The Birth of *Homo Colossus*: Energy Consumption and Pre-Familiarization in Joel Barlow’s *Vision of Columbus*

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Abstract: Although Raymond De Young points out the current response to energy descent he terms localization “is not globalization in reverse”, the writers of modernity’s energy ramp-up used many of the same techniques De Young proposes for adapting to the downslope of M. King Hubbert’s fossil-fuels peak. Among these is pre-familiarization, the construction of mental models that “help people to feel at home in a place they have not yet inhabited.” Long before William Catton’s depiction of the West’s outsized energy user as *Homo colossus*, for example, Joel Barlow provided early national Americans with a reflection of themselves as gigantic consumers of the continent’s bounty in his 1787 *Vision of Columbus*. In the epic poem, Barlow puts in place foundational elements of the myth of progress that will develop with an increasingly extravagant energy consumption: a refutation of the classical republican model of history as cyclical; a conflation of the process of resource extraction with that of production; a characterization of this “production” as the natural trait of the knowledgeable, moral Western subject; the pairing of this characterization with a racialized discourse; and an assertion of climate melioration that anticipates by two centuries the counter-arguments of anthropogenic climate-change denialists. The poem invites its reader to inhabit the skin of a lofty and distanced observer of natural life, drawing on the earlier century’s infatuation with the prospect view, to help the reader become “pre-familiarized” with an idea of him- or herself fitting an economic model of endless growth. In the work, therefore, might be found not only the blueprints for an as-yet inchoate Anthropocene, but also the design of a new humanity to go along with it.

Keywords: Joel Barlow; *Vision of Columbus*; early American republic; energy consumption; pre-familiarization; race; climate change; economic growth; localization; historiography

Flows of energy do work and also cause all kinds of activities not ordinarily thought of as work, such as the enjoyment of beauty and the feeling of love.

—Howard T. Odum and Elisabeth C. Odum ([1], p. 35).

Energy use in the fossil-fuels age is frequently figured as a mountain, one whose size has not precluded its being largely ignored by many areas of scholarship, including literary studies ([2], p. xxiii). According to this metaphor, the modernizing nations of Western Europe and the United States entered in the early nineteenth century upon an “upslope” of ever-greater energy use, depending increasingly upon the dense resources of coal, gas, and oil. In recent times, global extraction has gained a “peak”, one often associated with the name of M. King Hubbert. Hubbert, a petroleum engineer who accurately predicted the maximum point of American conventional-oil extraction more than a decade before it happened, created a mathematical model that presents modernity’s energy mountain in graphic terms:
first a rise in production, then a plateau, and finally a tapering off as resources dwindle. This current
downslope Raymond De Young and Thomas Princen describe as “localization”. They explain that “as
overextended economies and resource extraction efforts exhaust themselves, we foresee industrialized
societies experiencing a shift from the centrifugal forces of globalization (concentrated economic
and political power, cheap and abundant raw materials and energy, intensive commercialization,
displaced wastes, and abstract forms of communication) to the centripetal forces of localization (widely
distributed authority and leadership, more sustainable use of natural energy sources and materials,
personal proficiency, and community self-reliance)” ([3], p. xvii). Although De Young and Princen
are quick to point out that energy descent is not globalization in reverse, the writers of modernity’s
energy ramp-up did use many of the same techniques De Young and Princen propose for adapting
to the descent from Hubbert’s peak ([3], p. xxiv). The question for those early writers was the same
as for thinkers today: How to get their audience accustomed to a new level of energy use? Only, for
those early writers, the question was not how to get their readers down the mountain but how to get
them up.

To ascribe such a clear intentionality to the period would of course be anachronistic, but though
the late eighteenth-century social theorists did not have the same vocabulary with which to speak
about energy, they did argue strenuously for its increased use— and they had to do so. In the
American context, which this essay considers, proponents of growth and globalization had to contend
with assumptions about human behavior far different from those De Young and Princen describe as
challenging adaptation to decreased energy use. Americans of the early republic did not assume
“that people are predominantly greedy, hypercompetitive, individualistic, and care only about
the short term” ([3], p. 57). Instead, they subscribed to the ideal of republican virtue, by which
community leaders exhibited personal sacrifice for the common good. The possibility for another,
more growth-friendly, value system had been a long time coming, evidenced as it is in such important
(and, at the time, scandalous) publications such as Bernard de Mandeville’s Fable of the Bees (1714),
whose argument that private vices produce public good was slow to gain traction in the American
colonies. However, especially at the nation’s founding, debates between “homespun” republican
simplicity and cosmopolitan luxury may be understood as conversations about energy. American
writers of modernity’s energy upslope—those whose aim it was to encourage involvement in the
global market and its high-energy habits—recognized they had to induce their readers to use their
imaginations to picture to themselves the daily benefits of such a change in behavior.

In the language of De Young and Princen, writers had to convince their readers to overcome
their natural “familiarity bias” towards habits and values they already knew, in order to adopt the
new practices. They thus turned especially in the literary arts to the technique of pre-familiarization,
the construction of mental models that “help people to feel at home in a place they have not yet
inhabited” ([3], pp. 285, 295). Long before William Catton, Jr., might therefore depict in his classic study Overshoot the outsized American energy user as Homo colossus, someone who has made “a Faustian
bargain that mortgages the future...as the price of an exuberant present”, Americans had to develop
a correspondingly colossal appetite ([5], p. 157). One of the texts that helped Americans navigate
such a change appeared at that crucial moment between the highly republican-principled Revolution
and the foundation of a nation committed increasingly to more liberal policies of individualism and
market engagement after the ratification of the Constitution. It was Joel Barlow’s epic 1787 poem The

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1 For Hubbert’s peak, see ([3], pp. 5–12).
2 Bob Johnson characterizes Americans’ use of the word energy as predominately “figurative” before the mid-nineteenth
century ([2], p. 44). As we will see, however, conceptualizing energy use has for a very long time been a challenge for
Americans, for many reasons.
3 “The appeal of republican views likely slowed the rate at which early transitions occurred by leading to policies that limited
the rights and privileges granted to canal companies, discouraging the growth of urban manufacturing, and causing many
politicians to oppose measures that would promote industrial development” ([4], p. 11).
4 The Earth can only sustain 1 billion humans “living like Americans” ([6], p. 110).
Vision of Columbus, later reworked in 1807 as The Columbiad. The first thing it asked its readers to do was to picture themselves standing on the top of the highest mountain they could imagine.

