

White House Historical Assn.



Joel Barlow, marble bust by French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon, ca. 1804

Joel Barlow

THE VISION OF COLUMBUS

__1787__

Book VII: Selections

A lawyer, diplomat, and Revolutionary War chaplain, Joel Barlow pursued his writing ambitions after the war, joining the writers' group known as the Hartford Wits (or Connecticut Wits). In 1787 he published *The Vision of Columbus* as an epic overview of the glorious past and promising future of the Americas, the lands introduced by Columbus to the European world. "Overview" is an apt word here: in the poem an angel transports the despairing Columbus from his Spanish prison cell, where he was held for weeks after his third voyage, to a mountaintop in North America and reveals to him the vast achievements that will result from his "discovery." Truly an Enlightenment poem, Barlow's epic heralds man's ability to drive progress and enhance virtue. We enter as the angel lauds Americans' achievements in learning, science, and the arts.

...

Bring, bounteous Peace, in thy celestial throng
Life to my soul, and rapture to my song;
Give me to trace, with pure unclouded ray,
The arts and virtues that attend thy sway;
To see thy blissful charms, that here descend,
Through distant realms and endless years extend.

To cast new glories o'er the changing clime,
The Seraph¹ now reversed the flight of time;
Roll'd back the years, that led their course before,
And stretch'd immense the wild uncultured shore;
The paths of peaceful science raised to view,
And show'd the ascending crowds that useful arts pursue.

...

In youthful minds to wake the ardent flame,
To nurse the arts, and point the paths of fame,
Behold their liberal sires, with guardian care,
Thro' all the realms their seats of science rear.
Great without pomp the modest mansions rise;
Harvard and Yale and Princeton greet the skies;
Penn's ample walls o'er Del'ware's margin bend,
On James's bank the royal spires ascend,
Thy turrets, York, Columbia's walks command,
Bosom'd in groves, see growing Dartmouth stand;
While, o'er the realm reflecting solar fires,
On yon tall hill Rhode Island's seat aspires.

O'er all the shore, with sails and cities gay,
And where rude hamlets stretch their inland sway,
With humbler walls unnumber'd schools arise,
And youths unnumber'd seize the solid prize,

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Wren Building, orig. constructed in the late 1600s, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia

University of Pennsylvania, on the Delaware River
College of William & Mary near the James River, Virginia
Columbia University, New York City
Dartmouth College, New Hampshire

Brown University, orig. College of Rhode Island

¹ *Seraph*: an angel of the rank seraphim

In no blest land has Science rear'd her fane,
And fix'd so firm her wide-extended reign;
Each rustic here, that turns the furrow'd soil,
The maid, the youth, that ply mechanic toil,
In freedom nurst, in useful arts inured,
Know their just claims, and see their rights secured.

fane: temple; sacred place

rustic, i.e., rural person, farmer

...
In no blest land has fair Religion shone,
And fix'd so firm her everlasting throne.
Where, o'er the realms those spacious temples shine,
Frequent and full the throng'd assemblies join;
There, fired with virtue's animating flame,
The sacred task unnumber'd sages claim;
The task, for angels great; in early youth,
To lead whole nations in the walks of truth,
Shed the bright beams of knowledge on the mind,
For social compact harmonize mankind,
To life, to happiness, to joys above,
The soften'd soul with ardent zeal to move;
For this the voice of Heaven, in early years,
Tuned the glad songs of life-inspiring seers,
For this consenting seraphs leave the skies,
The God compassionates, the Savior dies.

...
Thus heard the hero — while his roving view
Traced other crowds that liberal arts pursue;
When thus the Seraph — Lo, a favorite band
The torch of science flaming in their hand!
Thro' nature's range their ardent souls aspire,
Or wake to life the canvas and the lyre.
Fixt in sublimest thought, behold them rise,
Superior worlds unfolding to their eyes;
Heaven in their view unveils the eternal plan,
And gives new guidance to the paths of man.

