpose is both to warn and to anticipate decline, organize experience and generate value?

As I have suggested, both Barbauld and Littleton use their poems to offer a prediction, but because those predictions are intended as warnings, they might also be understood as invested in preservation, in seeking to effect a very different future from the one they deliberately anticipate, and hence in the possibility of changes that will avoid ruin and produce an alternative future. Read this way, the fantasies of a ruined empire provide an opportunity to construct a commemoration of what each author suggests made the achievements of that empire possible. While Littleton uses his spirit to gesture toward principles of liberty (the Magna Carta) and martial valor (the broken sword), Barbauld's poem is much more detailed in its commemoration of Britain's achievements and accomplishments. Both poems work in the present to celebrate the past while simultaneously imagining multiple futures, one explicit, of ruin, and the other implicit, in which ruin is avoided. But because from their point of reference the future is always about to be and yet to happen, none of these possibilities are mutually exclusive. They all exist simultaneously. Littleton uses a date (2199) to mark the future setting of his poem, while Barbauld's poem takes its date from the present. Each might thus be understood in connection with a historicist emphasis on dating and the date.[4] In Barbauld's case, the poem's date also calls attention to a more complex, layered understanding of temporality—the discontinuous temporality of the future, which functions, in Koselleck's (1994: 282) words, as a "dynamic of a coexisting plurality of times"—that we might understand as an affective history of the present moment, by which term I mean to invoke a sense of how the future feels to those living in an earlier present.[5]

Though Barbauld's anxiety about the future is hardly unique, her work is nonetheless distinguished for the explicit detail of her vision of London in ruins. When youths from the new centers of empire in North America ("from the Blue Mountains or Ontario's lake" [Barbauld 2001: 165, line 130]) visit London, the city they encounter is strewn with vegetation and largely deserted, its river clogged with overgrowth:

> Pensive and thoughtful shall the wanderers greet
> Each splendid square, and still, untrodden street;

4. For an elaboration of this point in connection with Barbauld and others, see Chandler 1998: 94–151.
5. My thinking here has been influenced by what Mary Favret (2010: 9) calls "a sense of war" and "war mediated" in her discussion of affect and wartime.

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Or of some crumbling turret, mined by time,
The broken stairs with perilous step shall climb,
Thence stretch their view the wide horizon round,
By scattered hamlets trace its antient bound,
And, choked no more with fleets, fair Thames survey
Through reeds and sedge pursue his idle way.
(Ibid.: 167, lines 169–76)

In this passage the combination of the soft and the hard reflects the contrast between the natural ("reeds and sedge") and the manmade (the "crumbling turret" and "broken stairs") in a series of images that broadly suggest the ruins of classical antiquity and the weed-strewn, overgrown Colosseum in particular. The passage might also be read as an allegory of cultural progress itself, as it describes the movement through ruin as a "perilous" but profitable "climb" that enables enlightenment through a view of the "wide horizon round," thus offering the mastery of complete perspective and a view of the future that functions as a means to inscribe and perpetuate the value of the present.

The care with which Barbauld sketches her image of London in ruins further recalls related fantasies in the visual arts, particularly the work of the French painter Hubert Robert and the English draughtsman Joseph Gandy.[6] In contrast to the anxious futurity evoked by Robert's images, which frequently depict scenes of catastrophe, like *The Decentering of the Pont de Neuilly* (1772) or *Burning of the Opera in the Palais-Royal* (1781), Gandy's images consistently draw on tropes of the picturesque. Even though they show the projected ruins of Sir John Soane's designs—buildings that, it should be noted, were not yet constructed—Gandy's fantasies suggest a prolonged and indefinite futurity for Soane's work, work that, even when ruined, will have a permanence that comes to stand for a new set of classical standards, making Soane's Regency neoclassicism a replacement for classicism itself. Considered thus, Gandy's images might serve as a visual counterpart to Barbauld's poem.

In his writings on the Salon of 1767, Denis Diderot (1995: 197) uses Robert's images of real and fantastic ruins to sketch the contours of a "poetics of ruin" whose impulse toward an imagined futurity is evident: "We contemplate the ravages of time, and in our imagination we scatter the rubble of the very buildings in which we live over the ground; in that moment, solitude and silence prevail around us, we are the sole survivors of an entire nation that is no more." More recently, with a particular focus on Robert, Nina Dubin has linked the conjectural relation between past

6. For an image of Robert's *Imaginary View of the Grand Gallery of the Louvre in Ruins* (1796), see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hubert_Robert#/media/File:Louvre-peinture-francaise-p1020324.jpg. For Gandy's *Sir John Soane's Rotunda of the Bank of England in Ruins* (1798), see www.soane.org/whats-on/exhibitions/death-and-memory-soane-and-architecture-legacy.

