

# Joel Barlow's Eccentric American Vision

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"America—the land where a new kind of man was born from the idea that God was present in every man not only as compassion but as power, and so the country belonged to the people; for the will of the people—if the locks of their life could be given the art to turn—was then the will of God. Great and dangerous idea!"

—Norman Mailer, *Armies of the Night*

**D**ESIRING TO BE THE REPUBLIC'S FIRST GREAT POET, but having rather to settle as its first great diplomat, Joel Barlow contracted pneumonia somewhere outside of Zarnowiec, Poland in 1812, the year that Napoleon was routed in Russia; there he fell into unconsciousness and died the day after Christmas, entombed at the brown wood-timbered Church of the Nativity of Our Lady, very far from his beloved Hartford. Other than perhaps his name on a plaque at the State Department, and his Washington DC estate Kalorama, which gave its name to that tony neighborhood a few dozen blocks north of Foggy Bottom, Barlow is a ghost of the early Republic.

A wit, rhapsodist, polemicist, and writer, Barlow fulfilled his desire to pen a national epic for the new nation, in the form of a strange, turgid, and at times beautiful poem entitled *The Columbiad*, with its idiosyncratic injunction to "sing the Mariner who first unfurl'd / An eastern banner o'er the western world, / And taught mankind where future empires lay / In these fair confines of descending day." An ardent Jeffersonian, Barlow spent much of 1812 trailing Napoleon's doomed campaign in the east, hoping to get an audience with the emperor in his role as United States Minister Plenipotentiary to France on behalf of President James Madison who desired a treaty against the British. Instead, he found himself retreating back towards Paris along

with the entire Army of the French Empire, falling far short of his destination and eventually buried in a frozen graveyard in a forgotten corner of Poland.

***The Columbiad* is “more than an epic... no mere call to arms but a celebration of the worldwide inculcation of American principles and a new, Deistic universal language.”**

“Almighty Freedom! give my venturous song / The force, the charm that to thy voice belong,” incants Barlow, “Tis thine to shape my course, to light my way, / To nerve my country with the patriot lay, / To teach all men where all their interest lies, / How rulers may be just and nations wise: / Strong in thy strength I bend no suppliant knee, / Invoke no miracle, no Muse but thee.” Drawing directly from Book XI of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, wherein the archangel Michael unfurls before Adam the entire coming history of creation, Barlow imagines his titular epic hero Christopher Columbus during his Spanish imprisonment learning from an angel how the continents he discovered (or “discovered”) would become the landscape for a millennial republic—a celebration of both geography and history whose western terminus signals a providential destiny, America revealed as Hesperus, Paradise, Eden, Utopia.

When Barlow promises to “Invoke no miracle, no Muse but thee,” he enlists himself as a partisan of freedom to which he dedicates those verses, rejecting the supernatural in favor of the democratic, but he didn’t lack a theological imagination so much as he grabbed the prophetic laurels that gave him the right to create a new religion. When reading *The Columbiad*, it is imperative not to confuse the historical medieval-minded Catholic zealot and genocidal explorer Columbus with the character in Barlow’s poem: the latter is written in a mythopoeic vernacular, a fictional creation in the penning of a new scripture. Barlow’s Columbus is more Virgil’s Aeneas than he is the navigator of the *Nina*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria*. The poet wished to craft a new history for his nation, placing America’s beginnings in a past both transcendent and universal.

Dying in the borderland between the French and Russian Empires, the poet dreamt rather of a coming Empire of Liberty, having longed to work towards that promised day on which Danton had envisioned the last king hung by the entrails of the last priest. “Barlow saw the American Revolution as the opening skirmish of a

world revolution on behalf of the rights of all humanity,” writes William H. Goetzman in *Beyond the Revolution: A History of American Thought from Paine to Pragmatism*. Commensurate with that millennial cause, Barlow advocated for a new scripture that would do for the United States what Dante had done for Italy or Milton for Britain, a scripture that “because of its high moral and republican message, could exceed in grandeur even Homer,” as Gordon Wood writes in *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States*. That Barlow’s 1787 *Vision of Columbus* and its more radical nine-book 1807 revision *The Columbiad* doesn’t reach the sublimity of *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* is incontrovertible, indeed, totally uncontroversial. Other than the students at Joel Barlow High School in the poet’s hometown of Redding, Connecticut, few have ever heard of *The Columbiad*, and one doubts that even most of those students are familiar with their institution’s namesake.