See on yon darkening height bold Franklin tread,
Heaven's awful thunders rolling o'er his head;
Convolving clouds the billowy skies deform,
And forked flames emblaze the blackening storm.
See the descending streams around him burn,
Glance on his rod and with his guidance turn;
He bids conflicting heavens their blasts expire,
Curbs the fierce blaze and holds the imprison'd fire.
No more, when folding storms the vault o'er-spread,
The livid glare shall strike thy race with dread;
Nor towers nor temples, shuddering with the sound,
Sink in the flames and spread destruction round.
His daring toils, the threatening blast that wait,
Shall teach mankind to ward the bolts of fate;
The pointed steel o'er-top the ascending spire,



Harvard University

Benjamin Franklin, portrait by Robert Fekke, ca. 1746. No American of his time pursued scientific experimentation and correspondence as much as Franklin.



Franklin Institute

Top portion of a lightning rod designed by Franklin, whose experiments with electricity were renowned throughout America and Europe

And lead o'er trembling walls the harmless fire;
In his glad fame while distant worlds rejoice,
Far as the lightnings shine or thunders raise their voice.

See the sage Rittenhouse, with ardent eye,
Lift the long tube and pierce the starry sky;
Clear in his view the circling systems roll,
And broader splendors gild the central pole.
He marks what laws the eccentric wanderers bind,
Copies creation in his forming mind,
And bids, beneath his hand, in semblance rise,
With mimic orbs, the labors of the skies.
There wondering crowds with raptured eye behold
The spangled heavens their mystic maze unfold;
While each glad sage his splendid hall shall grace,
With all the spheres that cleave the ethereal space.

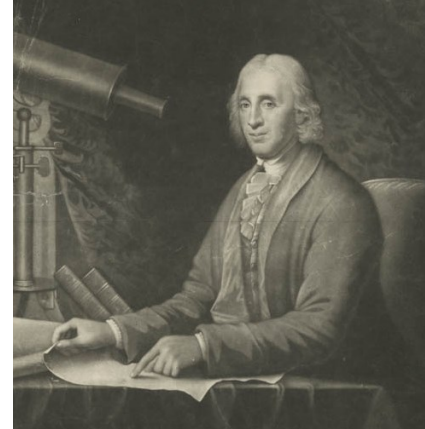
To guide the sailor in his wandering way,
See Godfrey's toils reverse the beams of day.
His lifted quadrant to the eye displays
From adverse skies the counteracting rays;
And marks, as devious sails bewilder'd roll,
Each nice gradation from the steadfast pole.

See, West with glowing life the canvas warms;
His sovereign hand creates impassion'd forms,
Spurns the cold critic rules, to seize the heart,
And boldly bursts the former bounds of Art.
No more her powers to ancient scenes confined,
He opes her liberal aid to all mankind;
She calls to life each patriot, chief or sage,
Garb'd in the dress and drapery of his age;
Again bold Regulus to death returns,
Again her falling Wolfe Britannia mourns;
Warriors in arms to frowning combat move,
And youths and virgins melt the soul to love;
Grief, rage and fear beneath his pencil start,
Roll the wild eye and pour the flowing heart;
While slumbering heroes wait his wakening call,
And distant ages fill the storied wall.

With rival force, see Copley's² pencil trace
The air of action and the charms of face;
Fair in his tints unfold the scenes of state,
The Senate listens and the peers debate;
Pale consternation every heart appalls,
In act to speak, while death-struck Chatham falls.
His strong, deep shades a bold expression give,
Raised into light the starting figures live:
With polish'd pride the finish'd features boast,
The master's art in nature's softness lost.

² John Singleton Copley; see p. 4.

New York Public Library



David Rittenhouse, engraving after 1796 portrait by C. W. Peale (detail). Trained as a clockmaker in Philadelphia, Rittenhouse pursued astronomy, established his own observatory, and built noted models of the solar system (the "mimic orbs").