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and future associated with ruins to the uncertainties and instabilities of an eighteenth-century credit economy. For Dubin, it is not an accident that the cult of ruins coincides with the emergence of modern market structures, because market forces produced an awareness of contingency taken up by eighteenth-century artists and aesthetes in their apprehension of ruins. Drawing on J. G. A. Pocock's (1985: 92) distinction between a time of continuity and a time of contingency, Dubin (2005–6) suggests that "credit injected uncertainty into the present, and disrupted the linear passage of time by conflating yesterday's debts and tomorrow's earnings. Suspended, then, between plenitude and mere potentiality, between past value and future returns, credit exhibited precisely the condition that is the hallmark of the ruin. For it was in the eighteenth century that ruins gained recognition . . . as unstable sites of temporal fluctuation."[7]

Dubin's connection between the instability of a credit economy and the contingency suggested by ruin is, of course, but one explanation for the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fascination with ruins. In a century that witnessed the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, the excavations of Herculaneum (begun 1738) and Pompeii (discovered 1748), and later the French Revolution, writers and visual artists alike were keen to exploit the aesthetic potential of natural and manmade catastrophe. In the British context, this tradition includes not only the work of Littleton and Barbauld but also Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826). Percy B. Shelley's "Ozymandias" (1818) and Thomas Love Peacock's poems on Palmyra (1806, 1812) also give prominence to sculptural fragments and ruined buildings, while ruins create the shadow of imminent disaster in the gothic novel. But the fascination with ruins was not solely an opportunity to brood over real and imagined catastrophe. Ruins and fragments could also be conventional reminders of mortality, as in John Keats's "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" (1817), or an opportunity to construct connections between past and present, as in Walter Scott's *The Antiquary* (1816). Nor, as the examples of Robert and Gandy indicate, was the fascination with ruins limited to print. The end of the Napoleonic Wars eventually made the ruins of Rome again accessible to travelers, the Elgin Marbles were brought to Britain in 1812 and purchased for the British Museum in 1816, and King George IV built a sham ruin from fragments imported from North Africa on the grounds of Virginia Water in 1826. To put it plainly, ruins—sham and real, projected and present, imagined and concrete—were omnipresent in romantic culture.

7. See also Dubin 2010.

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Later scholars evaluating this cult of ruins generally read the significance of ruins as indexing a series of relationships between past, present, and future.[8] Most recently, Anne Janowitz, Sophie Thomas, and Dubin have all used their readings of ruins to assign a particular meaning to changes in temporal understandings and to make arguments about late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century temporality, but they disagree as to the significance of the time represented by ruins. For Janowitz, ruins represent the power of the past, and one of the paradoxes of eighteenth-century ruin was that the image of decay lent the authority of antiquity to the construction of the English nation and hence helped sanction England's significance as a world power. Thomas (2003: 181) shares Janowitz's concern about the relationship between ruin and history, but for her ruins, which "float between past and present," exhibit a particular "double temporal identity" such that they are neither past nor present but both simultaneously. Ruins thus set historical actors in relation to time and "represent the historical relation, rather than history 'itself'" (ibid.). Dubin (2005–6), as we have seen, emphasizes how ruins reflect the insecurity of credit and produce "a new relationship to the future generated by the eighteenth-century financial revolution." While all of these accounts are compelling, I would like to avoid assigning a specific meaning to the temporality of ruin and to insist instead that ruins represent the incommensurability of multiple temporalities. They are an index of a series of new relationships to the future that emerge in the later eighteenth century—relationships that include but are not limited to anxieties about credit, the justification of empire, and new understandings of historicity.

Like the images of Robert and Gandy, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* evokes a temporality with three distinct layers. The material ruins (like those of Rome) extant in Barbauld's present moment imply that they were completed buildings at some point in the (largely antique) past. Looking at them, then, projects the structural relationship between present ruin and past wholeness forward into the future, so that the present comes to be imagined as the future's past or, more concretely, as the classical standard for new, future empires. As this combination of temporal change with the spatial movement of *translatio imperii* would imply, the transposition between times suggested by Barbauld's poem has its spatial correlatives in what we might describe as the "temporalization of space"[9] to suggest a future elsewhere, somewhere in North America or even South America, as the poem's final lines indicate. Such a process might appear frightening in the detail with which it predicts

8. I am thinking here of Dubin 2005–6, 2010; Goldstein 1977; Janowitz 1990; McFarland 1981; Simmel 1958; Thomas 2003.

9. The secondary literature on this concept is considerable. For its use in a literary context, see Bode 2004; Leask 2002; Tuite 2008.