Barlow’s Vision of Columbus was only one of several texts of the era that announced the arrival of the United States on a world stage the works suggested would soon become dominated by the former colonies. Responding to an “especially fervent” domestic interest in history, perhaps only natural, given the recent events of revolution and nation-founding, such texts placed America at the forefront of a new modern world ([8], p. 235). If Barlow’s poem stands out in this group, there are several good reasons. The first is a list of subscribers headed by Louis XVI (to whom the poem was dedicated) and “His Excellency, George Washington” ([9], p. 259). The second reason is a relentlessness of catalogued detail, which if it might have impressed readers at the poem’s appearance has since helped the work since fall dramatically out of favor, gaining as it has a reputation for its “stretches of tedium” ([10], p. 128). The third has to be its unity of plot: framed by the personal tale of the eponymous explorer having been unjustly thrown into prison toward the end of his life, the poem produces, through the device of a visiting angel, a change in heart in the despondent Admiral roughly parallel to that it wants to effect in its reader.

Barlow, one of the Hartford Wits, who would later become diplomat first to the “Barbary” states of the Maghreb and then to France, manufactures with his heroic couplets plenty of patriotic propaganda. Perhaps presaging his own world traveling, however, he also creates something like a travelogue through time and space. Beginning with Columbus’s imprisonment in Spain, the work follows the angel’s inducing of the old sailor to ascend nearby “Mount of Vision, supposed to be on the west coast of Spain” to view in the world below them the current of universal history as it plays out in the Western Hemisphere ([11], p. 34). The pictures the angel instructs the prisoner to observe begin with the founding of the ancient Incan empire, continue through that empire’s wars and its collapse, and then become focused finally on the European settlement of North America. Throughout, if the angel’s one purpose is “to gratify and soothe [sic] the desponding mind of the hero” unjustly put in chains, this aim only too well agrees with the poet’s singular purpose of showing its contemporary readers how the “discovery” of America and its subsequent settlement and independence has “laid open all parts of the earth to the range of the liberal mind”, exploitation and consumption understood as a kind of passive and intellectualized activity ([9], pp. xxi, iv). It will come as no surprise to its readers that the poem’s author was to be employed shortly afterwards as an agent for a land company, as The Vision of Columbus often gives off the air of a development prospectus put to rhyme.

Yet the poem accomplishes much more than advertisement. Within this unified plot of universal history coming to its revelatory culmination on the North American continent, Barlow’s text also puts in place several foundational elements of the myth of progress that will develop with an increasingly extravagant energy consumption. These we might name as a refutation of the classical republican model of history as cyclical; a conflation of the process of resource extraction with that of production; a characterization of this process of “production” as the natural trait of the knowledgeable and moral Western subject; the supporting of this characterization with a specifically racialized discourse of productivity; and an assertion of climate melioration accompanying this process that anticipates by some two centuries the flip counter-arguments of anthropogenic climate-change denials. Even

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5 The similarly epic poem “The Rising Glory of America,” first delivered in 1771 as a commencement speech at the College of New Jersey (later, Princeton) by authors Philip Freneau and Hugh Henry Brackenridge, for example, adopts, as Eric Wertheimer observes, a repetitively injunctive rhetoric: “What must rise, and who must fall” ([7], p. 10).

6 Future references to the poem will be to this edition and will be given in parentheses by page number or book and line number, with exceptions noted. For a work that went through many changes over a period of years, this edition, revised in 1793 and supplemented by the author with notes, provides the scholar with insight into Barlow’s own expectations of the purposes and effects of his poem.

7 By the phrase “myth of progress”, I refer to those exceptionalist accounts attributing the United States’ tremendous growth to “the product of Yankee know-how, an amorphous Protestant work ethic, or even the nation’s commitments to individualism, liberal markets, and competitive capitalism”, which explanations Bob Johnson similarly rejects for the observation modernity is the product of a “deep ecological revolution” involving energy ([2], p. 3).
more than this, the poem’s invitation to its reader to inhabit the skin of a lofty and distanced observer of natural life draws on the earlier century’s infatuation with the prospect view and notions of spectatorship to help the reader become “pre-familiarized” with those “abstract forms of communication” which De Young and Princen point out are so central to the “centrifugal forces of globalization”. The poem’s angel thus aims, as I have stated, to effect a change of heart in the continent’s European discoverer; but so too does the poem’s writer desire thus to produce a change of heart in its European settlers. As the “energy systems a society adopts create the structures that underlie personal expectations and assumptions about what is normal and possible” ([12], p. 7), The Vision of Columbus thus seeks nothing less than the inculcation in its reader of new habits of mind, new methods of perception and understanding, one might even say a new “common sense” for an American expected to grow colossal by consuming the continent’s energy bounty. If the definition of the proposed geologic epoch of the Anthropocene is of a nature shaped (cataclysmically) by humans, it begins for Americans with the notion of needing to adapt to processes that only appear natural. In the work, therefore, might be found not only the blueprints for an as-yet inchoate Anthropocene but the design of a new humanity—a new “human nature”—to go along with it.

1. The Energy of History in the Early American Anthropocene

The poem thus balances from its very first lines elements of the commonsensical and the speculative. The opening scenes the angel provides Columbus, for example, are of the ocean approach to the New World, a sight with which we might expect the explorer to be familiar. Only, this viewpoint is one from high above the Earth, a perspective so detached from individual situatedness that its truths might be connected not to individual experience but to a universal history playing itself out in the proffered views—“promis’d truths that wait [all of Columbus’s] kindred race” (VIII.33). The angel’s perspective on the land appearing before them focuses from the start on the motive power of nature just waiting to be captured by its human spectator:

Near and more near the long drawn coasts arise,
Bays stretch their arms and mountains lift the skies,
The lakes, unfolding, point the streams their way,
The plains, the hills, their spreading skirts display,
The vales draw forth, high walk th’ approaching groves,
And all the majesty of nature moves. (I.155–60)

The description emphasizes the New World providing Europeans a vast expansion of territory, which by itself means a concomitant boom in available energy. Yet the lines also guide the reader to understand this untapped power as abstracted into somewhat general, iconic images of forces already performing work, even the work of indication (or instruction) in their “pointing”. Energy’s pervasive presence here is not merely potential, in other words; nature is already doing so much “moving” on its own that it only seems logical to use this activity. In such a way does the poem’s presentation of the landscape, as already shaped by globalization’s “centrifugal” force, function as an invitation to the reader to reconceive of his or her surroundings in a very specific way. That is, the poem presents the landmass of North American as already formed into De Young and Princen’s “concentrated economic and political power” of America, a new land experiencing a new kind of time

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8 The term Anthropocene has been popularized by chemist Paul Crutzen as a fitting label for the present geological epoch, shaped as it has been so significantly by human activity.
9 In a similar fashion does Frederick Buell argue fossil fuels have come to “underwrite...the habitus of modern life in the United States—our ‘private worlds, identities, bodies, thoughts, sense of geography, and emotions’” (qtd. in [2], p. 4).
10 During the period Rolf Peter Sieferle characterizes as operating as an “agrarian solar energy system”, “[t]he overall area of a landscape determined the theoretical total quantity of energy available in this landscape” ([13], p. 25). The energy boost this new landmass gave to the European nations might thus be assessed as one of the most important elements leading to the industrial revolution, the other being readily accessible coal ([14], pp. 110, 126).
directing (pointing) it toward a specific end—a characterization the reader might then come to think of as “natural” or commonsensical.