Mariners' Museum (VA)



18th-c. octant similar to that invented by Thomas Godfrey, a Philadelphia optician

National Gallery of Canada



Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1771, depicting the 1759 death of the British general during the French and Indian War. A Pennsylvania native who became the British court painter, West created many scenes of British and American military triumph.

Fired with the martial toils, that bathed in gore
 His brave companions on his native shore
 Trumbull with daring hand the scene recalls,
 He shades with night Quebec's beleaguer'd walls,
 Mid flashing flames, that round the turrets rise,
 Blind carnage raves and great Montgomery dies.
 On Charlestown's height, thro' floods of rolling fire,
 Brave Warren falls, and sullen hosts retire;
 While other plains of death, that gloom the skies,
 And chiefs immortal o'er his canvas rise.

See rural seats of innocence and ease,
 High tufted towers and walks of waving trees,
 The white waves dashing on the craggy shores,
 Meandering streams and meads of spangled flowers,
 Where nature's sons their wild excursions lead,
 In just design, from Taylor's³ pencil spread.

Steward⁴ and Brown⁵ the moving portrait raise,
 Each rival stroke the force of life conveys;
 See circling Beauties round their tablets stand,
 And rise immortal from their plastic hand;
 Each breathing form preserves its wonted grace,
 And all the soul stands speaking in the face.

Two kindred arts the swelling statue heave,
 Wake the dead wax and teach the stone to live.
 While the bold chisel claims the rugged strife,
 To rouse the sceptred marble into life;
 While Latian⁶ shrines their figured patriots boast,
 And gods and heroes crowd each orient coast,
 See Wright's fair hands⁷ the livelier fire control,
 In waxen forms she breathes the impassion'd soul;
 The pencil'd tint o'er moulded substance glows,
 And different powers the unrival'd art compose.

To equal fame ascends thy tuneful throng,
 The boast of genius and the pride of song;
 Warm'd with the scenes that grace their various clime,
 Their lays shall triumph o'er the lapse of time.

With keen-eyed glance thro' nature's walks to pierce,
 With all the powers and every charm of verse,
 Each science opening in his ample mind,
 His fancy glowing and his taste refined,
 See Trumbull⁸ lead the train. His skillful hand
 Hurls the keen darts of Satire thro' the land;
 Pride, knavery, dullness, feel his mortal stings,

³ Unidentified. A British artist of the period, John Taylor, was known for his intricate pencil drawings; he never worked in America.

⁴ Perhaps referring to Gilbert Stuart, the Rhode Island portraitist who worked nearly twenty years in England before returning to the U.S.

⁵ Mather Brown, a Boston-born artist who also moved to England to pursue his career.

⁶ *Latia*: region of ancient Italy.

⁷ Patience Wright: see wax portrait of Washington, above right.

⁸ John Trumbull, Timothy Dwight, and David Humphreys—cited in these lines—were members with Joel Barlow of the self-appointed "Hartford Wits" in Connecticut, intellectually centered around Yale University in New Haven.



John Singleton Copley, *The Collapse of the Earl of Chatham in the House of Lords, 7 July 1778*, oil on canvas, 1779-80. Encouraged by Benjamin West to study in Europe, Boston-born Copley eventually settled in England and continued his career producing portraits and expansive historical canvasses, including *The Death of General [Joseph] Warren* (1775, Battle of Bunker Hill in Charlestown, near Boston).

Yale University Art Gallery



John Trumbull, *The Death of General Montgomery at the Attack on Quebec [1775]*, 1786. Born in Connecticut, Trumbull also spent a portion of his artistic career in Europe. Known as the "Artist of the Revolution," he painted four large Revolutionary War scenes commissioned for the U.S. Capitol rotunda

NPS/Morristown National Historic Park



Patience Wright, wax portrait of George Washington, n.d. Born in New Jersey, Wright became widely known for her wax figures. After moving to London in 1772, she opened a wax museum.