Even among specialists, *The Columbiad* is spoken of in less than valedictory terms. Goetzman writes that Barlow’s epic may be “Rich, eclectic, highly charged emotionally, full of ornament,” but despite that, or maybe because of it, *The Columbiad* is “clumsy and derivative.” Meanwhile, Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradburn in *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* snark that Barlow “did more to herald literary greatness than achieve it,” while Goetzman’s final appraisal is somehow even more damning—*The Columbiad* is “hardly a literary masterpiece.” Much of this is a bit harsh, at least in my estimation. The epic is indeed turgid at some points, the Augustan rhyming couplets audibly of the eighteenth-century, embarrassingly archaic to ears trained on Whitman, Dickinson, Stevens, Williams, Eliot, and Pound. More than in issues of prosody, arguably, it was Barlow’s poetic vocation itself that strikes many as irredeemably absurd; to write an epic poem for a modern, democratic republic seems at best strange and at worst pointless, an appropriation of a literary spirit so ancient that it appears a meaningless oddity for a nation whose origins are not shrouded deep in the mysteries of the past, like all those European countries with their medieval national epics from Spain’s *El Cid* to France’s *Song of Roland*. As Herman Melville would write, “We want no American Miltons.”

For Americans in the first generation after the Revolution, however, there was very much a desire to have, if not a few Miltons, at least a couple of Drydens, Richardsons, Popes, or Swifts, especially when *The Edinburgh Review* would ask with cavalier cruelty in 1820, “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?” John Adams had famously claimed that he studied war so that his children could study economics and his grandchildren could engage in art and literature, but for men of Barlow’s disposition there was a desire to skip some of these steps. Emory Elliot writes in *The Cambridge Introduction to Early American Literature* that the “host of celebratory

poems... called for the creation of a cultural climate in America in which the arts and letters would reach their highest form.” Novelists like Charles Brockden Brown in Philadelphia, and Hugh Henry Brackenridge on the western frontier, adapted the gothic and the picaresque to American climes, respectively, while the “Hartford Wits” such as Timothy Dwight (later president of Yale), John Trumbull, and Barlow, attempted to craft a novel American verse. “Columbia, Columbia, to glory rise, / The queen of the world, and the child of the skies!” intoned Dwight, for what he lacked in subtlety he made up for in enthusiasm. Much of this poetry existed as a specific rejoinder to the idea that only the British could produce English literature, but also—as in the case and cause of Barlow—to commemorate what they saw as a remarkable and unprecedented eschaton in the form of the American Revolution, which had turned the world upside down and leveled the feudal hierarchies that had dominated human civilization until that point. At least, that was their interpretation of 1776’s significance.

Compared to his peers, such as Dwight or Philip Freneau, Barlow was by far the most adamant, zealous, and messianic in his New World expectations, unusual as he was the most religiously free-thinking of the three. Perhaps this is not as unusual as might be expected at first consideration, once it’s admitted that Barlow replaced God with America. Writing in *The Columbiad*, a poem that culminates with what Goetzman describes as the poet’s “inevitable future of all mankind united in one religion, one language, and one Newtonian harmonious whole,” and that sees the establishment of a world capital built in Mesopotamia, Barlow imagines that:

Then shall your federal towers my bank adorn  
All hail with me the great millennial morn  
That gilds your capitol. Thence earth shall draw  
Her first clear codes of liberty and law;  
There public right a settled form shall find,  
Truth trim her lamp to lighten humankind  
Old Afric’s sons their shameful fetters cast,  
Our wild Hesperians humanize at last,  
All men participate, all time expand  
The source of good my liberal sages plann’d.

