

## TWO “CONNECTICUT WITS” – Joel Barlow and David Humphreys



A bust of Barlow (1754-1812)  
by Jean-Antoine Houdon.

Joel Barlow (1754-1812) was one of the “Connecticut Wits” -- along with Timothy Dwight, John Trumbull, David Humphreys, Lemuel Hopkins, and Richard Alsop -- and who gathered in the late 1780’s in Hartford for purposes of showing, by way of verse and essays published in newspapers, high-minded support for Federalist-Nationalism; accompanied by a satirical contempt and ridiculing scorn for lawlessness and disorder, as manifested in Shays’ rebellion, and mindless levelers, including ingratitude displayed by some citizens toward retiring Continental army officers with respect to the latter’s receiving just reimbursement for their war service. In addition to at one time acting as chaplain for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mass. brigade, and subsequently becoming lawyer, bookseller, land dealer, newspaper publisher, and European diplomat under Madison, Barlow was particularly conspicuous for being both a genuinely pious, if ad hoc (it took him six weeks to be ordained) clergyman, and flaming pro-French Revolutionary. Emory Elliott in his *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic, 1725-1810* (1986) makes a point of demonstrating that several of the Connecticut Wits and other important writers of the early United States took up authorship as a substitute for and instead of addressing the public as orthodox preachers; religion having lost much of its earlier pervasive influence following the Revolutionary War. Certainly Barlow without is one good example of this transition. And yet we must not think of such writers as desiring to supplant and overthrow traditional religion; rather their purpose was speak in a language people would more readily listen to; while showing themselves possessed of modern minds capable of adapting to the ineluctable moral and social changes transpiring in both the former colonies and Europe.

Traditionally received as Barlow’s fondest work is his light and humorous ode “Hasty Pudding” (1793); a tribute to corn flakes; written in the parodying manner of Samuel Butler, Alexander Pope, and fellow Hartford Wit John Trumbull; while he was in France observing the Revolution. Despite its overtly comical character, the poem contains occasionally beautiful lines respecting nature and rustic life not unlike something Wordsworth, himself a Revolutionary pilgrim in France at that same time, might have penned.

Yet more ambitiously, Barlow also composed two very grave and weighty epics, written in heroic couplets, centered on Columbus and the birth and hope of “America;” namely *The Vision of Columbus* (1787) and *The Columbiad* (1807). While, as is routinely observed, these in totum are *too* laborious in size and scope to work as poetry, they are notwithstanding not occasionally golden and stirring in their visionary and optimistic flights of ecstasy. Moreover, the two are also wonderful historical curiosities in describing then relatively recent events -- including Revolutionary War battles, campaigns, and personalities -- *poetically*.

The following is a specimen from *The Vision of Columbus*, Book IX; which latter and early draft, as inspired and imaginative literature, is by many preferred over *The Columbiad*. And yet the admittedly

more editorially contrived and self-conscious *Columbiad* can still be enjoyable and rousing in its own right as a nostalgic memento of the idealistic aspirations of the Revolutionary era.

At this blest period, when thy [Columbus'] peaceful race  
Shall speak one language and one cause embrace,  
Science and arts a speedier course shall find,  
And open earlier on the infant mind,  
No foreign terms shall crowd with barbarous rules,  
The dull, unmeaning pageantry of schools;  
Nor dark authorities, nor names unknown  
Fill the learn'd head with ignorance not its own;  
But truth's fair eye, with beams unclouded, shine,  
And simplest rules her moral lights confine;  
One living language, one unborrowed dress  
Her boldest flights with happiest force express;  
Triumphant virtue, in the garb of truth,  
Win a pure passage to the heart of youth,  
Pervade all climes, where suns or oceans roll,  
And bid the gospel cheer the illumined whole,  
As the glad day-star, on his golden throne,  
Fair type of truth and promise of the sun,  
Smiles up the orient, in his rosy way,  
Illumines the front of heaven, and leads the day;  
Thus soaring Science, daughter of the skies,  
First o'er the nations bids her beauties rise,  
Prepares the glorious way, to put abroad  
The beams of Heaven's own morn, the splendors of a God.  
Then blest Religion leads the raptured mind,  
Thro' brighter fields and pleasures more refined;  
Teaches the roving eye, at one broad view,  
To glance o'er time and look Existence thro',  
See worlds, and worlds, to Being's formless end,  
With all their hosts, on One dread power depend,  
Seraphs and suns and systems round him rise,  
Live in his life and kindle from his eyes,  
His boundless love, his all pervading soul  
Illume, sublime, and harmonizes the whole;  
Teaches the pride of man to fix its bound  
In one small point of this amazing round;  
To shrink and rest, where Heaven has fix'd its fate,  
A line its space, a moment for its date;  
Instructs the heart a nobler joy to taste,  
And share its feelings with another's breast,  
Extend its warmest wish for all mankind,  
And catch the image of the Maker's mind;  
While mutual love commands all strife to cease,  
And earth join joyous in the songs of peace...

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David Humphreys (1752-1818) was among the most versatile and scholarly of the “Connecticut Wits,” and who in addition to sometime bard, served as of Washington’s aide-de-camps, and indeed was one of the most liked and personally befriended of the General’s staff. He was later U.S. plenipotentiary (under Washington) to the court of Spain, sheep breeder, industrialist, historian and biographer. Here is a sonnet of his, and a song (to the tune “Restoration March.”)

**ADDRESSED TO MY FRIENDS AT YALE COLLEGE,  
ON MY LEAVING THEM TO JOIN THE ARMY (1776)**

ADIEU, thou Yale! where youthful poets dwell,  
No more I linger by thy classic stream.  
Inglorious ease and sportive songs farewell!  
Thou startling clarion! break the sleeper’s dream!  
And sing, ye bards! the war-inspiring theme.  
Heard ye the din of battle? clang of arms?  
Saw ye the steel ‘mid starry banners beam?  
Quick throbs my breast at war’s untried alarms,  
Unknown pulsations stirr’d by glory’s charms.  
While dear Columbia calls, no danger awes,  
Though certain death to threaten’d chains be join’d.  
Though fails this flesh devote to freedom’s cause,  
Can death subdue th’ unconquerable mind?  
Or adamantine chains ethereal substance bind?

**FREEDOM’S CALL**

Though love’s soft transports may  
A while allure the soul,  
When Freedom calls to war,  
Those powers she will control;  
When British bands in hostile arms,  
Indignantly we view,  
What patriot’s breast but throbs, to bid  
His love, and ease, adieu;  
In Freedom’s all-inspiring cause,  
To fly alert to arms,  
And change his downy bed  
For Mars’s dread alarms.

Then let not love’s sweet bane  
Your gallant souls enthral,  
But in your country’s cause,

Resolve to stand or fall;  
And when by our united force  
We've drove the tyrants home,  
With laurels, such as graced the brows  
Of sons of ancient Rome,  
We'll each return to his kind lass,  
Whose beauty soon shall prove  
That for the toils of war  
The best reward is love.

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William Thomas Sherman

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For a full list of titles in the Continental Army series, see:

<http://www.gunjones.com/Cont-Army-series.html>

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