And listening virtue triumphs while he sings;
 Proud Albion's sons,⁹ victorious now no more,
 In guilt retiring from the wasted shore,
 Strive their curst cruelties to hide in vain —
 The world shall learn them from his deathless strain.

On glory's wing to raise the ravish'd soul,
 Beyond the bounds of earth's benighted pole,
 For daring Dwight¹⁰ the Epic Muse¹¹ sublime
 Hails her new empire on the western clime.
 Fired with the themes by seers seraphic sung,
 Heaven in his eye, and rapture on his tongue,
 His voice divine revives the promised land,
 The Heaven-taught Leader and the chosen band.
 In Hanniel's¹² fate, proud faction finds her doom,
 Ai's¹³ midnight flames light nations to their tomb,
 In visions bright supernal¹⁴ joys are given,
 And all the dread futurities of heaven.

While freedom's cause his patriot bosom warms,
 In counsel sage, nor inexpert in arms,
 See Humphreys¹⁵ glorious from the field retire,
 Sheathe the glad sword and string the sounding lyre;
 That lyre which, erst, in hours of dark despair,
 Roused the sad realms to urge the unfinish'd war.
 O'er fallen friends, with all the strength of woe,
 His heart-felt sighs in moving numbers flow;
 His country's wrongs, her duties, dangers, praise,
 Fire his full soul and animate his lays;
 Immortal Washington with joy shall own
 So fond a favorite and so great a son.

[End of Book VII]

*When Yankees, skill'd in martial rule,
 First put the British troops to school;
 Instructed them in warlike trade,
 And new manoeuvres of parade,
 The true war-dance of Yankee reels,
 And manual exercise of heels;
 Made them give up, like saints complete,
 The arm of flesh, and trust the feet,
 And work, like Christians undissembling,
 Salvation out, by fear and trembling;
 Taught Percy fashionable races,
 And modern modes of Chevy-Chases:
 From Boston, in his best array,
 Great 'Squire M'Fingal took his way,
 And graced with ensigns of renown,
 Steer'd homeward to his native town.*

John Trumbull (cousin to the painter of the same name) wrote the mock epic poem *M'Fingal* during the Revolutionary War as a Patriot satirical attack of Loyalists' pro-British opposition to the war. These are the opening lines.

New York Public Library

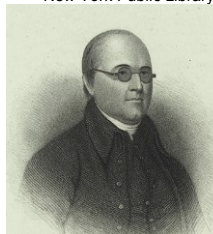


poet John Trumbull, engraving after portrait by his cousin John Trumbull, 1793

*Let endless blessings round our nation rise,
 Cheer all our lives, and waft us to the skies!
 Thus strains of rapture charm'd the listening gales.
 While the low sun-beam glimmer'd on the vales:
 To rest the camp retir'd: ten-thousand fires
 Thro' the calm silence rais'd their bending spires:
 The bright moon rose; winds cool'd the cheerful
 even, [evening]
 And wide magnificence enkindled heaven.*

In his 1785 allegory *The Conquest of Canaan*, Rev. Timothy Dwight likened the American Revolution to the conquest of Canaan by the Israelite leader Joshua. These are the closing lines.

New York Public Library



Rev. Timothy Dwight, engraving after portrait by John Trumbull

⁹ I.e., British forces.

¹⁰ Rev. Timothy Dwight of the Hartford Wits; see lines from *The Conquest of Canaan*, above right.

¹¹ *Epic Muse*: Calliope, the muse of epic poetry; one of the nine muses in Greek mythology who inspires creativity in arts, history, and astronomy.

¹² *Hanniel*: Hebrew leader chosen to aid Joshua in dividing the land of Canaan among the Israelites. [Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament]

¹³ *Ai*: a Canaanite city conquered by the Israelites under Joshua.

¹⁴ *Supernal*: coming from on high; celestial, of heaven.

¹⁵ David Humphreys of the Hartford Wits had been a Revolutionary War officer who penned widely read patriotic poems during the war, including *Address to the Armies of the United States* (1772).