While Barlow’s language is supremacist—imagining the indigenous “Hesperians” as needing to “humanize,” for example—it’s also ecumenical in a manner that eluded that presumptuous advocate of human equality, Thomas Jefferson. The poet envisions a fraternity of

humanity, with Africans emancipated and Indians given equal rights. This is, despite Barlow's secularism, a theological vision that is explicitly associated with his own jarring version of Christian eschatology in which, as Goetzman writes, the diplomat believed that "Science and republican progress, coupled with religion and the growing humanity of man, portended the millennium, which he believed would take place on earth before the second coming of God." There is an uncanny prophetic verisimilitude to the excerpt, those "federal towers" perhaps evoking the Washington Memorial, the "lamp to lighten humankind" recalling the Statue of Liberty, and yet it would be a mistake to interpret Barlow as a rank nationalist. As a supporter of the American Revolution, Barlow's loyalties were always with the latter word more than the former. Insomuch as he was an American, it was because like his friend Thomas Paine, he thought that the cause of the American Republic was the cause of mankind. Ruland and Bradbury argue that *The Columbiad* is "more than an epic... no mere call to arms but a celebration of the worldwide inculcation of American principles and a new, Deistic universal language."

A mythopoeic language, not just giving a litany of the features of the continent or recounting narratives about its discovery, but enchanting that same landscape with a significance beyond the literal, what Brackenridge and Philip Freneau expressed in their 1772 poem *The Raising Glory of America*, delivered on the steps of Princeton's Nassau Hall, as this transcendence of the "western world, / Where now the dawning light of science spreads. / Her orient ray, and wakes the muse's song." So much of what makes this verse ironic is that the poets who ham-handedly penned it wrote self-consciously in an almost absurdly old-fashioned idiom, its archaisms yoked to radical politics in an attempt to convey seriousness, just at the moment that all of this invoking of muses and singing of heroes became passé, since the novel had begun to supplant the epic as the consummate literary form. "No more of Britain, and her kings renown'd" earnestly write Freneau and Brackenridge, even while it's clear that theirs was an education which involved copious memorization of passages from Sir Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. "American writers were caught in a series of paradoxes," notes Goetzman. "They must look outward over the globe and yet inward at American soil and American things. They must speak with their own voices in the language of a disowned mother country," and they also had to financially compete with superior British writing which could sell more cheaply on an American market.

With all of those considerations, a poet like Barlow believed that American literature could be proven worthy by penning an epic, by giving the United States its *Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost*. Radical in all matters other than aesthetics, Barlow's epic was the literary equivalent of the conclusion offered by the 1793 architectural commissioners planning Washington DC, who advocated for a

neoclassicism based on “a grandeur of conception, a Republican simplicity, and that true elegance of proportion, which correspond to a tempered freedom excluding Frivolity, the food of little minds.” From the moment of the Revolution onward, America was messier than all of this, of course. Epic, with its flat heroes and its didactic morals, would never be the operative mode for a complex, modern society. We speak of the “Great American Novel”; we have our *Moby-Dick* and our *The Great Gatsby*, *Beloved* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but we’ve no *Faerie Queene*—certainly not *The Columbiad*—because, by 1807, it would be impossible to write anything epic that didn’t sound at best like exercise and at worst like satire. Because it couldn’t be anything other, *The Columbiad*, it must be said, was a failure.

Yet to write only of literary success is fallacious, for the vast majority of literary attempts are literary failures, and we can learn something altogether different from those blessed blunders. Furthermore, if the United States themselves are essentially the greatest of poems (with apologies to Whitman), any honest and judicious accounting most also admit that with the gulf between intent and execution, the United States must also be accounted as among the greatest of *failed* poems. Barlow fell short in his desire to pen an epic on the “importance of republican institutions; as being the great foundation of public and private happiness, the necessary aliment of future and permeant ameliorations in the condition of human nature.” Still, his failure was no greater, and no more condemnatory, than the failure of the state that he celebrated as living up to its promise in the dedicatory preamble to the Declaration of Independence that “Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,” but that was already a hypocrisy in a nation built on genocide and slavery the moment that quill hit parchment. This, of course, speaks to the central problem in *The Columbiad*, and that is Barlow’s Aeneas.

To valorize Columbus today—and it should be unequivocally stated that the navigator countenanced ethnic cleansing, committed atrocities, and initiated the exchange which resulted in millions of deaths—is problematic, to put it gently. But as concerns the epic, his Columbus is very much a fiction, a cipher, a symbol, a stand-in—a being who exists to be narrated toward, rather than to narrate. His status as a non-English origin for the United States—of a *republican* origin for the United States—animated some American progressives from Washington Irving to the immigrant rights groups that championed the Columbus Day holiday as an answer to nativist bigotry at the turn of the twentieth-century. As statues of the explorer come down throughout the nation—rightly so—*The Columbiad* provides a fascinating example of a work where the changing mores of a society contribute to the worth of the poem, because fundamentally what Barlow’s epic is about is *failure*. The gulf between what Barlow

promised and what he delivered is vast, but far less of a chasm than that between the highest ideals of the United States and the nation that actually exists. If the best of reading is an act of charity and grace, then returning to *The Columbiad* and understanding how Barlow intended it as a map not to the real United States, but to an imagined Edenic and utopian America, might get us, if not to the promised land, at least to a type of momentary respite.