Barlow, one of the authors of *The Anarchiad* (1787), a satirical work mocking the, at the time, powerful opposition to the Constitution’s ratification and its creation of a strong centralized government, began writing *The Vision of Columbus* in 1780, when the creation of a new nation, never mind a centralized power, was still very much in doubt. The United States’ founding upon the same nation-state model as Britain and France was the result of much debate and shifting of public opinion, but so too did Barlow undergo in the process something of his own “conversion” from “Calvinism to Deism and from Federalist conservatism to Jeffersonian progressivism” ([15], p. 131). It is a shift we might take to be representative of his fellow citizens’ own changes in opinion, and the result was not merely Barlow’s commitment (and that of Americans in general) to the ideology of global engagement pursued by the newly centralized government; it also altered his (and the nation’s) sense of historical time. From a believer in “a cyclical theory of civilization inherited from Graeco-Roman historiography”, Barlow, like many of his fellow citizens, came to ascribe “to the progressive theory of history unfolded in works like Condorcet’s *L’Equisse d’un tableau historique de progrès de l’esprit humain*” ([16], p. 18). As this is a major feature of the epic, laying the foundation for its plot of the United States rising to global domination through exploitation of its natural resources, it deserves special attention.

The concept of time that mobilized the revolutionaries was an emphatically classical inheritance, one that pictured civilizations as having lifespans much like anything else living on the planet. First, a culture rose to prominence, then it flourished at its height, and finally it decayed and withered away. Such a model might appear familiar to the biologist or ecologist, but it also cannot help but strike the student of energy with the same image of the “mountain” we find in descriptions of fossil-fuel ramp-up and decline. Because societies were prone to decadence and thus dissolution at their height, American revolutionaries repeatedly referenced a classical republican concept of cultural decline in their resistance to Britain, which nation appeared to them to have succumbed to its own degeneration, relying more on its might of arms than on its power of reason. However, if there linger in Barlow’s epic remnants of a nation-individual analogy, a powerful concept for the period, they serve not to speculate on the American state’s “mortality” so much as to emphasize America’s youthful break with this earlier view of time. This attitude might be seen in Barlow’s footnote to his imagining of a future one-world government, in which he quotes Richard Price’s 1784 *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution*: “The world has hitherto been gradually improving; light and knowledge have been gaining ground, and human life at present, compared with what it once was, is much the same that a youth approaching to manhood is, compared with an infant” (IX.68n., p. 242). Note this “youth” is as far from degeneration as he is from babbling; we see this fertile “middle state” in the poem’s opening scene too, in a spectacular potential of nature that inhabits an everlasting golden present, drawing the beholder into a future whose constant improvement is dependent merely upon his use of those natural resources.

The notion a culture might achieve through its “maturing” knowledge not that age when it might begin thinking about retirement but escape from the natural constraint even of aging is of course one of the basic tenets of the doctrine of infinite economic growth based on profligate energy use. In Barlow’s epic poem, what undergirds this sales pitch to the reader is not just the natural “plenitude” evidenced in many other period descriptions of the continent’s vast natural wealth ([17], pp. 144, 145), but the expectation of a new pattern of history for Americans. This pattern, not a cycle but rather a straight line of improvement, appears as a seemingly natural process that went by the name of *translatio imperii*. According to this historiographical theory, the great human civilizations had through the ages steadily progressed westward: Egypt giving way to Greece, which succumbed to Rome, which in turn fell before the rise of Britain. Barlow invokes this theory several times, but at no time as clearly as when depicting the future greatness of the United States. As Columbus gazes on the predicted triumph of American industry, for example, the angel explains,
Each orient realm, the former pride of earth,
Where men and science drew their ancient birth,
Shall soon behold in this enlighten’d coast,
Their fame transcended, and their glory lost. (VII.111–14)

What the passage accomplishes is the conceptualization of historical time itself as a kind of natural energy into which Americans might tap, as imperial greatness leaves Britain and comes to dawn on them.

Remaking the course of history into just another current that might be seen to lap against the American coast concretizes for the poem’s audience the effortlessness with which the New World’s obvious stores of De Young’s and Princen’s “cheap and abundant raw materials and energy” will bring wealth to its inhabitants and users. This is an important rhetorical move, because at the time of the poem’s composition, almost all energy sources were somatic, or vegetable, or organic—the terminology depends upon the authority. What the terms all mean, however, is that the majority of work done in the world relied on the muscular power of humans and animals fed by vegetable matter, or on vegetable matter itself burned: things that can be seen, touched. Such resources have a materiality and visibility the poem exploits in imagery of rich fecundity: “infant maize, unconscious of its worth”, an air of “untasted fragrance”, and “[u]nbidden harvests”, with the consistency of the prefix un-marking here the very definition of (literally) low-hanging energy fruit (I.525, 528, 529). The trope of history-as-current only adds to this sensorial invitation. All the poem’s reader has to do is follow a current that is already flowing, reap a harvest already ripening. Translatio imperii also appealed to its audience’s sense of a natural order, however, because the process’s westward course matched the daily path of the sun. Rather than a fanciful conceit, such an idea only reflects a time whose “extra-somatic” energy sources—wind and water energy, for example—were also engaged in seemingly “passive” ways. The harvesting of timber in colonial North America, for example, depended upon seasonal floods for transportation, when logs were simply floated downriver to sawmills ([12], p. 20). So while the reader today might find only quaint detail in the poem’s many gushing streams, for Barlow’s age such landscape features were the workhorses, so to speak, of industry. Indeed, Barlow’s society’s progress was so dependent upon that power that its own course might be depicted through the imagery of moving water:

As small, swift streams their furious course impel,
Till meeting waves their winding currents swell,
Then widening sweep thro’ each descending plain,
And move majestic to the boundless main;
’Tis thus society’s small sources rise,
Through passions wild their devious progress lies—(VIII.59–64).