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Britain's ruin (even if it is not clear about exactly where in North or South America succeeding empires will arise), but one advantage of imagining the unknown future as the repetition of the known past in a different location is that through such a process the present and the future are always experienced as a repetition of the past and hence as potentially knowable. The fantasy of ruins in the classical model makes recognizable an increasingly unfamiliar modernity.

Considered thus, the example of classical antiquity might be understood as crucial for certain romantic imaginations of futurity. Because we know what happened in classical antiquity, it represents a completed time horizon—what was, at some point in the past, about to happen has now transpired and can be known in its entirety. The present, in contrast, remains uncompleted. To forecast decline on the model of antiquity suggests how an uncompleted time horizon will be completed. It helps make the future knowable.

The ruin imagined in *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, then, may stand as a cultural prospect to be met with apprehension and alarm, but it also offers the possibility of making an unknown future known and imaginable. This is, moreover, not the only more positive effect produced by the fantasy of future ruin. To imagine modern buildings not just as future ruins but as *classical* ruins modeled on Greece and Rome is a kind of national validation. It equates the value of Britain with the values and permanent example of the classical past. In Percy B. Shelley's sonnet "Ozymandias" (1818) the forgotten ruin—the "colossal wreck" that stands "boundless and bare" as the "lone and level sands stretch far away" (Shelley 2002: 110)—represents an ironic monument to the hubris of power, much like Karl Marx's later assertion that all that is solid melts into air. Barbauld, in contrast, uses a fantasy of ruin to imagine something else entirely: that the destroyed remains of Britain's national monuments will attract pilgrims from a future empire who seek to model their own potential accomplishments after Britain's example in literature, science, politics, and the arts. Just as the British Empire was modeled on classical antiquity, the "classics" of a future empire will be recognizably British. Barbauld may have been inspired to this insight by *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), in which Mary Wollstonecraft imagines the British Empire as heir to the Roman. There Wollstonecraft (1995: 37) notes that "the time may come when the traveler may ask where proud London stood? When its temples, its laws, and its trade, may be buried in one common ruin, and only serve as a byword to point a moral, or furnish senators . . . on the other side of the Atlantic, with tropes to swell their thundering bursts of eloquence." Wollstonecraft, like Barbauld after her, emphasizes the ephemerality of Britain's temples, laws, and trade, but even as she seems to denigrate the practice of classical citation, she implies that British literature broadly understood will persist and form tropes for senators in the Americas.

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Barbauld's poem stages a similar trade-off. *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* is undoubtedly critical of British imperial ambitions and sees the war with France as a source of national ruin. Her critique is especially powerful, because it repeats familiar material and topoi for unfamiliar ends and thus represents, in Suvir Kaul's (2000: 127) words, a "reversal of the aspiration of national expansion, doubly effective in that she reiterates and works within the comparative historical schemas and the poetic idiom constitutive of the poetry of empire." Nonetheless, the place occupied by British literature and learning in Barbauld's poem—the canon of British classics—suggests that Barbauld is also celebrating aspects of empire. Telling here is Barbauld's (2001: 161) reluctance to name historical protagonists or events (Napoléon, for example, is referred to only as "The Despot" in line 9), which contrasts with her eagerness to announce the names of British national heroes like Samuel Johnson, William Pitt, Charles James Fox, David Garrick, John Moore, Humphrey Davy, Joshua Reynolds, and Joseph Priestley in lines 185–204 (ibid.: 168–69).

Littleton, Robert, Gandy, and Wollstonecraft had all previously imagined their present architectural landscape as the ruins of the future, and so too did Percy B. Shelley (2002: 339–441) in the dedication to *Peter Bell the Third* (composed 1819, published 1839).[10] One distinguishing feature of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, however, is the way it uses projected ruin to elaborate an explicit canon of British political, scientific, and cultural achievement. Even as Barbauld (2001: 167, lines 178–80) describes her pilgrims visiting the remains of Westminster Abbey with its "long isle and vaulted dome / Where Genius and where Valour find a home," she constructs her own version of the abbey's commemoration of the vaunted "silent dead." In this way, the poem constructs a pantheon of British accomplishment, one that ranges from statesmen and orators (William Pitt, First Earl of Chatham; James Fox) to stage actors (David Garrick), military leaders (Admiral Horatio Nelson, General Sir John Moore), scientists (Humphrey Davy, Joseph Priestley), and painters (Joshua Reynolds). Most telling here is the literary canon that Barbauld establishes. Just as "British tongues the fading fame prolong / Of Tully's eloquence and Maro's song" (ibid.: 172, lines 287–88), so too "new states shall know" British "stores of knowledge" (164, line 87). Their youth will be instructed by John Locke and William Paley and enthralled by John