Advocating for *The Columbiad* on aesthetic grounds, with its lapses into purple pabulum (for instance, describing how “freedom’s cause his patriot bosom warms”), would be a quixotic critical endeavor—though Barlow has a charm and earnestness which can be read separately from our own jaundiced irony. In a more charitable disposition from his earlier evaluation, Goetzman writes that *The Columbiad* “gave form to the revolutionary American’s quest for a world civilization... [a] sweeping, eclectic work of global scope” which is best described as a “poetic Palladian villa—almost a literary Monticello.” Such a description isn’t far-off, as the neo-classicism of Barlow’s Virgilian exercise is as conspicuous as the columns and dome on Jefferson’s plantation house, and yet in 2023, parallels between the poet and the president might not seem as laudatory as they did when Goetzman paid the faint compliment in 2009.

If promoting *The Columbiad* as worthwhile poetry might seem a bit eccentric, then in our current season of discontent, claiming any political utility in an epic celebrating Columbus as penned by a (minor) founding father would be borderline suicidal. Which is why I should steadfastly emphasize that that’s not what I wish to do; there are few literary historical essay types more tired and often unjustified than the variety whereby the overly clever critic attempts to mutilate this or that otherwise politically unacceptable past works into the Procrustean bed of currently approved sentiments. That being said, if one thrills to the clarion call for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness but rejects the hypocrite who penned those noble thoughts, Barlow does provide an opportunity for a Jeffersonianism without Jefferson, otherwise warm correspondence between the poet and the president showing the former vociferously denouncing slavery’s immorality to the latter.

What must be said about Barlow is that his politics weren’t just progressive, they were Jacobin—literally. This is reason enough to revisit Barlow the diplomat, who in matters of politics was much closer to Paine than Jefferson, going so far as to secure that oft-wretched pamphleteer from the Bastille when his commitment to liberty, equality, and fraternity proved even a bit too consistent for Robespierre’s liking. Detesting Napoleon as much as he did King George III (of whom he once wrote a song entitled “God Save the Guillotine”), Barlow was both a citizen of the United States and of France (even elected to the National Assembly), as well as a radical

republican and a committed democrat. His was an undeniably fascinating life—Barlow was a Deistic free-thinker and a veteran of the Battle of Long Island, a land speculator who sold plots in the Ohio Territory to wealthy Europeans, while unbeknownst to him his employers had no ownership to said claims, an enthusiastic supporter of the French Revolution, confidant to Jefferson, Paine, and the early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, and the author of the U.S. treaty with the Barbary Coast Pirates, which helped to end centuries of kidnapping and forced servitude in the Mediterranean by the various corsair states of North Africa. A masterful diplomatic missive, Barlow's 1796 *Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the United States of America and the Bey and Subjects of Tripoli of Barbary* not only established commercial relationships between the U.S. and the privateering North African principalities, it also effectively ended the Barbary Coast slave trade that had existed since the sixteenth century, while also firmly and unequivocally defining his new nation as radically secular.

“As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion,” read Article 11 of *The Treaty of Tripoli*, and “as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility of Mussulmen; and as the said States never entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mahometan nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.” Only the second unanimously approved bill in the Senate, with the first a pro forma dedication honoring George Washington. If *The Columbiad* wasn't to be Barlow's great epic of American possibilities, then perhaps his *Treaty of Tripoli* was, though written not in prosody but statecraft (Barlow made the Arabic translation himself, incidentally). Barlow, diplomat and poet, democratic and republican, Jacobin and revolutionary, was a steadfast radical secularist who enshrined that value into the Congressional record, and yet who wrote an epic that though excoriated amongst religious conservatives (such as Dwight) as being an apostate's blasphemy, is still filled with temples and towers, rising suns and proverbial Sons, the future millennium and the brotherhood of man. His “many activities as well as his vision made him famous as a New World prophet,” as Goetzman writes.