The submerged argument in the lines is that rapid societal changes, even if “furious” or “wild” in motivation and “small” in scope, will add up to a unifying force of improvement for the whole. This analogy appears in the “Argument” to Book IX of the poem, which promises the reader a glimpse of the “[f]uture progress of society with respect to commerce, discoveries, the opening of canals, philosophical, medical, and political knowledge, the assimilation and harmony of all languages” (p. 238). It is not for nothing that Cecelia Tichi has called the poem “Barlow’s great act of literary engineering” ([18], p. 128). Right up there with the invention of a universal language: canals!12

11 Bob Johnson provides a handy key to the different terms for this pre-industrial economy, identifying the “organic” economy with the work of E. A. Wrigley, the “solar-agrarian regime” with Rolf Peter Sieferle, the “somatic energy regime” with John McNeill, and the “biological old regime” with Robert Marks ([2], p. 15, n20).
12 Barlow collaborated with engineer Robert Fulton on a work to be entitled “The Canal: A Poem on the Application of Physical Science to Political Economy,” but the project was never finished ([18], p. 146).
Barlow’s busy landscapes thus have the purpose of their own “energy mining” in their ad-copy solicitation of more immigrant muscle power to the continent. However, the poem also aims to make the American reader believe he or she might access the natural energy flows around him or her through a distinctly intellectual power for which it gives patriotic examples: “See the sage Rittenhouse, with ardent eye, Lift the long tube and pierce the starry sky”, and “See, West with glowing life the canvass warms; His sovereign hand creates impassion’d forms” (VII.247–48, 265–66). In the repetitive carnival-barker’s syntax of the visual imperative, Barlow means to do much more than merely effect the reader’s appreciation for these great men; he proposes to engage the reader in a power of envisioning he understands guarantees America’s usurpation of European dominance of the globe.13

Although before the Revolution “95 percent of Americans farmed and consumed little from outside their immediate needs”, they had already begun to tap into a “symbiosis of muscle power and water power in the thickly forested New World” that would encourage “an ever-greater scale of operations, ever-greater capital investment” ([12], pp. 30, 40). Indeed, “in the 120 years of colonization leading up to the Revolution”, according to John McCusker and Russell Menard, the “gross national product (GNP) grew as much as 3.2 percent per year” (qtd. in [2], p. 10). Colonists’ exploitation of the vast energy reserve of the North American forests—“Where heavy trunks the sheltering dome requires, and copious fuel feeds the wint’ry fires” (I.517–18)—were already allowing them to delight in household fires bigger than those seen in the royal residences of Europe ([4], p. 26). The next step is for Barlow’s fellow citizens to lift up their eyes to a bigger plan; and this the poem itself designs to realize. Because, at a certain point, the description the poet gives of the new American power of visionary thought animating the heroes he lists becomes indistinguishable from the perspective he himself lends the reader:

Fixt in sublimest thought, see them rise,
Superior worlds unfolding to their eyes;
Heav’n in their view unveils th’ eternal plan,
And gives new guidance to the paths of man. (VII.225–228)

It is of course his own Vision of Columbus that through its angelic guide offers his readers a pictorial tour of heaven’s plan as it is played out in an embodied, material history, his own poem that fixes them in “sublimest thought”. Indeed, we might think of the work as a new kind of speculum principum—not for the “prince” to whom the work is dedicated, but the American reader who is already, thanks to the continent’s “boundless main”, its “copious fuel” of firewood, and its network of waterways, living at a “royal” level. All the reader has to do is open his or her eyes.

2. Seeing like a State

In such a way does the poem connect the gratification of the “imaginary wants” of a young global economy with a certain ennoblement of material circumstance but also of mind (IX.68n). If “a dread sublimity informs the whole” of the American continent, in other words, it only “wakes a dread sublimity of soul” in the landscape’s percipient (II.109–10). To behold the glory of New World nature is already to begin to consume it and take on its power. The view of the world from on high that the poem presents for its reader might be linked to the concept of the prospect view, that higher perspective of the king and philosopher, increasingly democratized throughout the eighteenth century through efforts in areas as diverse as painting and landscape design as the proper subject position of a burgeoning middle

13 Barlow has a personal stake in this course of empires as a poet as well, as common companion idea of the theory of translatio imperii was the concept of translatio studii. This notion held that with the transfer westward of political might also went an ascendancy in learning. If the poem’s argument, in other words, is that the United States will soon inherit the mantle of world leadership as a nation, one way to make plain this promise is to show achievement in American arts and sciences through the poet’s own artistry.
Such an imagined position speaks first of all to the expectation of spectacular production ordered for the viewer’s private pleasure, the kind of graphic ordering of the world we find in diagrams, maps, and tables. In this it also reflects the expectation of a distanced, high-energy engagement with the world we might find in newspapers treating events from far away, requiring, as such publications do, costly networks of communication but also, at the time, increasingly mechanized and industrialized methods of printing and distribution. If the world does one thing for the reader of Barlow’s poem, in other words, it is “unfold”, a verb used some twenty-nine times in the text to describe the activity of everything from the sky to sails to riverbanks. However, the verb of course details best the activity of reading De Young’s and Princen’s “abstract forms of communication” that are journals or books. If the poem thus strives to convince its reader that a high-energy, consumptive engagement with the world will somehow ennoble him or her, reflecting the reader’s higher intelligence and future promise of world domination, it also seeks to naturalize this engagement as something technologically mediated. The world with which the poem puts the reader in touch, in other words, is one made of paper.

Barlow’s poem is thus something like a course of training for its early republican reader in new “habits of thinking”, ones we might identify with a scientifically enabled commercial progressivism ([8], p. 241). Both on the level of textual production, in its meticulously ordered heroic couplets, and the content of the production of which it treats, which is enabled by distance, abstraction, and knowledge, the poem does not merely argue for this transition; it embodies it. That is, for those who might harbor some skepticism “about the social effects of a shift away from a local agricultural economy”, who might “know” nature primarily through their laboring in it, Barlow offers up an America of the “mind’s eye”, one whose attractions readers might too recognize if they just shift their point of view ([12], p. 67; [2], p. 48; [18], p. 5). As John Griffith points out, “What Barlow provides [with his landscape descriptions] is not an image of what one would see as he looked at the Mississippi River, but something of what he might know about the river from studying a map” ([8], p. 242) (see also [22], p. 77). This shift in perception Barlow characterizes as a liberation with clear benefits:

The mind shall soar; the nations catch the flame,
Enlarge their treaties and extend their fame;
And buried gold, drawn bounteous from the mine,
Give wings to commerce and the world refine. (II.385–88)

The American landscape becomes transformed in Barlow’s writing into a commodity, one accessed through abstract, knowing vision, but the viewer undergoes a similar transformation, or “refinement”, one whose recurring verb of draw only serves to emphasize both the process’s ease and the technological mediation embodied in the poem’s own “painting”.16

This individual “refinement” is one that goes hand-in-hand in the poem with the creation of that centralized power of the nation-state. Many Revolutionary-era thinkers had serious doubts a republic could be sustained over such a huge landmass as the American continent; what would make this historical anomaly possible are the stores of untapped energy much greater than those available to Greece and Rome, which would help “shrink” the nation’s area in terms of communication and transportation. Higher energy use thus lay at the heart of the American project from the very beginning.

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14 The definitive exploration of the prospect view remains John Barrell, English Literature in History, 1730–80: An Equal, Wide Survey (Hutchinson, 1983) [19], but there is a strong tradition of identifying the metaphors and technologies of vision as key to modernity—and colonialism. See, for example, Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision. Edited by David Michael Levin (University of California, 1993) [20], but also Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (Routledge, 1992) [21].

15 Not by accident did the increased circulation of printed news go hand-in-hand with the consumption of the new luxury products in such modern institutions as the coffee house: to conceive of oneself as having an expanded horizon of knowledge was already to have begun to cultivate in oneself a greater appetite for the other products of a trade made possible only by higher energy use.