10. Here Shelley (2002: 341) imagines a time "when St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey shall stand, shapeless and nameless ruins in the midst of an unpeopled marsh; when the piers of Waterloo bridge shall become . . . isles of reeds and osiers and cast the jagged shadows of their broken arches on the solitary stream,—and when some transatlantic commentator will be weighing in the scales of some new and now unimagined system of criticism the respective merits of the Bells and the Fudges and their historians."

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Milton, James Thomson, William Shakespeare, and Joanna Baillie. British literature and learning will become the new "classics."

In light of this canonization of British achievement, one cannot help but be struck by the degree to which *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* celebrates that which it criticizes and, more, by the way both the critique and the celebration work to similar ends. The patriotic desire to save or rescue and thus avoid the situation the poem prophesizes makes this a poem as much about preservation as about prophecy, as Barbauld seeks to identify and define the value of Britain—its history of liberty, its cosmopolitan markets, and above all its cultural and literary production. Indeed, the two are for her intimately connected, as commercial success provides the basis on which the arts thrive. Moments like this show that Barbauld is not just criticizing empire but also celebrating it, as the fantasy of decline here consolidates a present canon of value and the poem establishes a particular relationship between past and present on the basis of an imagined futurity. Alongside the anxiety of ruin, Barbauld also articulates a sense of assurance in the enduring quality of Britain's historical, cultural, and scientific achievements, as her poem establishes a confident summary of Britain's imperial spread and cultural triumphs. Britain may fall into ruin, but its ruin will not be anonymous or unheralded, for as denizens of future empires make their pilgrimages to London's ruins, Britain will become the new Rome. William Keach (1994: 573) acknowledges this when he notes Barbauld's recognition of the "unstable mix of economic and political crisis with burgeoning cultural production." Crisis produces confidence. Economic and political insecurity translates into the confident broadcast of cultural achievement.

How are we to make sense of this double movement, this combination of projected future catastrophe and decline with the simultaneous celebration of past and present accomplishments? Because classical ruins form the quintessential example of ruin and a memento mori about the decline of civilizations, to invoke ruin as the fate of an existing civilization can be threatening. But because the textual and later the sculptural and material remnants of classical civilization were commonly understood as the basis of European civilization, there was also a potential recompense in the repetition of classical decline. Fantasies of future decline and ruin thus produce a structure in which the continuity and persistence of culture come to stand in a compensatory relation to the loss of economic and political predominance, a structure that paradoxically enables the fantasy of loss and decline to stand also as one of continuity and permanence. In this sense, romantic fantasies of decline share a recuperative element of romantic historicism, which, while grounded in the recognition that normative standards are bound by time and place and hence

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change their meanings, commonly seeks consolation from loss and death in the perceived immortality and autonomy of the field of culture.[11]

Decline itself thus comes to constitute an economy in which the fantasy of future decline circulates to produce anxiety about the future along with standards of value and canons of national achievement. But Barbauld's contemporary invocation of imperial decline — like that of Littleton before her — is also fascinated by ancient ruins, because it seeks to economize decline itself, to turn the threat of obsolescence into the basis of continuity and the source of preservation. As decline in various guises continues to be the subject of vigorous public debate in our current historical moment,[12] Barbauld's poem and the larger romantic sense of crisis of which it is a part stand as reminders, first, that our contemporary anxieties about the future have a history and, second, that in our uncertainty about the future, we like our romantic precursors may be attempting to prevent decline, paradoxically, through the very recognition of its inevitability.

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11. On the fascination with the afterlife and the contemporary belief in the immortality of an autonomous cultural field, see Underwood 2002.
12. In the US context, for example, see Buchanan 2011; Friedman and Mandelbaum 2011; Levin 2012; Luce 2012; Murray 2012. Tellingly, the subtitle of Edward Luce's book is *America in the Age of Descent* in its North American edition and elsewhere is *America and the Spectre of Decline*.

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