What must be remembered is that secularism doesn't actually exist, at least not really. Yet it's one of the most important political virtues to be defended by our sacred honor. Epics like *The Columbiad*, Elliot argues, are “neoclassical in form but echo Puritan writing in content and imagery,” though I'd argue something similar for *The Treaty of Tripoli*. When Barlow assumes the possibility of a state not founded upon a religious foundation, he must draw from Protestant political assumptions, ranging from disestablishmentarianism to anti-episcopacy, for American secularism



is a particular Puritan heresy—in the same way that the French secularist tradition of *laïcité* could only have been derived from a Catholic context. Nothing is *sui generis*, not even secularism, and the assumptions made behind the separation of church and state are themselves “religious” assumptions, even if they are agnostic on questions of Christology, soteriology, eschatology, or whatever.

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Secularism is itself one of the most radical of theological concepts; it transcendently imagines that we can exorcise ourselves of religious authority, the better to more fully and freely practice faith itself. In his epic, Barlow was not fleeing from religion—he was creating one. Keeping the pieties of the Puritan post-millennialism he would have imbibed during a Connecticut childhood, he replaced the promise of the Second Coming with that of universal revolution, and God was dethroned—just like a king—in favor of the idea of “America.” This America was not the nation bounded at the time by the Atlantic and the western frontier, the Canadian border and Key West, but rather a mystical, transcendent, universal America that signified the highest and most noble of aspirations, which Barlow found in the National Assembly of France, or on the road to Zarnowiec, or in an imagined future. This America is a theological concept, a specifically covenantal one.

At the culmination of *The Columbiad*, the angel describes to the navigator a distant future of iconoclastic rebellion, where the peoples of the earth heap into a pile various idols (including Christian ones) so that “Beneath the footstool of all destructive things, / The mast of priesthood and the mace of kings, / Lies trampled in the dust; for here at last / Fraud, folly, error all their emblems cast... Swords, sceptres, miters, crowns and globes and stars, / Codes of false fame and stimulates to wars / Sink in the settling mass.” It is almost a ridiculous Enlightenment image in its democratic enthusiasms, and in keeping with Barlow’s Jacobin sympathies, but it is also, ironically, a religious vision as well (in keeping with the angel who narrates it).

Barlow’s cagey theological brilliance, which is lacking in crasser critics of organized religion, consisted in his understanding of the intrinsic power of narrative to impart transcendence, enchantment, and most of all meaning. With his poem, Barlow attempted to generate a new scripture for a new faith. He failed, but he wasn’t wrong to

understand that faiths need scriptures. Communities are bound in common purpose, by the stories which they tell, and in an anticipation of the best of the American tradition, Barlow envisioned a covenantal definition of Americanness that had nothing to do with ethnicity or language, race or religion, or even nationality for that matter, but to a promised and perfected “interminable reign” of freedom, justice, equality, and prosperity. That “America,” the word which he uses to describe that imagined state, bears little similarity to the United States of America, with its growing void between the wealthy and the rest, its massive imprisoned population, its disenfranchised swaths, and its terrorized communities of the marginalized. This is less a matter of Barlow’s error than of *The Columbiad’s* promise.

Like all prophetic poet-priests, Barlow knows that although the exact nature of a sacred scripture is arbitrary, the need for some kind of scripture is incontrovertible. America wasn’t born in 1776—or 1619—or 1492. No people are ever so clearly birthed; the work of the historian is just as much the vocation of the poet. The question becomes what should our scripture be, and Barlow deftly tried to square the contradictions of a barbarous place into a tale of universal redemption that would speak to everyone, even while such a goal was not possible—though the attempt is never without purpose. Like America, Barlow’s poem finds a certain victory in its failures, for while the narrative is still being written there remains room for hope. “American art was a promise as yet unredeemed,” write Bradburt and Ruland, and that remains true of the nation as well, for “America was the present, rushing, potential, time-bound, political... the prodigious but still unwritten and unfelt grandeur of prairie, river, mountain and forest,” the same today as it was when Barlow’s epic was written. That Barlow’s purpose and subject are so divergent is a divine contradiction that inadvertently speaks to the complexities of the country which he celebrated; a gesture towards not a nation that exists, but towards an imagined utopia to which we can ever strive, and towards the nature of that covenant itself.