16 Barlow engages in an extended metaphor of himself as merely painting a scene, which allows him to pass off his persuasion as mere description but also to engage his reader visually, imaginatively (VII.47–58).
but so did strong identification with the centralization of power its resources made possible. Indeed, one might go so far as to characterize the new perception of individual experience Barlow is advocating as binding together its audience in a common conceptualization of experience comparable to what James Scott calls “seeing like a state”. This manner of viewing and arranging the world Scott not coincidentally identifies as occurring in that period of what he calls “high modernism”, “from roughly 1830 until World War I”, with a European peak in energy extraction ([23], p. 89). Its elements include “the administrative ordering of nature and society”, “self-confidence about scientific and technological progress”, an “authoritarian state that is willing and able to use the full weight of its coercive power”, and “a prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these plans” ([23], p. 4). Scott’s purpose is to identify a governmental pattern of rational social planning that often goes awry, but the features he identifies also accurately trace the kind of presumptive controlling behavior enabled by higher energy use even at smaller scales. Evidence of the American frontier’s “administrative ordering” might be found in the many surveys and land-investment schemes of the period, in which Barlow himself was involved. Scott’s second element, on progress, is the very theme of Barlow’s poem. Setting aside the fourth element for now, we might understand the third characteristic as occupying much of the poet’s attention in the text, as Barlow is particularly keen to rationalize the potential costs to other peoples of the United States coming into ascendancy on what is, after all, a colonized continent. To do this, Barlow establishes as early as Book II of the epic an appeal to the reader through the medium of myth.

The Western Hemisphere has had other European settlers than the English and Dutch who Barlow identifies as inhabiting the northern continent, of course, and in particular the early experience of the Spanish served for Anglophone historians as a point of ideological contrast. Barlow references this “Black Legend” of Spanish Conquest in The Vision of Columbus as a counterpoint to the settlement of North America: unlike the Spanish, the story goes, who like “tygers” butchered the already urbanized natives of Central and South America, the predominately English and Dutch colonists of the north treat peacefully with indigenes who engage in “mazy wand’rings” ([7], p. 7; II.348, 225). In stark contrast to the relatively civilized urban dwellers of ancient Mexico City murdered and displaced by the conquistadores, the native inhabitants of the regions farther north appear quite differently under Columbus’s angel-directed gaze, in terms that suggest exactly how the reader should feel about them: “He saw, at once, as far as eye could rove, like scattering herds, the swarthy people move” (I.5–6). What Barlow is referencing here is the idea that “the Native Americans [were] heathens who had failed to utilize the new world”, a theory of just occupation cemented by Swiss legal theorist Emmerich de Vattel in the mid-eighteenth century, who identified possession of the land with its stable inhabitation ([12], p. 15). The tribes of the north, who show themselves to be, under Columbus’s more knowing eye, animal-like primitives, thus have no solid claim to the land they “roamed over” ([7], p. 5). In fact, as Columbus watches on, the “herd” of people seems to melt away in front of him, only “airy shapes” or “grisly phantoms,” who, “despising home/O’er shadowy streams and trackless deserts roam” (II.9, 12, 15–16). European settlers’ seizing of the vast tracts of energy-rich forests and fields of North America here emerges not only as an act done in good conscience, motivated by (self-)improvement, but even something that corrects a native mistake, as the riches of the continent are hardly a thing to “despise”—literally, look down upon.

If the way of perceiving the continent for which Barlow is arguing is as “a source of commodities—as raw material waiting for transformation”, we might understand the word “goods” to have a moral connotation here ([12], p. 15). That is, the European settlers are merely making use of natural resources of vegetable energy “wasted” by the natives. Leaning heavily on a Biblical conception of typology, Barlow endeavors to identify a precursor of ennobling civilization in the hemisphere, one U.S.-American settlers might point to as justifying and, in a sense, prophesying their own domination of the land. This the poem accomplishes through the figure of Manco Capac. Capac, the founder of the Incan empire in what is today Peru, appears in Barlow’s text as himself a wanderer from “a northern clime” (II.452). Capac and his wife Oella hatch a cunning plan to take over this new land he has stumbled upon by proclaiming themselves descendants of the natives’ sun god. Clothed in radiant
white cotton, the young couple are successful in their ruse, and the result is a peace and plenty that appear as magically as any product of our star’s boundless light:

Unbounded fullness flows beneath his [the sun’s] reign
Seas yield their treasures, fruits adorn the plain;
Warm’d by his beam, their mountains pour the flood,
And the cool breezes wake beneath the God. (II.529–32)

Commentators on the poem have pointed out the parallels between the Incan sun-god here and the Enlightenment’s own identification of itself with illumination, but we might take a step further and say what distinguishes Capac from his subjects is his “daring views”, his abstract separation of himself from others, which assumption of superiority allows him to exploit the various “yields” and “treasures” of the land, all of which come from the sun, which is, after all, the source of all energy on the planet.

There is an odd sort of “build it and they will come” quality to this specific fiction, as Capac’s (and, presumably, the European American’s) imaginative assertion of superiority leads directly to being swept up by the current of universal history in the direction of progress. As Barlow states outright in the poem’s final version as *The Columbiad*, “one of the most operative means of bringing forward our improvements and of making mankind wiser and better than they are, is to convince them that they are capable of becoming so” ([22], p. 80). What is crucial about Barlow’s fiction is its allowing a common conception among European settlers of North America that they are engaged in a morally responsible mission, which in turn allows them to extend their trust enough to participate in an expansive system. By themselves, that is, America’s new sources of energy are no guarantee of economic growth; what is needed is that “highly structured system of trade characterized by debt obligations that bound borrowers’ ambitions, expectations, and imaginations to future repayment”—in other words, credit, perhaps “the most expansive resource in human history” ([25], pp. 1, 102). “Credit”, Calvin Schermerhorn reminds us, “dealt with ambition. Credit dealt with imagination. Credit dealt with the future. Financial paper...bound borrowers’ ambitions, imaginations, and expectations to future repayment, perpetual accumulation, and relationships that expanded capacities seemingly without limit” ([25], p. 102). Credit’s “coercive power” may be seen in Schermerhorn’s choice of metaphor of binding, but also the context in which he is speaking, which is the rise of American capitalism through the practice of slavery. That the source of the northern colonizer’s power is so consistently characterized in Barlow’s poem as merely a habit of mind and not the energy exploitation that goes along with it is not surprising, given this context. Energy use even today continues to be hidden behind the celebration of innovation and technology, and the poem shows us why: to consider any activity important here other than thinking and observing is to risk countenancing the European settlement of the north is not too different from that active looting described in the “Black Legend” regarding the south, and the interpersonal trust necessary for expansive credit would necessarily be put at risk of erosion.

Capac thus serves as a kind of quasi-biblical “type of the later enlightenment” for the Anglo settler, but also as an origin myth of sorts for the eighteenth-century version of Thomas Friedman’s famous “McDonalds theory of war”, which identifies in that high-energy activity De Young and Princen characterize as “intensive commercialization” a powerful influence on self-interest, steering it away from armed conflict ([26], p. 41; [27]). The creation of “imaginary wants”, Barlow thus argues, for a readership unconvinced by the “goods” of global luxury trade, is not an activity that encourages greed; on the contrary, it is rather an imperative of a universal history to be fulfilled in a peaceful global society. Indeed, Barlow informs us the cultivation the northern settlers engage in not only “improves” the
settlers and land; clearing forests also serves to ameliorate the climate, removing as it does obstacles to the Earth’s warming by the sun and making the land and the surrounding atmosphere more habitable and healthy (I.470). Barlow’s linking the activity of cultivation to climate change is a strangely astute anticipation of the scale of effect that has given rise to the Anthropocene, understood in different terms for an era just beginning to climb the global energy mountain. Anthropogenic climate change is only one more detail in the poem put in service of a “culture of consumption”, rather than the abolition of one. However, the argument for the benefits of consumption—indeed, the intentional conflation of the extraction of energy resources, inherently destructive, wasteful, and subject to natural limits, with a production of “goods” inherently beneficial and dependent only upon human desire, trust, and ingenuity—cultivates in the reader a reorientation in regard to his or her daily experience.

What “counts” now, suddenly, is an altered relationship to the environment, mediated through paper but specifically paper currency, in which the American reveals him- or herself to be engaged in a communal activity of future-oriented confidence of belief, a characteristic that distinguishes the American as “actor” in something like a mythological drama.

3. The Production of Whiteness

Barlow’s blindness to the waste products of the exploitation of that vegetable energy of the continent is thus of a piece with his overlooking of the same process’s costs to other peoples on the continent. That is to say, his removal of himself from the immediate scene in view—its potential societal damage but also its environmental “sacrifice zones” ([4], p. 12)—seems all too often the very purpose of the perspective for which his poem offers training. If, in other words, as we have seen, the “swarthy” tribes of natives emerge as so many herd-like animals ignorant of the natural bounty that surrounds them, so too do enslaved humans only appear as emblems in the great spans of history of which the work treats. In the angel’s history lesson for Columbus, for example, “slavery” is a feature that “follow’d where the standard led” in the early days of competition among nascent European states (IV.356); or, it is that characteristic of blind devotion with which adherents of Eastern religions greet their objects of worship (VIII.283). Yet if there is one feature the colonization of North and South America have in common, which should unite the landmasses in a “higher” historical view such as Barlow’s, it is the importance to the continents’ developing economies of slavery. No mention at all is made of the slave labor that, as Greg Grandin points out, in “both the United States and Spanish America...produced the wealth that made independence possible” ([29], p. 7); but neither are mentioned those estimated 100,000 more captive Africans brought to the United States during the two decades Barlow worked to revise The Vision of Columbus into The Columbiad ([24], p. 40). Indeed, one could say Barlow’s blindness to the labor force that makes possible the United States’ leap into industrialized modernity is related to his—and the nation’s—blindness to the real costs and limits of energy itself; in fact, it is just possible the aversion to confront the centrality of the practice of slavery to the growing American economy is the source of the nation’s need to interpret the immense energy potential of vast forests and great swaths of uncultivated land as instead some feat of reason or fiat of favorable divinity, either of God or Nature.

18 “From these principles we may conclude that cultivation tends to warm the atmosphere and meliorate the climate of a cold country; as by removing the forests and the marshes, the solid earth is open to the sun and acts upon the air” (II.118n). One of Barlow’s sources for these ideas is History of America (1777) by William Robertson, characterized by Tichi as “a vicarious explorer in the bibliographic practice of the time” ([18], p. 121).
19 See the book by the same title by Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (Pantheon, 1983) [28].
20 Johnson identifies this hiding of the real costs of energy exploitation in regard specifically to fossil-fuel use as repression of “the many traumas and dislocations associated with fossil fuels both psychically and symbolically within a national narrative of progress, emancipation, and empowerment that had little room for modernity’s objections and casualties” ([2], p. xx).
21 In The Columbiad, Barlow adds an appeal to his audience to give up the urge to “master” other humans, through the introduction of the new character Atlas, “guardian genius of Africa”; but as this suggestion originates from the same angel-like perspective of domination of the entire globe, it not surprisingly had little effect on the poem’s readers (see [22], p. 78). Nowhere in the poem’s many forms does the poet address his hero’s role in enslaving indigenes.
One thus cannot help but detect some brutal irony in Barlow’s agreement with Schermerhorn on the right metaphor for the United States’ economic rise in his proclamation that the New World’s settlers will grow in power “Till arts and laws in one great system bind, By leagues of peace, the labors of mankind” (IV.381–82).22 Those who stand to gain by the exploitation of the continent’s energy resources are marked, as Manco Capac and Oella are marked, not just by the daring of their presumption and their fictions of commodification and moral trustworthiness and “production”, but by their whiteness. Capac and Oella appear before the sun-worshiping natives, we may recall, in gowns constructed by Oella herself out of white cotton, which until “late in the eighteenth century...had been a luxury good woven on handlooms in Indian villages” ([24], p. 80). However, with the beginning boom in cotton production in the southern United States at the time of The Vision of Columbus’s publication, that fact about cotton would change, with enormous consequences. In 1800, the South produced 1.4 million pounds of cotton; in 1860, 2 billion pounds ([24], p. 113). Rising up to refine and weave that raw cotton into cloth were not only the British textile mills upon which that nation’s first Industrial Revolution was based, but the replication of that same process in the United States, which “scattered settlements along virtually every stream” in New England capable of powering a waterwheel ([12], p. 50). The result was the transformation of the coast’s streams and rivers into a “complex landscape” of energy pathways that would serve the predominately “water-powered economy” of the nation until new energy sources might displace water after the Civil War ([12], pp. 19, 48). However, it also effected the transformation of experience for its participants, for whom the “shapes, textures, rhythms, and energies” of daily life “against which experiences appear familiar or unfamiliar, comfortable or disconcerting” too would drastically change ([12], p. 8).23 If, between those years, according to Baptist, “[a]n entire planet’s consumers shared in the welfare of the growing margin between the price of raw cotton and what the price would have been if picked by free labor”, this true example of Energy Return on Investment “would transform the worker’s idea of time, the traveler’s sense of space, and the consumer’s relationship to the market” ([24], p. 318); ([12], p. 40).24 Underlying this transformation is not just the bounty of natural resources and the general turn of mind toward credit, but another seemingly invisible “fuel”—of the enslaved ([30], p. 10).

A higher energy use not only makes things appear, then—it also makes things seem to disappear, including energy use itself.25 Yet Barlow’s poem attributes another surprising power to the purposeful utilization of energy to produce commodities, one that has to do with the identity of its users. Caught between the environmental theory of race of theorists like the Comte de Buffon, who held that North America was an unhealthy place that stunted human growth, and developers of a biological explanation like Thomas Jefferson, whose Notes on the State of Virginia (1785) seeks to explain race via structural anatomy and sympathy, Barlow links race to the labor of cultivation in which both native and European may share. The natives might in their “swarthy face/Display the wild complexion of the place”,

Yet when their tribes to happy nations rise,  
And earth by culture warms the genial skies,  
A fairer tint and more majestic grace  
Shall flush their features and exult the race. (II.115–20)

22 Interestingly, only eleven lines before this prophecy, Barlow uses the same verb of “bind” to describe the “tyranny” against which the universal historical process of peaceful progress is working (IV.370). Can it be the main difference between the two possible systems is who is “bound”, and by whom?
23 Tichi appraises Barlow’s contribution to an American tradition of imagining the New World as staging area for the creation of a “New Earth” to consist of his adding to the conversation the French term utilize: “[t]o render useful, to turn to account” ([18], p. 150).
24 The “margin” identified by Baptist can be conceived in energy terms: the energy “investment” in slavery (food, clothing, shelter, etc.) was dwarfed by the “return” on that investment in the work of the enslaved. The Energy Return on Investment, or EROI, method of energy analysis was introduced by Charles Hall; several writers have since compared slavery’s energy returns and the lifestyle it made possible to the energy returns and lifestyle enabled by fossil fuels (see [6], pp. 205, xii).
25 In regard specifically to fossil-fuels use, Johnson refers to this trend as the “disembodiment of labor” ([2], p. 43).
That optimism or “happiness” we have seen exhibited in credit expansion is here forwarded as a trait of the Europeans, in contrast to the more desultory or somber cultural others they encounter in the world; not merely a capacity for feeling for a sentimental age, it is an outlook on life, one capable in this limited case, it appears, of being communicated to the natives (see, for example, II.185). Thus might the natives benefit as much as the Earth itself from “culture”, or the cultivation of the land, in the “tint” of their skin and the “grace” of their bearing; but so too will the European settlers by this generosity and work:

[Columbus's] foll'wers too, fair Europe's noblest pride,
When future gales shall wing them o'er the tide,
A ruddier hue and deeper shade shall gain,
And stalk, in statelier figures, o'er the plain. (II.123–26)

Where might the races meet? In Earth-improving and human-enriching toil. No mention is made of darker-skinned laborers upon whose industry the creation of the modern world rests.

So it is a very peculiar kind of labor the poem celebrates. As many readers of the work have pointed out, its hero, Columbus, who after all lived an adventurous life by any standard, is relegated to the passive witnessing of the historical dioramas staged for the “great Observer” by his guardian angel (IV.439; VI.247; IX.373). Much more than just the author’s figure of his “ideal reader”, however, able to ask questions of the poet/angel and be representatively happy with the answers given ([18], p. 129),

Columbus also functions as the audience’s introduction to a new subject position in this developing modern economy. This we might understand as an attitude of “cooperation” with a bountiful Earth that is “bound” to produce, with a static abstractedness from the scenes of everyday life in which this labor takes place ([18], p. 134). This in turn relates to Scott’s fourth characteristic of “seeing like a state”, which is “a prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these plans” of centralized government. The reader who subscribes to Barlow’s view of the world is only urged to take on this “higher view” of the historical present in order to pursue his own pleasure in the global marketplace. The Vision of Columbus is emphatically no georgic: nowhere in its nine books does anyone milk a cow or plow a field; instead, it celebrates a change in perception that it connects to a higher racial unity in sun-warmed whiteness that naturally reaps its just reward.

Christopher Jones’ tracing in this period the creation of “landscapes of intensification” that exploit natural energy resources in land reworked into networks and pathways might be understood to have foundations in this particular text far more perceptual than physical. That is, one might say that the first step to creating a landscape of intensification was for the settlers to approach the natural features before them with the intention of “making them pay” or produce. Evidence of this attitude might be found throughout the poem, in which rivers never function as ecological environments but always as something like highways, leading to the open market of the ocean. If the network of streams and rivers witnessed by Columbus, in other words, might be repeatedly described as “sublime”, overwhelming all rational sense, it is because they promise a wealth beyond all prior measure:

He saw Xaraya’s diamond banks unfold,
And Paraguay’s deep channel pav’d with gold,
Saw proud Potosi rear his glittering head,
Whence the clear Plata wears his tinctur’d bed;
Rich with the spoils of many a distant mine,
In one broad silver sea their floods combine... (I.313–18)

Although skin color might be a slightly malleable quality in the poem, this matter of perception is not. To be “white”, conceivably, is at least a matter as perceptual as it is physical: it is to be able to

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26 Tichi is here quoting Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Wesleyan, 1961) [31].
recognize the land’s profit possibilities. Or we might put it this way: as a white westerner, when one looks at the land, a lightbulb naturally comes on.

As is fitting for an economy “bound” for expansion, the poem thus argues for a shift toward a more expansive vision of the nation and the national citizen. In stark contrast to Buffon, but also in a much different way than Jefferson, Barlow characterizes the new race of humans who inhabit the continent in terms of an intellectual as well as a physical bigness. Indeed, even the petty matter of their exhausting the land with repeated monoculture plantings will be reconceived within this larger story as part of the fable of Manifest Destiny: farmers do not move west because they have used wasteful methods, addicted as they might have become to the easily obtained high yields of “virgin” soils ([1], p. 106); rather, they are participating in a divinely ordained plan that also follows the sun’s path. It is no mistake Cecelia Tichi identifies in the poem’s “big picture” anticipation of the nation’s tall tales in the next century ([18], p. 135). However, another way to view Barlow’s description of the modern American citizen is as the flipside of Mandeville’s. In Mandeville’s conception of society, what one does doesn’t matter because even one’s vices add up to public good; similarly, in Barlow’s epic, what is celebrated first and foremost is a manner of beholding the landscape, one it identifies with a specific “race”. What this new point of view characterizes is the attitude of a consumer. The nation’s growth, and the beholder’s own intellectual expansion, will both happen as easily and as naturally as a glance, as those invisible processes of slave labor and energy exploitation both masquerade in the poem as simply a power of the poet’s and readers’ shared vision.

4. Conclusions: Amelioration and Apocalypse

Given all of these ingredients, the culmination of Barlow’s prophecy for the continent is something the reader will not be surprised to find him comparing to Biblical apocalypse. Specifically, he invokes the post-millennialist argument of a period of a thousand years’ enlightenment then to be followed by the divinely ordained end of history: “It has long been the opinion of the author, that such a state of peace and happiness as is foretold in scripture, and commonly called the millennial period, may be rationally expected to be introduced without a miracle” (IX.68n). The important distinction here between Barlow’s understanding and that of a pre-millennialism is that within Barlow’s conception of things the inception of the millennial period of peace and prosperity does not depend upon divine intervention; instead, humanity might be trusted to cooperate with and carry out a providential history just as it might be trusted to cooperate with and carry out the harvest of the New World’s inevitable, natural increase. The importance of this general belief in “growth as good,” as “progress and expansion”, cannot be overestimated, as it represents a key source of energy in the system ([1], p. 155).

Indeed, in The Vision of Columbus greater energy consumption is expressed in combined processes of historical, natural, and human improvement that are all inextricably linked. Not only does the cultivation of the land enrich its human workers, it also benefits the Earth, chasing away frost from its surface as “blooms of culture rise” (IX.108). This is true even if the source of this connection lies in human longing, as it is the “patriotic mind” becoming freed from “narrow views and local laws” through the desire to “taste new joys and cherish new desires”, which through these “imaginary wants” even now “lifts a larger thought and reaches far” in its commercial ambition (IX.193–94, 173, 197). Barlow’s continued emphasis on perspective in the quoted lines is not accidental. What the work wants to accomplish is the transformation of the acquisitive glance into prophetic sight, sure, but also more basically the shift in the reader’s point of view on the global luxury trade. Columbus learns from the angel how to reinterpret his life not as a tragedy but as something of a divine comedy, his many voyages leading to the establishment of a one-world commercial utopia. However, in a similar way

27 This repeated exhaustion of land by farmers who would then move west to exploit new soils was a practice only made possible by the landmass’s vast natural resources, but it set a general trend for other wasteful practices of the modern American, “behaviour that appears absurd from an energy point of view” ([13], p. 45).
does this “ideal reader” stand in for the poem’s audience, who are being instructed to understand how all of this goodness could possibly come from a process of acquisition that might “Expand the selfish to the social flame, and fire the soul to deeds of nobler fame” (IX.173–74). At the moment, they might feel similarly tempted to cast a disapproving eye on their own involvement in the global marketplace; but they too should recognize, the poem argues, these “temptations” as their own “famous” contributions to the peaceful End of Days.

In this embracing of a supposedly racial characteristic of happiness and optimism, the poet presents the reader as participating everywhere in flowing systems of energy. On one hand, all of the world’s separate streams—and canals!—pour together their natural plunder: “The streams, all freighted from the bounteous plain, Swell with the load and labor to the main” (IX.383–84). On the other hand, the Earth’s oceans crowd with sail:

The loaded barks, in peaceful squadrons, rise,
And wave their cloudly curtains to the skies.
Thro’ the deep strait that leads the midland tide,
The sails look forth, and swell their beauteous pride;
Where Asia’s isles and utmost shores extend,
Like rising suns the sheeted masts extend. (IX.97–100)

Not just a warming Earth results from this new way of being, but the oceans themselves made over into one great landscape of energy intensification—sails that appeal to the reader with an overwhelming vision of white. “White-rob’d” are the risen elect, who number in the “millions” at the final Day of Judgment (IX.351). White too the “main” the mass of sail “o’ershades” (IX.114). All is “cloudly”, and even the sails “look forth” with purposeful sight. What provides such improvement and bounty? The “great source of love”, according to the poet, which “flows abroad” (VIII.457).

Yet if it is a “chain” of friendship that “binds all human kind” in this vision of a paradise of shopping, it is a particularly monochromatic collective, one that has learned to enchain all of the Earth’s own motive forces as well (IX.56). What Barlow traces in the poem is the process Nye describes as the colonists’ development of the “energies of conquest” into “a surplus of power”, one the historian too pictures in similarly expansive, panoramic language:

The energies stored up for centuries in fine soils and seemingly endless forests had been released into the economy. The energies of streams had been harnessed to thousands of small waterwheels, each of which was as strong as a hundred men or more. Immigrant farmers had used the power of sailing ships, small mills, horses, oxen, and superior tools to displace Native Americans. Their system of power dispersed the population into the landscape it was transforming ([12], pp. 39–40).

Nowhere in The Vision of Columbus does Barlow urge the reader to act in any specific way to access this “system of power”, other than mimicking that Columbian gesture of taking ownership. In fact, convincing the reader that the purpose of these new energy flows is to enrich him effortlessly is exactly the point. If the reader is an American, he needs only to expect to be raised up; and if the reader is not an American, he needs to become one, quickly. Barlow’s own individual efforts to bring settlers to the United States as part of the post-revolution boom in land speculation would cost him nearly a year tromping all over the streets of Paris. It would end in the ignominy of scandal, thanks in part to an English con man who called himself, oddly, William Playfair ([32], p. 163). However, Barlow’s most-reworked literary effort was itself too part of a trend, one in thinking about a dawning world. An increasing number of printed texts about an improved future began to hint that the American experience might be establishing a new way of life entirely, whether one went to America or not. This sense only reflected observed facts. As historian Paul Colinvaux points out, the ramping up of American agriculture was to feed “babies in European slums, so that the future immigrants were actually living in the American spaces even before they crossed the Atlantic” ([33], p. 232). In
much the same way did the writers Barlow influenced—William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Paine [32,34]—envision in the tapping of the new energy flows a kind of Americanization of the world. So, while The Vision of Columbus even at the height of its popularity was something of a “coffee table” book, “more admired than read”, its epic style from the start outdated and its general gist available at a glance (“His Excellency” George Washington gave his copy away), that gist was a powerfully convincing one ([35], p. 7). In much the same way as Adam Smith might never use the word capitalism but only speak of a “society of perfect liberty” ([36], p. 74), Barlow’s book helped to transform implicitly his readers’ expectations of what the world was and what it was for, expectations the new flows of energy appeared to answer.

In the end, Barlow was right to believe that land speculation would usher the new nation into a much wealthier future. Only, it was slave-produced cotton, not self-harvesting timber and self-sowing fruit and grain, that would give the land value and make the Mississippi Delta in particular “a kind of Saudi Arabia of the early nineteenth century” ([37], p. 113). The fevered speculation in southern wilds and in the enslaved human beings to work them primed the credit and cash-flow pump of an industrializing economy that could then exploit not just aboveground forests, but what Rolf Peter Sieferle calls “subterranean forests”: vast deposits of oil, coal, and gas ([37], p. 38; [13]). The drive to access that even mightier system of power increased energy’s environmental and human costs in the United States, but it also provided Americans with a greater ability to hide those costs behind a theater scrim of “moral worth” ([33], p. 231). As a result, while the energy fields of the nation’s greatness might no longer present a panorama to behold but rather a dirty secret to hide, it was possible, for a time, to hide it ([2], pp. xxvii–xxix). As we now look upon the unmistakably damaged American landscape from the downslope of the modern energy mountain, however, we might have another understanding of an observer’s despondency, one the poet never anticipated. We might even wonder if the hands that draw back the curtains of cloud from the scene of “universal history” are those not of angels but of demons. Whatever our feelings, Barlow’s easily forgotten and dismissed little book presents us with an important story with which we have as yet still not fully come to terms.

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